

Censorship and Disinformation in Taiwan (Title WIP)

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Abstract

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1 Introduction

When Internet censorship and disinformation are discussed, China is often the country at the forefront, and understandably so. The second-largest country on Earth by population, with a long history of government control over the Internet domestically as well as a vested interest in influencing the shape of Internet discourse abroad.

China's neighbor Taiwan, however, has far less literature on the topic. Taiwan is a vibrant democracy with a crucial role in the geopolitics of both China (which seeks to annex it) and its rivals. As such, disinformation from both domestic sources and from foreign (especially Chinese) ones are an immediate concern. Is China seeking to influence Taiwan towards the politics it desires? Are American or other agents acting similarly? How has Taiwan responded to these challenges, and is government censorship a serious concern? What direction have these forces and trends taken in the past few years?

Some articles have been written about this topic, particularly before and during the 2024 Taiwanese national election. For example, NPR's Emily Feng published a piece in January of 2024 about the spread of political disinformation on Taiwanese social media platforms, some of it spread by China and others by domestic media outlets, with the possible goal of affecting election results and undermining the Democratic Progressive Party. Feng describes how the government had begun at time of writing to pursue some anti-disinformation laws and policies in cooperation with Internet companies, but was reluctant to pursue more stringent policies that would give the government control over social media during times of emergency. ([npr-taiwan-misinfo])

Likewise, the Associated Press published an article that same month after the election's conclusion, claiming, "In repelling disinformation, Chinese and domestic, Taiwan offers an example to other democracies holding elections this year." This article argued that Taiwan's strategy of employing the government, independent fact-check groups, and private citizens to call out misinfor-

mation wherever it arose was highly successful, without needing to employ censorship. ([ap-taiwan-misinfo])

However, an earlier article from 2019, published in the "Perspectives on Taiwan: Insights from the 2018 Taiwan-U.S. Policy Program" academic journal, claims that contrary to the jubilant mood expressed in the AP's 2024 article, in 2018, press freedom was under serious threat, with the DPP planning to criminalize fake news as defined the government. ([perspectives-taiwan]) With this shift in mind, I feel it is worth examining the trajectory of misinformation and censorship on the Taiwanese Internet over time – what caused the government to walk their stance back (or if they did at all!), where they appear to be heading right now, and if their policy was as effective as it seemed. This project could, in theory, be used to recommend censorship and fake news policies, whether in America and other countries (if borrowing from the Taiwanese model), or in Taiwan itself (if the policy was not as successful as it seemed).

2 Related Work

Articles on the state of censorship in Taiwan pre-2024 election:

- ([perspectives-taiwan])

Articles on the 2024 election and fake news and censorship surrounding it:

- ([npr-taiwan-misinfo])
- ([ap-taiwan-misinfo])

Statistics on censorship or fake news in Taiwan:

- ([freedom-house-taiwan-22])
- ([freedom-house-taiwan-23])

3 Conclusion

3.1 Preparation and Prerequisites

To complete this project, I'll need to read as many academic and journalistic articles on the topic as possible,

and then do my own quantitative research if at all possible. This will involve looking at specific laws proposed in the Taiwanese assembly, and hopefully exact numbers on Internet users, arrests made, maybe any throttling or blocking data if I can find it (I'm not terribly confident in that last component). I have done some preliminary research on statistics and found some numbers on general Internet access and usage rates, but if I can't find any (reputable) censorship statistics, this will be more of a qualitative synthesis and analysis. My final deliverable in either case would be something akin to a short research paper.

3.2 Evaluation

If I can get statistics on Internet censorship or disinformation in Taiwan, I'd do a (proportional) comparison with other countries we have statistics on: likely the U.S. (which has a similar form of government), and probably any other East Asian countries I could get reliable statistics for (Japan? South Korea?). This comparison would entail graphing the rates of censorship and disinformation over time, paying special attention to election years and laws or policies implemented. In the case where I cannot obtain such data, I would instead harshly interrogate my sources and my sources' sources to ensure I was getting the full picture, and do some comparison to the way these issues are discussed when it comes to other countries.

3.3 Ethics

My model may suffer from bias from the fact that I am using English-language sources mostly manufactured by Western authors, since I cannot speak Mandarin (despite living in Taiwan for several years as a child, I did not pick any Mandarin up for very long). This means that there may be incentive by some of these sources to portray Taiwan in a positive light to bolster pro-Taiwan sentiment for geopolitical reasons, or there may simply be inaccuracies due to ignorance. That being said, I can't think of any other serious ethical considerations for this project considering the data I'm using is likely to be either official government data or journalistically sourced, meaning any ethical problems with data collection have essentially already occurred.