Censorship and Disinformation in Taiwan

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Abstract

Taiwan is often seen as a bastion of free speech and liberal democracy. However, its antagonistic neighbor China has tried to influence its elections through online disinformation. In this project, I study the censorship Taiwan has performed to try to prevent this disinformation from affecting its democracy. I argue that though the media portrays Taiwan as censorship-free, this is not completely true. Taiwan may be directly censoring Chinese news and government sources, as well as North Korean and Muslim websites. In addition, certain "morally questionable" topics may be undergoing light censorship. However, Taiwan does remain fairly light on censorship in the grand scheme of things, instead relying on citizen activism and awareness to fight fake news.

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. ([2])

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 misinformation wherever it arose was highly successful, without needing to employ censorship. ([5])

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 by the government. ([7]) 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. The results of this project could 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:

- ([7])

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

- ([2])
- ([5])

Statistics on censorship or fake news in Taiwan:

- ([3])
- ([4])

Statistics on web connectivity tests conducted in Taiwan:

- ([6])
- ([1])

3 Body

To determine whether Internet censorship still exists in Taiwan and in what form, I looked at data from the global measurement platforms OONI, ICLab, and Censored Planet. This strategy was suggested in the paper "GFWeb: Measuring the Great Firewall's Web Censorship at Scale" by Nguyen Phong Hoang et al., although the authors of said paper did note that each of those platforms has its own blind spots, and so this analysis should be understood to be highly preliminary. (The authors surmounted those blind spots by building their own system to test China's Great Firewall, but I have neither the time nor the technical knowledge to do the same here.)

As such, we will go through the tests recorded on each of these measurement platforms in Taiwan, beginning with OONI.

3.1 OONI: Internet Connectivity Tests

Using OONI explorer, one can detect successful connections, confirmed instances of censorship, and anomalies when connecting to a specific web domain from a specific country during a specific time window. For the purposes of this study, I selected data from Taiwan only (sometimes investigating a specific website in other countries if its global status was unclear), from June 17 to July 17 of 2024, as well as from January 1 to February 1 of 2024 (the month of the recent Taiwanese national elections).

No instances of confirmed censorship were detected by OONI in either of the mentioned time periods in Taiwan, so instead, we will focus on rate of anomalies detected per total number of tests conducted. We will sort the websites into categories of "high anomalies" and "low anomalies," where high anomaly categories displayed about 8% or more of their tests as anomalies. Note that the anomaly occurrence rates between January and June 2024 were nearly identical.

When examining the categories selectable on the OONI Explorer website, the high-anomaly (made up of more than 8% anomalies) categories were e-commerce, pornography, provactive attire, alcohol and drugs, file sharing, and gambling. These categories seem to make up a "traditionally seen morally dubious" supercategory – pornography, provocative attire, alcohol and drugs, and gambling all seen as vices in most of the world. E-commerce and file sharing are outliers here; from a censor's point of view, one might want to censor these categories simply to limit user access to unpredictable files or products, but these could also be pure noise, as anomalies do not indicate a 100% likelihood of censorship.

Notably absent from the anomalies sighted were categories that might involve political dissent, such as news media, human rights issues, et cetera. This absence may indicate that political censorship is not a popular tactic in Taiwan. That being said, there are some specific political categories in which anomalies seemed to crop up more frequently.

The first of these categories was websites directly operated by the Chinese government, as well as government-sponsored Chinese news websites and (slightly more surprisingly, although not terribly) the large Chinese Internet marketplace and general platform, Alibaba. This category is relatively unsurprising; China is Taiwan's greatest geopolitical threat, and Chinese government propaganda would logically be something the Taiwanese government would want to defend against. Since Chinese media outlets are often seen as mouthpieces for the government due to the strict censorship regime in place there, restricting the highest-profile Chinese media sites would fit with this philosophy.

The next category was websites affiliated with the North Korean government. This category was also unsurprising; North Korea has an even tighter grip on its media than China, and similarly is an ideological and geopolitical enemy of Taiwan. I did not observe any miscellaneous North Korean Internet platforms incurring anomalies as I did for China, but I am not sure if any such platforms even exist.

Finally, a number of websites related to Islam and Islamic organizations experienced high rates of anomalies, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and islamdoor.com (as well as a few websites related to general interreligious cooperation). Whether this is an intentional strategy to suppress Islamic content on the Taiwanese Internet, or purely noise, is unclear.

(A number of Taiwanese news websites also experienced anomalies, but tests related to these websites experienced a high number of *failures* as well, meaning the data for those websites may simply be garbage.)

I also conducted Tor connectivity tests for these time periods. While the normal Tor test had a low anomaly rate (well within the ranges other countries were experiencing), the Tor Snowflake test experienced *only* anomalies, which I didn't quite know what to make of. It seems possible that Taiwan is limiting Tor Snowflake, but not Tor itself, but why is another matter.

3.2 ICLab: Autonomous System Censorship Leakage

Moving on to other websites, Censored Planet had almost no data related to Taiwan, so the remaining data point is a paper published on ICLab entitled "A Churn for the Better: Localizing Censorship Using Network-level Path Churn and Network Tomography" ([1]). This paper identified the level of censorship being performed by autonomous systems across the world using "censorship leakage," a metric by which the larger network was affected by blockages and slowing in individual autonomous systems. The technique used by this paper, "boolean network tomography," works by trying to find the paths across the global Internet network and creating an image of the network and its traffic.

According to this research, Taiwan had a single censoring autonomous system (compared to 6 in China, 0 in the United States and many other countries, and around 4-5 in a few European countries). This statistic supports the idea that Taiwan is performing some light censorship on its network, perhaps through an ISP.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Taiwan does seem to be performing Internet censorship focused on curtailing narratives from its geopolitical foes, although on a much smaller scale than China or other infamous censorship regimes. This claim alone is not terribly surprising; after all, many other countries, including the United States, perform some degree of censorship. However, it is a claim worth hearing when the common perception in the media about Taiwan's Internet culture seems to indicate that censorship is entirely foregone in favor of citizen activism and debunking. While that strategy may be real for the majority of disinformation spread online in Taiwan, censorship in Taiwan for explicit propaganda from antagonistic governments does seem to exist. In addition, there may be some censorship of "morally inappropriate" topics as well as unpredictable means of content delivery such as file sharing. That being said, if the media is to be believed, Taiwan's approach to censorship is working. Citizens do not feel overly censored, and fake news had little impact on the 2024 election. As such, it may be time to consider Taiwan's strategy of "prebunking" and censoring only the most explicit propagandist sources of information – and why that strategy worked as well as it did.

References

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