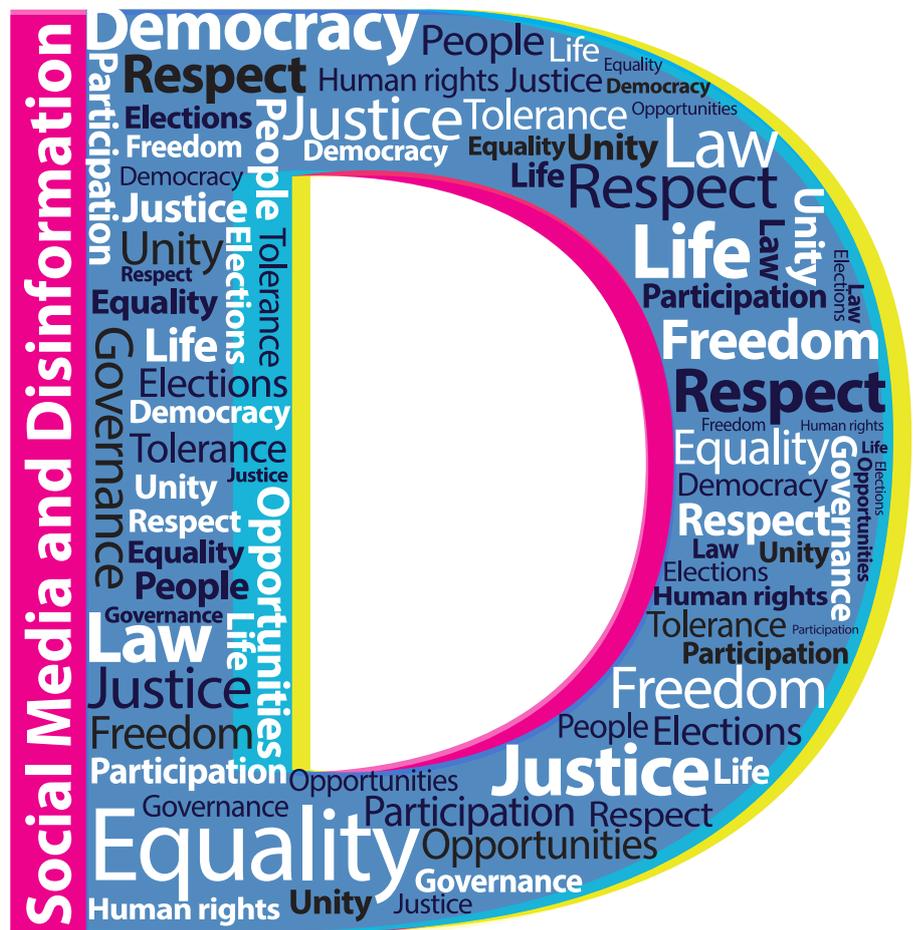


Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases

October 2020





In 2019, Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) selected social media and disinformation as the common challenge that continue to plague and hinder democracy in Asia.

Against this background, ADRN published this special report to evaluate the current state of social media and the spread of disinformation in the region by studying the phenomenon and its impact within different countries in Asia, as well as their responses.

The report investigates pressing, contemporary questions such as:

Who are the major disinformation disseminators?

What are the primary issue areas and who are the main targets?

What are the effects of disinformation?

What current legal and political efforts have been placed by governments, lawmakers, media and CSOs to combat against disinformation?

What are the methods of disinformation applied towards different linguistic communities?

How do public figures use their personal social media accounts to engage with the public?

Drawing on a rich array of resources and data,

This report offers country-specific analyses, highlights areas of improvement, and suggests policy recommendations for ensuring the protection of social media and online platforms from the spread of disinformation.

“Social Media, Disinformation and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases”

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Social Media, Disinformation and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases

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Country Case 1: Japan

Influence Activities of Domestic Actors on the Internet: Disinformation and Information Manipulation in Japan

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External and domestic illiberal actors have been manipulating information at an unprecedented level in recent years. A large amount of the existing literature focuses on the activities of China and Russia and indicates that these countries operate disinformation campaigns and information manipulation through the internet globally (Cook, 2020; Diamond, 2019; Diamond et al., 2016; Diamond & Schell, 2019; Fried & Polyakova, 2018; Hamilton, 2018; NED, 2017; Puddington & Roylance, 2017; Weber, 2019; Woolley & Howard, 2017). An even greater issue in this age of information technology is the dissemination of disinformation by authoritarian political leaders toward their domestic audiences. Disinformation causes chaos in elections, makes truth hard to grasp, and polarizes people. Democracy and pro-democracy actors have been under constant threat by such disinformation campaigns (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Japanese scholars and commentators have paid attention to the sharp power exerted by China and Russia (Anami, 2018; Kawashima, 2019; Koizumi et al., 2018; Tokuchi, 2019), and many examine China's influence activities especially in regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the US (Ichihara, 2020; Kawashima, 2018a; Kawashima, 2018b; Matsumoto, 2019; Oki, 2018; Shuto, 2018; Watanabe, 2018; Wu, 2019). With limited exceptions such as Hsiao (2019) and Stewart (2020), there have been almost no studies on the influence activities of these foreign authoritarian countries within Japan. From such works as Bradshaw and Howard (2019), Stewart (2020), and Weber (2019), we can assume that this is because the use of sharp power by foreign actors is considered to have a relatively limited impact inside Japan.

This is in stark contrast to the growth of research on the use of disinformation within the country by domestic political actors. Fact checkers, journalists, and scholars have conducted research on the state of disinformation and fact checks, especially around elections (Ichida, 2018; Matsumoto K., 2019; Ogasawara, 2019; Okuyama, 2019; Tateiwa, 2019; Tateiwa & Yanai, 2018). This aspect has been examined extensively over the past eight years, with the greatest focus being placed on the prime ministers and the governing party (Ichida, 2018; Minami, 2019; Minami & Mochizuki, 2018; Tsuda,

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Kayama, & Yasuda, 2013).

However, there are three issues with the existing literature. First, existing literature on the state of disinformation in Japan is published in Japanese and does not reach a wider audience. Second, with limited exceptions such as Ogasawara (2019) and Schäfer et al. (2017), most studies fail to provide any scientific evidence. Third, studies on the sharp power of external actors fail to examine the influence activities of domestic news sites that potentially have links to external authoritarian countries, whose news articles are disseminated widely in Japan through aggregator sites.

Thus, this study conducts a scientific analysis of the influence activities of domestic political actors, as well as private entities that disseminate information on China as Japan's giant neighbor, focusing on both disinformation and information manipulation. The study employs quantitative text analysis using KH Coder. The data used for analysis comprise information on Twitter and articles from target news sites.

The paper provides the following three discussions. First, albeit in a restrained manner, disinformation has been spread in Japan by both political actors and trolls. Second, Record China, a portal site which offers China-related news, has been backed by an agent linked with China's United Front Work Department, and disseminates news to instigate anti-Korea sentiment while at the same time attempting to improve the image of China and spread Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda. Finally, while the Japanese government takes a democratic post-hoc approach to tackling disinformation, which is commendable, more support should be provided for private fact-checking activities.

1. Political Actors, Trolls, and Disinformation

1.1. The Restrained Spread of Disinformation

Political maneuvering through disinformation has been somewhat restrained thus far in Japan. Ogasawara (2019, p. 146) highlights two reasons. First, the use of social media as a news source is relatively limited. According to a survey conducted in 2020, while the percentage of people who use TV and the internet as news sources is 60 percent and 62 percent, respectively, the percentage of those using social media as a news source is only 25 percent (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism & University of Oxford, 2020, p. 98). Okuyama (2019, pp. 166–167) notes that the usage of social media for election campaigns has been limited as well. According to a survey conducted by the Asahi Shimbun on the House of Representatives election in 2017, for example, while 72 percent of the candidates used social media to announce the location of their speeches, only 21 percent used it to post their policies (Sudo, 2017).

While the percentage of people who use the internet as a news source is on the rise, they tend to prefer using news platforms such as Yahoo! News. According to a study conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the University of Oxford (2020, p. 98), 58 percent of Japanese respondents cited Yahoo! News as the online news service they use the most. Unlike social media platforms where unreliable information can be shared, Yahoo! Japan checks the reliability and professionalism of its content providers. This naturally results in the main content providers for Yahoo!

News being mass media, magazines, journalists, and scholars, who are less likely to spread disinformation. As of July 2019, Yahoo! Japan had about 300 contracted partner companies, 500 media outlets, and 500 individual authors. Contracted media outlets include newspapers, news agencies, magazines, TV stations, and online media, and the individual authors are scholars, freelance journalists, experts, and NGO staff. Yahoo! Japan checks its content before publishing, and it also requires revisions or withdraws content if deemed necessary based on comments from readers. If certain requirements are not met, the contract may be terminated (Policy Planning Department, Yahoo Japan Corporation, 2019).

The second factor Ogasawara (2019, p. 146) notes as restraining the spread of disinformation in Japan is the credibility of Japanese mass media. Japanese media outlets have traditionally not been extensively colored by ideology, and this neutrality or weak polarization has helped maintain public trust in the mass media in general (Hayashi, 2020, pp. 337–339). One of the main reasons why Japan's mass media is not highly polarized is the horizontal nature of Japanese newspapers. Since World War II, Japanese newspapers have been careful not to miss any news published in other papers (Okuyama, 2019, pp. 161–162). This has led to similar news content across media outlets, and has limited the extent to which a media outlet is characterized by its own political coloration. Although the polarization of mass media has strengthened in the past decade, the level of polarization remains moderate overall.

1.2 Political Actors and Disinformation

Nonetheless, disinformation is created and shared in Japan. According to a report compiled by the study group on platform services in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, common occasions where disinformation spreads on the internet in Japan include disasters and elections. The report also points to curation sites, which summarize information on particular topics, as platforms where disinformation is widespread (Study Group on Platform Services, 2020, p. 19).

Disinformation spread during elections can have serious political consequences. However, it is hard to grasp the overall trend of the frequency or amount of disinformation. If we take the July 2019 House of Councilors election as an example, the Fact Checking Console of FactCheck Initiative Japan (FIJ), a Japanese fact-checking platform, automatically identified 66,927 articles as questionable, but only seventy-two of these articles were fact checked, and only nine of the checked articles were eventually published (FIJ, 2019, p. 3). It is not clear how many of the 66,927 articles contained disinformation.

There have been some attempts to grasp the landscape of disinformation in Japan. Morihiko Ogasawara and Seiko Kiyohara conducted a study on the 2017 House of Representatives election, targeting 1,000 people aged between 18 and 69, and asked whether the respondents had recognized any fake news (disinformation or misinformation) during the election. Of the respondents, 29.5 percent said they had seen some fake news about candidates or political parties at least once during the election campaign (Ogasawara, 2019, pp. 136–137). However, the percentage who identified the internet as the source of this fake news was significantly lower (23.4 percent for portals/news sites, 20.3 percent for Twitter, 17.3 percent for curation sites, 8.5 percent for news apps, 3.7 percent for Facebook, and 1.4 percent for LINE) than the percentage who identified TV as the source (50.8 percent) (Ogasawara, 2019,

pp. 137–138). Furthermore, Ogasawara argues that the perceptions of respondents might have been influenced by political blogs that critically analyze TV broadcasts and unfairly call such broadcasts fake news. If that is indeed the case, the awareness of disinformation does not indicate its actual existence or dissemination (Ogasawara, 2019, p. 144). Obtaining data on the entire picture of disinformation remains difficult.

Political actors spread disinformation/misinformation during non-election periods as well as during the elections. The political actor who has been studied the most on this front is the prime minister due to his influence. Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is a frequent user of Facebook (Tsuda, Yasuda, & Suzuki, 2013, pp. 9–10), and his posts and those of his secretaries also sometimes comprise disinformation or misinformation. For example, in a critical comment on an NHK program broadcast on December 22, 2012, Abe's secretary described Professor Kiichi Fujiwara of the University of Tokyo as a person “famous for his statement that ‘The Five Returned Abductees must be returned to North Korea immediately!’” However, Fujiwara subsequently posted on Twitter that he had never made such a statement or written anything of the sort (Fujiwara, 2012). Abe himself has posted disinformation/misinformation on his Facebook account concerning statements made by former prime ministers of the Democratic Party of Japan and the content of the NHK's broadcasts (Nakagawa, 2013, pp. 54–55). Existing studies also locate a much greater amount of disinformation from Prime Minister Abe offline (Minami & Mochizuki, 2018).

The major political figure who has used disinformation most extensively is Takashi Tachibana of the Party to Protect the People from the NHK. Tachibana uses every possible tool from sexual content to intimidation, and his disinformation targets the NHK, liberals, and electoral institutions. He has fabricated the ID card of a liberal politician to make it appear that he was a foreigner (INFACT, 2019b), disseminated incorrect information during election campaigns about salaries and viewing fees for the NHK (INFACT, 2019a), and his Twitter top profile even states he is giving away stickers that perfectly block NHK bill collectors, although such a sticker does not in fact have any effect (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Takashi Tachibana's Twitter Profile



Source: Tachibana, n.d.

Note: The text circled in red states, “If you put this NHK Repellent Sticker on your doorstep, the NHK's visits will totally stop. Please call the following number if the NHK still comes. I will definitely turn the NHK away.”

1.3 Trolls

Abe and Tachibana are both critical of the mass media and liberals, and their tactics appeal to Japan's online right-wing community (Netto-uyoku), which both creates and shares disinformation. This amplification effect causes the disinformation put out by political actors to go viral and increases its impact. In other words, the Netto-uyoku play the role of troll.

The xenophobic Association of Citizens against the Special Privileges of the Zainichi (Zaitokukai), established in 2007, has mobilized the Netto-uyoku (Kamematsu, 2013, pp. 144–145) and spreads disinformation online, for instance in the comment sections of articles published on Yahoo! News and other online media sites. The content of the Netto-uyoku's disinformation has certain themes: anti-media, anti-liberals, and xenophobia. This is in concordance with the international tendency whereby right-wing movements are more prone to spreading disinformation (Grinberg et al., 2019).

The Netto-uyoku seem to be a product of increased economic inequality in society. According to Yasuda (2013, p. 151), many of the Netto-uyoku cite the media, civil servants, and teachers as their enemies, and some term their position as a “class struggle.” Yasuda argues that the Netto-uyoku perceive themselves as victims in the dichotomy between themselves and their enemies who have wealth and outlets for their opinions. In this dichotomy, the Netto-uyoku see themselves as being economically disadvantaged and having no access to outlets for their opinions (Tsuda, Yasuda, & Suzuki, 2013, pp. 17–18).

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has organized some of these Netto-uyoku as members of the Jiminto-Net Supporters Club (J-NSC) (Nishida, 2015, pp. 146–149), a volunteer supporters club for the LDP with a membership of approximately 20,000 (Ichida, 2018, p. 210). J-NSC members are encouraged to make online posts favorable to the LDP, thereby becoming de facto trolls for that party. The members of the J-NSC write extensively online, and thus their narratives are impactful on the online discourse. The LDP does not control them even if their posts include disinformation or cause controversy, insofar as their posts are beneficial for the LDP (Nakagawa, 2013, p. 46).

Using the profile search function “twipro,” this study found 665 hits for the search word “J-NSC” as of June 23, 2020. Excluding one profile that was not a member of J-NSC, the research examined words used in their profiles using KH Coder. The search excluded words related to Twitter itself (Twitter, follow, follower, RT, tweet, retweet), the J-NSC (J-NSC, NSC, members), and words that have no meaning in themselves (what KH Coder categorizes as verb B, adjective B, adverb B, and negative auxiliary verbs).

The top 80 words are shown in Table 1. Many of the words with high counts are generally anti-mass media, anti-foreigner, and anti-liberal. J-NSC members voice their opinion that mass media is spreading “biased” reports with “left-wing” discourse, and thus represents “anti-Japanese” “traitors.”

Table 1. Words Most Frequently Found in the Twitter Profiles of J-NSC Members

Word	Count	Word	Count	Word	Count	Word	Count
日本 (Japan)	246	応援 (support)	25	my日本 (my Japan)	15	愛する (love)	12
支持 (support)	64	総理 (prime minister)	25	会 (meeting)	15	願う (hope)	12
日本人 (Japanese people)	64	ネット (internet)	24	最近 (recently)	15	垢 (account)	12
自民党 (LDP)	54	奉賛 (support)	24	在日 (foreigners in Japan)	15	参加 (participation)	12
安倍 (Abe)	49	靖国神社 (Yasukuni Shrine)	24	断固 (resolute)	15	党員 (party member)	12
保守 (conservative)	49	今 (now)	22	被害 (damage)	15	日々 (everyday)	12
反対 (oppose)	44	崇敬 (reverence)	22	法案 (bill)	15	売国奴 (traitor)	12
好き (like)	43	改正 (amendment)	21	ブロック (block)	14	復活 (revival)	12
政権 (administration)	42	頑張る (work hard)	21	行動 (action)	14	無言 (silent)	12
政治 (politics)	41	心 (heart)	21	取り戻す (get back)	14	マスコミ (mass media)	11
反日 (anti-Japan)	41	原発 (nuclear power plant)	20	全国 (national)	14	活動 (activity)	11
大好き (like a lot)	39	趣味 (hobby)	20	多い (many)	14	感謝 (thanks)	11
国 (country)	33	人 (people)	20	奪還 (recapture)	14	歓迎 (welcome)	11
外国 (foreign country)	30	年 (year)	20	東京 (Tokyo)	14	企業 (company)	11
思う (think)	30	売国 (traitor)	20	文化 (culture)	14	基本 (basic)	11
憲法 (constitution)	28	お願い (please)	17	ネタ (topic)	13	誇り (pride)	11
守る (defend)	28	左翼 (left wing)	17	人権 (human rights)	13	子供 (child)	11
歴史 (history)	27	委員 (committee member)	16	生まれる (born)	13	時代 (period/era)	11
猫 (cat)	26	党 (party)	16	大嫌い (hate)	13	自衛隊 (Self Defense Force)	11
愛国 (patriot)	25	拉致 (abduction)	16	マスコミ (trashy mass media)	12	主義 (ideology)	11

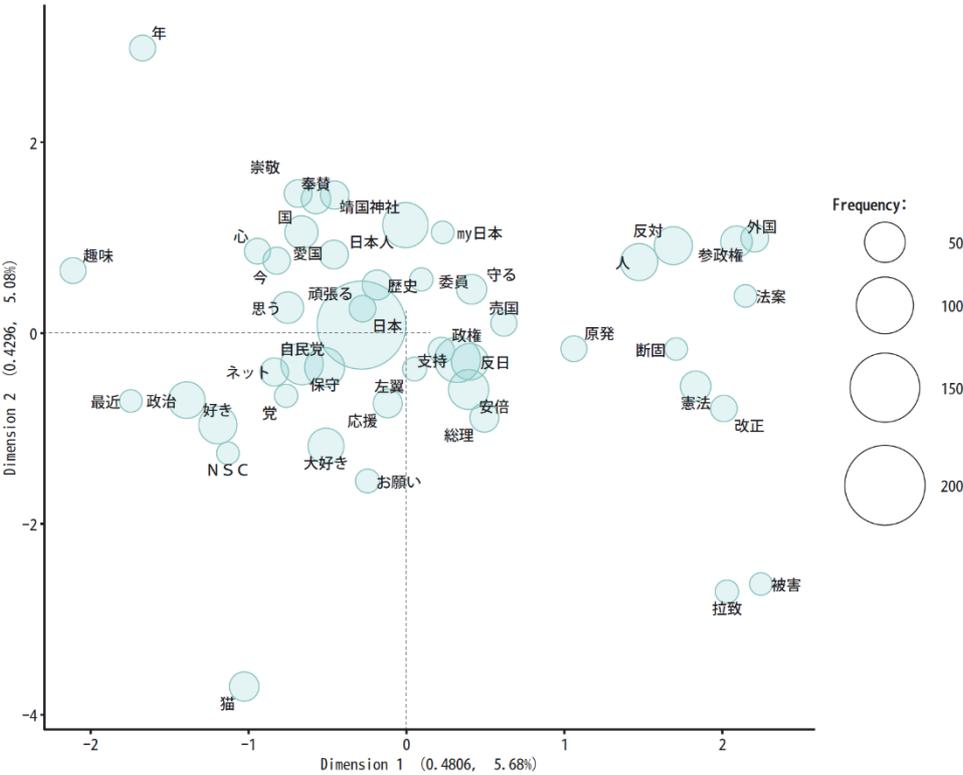
Note: Data extracted on June 24, 2020.

Source: Compiled by the author using KH Coder.

This study further conducted a correspondence analysis to analyze the political stance of J-NSC members. It examined the relationships between words that appeared more than 15 times throughout the Twitter profiles of J-NSC members. The frequency of the usage of these words is shown by the size of the bubbles, and their correlations are shown by the proximity of the bubbles. Words that are used widely among all of the Twitter profiles appear near the coordinate axis.

Figure 2 presents the results of the correspondence analysis. It shows the patriotic tendency among J-NSC members in general, and their self-identification as conservatives. At the same time, they exhibit dislike toward foreigners and oppose the political participation of Japanese citizens with foreign roots. They also consider the left wing to be anti-Japanese traitors.

Figure 2. J-NSC Correspondence Analysis



Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

This does not mean that it is only conservatives or right-wing actors that use disinformation. However, the online influence activities of political actors and trolls with conservative or right-wing content are more impactful than those with liberal content, and drive the online discourse to weaken trust in mass media, engage in hate speech toward Japanese individuals with foreign roots, foreigners, and pro-democracy and pro-human rights politicians and activists. Their disinformation and information manipulation activities pose a serious threat to discussions on human rights and democracy in Japan.

2. News from China-Related Information Sites

Links between domestic actors and external authoritarian countries that play a role in controlling information online have rarely been studied in Japan. Given its geographical proximity and the density of economic and personal interactions, China's sharp power should be a particular research focus. In a recent study, Stewart (2020) argued that Japan is not heavily influenced by the CCP's information activities. However, his research is mostly based on interviews with scholars in Japan, and some empirical research is warranted.

Table 2 shows a list of news media that provide China-related information in Japanese on the internet. Most of these are Japanese translations of Chinese government-affiliated media, and some are news sites from Falun Gong members in exile. These two types of news sites do have clear messages, but they are not domestic actors in Japan. Chinese diaspora media in Japan are briefly studied by Stewart (2020, pp. 9–10), who found that they post articles from CCP-controlled news agencies.

Table 2. Online Media Providing China-Related Information in Japanese

Type	Name
National Media	China Net
	People's Daily Online
	Xinhua News
	China News Service
	China Economic Net
Local Media	Dazhong (Shandong Province)
	Eastday.com (Shanghai)
Falun Gong Exile Media	The Epoch Times
	NTD Japan
Chinese Diaspora Media in Japan	JNOC News
	Live Japan
	The Duan Press
Japan-Based Media	Record China
	SearChina

Source: Created by the author based on information in NDL (2020a, 2020b) and Stewart (2020), with revisions.

News sources that have a wider reach in Japan and yet have not been examined by the existing literature are Record China and SearChina. These are entities within Japan, and their news is distributed through Japanese news aggregator sites such as BIGLOBE, excite news, MSN News, Nico Nico News, Infoseek News, livedoor News, dmenu news, and goo news,² and thus reaches a wide readership. Their content used to also be disseminated through Yahoo! News, the most influential news aggregator site in Japan. The following sections analyze the nature of the information distributed by these two outlets, and

² SearChina content is distributed through MSN News, but Record China content is not distributed through MSN News as of the time of this writing.

examine whether they are under the influence of the CCP.

This study analyzes the content of the two media outlets using the qualitative text analysis method. The analysis excludes verbs and adverbs because they do not carry substantial meaning. It also excludes other words that are not particularly meaningful, and a list of the stop words (the words excluded from the analysis) is shown in the appendix. The analysis targets articles from Record China and SearChina published in 2019.

2.1 Record China

Record China is a news site that was created in 2005 in Tokyo. Established by Chinese filmmaker Shujian Ren, it originally specialized in the sale of pictures, but commenced news coverage in 2006. According to Ren (2020), the company mostly focuses on social and cultural news, intending to differentiate its news content from that of major news agencies.

In reality, however, Record China disseminates news with strong political messages from the stance of the CCP. It occasionally reposts content from the CCP's news agencies. On issues where the Chinese government is criticized, it introduces news that supports the Chinese government's stance. A good example is news on the Uighur issue. In 2019, the internment camps and egregious human rights violations by the Chinese government toward the Uighurs drew widespread international criticism. On December 18 and 19, Record China reposted a propaganda video created by China Global Television Network (CGTN), an official state news station, which depicted Uighurs as terrorists (Record China, 2019a). Furthermore, Hiroyuki Yamaki, Record China's former CEO and current advisor (Record China, 2020b), commented on this documentary on Record China's Facebook page, supporting the Chinese government's fight against Uighur “terrorists” (Figure 3).³

³ Yamaki is a former chief editor for *Jiji Press*, but was never in charge of China at that news agency (Ako, 2020).

Figure 3. Record China's Repost of a CGTN Propaganda Documentary



Note: This documentary was reposted on Record China's website, its Facebook Page, and its Twitter account on December 18 and 19, 2019. The above caption is from its Facebook page.

Source: Record China (2019b).

Record China released 24 articles on Xinjiang in 2019. Among them, 11 reported the Chinese government's official position on the issue, three reported a mention allegedly made by a foreign political leader (according to the Chinese government) to the effect that the Uighur issue is a Chinese domestic issue, and one makes fun of a Uighur actress. The rest are reports or mentions about nature or people in Xinjiang, and none of the articles discuss the Chinese government's serious human rights violations against the Uighurs. This clearly shows that Record China follows the official party line. Even the article which makes fun of a Uighur actress is in line with the CCP's usual tactics: CCP media reports negative content about the Party's enemies (Cook, 2020, pp. 6–7).

This study conducted research on Record China's registration with the help of Bingchun Ke of Doublethink Lab in Taiwan. According to the Registration Information Provision Service in Japan, Record China is registered as Record China Co. (株式会社Record China) in Tokyo Japan (Touki, 2020), and it uses recordchina.co.jp as its domain (Record China, 2020a). According to DomainBigData (2020a), however, the company has other domains as well, and one of its domains is recordchina.cn. This Chinese

domain was registered in 2015, with the sponsoring registrar being Xiamen Shangzhong Online Technology Corporation (厦门商中在线科技股份有限公司) (DomainBigData, 2020b). According to qichacha (2020a), a Chinese credit check site, Shangzhong Online Technology Corporation's majority shareholder is Panasia Info&Tech JiangSu CO., Ltd. (泛亚信息技术江苏有限公司), whose chairman and general manager is Yan Jianou (颜健鸥). Yan Jianou is a deputy to the Wuxi Municipal People's Congress and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) of Wuxi Chong'an District (PANASIA, 2020). Given that the CPPCC is controlled by the United Front Work Department of the CCP, which is in charge of intelligence and influence activities abroad, Record China has been a tool of the CCP for its influence activities since 2015 at least. This coincides with the timing of the CCP's strengthening of its information campaign globally. The Party's influence on Record China is hidden within a triple-layered structure.

This study analyzed the exact content in Record China articles, taking all of the articles published in 2019 as samples, for a total of 5,114 articles. Table 3 shows the ten words that appeared most frequently in Record China articles. China, Japan, and South Korea (ROK) appear the most, despite the news site being "Record China." The top page of Record China's Twitter account says "What are the real feelings of the Chinese and Koreans?" showing that ROK-related news has some value for Record China (Record China, 2000c). The company also takes an interest in the US. Such words as issues/problems, relations, government, and world are also among the top ten, which indicates that Record China frequently reports news on inter-governmental relations despite the emphasis placed on socio-cultural content by Ren (2020).

Table 3. Most Frequently Used Words in Record China (2019)

Word	Count	Word	Count
中国 (China)	14,333	關係 (relations)	2,828
日本 (Japan)	13,902	政府 (government)	2,813
韩国 (ROK)	12,542	世界 (world)	2,412
米 (US)	4,153	經濟 (economy)	2,379
問題 (issues/problems)	3,087	米 (US)	2,189

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

Table 4 shows the most frequently used news sources in Record China articles. Given that each news article from Record China mentions its original source and summarizes its content, this table counts the number of Record China articles that mention sources. Reflecting Record China's interest in China and South Korea, the company mostly uses news sources from these two countries. When it comes to Chinese sources, Record China heavily uses either official or quasi-official state media. Fifty-five and a half percent of its news articles that use Chinese sources use Chinese official or quasi-official state media as sources. Record China seems to like using sources with a weaker coloration of CCP control when possible, and thus it often uses overseas media under CCP influence such as *Duowei News*.

Table 4. The 20 News Sources Most Frequently Used by Record China (2019)

Name	Country	Count	CCP Control
微博 (Weibo)	China	741	Censored; pro-CCP
ウェイボー (Weibo)	China	514	Censored; pro-CCP
環球時報 (Global Times)	China	472	Official state media
聯合ニュース (Yonhap News)	ROK	351	
觀察者網 (Guancha)	China	248	Censored; pro-CCP
環球網 (Global Times)	China	223	Official state media
多維新聞 (Duowei News)	US/China	204	Overseas media purchased by a CCP-linked businessman
韓国經濟 (Korea Economic Daily)	ROK	201	
中央日報 (JoongAng Ilbo)	ROK	200	
朝鮮日報 (Chosun Ilbo)	ROK	192	
中国新聞網 (China News)	China	166	Official state media
新華社 (Xinhua News Agency)	China	130	Official state media
CCTV	China	110	Official state media
梨視頻 (Pear Video)	China	107	Quasi-official state media
新京報 (Beijing News)	China	106	Quasi-official state media
海外網 (Haiwai Net)	China	102	Official state media
中国中央テレビ (CCTV)	China	96	Official state media
澎湃新聞 (The Paper)	China	82	Quasi-official state media
参考消息網 (Reference News)	China	77	Official state media
ブルームバーグ (Bloomberg)	US	76	

Note: CCP control is determined based on Bi (2020), Chong (2018), and Diamond and Schell (2019, chapter 6). Weibo is written as “微博” and “ウェイボー” in Japanese, and KH Coder counts the two separately.

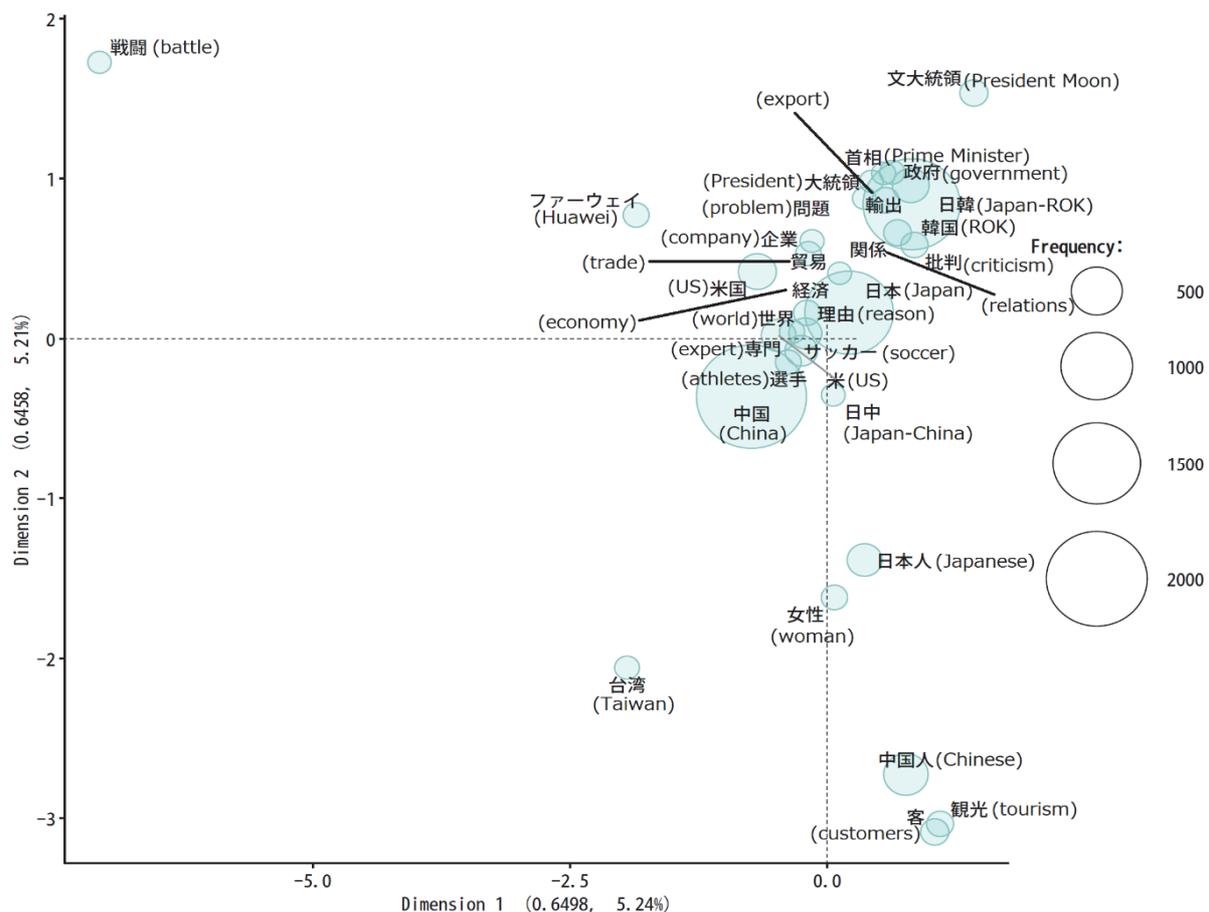
Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

Although private online news sources such as *Weibo* are used as well, their content is also heavily influenced by the CCP. The Chinese government has rapidly expanded its control over domestic media and tech companies to have them assist in the dissemination of CCP propaganda under the Xi Jinping administration (Cook, 2020, p. 16), and private online news platforms have CCP branches internally, through which the Party exerts influence over private companies (Chen, 2017). Content censorship officers (numbering up to the tens of thousands) are also deployed to every internet company, and censorship is conducted incessantly (Bi, 2020). These activities align the content from private online platforms with CCP guidelines, and thus we cannot expect independent news content, especially when it comes to politically sensitive issues. As such, Chinese media outlets are under the influence of the CCP, and Record China has been using information from these sources. Record China is thus playing the role of mouthpiece for the CCP.

In order to examine the patterns in the usage of words in Record China articles, this study next conducted a correspondence analysis, taking news titles in 2019 as samples, assuming that titles strongly convey the site’s message. It examined the relations among words that appeared more than 100 times. The results are shown in Figure 4. The size of each bubble shows term counts, and the bubbles plotted close to each other have similar appearance patterns. The results show that when it comes to the ROK,

news content predominantly focuses on Japan–ROK relations, particularly on problems between the two governments. Reflecting that export restriction was a major issue between the two countries in 2019, such terms as “export,” “criticism,” and “problem” are among those frequently used in correspondence with such terms as “Japan–ROK” or “ROK.” When it comes to China-related news content, on the other hand, the site mostly reports on socio-cultural and non-political content such as soccer and tourism. These results indicate Record China’s intention to place China in a non-political light while invigorating anti-ROK sentiment in Japan.

Figure 4. Correspondence Analysis of Words Used in Record China Titles (2019)



Note: English translations are inserted by the author.

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

The analysis further examined the association of words with terms related to the ROK. It coded Korea, Republic of Korea, Seoul, Korean language, and Korean people as “ROK,” and examined this category’s relationships with other words. The results are shown in Table 5. The table shows that various problems between Japan and the ROK, including export restrictions, boycott of Japanese products, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), comfort women, conscripted laborers, history, and the rising sun flag are favorite topics for Record China. Although this emphasis would partially reflect the troubled Japan–Korea relations during 2019, it does seem to present an arbitrary focus on negative news between the two countries for an aggregator site which claims to cover socio-cultural news on China.

Table 5. Words Associated with the ROK in Article Titles of Record China (2019)

1	日本 (Japan)	19	謝罪 (apology)	37	選手 (athlete)	55	経済 (economy)
2	日韓 (Japan-ROK)	20	理由 (reason)	38	規制 (restriction)	56	被害 (suffering/damage)
3	批判 (criticism)	21	GSOMIA	39	会談 (talk)	57	竹島 (Takeshima)
4	文大統領 (President Moon)	22	韓 (ROK)	40	専門 (expertise)	58	米韓 (US-ROK)
5	関係 (relations)	23	不満 (discontent)	41	東京 (Tokyo)	59	対立 (confrontation)
6	問題 (issues/problems)	24	大統領 (president)	42	ボイコット (boycott)	60	女性 (women)
7	政府 (government)	25	首相 (prime minister)	43	悪化 (deterioration)	61	首脳 (leaders)
8	慰安婦 (comfort woman)	26	北朝鮮 (DPRK)	44	サムスン (Samsung)	62	報復 (retaliation)
9	日本人 (Japanese)	27	製品 (product)	45	物議 (controversial)	63	教授 (professor)
10	輸出 (export)	28	観光 (tourism)	46	影響 (influence)	64	市場 (market)
11	米国 (US)	29	徴用工 (conscripted laborer)	47	議員 (lawmaker)	65	代表 (representatives)
12	世界 (world)	30	不買 (boycott)	48	五輪 (Olympics)	66	大統領府 (Executive Office)
13	懸念 (concern)	31	安倍 (Abe)	49	破棄 (termination)	67	像 (statue)
14	サッカー (soccer)	32	運動 (movement)	50	反発 (opposition)	68	激怒 (rage)
15	企業 (company)	33	賛否 (controversial)	51	外交 (diplomacy)	69	半導体 (semiconductor)
16	米 (US)	34	発言 (utterance)	52	抗議 (protest)	70	要求 (request)
17	旭日旗 (rising sun flag)	35	称賛 (praise)	53	国民 (citizens)	71	可能 (possible)
18	反応 (response)	36	客 (customer)	54	危機 (crisis)	72	除外 (exclusion)

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

This is in stark contrast to words associated with China. This study coded the words China, People's Republic of China, Beijing, Chinese language, and Chinese people as "China," and examined associations with other words. The results are shown in Table 6. While reports were mostly focused on political issues in relation to the ROK, articles related to China covered a wide range of topics from sports and tourism to celebrities and even the economy and trade—this despite the fact that there were political issues between Japan and China in 2019, including territorial and cybersecurity issues. Although these results would reflect the generally positive Japan–China relations in 2019 as well, the wide variety of socio-cultural coverage, as well as the lack of negative news, presents a sharp contrast to the case of the ROK and seems rather arbitrary.

Table 6. Words Associated with China in Record China (2019)

1	日本 (Japan)	19	代表 (representatives)	37	東京 (Tokyo)	55	米中 (US-China)
2	米国 (US)	20	日中 (Japan-China)	38	記者 (journalist)	56	トランプ (Trump)
3	サッカー (soccer)	21	人気 (popular)	39	戦闘 (battle)	57	留学生 (international students)
4	日本人 (Japanese)	22	男性 (male)	40	市場 (market)	58	逮捕 (arrest)
5	米 (US)	23	問題 (problem)	41	注目 (attention)	59	大会 (tournament)
6	客 (customer)	24	アジア (Asia)	42	子ども (kids)	60	上海 (Shanghai)
7	世界 (world)	25	貿易 (trade)	43	ランキング (ranking)	61	五輪 (Olympic)
8	専門 (expert)	26	関係 (relations)	44	高い (high/expensive)	62	空港 (airport)
9	観光 (tourism)	27	ファーウェイ (Huawei)	45	卓球 (table tennis)	63	反響 (reaction)
10	女性 (women)	28	香港 (Hong Kong)	46	禁止 (prohibition)	64	騒動 (turmoil)
11	鉄道 (railway)	29	大統領 (president)	47	スマホ (smartphone)	65	感動 (touching)
12	選手 (athlete)	30	台湾 (Taiwan)	48	安倍 (Abe)	66	殺到 (flood of people)
13	高速 (high-speed)	31	首相 (prime minister)	49	技術 (technology)	67	開発 (development)
14	話題 (topic)	32	外国 (foreign country)	50	軍事 (military)	68	発言 (utterance)
15	理由 (reason)	33	旅行 (travel)	51	優勝 (victory)	69	韓 (ROK)
16	外交 (diplomacy)	34	賞賛 (praise)	52	最大 (biggest)	70	結婚 (marriage)
17	反応 (response)	35	経済 (economy)	53	反論 (opposition)	71	戦争 (war)
18	企業 (company)	36	ファン (fan)	54	海外 (overseas)	72	運転 (drive)

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

Record China's instigation of anti-Korea sentiment might be a tactic to polarize Japanese society along this social cleavage, which is a normal tactic in China's sharp power activities. Anti-Korea sentiment, which is emphasized by the Netto-uyoku and other right-wing actors, is among the issues that are strongly counterargued by progressives. Record China would also be intending to make the management of the quasi-alliance between Japan and the ROK difficult. Record China's influence activities thus could not only polarize Japan and weaken Japanese democracy, but also damage Japanese security.

2.2 SearChina

SearChina was founded in 1999 as a portal site to provide information on China-related news, especially financial news, based on the China Information Bureau (中国情報局) established a year ago by a Chinese entrepreneur and SearChina founder Masakazu Motoki. Its strength is in stock-related information, but it also selects socio-cultural news items from the Chinese media and disseminates them in Japanese.

In 2004, the site became a news source for Yahoo! Japan, the biggest online news site in Japan, and began reaching a wide Japanese audience. However, Yahoo! Japan cancelled its partnership with SearChina in September 2015, alarmed at the flood of anti-Korea news. Just as with Record China, there is a possibility that SearChina was intending to polarize Japanese society and deteriorate Japan-ROK relations. But according to *Diamond Weekly*, SearChina merely aimed to gain PR revenue with such news (Weekly Diamond Editorial Team, 2015). I attempted to conduct an interview with SearChina on this issue, but my interview request was declined.

In 2002, SearChina strengthened its ties with China and amped up its operations in that country. First, SearChina linked up with the China News Service and began translating and disseminating news from the China News Service in Japanese (Nikkei Shimbun, 2002). The China News Service is an official state media outlet, but the news content SearChina covered was on Chinese companies and did not carry political messages. In the same year, SearChina established Shanghai SearChina (新秦商務諮詢(上海)有限公司). Unlike Record China which hides its domain origin and its links to China, the establishment of Shanghai SearChina was publicly announced.

According to qichacha, Shanghai SearChina was purchased in 2015 by Beijing Xinzheng Huayi International Consulting Co. (北京新证华益国际咨询有限公司) (qichacha, 2020c) and changed its name to Guide (Shanghai) Information Consulting Co. (导知(上海)信息咨询有限公司) (qichacha, 2020b). Beijing Xinzheng Huayi International Consulting Co. is owned by Shanghai Xinzheng Finance and Economy Information Consulting Co., Ltd. (上海新证财经信息咨询有限公司) (qichacha, 2020d). Sino-Ocean Holding Group (远洋控股集团(中国)有限公司) and China Securities Journal, Inc. (中国证券报有限责任公司) together hold 85 percent of the shares of Shanghai Xinzheng Finance and Economy Information Consulting Co., Ltd. (qichacha, 2020e), and one of these, China Securities Journal, Inc., is 100 percent held by China Fortune Media Group Inc. (中国财富传媒集团股份公司) (qichacha, 2020f). Further, 96.42 percent of China Fortune Media Group's stock is held by Xinhua News Agency Investment Holdings Co., Ltd. (新华社控股有限公司) (qichacha, 2020g), which is under the Xinhua News Agency (新华通讯社)

(qichacha, 2020h), a news agency under the direct control of the CCP. Under multiple layers of ownership, former Shanghai SearChina thus came under the influence of the CCP.

However, this does not mean that SearChina itself is under the influence of the CCP and Xinhua. Shanghai SearChina was a subsidiary of SearChina only until February 2014, and it was only afterwards that Xinhua began exerting influence over the company as far as the evidence suggests. Furthermore, SBI Holdings (formerly standing for Soft Bank Investment, and currently Strategic Business Innovator), a Japanese private investing company, became the majority shareholder of SearChina in 2010.

Unlike Record China, SearChina does not release news with strong political messages, and it does not repost content from CCP news agencies. Table 7 shows the news sources used most frequently in SearChina articles. Unlike Record China, SearChina predominantly uses Chinese sources, and an overwhelming number of articles are driven from Toutiao, which is operated by ByteDance. ByteDance is not an official state media outlet, but it operates an especially strong self-censorship system among the private online media companies to follow the party line (Bi, 2020). In that sense, as SearChina predominantly uses ByteDance news content, its content is influenced by the CCP.

Table 7. 10 News Sources Most Frequently Used in SearChina (2019)

Name	Count	CCP Control
今日頭條 (Toutiao)	14,456	Censored; pro-CCP
東方網 (East Day)	246	Quasi-official state media
搜狐 (Sohu)	57	Censored; pro-CCP
快資訊 ("Quick Capital," Weibo)	13	Censored; pro-CCP
環球網 (Global Times)	12	Official state media
微博 (Weibo)	12	Censored; pro-CCP
網易 (NetEase)	10	Censored; pro-CCP
百度 (Baidu)	8	Censored; pro-CCP
人民網 (People's Daily)	7	Official state media
海外網 (Haiwai Net)	6	Official state media

Note: CCP control is determined based on Diamond and Schell (2019, chapter 6) and Bi (2020).

Source: Created by author using KH Coder.

This study examined SearChina's news content, taking all of the news items disseminated in 2019 as samples, but excluded articles on stock-related issues in order to focus on the political tendencies in SearChina news. The sample size totaled 3,778 articles. Table 8 presents the ten words that appeared most frequently throughout the articles. These results demonstrate that SearChina mainly publishes articles about Japan and China, and in 2019 it frequently distributed news articles on the competition over the high-speed railway between the two countries. The overview reveals SearChina's interest in economy-related news. SearChina seems to have decreased its dissemination of Korea-related news after the termination of its partnership contract with Yahoo! News in 2015.

Table 8. Most Frequently Used Words in SearChina (2019)

Word	Count	Word	Count
日本 (Japan)	63,182	競争 (competition)	41,895
受注 (receive an order)	55,771	プロジェクト (project)	27,901
中国 (China)	46,688	強み (strength)	27,893
鉄道 (railway)	42,134	掲載 (publication)	14,839
高速 (high-speed)	42,079	高い (high/expensive)	14,739

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

Table 9 presents the 50 adjective verbs (*keiyodoshi*) most frequently used in SearChina articles. It shows that the top 30 words are mostly positive. In the top 50, positive words were used 30,035 times, while negative words were used only 479 times. Given that Japan and China are two of the most frequently used words in SearChina content, this shows that SearChina selectively publishes articles that present Japan and China in a positive light.

Table 9. Most Frequently Used Adjective Verbs in SearChina (2019)

	Word	Count	Word	Count	Word	Count
1	安全 (safe)	14,097	豊か (wealthy)	78	新たな (new)	50
2	優位 (superior)	13,958	明らか (obvious)	77	さまざま (various)	49
3	非常 (emergent)	581	主 (main)	74	危険 (dangerous)	48
4	必要 (necessary)	351	安定 (stable)	68	圧倒的 (overwhelming)	47
5	様々 (various)	168	普通 (ordinary)	68	当たり前 (take for granted)	47
6	可能 (possible)	163	十分 (sufficient)	66	独自 (original)	47
7	重要 (important)	140	静か (quiet)	61	スマート (smart)	46
8	きれい (beautiful)	134	深刻 (serious)	60	不思議 (mysterious)	42
9	疑問 (doubtful)	134	独特 (peculiar)	60	完全 (perfectly)	39
10	清潔 (clean)	127	有名 (famous)	59	大変 (trouble)	39
11	確か (correct)	119	簡単 (simple)	58	多様 (diverse)	38
12	自然 (natural)	102	急速 (rapid)	57	残念 (disappointment)	37
13	便利 (convenient)	95	同様 (similar)	57	自由 (free)	37
14	好き (liking)	94	快適 (comfortable)	56	厳格 (rigorous)	36
15	大切 (important)	93	大量 (massive)	56	高額 (expensive)	36
16	高級 (high rank)	91	迷惑 (bothersome)	54	急激 (radical)	35
17	健康 (healthy)	81	豊富 (abundant)	51		

Note: Words shaded in gray are positive adjective verbs, and those highlighted with stripes are negative adjective verbs. Words on a white background are not classified as either positive or negative.

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

This research further tested for a correlation between positive or negative adjective verbs on the one hand and countries on the other. Taking adjective verbs that were used more than twice throughout the period, the research coded positive adjective verbs (186 words) as “positive” and negative adjective verbs (118 words) as “negative.” In addition, the words China, People’s Republic of China, Beijing, Chinese language, and Chinese people were coded as “China,” and Japan, Japanese language, and Japanese people were coded as “Japan.” The test did not include “Tokyo” in the code “Japan,” because the term Tokyo is not used to signify Japan to a Japanese audience, whereas the capital cities of other countries are used to represent those countries. In order to check whether SearChina still distributes anti-Korea news, the words Korea, Republic of Korea, Seoul, Korean language, and Korean people were coded as “ROK” and included in the test.

Table 10 presents the results of the analysis. The Jaccard coefficient takes the value from 0 to 1, with 0 indicating no similarity between codes, and 1 indicating a perfect overlap of codes. The results indicate that articles about Korea are not linked with either positive or negative adjective verbs, but articles about Japan and China are highly correlated with positive adjective verbs.

Table 10. SearChina Similarity Matrix (2019)

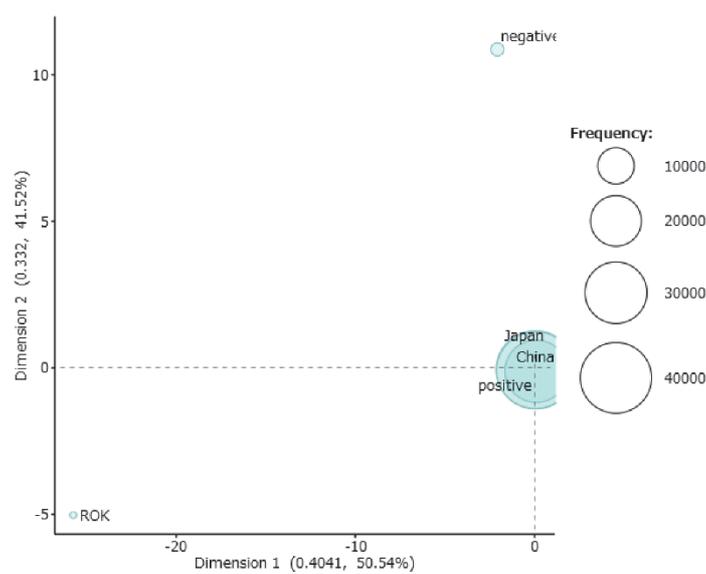
	Positive	Negative
Japan	0.587	0.011
China	0.591	0.009
ROK	0.001	0.014

Note: The analysis uses Jaccard coefficients. Larger numbers show greater similarities.

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

The Jaccard coefficient tends to have very low scores for items with moderate co-occurrence. Therefore, the difference in the Jaccard coefficient between the ROK and positive (0.001) and the ROK and negative (0.014) could still be a meaningful difference. The possibility should be tested using Pointwise Mutual Information, with which KH Coder is not equipped. This is a task for future research.

This research conducted a correspondence analysis as well which confirmed the results of the Similarity Matrix. Figure 5 shows that SearChina’s usage of positive terms heavily overlaps with its articles on Japan and China. While this may not be malicious impression manipulation, SearChina is selecting news content arbitrarily to disseminate a positive image about Japan and China. The creation of pro-China discourse is a tactic of the CCP, and thus there remains a possibility that the CCP is exerting some influence over SearChina.

Figure 5. SearChina Correspondence Analysis (2019)

Source: Created by the author using KH Coder.

In sum, SearChina has been arbitrarily disseminating positive news about China to expand pro-China sentiment in Japan. Although SearChina does not disseminate CCP propaganda like Record China does, the spread of pro-China discourse is in line with the Chinese government's information activities. Unlike Record China, however, SearChina did not report news to instigate anti-Korea sentiment, at least during the period examined. This study did not find a link between SearChina and the CCP. Further research is warranted about SearChina's intentions with its arbitrary news picks.

3. Measures against Disinformation

3.1 Government Response

In Japan, cyberattacks and website defacement targeting companies and ministries have been occurring since the early 2000s, and the Cabinet Secretariat's Information Security Policy Office was established in 2005 in response. The response to disinformation has not been sufficient to date. Due to weak awareness of the seriousness of the impact of disinformation in Japan, it was not until recently that the government set up a group to study disinformation.

In 2018, a study group was established in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, with combating disinformation as one of its themes. The final report, which was published in February 2020 after a series of meetings, states that measures against disinformation should be based on voluntary efforts by private actors. Specifically, the report requests that platform operators themselves remove disinformation and fake accounts in addition to the fact-checking efforts of private actors (Study Group on Platform Services, 2020, pp. 14, 35–36).

This recommendation has its pros and cons. On the one hand, it upholds the value of the rule of law and is thus commendable. In response to the spread of disinformation, some countries are working to

regulate disinformation by developing fake news laws. However, this runs the risk of the regulation entities enforcing the law arbitrarily and overly restricting freedom of expression. The approach does not fit with the rule of law, which aims to regulate *ex post*. Thus, the Japanese government does not take *ex ante* measures against disinformation. If disinformation causes concrete problems, it can be dealt with under the existing legal framework such as criminal law, the public office election law, the Law on Premiums, and the Law on Financial Instruments and Transactions.

On the other hand, given the expanding scale of disinformation and information manipulation activities, civil society needs much more support from the government in efforts to combat these issues. The following section addresses the state of the civil society response and related issues.

3.2 Civil Society Responses

Japanese civil society has organized networks of fact checkers such as GoHoo established in 2012 (and disbanded in 2019) and FIJ established in 2017. As of June 2020, FIJ has partnerships with 14 domestic media outlets and research institutes and four overseas fact checkers. Major media partners include Ryukyu Shimpo and Chukyo TV, and online media partners include BuzzFeed Japan and Japan In Depth (FIJ, 2020). These partners have conducted fact-check projects during major elections. Citizens and students also participate in fact checks (FIJ, 2019, p. 2).

In addition, major newspapers have been conducting fact checks on their own. The Asahi Shimbun has been fact checking statements made by politicians since the fall of 2016 (Minami & Mochizuki, 2018, p. 237). The Ryukyu Shimpo has been fact checking statements by politicians and information on the internet concerning Okinawa. However, none of the newspaper companies have a systematic fact-checking mechanism. Excessive self-regulation is one of the reasons behind the weak fact-checking mechanisms on the part of the media (Yanai, 2019).

In order to improve the credibility of online media and media literacy among consumers, the Japan Internet Media Association (JIMA) was also established in April 2019 as an organization of stakeholders' associations. Members have been sharing information to foster trust in the media (JIMA, n.d.).

These private sector efforts are expected to play a central role in tackling disinformation and information manipulation. To date, however, there have been three issues around fact checking in Japan. First, unlike in other countries where donations come from foundations and other sources, private fact-checking organizations in Japan suffer from a shortage of funding. GoHoo was plagued by a lack of funds, which led to its dissolution (Watchdog for accuracy in news reporting Japan disbanded, 2019). The FIJ as a platform is funded by foundations such as the KDDI Foundation and the Toyota Foundation, but there has been no funding for the actual fact checkers. Scholars use their research funds to conduct fact checking, and most fact checkers conduct their checks as voluntary social contributions (Yanai, 2019).

The lack of human resources is also a major problem. While there are many organizations overseas that focus solely on fact checking, such organizations do not exist in Japan. Fact checkers conduct checks in between their day-to-day tasks. There has been little sense of urgency to address the issue of disinformation within Japanese society because political manipulation through disinformation has been

relatively restrained so far (Yanai, 2019). However, with the expansion of disinformation already taking place with COVID-19, additional labor to conduct fact checking is greatly needed.

Third, compared to international fact-checking standards, some fact checks are weak in terms of neutrality and impartiality. There is no point in conducting fact checking if the content of the work is questionable. To address this problem, the International Fact-Checking Network sets out principles for fact checkers: non-partisanship and fairness; standards and transparency of sources; transparency of funding and organization; standards and transparency of methodology; and open and honest corrections (International Fact-Checking Network, n.d.). However, Hiroyuki Fujishiro (2019) points out that fact checks conducted by Ryukyu Shimpo and BuzzFeed during the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election were weak in both impartiality and transparency of sources. The lack of a systematic fact-checking, human resources, and funding appear to be the cause of such quality issues.

4. Conclusion: Necessities for the Future

Existing studies have either not found evidence of information manipulation in Japan (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Weber, 2019), or have argued that such influence is weak (Stewart, 2020). However, Japan is not immune to information manipulation. There are domestic political actors, trolls, and entities that function to spread the CCP's propaganda, creating disinformation and engaging in other influence activities. The use of disinformation by domestic political actors, along with its amplification by their trolls, are weakening trust in mass media and increasing hatred towards people with foreign roots. In addition, under the influence of the CCP's United Front Work Department, Record China has not only been spreading propaganda for the CCP and trying to nurture pro-China sentiment and discourse; with its information activities, it seems to be attempting to polarize Japanese society and deteriorate Japan-ROK relations as well. SearChina has also been trying to nurture pro-China sentiment arbitrarily, although it was not found to be under direct CCP influence. Japanese conservatives and right-wing communities who are both anti-China and anti-ROK should be aware that their anti-ROK sentiment is instigated and manipulated by the CCP.

The amount of disinformation/misinformation spread by domestic political actors has expanded exponentially with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Societal need for systematic fact checking is at a historically high level. With the introduction of an automated detector of dubious information, named the Fact-Checking Console, FIJ has expanded the amount of fake news it is able to detect. In 2020, 200 to 300 instances of dubious discourse have been detected every month. However, without human and financial resources, FIJ partners cannot conduct high-quality fact checks on the scale that is needed. The Japanese government should support private fact checkers financially. In order to do so without violating the autonomy of fact checkers, quasi-governmental private foundations such as the Japan Foundation should fund such work. Governmental projects to nurture fact checkers might also help in raising awareness and interest in fact checking.

Further research on the influence of external actors is also greatly needed. The scope of the current

study is insufficient given the limitation of the sample size. Further study is warranted to examine whether and how China-linked domestic news portal sites have changed their news content over time along with their strengthening of relations with the CCP. The impact of the cancellation of contracts with Yahoo! News should also be addressed. This study did not have enough space to examine whether Record China and SearChina are disseminating disinformation, and thus additional study of this issue is strongly warranted. Furthermore, the fact that the CCP is instigating anti-ROK sentiment in Japan suggests that the CCP is likely doing the same in the ROK, indicating the need for studies on China's influence activities in the ROK and the instigation of anti-Japan sentiment. Policymakers in the two countries must be strongly mindful not to be influenced by such instigation from China.

As a caveat, strict scientific methodology is essential for the objectivity of any such study. We need to pay extra attention to not manipulate information arbitrarily with our research.

Appendix. Stop Word List for Record China and SearChina

All of the adverbs (categorized as adverb, adverb possible, and adverb B in KH Coder)	All of the verbs (categorized as verb and verb B in KH Coder)
中国メディア (Chinese media)	新聞 (newspaper)
韓国メディア (Korean media)	紹介 (introduce)
台湾メディア (Taiwanese media)	指摘 (point out)
香港メディア (Hong Kong media)	説明 (explain)
米メディア (US media)	発表 (announce)
米華字メディア (Chinese language media in the US)	コメント (comment)
蘭華字メディア (Chinese language media in the Netherlands)	報道 (report)
声 (voice)	引用 (quote)
国 (country)	動画 (video)
月 (month)	1つ (one)
年 (year)	2つ (two)
人 (people)	3つ (three)
ネット (internet)	4つ (four)
ユーザー (user)	5つ (five)
ニュース (news)	6つ (six)
ツイッター (Twitter)	7つ (seven)
記事 (article)	8つ (eight)
メディア (media)	9つ (nine)

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Country Case 2: Mongolia

Misinformation and the Social Media Landscape in Mongolia

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Introduction

If we can use them, social networks offer an opportunity for great development for a country with a small population and a large territory like Mongolia. On the other hand, if we, Mongolians, do not start taking advantage of modern information and communication technology immediately, we will lag behind other countries. Nowadays, we have no choice but to join social networks and adjust our work and lives accordingly.

Citizens of countries that are now building e-societies can vote without leaving home and prepare all types of reports and news. These countries have been implementing “electronic signatures” to sign documents, agreements, and contracts on smartphones. Bureaucracy is no longer as government agencies integrate information at all levels and have begun to serve their citizens online.

Countries that successfully built e-societies have established decentralized, open information infrastructure and connected various services and databases. Over time, e-society is being expanded to meet new needs by enriching this infrastructure with new industries and new products.

Estonia, which has established one of the world’s most prosperous e-societies, has achieved an unprecedented level of transparency and openness in public governance, allowing individuals, governments, and businesses to share information in a highly secure online environment at any time. Since social services are provided to everyone quickly online, it has made it possible for citizens to protect their health and prevent diseases. As a result, the average age of the population has increased significantly. Education is also becoming more competitive around the world as the education sector changes. We Mongolians are nomads and curious people by nature, and we always try to find the reason behind things. We are also quick to learn foreign languages and are good at adapting to new environments. Mongolia ranks quite high in terms of the ratio of people living abroad compared to the overall population. However, this is not sufficient to take full advantage of the benefits of online social networks. Today, we need favorable business conditions, an environment which encourages innovation, information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, and transparent government regulations

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that support fair competition.

Mongolia ranked 61st, which is two ranks lower than the prior year, in the World Economic Forum report of 2014, which compared 144 countries by criteria such as internet penetration, adult education, cell phone usage, and investors in this sector. Finland, Singapore, and Sweden were ranked at the top by the report and Hong Kong and the Republic of Korea were ranked in the top 10 from Asia. These countries led others in terms of such indicators as a favorable business environment, good information technology infrastructure, and population skills. Finland, for example, has one of the best education systems in the world, is a hub for e-innovation, has the largest number of patents in the ICT sector per capita, and 90 percent of all households have access to the internet (compared to 85 percent in the UK, 70 percent in the United States, and 14 percent in Mongolia). Mongolia ranked 95th in terms of government vision for ICT, 45th in terms of introducing the internet to government services, and 103rd in terms of promoting this sector to its citizens.

The digitalization of society increases economic growth and creates new workplaces. Buzz Co, for example, rates countries by a conversion index of zero to 100. The company found that a 10 percent increase in this index results in a parallel increase of a country's GDP per capita by 0.75 percent and a fall of 1.02 percent in unemployment. Mongolia ranked between 35 and 50 in this index, with the Mongolian economy defined as one in transition. Creating an e-society (the E-Mongolia project) will play a key role in ending the economy's reliance on mining alone and in developing other sectors.

Twenty-seven percent of Mongolia's population is under the age of 14, while 20 percent is between the ages of 15 and 24. In other words, almost half of the population is under the age of 25, which is considered an age at which people learn fast. Most people in this demographic never knew life without the digital world, cell phones, and the internet. Mongolia can develop rapidly in a short period of time if we provide the population with bilingual education in English and Mongolian, as well as other foreign languages, and develop and use ICT infrastructure competently. To do so, Mongolia's ICT infrastructure and the confidential information of individuals, businesses, and the government must be secured. However, this does not mean restricting the use of the internet in the name of security, as everyone should have the freedom to go online.

Protecting privacy and internet freedom has become a major challenge for democracies as well as a key requirement for rapid development. The Fourth Annual Freedom Online Coalition conference was held in April 2014 in the Estonian capital of Tallinn with more than 400 delegates from over 60 countries participating. At this conference, Mongolia was selected as the chair of the Freedom Online Coalition and the next annual Freedom Online conference is slated to be held in Ulaanbaatar, which shows that the country is democratic and protects the freedom of the internet. As part of this prestigious event, Mongolia will have a lot of work to do to digitalize the country and will have a great opportunity to learn and work with civil society organizations from other member countries as well as reputable supporting companies such as Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft.

It is time for our government, civil society, the private sector, and the public as a whole to realize that making Mongolia electronic is a priority for today's Mongolians, a commitment to the next generation, and an honor. However, mass media has always been an important instrument in the toolkit

of politicians. Throughout modernity, the use of newspapers, radio stations, posters, and television have always had a fundamental influence on the perception of the public. However, in recent years the growing trend of using internet-based tools such as social media has been especially effective in exploiting fundamental cultural characteristics such as traditions, shared values, identities, religious beliefs, and nationalities. This exploitation is aimed directly at stimulating the opinion of the public and directing their attention to produce a favorable political climate that benefits the political interests of certain individuals and groups.

Disinformation and the Mongolian Legal Environment

According to a research study conducted by the Communications Regulatory Commission of Mongolia, there were 2,512,100 internet users in Mongolia in 2016 in duplicate from various devices such as mobile phones and computers. The study found that 86.7 percent of users are located in Ulaanbaatar, 10.3 percent of users are in Aimaks, and 2.9 percent operate in Soums. The research shows that Mongolians are increasingly using social media rather than traditional media to express their views and opinions.

Mongolia has in theory stopped the spread of false information, defamation, and insults via legal mechanisms such as the Law on Infringement, the Law on Child Protection, and the Law on Elections, but in practice, it has not been very effective. Most recently, in 2019, the Law on Infringement was amended to impose fines of MNT 2 million on individuals and MNT 20 million on legal entities for spreading slander or insulting disinformation. These fines are 100-2000 percent greater than the average monthly salary of Mongolians. This clause in the law is used more frequently in the media and in political activities than in civilian life, and blocks the freedom, democracy, and independence of the media sector.

Disinformation in Mongolia

Fake news and disinformation and their effects on democratic institutions and the perception of democracy have become a strongly debated topic around the world. These trends have not passed over the democracies in Asia but have had a unique and volatile effect on the political realities of the region. From President Rodrigo Duterte's campaign allegedly depicting the country as a "narco-state" in the 2016 Philippine elections to the passing of so-called "fake news laws" in Malaysia and Cambodia and the periodic blocking of social media platforms such as Facebook in Sri Lanka, the role of disinformation is without a doubt present in Asian politics.

Mongolia is also facing its own challenges with fake news and disinformation. Like the infamous words "Make America Great Again" and "...build the wall" that brought victory in the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the slogan "Mongolia will win" also triumphed over sound fiscal policy and the continuation of mega projects. The presidential election of 2017 demonstrated how strong of a tool social media platforms can be while also showcasing how effective disinformation campaigns aimed at emotional triggers are during elections.

Defining “Disinformation” and “Fake News”

The act of spreading false information to achieve political or military objectives is as old as politics and war itself. However, the terminology that we use today, namely, disinformation and fake news, are relatively new. A loan word from Russian, “disinformation” has only been in use outside of the Soviet Union since the 1980s. As for “fake news,” this term is very modern and has only been in usage in its current context since 2016. Though modern and viral in its use, there is currently no definition that encapsulates all of its contextual meanings. Thus, with a caveat, the definition of the Collins Dictionary will be used as they named it the “official Word of the Year” in 2017. Collins Dictionary defines fake news as “false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting.” To define disinformation, we use the definition in the UNESCO report “Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation - Handbook for Journalism Education and Training” for the sake of simplicity. This report defines the term as “information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country.” Though simple, the definition is broad enough to incorporate the political, military, and economic uses of the concept. Popularized by Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential elections, fake news is too broad of a term to effectively describe political events and phenomena. Therefore, we will rely more on the term disinformation.

The History of Disinformation in Politics

The word disinformation itself is disinformation. In his 2013 book “Disinformation,” former Lt. General Ion Mihai Pacepa, who later defected from Romania to the United States, writes that “Stalin gave the tactic a French-sounding title, dezinformatsiya in Russian, in order to put forth the ruse that it was actually a technique used by the Western world.” Indeed, it was the Russians who wrote the metaphorical textbook on the use of disinformation for military and political gain. One of the most well-known disinformation campaigns, popularized as “Operation INFEKTION,” shows exactly how effective this tool can be. Directed at exploiting cracks in the cohesion of a society and undermining the unity of the state, Operation INFEKTION gave rise to the concept that the United States created the AIDS virus as a biological weapon and to eradicate the poor black population. Still to this day rumors and hearsay persist that implicate the United States in the alleged creation of the disease.

Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the tool that is disinformation has not been abandoned. According to the Russian Social Media Influence report published in 2018 by the Rand Cooperation, Russia “disseminates propaganda to Russian speakers in the Baltics, Ukraine, and other nearby states … to sow dissent against host and neighboring countries, as well as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union.”

The examples above all depict organized disinformation campaigns. A certain level of organization is required to execute an undertaking of such magnitude. Yet many a time erroneous news takes on a life of its own and becomes what is commonly described as “fake news.” Here it is important to attempt to distinguish the phenomenon. Aside from organized disinformation campaigns, fake news can also stem

from inaccurate or speculative reporting as well as the simplification of an event to such a degree that it no longer correctly conveys reality.

Fake News, Disinformation, and Politics

As fake news in the media landscape is being used intentionally for political gain, before the widespread use of the term “fake news,” there was in fact a considerable amount of insight into what is commonly described as misinformation and disinformation.

The use of fabricated facts goes back as far as writing itself. From Octavian’s smear campaign where he etched slogans onto coins to compromise the reputation of Mark Antony, to the many applications of mis- and disinformation used by militaries around the world, deceiving the enemy or the public to meet one’s objectives has always been fairly common. However, it was only after the invention of the Gutenberg press that fake news became a tool to shape the opinion of the public. The Great Moon Hoax of 1835, the German corpse factory of 1917, and the news article about Irishmen stealing bibles in 1844 that led to revolts and violence are just some of the many examples. Nations understood the power of this new tool, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, the Soviet propaganda apparatus, and many organizations in other countries dedicated to managing reality in their own nations.

Although the literature on the subject is extensive and it may seem that it is well researched, the era of the internet has changed the rules of the game. In recent years the phenomenon of fake news has taken on a new life. With the universal accessibility of information that is provided by the internet, not only state sponsored actors but also individuals can become crucial players in the fake news scene. The 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit vote are key examples of how fake news and its effects on the perceptions of the public have a significant degree of influence over election results.

The Social Media Landscape of Mongolia

It has only been 30 years since Mongolia transitioned to democracy and a free market economy, thus opening itself to the entire world. In the early days of this monumental shift, Mongolians realized that they were behind the rest of the world in many aspects of communication technology. However, the speed at which Mongolia has reformed the internet and communication landscape has been breathtaking. Currently, the two biggest cellular operators in Mongolia, Mobicom and Unitel, have penetrated even the farthest edges of the country. Where once it was only possible to communicate with the outside world by traveling long distances on a horse to the nearest Soum center to make phone calls, the situation has changed so drastically that it is possible to film Facebook live videos using 4G cellular internet in the most distant of places. However, there are still areas where cellular internet is not very strong and people have to manage with only cellular data connections. According to the IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking 2019, Mongolia ranks 3rd in the world in terms of smartphone possession and 6th in terms of

investment in telecommunications.

Demographically, the country is very young. Nearly 60 percent of the population is under the age of 35. As culture and entertainment become ever more global, the young people of Mongolia have grown accustomed to watching their favorite YouTubers and Instagrammers. This need to consume online-based entertainment products has also been an incentive to build increasingly more complex systems to guarantee a constant internet connection.

Among the many social media platforms in the world, Facebook reigns supreme in Mongolia. According to websites such as www.statista.com, North America has the highest percentage of Facebook users with respect to the population. Yet, multiple internet user statistic aggregating websites consistently show that more than 80 percent of the Mongolian population is active on Facebook. As of January 2019, Mongolia had 2.2 million active Facebook users. This number puts Mongolia first in Asia and 10th in the world compared with the total population, according to Facebook's "Affected Internet Index-2018." In terms of global usage of Facebook, one user on average writes five comments, gives 16 likes, shares a post three times and makes 12 posts per month. One interesting fact is that the average amount of time spent on Facebook per day is approximately 53 minutes around the world, while that number is around 77 minutes in Mongolia. This shows that Mongolians spend on average more time on the platform than their counterparts in other countries. Facebook's own Messenger application is also the most common method of communication in the country.

However, before accepting these staggering numbers, one must consider that the statistics websites do not take into account how many of these Facebook "users" are in fact real people. The use of fake, clone, and troll accounts is documented around the world, especially in Eastern Europe and China. Although there are currently no studies on the number of fake accounts in Mongolia, there are consistent rumors of large groups of people managing thousands of fake accounts to artificially create the public perception of politicians and political parties on social media platforms.

In addition, there are studies showing more than 44,000 active Twitter users in the country. Although the absolute value is low, in comparison to the population, 44,000 is a considerable number. Another aspect to the Twitter scene in Mongolia is that people consider the platform to be one for political and intellectual thinking. As the common joke goes, there are no stupid people on Twitter. In fact, the platform is accepted as such to a degree that relatively small movements on Twitter have changed laws and regulations in the past.

Media Literacy and Disinformation

Media literacy or digital literacy is a fairly new but pressing topic for Mongolia. With the number of active internet users and the overabundance of online-based news outlets as well as the lack of any institutionalized form of education on digital literacy, the accuracy and trustworthiness of sources comes heavily into question. As a result, fake news, misinformation, and possible disinformation can easily be found on the Mongolian Facebook scene.

A common method for developing Facebook pages and accumulating “likes” is to announce lotteries. For instance, in 2018 a Facebook page named “Bayanmongol town” started a competition by posting “Win a two-room 65.6m² apartment by liking, sharing.” At the end of a given period of time the organizers would randomly select one of the people who shared the post and they would win the grand prize of a two room apartment. The post reached 10 million people (many people engaged with the post more than once), 400 likes, 14,972 shares, and 12,800 comments. Without resolving the competition, the Facebook page later changed its name. Another tried and tested scheme is to post a picture and tie some sort of superstition to it. One example is an account named “Mongolian Hit” that posted a picture of a bundle of money, explaining that whoever shares the post within five seconds of seeing it will attain great wealth in the next 24 hours. This post had obtained 37,600 shares as of March 20, 2018.

The above are some of the more benign examples where the culprit merely ends up with a Facebook page with a considerable number of likes. However, there are other nefarious ways to prey on the lack of digital literacy of Mongolians. From time to time Facebook based applications make the rounds on the platform. These applications offer to allow a user to change the sex of their profile picture or extrapolate their ethnicity based on the pictures in their Facebook albums. All the user has to do is to login using their Facebook credentials and therefore their email or phone number. In one elegant motion the creators of the application have now gained access to the user’s private information.

Another common technique that abuses the naiveté of the average Facebook user is to post blatant lies. Such acts of disinformation usually utilize the abundant Sinophobic leanings in Mongolian society. It is not rare to go after specific politicians by “discovering” their Chinese heritage. The popular Facebook page DMNN, which has over 300,000 followers, often uses this strategy. During the current parliamentary elections in Mongolia, the page has depicted some candidates as Chinese and provided additional context painting them as traitors or spies.

Disinformation in Mongolian Politics

The political reality in Mongolia has become very interesting yet volatile. As detailed above, a significant amount of money has been invested in telecommunications so that 3G or 4G internet is accessible in all settled areas and nearly all corners of the country. It is a nation where virtually all voters have a smartphone with internet access and a significant majority have Facebook accounts. Yet, Mongolians remain lacking in media literacy. This combination of extreme connectivity coupled with the lack of tools and skills that help determine whether something they read or see is indeed real or fake makes the general population exceptionally vulnerable to fake news and organized disinformation campaigns in this post-truth world.

The most recent case where large-scale media campaigns affected election results may have been during the 2017 Mongolian presidential elections. To give a little context, the ruling Mongolian People’s Party had nominated M. Enkhbold, the then-Speaker of the Parliament against whom the opposition, the Democratic Party of Mongolia, had nominated Kh. Battulga. A third candidate from the Mongolian

People's Revolutionary Party was also running; however, he was eliminated in the first round of the elections.

Even before the start of the official campaign period, Mr. Kh. Battulga announced “Mongolia will win” as his slogan. The exact meaning of these words was never fully explained. Some interpreted it as “Mongolia has been losing, now it’s time to win,” while others understood it to be a Mongolian version of Trump’s “Make America Great Again.” However, based on the Facebook comments on the subject, most people understood the slogan as meaning that “M. Enkhbold is Chinese and a genuine Mongolian should be elected.” To further drive this point home, the campaign team of the Democratic Party started posting three important videos on June 1 and 2. This was before the official start of the campaign period. The three videos were titled “Enkhbold’s ethnic heritage,” “The death of a brave Mongolian,” and “Insulting the Great Chinggis Khan.” These posts quickly went viral. The first video was disseminated by posting it in one of Mongolia’s largest Facebook groups with over 330,000 members.

Although it is impossible to pinpoint the exact amount of influence these videos had on the final results of the election, we can see from this example that negative campaigns on social media platforms that abuse common sentiments amongst the population can reach a significant number of voters and have the potential to affect their decision making.

Social Media Platforms and their Effects

During the last presidential election, Mongolian politicians all understood the effectiveness of social media. Hence, for the first time, Article 47, relating to the use of social networks, was added to the Parliamentary Election Law. Article 47.1 of the law clearly defines what kind of websites can be used, Article 47.2 dictates terms of website use, and Article 47.3 stipulates rules for using websites. For instance, candidates must register their website with the GEC, and then the site can be used during the election campaign as long as it is configured to not allow commenting. Candidates are also obligated to temporarily close their website for the 24 hours before polling day. However, enforcement of this new law was poor as plenty of “candidate support pages” ran during the election campaign period. The “Youth for Policy Watch” NGO also reported that politicians and political parties sharply increased their spending on social networks in this election. It is noteworthy that the Mongolian People's Party stated in the audit report undertaken by Youth for Policy Watch that their social network expenses were about 15 percent of the total election expenditure. In comparison, expenses relating to radio and television accounted for more than 50 percent of their total expenditures, indicating that the electoral system has lost its traditional form. It is worth noting that all radio and television content was also broadcasted across social networks.

Social Media and the Legislative Election 2020 in Mongolia

Parliamentary elections were held in Mongolia on June 24, 2020. The result was a victory for the ruling

Mongolian People's Party, which won 62 of the 76 seats, a slight decrease from the 65 won in the 2016 elections. The 76 members of the State Great Khural will be elected by plurality-at-large voting in multi-member constituencies. 606 candidates/121 independents, 12 political parties, and four coalitions competed for 76 seats.

The center-right Democratic Party won 11 seats. The candidate of “Our” Coalition, former State Great Khural member and vice chairperson of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party Sainkhuu Ganbaatar, won a seat as did the candidate of the “Right Person Electorate” Coalition and Chairperson of the National Labor Party Togmid Dorjkhand. Former Prime Minister of Mongolia Norov Altankhuyag won one seat as an independent candidate.

The 76 members who won the election have an average of 46,988 likes on Facebook. Surprisingly, Aubakar. A does not have a Facebook account, Uchral Nyam-Osor (184,000) has the most likes, and broadcaster Anujin Purev-Ochir (5,800)³ has the least number of likes. By duplicating likes from the same people, these 76 members have a total of 3,524,120 likes on Facebook.

During the election period, Facebook was the most used social media platform by politicians, who posted content an average of six times during the 18 days of the campaign for a fee. As this is only the average number of daily posts made by the elected members, we cannot accurately estimate the amount paid for publications behind the official and unofficial pages of the 530 candidates, political parties, and coalitions. It also is impossible to estimate how many posts were false.

Disinformation and Election Scandals

Two major scandals in this election targeted two candidates from the ruling party. Beginning May 19, 2020, a rumor spread widely over a period of fourteen days that Amartuvshin. G was a citizen of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, meaning that a foreign national was seeking election to the Mongolian legislature. This information continued to spread until Secretary General of the MPP, Amarbayasgalan. D, announced that he had instructed the law enforcement agencies to verify the information and that if the candidate was found to be a foreigner, he would have to withdraw his name and further legal action would be taken. Surprisingly, candidate Amartuvshin. G also issued a statement proving his lack of citizenship in the Kingdom of the Netherlands on June 17, a month after the news first spread and a week before voting day. The reason why this false information was so convincing and widespread is that the Ard Financial Group director Gankhuyag. Ch, who is one of Amarbayasgalan. D's close associates, demanded on his Twitter and Facebook pages that he prove whether or not he is a foreign citizen. Due to this post on social media, many people didn't believe the truth even after Amarbayasgalan. D denied the rumor as false.

The next sensation was that Prime Minister Khurelsukh. U's “secret lover” was dating other high-ranking government officials. A photo of a young woman working in the Cabinet Secretariat of Government was posted on social media and social media users were convinced that she also had a close relationship with MPP candidate Bat-Erdene. J. Due to the spread of this false information, the woman

³ Please find more information in the appendix

was taken to the hospital in critical condition, although the incident was covered up when she appeared in public on July 22 and denied the false information. “It is unfortunate that social media is affecting our personal lives and that our personal lives are influencing politics,” she said in a video posted online.

Although the election law prohibits conducting and publishing research, since the start of the election campaign, there has been a proliferation of blatantly fabricated research studies and information that can be misleading to the public. Psychologists Sigmund Freud, Gustave Le Bon, and Gabriel Tarde have theoretically proven that the spread of false information influences mass psychology. The famous Spanish philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset said, “A person who comprises the collective strives to become an average representation of the collective and shies away from standing out, the collective does not contemplate or reflect but instead is guided by gossip, indirect attitudes, and gossip.” The MEC Politbarometer project, a local research organization, is one of the activities that has led the public to engage in the psychology of making choices like everyone else. Every three days, the company used its Facebook account to determine the ratings of candidates in 29 constituencies and publish research such as “If the election was today, these politicians would win,” and then distribute it to all citizens at a high cost. The company stated that this research was conducted by professors, doctors, and experts from major domestic universities. It is not possible to estimate the extent of the influence this research had on the voters, but their predictions matched 79 percent of the actual results. Such activities are irrelevant to political or journalism education since they effect irrational decision making among voters and citizens.

Civil Society in the 2020 Legislative Election

Since the first free and democratic elections were held in 1992, voter turnout has steadily declined until the 2016 elections.

Year	Election Turnout	Year	Election Turnout
1992	95.6 percent	2008	76.5 percent
1996	92.1 percent	2012	67.3 percent
2000	82.4 percent	2016	74.4 percent
2004	81.8 percent	2020	74.6 percent

As the social environment developed, the e-campaign to increase the minimum age of participation from 18 to 25 in the election became rather intense, as can be seen from the turnout in the 2016-2020 legislative election. The National Statistics Office (NSO) reported that only three out of 10 people aged 15-25 voted in the 2016 parliamentary elections. By the time the results of the research were announced, Mongolian society was divided and the comments of the older generation, who strongly criticized the youth, and the actions of civil society organizations began to appear on social media. As shown by the prominent news outlet Ikon, this resulted in a 62 percent participation rate of 18 to 25-year-olds in the 2020 Parliamentary elections.

Highlights of the campaigns across the country to increase youth participation in elections include:

- From October 2019, the Academy of Political Education has organized a “mock election” program nationwide, providing students aged 17-24 with the opportunity to compete and participate in

elections directly.

- Morning social project from Zorig Foundation.
- “I have a suggestion” social campaign organized by UBLIFE.MN
- Election with Deel (Mongolian traditional costume)

The “I have a suggestion” project alone was a major social media campaign that reached 4,600,000 people in total in July 2020 (Altanchimeg, 2020).

Conclusion

The lack of digital literacy combined with the overwhelming presence of Facebook in Mongolia gives politicians and parties ample justification to invest heavily in efforts to disseminate information across their platforms as well as sabotage the efforts of their rivals on social media and other digital spaces.

Many civil society organizations are combating this threat by launching digital literacy and political education campaigns in Mongolia. Positive changes can already be seen. In the 2017 presidential elections, a fabricated picture of a politician with a catchy slogan was enough to change the perception of the public. This will not suffice this year. The voters have become perceptive to the dangers of fake news. Many ordinary users comment on such pictures asking for actual sources or outright dismissing it as false. As the digital literacy of voters increases, the methods and techniques to influence voters will also develop. Technologies such as deepfakes and Deep Voice may already have been used for political purposes. It will only be a matter of time before these technologies penetrate the Mongolian political and social media landscape. This in turn will start anew the process of gullible voters and educating the people on these aspects of misinformation.

We have experienced a lot of conflict and mistrust related to technology. One example is a scandal that arose before the parliamentary elections of 2016, a political case known in Mongolian society as “60 billion.” This case was part of a plan to raise funds for the party’s election in the form of bargains for government positions. The Mongolian People’s Party (MPP) is said to have won the election by raising MNT 60 billion through bargaining. Due to the release of related audio and video footage on social media, ruling MPP officials faced strong opposition. MPP officials dismissed the video footage as having been “edited,” but this has remained a hot political topic for the past four years because only about half of the public believed the video was edited. However, the case was closed when two people related to this case pled guilty and were imprisoned. If the above-mentioned sophisticated technology penetrates social media in Mongolia, we will lack the cognitive education to discover the truth, much less face and accept the truth.

Appendix

List of Mongolian Great Khural State Members and their Facebook Page Likes

No.	Name	Party	Likes	No.	Name	Party	Likes
1	Baatarbileg Yo	MPP	4k	39	Purevdorj B	DP	22k
2	Munkhbat J	MPP	40k	40	Byambatsogt S	MPP	106k
3	Temuulen G	MPP	23k	41	Davaasuren S	MPP	21k
4	Badelkhan D	MPP	8k	42	Munkhbaatar L	MPP	23k
5	Aubakar A	MPP		43	Enkh-Amgalan L	MPP	90k
6	Beysen D	DP	5.5k	44	Khurelsukh U	MPP- PM	175k
7	Zandanshatar G	MPP Speaker	110k	45	Oyun-Erdene L	MPP	149k
8	Ganbat D	DP	25k	46	Bat-Erdene B	MPP	124k
9	Adiyasuren A	DP	20k	47	Javkhlan B	MPP	13k
10	Anandbazar B	MPP	6.4k	48	Damdinyam G	MPP	19k
11	Bat-Erdene J	MPP	24k	49	Battumur B	MPP	23k
12	Enkh-Amgalan B	MPP	24k	50	Batlut D	MPP	18k
13	Radnaased D	MPP	16k	51	Altankhuyag N	Independent	160k
14	Batbold Su	MPP	10k	52	Ganbaatar S	"Our" coalition MPRP	141k
15	Munkhtsetseg G	MPP	9.5k	53	Amarsaikhan S	MPP	181k
16	Bolorchuluun A	MPP	13k	54	Sandag-Ochir Ts	MPP	9.3k
17	Sergelen Ts	MPP	7.6k	55	Enkhbayar B	MPP	65k
18	Delgersaikhan D	MPP	13k	56	Saranchimeg B	MPP	27k
19	Enkhtuvshin T	MPP	6.5k	57	Chinburen J	MPP	41k
20	Tserenpuntsag Ts	MPP	26k	58	Bulgantuya Kh	MPP	45k
21	Bayarsaikhan B	MPP	18k	59	Munkhtsetseg Ts	MPP	11k
22	Chinzorig S	MPP	17k	60	Bat-Amgalan E	MPP	27k
23	Togtokhsuren D	MPP	15k	61	Tsogtbaatar D	MPP	24k
24	Ganbold G	MPP	18k	62	Munkh-Orgil Ts	MPP	22k
25	Naranbaatar N	MPP	21k	63	Ayursaikhan T	MPP	71k
26	D. Bat-Erdene	DP	34k	64	Oyunchimeg M	MPP	22k
27	Batsuuri J	DP	14k	65	Sukhbaatar J	MPP	14k
28	Ganibal N	DP	11k	66	Gankhuyag Kh	MPP	72k
29	Erdenebat J	MPP	151k	67	Ganbaatar J	MPP	137k
30	Undram Ch	MPP	11k	68	Odontuya S	DP	90k
31	Unurbolor D	MPP	16k	69	Nyambaatar Kh	MPP	88k
32	Batjargal J	MPP	6.6k	70	Jargalmaa B	MPP	9.2k
33	Tuvaan Ts	DP	8.7k	71	Uchral N	MPP	184k
34	Enkhbold N	MPP	48k	72	Sumiyabazar D	MPP	44k
35	Tsogtgerel O	DP	50k	73	Anujin P	MPP	5.8k
36	Khurelbaatar Ch	MPP	120k	74	Amartuvshin G	MPP	142k
37	Chojjilsuren B	MPP	11k	75	Sarangerel D	MPP	27k
38	Adishaa Sh	DP	15k	76	Dorjkhand T	"Right Person" coalition Labour Party	

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Country Case 3: South Korea

The Rise of Political Social Media in South Korea: A Focus on Disinformation and Polarization

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I . Introduction

Social media defined as a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content emerged in the mid-2000s. Google and Wikipedia were founded in 1998 and 2001 respectively. Globally popular social media sites such as Myspace (2003), Facebook (2004), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006) soon followed.² The development of “Web 2.0” has shifted the channels for networked communication to interactive platforms that reach a much wider section of the public. When Tim O’Reilly coined the term “Web 2.0” in 2005 to distinguish this change from the “Web 1.0,” he envisioned a platform network spanning all connected devices based on radical trust, radical decentralization, and collective intelligence. Over the past decade, these social media brands have come to punctuate everyday social life. Now online searches are often simply referred to as “googling.” Facebook’s “sharing,” “liking,” and “friending” and Twitter’s “following” and “trending” became trendy words.

Social media companies all started by emphasizing “participatory culture” as the buzzword that connoted the web’s potential to nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy. However, most of these companies have morphed into large global businesses through the commercialization process, with the exception of Wikipedia which still maintains a nonmarket peer-production model.³ People know that social media platforms are not a neutral utility but rather a commercial tool that exploits their unpaid digital labor and monetizes the content and data they generate. Nevertheless, using social media has become a way of life for people living a digitally connected world. Expressing and sharing political information and opinions is one key aspect of this digital way of life.

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² Scholars used to use the term computer mediated communication (CMC) or social network service or site (SNS), and some still prefer to use these terms. But “social media” has become the preferred new term to describe the exponential rise of interactive two-way vehicles of networked sociality.

³ Supporting the goal of making the web more social also means supporting the idea of sharing user created content and user background data. Corporate platforms soon discovered that they could commoditize valuable by-products of behavioral and profiling data by means of coding technologies. Van Dijck (2013, 4) says “connectivity quickly evolved into a valuable resource as engineers found ways to code information into algorithms that helped brand a particular form of online sociality and make it profitable in online markets.” Fuchs (2017, 127) is much more critical, arguing that corporations and capitalistic logic have colonized social media.

Accordingly, researchers have begun to pay attention to the role of social media in democracy.

Optimists view social media as a tool that enhances freedom and facilitates cooperation and collective action. For example, Shirley (2008, 172) says, “To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others,” and this freedom of speech on social media means freedom of the press and freedom of assembly. For Castells (2013, 2015), the internet is a material culture promoting freedom. He views the most important transformation of digital communication as the shift of mass communication to “mass self-communication” that aids horizontal communication networks in prevailing over traditional vertical forms of communication. In the interaction between power (largely coming from institutions) and counter-power (from civil society), he argues, the expansion of mass self-communication has supported an unexpected, extraordinary broadening of individual and social actors capable of challenging the power of the state (Castells, 2013, xxiv). The culture of networked individualism can find its best form of expression in this mass self-communication universe since it is characterized by autonomy, horizontal networking, interaction, and the individual initiated recombination of content (Castells, 2013, 125). Social media rose as a response to a lack of trust in mainstream media and a general feeling of exhaustion of listening to experts. In a similar vein, Gerbaudo (2018) characterizes social media as the gathering spaces where those who are typically underrepresented and lonely can coalesce into crowds, make their voices heard, and rally together. Papacharissi (2010, 164) is also affirmative by arguing that social media sites like Twitter connect the personal in the private sphere to the political, and the self to the polity and society. She argues activities that were previously pursued in the public realm are now practiced in the private realm of social media. Gardels (2019) maintains that the participatory power of social media networks is a game changer for governance as it generally levels the playing field between amateurs and experts, peers and authorities. This game change effect is increasingly noticeable as social media communication is translated into offline actions. Jenkins attributes this process of mobilization into action to the “spreadability” characteristic of social media which allows for the diffusion of expressive public messages instantaneously on a massive scale.

But skeptics point out that social media is neither a public sphere nor an influential space for action. First of all, social media users remain passive searchers or consumers occupied with entertainment and sports rather than politics (Fuchs, 2017, 122-124).⁴ Even if social media has some features of the public sphere, some argue that it is non-democratically influenced by experts in the case of Wikipedia.⁵ Twitter users also tend to follow political celebrities rather than send their own messages. A small but prolific group of just 10 percent of Twitter users accounts for over 90 percent of tweets (Van Dijck, 2013, 74). Even on Facebook, which is more horizontal than Twitter and Wikipedia, popular users enjoy greater communicative power. The principle of popularity on social media aided by promotional algorithms inherently creates some users who are more equal than others. In other words, not all social media users

⁴ Only seven percent and three percent of the top Twitter topics in 2009 and 2010 were political topics while 38 percent and 28 percent of these years were entertainment-oriented (Fuchs, 2017, 282).

⁵ Wikipedia is known as the “wisdom of crowds,” but it is run by a user hierarchy starting with the lowest user group composed in ascending order of blocked users, unregistered users, new users, and registered users, followed by the middle level of bots, administrators, bureaucrats, and stewards, and the top positions of developers and system administrators (Van Dijck, 2013, 136).

are as equal as is claimed. Skeptics also challenge the mobilization power of social media. Van Dijck (2013) says that people may support popular political ideas rather easily with no intention of participating in real actions, and this support is for the sole purpose of maintaining the user's self-image which they have crafted to garner popularity within and beyond their intimate circles. Gladwell (2011, 45-49) also argues that social media platforms are built around weak ties upon which people are not willing make a real sacrifice such as bothering to take to the streets to protest. This assessment can certainly be denounced, however, since we have witnessed many instances in which social media communication leads directly to street protests.

Recent debates on social media focus on its divisiveness rather than its potential to serve as kind of liberation technology. For example, the Omidyar Group (2017) identifies six key ways in which social media is threatening democracy: exacerbating the polarization of civil society via echo chambers and filter bubbles; rapidly spreading misinformation and disinformation and amplifying populist and illiberal waves across the globe; creating competing realities driven by the intertwining of popularity and legitimacy via algorithms; being vulnerable to political capture and voter manipulation by enabling malevolent actors to spread disinformation and covertly influence public opinion; capturing unprecedented amounts of data that can be used to manipulate user behavior; and facilitating hate speech, public humiliation, and the targeted marginalization of disadvantaged or minority voices.

Considering both positive and negative assessments of social media, this paper is based on several premises. First, social media has risen as an important social space in which people express their ideas and opinions. As a distinctively hybrid space of the personal and at the same time the public sphere, for better or worse, social media platforms function as critical channels in framing public discourse and shaping public opinion. They influence political actions such as voting and protests. The remaining questions are then how to maintain the contribution of social media to participatory democracy while keeping its divisive and manipulative functions under control.

Two negative functions of social media will be focused on here. The first is its increasing usage as a tool for divisive politics. While social media enhances participatory politics, it is equally true that social media sites tend to undermine the democratic virtues of tolerance and moderation. People tend to participate in social media spaces where other users have similar sociopolitical views. The homophily network feature of social media limits the radius of openness so that users cannot be exposed to different views and opinions. These "echo chambers" or "filter bubbles" make social media a communication tool of extremism and political polarization while narrowing the space for moderates. Gerbaudo (2012, 33) says that the aggregation logic of algorithms is based on the filter-by-interest dynamic. Social media interfaces aim to catch the attention of users so that only content matching user interests is aggregated. Due to this focalization, social media has the tendency to be populist or "mobocratic" in polarizing public opinion. Furthermore, commercialized social media prioritizes sensational and extreme messages through the function of content moderation to capture people's attention. Accordingly, social media facilitates social divides while shrinking the middle.

The second is the dangerous trend of using social media as a tool of disinformation. Anonymous social media users can easily upload content since there is no gatekeeping mechanism like that which

exists in traditional media. The technological features of these sites allow bots and AI technology to rapidly spread or create fake messages across social media on a massive scale. They also permit foreign actors to intervene in the politics of other countries as seen in the Russian intervention in the 2016 United States presidential campaign. Persily (2017) argues that by aiding the disruption of established institutions like political parties and the media, the internet has left a void that can be filled not only by direct appeals from candidates, but also by fake news and propaganda. Diamond (2019, 100) describes this negative cycle vividly by saying, “As people get hooked, shocking posts go viral, the number of users keeps growing, the ad revenues pour in, and American society gets angrier, more polarized, and more readily manipulated.”

Social media’s affinity with populism has also made platforms a source of disinformation. There has been a long-term convergence between the commercial logic of the media, who adjust their content to align with the interests of the public in order to attract advertisers, and the political logic of populist actors trying to gain visibility and attract voters with emotional language, controversial content, and dramatization. As a result, Manucci (2017, 470) says *infotainment*, which blurs the boundaries between information and entertainment, has become a central feature of contemporary mass media. This mediatization of politics can be said to be more salient in the case of social media rather than traditional media since populist actors try to build direct links with ordinary people through social media. Populists often shun established media outlets, denigrating them as elitist, and claim legitimacy through bottom-up communication with their supporters. Many social media news channels comprise infotainment with populist emotional appeals.

Is South Korea also subject to these negative functions of social media? South Korea is known to be an IT power equipped with an extensive, well-developed internet infrastructure and a large number of active social media users. The contentious politics in South Korea are increasingly framed within the affective-cognitive dimension with words like justice and fairness. The social media channels here function perfectly as an informal social sphere for people to share their feelings and opinions on public issues. At the same time, Korean society is polarized politically with a complex combination of ideological orientations and different values. These factors of emotionalism and polarization provide fertile soil for social media to play a negative role in the maintenance of a healthy democracy. While the role of internet communication in the country’s politics is often mentioned, there is a dearth of studies on how social media affects the country’s quality of democracy. This paper is divided into three parts. The first is a review of the rise of social media in South Korea from the perspective of the increasingly affective nature of politics in the country. The second is an analysis of how social media is used to spread disinformation and how existing polarization is worsened by social media in South Korea. The final section analyzes popular YouTube channels that have emerged as a platform for disseminating biased political news and comments.

II. The Rise of Social Media in South Korea as an Expressive Political Space

According to the KISDI STAT Report of 2019 (Korea Information Society Development Institute [KISDI], 2019), the number of social media users in South Korea has increased over time, from 16.8 percent of the population in 2011 to 48.2 percent in 2018. In 2018, 47.3 percent of women and 49.1 percent of men used social media. As expected, younger people tend to use social media more, with users comprising 82.3 percent of people in their twenties, 73.3 percent of people in their thirties, 55.9 percent of people in their forties, and 53.8 percent of people in their fifties or older. The top five social media platforms are Facebook (34 percent), Kakao Story (27 percent), Twitter (14 percent), Naver Band (11.3 percent), and Instagram (10.8 percent). Among social media users, younger Koreans spend the most time on social media sites. Koreans in their twenties use social media for an average of 67 minutes per day, while older Koreans in their sixties spend an average of 42 minutes a day. Reflecting the widespread use of smartphones for private communication, social media users access platforms through their smartphones. The average user spends 52 minutes a day on social media on their smartphone while desktop usage averages just 2.7 minutes per day. This survey did not consider YouTube to be a social media platform. However, YouTube is becoming increasingly popular among South Koreans of all ages. Korean smartphone users of all age groups use the YouTube app longer than any other app (Kim, 2019). Another survey revealed that as of 2019, six out of ten South Korean internet users rely on YouTube for search purposes, making YouTube second only to Naver, on which 92 percent of internet users rely (56 percent used Google, 37.6 percent Daum, and 27.1 percent Instagram) (Kim, 2019). The ability to share video clips through the YouTube app has made the app popular as demand for searches and other cultural consumption via videos expands. In addition, the potential to make money by sharing advertisement fees with a supporting company has motivated a growing number of Koreans to become content creators themselves.

While it is certain that the internet has become a major channel for information searches, it is difficult to say that newspapers and broadcast television have become less important. Major Korean web portals like Naver and Daum carry news from different sources and social media users share articles by posting them on their own pages. Therefore, it is less important where users obtain their news than which source the articles are originally from. Despite this interface problem, the East Asia Institute's survey in May 2020 reveals that broadcast and cable television outlets are the most popular media sources among South Koreans to obtain news or information on current affairs. Approximately 37 percent of survey respondents chose the three major television stations (KBS, MBC, SBS) as their primary news source while 18.3 percent chose cable TV stations (TV Chosun, Channel A, MBN, JTBC). The web portals (Naver, Daum, Google, etc.), which offer news from both conventional newspapers and TV, are also frequently used with 31.8 percent of respondents indicating these as their main news source. Just 3.1 percent of respondents indicated that they had read or seen news and information about current affairs on a social media platform (Band, Kakao Story, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and just one percent said they had done so via messenger services in the past week (Kakao Talk, Line, Nate On, Facebook Messenger, etc.). Two and a half percent chose online video platforms. Only 2.6 percent read physical newspapers and 2.4 percent read online news directly on news websites. The boundary between

established media and social media has blurred as Facebook or Twitter comments made by politicians or influencers are frequently quoted by newspapers and TV channels. Nevertheless, it is right to say that social media and messenger services are not the primary channels by which South Koreans obtain news or information on current affairs. Rather, they play the role of a privatized semi-public space for users to express and share political opinions among like-minded people.

The rise of social media in South Korea is related to the rise of the affective public. Contemporary politics are increasingly individualized, and emotion is becoming an important source of political action. Bennett (2012) says with social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties, we live an era of personalized politics in which the individually expressive personal action frame displaces the collective action frame. Individuals are mobilized to form rapidly, but large-scale political actions center around personal lifestyle values such as economic justice, environmental protection, and human rights. Earlier Dalton (1988) identified a similar phenomenon as partisan dealignment with weakened political party identity or ideology and argued for the emergence of cognitively participatory citizens on the issues they select. Diluted ties of individuals to political institutions and groups are caused by the unpredictable issue-driven nature of the fluid politics of today. In the revised edition of this book (2019), he reasons his theory of political cognition from Daniel Kahneman's (2012) famous "fast thinking" psychology in decision-making processes. Recognizing the associative judgement of people based on intuition and feelings developed from previous experience, emotions, moral values, and personal traits, cognitively participatory citizens overlap with the concept of the affective public. As politics become increasingly individualized, affective politics that appeal to individual feelings and morality has become a powerful force. Unlike lofty values and respectable ideas, emotion or affect has long been treated as irrational mob psychology. It is only recently that emotion has been recognized as a force unifying people of diverse backgrounds.

Anger over injustice is a common driving force in affective politics. Massive job losses following frequent global economic crises, poverty, economic polarization, climate change, and the recent pandemic have accumulated since the turn of the century. People, especially youths, are anxious and fearful as their lives are threatened by external factors they cannot control. When this diffused fear across detached individuals is accumulated and shared, it translates into popular movements or protests that can have a greater consequence. The Indignados Movement in Europe and the globally scattered Occupy movements illustrate the power of emotions in mobilizing people. One should note that the contagious nature of protest movements, as seen in the popular protests in Egypt during late January and February of 2011, was based on public anger in response to injustice. The mass protests in Tunisia during this period were sparked by the self-immolation of a poor man. Both share the same feelings of anger against the incapable corrupt government. Their impact was huge, ending the decades of authoritarian rule under Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. The so-called Arab Spring also inspired Spaniards to demonstrate against austerity and corruption in Madrid and 57 other cities in Spain beginning in May 2011. In September of the same year, Occupy Wall Street protesters began to occupy Zuccotti Park in downtown Manhattan under the slogan "We are the 99 percent." South Korea was no exception. As social mobility has slowed, many South Koreans have begun to feel deprived and believe their social system is not just. The shortage

of decent work and the rapid rise of housing prices are viewed as primarily responsible for this. Words like “fairness” and “justice” permeate political expression and street protests in a reflection of this political environment. But this anger is not solely driven by economic discontent. It appears to be rather driven by political identity. The same word “justice” was yelled by the impeachment protestors against President Park Geun-hye in late 2016, and also the protestors opposing the nomination of Cho Kuk to the position of Minister of Justice by President Moon Jae-in in 2019. Increasingly polarized politics find the emotive public an effective means of political mobilization.

Individually held feelings or emotions are ephemeral and transient. Once framed by narrative expressions, however, feelings or emotions are capable of being shared on a large scale and can be transformed into action. Papacharissi (2015, 19) points out, “Disorder, marginality and anarchy present the habitat for affect, mainly because order, mainstreaming, and hierarchy afford form that compromises the futurity of affect.” Therefore, emotions occur in marginal spaces supporting the emergence of change. Affect is empowered, she argues, at the point at which new formations of the political are in the process of being imagined but are not yet articulated. In this sense, affective power is pre-actualized regardless of whether this power results in collective action or not.⁶ It is social media platforms, not the deliberate, institutionally arranged civic engagement structures, on which the affective public interacts. For this reason, Papacharissi (2015, 118-119) calls social media platforms a “soft structure of feelings” that breed hope for change. Online technologies collapse public and private boundaries, thus affording opportunities for expression that empower individuals (2015, 94).⁷ Social media allows citizens to play a monitorial role by navigating, redacting, and reviewing information from the basis of the self-developed sphere of sub-politics.⁸ Castells (2015, 13-14) also pays attention to this emotional aspect of social media participation by saying “the big bang of a social movement starts with the transformation of emotion into action,” so that social movements are emotional movements at the individual level. But in real politics, the big bang remains the exception rather than the norm. In the emotional process leading to action, anger is the trigger while fear is the repressor. Fear is overcome by sharing and identifying with others in a process of digital communication.

However, networking does not necessarily translate into physical aggregation. While social media connects individuals with distant others, mobilizing spatially dispersed people to participate in a collective action in a specific space at a specific time is very difficult. In this regard, Gerbaudo (2012, 39) defines the process of mobilization as “a performative act of gathering or assembling which spatially re-composes together in a temporary unity what was previously torn apart, and which in so doing creates public space

⁶ To distinguish affect from feeling or emotion, Papacharissi defines affect as the intense force driving the unconscious mind or body state with a not yet developed sense of direction. Affect precedes feeling or emotion. However, this paper uses these terms interchangeably.

⁷ In particular, she believes Twitter affords a platform for potentially rich and variable public or private performances of the self through a converged response to sociocultural, economic, and political issues. Here, citizens play a monitorial role by navigating, redacting, and reviewing information from the basis of the self-developed sphere of sub-politics.

⁸ Papacharissi (2010, 103, 137) argues the monitorial citizen is neither a better nor a worse servant of democracy than past citizens were. Monitorial citizens are solitary, but not lonely or isolated since they cultivate civic habits enabling them to connect with others on the basis of shared social, political, and cultural priorities. They are civic engagers with the potential for action.

as a form of collective and emplaced experience.” According to him, the role of social media is different depending on the stage of a social movement. Social media plays an important role in mobilizing and coordinating participants, and a somewhat lesser role in sustaining collective identities and emotions. However, once movements hit the streets and face-to-face and communal interactions become possible, social media is crucially used for constructing a “choreography of assembly” that facilitates the gathering of participants in public space and generates an emotional tension toward participants (Gerbaudo, 2012, 103-104). While the leaderless feature of social media-driven movements has been emphasized, the role of activists inevitably becomes prominent in the later stages of such movements.⁹

The debates thus far have looked at the transition from outrage to hope for change in the context of vertical power relations between the state or other public institutions and individuals. Anger also operates between social groups within civil society. When mainstream civil society does not recognize minority groups as equal citizens or is divided between confrontational forces, anger and fear coalesce around social media to attack target groups or weaken oppositional forces. The increase in fake news and disinformation illustrates how social media can serve these ill-conceived purposes so well.

III. Social Media Use for Disinformation and Polarization in South Korean Politics

Social Media and Disinformation

The affective nature of social media and its ability to bring people together to raise their voices and rally together is a double-edged sword. It can not only nurture hope for change, but also breed hatred and manipulate public opinion. Contemporary social media has become an insidious space for spreading disinformation. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “disinformation” as false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth. Social media platforms are free and easy for audiences to access and the scale and speed of information diffusion is too broad and too fast to effectively halt. At the same time, these platforms remain loosely regulated such that it is easy for content creators to spread fake news, hate speech, and disinformation without penalty. In India, WhatsApp has 200 million users and has become a substitute for face-to-face discussions that would otherwise take place in the proverbial town square. Third-party apps allow users to join WhatsApp chat groups initially with family and friends to align their political views. This open environment has caused rumors to spread through group chats and resulted in 30 lynchings (Imai, 2019). It is common knowledge that disinformation proliferated on social media during the 2016

⁹ Even the patterns of assembling protestors are different. The Occupy Wall Street Facebook page began getting significant traffic only after activists had physically occupied Zuccotti Park on September 17, 2011. Gerbaudo points out that this was because both the main Occupy page and the Facebook event page created by Adbusters completely lacked the emotional component which was the hallmark of both the Kullena Khaled Said page in Egypt and the Democracia Real Ya page in Spain (114-5). The role of social media in Occupy was more as a means to facilitate the reverberation of episodes taking place on the ground rather than as a means of preparing the terrain symbolically for the protests. There was also confusion at the core of the identity of Occupy between the radical countercultural imaginary proposed by Adbusters and the populist “We are the 99 percent” coined by David Graeber. Only once the physical occupation had begun did the movement’s identity eventually crystalize around a majoritarian orientation, and the Tumblr page began to take off.

US election campaign. According to the NYU Center for Data Science, 400,000 bots posted 3.8 million tweets during the final month before the 2016 election. Further, during the final three months of the campaign, users engaged more with the top twenty fake news stories than they did with authentic ones. One study found that 30–40 percent of automated texts on factual topics deceived ordinary users and 15–25 percent deceived experts; ordinary users were deceived by 60 percent of automated information and experts by 30 percent of non-factual topics (Oliver, 2018). Advances in digital technology have also begun to lead to the rise of “deepfakes”—highly realistic and difficult-to-detect digital manipulations of audio or video. It is becoming technologically easier to deploy deepfakes for political purposes so that repeated exposure to “footage” of someone saying or doing something he or she never said or did can manipulate public opinion.

According to a report by the Oxford Internet Institute (2019), computational propaganda has become a tool of information control that is strategically used in combination with surveillance, censorship, and threats of violence. The report finds that, among the 70 countries surveyed, 87 percent used human accounts, 80 percent bot accounts, 11 percent cyborg accounts, and 7 percent hacked or stolen accounts. According to the report, there are three distinct ways of using computational propaganda: to suppress fundamental human rights; to discredit political opposition; and to drown out political dissent. In highly democratized but polarized politics, discrediting the political opposition and swaying public opinion are common purposes of disinformation on social media platforms. “Cyber troops” hired by governments or political parties can use social media to manipulate public opinion. At the same time, these cyber troops often work in conjunction with private industry, civil society organizations, hacker collectives, or ideologically extreme fringe movements. When manipulated messages disseminated by cyber troops were analyzed, the Oxford report found that 71 percent were to spread pro-government or pro-party propaganda, 89 percent were to attack political opponents, and 34 percent spread polarizing messages designed to drive divisions in society. The study further found that South Korea has a small number of cyber troops which support or attack the opposition through bots and human accounts. Disinformation in South Korea is much less worrisome than other countries in the sense that computational propaganda is used to influence public opinion rather than suppress freedom. Nevertheless, distorted information and disinformation spread through social media has emerged as a threat to democracy in South Korea as well.

Two famous opinion-rigging scandals in South Korea revealed that cyber opinion can be manipulated. Several days before the presidential election of 2012, a female agent of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) was first questioned by police over allegations that she repeatedly made negative comments online about the main opposition presidential candidate Moon Jae-in (Yoon, 2012). Despite her denial of these allegations, police found that she had expressed her views 250 times by clicking the “agree” or “disagree” icons since the end of August using 20 different IDs (Kim, 2013). Investigation of the female agent, who was suspected of violating election campaign laws, continued under the newly inaugurated government of President Park Geun-hye who defeated Moon. This so-called “NIS troll incident” led civic groups to sue the NIS chief Won Sei-hoon, while the opposition Democratic United Party (DUP) led the charge against the new government with demands for a fair investigation. Won was barred from leaving the country pending investigation in March and indicted in June over the allegations that he had

interfered in domestic politics while in office (“Former Spy Chief Banned From Overseas Travel,” 2013). In April 2018, after a long court battle that lasted four years and ten months, the Supreme Court sentenced him to four years of imprisonment for illegally interfering in the election campaign via a psychological cyber team (Lee, 2018).

Another opinion-rigging incident occurred during the 2017 presidential election campaign period. In March 2018, Kim Dong-won, a representative of a progressive citizen group and a blogger known as *Druking*, was suspected of doubling “likes” of Naver online comments denigrating President Moon. He was allegedly motivated by revenge after his request for a political favor from Moon’s camp was denied. The investigation revealed the new information that he was systematically operating an automatic macro program during the previous year’s presidential election campaign period to support Moon. Kim implicated Governor Kim Kyoung-soo of Kyungnam Province as colluding in this opinion-rigging during the election campaign. The opposition party defined this incident as election fraud with the potential to invalidate the results of the previous presidential election. In contrast, the ruling party took the position that this incident was a crime committed by an individual broker with no relationship to the party. This stormy scandal sharply divided the National Assembly and MPs finally passed a law to form a team of special prosecutors in May of 2018 to investigate this incident. In January 2019, the lower court sentenced Kim Dong-won to three and half years in prison for obstructing business by using illegal automated software to generate fake online comments, among other charges. At the same time, the Court arrested Governor Kim and sentenced him to two years for colluding with a power blogger to manipulate online comments in order to help President Moon in the 2017 presidential election (Jo, 2018; “Top Confidant of South Korea’s Moon Jailed,” 2018). But he appealed the case to a higher court and posted bail in April 2019. The ruling in the case has been postponed as of August 2020.

There have been claims that online political comments are manipulated and therefore should not be regarded as reflecting true public opinion. The two famous incidents mentioned above seem to have validated this popular suspicion. After a slew of visceral troll comments against a young singer led to her suicide, Daum portal disallowed comments on entertainment news beginning October 30, 2019. Most portals use bots to detect and erase inappropriate trolling comments and accounts. However, the automatic deletion of accounts and comments is unpopular among internet users for the sake of freedom of expression. Social media platforms are increasingly turning to such tools to sway public opinion. People organize their digital participation as a way to win over those who disagree with them. Korean digital portals such as Naver or Daum show the real-time ranking of news articles that people click on. News articles or commentaries with a high number of clicks indicate their popularity, and so highly ranked content is interpreted as representing public opinion. This practice has been pointed out as weakening fair assessment since people only click on top ranked popular news stories.

There are many expressions which fall into a grey area, meaning it is difficult to judge whether they are disinformation or simply unchecked misinformation. Many political commentaries available through the internet and on social media platforms are written without rigorous fact checking. They quote other stories and often cite unreliable sources, or express personal opinions without any evidence. Since social media space is in between the private and public spheres, a great deal of information and news is circulated and

consumed without anyone bothering to check the credibility of the source or the information itself. Therefore, it is difficult to call these “interpreted” news and accompanying comments obvious fake news. In messenger groups, users share tend to similar backgrounds and political views. Therefore, it is easy to use radical language and express one-sided feelings of love or hatred. This tendency is reinforcing political polarization, and is one of the more conspicuous negative functions of social media in South Korea.

Social Media and Political Polarization in South Korea

Korean politics have become increasingly polarized since democratization. This tendency has been notably aggravated under Moon Jae-in’s government, which has taken pride in claiming its legitimacy from the popular impeachment of the previous President Park Geun-hye. Since its inception, the Moon administration has pursued a series of reforms, labelling policies enacted under conservative rule “accumulated evils.” The ruling party and the administration have been pushing their policy goals in the name of the people. The phrase “the mind of the candlelight protestors” has been monopolized by the ruling party, the Moon administration, and his staunch far-left supporters. Choi (2020) has criticized this coalition for ignoring many citizens who participated in the impeachment candlelight movement but who do not agree with the far left agenda. He warns that unilateral pushes by the Moon government and the super majority ruling party are likely to derail their intended reforms and invite political backlash. Shin (2020, 101) also criticizes the populist turn of the former prodemocracy activists who have risen to power and argues that President Moon himself is causing democratic backsliding by embracing a politics of confrontation, resentment, and even hatred.

South Korean civil society itself is so deeply divided that both the left and the right claim that their side has the absolute majority. According to the EAI South Korean Identity Survey conducted four times between 2005 and 2020, more than 40 percent of South Koreans perceive themselves as moderate (40 percent in 2005—43 percent in 2010—49 percent in 2015—43 percent in 2020) rather than progressive (33 percent—27.5 percent—20 percent—31 percent respectively) or conservative (27 percent—30 percent—30 percent—26 percent). But politics are led by those who are on the far sides of the spectrum rather than by moderates who are more likely to have views that align with those of the median voters. When the conservatives are in power, far-left groups tend to veto the incumbent president while loyal conservative supporters defend their favored political leaders. On the other hand, when the progressives are in power, the far right oppose the incumbent president while extreme supporters use all means to defend their leadership. This pattern has repeated each time Korea has elected a president, but the current situation is something of an exception as the ruling party has absolute power with 176 of the total 300 parliamentary seats. The April 15, 2020 election reduced the share of seats held by the opposition conservative party to 103. However, the popular vote gap between the two major parties in the 253 elected seat constituency is much narrower than the difference in the number of seats. The margin remains only 8.4 percent, with the ruling Democratic Party taking 49.9 percent and the conservatives taking 41.5 percent. The simple majority rule for constituency voting means that the seat gap is much bigger than the popular vote gap. If we consider that proportional regional votes comprise 47 of the total 300 seats, the actual percentage of votes that the two major parties received is almost equal at 33.35

percent and 33.84 percent respectively (National Election Commission, 2020). This popular voting composition implies that the potential for contentious politics in civil society is great despite the ruling party's control of the National Assembly.

When opinions are highly divided, information that has not been fact checked tends to inundate social media space. Again, social media was used as a political space to express anger and organize the popular protests that took place in 2019 over the so-called "Cho Kuk Incident." Cho Kuk, who was the Presidential Senior Secretary for Civil Affairs at the time of his appointment as Minister of Justice, is well-established as a progressive law professor and a Twitter influencer. After taking a public position, he tried to implement policies to reduce the power of the Prosecutors' Office. When rumors spread that his daughter had received unjust favors to gain admission to a prestigious university and later medical school, college students who were formerly his strong supporters felt betrayed and waged a series of demonstrations on several university campuses (Lee, 2019). The opposition parties rallied against him during the congressional hearings which were held regarding his potential appointment. The Prosecutors' Office charged his wife when the congressional hearings were nearing the end. The approval of his nomination became a proxy war between the supporters and opponents of the Moon administration. After a month-long brawl, on September 9, 2019, President Moon officially named him Minister of Justice despite the fierce resistance from the opposition parties and the negative public opinion over his nomination (Lee, 2019). Cho Kuk's nomination became a divisive public issue, and soon two groups of pro- and anti-government forces began to demonstrate in two different places in downtown Seoul. As the street protests and political confrontations peaked in October, he resigned from the post on October 14. While his wife's court case is ongoing as of August 2020, this incident vividly demonstrates the extreme political divide in South Korea.

Although the effect of social media platforms on politics is recognized, there are few empirical studies examining their specific influence. Among the available studies, Hahn et al. (2015) provide a valuable research study primarily focused on Korean Twitter users. Since Twitter is a platform which allows for personal commentary on current issues and news, it is a more relevant social media platform than Facebook in terms of understanding the political influence of social media. As expected, liberals, young users, and those who are generally interested in politics are more likely to use Twitter. The study finds that there is strong partisan selectivity along ideological and generational lines when Korean Twitter users follow 34 major news outlets. Namely, supporters of conservative parties primarily follow conservative media outlets, while supporters of liberal parties do exactly the opposite. Through statistical analysis, Hahn et al. confirm the thesis that the network of Twitter following mirrors the landscape of offline political polarization. But they also find that Twitter followers of individual legislators are not anchored to the original legislator based on the data of all followers of each legislator of the 18th National Assembly (May 30, 2008 – May 29, 2012). A later longitudinal study by Lee and Hahn (2017) reveals that the extent of out-party following substantially increased from September 2010 to June 2011, lessening the severity of polarization. They argue that the severity of initial polarization might ameliorate over time on social media due to the strong issue salience and the weak party identification and loyalty in South Korea. However, this study does not investigate whether the out-party politicians whom Twitter

followers selected later are from similar conservative or similar progressive parties.

The rise of social media has also enhanced the ability of celebrities to speak on political and public issues directly to the public. Celebrities have become influential in politics as they tend to boast a large number of followers on Twitter. Based on data from April 2012, Park et al. (2015) identified the top fourteen “political celebrities” in terms of their number of Twitter followers, and these fourteen celebrities came from three groups: “politainers” (comedians and actors), writers (novelists and cartoonists), and public intellectuals (college professors, columnists, and journalists). When compared against the news outlets, the distribution of celebrity followers was heavily skewed toward liberals. The thirteen liberal political celebrities had between 81,387 and 806,673 followers, with the average number being 323,261. The most popular celebrity was comedian turned entertainer Jaedong Kim, with 806,673 followers out of about 1.87 million total Twitter followers of these fourteen celebrities. In contrast, the single conservative commentator, Jo Kapje, had a mere 12,700 followers. Based on the profile questionnaire from the survey panelists, this study revealed that liberals were more likely to follow political celebrities. This ideological slant was most prominent among the followers of politainers. In addition, the followers of celebrities did not view television news, which tends to be more balanced without tilting toward a specific ideology.

The more recent polarization of social media is revealed by Hahn’s analysis using the data of EAI’s South Korean Identity Survey that was carried out in May 2020 (Hahn, 2020). The survey covers 34 media channels composed of major newspapers, broadcast TV stations, and YouTube channels. He found that media polarization is much more salient than party polarization in left-right ideological orientation. When comparing the average ideological propensity of people who showed trust in each of these 34 channels, nine YouTube channels fell on two extreme and opposite ends (two on the far left and seven on the far right). Among the 15 total YouTube channels included in the survey, the viewers of 12 of these YouTube channels were positioned farther right ideologically than conservative party supporters. Leftist YouTube channels were also positioned farther left ideologically than progressive party supporters. At the same time, however, Hahn finds that support for polarized media does not transfer significantly into diverging policy preferences. With this observation, he concludes that media polarization is based on affective identity alignment rather than policy alignment. This suggests that political parties should not position their policy choices based on vocal supporters who are active on social media.

It is interesting to note that in Korea, Twitter has lost its dominant status over time and now YouTube has emerged as the dominant app through which people express political opinions. As people who do not trust government or established media began to seek alternative media outlets, conservative political commentators have rushed to YouTube under the progressive Moon Jae-in administration. This is a stark contrast to the progressive dominance of Twitter during the previous conservative Park Geun-hye government. While established media outlets and cable news provide a space for the opposition to speak against the incumbent government, social media platforms like YouTube provide a more direct and accessible channel for commentators to voice their strong opinions.

IV. Case Study of the YouTube War in South Korea

The Oxford Internet Institute's report on disinformation specifies Facebook and YouTube as the major platforms through which digital disinformation is spread in South Korea. People share YouTube commentaries they find that agree with their own political leanings. Some YouTube videos use a small group discussion format, but the majority are individual commentaries on current political issues. These political YouTubers are people who are already well known due to their previous work as journalists, politicians, or politainers. According to Bigfoot, there were 126 Korean YouTube channels in the category of "politics, economy, and society" as of September 16, 2019. These channels include young YouTubers who are less well known to the public, but most popular YouTube channels are run by conservative commentators in their fifties or sixties. This rise of rightist YouTubers is related to the older generation's heavy usage of smartphone video streaming that became technically possible with the advent of 4G in 2011. This generation has more free time compared to people in their thirties and forties, and they share YouTube videos through smaller messenger app groups such as Kakao and Band. According to one analysis, people in their fifties spend the most time on YouTube compared to any other age group (Jung, 2019). This generation also has disposable income to support the YouTube channels of their choice by becoming paid subscribers or financial contributors.

Of the ten most popular YouTube channels based on the number of subscribers cited in Bigfoot as of September 16, 2019, seven are run by conservative YouTubers (Bigfoot, 2020). The most popular channel, "A Skill of God (*Shin ui hansu*)," was created by Shin Hye-sik, representative of the Independence Paper. This channel had 903,000 subscribers with 302 million total views. The Roh Moo-hyun Foundation YouTube channel known as Rhyu Si-min's "Alilleo" has second largest number of subscribers with 876,800. But its 39.3 million total views pale in comparison to the other two most popular conservative channels. Jin Seong-ho's channel has 550,000 subscribers but a total of 185.7 million views. Pen and Mike TV, created by former economy newspaper advisor Chung Kyu-jae, had 541,700 subscribers with 283.3 million total views. Three of the top ten most popular YouTube news channels were run by congressmen. Jin Seong-ho and Hong Jun-pyo of TV Hongka Cola are former and incumbent politicians respectively, both belonging to the opposition conservative party. Rhyu Si-min is a former ruling party MP and served in the progressive Roh Moo-hyun administration as Minister of Health and Welfare. With one exception, the rest were all journalists who previously or currently worked for a major media outlet.

Benkler et al. (2018) argued that the right-wing media ecosystem has been much more susceptible to disinformation, lies, and half-truths in American politics. Observing two left-wing and right-wing YouTube channels respectively indicates that South Korean YouTubers are no different. Shin's "A Skill of God" and Rhyu's "Allileo" were chosen as the two most popular conservative and liberal channels respectively. "Thanji Broadcasting," which is run by well-known liberal critic Kim Uh-jun, and "Hwang Jang-soo's News Briefing" were added as the second liberal and conservative channels. Two issues that had divided public opinion were selected. The first was Japan's export control to South Korea, which conservatives attribute as being the fault of both Moon's administration and Japan's Abe Shinzo Cabinet. Liberals blamed Abe and urged citizens to engage in a patriotic boycott of both Japanese products and

travel to Japan. The second topic was the nomination of Yoon Seok-yeol as the Prosecutor General, who was the icon of President Moon’s drive to eradicate the “accumulated evils” from public affairs. He was also regarded as a politically minded prosecutor who rose against the previous President Park Geun-hye.¹⁰

All channels had strong partisan leanings, but their presentation of content on the aforementioned issues differed somewhat. More “pragmatic” channels try to start their videos by introducing the basics of each issue, such as the key facts, the background of how the issue arose, key considerations and perspectives, and the future outlook. In this process, these channels use a wide array of credentialed sources—ranging from government documents to statements from opposition parties—to describe the full situation. The operators of the channels, in describing the background and potential future outcomes of each situation, often present their own viewpoints and commentary. While doing so, they often offer constructive criticism towards the main party that they support (left: Democratic Party, right: Liberty Korea Party), providing suggestions for how to react and move forward from the current situation. The term “pragmatic” was coined to describe such channels because they demonstrate their understanding of the current political context and try to advocate a way forward that aligns with their ideological bases.

More “ideological” channels do not necessarily offer background information on the given topic, but proceed straight into talking about the main events. Information shared on ideological channels is often mischaracterized as factual or is discussed in a misleading manner, making it harder for viewers to distinguish between facts and analyses (opinions). In this process, the expectations, political goals, and potential strategies with regard to the issue being discussed by the commentators and the hosts can seemingly morph into facts. Such commentators carefully place the situation in an anti-opposition frame, using words with antagonistic connotations to criticize politicians, influential figures, and citizens with differing political views—completely contrasting with the rhetorical strategies used by the pragmatic channels. By doing so, they are able to present to their viewers a very skewed outlook on political issues, making it seem as if the opposition had caused all of the problems. The antagonistic anger is at times so intense that the words used in their broadcasts would not be allowed on public television.

Rhyu’s Allileo channel posts a video with prominent guests each week who discuss both trivial and controversial political topics. Rhyu plays the “devil’s advocate” and challenges his guests, who have (often) liberal leanings, with conservative rhetoric and logic and guides the viewers through each issue. For example, in the video on the issue of the nomination of Yoon Seok-yeol, Rhyu invited a member of the National Assembly who was part of Yoon’s confirmation hearing and questioned him on exactly what happened in the Assembly during that time, with a clear disclosure that his viewpoints were generally representative of the Democratic Party. Rhyu tries to maintain a balanced approach when it comes to stating facts, but will make a noticeable pivot to mentioning his personal opinions when he feels the need. He also attempts to give suggestions as to what the Moon administration should do in his videos, giving his channel a pragmatic leaning. What is remarkable about his comments and interaction with his audience is that the viewers seem to be quite animated by his colorful comments. A large portion of the

¹⁰ Mr. Yoon investigated the opinion rigging incident by the intelligence office staff to favor Park when she was campaigning for the presidential election campaign. Ironically, he also investigated Minister of Justice Cho Kuk’s family in 2019 after he was nominated as Prosecutor General to the surprise of the ruling party.

YouTube comments were those that reiterated what Rhyu had said in the video, attesting to the echo chamber effect of comment sections. In addition, viewers tended to solidify around some of the potentially controversial, opinionated statements that Rhyu and his other guests state in their videos; they tend to use even more aggressive language.

Compared to Rhyu's YouTube channel, Kim Ou-joon's Thanji Broadcasting tends to be more ideological. Kim first achieved fame with the podcast series "I'm a Weasel (*Nanun geomsuda*)" criticizing the Lee Myung-bak administration through satire and black comedy. Often perceived as the face of yellow (tabloid) journalism in Korea, Kim boasts about half a million subscribers. In any given video, he has multiple segments throughout the show with different guests focusing on various issues. Kim mostly invites academics and current politicians (such as Prof. Hosaka Yuji, Korea-Japan relations expert), and while segments with these guests seem to teeter between facts and opinions with a slightly heavier weight on opinion, Kim intervenes and often uses strong language with oversimplified and over-generalized statements to summarize what the guests say, which can potentially twist the intended meaning. Kim also features a segment with his podcast colleague and freelance journalist Choo Chin-woo that attacks conservatives and the conservative party through "reporting" on the week's political events. His broadcast, with a strong anti-opposition frame and simplified rhetoric that has the potential to mislead viewers, can be perceived as more ideological than pragmatic. Kim takes an interesting approach in how he communicates with his audience. First, he airs the show in a live studio setting with a live audience. Second, he has a YouTube subscriber count clock that displays the number of subscribers he has at any given time. Lastly, he streams the show live on YouTube to allow the online audience to comment and remark on the show's content in real time. All of these strategies, complemented by Kim's blunt commentary throughout the show, magnify the echo chamber effect of the comments that reverberate between himself and his audience. Furthermore, it appears at times that Kim takes notice of this echo chamber (because of the live audience members and their reaction) and uses it to make more aggressive comments for the purpose of entertainment. It seems that the pragmatic and ideological channels, at least among those which swing liberal, differ in terms of the relationship the channel operators and viewers have. However, the similar characteristics of the viewers seem to be relevant given the kinds of comments left on both types of channels.

Turning towards right-wing YouTube, Hwang Jang-soo's News Briefing can be categorized as pragmatic. He airs five segments per day on various topics with "economic analysis" and "political analysis." Like Rhyu, Hwang does not seem to have an active, two-way relationship with his viewers. Hwang, a former politician and political commentator, is widely viewed as a radical right-winger. Contrary to the public view, he offers practical criticism to both ends of the political spectrum and largely follows the structure of Rhyu's videos: presenting facts using news sources and government documents, offering viewpoints from both conservative and liberal camps, and levying harsh criticism against the current leadership of Hwang Kyo-anh in the Liberty Korea Party. This does not mean that he is not a supporter of the Liberty Korea Party. His viewers seem to align themselves more with mainstream conservatism (Liberty Korea Party) than with radical conservatism (Our Republican Party), which supports the release of former President Park from prison. Hwang, however, does not signal a

noticeable pivot to commentary like Rhyu, potentially causing some viewers to confuse facts and opinions while watching his videos. Moreover, Hwang sometimes produces his videos with greatly differing ratios of commentary and facts—sometimes so off-balance that Hwang can potentially act as an agent of disinformation in the conservative arena. Yet the core facets of his videos still revolve around credible sources in explaining the situation and making sure the background of the issue is thoroughly covered. He also makes sure to offer criticism to both liberals and conservatives for their roles in any given issue.

Shin Hye-sik's A Skill of God livestreams five to six podcast episode recordings per week covering news on various topics, ranging from 10 minutes to over an hour in length. Shin is a far-right commentator and activist, and his channel falls into the ideological category. It uses catchphrases and “gotcha” phrases as video titles to draw in viewers, such as “EMERGENCY!!! PREDICTIONS OF KIM JONG UN PLANNING A NUKE THREAT.” It tries to bolster its credibility by inviting Assembly members from right-wing parties and former Park administration officials to comment on the actions taken by the current government. The channel and the “journalists” that contribute to the videos frame their work as “investigative journalism,” and do not provide explanations of the overall background situation. They simply proceed straight to discussing predictions and political rumors. However, the problem with the structuring of his videos is that the “investigative journalism” the journalists in the channel conduct is already based on a foundation of disinformation, making it hard for viewers to even notice that a majority of their statements are false. The channel also frames every action from the Moon administration as unpatriotic and uses language to stoke fear amongst its viewers. The echo chamber and solidarity amongst viewers and the hosts are greatly magnified because the episodes are filmed live. Whereas Hwang's viewers leave comments about their concerns over how the Liberty Korea Party is conducting itself, viewers of this channel often leave antagonistic, baseless comments just seeking to attack pro-Moon supporters.

If Hwang's channel is similar to Rhyu's in terms of its pragmatic posture, Shin's channel is similar to Kim's for being aggressive in attacking the opposite side of politicians and media. While ideologically leaning YouTube channels are more likely to be spreading disinformation compared to pragmatic channels, they are all the same in terms of creating echo chambers and so ultimately contribute to further radicalization of already polarized Korean politics. Conservative viewers are solidified around an anti-liberal and anti-Moon agenda, while liberal viewers reinforce each other's views and rally around a pro-Moon agenda. Conventional media is also divided along the ideological gap, but the gap between social media news channels is much greater. Social media users are increasingly obtaining news and information through their chosen digital networks and relying less on TV and print newspapers. Social media platforms as news outlets do not filter disinformation and users are free to express extreme opinions, as shown in the case of the YouTube hosts and viewers discussed above. Ethnic and religious cleavages are weak in South Korea due to the country's relatively homogeneous social composition. Therefore, ethnic hate speech and violent disinformation are rare occurrences in the country. However, social media exacerbates the existing political polarization in South Korea and is likely to diffuse extremism and confrontation throughout the broader political arena. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) emphasized moderation and institutional forbearance as two critical elements for sustaining democracy.

South Koreans are not only losing tolerance for groups having different views—elites who have the chance to hold power also feel existentially threatened by the opposition. In this political environment, social media is used to reinforce already existing polarization rather than contributing to political compromise and social integration.

Discussion: Digital Democracy Checked by Deliberation

As negative usage of social media and digital technology in general spreads, more countries are moving away from techno-libertarianism. Many authoritarian governments have already restricted online news and communication platforms. For example, China banned Twitter and Facebook outright and Iran also outlawed Facebook. For democracies upholding the freedom of expression and individual liberty, selective regulations are being introduced. Pressure for big tech companies to filter fake news and hate speech is also mounting.

The United Nations has begun to respond to human rights issues related to digital technology. The UN General Assembly published a report in August 2018 titled, “Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression” by Special Rapporteur David Kaya. The report elaborates five rights including “right to freedom of opinion, right to freedom of expression, right to privacy, obligation of non-discrimination, and right to an effective remedy.” It demands the creation of substantive principles for AI and provides recommendations for states and companies. The UN Human Rights Council’s “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association”^{*} in 2019 also maintained that existing international human rights norms and principles should not only dictate State conduct, but also be the framework that guides AI and digital technology.

The European Union regulates disinformation and protects private information through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which offers much more robust protections compared to the previous Data Protection Directive.¹¹ It is reported that the new EU Commission plans to introduce the Digital Service Act that is likely to contain rules governing everything from political advertising to terrorist content (The Economist, 2019). Australia rushed to enact the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material bill in April 2019 after a live-streamed terrorist attack on mosques occurred in New Zealand. This new law requires anything on social media services depicting terrorism, murder, or kidnapping to swiftly be removed. Germany passed a similar law in 2017 that gives social media firms 24 hours to remove fake news and hate speech or face fines of up to 50 million euros. This series of new regulatory moves reflects how seriously democratic governments view the presence of illegal and undesirable content on social media. However, there must be caution since some governments can use the cause of anti-fake news bills to restrict freedom of expression. For example, Singapore’s Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act of June 2019 allows the penalization of “falsehoods that interfere with public tranquility or diminish public confidence in the government.”

¹¹ The GDPR was legislated in 2016 and became effective in May of 2018.

This regulatory trend also creates problems. The first is cost. Faced with the new trend of regulation, social media firms need to hire more human content moderators. It is reported that a consultancy company estimated the number of such employees to be approximately 100,000 worldwide in 2017. Facebook doubled the number of its human content moderators to 15,000 between August and December 2018. The Economist reports that harsh penalties will incentivize social media firms to choose where to operate or block European users to avoid the cost of compliance with EU privacy laws. Censorship laws will mean another set of walls dividing the global village. The second problem is how to establish objective principles. It is odd to rely on a private company to play referee when it comes to the truth of political content. Political speech is often ambiguous and difficult to clearly fact check.

In South Korea, the Law on Promoting Information Communication and Protecting Information has functioned as the umbrella regulatory law ever since its legislation in 1986. The *White Paper of Internet Industry Regulation* (2015) laid out four areas of regulation: private information and privacy related regulation, content-related regulation, protection of adolescents, and e-commerce and new digital services. This law has defined four kinds of illegal data: information defamation, threats, and damaging information about individuals; socially undesirable information such as pornographic and speculative information; information revealing state secrets; and information violating the National Security Act. This law has been revised over time to respond to a rise in illegal and immoral internet usage. However, the law is difficult to enforce since malicious usage against individuals, primarily celebrities, is met with light punishment. The spread of disinformation on larger public issues has not yet been properly regulated.

When the news of “mad cow disease” from American beef spread across social media and caused popular protests against the newly sworn-in Lee Myung-bak government’s decision to import the controversial beef, the government tried to regulate fake news by introducing a new law. In response, tech companies including Naver, SK Communications, Yahoo Korea, KTH, Hanaro Dream, and Freechell created a self-regulating network in order to persuade Congress not to enact the law in 2008. The Korea Internet Self-Governance Organization (KISO) was launched in 2009. Since its creation, the KISO has been in charge of the self-regulatory regime of tech firms in South Korea. It operates several committees who are in charge of such tasks as verifying the search rankings on the nation’s largest web portal Naver, supervising online ads, establishing protective measures to shield adolescents from harmful information, and checking real estate information. It also enacted the decision to delist problematic uploaded content from search results. As fake news continues to increase, KISO recently introduced a measure to erase disinformation using a press release format. According to a survey in 2018, 51.2 percent of netizens prefer voluntary regulation (37.7 percent prefer self-monitoring by tech firms and 13.5 percent favor monitoring by the third parties) while only a third preferred regulation by public authorities (20.9 percent preferred the government’s administrative regulation and 14.4 percent preferred reinforced legislation).

This paper has discussed the rising negative impact of social media on the quality of democracy. Digital platforms still provide a positive public sphere where individuals express their opinions and find solidarity that can be translated into offline democratic politics or social movements. At the same time, social media has become an ugly space rapidly disseminating hate speech and images of violence. More

seriously, social media became a disinformation instrument for those aiming to intentionally mislead the public. This manipulative intervention of social media into formal politics is now happening everywhere. In South Korea, the negative function of social media contributing to the reinforcement of confrontational politics is more salient than the spread of disinformation. Democratic countries have begun to introduce or strengthen regulations in order to combat this misuse of social media. But simple censorship cannot be the answer, since this sort of remedy may cause tech firms to stop providing service in highly regulated countries. Censorship can also be misused by authorities for political gain.

We need a smart balance between guaranteeing the freedom of expression and participation on the one hand and protecting privacy and regulating disinformation on the other. In this vein, Cardels (2019) suggests a new design for democracy that engages the participatory power of social media but imposes a deliberate check against false claims and untrustworthy information. Deliberation can emerge when concerns from the public are proactively solicited and empower knowledgeable bodies to process those concerns into effective and consensual responses on a non-partisan basis. We need mediating principles and practices to sort out facts from untruths and bridge conflicting views. This needs to be accompanied by digital civic education for social tolerance and an innovative design of social media that can accommodate pluralism. Until then, democratic gains from citizen participation in digital platforms will be cancelled out by the extremism, polarization, and populism that results from their misuse.

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Country Case 4: Taiwan

Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Taiwan

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In recent years, social media has become essential in everyday Taiwanese life. It is estimated that nearly 97 percent of Taiwanese internet users use Facebook. In addition to Facebook, LINE, an instant messaging platform, is the other very popular social media platform in Taiwan (Jennings, 2018). The penetration rates of these two platforms in Taiwan are one of the highest in the world. Other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and WeChat all have Taiwanese users as well. Many Taiwanese spend hours each day using social media platforms. Politicians also use social media to connect to their constituencies. The popularity of social media has changed the landscape of political mobilization and competition and influences the function of democracy.

In this paper we first sketch the media usage landscape in Taiwan. We then discuss the situation of disinformation in Taiwan. The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy contributes to this section. Finally, we discuss to what extent the use of the internet and social media, including the frequency of internet use and types of media, influence the polarization of political views. To assess political views, we look into the perceptions of the performance of the incumbent government, the overall function of democracy, and the quality of democracy. Will internet and social media usage induce increased polarization of partisan supporters?

Literature Review

In the social media environment, people tend to connect with other like-minded people. This creates a cyber space in which people exchange information only among those who hold the same political views. Many people live in Facebook and Twitter bubbles and seldom hear views from the opposing side. This news media environment essentially creates an echo chamber for politically salient and sensitive issues and leaves less room for compromising and deliberation (Barbera et al., 2015). Brady et al. (2017) find that during the 2016 US presidential election campaigns, tweets with emotive and moral words were more

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likely to be shared. This media environment tends to exacerbate polarization. The rise of polarization in turn tends to increase gridlock and even harm democratic norms and mutual respect (Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Tucker, 2018).

The rise of social media democratizes the publication and dissemination of news. It breaks the monopoly of traditional media and allows more voices to be heard. However, user-generated media content is often less accountable and verifiable and it is more difficult to trace the sources of such content. People are therefore more likely to be exposed to misinformation and propaganda (Tucker et al., 2018). The ability of social media platforms to conduct fact checking and debunk rumors is generally weak (Margolin, 2017; Friggeri et al., 2014). Social media essentially lacks the gatekeeping mechanism that traditional media channels have. Although traditional media outlets are also likely to produce misinformation and distorted partisan news, they are comparatively more accountable.

Disinformation may include fake news, rumors, inadvertently incorrect information, and politically slanted information (Tucker et al., 2018). Regardless of the type, disinformation is likely to contribute to polarization. The spread of disinformation delivers distorted information to ordinary people who often lack accurate information about important political and economic affairs. This often results in a distorted public opinion about some of the political or economic issues that governments rely on to make policy decisions (Tucker et al., 2018). Disinformation is likely to be more serious in the era of social media.

Other scholars argue that the rise of polarization is actually more salient among people who use very little internet and social media. Social media usage is not a contributing factor to rising political polarization (Boxell et al., 2017). Facebook and Twitter users are actually more likely to be exposed to heterogeneous political views (Wojcieszak and Mutz, 2009; Bakshy et al., 2015; Duggan and Smith, 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017). People tend to connect to so-called weak personal networks such as colleagues, distant relatives, and friends of friends on social media (Bakshy, 2012). Through these networks, people are likely to be exposed to at least some level of cross-cutting political viewpoints. A cross-country study also revealed that social media users are exposed to a variety of political viewpoints (Newman et al., 2017). In fact, Barnidge (2017) finds that social media users tend to receive more divergent political viewpoints online than in daily face-to-face interactions. It is expected that exposure to heterogeneous viewpoints induces people to be more tolerant of oppositional views (Mutz, 2002).

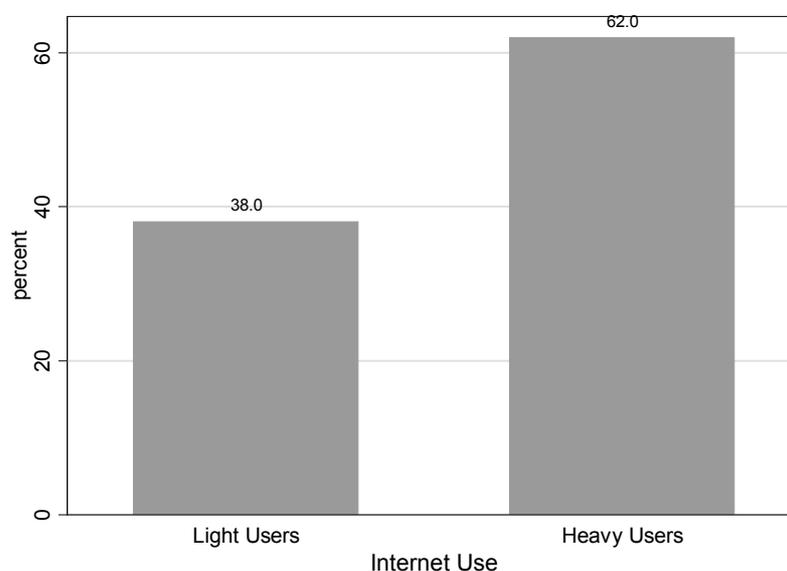
However, Levendusky (2013) refutes the moderating effect of internet usage. He shows that exposure to online partisan content makes people more likely to be polarized and have stronger party identification. Bail et al. (2018) find that exposure to different political views on social media actually exacerbates political polarization. Short of in-depth face-to-face dialogue, exposure to opposing views is unlikely to make people more moderate.

Other scholars argue that political elites are the main source of issue polarization. If their issue stances are polarized, then media content, whether it be traditional or on social platforms, just reflects such division (Arcenaux and Johnson, 2015). On the contrary, political leaders simply respond to the preferences of their constituencies. As the demographic characteristics and political viewpoints of constituencies become more distinct, the policy stances of politicians also tend to be polarized.

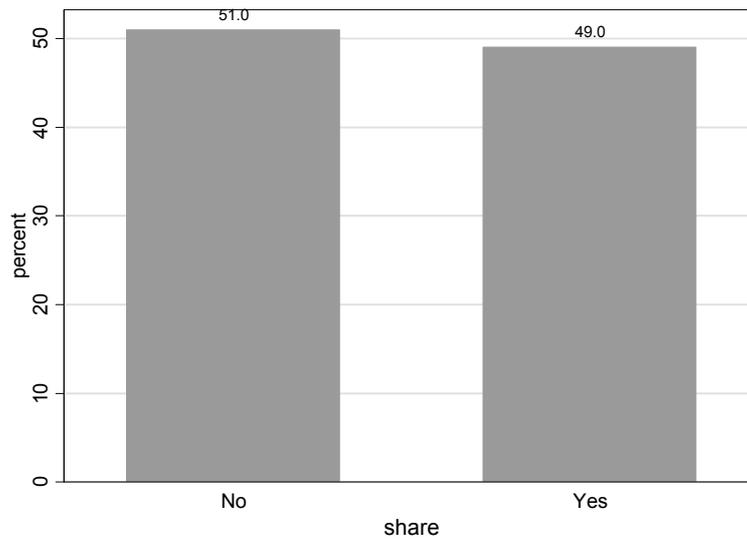
Media Usage

We use the 2019 Asian Barometer Survey (hereafter, ABS) to demonstrate the profile of social media usage and people's political attitudes in Taiwan. We first demonstrate how people use different types of media to get political news. A survey question asks respondents how often they use the internet to read political news. As shown below, about 62 percent of respondents say they use the internet to get political news on a daily basis. Thirty-eight percent of respondents reply that they seldom or never use the internet to get political news.

Figure 1. Frequency of Internet Use to Get Political News

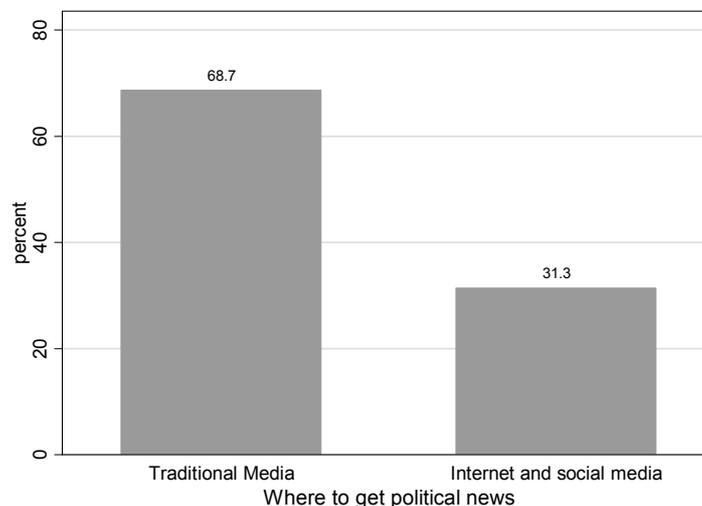


In another question, ABS asks “Do you currently use any of the following social media networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.)?” As shown below, 96 percent of respondents replied that they use at least one of the above social media platforms. In another question, ABS asks respondents the purpose of using social media. Do they use social media primarily for private purposes such as connecting with other people and for work, or primarily for non-private purposes such as expressing opinions on political issues and to share news or information? About 49 percent of respondents stated they use social media networks to express opinions on political issues or to share news or information.

Figure 2. Use of Social Media Networks to Share News

The survey also asks respondents which media is the most important source of political news. Figure 3 shows that 31.3 percent of people said the internet and social media are the most important sources of political news, while the majority of people (68.7 percent) still mainly rely on traditional media channels such as newspapers, TV, and the radio for political news.

Next, we examine media use overall. Do people use traditional media and social media together or separately? Using the 2019 Taiwan Election and Democracy Survey, we find that most Taiwanese are mixed media users. Many people use traditional and social media together. About 71.3 percent of the voters who use social media to get information rely on TV as their primary election news source. An additional 12.6 percent of this group receives election news mainly through the internet. Conversely, 61 percent of voters who rely primarily on TV for their election news also surf social media, forums, and online newspapers for political and public policy information.

Figure 3. Media Platforms that People Use Most to Get Political News

In Taiwan, tweets or posts made by politicians can be a source of news for TV or newspapers. At the same time, people may share stories from traditional media on Facebook. News on TV or in newspapers can also become a discussion topic on internet forums. The structure of traditional and non-traditional news outlets is intertwined. The main TV channels and newspapers also have Facebook pages. By managing both channels, they can increase views of the news stories they publish.

As traditional media still plays an important role in providing political news to Taiwanese people, the country's media profile is quite different from many other countries, especially that of the US. Advances in communication technology have also seen a shift in many Western countries, as people have gradually begun to obtain political information partly or mainly through internet platforms. Surveys conducted by Pew Research Center show that about two-thirds of Americans get at least some of their news from social media platforms and about 47 percent of respondents indicated that they sometimes or often get news from this type of media outlet (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017). The 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report showed that across 36 countries, about 30 to 70 percent of people got their news from social media sites. A much higher percentage (70-80 percent) of respondents got their news from various online platforms (including social media).

TEDS 2019 shows that only 15.7 percent of people in Taiwan say that they receive election news only from social media. In addition, although mixed viewing behavior is common in both places, the extent differs. In the US, only about 20 percent to 33 percent of social media users also get news via several different TV outlets. For example, 33 percent and 24 percent of Facebook users also get news from news websites and print newspapers, respectively (Shearer and Gottfried, 2017). In Taiwan, 71 percent of social media users also get news from TV.³ The media use profile in Taiwan presents a more balanced picture.

Social Media and Political Mobilization

In Taiwan, government officials and legislators of all layers use various internet platforms to connect to their constituencies and advertise their performance records. Many central-level government officials and politicians actively manage their own Facebook accounts. For example, President Tsai carefully seeks to expand her social media outreach. She regularly updates her Facebook, LINE, Instagram, and YouTube accounts. As of 2019, her Facebook followers exceeded 2.4 million, making her account the largest in Taiwan. Her LINE group reached 400,000 users. Several other political leaders are also active on social media. For example, former President Yin-jou Ma, Taipei Mayor Wen-je Ko, and Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-yu also have a large number of social media followers. As more and more people use social media to get information, many government agencies have begun to utilize Facebook to promote and defend their policies, especially during elections.

The rise of the internet and social media have democratized the media landscape, bringing about several positive impacts. Social media draws public attention to issues and minority groups that were often neglected in the past. Social media also enables people to communicate, organize, and mobilize

³ Across all countries, 50 to 80 percent of people get news from TV (Newman et al. 2017).

more easily. After 2010, civil society organizations staged several large-scale protests and were able to successfully block some government policies. The rise of social media enhanced the capacity of the civil society organizations to organize and check the discretion and encroachment of the state.

Since young people use social media more heavily, politicians who uphold progressive values such as human rights, environmental protection, and gender equality are more likely to increase their followers on social media platforms. For example, President Tsai endorses same-sex marriage, the adoption of renewable energy, and transitional justice, and is critical of the authoritarian government in China. Her policy stances make her popular among Taiwanese youth. When President Xi of China delivered a speech that threatened Taiwan in early 2019, the number of her social media followers increased immediately.

The rise of social media allows politicians to more easily connect directly to their followers, which weakens the role of political parties and traditional media in election mobilization. This helps political outsiders and political novices become popular in a short period of time. Because social media platforms limit the number of words per post, politicians tend to post articles that are short and deliver messages that can be easily read and shared on the social media. At the same time, however, these posts often lack sufficient space for substantive policy deliberation. It turns out that value-related questions such as China's encroachment, gay marriage, and populist messages of good versus evil and us versus them are easily discussed and shared by internet users. In contrast, in-depth discussions of public policies such as the costs and benefits of various infrastructure projects and pension reforms are often left out of such news media platforms. As people focus their attention on value-laden issues, necessary structural economic and social reforms are often omitted.

In addition, there is an army of online supporters that deliberately defend the parties they support and attack rival politicians and opinion leaders in several media outlets. Some of these cyber armies are organized or even paid by politicians or parties. They actively seek to influence the weight of public opinion to favor the party they endorse. In some cases, they spread fake news to influence public attitudes toward certain politicians or policies. A significant portion of the fake news and cyber armies, however, come from outside Taiwan, especially from China. We will turn to this part in detail below.

Disinformation

Social Media and Websites Utilized for Information Manipulation in Taiwan

Multiple studies have analyzed how disinformation has been spread across social media in Taiwan, how foreign agents are manipulating information in Taiwan, and how people feel disinformation is jeopardizing democracy, freedom of expression, and people's capacity to make decisions. According to the research conducted by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) program of Gothenburg University in Sweden, Taiwan suffers the most from disinformation operations run by foreign forces (Mechkova et al. 2019), which means that much of the fake information circulating in Taiwan may come from foreign governments or their agents. The same survey also found that the extensive consumption of online media by Taiwanese people might make Taiwan particularly vulnerable to foreign information manipulation (Mechkova et al.

2019). As various online media outlets report and interpret the same incidents very differently, it may lead to very different understandings and interpretations among users (Mechkova et al. 2019). Although this variety proves that the internet environment in Taiwan is open, free, and diverse, it also shows that Taiwan is vulnerable to foreign information manipulation. Reuters reporters interviewed ten journalists and reviewed contracts signed by the Taiwan Affairs Office, finding proof that local Chinese governments had paid five media outlets in Taiwan for positive coverage (Yimou Lee, I-hwa Cheng, 2019). These media outlets produced news programs that supported propaganda for China in return. For example, the Taiwan Affairs Office spent USD \$4,300 procuring two feature stories from Taiwanese media outlets to highlight various incentives for Taiwanese business people to go to China (Yimou Lee, I-hwa Cheng, 2019).

The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy also commissioned the NCCU Election Study Center to conduct a survey titled the 2019 Taiwanese View of Democratic Values and Governance. The survey found that most people in Taiwan think disinformation will infringe on democracy, are very much aware of and concerned about information manipulation, and also hope that the government will take action against information operations. Most respondents also believe that disinformation will impact personal judgments on public affairs. According to the survey, 65.7 percent of respondents agree that disinformation causes “significant damage” to democracy, 28.5 percent agree that disinformation causes “some damage” to democracy, and only 1.6 percent think that it causes no damage at all. In addition, 80.5 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “disinformation is included in freedom of speech, so the government should not have any regulations concerning disinformation,” while just 14.3 percent agreed. Approximately 34 percent of respondents agreed that disinformation often influences their judgments on public affairs, while 34.8 percent say it happens sometimes. Approximately 70 percent of respondents believe disinformation often influences the judgment of others on public affairs, and 21.6 percent believe that it happens to others sometimes.

The social media platforms and websites that are most frequently used to spread disinformation in Taiwan include LINE, Facebook, PTT (one of the biggest Bulletin Board Systems in Taiwan), and content farms and political propaganda websites.

1. LINE

LINE is a closed messaging application with 21 million users in Taiwan (LINE, 2019), and it is the most powerful channel for distributing disinformation in the country. Because of its closed and one-to-one environment, people often add their friends, family, colleagues, and people they are already familiar with to their LINE contact list. This may facilitate the spread of disinformation on LINE, because people tend to believe or identify with the information shared by their friends, family, or people they know very well. Users will be encouraged to share information that people in their social networks like or prevent the sharing of information that will hurt their relationship with their social network without focusing on whether such information is true or not.

An example of this was given in the Reporters without Borders report *China's Pursuit of a New*

World Media Order. The report highlights that social media is the new battlefield of China's information operation toward Taiwan, and includes disinformation campaigns against the government's pension reform policy and rumors about the validity of Taiwan's passport (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). The government has confirmed that one of the sources of the fake news regarding pension reforms is China's content farms, and that the fake news spread massively through LINE (The Liberty Times, 2019).

2. Facebook

In Taiwan, Facebook has over 19 million users (Hootsuite & We Are Social, 2018). A market for trading engagements, pages, and accounts on Facebook exists in Taiwan, and has become a method of manufacturing disinformation. Many managers of Facebook fan pages have received private messages requesting to buy their fan page, and the users that wrote these private messages behaved very much like buyers from China (Sanlih E-Television (SETN.COM), 2019). Closed Facebook groups are also frequently utilized for information manipulation, political mobilization, and information distribution.

One example is a fake news story targeting Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen. In mid-August of 2018, continuous rainstorms caused flooding in southern Taiwan. In order to supervise and facilitate the work of rebuilding the affected region, President Tsai visited the disaster areas on August 25, 2018. Since parts of the routes to the affected areas were still flooding and her schedule was very full, the President followed the suggestion of the local government apparatus that had been rescuing stranded citizens and rebuilding the disaster areas, taking an armored vehicle to help her move to many affected areas in very limited amount of time. The President also moved on foot since the disaster areas were located in different types of terrain. However, on August 26, 2018, a man named Mr. Na posted a picture of the President waving from an armored vehicle on his Facebook fan page with the caption "Original! Crazy News of the Ghost Island (正宗! 鬼島狂新聞)," adding a statement saying that he was one of the soldiers serving on the armored vehicle, all of his colleagues escorting the president were required to load all of their firearms, and the President only took an armored vehicle to visit all of the disaster areas. Following an investigation by the Criminal Investigation Bureau, Mr. Na confessed that he was not a soldier, and that his entire statement was fake. He posted the picture and the statement just to complain about the government (Hsu, Ya-Chu, 2018). The Presidential Office's statement and reports from other media also proved that what Mr. Na posted was fake (The Liberty Times, 2018).

3. Content Farms and Political Propaganda Websites or Reports

Content farms have been prospering in Taiwan and are a major tool through which China infiltrates the country. Many texts published by content farms have been found to be unoriginal and copied from China. The Reporters Without Borders report *China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order* also mentioned the Taiwan Kansai Airport incident as an example demonstrating how China manipulated disinformation by using content farms as weapons (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Since content farms have been

manufacturing massive amounts of fake news in Taiwan, Taiwanese netizens have even started some actions to track and list at least 50 content farms on the internet to combat the continuous spread of fake news (The Liberty Times, 2019). Beginning in October 2019, Facebook users in Taiwan discovered they were no longer able to repost or share some of the posts produced by content farms. When Facebook users try to share them, the system will tell you that the posts have violated the community guidelines and cannot be shared. Facebook's actions in this respect show how serious the negative impact of content farms is on Taiwan (Yeh, 2019).

4. PTT

PTT is the most popular Bulletin Board System in Taiwan. Just like Reddit in America, the anonymity of PTT encourages users to talk about anything they want with no strings attached. Over the past 13 years, it has become one of the top 20 most popular websites in Taiwan. Because of its high number of users, Taiwanese media like to dig through and copy or quote popular information from PTT and turn it into a report or news story. It has also made PTT a popular tool to exercise spin control or send out a trial balloon for specific political candidates, products, or issues. This is reflected by the rising price of PTT accounts—during Taiwan's 2018 local election, the price of a PTT account went up to as much as NT \$105,000 (The Liberty Times, 2018).

Massive fake accounts have also been created to exercise spin control. In order to make a fake news story or candidate seem worth reporting on and gain popularity, information operators need a huge number of accounts, authentic or fake, to like or reply to their posts. Moreover, operators behind fake news make use of fake accounts to prevent themselves from being tracked. After a tremendous number of fake accounts became sources and accelerators of disinformation, which undermined the credibility of PTT, the managers of PTT deleted a huge number of fake accounts (Sanlih E-Television (SETN.COM), 2019) and raised the threshold required for an account to post information on PTT (The Liberty Times, 2018).

Since some accounts were pinpointed as frequently spreading fake news on PTT and some similar news had been repeatedly reposted and forwarded by specific groups of accounts, civil society in Taiwan began to track these accounts and their IPs. They did find some specific accounts which kept posting or liking a particular piece of news for spin control, acting like cyber armies. Moreover, the IPs of some of the netizens found among those accounts were foreign, and it was found that others used VPNs to hide their true IP address or kept switching IPs in order to prevent themselves from being tracked (Chia-Hsien Lin, 2019). This illustrates how foreign forces are able to use disinformation to impact Taiwan.

The Impact of Disinformation

This section will discuss how, in the process of marriage equality legislation and gender equality education, disinformation was manipulated and able to infringe on democracy and human rights in

Taiwan.

Although the Council of Grand Justices issued Interpretation No. 748 in 2017 ruling that forbidding marriage between same-sex couples violated the principles of the Constitution, anti-marriage equality groups launched three referenda after this issuance in an attempt to undermine the legal status of same-sex marriages and exclude education regarding respect for different gender identities and sexual orientations from the public school curriculum. Before the voting day on November 24, 2018, disinformation targeting the legalization of same-sex marriage and gender education was disseminated overwhelmingly across social media, including hate speech against LGBT groups. Although same-sex marriage was legalized in Taiwan in the end, all three referenda won the majority vote and impacted human rights and democracy in Taiwan.

The legislative processes for marriage equality endured more complex and unexpected political influence compared to other bills. As the referenda and local elections were held on the same day in 2018, the referenda became one of the chips or issues that candidates or political parties made use of to strengthen their rate of support or mobilize supporters. Anti-marriage equality groups and political parties not in favor of LGBT rights formed a strategic alliance and aggregated their information operations in both the online and offline worlds. This alliance massively increased disinformation against the LGBT community, and the disinformation content became extreme. Discussions on social media regarding the referenda took a political turn instead of focusing on facts, policies, or human rights.

Examples of Fake News Targeting the Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage and Gender Equality Education

The following incidents are examples of fake news which targeted the legalization of same-sex marriage.

1. About a month before the referenda, a piece of fake news saying that legalizing same-sex marriage was a conspiracy promoted by the AIDS medication pharmaceutical industry was spread widely through LINE, and was fact checked as fake news by the fact-checking website MyGoPen, the National Health Insurance Administration, and the Taiwan Centers for Disease Control of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. The fake news story said that if same-sex marriage were legalized, gays around the world would marry Taiwanese gays and receive Taiwanese citizenship (Yeh, 2018). They would then have access to free national health insurance and AIDS medication. Thus, Taiwan would become the top user of AIDS medication in the world, and the national health insurance system would collapse. As AIDS medications are costly, the pharmaceutical industry would be the ultimate beneficiary (Charles Yeh, 2018).⁴ To counteract this fake news story, the Taiwan FactCheck Center fact checked it and clarified that foreign AIDS patients in Taiwan only accounted for 0.00052 percent of the nation's total health insurance expenses, so it was illogical to say that Taiwan's healthcare system would collapse due to the entrance of foreign AIDS patients even if same-sex marriage were legalized (Taiwan FactCheck Center, 2018). Further, the criteria and procedure that foreign residents and foreign spouses of Taiwanese citizens must use to apply for Taiwan's national health insurance are the same, so the legalization of same-sex marriage wouldn't

⁴ Please refer to the MyGoPen website for the full text of the fake news story (https://www.mygopen.com/2018/11/line_5.html)

make it easier for non-Taiwanese residents to apply for national health insurance (Taiwan FactCheck Center, 2018).

2. A fake news story stated that the meaning and goal behind the symbol of the LGBT rainbow flag was to encourage adults to have sex with people under 16 years old, paving the way towards the legalization of pedophilia (Steger, 2018). In fact, there was not a single word regarding pedophilia in any version of the draft bills for the legalization of same-sex marriage, and no literature can prove that that is what the LGBT rainbow flag implies.
3. A fake news story was spread on LINE which said that textbooks for junior high schools would include content teaching students how to take selfies while having sex and how to engage in sexual relationships with teachers or animals. This news was fact checked by the Taiwan FactCheck Center on August 17, 2018. After reading all of the textbooks that had passed the Ministry of Education's review and were thereby allowed to be used in junior high schools, the Center didn't find any chapters or wording mentioning content resembling what the fake news story alleged (Taiwan FactCheck Center, 2018).

What Information Resources about the LGBT Community Received the Most Attention on Social Media?

Why was the impact of disinformation still strong during the referenda despite Taiwan's independent fact-checking organizations, online tools, and government efforts to rapidly combat fake news? A survey monitoring the volume of posts related to LGBT issues on different social media platforms was conducted eight months before the referenda in 2018. The survey results showed that on social media, the posts about the LGBT community from Taiwan's major media companies weren't the most influential (Chien-jung Kao and Cheng-hsu Fan, 2018). Instead, posts from the social media pages of organizations or individuals with a clear stance for or against LGBT ranked as the top five most influential posts regarding LGBT issues compared to the articles posted on the Facebook pages of major newspapers before the referenda. People seemed like to share, like, and comment on information regarding LGBT rights shared on social media accounts with a clear stance on such issues and were less engaged with posts made by the social media accounts of major media outlets, which took a relatively neutral stance on LGBT rights and movements (Chien-jung Kao and Cheng-hsu Fan, 2018). This research seems to reflect that information regarding the LGBT community which comes from a relatively neutral source might not circulate smoothly among pro- and anti-LGBT groups. People instead tended to receive information from their filter bubbles and echo chambers, and thereby the spread of disinformation was facilitated and further reinforced the filter bubbles within which it had originated.

Impact on Democracy and Human Rights

Disinformation not only stopped people from having rational discussions about what decision they should make on the referenda regarding same-sex marriage and gender education—it also caused irrecoverable damage to human rights.

According to Legislator Meinu Yu, nine cases of suicide within the LGBT community and 23

bullying cases against LGBT students were reported after the referenda vote (ETtoday, 2018). Kaohsiung Medical University's Department of Psychiatry Professor Cheng-fang Yen's studies also show that the disinformation surrounding the referenda might have already damaged the mental health of people who identify as LGBT. Professor Yen conducted a survey through Facebook on the mental health of straight and LGBT people before and after the referenda (Chiu, 2018). The survey was conducted twice in order to compare the changes in the mental state of people with different sexual orientations. The first round was conducted 22 months before the referenda day, while the second one was conducted one week after the vote (Chiu, 2018). The survey results showed that before the referenda, 15.4 percent of LGBT people had the intention of committing suicide, while after the referenda 24.6 percent had the intention of committing suicide. The survey found no change regarding the desire of straight people to commit suicide (Chiu, 2018). This shows that the entirety of the referendum process, including the spread of disinformation against the LGBT community and the outcome of the referenda, might have directly hurt people who identify as LGBT.

Responses from Civil Society

Although disinformation has infringed on democracy and human rights in Taiwan, civil society has been working to innovate and come up with a variety of solutions. These solutions include establishing fact-checking technology tools and organizations, enhancing media literacy, encouraging grassroots, face-to-face, and youth initiatives, and promoting responsible, quality journalism. Academics, NGOs, the civic tech community, grassroots advocates, and new media are all taking action against disinformation. The Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) invited academics and practitioners fighting against disinformation to share their experiences at the Tackling the Spread of Disinformation: Experience of Taiwan's Civil Society Workshop held on July 2, 2019 as part of the Asia Democracy Research Network's research project, and interviewed some other practitioners about their experiences. The solution, initiatives, and common proposals for future action which were put forth at the workshop are summarized as follows.

Fact Checking: Tools from the Civic Tech Community and Independent Fact-checking Center

Since Taiwan has the biggest and most energetic civic tech community in Asia, netizens have been innovating technical solutions to facilitate fact checking.

1. Cofacts: LINE bots for fact checking

Cofacts is a robot program on LINE which performs fact checking. It appears on LINE just like any of your other friends. LINE users can friend Cofacts on their LINE accounts and forward all questionable messages to Cofacts.

The robot program was founded by software engineers in 2016 and is sustained by many volunteers.⁵ After receiving forwarded messages from users, Cofacts will search in its online database to see if there are any fact-checking results available that already match the questionable messages. If there is a match, Cofacts will send the users who forwarded the messages the results stating what category the questionable message belongs to: contains truthful information; contains untruthful information; contains personal opinions; or fact checking is not applicable, and provide users fact-check reports including additional references (Cofacts, n.d.). For messages categorized as containing untruthful information, Cofacts will send the users a fact-check report and additional references. For messages categorized as containing personal opinions, Cofacts volunteers will provide users with another reference which holds opposing opinions to the questionable messages in order to encourage users to see more diverse and various perspectives on the same issue. The purpose of this is to leave space for the exchange of different opinions and create the opportunity for dialogue between people with different opinions (Johnson and Liang, 2017).

The design of the Cofacts fact-checking mechanism and database follows its core values of belief in collective wisdom, openness, and transparency (Han, 2018). Users and fact-checking volunteers are all pillars that support the Cofacts fact-checking mechanism and database. Johnson and his team have established an online platform where volunteers can input fact-check results simultaneously from anywhere in the world, making the work of fact checking more efficient and lowering the technological barrier for fact-checking volunteers. Cofacts regularly hosts fact-checking workshops to train more volunteers and let volunteers fact check together and share their experiences. Cofacts users also play an important role by continuously providing questionable messages to the database and enhancing the openness of the fact-checking process. Even though some questionable messages might not be fact checked in a timely manner due to human resource constraints, these questionable messages will be categorized in the database for future fact checking and further analysis. Governmental apparatuses such as the National Police Agency under the Ministry of the Interior have also provided anti-fraud tips and information to the Cofacts database to help users obtain correct anti-fraud information. As of March 2020, nearly 130,000 LINE users had added Cofacts as their friend on LINE (Cofacts, 2020), and nearly 33,704 questionable messages in the database had been fact checked.⁶

Cofacts wants to do more than fact checking: it also aims to cultivate the general public's capacity for media literacy and promote the free circulation of information to break filter bubbles. Anyone can join in the weekly gatherings held by Cofacts to learn and perform fact checking (Cofacts, n.d.). Participants include both youths and those who are middle-aged. By fact checking on their own, participants learn ways to verify information. Moreover, participants meet different kinds of people at these gatherings, and learn how and why different people might generate different fact-checking results (Liao, 2019).

⁵ Please refer to the Cofacts website: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/>

⁶ Please refer to the Cofacts website: <https://cofacts.g0v.tw/articles?filter=solved&replyRequestCount=1>

2. Fact-checking Organizations: The Taiwan FactCheck Center

The Taiwan FactCheck Center was the first fact-checking NGO in Taiwan. The Center's Director, Yuan-Hui Hu, began advocating for the establishment of the Taiwan FactCheck Center together with other individuals beginning in 2017. In 2018, the center was founded. In November 2018, the Center successfully obtained a certification from the International Fact-Checking Network. In the beginning, this Center was supported by the Quality News Development Association and Taiwan Media Watch. The Center is currently working towards becoming an independent foundation. The Center complies with the rules and regulations set forth by the International Fact-Checking Network and prioritizes transparency in all things.

In 2019, the Center cooperated with National Education Radio and CTS TV to respectively launch an audio and video version of a news fact-checking report. This marked an important beginning for the center's connections with various media outlets. The Center began cooperating with Yahoo in February 2019 to distribute its fact-checking report via Yahoo's platform. Starting in March 2019, internet users can see fact-checking tags and references by the Center or other fact-checking sites underneath their search results when they use Google through Google's claim review function. The Center has also started cooperating with LINE, and became Facebook's third-party fact-checking partner in June 2019.

The Center provides training against disinformation, which targets proactive producers of information such as journalists and civic reporters as well as college faculty members and students. The center has organized disinformation workshops in Taichung and Taipei that have attracted large crowds.

Grassroots and Youth Movement: The Youth Combating Fake News Front

Jen-Yu Hsu, a member of The Youth Combating Fake News Front, stated that their organization was founded on April 7, 2018 following a series of incidents that occurred during and after the 2018 local election. The organization used this series of incidents as an opportunity to raise student awareness of fake news. The Front launched a petition among all college students to fight against and resist fake news; they also put out a call warning everyone to pay attention to the Chinese capital and influences behind specific media organizations and stories. This petition was signed by over 10,000 individuals and 100 organizations within a single day, and since then its Facebook posts have accumulated over 700,000 views. After that, they decided to continue managing the Youth Front's Facebook fan page, where they share relevant news stories, activities, and information. They have successfully enabled some students who were worried but did not know how and where to gain access to information to obtain systematic information to share with friends and family members.

The group continues to take action, some of which are summarized below.

Information Compilation and Sharing

The organization compiles and shares information on penalties issued by the National Communications Commission (NCC) for serious and intentionally unbalanced reports so that people who are concerned

with an issue or who love to connect and talk with others online have verified and systematic information to share. When people or their fan pages are harassed by radical internet users using disinformation or false news, people who have visited the fan page can repost the information the Front has compiled, saving them the time of doing it on their own. People can also share this information with their parents.

Tracking Whether Media Reporting is Balanced

The organization also pays attention to whether Taiwan's media fulfills its responsibility to engage in balanced reporting on important human rights incidents such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and the anti-extradition bill movement in Hong Kong. Their efforts have triggered public awareness and concerns over whether Taiwanese media, both online and traditional channels, are engaged in balanced reporting.

Face-to-Face Media Literacy and Action against Disinformation Seminars

The Front also holds on-campus seminars at universities in cooperation with local civic media, scholars, and NGOs to talk about topics such as information warfare, fake news, and Chinese factors behind media in Taiwan. The seminars also invite anti-media monopoly scholars to share information about the movement. Reservations for seats at these seminars fill up within a day or two, and each session thus far has attracted around 200 or 300 participants.

Media Literacy Education for Youth: Taiwan Alliance for Advancement of Youth Rights and Welfare

Researchers Chih-Yang Liu and Hsin-Hua Tsai of the Taiwan Alliance for Advancement of Youth Rights and Welfare explained that their alliance has long focused on the right of access to the media stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has launched media literacy education for children, organizing on-campus workshops about media literacy and trainings that target teachers and volunteers. The alliance has also invited college students to join in the supervision of journalism.

As part of its policy advocacy, the Taiwan Alliance for Advancement of Youth Rights and Welfare promoted and participated in the incorporation of media literacy in the curriculum guidelines for 2019 public school textbooks, offering professional opinions to the government. The alliance also provides support to teachers regarding the implementation of the new curriculum. Furthermore, the Alliance developed the world's first media literacy board game "Crazy News" last year, so that media literacy education would no longer be boring. To play the game, one group of students assumes the role of journalists, and reads out false news or news with fabricated elements compiled by the Alliance. Another group of students plays the role of the audience and has to identify the inappropriate presentation of the news stories, thus cultivating student awareness of truthfulness and appropriateness standards in journalism. The Alliance also trains junior high school and senior high school students how to report and appeal to government agencies when they see disinformation.

The alliance cooperates with the K-12 Education Administration, and has visited over 20 junior and senior high schools in Taiwan to organize a “mock voting” activity. The activity includes voter education, offering an opportunity for students to consider referendum topics. This is also a way of teaching high school students basic knowledge on press coverage of democratic topics so that they will not be easily misled by disinformation.

Civil Society’s Policy Proposals

After TFD’s Tackling the Spread of Disinformation: Experience of Taiwan’s Civil Society Workshop, participants from civil society put forth the following action plans as important policy proposals.

Facilitating Cooperation between Different Fact-Checking Platforms and Media Reform Organizations

All those engaging in fact checking work believe that we need more cooperation in the following directions.

1. Promote Cooperation among Different Fact-Checking Organizations

The Taiwan FactCheck Center has been cooperating with other fact-checking organizations such as Cofacts, MyGoPen, and Rumor and Truth, and regularly participates in the Cofacts volunteer team to review the fake news reported by users. The Center also shares its fact-checking reports with Cofacts. The Center is willing to help any organization that wishes to further develop their fact-checking mechanisms.

2. People with Different Expertise Must Work Together to Build a Disinformation Database

In order to build a more complete fact-checking system, a more comprehensive disinformation database is needed. However, to build this database, interdisciplinary professionals are required because expertise in different fields is required to identify disinformation. For example, a person with expert knowledge on gender issues can be a better judge of whether a news story is intentionally generating gender discrimination than a person without such knowledge.

3. Fact-Checking Tools Should Expand to Include Images and Video News

The majority of fake news dispersed on social media is in the form of images and videos. Expanding fact-checking tools to include images and videos will create increased opportunities to effectively use fact-checking tools on information distributed via multimedia, and the fact-checking process and reports can also be presented through multimedia to attract the attention of a wider audience.

Establishing Self-Regulating Mechanisms for Social Media

Director Hu of Taiwan FactCheck Center mentions that currently Taiwan only demands self-regulation from traditional media, but most disinformation is dispersed through social media. We must therefore facilitate social media self-regulation mechanisms. The Taiwan Alliance for Advancement of Youth Rights and Welfare and the Taiwan FactCheck Center have voiced the necessity of establishing a social media platform self-regulation convention at meetings with the NCC, and they need more help to advocate for this issue. Although a social media self-regulation convention was developed by a social media company in Taiwan on June 21, 2019, there remains room for improvement when compared with other countries.

Media Literacy Education is the First Priority

Director Hu of Taiwan FactCheck Center argues that the fact-checking process can never catch up to the speed at which fake news stories are generated. Therefore, the most important priority is to enhance the public's level of media literacy and foster their ability to engage in critical thinking. He argues that only then can we nurture immunity against fake news. Jason Liu of the Reporter Foundation stated that although everyone is worried about Taiwan being attacked by information warfare, we should not forget that each one of us is standing at the frontline of this war, and each one of us must be armed with media literacy.

Developing Digital Games for Media Literacy Training

All of the participants of this workshop discussed the potential to develop digital games for media literacy training to trigger public interest in media literacy training and expedite the education process. The participants have all established some groundwork and are willing to share their expertise in this area.

More Grassroots Organizations Advocating for Media Literacy

Director Hu of the Taiwan FactCheck Center stated that we need to have more grassroots organizations that communicate face-to-face with the public about the importance of media literacy. Currently, organizations such as Fake News Cleaner in Taiwan are engaging in such efforts, but similar organizations lack the manpower to do more. Community universities are great seeds of incubation, and more people should be engaged in media literacy training for elderly citizens. The Taiwan Alliance for Advancement of Youth Rights and Welfare also targets young people in face-to-face media literacy training, but more manpower is needed. Government investment in and creation of media literacy resources are often influenced by party alternation or political factors, and thereby cannot be sustained, which is why we need private organizations to provide continued investment and attention to this issue.

Connecting with More Organizations to Propose Initiatives to the Government

Director Hu of the Taiwan FactCheck Center stated that those organizations and citizens who participated in the workshop should continue to let different opinions be heard throughout the government system, generating a greater voice for initiatives, and urge the government to continue promoting related work and invest resources in efforts to combat fake news and disinformation.

Media Use and Polarization

It is often argued that the popularity of social media aggravates political polarization. Social media contributes to the problem of echo chambers and cyber armies in Taiwan (Wang 2018). Many people primarily access political information through social media. Chang (2019) finds that social media usage is conducive to greater polarization. He analyzes how Facebook users share information about the KMT presidential candidate, Mr. Han. Pan-Green supporters tend to share negative news about him while pan-Blue supporters share positive news about him. By analyzing social media posts, he also finds that the cross-strait political relationship is the most salient partisan issue affecting how people perceive the main political parties online. The use of social media creates a cyberspace in which people exchange information only among those who hold similar political views.

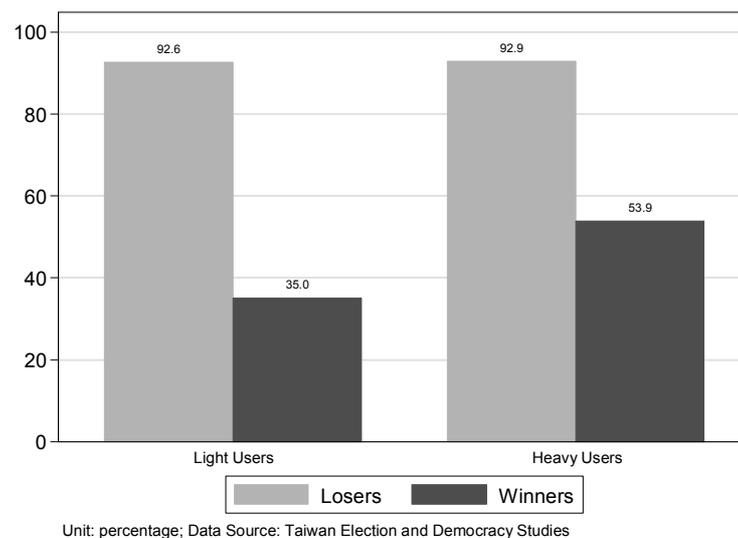
In addition, with the popularity of social media, it is easier than ever before to generate and spread fake news stories. The internet and social media allow politicians, cyber celebrities, and average users to distribute short posts that deliver inflammatory messages and sometimes misinformation to persuade and mobilize supporters. People can easily demonize their political rivals online. All of these factors contribute to political polarization. Based on recent political developments in Taiwan, we will examine to what extent and in what way the use of social media exacerbates political polarization. To do so, we first need to operationalize the relationship. If the use of social media exacerbates political polarization, we should be able to observe a larger political perception gap between pan-Blue and pan-Green supporters who are heavy internet users. We use the 5th wave Asian Barometer Survey to study the effect of social media usage and people's political attitudes.

Media Use and the President's Approval Rating

We first explore the relationship between the frequency of internet usage and people's political attitudes according to who they supported in the most recent presidential election. The question asked to measure internet usage was "How often do you use the internet, either through a computer, tablet or smartphone?" We then measure political support by looking at whether a person voted for Tsai Ing-wen, the winning candidate, or for Eric Chu, the losing candidate. These two political camps exhibit distinct national identification and unification-independence preferences. If the use of internet and social media in particular tend to encourage political polarization, then we would expect those people who use the internet and social media more intensively to exhibit a large perception gap regarding the performance of

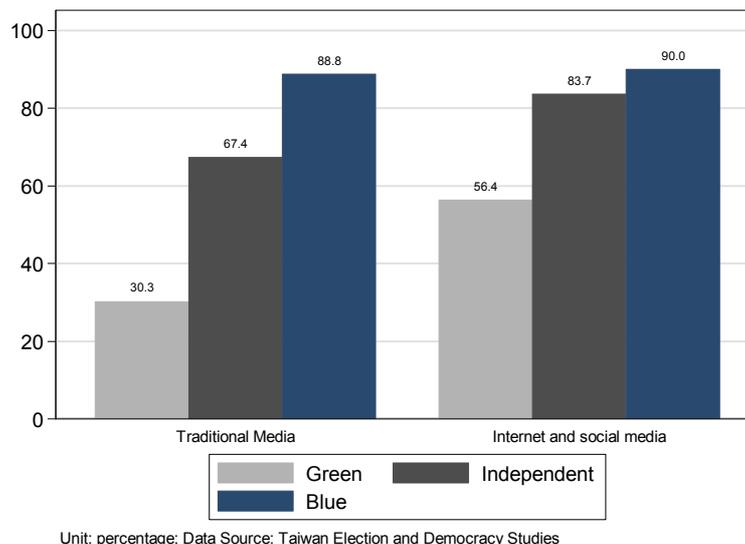
President Tsai compared to those who use the internet less. The exact wording of the approval question was “How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with President Tsai’s government?” High values denote that respondents are less satisfied with the performance of the president. As shown in the figure below, among the intensive internet users, the election winner and losers tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the performance of the incumbent government. In other words, people who use the internet more are also more likely to hold moderate views than those who use it less.

Figure 4. Frequency of Internet Surfing and Distrust in Government



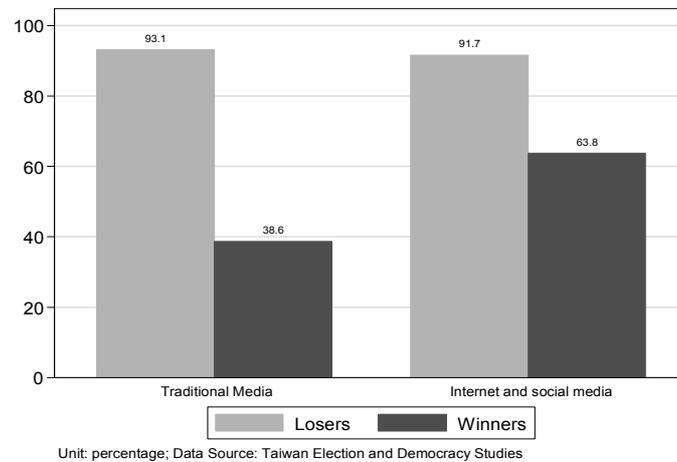
The reason that the attitude gap between heavy internet users is smaller is mainly due to the attitudes of those who favor the winning side. As shown in the figure above, political losers hold similar negative views about the performance of the incumbent government regardless of whether they use the internet often or not. In contrast, heavy internet users who favor the winning side tend to express some reservations about the performance of the incumbent government. In other words, the heavy internet users who favor the winning camp appear to hold a relatively critical view of the incumbent government. They tend to receive information from different angles about important government policies such as energy, pensions, and labor rights. Thus, they are less likely to totally approve of the performance of the Tsai government despite voting for her.

We can also examine the relationship between frequency of internet usage and people’s political attitudes according to their party identification. As shown in the figure below, the ABS survey demonstrates that those who use the internet intensively are actually likely to be moderate. Among intensive internet users, pan-Green leaners, independents, and Pan-Blue leaners tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the performance of the incumbent government. In general, pan-Blue leaners tend to disapprove of the job President Tsai is doing regardless of whether they are light or heavy internet users. In contrast, pan-Green leaners and independent respondents who use the internet intensively tend to hold a more critical view of the incumbent government. This is why the attitude gap among heavy internet users is smaller than the gap among light users.

Figure 5. Frequency of Internet Surfing and Distrust in Government (by Party Identification)

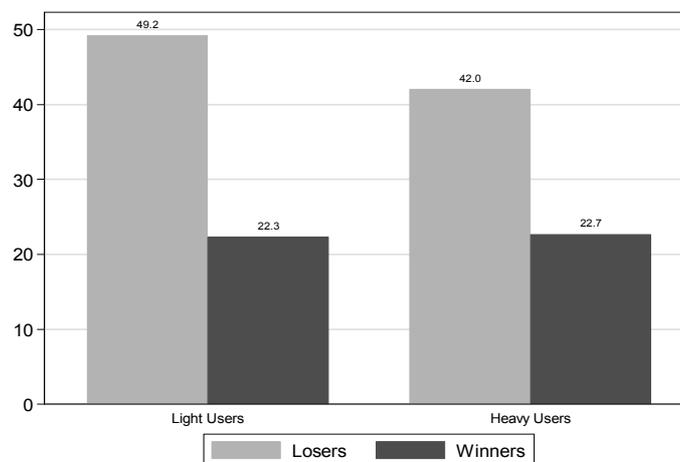
The ABS also has a question asking people if they currently use Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, or other social media platforms. Ninety-six percent of respondents replied that they use at least one such social network. Since nearly all respondents are social media users, we were not able to analyze the difference between social media users and non-users. In another question, the ABS asks respondents whether they use social media primarily for private purposes, such as to connect with other people and for work, or for non-private purposes, such as expressing their opinions on political issues and to share news or information. We find that respondents who use social media primarily for non-private purposes tend to be more moderate in their views than those use it for private purposes.

In another question, the ABS asks respondents which is the most important channel via which they find information about politics and the government. The answer options include traditional media such as television, newspapers (print and online), and the radio, and new media such as the internet and social media. The next graph shows that people who rely on the internet and social media as their primary source of political news actually tend to be more moderate compared to those who still depend on traditional media such as TV, newspapers, and the radio. The responses to this question also illustrated that social media users tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the incumbent government. As shown in the figure below, political losers of both types hold similar negative views of the performance of the incumbent government. In contrast, heavy social media users who favor the political winners tend to express some reservations about the performance of the incumbent government.

Figure 6. Main Source of Political News and Distrust in Government

Media Use and the Performance of the Democratic System

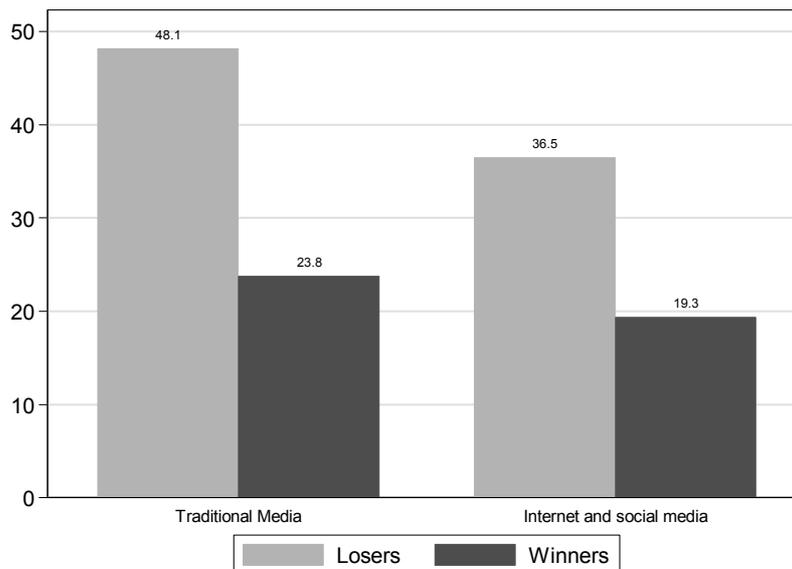
To measure political attitudes, in addition to the approval rating of the president, we also discuss the public assessment of the performance of democracy to make sure the effect of media use is stable. To this end, we examine the perceived function of democracy, including satisfaction with the way democracy works and the perceived quality of Taiwan's democratic governance. First, we examine media usage and perceived satisfaction with democracy. High values indicate that respondents are less satisfied with the performance of democracy. As shown below, among intensive internet users, the winning and losing camps tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the performance of the country's democracy. The attitudes of the winners are similar between different types of media users. Among the losing camps, heavy internet users tend to hold a more positive view of the function of democracy than light users do.⁷

Figure 7. Frequency of Internet Surfing and Democratic Dissatisfaction

⁷ We also find that respondents who use social media primarily for private purposes tend to be more moderate than those use it for non-private purposes in terms of their assessment of the performance of democracy. The attitudes of the winners are similar between different types of media users. For those who favor the losing camp, heavy internet users tend to hold a more positive view of the function of democracy.

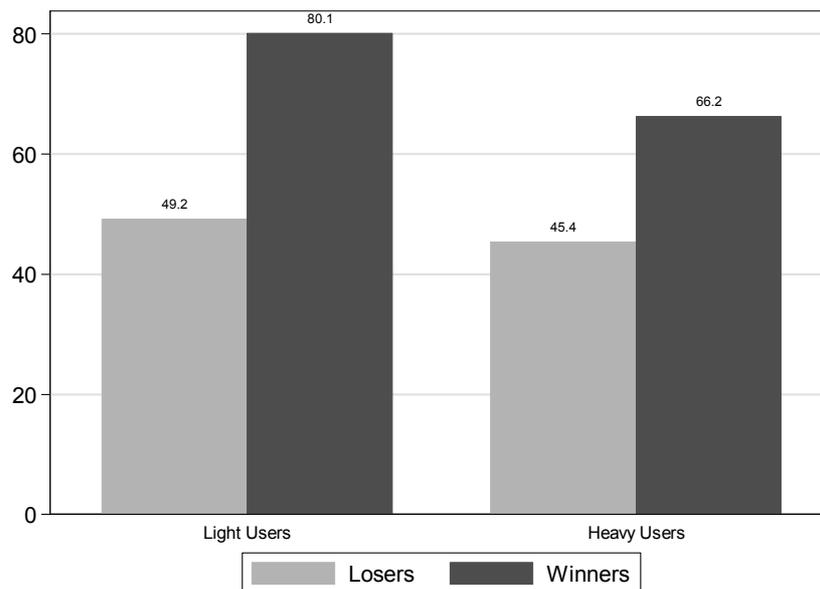
Next, we discuss the use of traditional media and new media and the political attitudes of those who rely on each. The next graph also demonstrates that people who rely on the internet and social media for their primary political news actually tend to be more moderate. Compared to those who still depend on traditional media such as TV, newspapers, and the radio, internet and social media users tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the overall performance of democracy.

Figure 8. Social Media Use and Democratic Satisfaction



To further understand the political attitudes of survey respondents, we also examine the perceived quality of democratic governance. The concept includes several attributes: when government leaders break laws, there is nothing the court can do; all citizens from different ethnic communities are treated equally by the government; people are free to speak their minds without fear; people can join any organization they like without fear; how often government officials withhold important information from the public; to what extent is the legislature capable of keeping government leaders in check; how capable is the government in terms of enforcing laws and implementing policies; and how effective is the government in cracking down on corruption. We construct a new variable by taking the average of these items. High values denote that respondents are more satisfied with the quality of democracy. We find that among intensive internet users, the winning camp and losing camp tend to have a smaller gap in their views of the quality of the democracy.⁸ Similarly, among respondents who rely on the internet and social media for political news, those who favor the winning camp and losing camp also have a smaller gap in their views of the quality of democracy. Frequent new media users tend to receive different perspectives about important public policy issues such as equal opportunity, government spending, government corruption, nuclear power, and renewable energy. Thus, they are less likely to totally approve of the performance of the Tsai government despite voting for her.

⁸ We also find that respondents who use social media primarily to express opinions on political issues or to share news or information tend to be more moderate than those use it for non-private purposes in terms of their assessment of the quality of democratic governance. To save space, we did not cover this topic.

Figure 9. Social Media Use and Perceived Democratic Quality

Discussion

These findings suggest that people who use the internet more frequently are more likely to be moderate in term of their views about the performance of the incumbent government, satisfaction with the way democracy works, and democratic quality. Our findings also suggest that the use of social media does not polarize people's political views any more than the traditional outlets in Taiwan; in fact, new media users tend to hold more moderate political views compared to traditional media users. These findings refute the echo chamber, cyber army, and fake news theories that argue that social media usage tends to aggravate political polarization.

One main factor contributing to this pattern is that the internet and social media platforms enable users to be exposed to different political views. The variety of information contributes to lower levels of polarization. In Taiwan, traditional media forms such as newspapers and TV channels are very clearly divided along partisan lines. Watching these news outlets frequently actually tends to strengthen existing political views and aggravate negative views held by opposing political camps.

The premise for social media platforms to provide cross-cutting political information depends on the existence of platforms that connect people who hold divergent political opinions. In Taiwan, the social cleavage—national identity—does not coincide with other dimensions of social life. People with different national identities or different unification-independence preferences are socially mixed. They may live in the same neighborhoods, work together, or go to the same clubs. They may also send their kids to the same schools and thus become friends on social media. With these extended personal networks which include colleagues, distant relatives, and friends, social media users are likely to be exposed to at least some level of cross-cutting political viewpoints. In addition, because of the political heterogeneity of

friends on social media one might have, people often refrain from using inflammatory language on Facebook or LINE. These unique features of social media networks in Taiwan essentially hinder the formation of solid and closed echo chambers, preventing the potential negative effects of social media use.

In contrast, in some countries such as the US, the main social cleavages are class-based and race-based, making social ties more segregated and less intertwined. The Republican-leaning and Democrat-leaning tend to belong to different social classes and races, live in different neighborhoods, have different occupations, and send their kids to different schools. They are less likely to connect with people on the opposing side via social media and be exposed different political viewpoints. The use of social media thus tends to create solid echo chambers and aggravate political polarization.

Cyber armies and the proliferation of fake news in recent years do pose a threat to these characteristics of social media networks in Taiwan. These two factors have the potential to exaggerate the adverse attitudes of internet users toward the opposite political camps. The result of the ABS showing that internet and social media users in Taiwan tend to be more moderate actually suggests that cyber armies and fake news do not significantly shape people's overall political views toward the performance of the government and democracy. This is likely because the main social cleavage in Taiwan is not class-based or race-based as mentioned above. Taiwan has a vibrant and autonomous civil society and internet community, which is mostly independent of state and party influences. Internet users are able to think independently and are less susceptible to outlandish news stories.

The political parties in Taiwan that have suffered election losses in recent years often blame propaganda spread by cyber armies and fake news for causing their electoral defeats. They claim that these two types of information distort the truth, demonize political figures, and induce people to hold a distorted view of the opposing political camps, which are the factors that cause their defeat. The two forces do exist and adversely influence political competition and public views on some particular issues. However, our discussion shows that frequent internet and social media usage do not induce people toward polarization; instead, they become more moderate. When civil society is mature and autonomous, fake news and propaganda spread by cyber armies appear not to decisively influence how people think about the performance of the incumbent government and democracy. Political parties exaggerate the adverse effects of cyber armies and fake news.

Finally, new media users tend to be younger, more educated, and hold higher liberal democratic values. Thus, it is likely that liberal democratic values may determine how people use media to get political news and their political perceptions. We can redraw the relationship presented in Figure 4 by dividing the total sample into high and low liberal democratic value holders. The results show that among the higher liberal democratic value holders, frequent internet users do tend to have a smaller winner-loser gap in approval ratings of the government. Nevertheless, among the low liberal democratic value holders, frequent internet users exhibit an even smaller winner-loser gap in approval ratings. This suggests that liberal democratic values are not the driving force that impacts how internet usage affects the winner-loser political perception gap. Even controlling for the effect of liberal democratic values, new media usage is still associated with a smaller political attitude gap between the winners and losers of elections and among different party supporters.

Conclusion

The rise of the internet and social media have changed the political landscape in different countries in different ways. In this article, we explored how media consumption and media usage affect political polarization in Taiwan. We found that frequent internet use is conducive to a smaller winner-loser and partisan trust gap. Frequent internet users are more likely to hold a narrow view of the performance of the president and the function of democracy in Taiwan. The type of media through which people access news also has a significant impact on political polarization. Social media users tend to have a smaller political attitudes gap.

We also examined the issue of misinformation and its impact on Taiwan's democratic development and human rights. We found that the adverse effects of fake news and propaganda spread by cyber armies do not play a salient role in affecting how people perceive the incumbent administration and overall democratic performance. However, as China tightens its domestic political control and becomes more assertive on the world stage, it remains important to seek measures to block misinformation and cyber armies from outside Taiwan's border to safeguard Taiwanese democracy. It is also important to tackle domestically produced fake news that may distort public opinion and election results. At the same time, the government must be careful about the measures it takes to regulate fake news originating in Taiwan. They need to balance the need to curb cyber libel with the possible harm to the protection of press freedom and human rights.

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Country Case 5: Indonesia

Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in the 2019 Simultaneous Elections in Indonesia

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Introduction

The presence of social media has changed people's behavior and culture in communicating and consuming news. Social media has transformed information scarcity into information abundance. It has made information accessible in a fast and timely manner. Due to its nature, social media is used as a medium to give important information, but it is also used to spread disinformation. It is very interesting to analyze the evidence from Indonesia prior to the 2019 simultaneous elections regarding the spread of disinformation. There are a high number of internet users in Indonesia, and the political processes prior to the election massively featured disinformation during that particular year. This study is focused on the disinformation phenomenon that occurred in political year 2018-2019 in Indonesia. Social media user data from Indonesia in 2018 shows that among the total population of 265.4 million, 132.7 million are internet users, and 130 million are active users of social media (Picture 1.1). Indonesia no doubt has tremendous challenges in managing social media literacy considering the massive amount of disinformation spread on these platforms. This challenge was even greater prior to the election in Indonesia (detik.com, 2018).

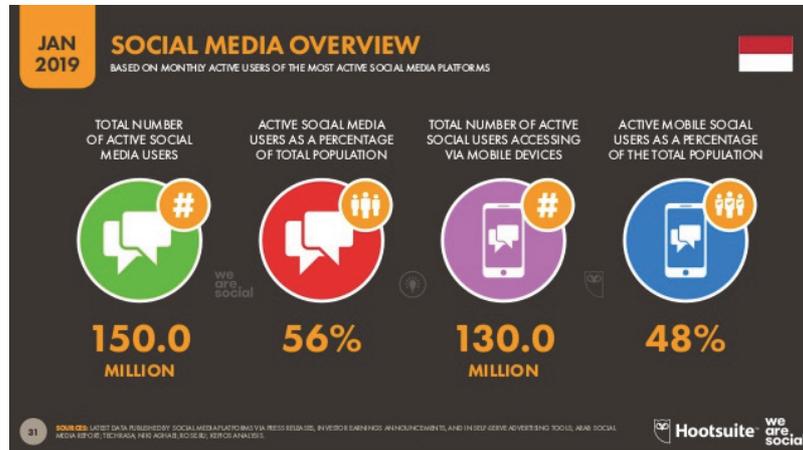
Picture 1.1. Indonesia's Digital Statistical Indicators 2018



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The data below shows a significant increase in the number of active social media users in early 2019 in Indonesia (Hootsuite, 2019).

Picture 1.2. Overview of Social Media in Indonesia



Source: Hootsuite, 2019

The behavior of social media is very much determined by its users. In Indonesia especially during the political year 2018-2019, social media played a very strategic role. We call this a political year because in 2018-2019, Indonesians were preparing for the simultaneous elections in 2019. Previously, political campaigns were mostly done through meetings and street campaigns. Recently, campaigns have begun to use social media more frequently. Political campaigns in recent years have used a combination model: conventional campaigning and social media. Social media has been seen by election candidates in Indonesia as an effective tool for campaigning. Social media is also being used to defeat rivals in elections. Numerous studies show that the use of social media for political purposes is increasing. People are aware that one of the advantages of social media is that information is delivered directly to users. The absence of formalities as well as the speed of delivery have made social media the choice to influence the public.

Anything posted on social media leaves a digital trail, and this contributes to the problems faced by Indonesia. In fact, many people are not aware of the nature of social media. People still easily share any news they receive with a wider audience before considering the urgency or the substance of the news. As a result, there were many fake news articles created or shared by irresponsible users prior to the elections in Indonesia 2019. They spread hoaxes and sometimes even used disinformation to defeat political contestants in the elections or undermine the work of the General Election Commission (*Komisi Pemilihan Umum/KPU*) and disturb the election process.

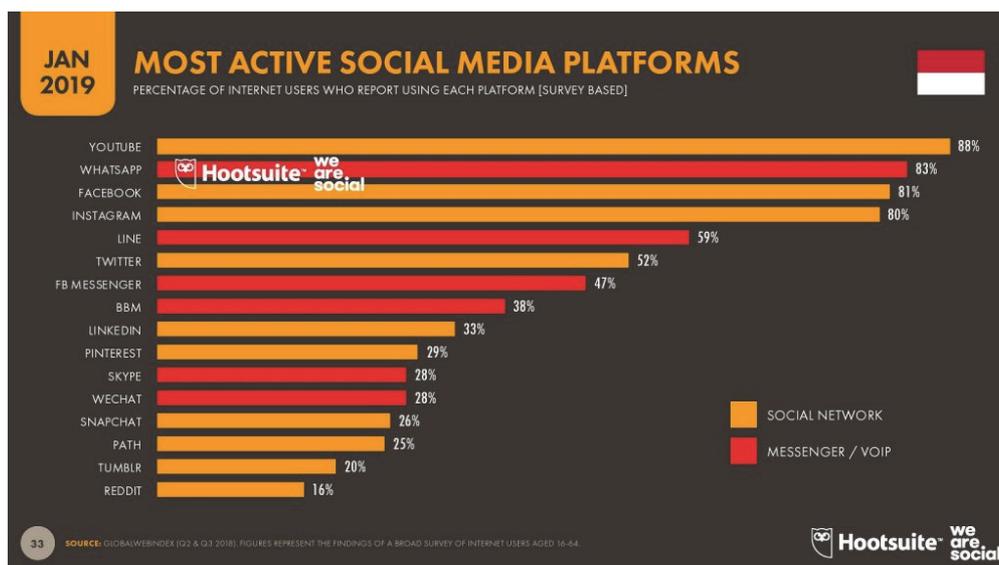
The presence of social media also has negative impacts. Although it has changed the way people communicate with each other, social media can also have a negative impact, especially if users do not carefully filter the information they need. People who do not carefully distinguish between real and fake information will easily be influenced by the fast spread of information without checking first whether it comes from a reliable resource. Therefore, it depends how users perceive social media: as a good factor

or as a bad factor. This study aims to analyze the phenomenon of social media and the spread of disinformation in Indonesia in 2018-2019, particularly prior to the 2019 simultaneous elections. Unlike anywhere else, this study shows how disinformation targeted the election contestants, in this case the presidential and vice presidential candidates and the KPU. This study aims to answer three main questions: (1) how disinformation targeting the KPU aimed to undermine the election and in turn disadvantage the incumbent; (2) how disinformation targeting two candidates aimed to shift the voting preferences of the public; and (3) how social media and disinformation disrupted the political process in 2019 in Indonesia.

Disinformation Features: The Use of Social Media for Political Purposes

It is widely known that the fast spread of information can be seen as the advantage of the current era. Nowadays, information is not dominated by conventional channels, such as printed newspapers or scheduled TV broadcasts. People instead tend to use social media, shifting from the use of conventional channels to an unlimited and borderless channel of communication. One of these channels is social media. In Indonesia, the dominant social media and messenger platforms are YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Picture 1.3 shows the profile of social media users in Indonesia in 2019 (Hootsuite, 2019). Prior to the 2019 Indonesian simultaneous elections, the use of social media in Indonesia increased significantly as can be seen from the data above. Social media has also been used for political contestation purposes.

Picture 1.3. Most Used Social Media Platforms in Indonesia



Political parties or candidates often use social media as part of a broader campaign strategy. The massive use of social media in Indonesia, especially prior to the 2019 elections, not only targeted political candidates, but also the KPU. From a theoretical point of view, usually the use of social media

by political parties or candidates during campaigns aims to manipulate public opinion, either by purposefully spreading fake news or disinformation, or by trolling or targeting any support for the opposition party. This is different from traditional digital campaign strategies, which have generally focused on spreading information about the party or candidate's platform, or sending out advertisements to voters (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). In Indonesia, the trend was different as disinformation was also targeted towards the KPU.

From the perspective of social media users, individual activities on social media tend to be limited to issuing statements or updating one's social profile. But due to low social media literacy, some internet users on social media attack each other, harassing or shaming others. Some are not aware that the information they share is easily viewed by the public and leaves a digital trail. This shows the existence of individual weaknesses on social media literacy. In Indonesia, it was also shown that the polarization of issues during the elections influenced the increase on social media profiles prior to the election (ANU, 2019).

The changing patterns of interaction between individuals are due to the characteristics of social media that allow each user to not only consume information but also to produce or distribute information. This characteristic allows anyone active on social media to enter a platform and become involved as a consumer as well as an information producer.

These social media characteristics enable everyone to share information with the public or with anyone they want. Everyone on social media has the authority to choose and form the opinions they want. In Indonesia, this possibility is increasingly more flexible because it is encouraged and supported by a democratic climate that ensures that everyone is free to express their opinions on social media. Social media platforms are used a great deal in Indonesia. A significant amount of material is shared by ordinary citizens themselves, aided by the increasing popularity of messenger apps like WhatsApp. These factors combined with a low level of digital literacy has made Indonesian voters easy targets for hoaxes (Tapsell, 2018).

Prior to the elections, the use of social media increased because in the 2019 simultaneous elections, there were only two pairs of candidates for president and vice president. The candidates who competed for the presidency were similar to the candidates who ran in 2014. Both Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto ran again in the 2019 simultaneous elections. The competition to spread news through social media reflected the head to head competition between the followers of the two candidates. Online communities and social media can play a role as social agents and enact political change. The specific characteristics of social media in a free democratic climate enable people to communicate freely. But some people share anything they receive without filtering the news. The massive production of social media disinformation is the result of the careless attitude of users towards social media.

Social media activities in Indonesia are very dynamic. High levels of activity on social media can even have an impact on social movements and create political change in Indonesia. A large number of social media users and the democratic climate that allows for freedom of opinion in Indonesia means activities on social media are both voluminous and instantaneous (real-time). The height and magnitude of activity on social media often triggers tensions between social media users on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. They fight via social media content. Max Walden, quoting research done by Central

Connecticut State University in 2016, noted that Indonesia was ranked 60th out of 61 countries included in a global study regarding literacy and literate behavior (Walden, 2018). The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report found that Indonesians were second only to Chinese people in terms of their level of trust in the media. At the same time, almost 80 percent of Indonesians reported that they were worried about fake news being used as weapon (Walden, 2018). Therefore, it is quite challenging to see the development of social media and disinformation, especially prior to the elections.

In democratic elections, the mission, vision, and programs offered by candidates, especially during campaigns, are for the purpose of providing good political education. Moreover, every election candidate can provide policy alternatives that they intend to implement to make changes or improvements in development when they are elected. It is hoped that voters will make their choices based on these offers and not solely due to emotional factors and psychological closeness highlighted by the candidates. Unfortunately, despite the ongoing campaign, public space was not filled with the intended programmatic debate. Public space tends to be used as a political effort to defeat competing candidates and to undermine the work of the election commission.

Lately, the presence of social media as a means of disseminating information aimed at the public or voters in elections is seen as an effective and important step in shaping opinions and regulating political agendas. In line with the above phenomenon, as Indonesians turn to social media for their daily news intake, a rising tide of bots and paid fake social media accounts commissioned to spread disinformation were identified (Tapsell, 2018).

Election Campaigns and Social Media: The Government Response

The 2019 simultaneous elections were a battle zone for opinions, rampant black campaigns,² and expressions of hatred and incitement on social media. The 2019 simultaneous elections were the first time presidential, parliamentary, and regional elections all took place on one day. It was a massive democratic undertaking which determined the future identity of a vast and diverse country. About 245,000 candidates ran for more than 20,000 national and local legislative seats across a country made up of around 18,000 islands and covering 1.9 million sq. km (735,400 sq. miles). The Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, called it “one of the most complicated single-day elections in global history” (BBC, 2019).

Because of this simultaneous nature, the election participants (political parties, legislative candidates, and presidential and vice-presidential candidates) moved together to campaign, both to introduce themselves and their presidential candidates. However, based on the *Kompas* (the printed newspaper company based in Jakarta) survey, one month before the simultaneous elections were held, about 16.2 percent of the people had not decided which contestant they were going to vote for. This also suggests that the presidential and vice-presidential election contestation and the campaign received greater attention

² Black campaigns are distinguished from negative campaigns and defined as campaigns that “insult someone, religion, ethnicity, race, class, candidate and/or other election participants.” The black campaign accuses the opposing party of false or unproven allegations, or through irrelevant matters related to their capacity as leaders.

compared to the legislative elections, which were also held in the same period (Kompas.com, 2019b).

The 2019 presidential election campaign was quite different from the 2014 presidential election. Differences included the longer duration of the campaign and the existence of social media as a new election campaign method regulated through Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning elections and PKPU No. 28 of 2018 relating to the election campaigns. The relatively long campaign period turned out to have implications for the successful team in arranging appropriate and substantive strategies. Social media also received special attention as one method of delivering the vision and mission of the candidates to the voters.

Six months and three weeks were allotted for the 2019 election campaign by the electoral law, which had its challenges as to whether the campaign period as stipulated could effectively be used as a means of socializing the vision and mission of the political parties and the candidate political profiles. Some may argue that the campaign period was too long considering that it absorbed a lot of resources from the political party side as well from the candidate side. However, the geographical area of Indonesia is significant, and it takes time to disseminate information about political campaigning to all of society. A *Kompas* survey showed that 57.3 percent of respondents wanted a dynamic campaign between the groups competing and wanted the public to understand the platforms being offered. On the other hand, 32.6 percent wanted the campaign to be carried out calmly and peacefully even if the public did not understand the platforms offered, and 10.1 percent of respondents wanted a tough and tense campaign between camps and wanted the public to understand the platforms offered. This voter view illustrates the demand for election participants to prioritize the platforms being offered (Kompas, 2019).

During the electoral campaign, some political parties produced and utilized short videos to disseminate their ideas and programs to voters through various available social media platforms. Political parties also developed the use of social media influencers, colloquially referred to as “buzzers,” to expand their reach to constituents in the targeted areas. There are three advantages of social media as a form of political campaign media. First, social media provides easy access for prospective voters, as candidates can directly interact with potential voters on a broad scale and with an intensity that is greater than traditional campaign tactics such as door knocking, brochure distribution, and even coverage by print or television media. The use of social media in the presidential election campaign offered direct involvement between candidates and prospective voters by creating a space for interaction and discussion via liking, commenting on, and sharing messages. Second, in addition to being easily accessible, social media is cheap for its users. Although not all regions can access social media, its broad reach can reduce campaign costs, which are always fairly expensive. It is not expensive to disseminate material on social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and others. Third, social media has a broad reach because it is very easy for people to share the content or information they receive. Unlike conventional, traditional campaign media, social media transcends geographical boundaries. Campaign messages can also be adjusted to target specific voter demographics (Utz, 2009).

One of the campaigns that received a great deal of attention before the elections was the spread of the hashtag #2019GantiPresiden, which means “change the president in 2019.” This is the hashtag put forth by Jokowi’s opponent, PKS politician (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera Sosial/Prosperous Justice Party) Mardani

Ali Sera. At the beginning it is said that the hashtag was meant to attract attention to find more followers that were going to vote for PKS in the simultaneous elections. However, later on the hashtag became a kind of iconic trademark that was used by presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto-Sandiaga Uno to defeat the other presidential candidates.

In Indonesia the law on Information and Electronic Transactions 19/2016 regulates the use of information technology in transactions and communication. The law regulates what can and cannot be done when using information technology and is aimed at maintaining social order. All social media use in Indonesia has to abide by this rule.

Several cases of violations of this law have been brought to the court. This was to show that the government is willing to enforce the law. One such case is that of Ahmad Dhani, who was found guilty of hate speech. He was summoned under Article 45A Verse (2) and Article 28 Verse (2) of the Law on Information and Electronic Transactions 19/2016 as well as Article 55 Verse (1) of the Criminal Law (Tempo.co, 2018).

Ahead of the 2019 simultaneous elections, disinformation was rampant in Indonesia. The disinformation became so extensive that the government began holding weekly directives to uncover “hoaxes” and provide “real facts.” Of particular concern was the increasing disinformation targeting the KPU, which ranged from stories about the use of sturdy paper ballot boxes, stories saying that the ballot papers were used and sent from China in huge amounts, and stories about Chinese foreign workers, who were accused of being intentionally mobilized to support the candidacy of Joko Widodo-Ma’ruf Amin. Although the accusations were just slightly obvious, such disinformation related to China disrupted electoral management. This disinformation also impacted the KPU, with a rumor that the chairman of the KPU was a Chinese descendant and therefore the election agenda had been hijacked by the Chinese agenda. Another story stated that the vote counting process of the results of the 2019 simultaneous elections ended after midnight, and the KPU hid certain information and altered the winner of the presidential election. When the official results were released on May 22, people still accused the KPU of not being independent. The way people reacted to this wave of disinformation has the potential to affect the short-term and long-term stability of democracy in Indonesia.

Disinformation and Responses

Disinformation and hoaxes during elections are very frequently found on social media, especially during political years in Indonesia. A Daily Social Survey (2018) of 2,032 internet users in Indonesia showed that 81.25 percent of respondents had received a hoax via Facebook, around 56.55 percent through WhatsApp, as many as 29.48 percent via Instagram. No less than 32.97 percent of respondents received hoaxes via Telegram. There are other social media platforms that are also flooded with hoaxes, such as Twitter, but the number of recipients is below 30 percent. Hoaxes are more widely distributed on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram because these three applications are the most popular and widely used in Indonesia. Therefore, it is understood that social media plays a significant role in the spread of

information. As a consequence, hoaxes can easily become massive, and disinformation is spread easily. As reported by *Mafindo* (the Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society), during December 2018, hoaxes related to political issues ranked first (40.9 percent) while the frequency of hoaxes based on religion, ethnicity, race, or intergroup affiliation (known as SARA, which is the Indonesian abbreviation for ethnicity, religion, race, and other social divisions) ranked second (17 percent) (PUSAD & MAFINDO, 2019, p. 20). The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) supported by *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) has responded to this issue by prohibiting the spread of hate speech via social media (Kompas.com, 2017). This response considers the following features.

Firstly, to this day social media does not include press media, and therefore those involved in the utilization of social media are not bound by Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the press. Those who use social media do not need to abide by the journalistic code of ethics and are not required to be clear and accountable. However, we also have Law No. 19 of 2016 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions, so social media users must remain wise and be more careful. Social media is unlike conventional media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, television, and radio stations where reporters are strictly bound by a code of ethics and can be sanctioned.

Secondly, we shall urge people to be more selective in finding information through social media. Social media literacy is important so that consumers of information do not just swallow any information submitted on social media and regard it as truth. The habit of sharing information on social media must also be changed because it is not certain that the information shared is truthful. Therefore, we have to make people check the information first before they share any news.

Thirdly, there is a firm stand, especially within the government, regarding the misuse of social media to divide national unity by spreading false information or hoaxes. Due to the numerous hoaxes on social media, real information may be warped into misleading information (disinformation). In short, social media as a product of information technology cannot be avoided. The most important task is to properly equip users and consumers of information with the knowledge and skills they need to distinguish facts from lies.

There are immense challenges inherent in overcoming hoaxes during political years, especially before elections. The election law stipulates that all candidates must obey the provision of the law that prohibits the production of any political campaign material containing fake news or disinformation. However, political hoaxes about SARA issues have been linked to political campaigns. Political hoaxes that focus on religion, ethnicity, race, and intergroup affiliation need to be taken seriously because they contain the potential to incite violence and often manipulate reality according to the concept that was introduced by Cherian George, a professor of media studies from the University of Hong Kong. He discusses cases that occurred in the three largest democracies in the world, namely the United States, India, and Indonesia, where the promotion of hatred has sometimes been used as a political strategy to defeat opponents (George, 2020, p. 145). One massive hoax and instance of hate speech which influenced the political dynamics in Indonesia before the 2019 elections is the blasphemy case of *Ahok* (Basuki Tjahaya Purnama), who was the incumbent governor of Jakarta in 2017. He was ultimately charged with blasphemy after being accused of insulting Islam during his reelection campaign. The court sentenced him

to several months in jail. During that time, the production of disinformation was massive and targeted those members of the public who were particularly sensitive towards issues involving religious practices or ethnicity.

Data shows that the average Indonesian uses the internet for 8 hours and 36 minutes a day, and 3 hours and 26 minutes a day are spent on social media (Wong, 2019). Indonesia has the fourth-highest level of social media users globally. Indonesia is Facebook's third-largest market, with more than 100 million accounts. Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram are also popular. Many Indonesians use social media as a trusted source of news and information, but digital literacy remains low. As a result, Indonesians are easily targeted by hoaxes and fake news.

Data released in a new report from *Mafindo*, an organization focused on combating fake news and improving digital literacy, shows that political fake news and disinformation shot up by 61 percent between December 2018 and January 2019. Of 109 problematic items identified in January 2019, 58 were political in nature, with the latest *Mafindo* data from February 2019 further indicating an increasing escalation. In December 2018 there were 88 fake news stories, of which 36 were political in nature (The Guardian, 2019). Dozens of posts containing disinformation spread, and with them spread fears that people may not trust the results of a legitimate election.

Many sources noted that during the 2019 presidential election, both campaign teams funded groups of buzzers to produce and disseminate false information using fake identities created for social media. Many social media platforms have been used to undermine other candidates. The main element in a successful "buzzer" campaign is the use of bots and spam accounts, which buzzers and social media consultants said were mostly used on Twitter and Instagram to create trending topics (Potkin, 2019).

A report on sentiment-related news identified the following trends.

Diagram 1.1. Sentiment toward Candidates



Source: <http://blog.nolimit.id/2019/03/22/analisis-tren-media-sosial-terkait-pilpres-2019/>.
 Accessed July 20, 2019

The Indonesian Ministry of Communication reported 700 election-related hoaxes one month before voting began (Yang Hui & Prakash, 2019). The hoaxes ranged from predictable to very strange. After the first presidential debate, some stories spread that claimed Jokowi was receiving answers via a hearing aid and a pen. One Facebook status wondered why Jokowi had to press his ear several times during the second presidential debate. This status was shared more than 35,872 times by other Facebook accounts and had more than 5,105 comments (Kompas.com, 2019a). There was also the accusation that Prabowo Subianto used Google smart glasses to “cheat.” This comment was published in *Suara Anda* (News Program) on February 19, 2019 and was forwarded more than 300 times within the two days after it was published (okezone.com, 2019). Both stories are disinformative.

Disinformation surrounding the elections not only targeted the candidates, but also the KPU. One story which was widely circulated criticized the use of cardboard boxes as ballot boxes for the election, claiming they were neither durable nor waterproof. The KPU responded to this accusation by saying that the cardboard boxes used are sturdy, durable, and secure enough to store the ballot papers. The KPU further clarified that they use sturdy and waterproof cardboard boxes (detik.com, 2018).

Picture 1.4. Cardboard Boxes³

Source: wartakota.tribunnews.com & opini.id

Another story accused Arief Budiman, the Chairman of the KPU, of being of Chinese descent. Since issue of “Chinese” is still somewhat sensitive, the hoax attempted to undermine the election by alleging that the election would mobilize the Chinese workers who now reside in Indonesia because of coincident factors (antaranews.com, 2019). Picture 1.5 below shows the hoax targeting the Chairman of the KPU, which claimed that he had a secret Chinese name, Soe Hok djin. The purpose of this picture was to stir up SARA issues by claiming that the Chairman of the KPU was closely connected to Chinese people.

Picture 1.5. Hoax against the Chairman of the KPU⁴

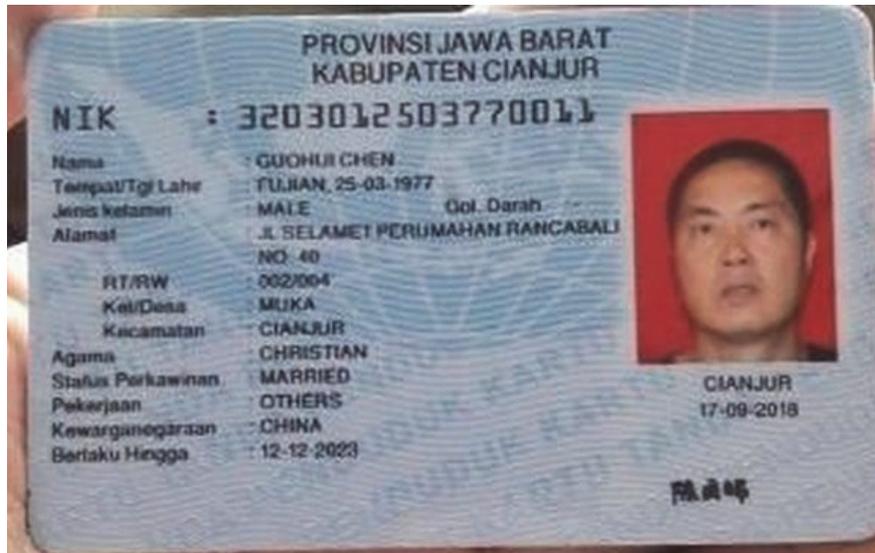
Source: kaskus.co.id

³ The picture on the left was released by the General Election Commission (KPU), which was eager to prove the durability of the ballot boxes by sitting on them. The right is a picture of the cardboard boxes used in the election.

⁴ Picture 1.5 shows Mr. Arief Budiman, Chairman of the KPU, taking a selfie with a member of the PDIP (*Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan/Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle*), who is of Chinese descent. This picture was assumed to support the accusation towards the Chairman. The Facebook post said that Mr. Budiman was the blood brother of Soe Hoek Gie, and that Mr. Budiman’s birth name is Soe Hok djin.

Another story accused a Chinese worker of falsely obtaining an Indonesian ID card (pictured below). In fact, the worker was employed at a local company and obtained the ID card legally as regulated by Indonesian law (detik.com, 2019b).

Picture 1.6. Indonesia's ID Card for Chinese Workers



Source: nasional.okezone.com

Picture 1.6 above is the ID card of a Chinese worker that was published by the regency of Cianjur, West Java. In the beginning, the Chinese worker was accused of being a foreigner who falsely obtained an Indonesian ID card. The people who made this accusation did not carefully look at the regulations, which allow foreign workers to have an Indonesian ID card as long as they fulfill the legal requirements. The ID cards for foreigners are written in English.

The most dangerous type of deliberate disinformation is the kind that seeks to delegitimize an entire election or sow doubts about the validity of the voting process (The Straits Times, 2019). In January, a video went viral after claiming to show seven boxes sent from China containing millions of ballots punched for Jokowi in a port in northern Jakarta (detik.com, 2019a). This story was designated by the police as a hoax, but it is estimated that at least 17,000 tweets shared this false information. The Prabowo campaign team also claimed there were 17.5 million names that were “problematic” on the voter list, something the KPU later denied. The fake news story about the used ballot papers supposedly found in northern Jakarta also targeted the KPU and was closely connected with the effort to delegitimize the work performed by the KPU and show their partisanship.

Picture 1.7. Disinformation Regarding Ballot Papers



Source: arrahmannews.com & kabar24bisnis.com

On the left is the forwarded tweet about the seven containers containing punched ballot papers found in North Jakarta Seaport. The picture on the right was taken during the press conference which was held to respond to the rumors about the seven containers. The press conference took place at the office of *Bea Cukai* (Tax Revenue Office) of North Jakarta Seaport.

Another video showed the leader of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI), who supported Jokowi, inviting people to join her to eat pork after the elections. The video shocked some conservative Muslims, and more than 150,000 people watched it 24 hours after it was published. The video turned out to be engineered; she invited people to eat noodles. The word for noodles in Indonesian is *bakmi*, but it was engineered to sound like *babi* (pork) (PDSI KOMINFO, 2019).

Disinformation in Indonesia usually focuses on the religious and ethnic credibility of candidates. There are scattered stories that depict Jokowi as Chinese, Christian, or communist, or maybe all three. Disinformation also targeted Prabowo by describing him as an atheist. Any information relating to religion easily gets people riled up in Indonesia. Despite the laws stating that there would be sanctions against the use of disinformation, many hoaxes still spread easily, especially before the elections. Given the deep social, ethnic, and religious differences in Indonesian society, disinformation can trigger actions of hatred and intolerance. Trying to discredit political opponents is a standard tactic in elections. However, this type of disinformation has the potential to erode public confidence in elections and democratic institutions (Walker, 2019).

Picture 1.8. Disinformation regarding the Chairperson of the PSI Party⁵



Source: syyhoaxanalyzer.com (2019)

Hoaxes targeting the KPU remained rife even after election day. A YouTube video intending to show a KPU official admitting that he was bribed went viral. Later, it was learned that the video was edited and that the original video recorded in 2014 showed the official stating that he had refused bribes.

Disinformation also spread about the winner of the election. As he did in 2014, Prabowo claimed victory. This was despite the quick count that showed Jokowi with a nine-point advantage. A few days after the election, Prabowo criticized the “lying survey agency” and asked his cheering supporters, “Do you trust the survey institute?” He then replied to his own question, saying, “No. They are liars, people don't believe them.” On May 1, Prabowo told the crowd that the media was “destroying democracy in Indonesia today” by continuing to publish “fake results.” Prabowo also used the news of the tragic deaths of more than 700 election administrators due to fatigue-related illnesses to discredit the KPU. The context of this election victim was provided in a press conference held by the Indonesian Doctors Association (IDI), who said that this was due to the “fatigue” factor.

Sometimes the KPU exacerbates their own situation. Differences were found between the results entered by the KPU and those recorded on the vote-counting form by the independent election monitoring committee. But the anomaly proved to be a consequence of human error and was corrected. Election watchdogs and observers from 33 countries found no indication of systemic fraud. Despite this, the BAWASLU (The General Election Supervisory Agency) released accusations that the Counting System of Elections (*Situng*) and Quick Count program committed administrative violations towards the regulation of the technology-based recapitulation. Based on the above press release, the KPU had to refine the system

⁵ Instagram Post from Grace Natalie, the PSI's Chairperson. Her official account clarified the fake video that accused her of inviting people to eat pork.

of data input to the *Situng* and give the BAWASLU the list of the quick count companies registered in the election (Kompas.com, 2019c).

Scheme to Counter Hoaxes

In a democratic country like Indonesia, disinformation targeting the electoral process is the most worrying phenomena. This is because people easily believe that disinformation is real news. Disinformation may threaten public trust in the KPU. If people start to doubt that the elections are free and fair and suspect that the results do not reflect the true desires of the voters, then they will be far more likely to dispute the results, and every president who wins will struggle to lead effectively.

Although most Indonesians accepted the 2019 election results, skepticism created by the disinformation targeting the KPU provided an impetus to Prabowo's call for a people power movement to oppose the outcome. Prabowo's hardline supporters were provoked by claims that the elections were fraudulent and that the KPU is Jokowi's tool. Analysts and authorities in Indonesia worried that the announcement of the official results could be followed by mass demonstrations and violence. There was even a concern that terrorists could target the protest locations, even though this did not happen until a binding decision from the Constitutional Court (MK) declared the Constitution Court Decision in the dispute over the results of the election.

To respond to the growing number of hoaxes and spread of disinformation prior to the elections, in June, the Google News Initiative teamed up with 22 of the country's major media outlets to actively debunk fake news through a website called CekFakta.com. The government also took the issue very seriously. Indonesia's communications ministry announced in September that it would be hosting weekly fake news briefings and busting hoaxes via a new website called StopHoax.id (Walden, 2018).

Further, according to the president of *Mafindo*, Anita Wahid, the impact of government intervention is limited in the context of an election because authorities are taking orders from the incumbent. Every time a hoax is caught by the government and debunked, or an account is shut down, there is a risk that the government will be framed as trying to silence its opponents (Walden, 2018).

In July, *Mafindo* released what it called the WhatsApp Hoax Buster (WHB) as a Google Chrome extension. The WHB system is a database that automatically counters hoaxes on WhatsApp. When a hoax appears, users can instantly forward a message to be verified against the organization's hoax data base. Wahid told VOA that the organization's data shows that the frequency of hoaxes has consistently increased in recent years, from ten per month in 2015 to 27 per month in 2016, 59 in 2017, and 96 per month in 2018 (Walden, 2018).

Another organization, *Drone Emprit*, is developing a system that automatically infiltrates WhatsApp group chats to monitor discussions and the spread of the most frequently forwarded messages. *Drone Emprit* uses machine learning to analyze social media with tech that was previously used to mine big data sets. It has been vital in identifying the kinds of bot network accounts that are used by a lot of disinformation agencies (Vice.com, 2018).

Conclusion

From the explanation above, it can be said that in Indonesia, social media has a dual function: 1) social media is for channeling educational information, and 2) social media is a platform for spreading disinformation. Taking into account the political backdrop of Indonesia in 2018-2019, at which time Indonesia was preparing for the simultaneous elections, social media was likely to be used to spread disinformation. As discussed above, instead of functioning as a reliable alternative source of information, social media and online media sometimes become poor quality news outlets and spread disinformation. This was due to the political competition of the election candidates. In Indonesia, during this time the spread of disinformation mainly targeted two sides: the candidates and the KPU.

While the disinformation targeted at candidates was aimed at winning the contestation, disinformation targeting the KPU was aimed at undermining the agency's work in the hopes of undermining the legitimacy of the elections and negatively impacting the incumbent candidate.

The responses to counter the spread of disinformation came from formal explanations by the KPU, the government, the campaign to turn back hoaxes, cooperation with Google and Facebook to scrutinize the disinformation delivered through their platforms, and the implementation of the law on Information and Electronic Transactions. The law was enforced by bringing up the violators to the court. All efforts were done in order to cultivate better political competition, especially during 2018-2019.

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Country Case 6: Malaysia

Social Media, Democracy, and Disinformation in Asia: The Case of Malaysia

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Introduction

The advent of widely accessible internet has resulted in significant shifts in human behavior and interaction. The enormous amount of data possessed by search engines, websites, social media platforms, and free messaging apps presents an opportunity to commodify this data, turning it into a product to be sold for a profit. The internet has evolved from being a convenient place for people to book flights and holidays into a powerful tool that can be used to manipulate thoughts, emotions, and reinforce prejudices. Like any other form of technological innovation, the inherent good of the internet can be overshadowed by those who choose to use it to achieve their own sinister objectives. This paper will focus on the use of social media platforms for political purposes, particularly as a campaign tool in the 12th, 13th, and 14th Malaysian general elections.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of disinformation within social media platforms on a democracy. Disinformation is generally defined as the deliberate act of disseminating information or news that is not only misleading, but biased, manipulated, or utilized as a hostile tactical act such as propaganda or false narratives.³ The act of disinforming is powerful and can be divisive, and is a common practice within politics. In this digital age, disinformation is rampant and can have multiple negative repercussions on a democracy when a state is ill-equipped to counter the effects. Disinformation, especially in the social media space, enables widespread circulation of false, inaccurate, or misleading information which is designed to profit or to promote intentional public harm.⁴ The state needs to be able to distinguish between fake news and information that is sensitive and controversial to prevent such information from dominating in society.

A survey done by the Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) showed that 87.4 percent of Malaysians are internet users. Out of these users, 85.6 percent of people listed social networking as their main online activity. Out of the estimated 24.6 million social media users, 97.3

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³ Misinformation is a genuine mistaken belief shared in a particular news item/information without malicious intent.

⁴ Defined by the European Commission's High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation

percent have a Facebook account, and out of 27.8 million instant messaging app users, 98.1 percent use WhatsApp daily (“Malaysia’s population in 3Q,” 2019). Due to the overwhelming popularity of Facebook and WhatsApp among Malaysians, this paper will focus primarily on these two platforms, while also discussing others such as Twitter, Instagram, and others where necessary.

Research Questions

This paper will aim to answer the following questions: how did social media become a significant feature in the Malaysian democratic process? What are the factors that contribute towards social media usage in Malaysian politics? Does social media act as an enabler or inhibitor for Malaysia’s democratic process? What impact did social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp have upon the general elections in 2013 and 2018?

This paper will examine the broader implications of social media usage on democratic values as a whole. How does the proliferation of fake news and disinformation play a role in shaping the national discourse? There have been attempts by the government to regulate fake news and hate speech in the name of maintaining social order and racial harmony, but how have these attempts been received by civil society and the public? How do democratic societies navigate this need to balance between a commitment to truth and upholding freedom of expression? Finally, this paper will lay out some recommendations that democratic states, not limited to Malaysia, can adopt to empower the usage of social media and to rectify any disadvantages or harms brought on a democracy. While this paper aims to inquire about the ramifications of disinformation spread via social media on a democracy, we concur that there are also notable advantages which have resulted from the development of social media.

Literature Review

Tapsell (2018) analyzes the role of new communication technologies in the regime change of GE14 and uses James Scott’s (1987) *Weapons of the Weak* as the theoretical foundation for assessing the role of WhatsApp and other social media platforms as tools of resistance. Leong (2015) investigates how new media has influenced the political process and communication strategies in Malaysia and its impact on the political landscape.

A paper published by the International Conference of Democratization in Southeast Asia, “Fake News and Elections in Two Southeast Asian Nations: A Comparative Study of Malaysia General Elections 2018 and Indonesia Presidential Election 2019” delves into the aftermath of disinformation in politics brought on by social media users (Jalli et al., 2019). We review the methods used to obtain the data for social media usage in politics and extrapolate the findings to help draw our conclusions.

The Role of Social Media in Malaysian Politics

The increasing reliance on the internet and social media as mediums to receive information is not a phenomenon that is unique to Malaysia. Malaysia does present a rather distinctive case however, because of two factors: the control of the press by the government and the ownership and control of mainstream newspapers by prominent political parties. Under the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, all printing presses require a license to operate, granted by the Minister of Home Affairs, which must be renewed every year. This law gives complete discretion to the Minister to issue and suspend newspaper licenses, and there have been many instances in the past where he used (or misused) this discretion (Shukry, 2015).

Ownership of media outlets is another cause for concern in any discourse that involves free speech and freedom of expression. Malaysia's largest Malay-language newspaper, *Utusan Malaysia*, was until recently owned by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO)⁵, who held a stake of 49.77 percent (Shankar, 2019). The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)⁶ has a 42 percent stake in *The Star*, which is Malaysia's leading English language newspaper. Being owned by political parties has resulted in biased reporting from these newspapers in the past, which has in turn eroded public trust in mainstream newspapers.

The combination of state control over the press and the partisan leanings of mainstream newspapers creates fertile ground for Malaysians to increasingly rely on the internet for news. The 1998 Reformasi movement served as a catalyst for independent online news portals to emerge, the most prominent being *Malaysiakini*, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

In the two decades that followed the 1998 Reformasi movement, online news portals, which do not require a government-issued license, have proliferated. In 2018, 89 percent of Malaysians relied heavily on online news sources, 72 percent from social media, and a total of 77 percent of Malaysians depended on their smartphones for news and information (Newman et al., 2018). The increasing trust in online sources and social media platforms has contributed to the utilization of these platforms in political campaigns, which will be explored in the next section.

Factors Contributing to the Usage of Social Media in Politics

The usage of social media can be compartmentalized into three components: information, identity-building, and mobilization (Leong, 2015). Old media was used to disseminate news nationwide, but the disadvantage of the traditional method is that information can only be shared one way. With the emergence of new media, political discourse and information spread more robustly. This also gives rise to the possibility of disinformation and the spread of fake news in society as we are exploring in this paper.

Identity-building is a prominent contributor towards the usage of social media in politics. We can

⁵ UMNO is one of the component parties in the Barisan Nasional coalition. It is an all-Malay party.

⁶ MCA is one of the component parties in the Barisan Nasional coalition. It is an all-Chinese party.

observe a surge of cybertroopers or keyboard warriors who adopt a pseudidentity that allows them to comment anonymously in political discourses. However, new media bridges the gap across multiple socio-political groups in Malaysia which enables better and more productive discourse to occur. We simultaneously observe a rise in more objectively critical commentators of politics, which is a positive feat for democratic states as it promotes the right to speech and expression. This is a product of social media that was nearly impossible to attain in the age of old media.

Mobilization, on the other hand, is the ability of political groups and politicians to network with social media users—adding to the growth and building of their parties. Political groups can also utilize social media platforms to recruit young political activists who are keen to be introduced in the political sphere. We have witnessed young politicians who focus on their social media presence to connect with the younger generation, namely Syed Saddiq, Hannah Yeoh, Shahril Hamdan, and many more. Their prominence on social media enables them to better communicate and be informed of youth opinions, which are often overshadowed and overlooked by traditional media outlets.

The Use of Social Media in Political Campaigning in Malaysia

12th General Election (GE12), 2008

2008 was an important year for Malaysians. It marked 10 years after the Reformasi movement in 1998 that saw the rise of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked from office on charges of corruption and sodomy and became one of the world's most recognizable pro-democracy figures. Barack Obama was running to be the first African American President of the United States, and his pioneering use of social media in his campaign was said to have contributed significantly to his decisive victory, and paved the way for many other political campaigns around the world.

In Malaysia, online campaigns were not the norm yet, but they began to gain ground among the then-opposition coalition, Pakatan Rakyat (PR). PR's use of "new media" platforms was limited to blogs, party websites, Twitter, Facebook, alternative news portals, and YouTube, meant to counter a hostile pro-government mainstream media (Gomez, 2014). The only politician to have a Twitter account before GE12 was the opposition leader, Anwar Ibrahim.

WhatsApp was not yet invented in 2008, but the seeds of an "internet election" were already planted because of the increased flow of online information (Chinnasamy and Griffiths, 2013). GE12 became historically significant in Malaysia, as it was the first time the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition lost its two-thirds supermajority in Parliament. The opposition also gained victory in five states, including the rich industrialized states of Penang and Selangor.

13th General Election (GE13), 2013

The lead-up to GE13 saw an increasing online presence of the former Prime Minister Najib Razak. At the time he commanded over 1 million followers on Twitter, which was more than many leaders from

the opposition coalition (Gomez, 2014). WhatsApp use was widespread in 2013 and evidently added an extra dimension to campaigning.

14th General Election (GE14), 2018

Social media offers a complement to a political party's presence in on-the-ground rallies and campaigns. WhatsApp and Facebook have gained traction as the main sources of news and current affairs for Malaysians, which has in turn made it important for political parties to dominate and control their party's narrative on social media (Abdullah & Anuar, 2018). It also played the role as a platform for dissent and "unpopular opinions," making politics more attractive to the younger generation as discussions become increasingly nuanced.

BN's well-resourced campaigns began to bridge the gap online as the opposition's presence on social media saw signs of slowing down. They prepared a large funding pool to spend on more sophisticated campaigns instead of depending on cybertroopers alone to act as keyboard warriors, which is a popular form of weaponry for most political parties.

While social media holds some negative connotations, it also encouraged political participation during GE14. #PulangMengundi (Return Home to Vote) was a popular social media movement on sites like Twitter and Facebook that helped voters return to their hometowns to vote with donations or crowdfunding. Another popular movement during the elections was #CarpoolGE14, which connected the public within social media to carpool back to their voting districts. These movements may have caused the surge of voter turnout for the historic GE14 that toppled the 60-year ruling coalition Barisan Nasional.

Social Media's Role in Exacerbating Race and Religious Rhetoric

Rhetoric of race and religion are exacerbated when social media users utilize platforms to spread misinformation and virilize content such as pictures and videos that have a false narrative. Without proper scrutiny over the reliability of sources, it becomes difficult to distinguish between real and false information.

An example of misinformation that spread rapidly over the internet is the road rage incident in Bangi, Selangor that was manipulated and falsely understood by social media users to become a racial issue (Zainal, 2019). News sources such as The Star and New Straits Times released statements assuring the public that the road rage incident was falsely narrated as a race issue by social media users, stating this unnecessarily stretched pre-existing racial tensions within the Malay and Chinese communities.

The Khat calligraphy issue, which contributed to Dr. Maszlee Malik's resignation as the Minister of Education, was also exacerbated by the escalation of misinformation ("It was a bumpy road," 2020). Despite the many notable achievements and reforms made during his tenure, such as Malaysia's improvement in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018 and increases in the accessibility of education and enrollment for students in the B40 income group, he was politically

attacked online by misleading headlines and controversial issues that were not immediately resolved (Tee, 2020). The introduction of Khat in primary education was not well accepted by other races and religions as they did not agree with the justification given by Dr. Maszlee that it would enrich historic Islamic heritage and art (“Malaysia’s educationists against,” 2019). This caused racial tensions as Dong Zong (The United Chinese School Committees’ Association of Malaysia) made their protest public, thus instigating the Malay community to call them racist (Kasim, 2019).

Disinformation and its Impact on Politics and Democracy

The emergence of fake news was predominantly observed post-GE14. A global study has shown that Malaysia stands among the 70 countries where media manipulation and disinformation are deliberately practiced to misinform users (Chu, 2019). This is further exacerbated by the algorithms designed for social media that carry the potential to create echo chambers where users are fed with biased information which reaffirms their false political beliefs. We will discuss three primary issues. Firstly, there is the possibility that disinformation will crowd out any chance of productive political discourse on social media platforms. Secondly, we will examine how disinformation harms our democracy when fake news is used as a political tactic. Thirdly, we will discuss the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation due to low media literacy among Malaysians.

Political hatred is a common notion amongst party supporters due to their biases and blind loyalty to respective parties, leading them to believe that they are superior to others. The existence of social media that scales up the ability to express political hate is a demand-driven phenomenon and it is constantly fueled by its users, particularly anonymous ones who are able to conveniently hide behind a pseudonym. The most controversial subjects over the decade include the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) case involving Malaysia’s ex-Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, the debate between GST and SST, and the sharp and sudden fluctuations of oil prices. The prevalence of fake news has had negative repercussions for politics and democracy when users fail to fact check and continue to spread news without first deliberating its authenticity. Fake news is frequently used as a political tactic to spur controversies and spark commotion within the public in order to sway the attention of users away from the real issues. Computational propaganda has always been a common tool of information gatekeeping and control in suppressing human rights issues and used to discredit dissenting political opinions.

Cyber armies or cybertroops are most rampant and vocal when a general election is near. An Atlantic Press journal article mentioned that during the polling season in Malaysia, public opinion is easily shaped by cybertroopers as they flood social media platforms with biased information, pro-government propaganda, and anti-opposition rhetoric (Jalli et al., 2019). After carrying out several private interviews, an informant claimed that their role as a cybertrooper during GE14 was to create any rhetoric that attacked Pakatan Harapan, and to ensure that the public sphere on social media was informed of any issue that they put forward. They were paid a handsome fee—one informant said that he was paid RM10,000 per month for a year in the lead up to GE14. Not all cybertroopers were paid;

another informant claimed that she aggressively protested against PH on social media as she was socially indoctrinated with BN's propaganda since high school. She admitted that there were numerous occasions where she freely campaigned on social media platforms as a sign of support for the party. Fake bot accounts (automated accounts that mimic a human user's behavior on the internet) are also widely used on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and even YouTube by nearly all of the political parties in Malaysia. This proves that disinformation is deliberately used as a political tactic by not only the parties, but even ordinary users of social media, and it harms our democracy.

Another contention that adds to the impact of disinformation is the reliability of sources. As any information shared on social media carries a great deal of influence across all generations in Malaysia, particularly in more tech-savvy areas, it is imperative that the content is valid. The spread of disinformation causes miscommunications and may affect politics in Malaysia on a large scale. Low media literacy drives the spread of fake news through social media platforms, and it is even further amplified when political parties take advantage of this to boost their own standing or create false narratives about other parties. Media literacy is becoming an added skill that is critical in this digital age, but there is a lack of awareness about this, especially in areas that are less digitally advanced. Although internet connectivity has improved fivefold over the past 20 years, media literacy has not been given the same attention ("Internet usage in Malaysia," 2011). To develop social media literacy, one must be an engaged and informed citizen with the ability to critically assess the content flooding social media platforms rather than passively consuming information, which is what most Malaysians are guilty of doing (Lim, 2019). This skill is critical and should be accessible to all Malaysians as disinformation and misinformation become a common practice in politics. This will be further explained in the final section of this paper.

We also observe a concerning blurred line between fake news and seditious news. In Malaysia, Section 505(b) of the Penal Code makes it an offense punishable by up to two (2) years of imprisonment to make, publish, or circulate "any statement, rumor, or report with intent to cause, or which is likely to cause fear or alarm to the public, or to any section of the public whereby any person may be induced to commit an offense against the state or against public tranquility" ("Malaysia: New government backslides," 2020). This law can be easily manipulated to convict anyone who is seen to criticize or raise public scrutiny against the government, and this has been an apparent practice since the Perikatan Nasional government took over in March 2020. Any news or information that sparks criticism against the ruling coalition should not be mistaken for disinformation, as this drowns out the objective of effective political discourse.

Such mistakes create a domino effect in society as people fear that voicing their opinions or spreading any information will cause them to be convicted or called in for questioning by the authorities, thereby making our democracy redundant. These kinds of laws appropriate any abuse and allow the government to censor media on a wider scale. The Perikatan Nasional government must do better to avoid the misuse and abuse of laws surrounding the media, which has always been the modus operandi of the ruling coalition even before social media played a crucial role in politics.

The Emergence of Artificial Intelligence within Social Media

Artificial Intelligence (AI) covers several types of technologies—machine learning, computer vision, the Internet of Things (IoT), augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), and more. Essentially, AI-powered technology acts as an aid to machinery in performing tasks as well as humans, identifying any impediments or complications and working to find solutions. There are two reasons why the integration of AI is relevant to social media platforms (Kaput, 2020). Firstly, AI has the ability to reduce costs as labor-intensive tasks become either partially or fully automated. This includes tasks such as scheduling posts and generating relevant links and hashtags, enabling us to delve into research much more easily and quickly. Second, it helps corporations increase revenue as social media platforms are able to work more efficiently without the daily risk of human error. AI has proven to drive better engagement and results from social media postings as it allows us to track posts and users who are “influential.” Thus, better content can be managed and curated without the expense of hard labor. Ads are becoming much more effective both cost-wise and engagement-wise because AI is capable of identifying specific groups to target instead of blindly broadcasting ads as traditional media used to do. The type of data extracted by AI technology is a powerful tool that most social media platforms are learning to utilize to optimize their resources. This creates a lot of advantages for both producers and consumers of social media, but ultimately has its disadvantages as well. One of the biggest disadvantages posed by the integration of AI within social media platforms is the threat of disinformation, which will be illuminated in the next section.

The Threat of Disinformation with AI Technology

The use of AI has enabled users, both consumers and producers, to alter the ways that information (and therefore disinformation) is fabricated and disseminated. AI-powered software raises a multitude of ethical questions and introduces risks for human rights and democracy. Some of the threats posed by the integration of AI into social media platforms include the lack of algorithmic fairness, personalization of content, privacy infringement, increased risk of user manipulation, and the doctoring of materials such as photos, videos, and audio files without consent (Kertysova, 2018).

The personalization of content could be beneficial to users as it may reduce the time and energy consumed on social media when specific content is received by the “right” audience without galvanizing the effort of broadcasting news to the general public. However, experts have raised concerns over partial information blindness, also known as filter bubbles (Haim et al., 2018). Certain types of news or information are either over-represented or under-represented, causing users to become less informed regardless of their participation in politics. This may lead to reduced diversity in the information shared on social media. As audiences become more easily targeted, there is an increased risk of tailoring particular types of information to be consumed. Hence the risk and impact of material manipulation is also doubled.

A recent development in AI technology is the introduction of “deepfake” videos and photos. With deepfake technology, one is able to superimpose one person’s face onto someone else’s to create content (Nijar, 2019). Deepfake materials, usually videos or audio recordings, are a combination of “fake” and “deep learning,” where they are easily produced using specific programs and applications that allow

anyone to generate a deepfake within the comfort of their own home. As of September 2019, 14,678 deepfake videos were circulating online, 96 percent of which were non-consensual, fabricated pornographic material (Sensity, n.d.). However, deepfake threats are relatively new in Malaysia in comparison to the US, according to Munira Mustaffa who is a US-based counter-intelligence expert (Hani, 2019). With that said, it is important to note that Malaysia is still lacking the appropriate technology to identify any deepfake threats, making it a big issue should any materials be created with the intent of extortion, propaganda, or targeted hoaxes which could ultimately lead to the spread of disinformation among the public. The government must be more responsive to this ongoing cybersecurity threat. We have already seen instances of probable deepfake threats like the recent alleged Azmin Ali sodomy case. Deepfakes open a floodgate of risks to democracy as they cause unnecessary controversy within the political realm which may be weaponized to jeopardize any public figure or organization.

Disinformation in the Midst of Crises

The recent outbreak of the novel coronavirus (also globally recognized as COVID-19) has pushed governments to implement drastic measures in pursuit of protecting public health and saving the economy. In times of crisis, the right to speech and expression is crucial to uphold in a democracy—the public should be allowed to voice any dissent to the government’s decisions. It acts as a counterbalance when the state is given the autonomy to make pivotal decisions and implement laws during a period of emergency. The Malaysian government has declared its commitment to protecting free speech and expression under the Federal Constitution and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. However, these protections can be lawfully restricted under certain legitimate circumstances such as in pursuit of public order or health.

Recent occurrences that are pertinent to COVID-19 and disinformation include false news that the military were authorized to assault civilians should anyone break the MCO rules; that hospitals and medical personnel were desperately in need of funds and health equipment; and the false spread of contaminated areas and shops, all of which were designed to instigate public distress and anxiety. There are also cases of scamming and exploitation committed by opportunists who created fake crowdfunding accounts with the narrative that they were meant to be funds for the health sector (Paulsen, 2020). Fake reports regarding local transmissions and imported cases on WhatsApp groups were also widespread during the peak of the pandemic in Malaysia before we successfully flattened the curve. In addition, some were promoting alleged “traditional cures” for COVID-19 such as the consumption of garlic and turmeric water, which was not only misleading but also detrimental to public health if the information was relayed to less-educated and less-informed groups. WhatsApp was the most popular platform for disinformation, while Facebook followed closely (“Fact-checks done,” 2020). Eighty-six percent of these false claims were allegedly statements from the government.

As official statements come from the government, they could naturally conjure a conflict of interest. Therefore, to uphold the basic right to information, journalistic and public opinion should also complement the state’s efforts. This is why we believe that although the government has the autonomy to restrict public speech during times of crisis to defend civic order, the public must not be sanctioned from voicing dissent or disapproval against the government’s initiatives.

Disinformation and Xenophobia

Xenophobia is the prejudice against people from other countries, and is slightly different from racism where the dislike is towards another race. Xenophobia and hate speech targeted towards the Rohingya migrant group in Malaysia became particularly virulent during the start of COVID-19 in April 2020. Some of the false claims made were that the Rohingya refugees were persistent in gaining full citizenship rights; that they were obtaining monetary aid from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); that the refugees were unlawful without consequence; and more controversially that they were receiving healthcare benefits at the expense of Malaysian citizens. This hugely contributed to ill feelings toward the refugees, stereotyping these migrants as “illegal foreigners.” Those spreading hate speech also stipulated that the refugees should return to their home countries as they were disease carriers, therefore risking the lives of locals. Due to the uncontrolled spread of disinformation, Malaysians are becoming more desensitized to the government’s inhumane actions toward refugees and asylum seekers. There was little resistance from the public when 200 Rohingyas on a boat were turned away in April 2020, and when the government placed migrants and refugees in cramped detention centers to contain the spread of the virus during the lockdown (Malaysian National News Agency, 2020).

Social media users have played with the “unity” rhetoric, creating false narratives that refugees, migrant workers, and asylum seekers are a burden on government resources that are funded by taxpayers. In the report made by Al Jazeera, more than 700 migrants (including women and children) were taken into custody according to Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN; Alsaafin et al., 2020). This was criticized by APRRN because the Malaysian government had pledged earlier not to arrest or detain undocumented migrants, which is how they refer to refugees. Although the antagonism concerning refugees has slowly subsided in recent months, the pre-existing social tensions and segregation that were embedded in Malaysia were highlighted from mid-March to late June 2020 (Zainul, 2020). This period further demonstrated that a large portion of the Malaysian population is exceptionally gullible to false narratives which target a vulnerable minority group.

The State’s Response

According to international human rights standards, a government should only implement restrictions on free speech for the respect and protection of the rights of others, or the protection of national security and public order (“Malaysia: New government backslides,” 2020). Therefore, the restrictions must be as minimal as possible, only to sufficiently protect the rights of the public. However, in Malaysia, none of the laws that surround the media and freedom of speech adhere to the aforementioned standards.

Recently, the Perikatan Nasional government has created public worry over their approach towards social media and free speech. This is due to cases such as the investigations carried out against Al Jazeera for releasing a documentary regarding the raids that were done by the government on illegal and undocumented foreign workers in the midst of the coronavirus lockdown in May (Anand, 2020). The investigation was done under the Penal Code and the Sedition Act, which restricts any speech that is

deemed to instigate racial or religious contention. The purpose of the documentary was to shed some light on civil rights issues in Malaysia with hopes that the ruling coalition would take accountability for their actions. However, none of this was achieved as the government was quick to remove the documentary and question Al Jazeera for circulating “false information.” The Malaysian police and immigration department refused to immediately respond to any requests for clarification or comment.

Multiple non-governmental organizations and activists have been called in for questioning by the authorities since the PN government took over in March 2020, especially after the MCMC urged the public to report any content that is related to race, religion, or the royal institution on social media platforms (Malaysian National News Agency, 2019). The MCMC claimed that the purpose of this was to preserve harmony and peace in society, but why must it be at the cost of the public’s freedom of speech and expression?

However, the state has successfully responded to fake news regarding COVID-19. After the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020, news (and unverified news) spread rampantly on social media platforms, specifically WhatsApp. Communications and Multimedia Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah mentioned that a rapid response team was prepared to clarify any issues or queries by the public. A portal (www.sebenarnya.my) site and several fake news lists were created to enable the citizenry to fact check any information that they receive. The authorities were also diligent in giving consistent press conferences and statements while posting updates on social media and official government websites to confront the spread of any misinformation. The Ministry of Health (MoH) stressed to the public that any reports regarding COVID-19 must be fact checked through their social media accounts and the official MoH website to avoid any misinterpretation. They also implemented automated text message notifications that allow news and updates to travel quickly and more efficiently as they were able to reach the more rural areas that are less digitally advanced. Datuk Saifuddin reaffirmed that while we embrace the principles of democracy and the right to information, the state is still ironically required to take action against disinformation which could further harm democratic institutions (Malaysian National News Agency, 2020).

In relation to the deepfake materials we mentioned above, the Azmin Ali and Anwar Ibrahim sodomy scandals were rumored by some experts to be deepfake videos. Nonetheless, it becomes concerning when the footage in circulation causes divisive public opinions. Moreover, the state is not sufficiently equipped to tackle such issues. No one has definitively established otherwise for either side of the coin (Khoo, 2020). The difficulty in distinguishing what is real and what is fake poses a real threat to our democracy as fake news can be easily circulated without the proper tools to verify its authenticity, thus increasing the risk of implicating the profiles of public figures and political parties. How can the citizens of a democratic state make informed political choices, especially for election voting, when part of the information they possess is manipulated and forged? It is even more dangerous when producers of fake content play with religious and racial sentiment as Malaysia is a melting pot of multiple religions and races.

Moving Forward: How Do We Tackle the Challenges that Technology Presents to Our Democracy?

Although Malaysia is a democracy, there are many instances where our civil liberties and social rights are restricted as mentioned above. Moving forward, it is imperative that the government draw a distinction between misinformation and controversial information. The prevalence of fake news on social media is detrimental when it sparks public outcry or when it is spread without any fact checking. Social media, especially platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, allow news to travel faster than before when the public solely depended on print newspapers or television, where communication flowed in one direction.

Social media enables the public to exchange their views and opinions about politics in Malaysia, creating more pronounced and diverse conversations. The challenge for any government today is to strike a balance between allowing speech and expression to flourish and compete in the marketplace of ideas while maintaining public order and safety.

The government can take the following steps to ensure this balance can be struck:

- Creation of non-partisan and unbiased platforms that can be used by the public to fact check any news spread on the internet;
- Clearer guidelines and explanations on restrictions that the government is adamant on imposing;
- Abolish or amend laws that aim to stifle dissent and differences of opinion;
- Allow self-regulation of the media through the creation of a Media Council whose membership consists of leaders in the industry (Yong, 2020).

The government must also galvanize greater effort into making cyberspace safer for democracy (Shackelford, 2020). The initiatives that could be taken include:

- The integration of disparate efforts
 - Establishing an independent agency like in Indonesia to determine professional standards of “information”; revamping and restructuring of industries such as FINAS
 - Improve censorship and surveillance without hampering the right to expression. Much can be reviewed from India and China’s extreme censorship laws in contrast with the liberalized freedom of expression of the United States;
 - Investigations into tech giants such as Facebook, Google, and more.
- The compliance of social media firms with the EU Code for Disinformation which is similar to the EU’s data privacy regulations
 - A revision of the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010 to address the issue of online privacy
 - Improving media literacy and education to protect citizens against disinformation
 - Educational reform to help students recognize disinformation from an early age

Media literacy is defined as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms.” (Prasad, 2011). Additionally, a media literate person is able to decode, evaluate, analyze, and produce content for both print and electronic media. The early exposure of the younger generation to technology makes media literacy even more relevant now than it was before. As it is difficult for us to identify the credibility of news disseminated on social media platforms, it is important for youths and adults in this age to become media literate to better decipher the content that they consume. Media literacy allows us to not only deconstruct content, but also to recognize and identify any notes of persuasion or manipulation and prevent blind consumption of media (Raj, 2019).

To execute this, media literacy can be assimilated into the prevailing curriculum in schools, particularly upper-primary and secondary forms where development is vital. Students are already utilizing the internet in this generation for their schoolwork. Thus, this addition to their curriculum can help empower them to think more critically and assess the content they consume. They would also be able to understand content better with a decreased risk of information blindness. To add to that, media literacy is a crucial skill to address multiple issues on a social level and to improve one’s life skills. Critical media consumers are empowered to allow more engaging and stimulating discussions online that focus on substance instead of rhetoric as we can observe from social media engagement today.

Conclusion

The trade-off between the freedom of speech and maintenance of public harmony is tricky for a democratic country with multiple races and religions. To uphold the sovereignty of a democracy, there is a need to uplift its civil rights and allow the public to make informed decisions without the manipulation or influence of political parties. As we evolve into a generation with an increased dependency on technology to disseminate information more efficiently, checks and balances must exist to ensure that disinformation and its harms are minimized. The role of the government is to handle any threats to democracy, and this is not mutually exclusive of threats that exist in cyberspace. Cybersecurity is becoming a key focus for many countries, especially more vulnerable developing economies. The floodgate that opens with technology allows the infiltration of disinformation which can be weaponized by any party. The political strategy of using fake bots to spread pro-government or pro-opposition propaganda as well as personal attacks or harassment has not only amplified disinformation in the public sphere, it also increasingly incites violence and reduces the public’s trust in democratic systems and the media itself. As we have mentioned, there is a magnified need for states to invest in media literacy for the public to assure that disinformation is prevented, especially during times of elections, political turmoil, and most importantly emergencies. Social media platforms are widely used and accessed by Malaysians of all ages daily. Thus, the quality of the content produced and received is vital. The effects of disinformation and misinformation are similar, regardless of whether the news was maliciously and intentionally spread or whether it was shared out of mistaken belief, which is why media literacy is highly emphasized in this case study. This paper concludes that the advent of social media in politics could be detrimental to democracy if pre-emptive steps are not taken by the government to combat the negative repercussions of disinformation without taking away the public’s fundamental right to speech and expression.

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Country Case 7: Myanmar

Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Myanmar

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Introduction

Social media has united communities over vast swaths of territory, in some cases enabling dialogue with people in parts of countries that are otherwise not easily accessible. The vast networks created by social media have become mediums for civic and democratic discourse. In fact, in the early 21st century, social media was heralded as a tool that could make the expansion of democratic practices throughout the world possible. The democratization of information was expected to disseminate educational opportunities to remote corners of the world and to allow the citizens living under autocratic rule to see the economic and social benefits of democracy. To some degree, society has reaped these positive impacts of social media. In 2008, social media narratives helped facilitate a feeling of public shared grievance. Different technological tools have enabled human rights workers to hold autocratic governments accountable, as seen by how social media posts were the basis of the New York Times investigation that identified the Russian and Ukrainian military officers that perpetrated the shooting of civilian aircraft Malaysia Airlines Flight 17. The speed at which social media moves, however, is also dangerous. False and misleading messages can now travel at an unparalleled velocity. These messages can sway elections, stoke conflict between different ethnic or religious groups, and spread violent extremism. Though varying in the degree of threat, each of these outcomes degrades the quality of a democracy within a country. Since these attacks often occur in parallel, they threaten the global paradigm of democracy.

Nowhere is democracy more susceptible to backsliding at the hands of social media exploitation than within developing nations and countries in the middle of democratic transition. Though social media has been credited with harming democracy in countries ranging from the United States to Sri Lanka, Myanmar continues to dominate the conversation about social media usage and democracy. Formerly the international community's shining example of peaceful democratic transition, Myanmar has stagnated in recent years. High rates of social media usage and high-profile cases of intercommunal violence have brought Myanmar to the forefront of the debate over the negative impact of social media and the need

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for greater regulation of international social media networks.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between social media usage and democracy in Myanmar, with a particular emphasis on the impact of disinformation. It will begin by addressing the general body of literature on the impacts of social media on democratic practices and institutions before moving into a Myanmar-specific discussion. The report is the product of fifteen qualitative interviews about disinformation on social media. Interview respondents included members of civil society organizations, civic technology organizations, technologists, tech sector actors, and members of the media. Respondents were selected based upon their background in the disinformation space or the pertinence of disinformation to the work they are currently doing. To ensure the safety of interview participants, particularly members of civil society organizations working within the country on sensitive issues, these interviews were conducted off the record. The interview participants will not be named within this report.

Lastly, before proceeding, several definitions must be addressed. Throughout this report, the terms hate speech, disinformation, and misinformation will be used. Though often times these concepts are intertwined or reliant on each other, their definitions for the purposes of this paper are as follows:⁴

1. Hate Speech: Abusive or threatening speech or writing that expresses prejudice against a particular group, especially on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation.
2. Disinformation: False information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization about a rival power or the media.
3. Misinformation: Incorrect or misleading information.⁵

The Undeniable Impact of Social Media on Democracy

The Positive

Social media is one of the primary types of liberation technology, a term coined by Larry Diamond to describe the organizing potential provided by social media in autocratic states. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit enjoy massive amounts of organizing potential and allow young leaders to broadcast their messages to communities beyond their own. In times of rebellion against an entrenched political regime or system, social media can eliminate the collective action problem among a population by providing clues as to the number of individuals willing to engage in a collective action and by helping organizers spread their message in a diffuse manner. Social media was an undeniably helpful tool in spreading the Arab Spring in 2011, which began in Tunisia. The self-immolation of 26-year-old fruit seller Mohamed Bouazizi was broadcasted far and wide across social media networks, galvanizing demonstrations against the despotic President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali which led to him stepping down

⁴ These definitions are those most accessible to the general public, not academics. Among the academic community there is still much discussion around the ambiguities of existing definitions. This paper does not seek to be the arbiter of those discussions; therefore, the definitions are borrowed from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

⁵ This definition purposely does not include intent, because misinformation can be—and often is—transmitted unknowingly by actors who believe it to be the truth.

and facilitated the establishment of a democratic republic in Tunisia.

Similarly, social media can be used to amplify the messages of citizen journalists where traditional media sources have been eliminated, co-opted by the state, or coerced into submission. By providing a space for users to anonymously post content, social media offers an easy medium for citizen journalists to document human rights abuses perpetrated by the state or malicious non-state actors. By exposing these actions to the global community, citizen journalists are able to provoke outrage about previously anonymous grievances of a community and occasionally extract action or intervention from outside nations. Even if no outside action is readily taken, social media remains a powerful tool for the documentation of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other human rights abuses for international organizations including the ICC to chronicle and use for prosecution in a post-conflict setting. Unfortunately, social media is becoming less of an effective counter to repressive regimes as these regimes improve their ability to censor and manipulate content.

The Negative

Thomas Jefferson is often credited with saying “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people.” Though the Thomas Jefferson Foundation is unable to establish the veracity of this quote—it has not been found in any of his writings—they affirm that it is in line with his sentiment that a well-informed public is the bedrock of a democratic system. Social media networks can threaten this democratic ideal by acting as amplifiers of violent messages and disinformation. In fact, networks that depend on advertising and user traffic even benefit from undermining these democratic norms. The algorithms that determine what content is displayed on social media sites can often disproportionately favor posts with inherent shock value, such as an outrageous story full of disinformation. For example, as noted in a 2016 BuzzFeed News article, the 20 most-shared fake articles outpaced the 20 most-shared real articles on Facebook (Silverman, 2016).

Additionally, social media can be dangerous as a platform that allows people to process information in a way that reinforces their pre-existing opinions via identity-protective cognition (IPC). IPC is a psychological process that often enables the transmission of misinformation or disinformation, because it is a process of motivated reasoning wherein individuals “selectively credit or dismiss factual information” in patterns that protect one’s connection to a particular affinity group (Kahan, 2017). Information operations, disinformation, and even misinformation can exploit these psychological ties to identity. It is well documented that individuals seek information and media that reinforce their pre-existing cultural, political, and social beliefs. Additionally, they are more likely to accept information that accedes to their pre-existing beliefs as fact, as evidenced by a study that measured the likelihood of an American to agree that an expert with strong credentials should be classified as an expert based upon the expert’s view of climate change (Kahan et al., 2011). Despite unchanging credentials, individuals with strong ideological leanings were more likely to discount the expert if they disagreed with his assessment of the risks of climate change (see Appendix I). As individuals gravitate toward information that supports their beliefs, they become susceptible to misinformation and disinformation and then further transmit it to members of their social network. Rather than facilitating democratic discourse among people who would otherwise be

unable to speak and understand each other, social media allows individuals to continue within their own bubbles.

Global Response to Misinformation

As large tech companies grapple with the ways in which their networks can be exploited to foment anti-democratic speech and actions, they have been slow to roll out major innovation. In the wake of the 2016 United States presidential election, Facebook, Twitter, and Google all unveiled tools to stem the flow of misinformation on their platforms. However, most of these tools primarily targeted English-speaking networks in the United States and abroad (Wardle,2017). These same tools are yet to be rolled out among nations in the Global South, where disinformation can be equally, if not more, damaging to society.

The focus on creating tools to help address problems with misinformation in western nations is the consequence of a discourse focusing on election interference and information operations among western democracies. However, as tech companies continue to expand into developing and transitioning nations in the Global South, problems with the wide spread of disinformation are being exported as well. In developing regions of the world, tech has encroached with such rapidity that computer literacy has not kept pace. In some developing nations with limited access to data, Facebook has become synonymous with the internet (see Appendix II). This issue has partially arisen organically because internet access and Facebook have been simultaneously introduced in developing nations; however, Facebook has exacerbated the issue by unveiling a special platform called Free Basics that gives users in developing nations internet access (Hatmaker, 2018). In 2017, Free Basics provided free internet access to consumers in 65 countries where data prices remained exorbitant. Through Free Basics, users could access a curated list of services. But these efforts to reach new markets have not been matched with efforts to build organizational capacity inside tech companies to properly monitor these networks. For example, in early 2015 Facebook employed just two content moderators with Burmese language skills despite hosting nearly five million users at the time (Solon, 2018).

A variety of actors, including but not limited to “ISIS-aligned terror groups, domestic extremist nationalist and religious groups, and authoritarian governments” have sought to exploit these gaps in media and computer literacy to spread propaganda (Oh, 2017). In many of these nations, particularly within Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, democratic institutions are new and evolving, making them more vulnerable than those firmly entrenched democratic traditions of many western nations. Information operations can prove more dangerous in places without fully independent media sources or in places where journalists and civil society organizations are under attack by the government because society lacks a natural counterweight to false narratives (Oh, 2017). In an even more insidious fashion, autocrats can exploit social media networks as a way of monitoring and suppressing public opinion within a population.

Social Media Disinformation in Myanmar

Social Media Penetration in Myanmar

Since opening up in 2011, Myanmar has seen rates of internet and social media usage skyrocket. Prohibitively high data costs dropped as Myanmar allowed foreign telecommunication companies such as Ooredoo and Telenor into the country in 2013. In 2014 the price of buying a SIM card fell from \$1000USD to around \$1 USD (Aung Kyaw Nyunt, 2016). Accordingly, the number of people in Myanmar using mobile data expanded from two million to 39 million by 2016. As of 2018, mobile penetration in Myanmar has reached close to 95 percent of citizens with more than 50 million users (Tanner, 2018).

Social media penetration has lagged mobile penetration, but has recently seen a drastic upswing. Between 2016 and 2019 social media usage nearly doubled from 20 percent to 36 percent of the population (Doan, 2019). Facebook is the country's indispensable social network, with over 20 million users as of October 2018 ("Facebook Users," 2018). Among active Facebook users, the largest demographic is 18-24 year-olds (44.8 percent of users) closely followed by 25-34 year-olds (35.4 percent of users). Additionally, a large gender gap exists among Facebook users in Myanmar: 62 percent of users are men as compared to 38 percent of female users ("Facebook Users," 2018). Myanmar can be counted among the countries in which Facebook is synonymous with the internet. Typically, communications are conducted through Facebook rather than via email or text messaging, from making restaurant reservations, to reading the news, to receiving official government press statements. Although this conveniently streamlines internet usage, it also presents information of varying quality and credibility on an equal playing field, creating issues for information credibility. Facebook has become so central to life in Myanmar that, according to the owner of a major news outlet in Myanmar, news teams often take their cues from social media, rather than the typical model of traditional media influencing social media discourse. For example, the government first announced the resignation of President Htin Kyaw via Facebook in 2018. More recently, the 2020 calendar of public holidays was first posted on Facebook by a non-government source.

Despite heavy usage of mobile phones and social media, Myanmar lags behind in digital and media literacy. Much of this can be attributed to the rapidity of digital development and the former government monopoly on information. It is common in Myanmar for an individual to be unaware of how to install apps on their smartphone, which means relevant apps (news, messaging apps, and Facebook) come pre-installed. The mobile phone shops assist customers in setting up accounts, and often customers return to the shop for help with updates or password resets. In rural areas, where communities often have to wait several days to receive out-of-date print news, Facebook has become a way of receiving instant news. In fact, people treat reading their Facebook feeds like they are reading the newspaper (Einzenberger, 2016).

Disinformation in Myanmar

The lack of digital literacy among the population and ambiguity around the credibility of information sources on Facebook combine to create a space ripe for the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. The widespread penetration of Facebook within Myanmar also allows malicious actors to easily launch information operations without having to operate across multiple platforms. Though the possibilities for abuse are endless, there are several high-level concerns for the impact of disinformation in Myanmar. In interviews, tech actors and civil society organizations on the ground have identified the following top two concerns regarding social media disinformation: intercommunal violence and election influencing.

Intercommunal Violence

The majority of actors interviewed for this project emphasized that their largest concern about disinformation stemmed from the ability of users to spread hate speech to inspire intercommunal violence. With over 100 distinct ethnic groups, Myanmar is a patchwork of communities containing multiple groups. In many parts of the country, these communities are fraught with tensions between different ethnic groups based upon the distribution and use of land, natural resources, and power. To complicate the situation, armed groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army or the Arakan Army, claim to represent the interests of various ethnic groups against the central government or against other ethnic groups. The presence of these tensions and these military offshoots of ethnic groups create a volatile and constantly evolving situation all around the country.

Though social media is not the root cause of the instability that enables intercommunal violence, it can exacerbate existing tensions and trigger violence. Recently, a UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission announced that social media—predominantly Facebook—“substantively contributed to the level of acrimony and dissension and conflict” in spreading misinformation and disinformation. Facebook provides both a medium to quickly spread disinformation among a community to inflame the passions of its members as well as a platform to organize collective retaliatory action. Emphasizing intercommunal violence as the largest concern about disinformation in Myanmar is not to say that it is the most likely outcome to occur; in fact, incidents of intercommunal violence stemming from Facebook are few and far between, while disinformation surrounding the upcoming elections is constant and pervasive. However, intercommunal violence can be fatal, making the risk high impact no matter the probability of occurrence.

In recent years, there have been several incidents in Myanmar of Facebook being used to incite violence against individuals within minority ethnic or religious groups or against these groups as a whole. In 2014, a false rumor circulated about a Muslim shop owner in Mandalay raping one of his Buddhist female employees (McLaughlin, 2018). Though the rumor originally surfaced on a private blog, it quickly made its way onto Facebook. Wirathu, a Buddhist-nationalist monk with a large following in the Mandalay area, shared the post, causing it to explode. Hundreds of angry citizens swarmed the teashop. As the protest devolved into a riot, the police struggled to maintain control of the situation during a multi-day spree of mayhem that left 20 injured and two men dead (McLaughlin, 2018). Unfortunately, this

is not an isolated incident. The Facebook platform was also used to incite offline violence between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine state in 2017 amidst Myanmar military operations in the area.

Disinformation is also used in racist propaganda disseminated by the military as well as individual government officials. “Buddhism was exploited by Myanmar’s military junta to create a cultural and political *national identity* which assisted in legitimizing and installing political power” (Schober, 2005). “Buddhist radical nationalists are sources of political *supremacy of religious norms and values* rhetoric which implements *racism*, represented on Facebook, as interviewees pointed out” (Radue, 2019). There was evidence that even a high-ranking government official took part in spreading disinformation. Zaw Htay (also known as Hmuu Zaw) is the spokesman of the government of Myanmar who has been serving as the Director General of the State Counsellor’s Office since April 2016, and was involved in spreading disinformation against the Rohingya Muslims. During the crisis, Rohingyas were accused of torching their own houses. Zaw Htay shared a photo on social media where a Rohingya man and woman were shown setting their house on fire, and the photo was later revealed to be fake. Worse still, it was revealed that the photo was created using Hindus, who look similar to the Rohingya (Associated Press, 2017). Even now, tensions between religious and ethnic groups within Myanmar remain high, leaving the potential for Facebook to again be leveraged to build offline conflict.

Election Influencing

Several civil society actors whom we interviewed expressed concerns about disinformation ramping up in the leadup to the 2020 fall parliamentary elections. Aung San Su Kyi’s National League for Democracy will be seeking re-election for the first time. As noted in a recent United States Institute for Peace report, Facebook is often used as a platform to magnify intercommunal tensions. This may be the case looking toward the 2020 elections, particularly among Rohingya activists and Bamar—the majority ethnic group in Myanmar—nationalists.

According to sources from more traditional news networks, including leading newspapers in Myanmar, social media is a potent tool for political news because it fills a void that traditional media cannot. The employment of arcane laws such as the Telecommunications Act, which contains provisions to prosecute individuals who engage in defamation of the government, has silenced traditional media outlets in their criticisms. Outlets engaging in thoughtful criticism of the government risk prosecution, such as the case of the two Reuters reporters who questioned the government narrative on the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine state through investigative reporting and were jailed. This fearmongering created by the arbitrary enforcement of the Telecommunications Act against journalists may create a dearth of balanced coverage of the 2020 election cycle, magnifying the role of social media in broadcasting alternative narratives to the public. Some of these narratives may not be benign or in the interest of informing the public.

The importance of disinformation in the leadup to the 2020 elections increases when one considers the stakes attached to the NLD competition against the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) or the former ruling party spearheaded by the military. In the past months, Facebook has taken down “hundreds of accounts deemed guilty of ‘coordinated inauthentic behavior,’ with many linked to the

military,” or the supporters of the USDP (Callahan et al.,2019). Additionally, the military retains control of the internet portal of Myanmar, and could potentially shut down Facebook, the primary arbiter of news and information flow in the leadup to the election. This could cause widespread chaos throughout Myanmar and impact electoral results.

Intercommunal violence and election influencing are not without causal relation—the former has a potential to influence the latter. One can draw this conclusion from the Meikhtilar incident that happened in 2013. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won in the elections in 1990 and in the by-elections of 2012 in Meikhtilar, losing only in the 2010 general election which they boycotted. But after the “massacre” where 44 were killed and 86 to 93 people were injured (Physicians for Human Rights, 2013), votes were swayed to the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) which is composed of former military generals and officials. The USDP won all four seats related to the Meikhtilar constituency in the 2015 general election (Aung Aung, 2018). This incident offers a demonstration of the influence of intercommunal violence on election results.

Mechanisms of Disinformation

Based upon interviews with actors that have been the target of disinformation, it is clear that actors perpetrating disinformation range in terms of both scale and sophistication. In one interview with a prominent civil society organization, the interview subject noted that their organization had been the subject of trolling recently. A variety of actors targeted the organization’s Facebook page in an attempt to discredit the organization’s opinions on transition-related policy. Clearly coordinated, the actors were using Facebook profiles that had been created quite recently and were clearly fake. They did not have friends, a posting history, or multiple pictures. They primarily latched onto articles published by the civil society organization and spammed them with negative comments. Though easily addressed with some cooperation from Facebook, these trolling campaigns can negatively impact the credibility of civil society organizations or media outlets, further degrading public trust in information at a time where it is already low. They can also lead to personal threats against employees of media outlets led by CSOs, a prospect that allows for the intimidation of actors and that may lead to self-censorship.

After speaking with a prominent media outlet, it became clear that other trolling and disinformation efforts are more thoroughly planned and effective. The media outlet pointed to an attempt to spread disinformation that was recently thwarted. A fake Facebook page popped up mirroring the online presence of this outlet. Every nine out of ten stories would be copied from the outlet, giving an air of authenticity and timeliness to the news coverage. However, that last one out of ten stories posted by the fake outlet would be pure disinformation. By exploiting the credibility of the real outlet and bolstering the readership of the page through genuine news stories, the fake outlet accumulated thousands of readers before it was reported by the real outlet and shut down by Facebook. In fact, the fake outlet was only removed based upon the diligence of the true outlet. This type of incident is a common enough occurrence that the outlet has a team responsible for seeking out actors exploiting their credibility. When discussing this incident, the outlet expressed exasperation that Facebook has yet to roll out a mechanism to prevent imposters from capitalizing upon the readership of prominent media sources in Myanmar.

Discussion

As discussed earlier, the two concerns of disinformation in social media are intercommunal violence and election influencing violation of which is threatening to democracy. However, both prevention of these are being challenged by the prevalence of disinformation, which often walks hand in hand with hate speech, on social media. They challenge the very continuance of the democratic transition in Myanmar and prevent it from becoming a full-fledged liberal democracy. Unfortunately, the newness of democratic institutions and practices, such as the development of a free press, make the Myanmar people much more susceptible to exploitative disinformation and information operations perpetrated by malicious actors wishing to stoke divisions within the country. Though disinformation may be the root of the issue, misinformation transmitted by citizens lacking the media literacy necessary to distinguish between fact and fiction is far more problematic. These citizens are the ones sharing false, often divisive information among community members and community groups. Without social media, these narratives would be limited to spreading based on word of mouth. The network effect of platforms such as Facebook allows one post to reach hundreds of thousands of citizens unknown to the original author, provided it is provocative enough to encourage sharing.

Disinformation, Democracy and Human Rights

According to the data from the International Telecommunications Union, more than 50 percent of the global population uses the internet and this percentage is continuing to gradually increase. As a result, the internet has become the primary source to which information is contributed and perpetrators of disinformation take advantage of this by using information channels to achieve their goals and creating “fake news” intentionally. These fake news articles or disinformation harm the public, making it difficult for voters to make the right decisions when voting and having negative effects on democracy. According to Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), everybody has the right to free and fair elections, and elections can be seen as the symbol of democracy. However, disinformation and fake news discourage voters from obtaining accurate information and can also change voting behaviors.

The internet plays a crucial role in countering disinformation, and it can also enhance democracy participation (Evans, 2017). However, the digital readiness of electoral management bodies in Myanmar is the lowest among the region. Netina Tan notes that “Based on the earlier criteria, the ten electoral management bodies (EMBs) in East and Southeast Asia may be classified into three broad levels of digital readiness: high (2 to 6), medium (-2 to 2), and low (-6 to -2)···the EMBs with a high level of digital readiness include Singapore (5.67), South Korea (4.27), Japan (2.5), Taiwan (2.27), and Thailand (2.08). The EMBs with medium digital readiness scores include Malaysia (1.6), the Philippines (-0.16), and Indonesia (-1.39). Finally, the EMBs from Cambodia (-2.98) and Myanmar (-5.16) have low levels of digital readiness” (Tan, 2020). In the same article, Tan also stated that “Regulating social media during elections is even more challenging as it is difficult to identify the source of disinformation, verify the truthfulness of fabricated content, and stop the dissemination within a short campaign time frame” and “the

relationship between social media use and elections is also complicated by the fact that misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information can occur in any part of the electoral phases, depending on the degree to which the EMBs have adopted ICT such as biometric registration, electronic voting, or social media apps”(Tan, 2018). As a developing country where the technology industry is not well developed and digital literacy is low, digital readiness for election-related disinformation is quite low, and such disinformation therefore has high impact on democracy in Myanmar.

In the democratization process, the role of media and the right to access accurate information is important, and people need to be able to evaluate the ongoing process of the government by using media platforms. The ubiquity of misinformation on social media means that people lack accurate information and suffer the negative consequences of using the internet such as consuming disinformation and misinformation, which in turn becomes a major threat to democracy and human rights.

For example, some people in Myanmar use Facebook as a social media platform that can easily share fake news of sensitive issues concerning ethnic minority groups such as Rohingya issues. As a result, fake news has replaced hate speech and become the major problem of the Myanmar government. To avoid these problems, the Myanmar government tried to shut down the internet connection in the Rakhine state of Myanmar, but it was not a good way to solve these problems. As a result, people in Rakhine state also lost their rights to access needed information and the right to explore their voices, and it weakened the democratization process. Disinformation on Facebook negatively affects the voting behaviors of people in Myanmar and it weakens the power of the government and democracy as well.

Misinformation and fake news are a major driver of violations of human rights rules and laws and have a negative impact on the dignity of human beings. A paper from the Policy Department for Citizens’ Rights and Constitutional Affairs (2019) summarizes the impact of disinformation on human rights in two main categories: impact on privacy and data protection, and freedom of expression and freedom to receive information.

Although the accessibility of information is a fundamental human right, the government of Myanmar shut down the internet connection in Rakhine state presumably to prevent some of its violations against minority groups in Rakhine state from being revealed, leaving people in these areas without the access to information that is their right. “First, it has reduced the content posted by the AA and its supporters that incite ethnic tensions between the Rakhine and Bamar people,” Myanmar military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun told Radio Free Asia in defense of the shutdown (Radio Free Asia, 2020).

In 2013, the Myanmar government introduced the Telecommunications Act to support and protect telecommunications service providers and users in accord and to avoid misinformation and cyber-crimes. Article 66(D) of this Act states that “anyone found guilty of extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening any person by using any telecommunications network shall be punished with a maximum three years in prison, a fine or both.” Many activists and ordinary residents have been arrested under Article 66(D) for criticizing the military government on Facebook.

Facebook’s Response to Social Media Disinformation in Myanmar

Despite the significant role Facebook plays in Myanmar’s society, the company has yet to develop a comprehensive plan to target disinformation. In years past, the effectiveness of Facebook in preventing the platform from being used nefariously has been underwhelming. In 2014, Facebook only had one Burmese-speaking content moderator. This was expanded to four in 2015, but still lagged well behind the per capita moderators devoted to Western markets. In comparison, to keep pace with the number of moderators (1,200) demanded by Germany, a country with strict hate speech laws that require constant scrutiny of content, Facebook would need to hire 800 reviewers in Myanmar (Roose et al., 2019). In the wake of criticism over violence against Muslims incited via Facebook, the company announced that it had expanded the number of content moderators to 60 with a promise to hire an additional 40 moderators—far shy of the 800 that would be necessary to uphold content moderation at a level equivalent to that in countries like Germany (Solon, 2018). Despite this commitment to hiring more Burmese-speaking moderators, Facebook is yet to establish an office or staff in Myanmar (Solon, 2018). Instead, the country team working on Myanmar issues is based out of Singapore.

Facebook relies heavily on user reporting and content moderation in Myanmar because despite the government’s usage of Unicode, the majority of the public continues to use Zawgyi (a typeface for Burmese language script which is only partially Unicode compliant) when posting on Facebook. Algorithms designed to detect hate speech are reliant on Unicode, making a tech-based solution for hate speech and disinformation difficult in Myanmar. A Reuters investigation on hate speech against the Rohingya population provides context to the difficulties of automated detection of hate speech and disinformation:

In Burmese, [a] post says: “Kill all the kalars that you see in Myanmar; none of them should be left alive.”

Facebook’s translation into English: “I shouldn’t have a rainbow in Myanmar.” (Stecklow, 2018).

Though in recent blog posts, Facebook touted efforts to improve detection efforts in Myanmar, these are yet to materialize in a comprehensive or transparent manner.

Other responses generated by Facebook include removing the pages of top Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) members, including Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, that have violated community standards by reposting hate speech that is misleading to the public. Most recently, Facebook took down the pages of four prominent Ethnic Armed Organizations—the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Kachin Independence Army, and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army—after designating them “dangerous organizations” (Wong, 2019). Local NGOs designate these efforts as “grossly insufficient” and arbitrary. They liken them to placing a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. While popular social media influencers can expose a larger audience of viewers to disinformation through their platforms, the majority of disinformation is transmitted among community networks. Facebook rolls out

the occasional update on their blog, but there is a lack of visibility about the development of a comprehensive strategy for minimizing hate speech and disinformation on their platform.

Moving Forward: Ongoing and Future Efforts to Stem Disinformation

CSOs and tech sector actors alike continue to recognize the threats posed by disinformation and social media in Myanmar. However, various stakeholders lack a unified approach or vision in dealing with these. As mentioned above, to reduce the impact of disinformation and misinformation on the impending elections, the government needs to improve the digital readiness of EMBs despite budgetary challenges. They can also try to form alliances with CSOs to help the situation. Later this year, Facebook is expected to roll out a grand plan for confronting disinformation and hate speech in advance of the 2020 elections, as it has done before in other pivotal elections around the world (e.g. Brazil in 2018).

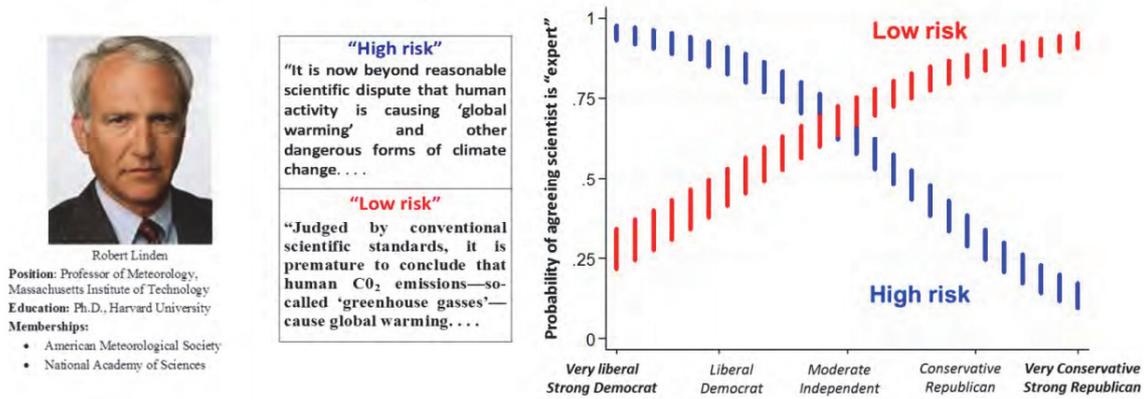
In the article “Ensuring free and fair election coverage in Myanmar” from UNESCO, it is stated that “in order to provide the media with a valuable resource on how to best cover the elections with transparency and impartiality, UNESCO, in collaboration with IMS, supported the Myanmar Press Council to update the Election Reporting Guidelines. The update follows an agreement by the Press Council and the Election Commission to set up regular channels of communications to respond quickly to disinformation about political parties spread through the media and on social media” (UNESCO, 2020). The role of the international organizations and international assistance can also help the situation and have a positive impact on elections.

Efforts for countering disinformation should be promoted across the country, and civil society, with the help of international institutions such as DW Akademie, will play an important role in terms of trainings for identifying tools and creating networks (Bärthlein& Mayer, 2019). Myanmar needs to prepare short-term efforts such as counter-messaging and fact checking as well as long-term efforts such as promoting pluralistic social norms and media or digital literacy. In both cases, collaboration among national and international actors including government or non-governmental organizations is vital.

Appendix

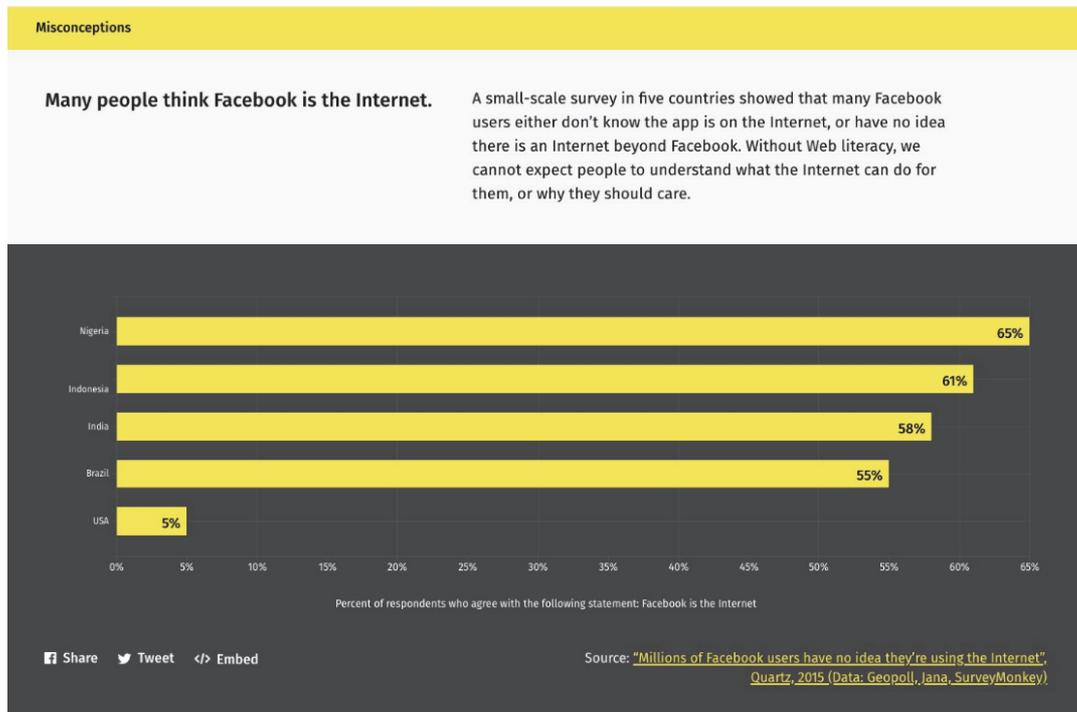
Appendix I. Figure published in Kahan 2017 but adapted from Kahana, Jenkins-Smith & Braman (2011). The study focused on how subjects evaluated expertise based upon their political groups and whether or not they ideologically agreed with the expert.

Is this scientist an “expert” on global warming?



Appendix II : Chart from Mozilla’s 2019 Internet Health Report indicating that in a small-scale survey many internet users in developing nations find Facebook indistinguishable from the larger internet.

Social media



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Country Case 8: Philippines

Social Media, Democracy and Disinformation: The Case of the Philippines

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Introduction

Disinformation is concerned with the systemic disruption of information channels caused by strategic deception and consumed by a targeted segment of a population to advance a particular political agenda. It may come in the form of fake news stories or simulated documentary formats that can appear credible (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It may overlap with online propaganda, which is potentially correct information but is reframed and packaged to support a particular agenda or disparage opposing viewpoints. Disinformation differs from misinformation, as the former seeks to cause harm while the latter may unintentionally cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is concerned with a wide range of channels and content such as trolling, fake accounts, shocking news, and online influencers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is characterized by the creation and dissemination of contrived content by multiple actors including state and private actors who utilize bots, trolls, websites, and social media influencers (Deb, Donohue, & Galisyer, 2017; Howard & Bradshaw, 2018).

In this paper, disinformation refers to efforts to intentionally mislead by providing strategically designed propaganda to secure political gains (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The definition emphasizes a level of organization, intention to misinform, and aim to achieve specific political gains. The sophistication of disinformation in the Philippines reflects how deeply entrenched it is as an industry. It is often focused on political marketing and advertising and employs casual digital workers who produce strategy and content to be consumed by a specific political market (Ong & Cabañes, 2018).

Research on the use of social media and its potential implications on the quality of democracy points to concepts such as political communications, hyper-partisanship, disinformation, civic engagement, and political opposition (J. Tucker et al., 2018). Disinformation and misinformation are hypothetically seen to shape democratic quality and performance due to increased polarization and partisanship, echo-chamber

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effects, the strengthening of populist messages, the delegitimizing of opposing minority views and interests, and wide capture of personal data (Deb et al., 2017).

Theoretically, democracy functions if segments of society are able to freely pursue competing interests and ideas in a society usually facilitated by democratic mechanisms such as elections, party systems, and civil society (Diamond & Morlino, 2019). These are premised on the assumptions that the democratic constituency has the ability to consume political information, that the quality of information and political discourse is reasonably high, and that there is the means to pursue collective action (Schudson et al., 2017). Observers have highlighted how social media has become a tool to pollute information, erode political discourse, and destroy civility (Ressa, 2016). Hyper-partisanship may emerge where citizens cannot engage in fruitful political conversations. Nevertheless, outcomes remained mixed on how disinformation has resulted in observed levels of political partisanship (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In electoral democracy, social media contributes significantly to political campaigning and messaging. Populist leaders have engaged the platform to spread their anti-establishment discourse which consists of the rejection of the legitimacy of existing democratic institutions, dismissal of mainstream media, and accusations of corruption against neo-liberal institutions including those that protect civil liberties and human rights (Persily, 2017). The cases that have been heavily documented include the US elections of 2016 and the Brexit campaign (J. A. Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barberá, 2017). The spread of false information seeks to agitate specific segments of the voting public to strategically achieve political ends.

In terms of incentives, reports in the Philippines reveal how international and local public relations firms have developed an industry of disinformation after being engaged in national elections through political campaigns (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Graham-Harrison & Cadwalladr, 2018). In the Philippines, where the party system is weak, disinformation spread through social media has strengthened the politics of personality and imagery. Facebook and YouTube have become primary sources of political information and education on key issues. This has bolstered support around the strongman imagery of President Duterte (Ressa, 2016).

With regard to democratic discourse, activists and journalists in the Philippines have seen how disinformation has been utilized to reframe and delegitimize discourse on the importance of democratic values and civil liberties in the country (Balod & Hameleers, 2019). In the Philippines, disinformation has been observed to contribute to the reframing of the concepts of human rights and political opposition as opposed to social order, preventing national development, and associated with destabilization and the “Dilawan” (i.e. being with the Yellow Party, which was the party of the previous administration and now serves as the current political opposition). Facebook and YouTube have been widely used in efforts to dismiss the legitimacy of key institutions that promote human rights such as the Commission on Human Rights and the United Nations. Social media has also been a platform for criticizing key political figures and media practitioners (Cabañes & Cornelio, 2017). President Duterte’s popularity is anchored in the practice of “penal populism” and politics of fear which seek to reverse the perceived elitist liberal reformism of the previous administration (Curato, 2016; Thompson, 2016).

Previous studies on the use of social media and the spread of disinformation primarily looked at its

pervasiveness in electoral campaigns (Ong et al., 2019) and its level of sophistication and organization (Ong & Cabañes, 2018). However, it would also be interesting to examine how networked disinformation or misinformation coupled with weak democratic institutions and problematic rule of law has effectively threatened political opposition and human rights norms, which are important tenets of a functioning democracy (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It would also be important to understand how the change in political messaging is partly shaped and exacerbated by the weakness of democratic institutions with the assumption that social media and disinformation are tools to achieve specific political outcomes that can be democratic or authoritarian (Diamond et al, 2010; Morgan, 2018).

The Disinformation Ecosystem

There is a highly organized network of misinformation and disinformation in the Philippines that is deeply entrenched in the democratic process and political economy. This was well documented in the seminal work on networked disinformation (Ong & Cabañes, 2018). With over 73 million Filipino Facebook users (70% of the population and 91% of all internet users in the Philippines) spending at least 10 hours a day on said platform (most active in the world) (Kemp, 2020), the Philippines is a fertile ground for disinformation (Tapsell, 2019). While reports highlight the 2016 and 2019 elections, observers have indicated that trolls that spread historical revisionism were already mobilized during the 2010 elections (Ramos, 2018).

Networked disinformation refers to the organized production of political deception that distributes responsibilities to diverse or loosely interconnected groups of hierarchized digital workers (Ong & Cabañes, 2018). While key studies have explored knowledge about state-sponsored disinformation in the Philippines, disinformation is embedded as an organized industry with key players from the private sector—mostly coming from the marketing and strategic communications industry—that cater to political clients who may be in government or civil society (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018). The creation and dissemination of misinformation and disinformation is very organized, to the extent that political clients from other countries are tapping the services of Filipino firms (Mathani & Cabato, 2019).

The architecture of networked disinformation is composed of and led by elite advertising and PR firms who coordinate with political clients about political objectives. Mostly, these are unseen hands with an organized machinery that can mobilize resources to pursue a multitude of political strategies using social media. Investigative reports have detailed how Strategic Communications Laboratories, the parent company of Cambridge Analytica, allegedly helped in the election of President Duterte (Robles, 2018). In the Philippines, the man behind Duterte’s social media team is Nick Gabunada. He is trained in media strategies and strategic communication.

In an article that documented his speech at an event on social marketing, Gabunada explained that his role is to “communicate the key message of the week, and monitor and boost certain posts that are gaining traction.” His team includes a research team, digital influencers, bloggers, and volunteers or internet groups. In 2019, Gabunada came under fire after Facebook took down over 200 fake Facebook

accounts linked to Duterte’s campaign (Gregorio, 2019). Social media strategists are now central players and integrated in the overall campaigns of candidates from the national to the local level. PR Strategists charge as much as USD \$100,000 for national campaigns and as little as USD \$1,000 for local campaigns (Ong et al., 2019).

Digital opinion leaders have high numbers of followers on their social media platforms. Celebrities include bloggers and vloggers. The Mocha Uson Official Facebook Page that serves as a page for staunch Duterte sympathizers and fans has over 5.8 million followers and over 5 million likes. Mocha Uson was a former sexy dancer-actress who has supported Duterte since the 2016 electoral campaign. Her legion of online followers is called the Die Hard Duterte Supporters (DDS). Given her millions of DDS followers, Mocha has been appointed by Duterte to various key positions in his administration such as Assistant Secretary of Presidential Communications. On numerous occasions, the Mocha Uson Official Facebook page has been allegedly documented to post misleading news and information that had been the subject of several fact checks by media organizations. She has referred to the mainstream media as “presstitutes” (Vera Files, 2018). Other key online opinion leaders with large numbers of followers include RJ Nieto (Thinking Pinoy) and Sasot, who have both been linked to the spread of pro-government news and messages. From the opposition side, the Pinoy Ako Blog and pages such as Tindig Pilipinas serve as platforms that criticize the Duterte administration.

Table 1. Purposive Sample of Online Influencers, FB Pages/Platforms, and Number of Followers⁵

Influencer/Page/ Platform	Facebook Followers/Likes	Twitter Followers	Instagram Followers	Description
Mocha Uson blog	5,946,657	178,000	N/A	The Mocha Uson blog is a Facebook page that President Duterte supporters manage. On this Facebook page, optimism about the actions of the administration can be seen in many posts. The page managers also post links to live forums, discussions, and new videos from the official Mocha Uson Facebook page.
Mocha Uson	199,368	N/A	124,000	Mocha Uson was an actress and a dance group leader who became a famous political figure during the early months of President Duterte’s stay in the Malacañang Palace. Her social media accounts are active when blogging information about the current administration’s actions or when showing support for the administration. She uses this platform to spread and voice her own opinions to her followers.
Rey Joseph	1,692,762	91,800	41,300	Rey Joseph Nieto is an active political

⁵ As of June 29, 2020.

Influencer/Page/ Platform	Facebook Followers/Likes	Twitter Followers	Instagram Followers	Description
"Thinking Pinoy" Nieto				blogger and vlogger who supports President Rodrigo Duterte. Rey Joseph or RJ uses the pen name "Thinking Pinoy" when writing his blogs. His social media accounts are filled with political blogs and analysis that cover the Duterte administration's political actions.
Sass Sasot/For the Motherland	727,227	64,100	N/A	For The Motherland is a Facebook group page that is managed by Sass Sasot, a Filipino blogger who shows support for President Rodrigo Duterte. The page contains political posts and strong ideological statements about the status of the LGBTQ+ community in the Philippines. It also includes re-posts of news articles and blog posts that the page manager Sasot sometimes analyzes and posts comments about.
Pinoy Ako Blog	248,000	50,700	N/A	Managed by blogger Jover Laurio, this page posts criticisms of the Duterte regime's policies and programs.
DDS Confessions	14,000	10,600	N/A	A satirical page that is critical of DDS comments (real or bots) and vitriolic or fake information.

Fake account operators play a key role in the disinformation network. These people are hired by PR firms to work on candidate political campaigns. The function of fake account operators is to boost specific messages, deflect specific messages, amplify issues, and create illusions of engagement. While the use of artificial intelligence or bots in duplicating comments/accounts has been widely documented, in the Philippines, the industry is still dominated by the practice of hiring people to maintain troll farms who create multiple fake accounts. The goal of these troll farms is to create an illusion of organic support for a specific political agenda (Bradshaw & Howard, n.d.). In 2019, media reports indicated that fake account operators are college graduates that earn between PHP 30,000 (USD \$617) and PHP 70,000 (USD \$1,440) a month. Each troll operator manages from 15 to 50 accounts with various personalities and profile sets (Magsino, 2019).

The last stage in the production of disinformation is the engagement of grassroots information intermediaries. These are legitimate online groups, moderators, and fan pages of specific politicians. They operate at the behest of the politicians they support and their engagement is usually voluntary. This is the last stage of disinformation before the messages are channeled to the general public or online users.

Table 2. Hierarchy of Networked Disinformation in the Philippines (Ong & Cabañes, 2018)

Actor	Characteristic	Incentive
PR strategist or political marketer	Provides overall framework and strategy; coordinates with campaigns	Paid/hired by political candidate
Key digital influencer	Famous online celebrities with large followings including pundits, actors, actresses, internet celebrities	Paid/hired by political candidates or strategists
Fake account operator	Management of fake accounts for boosting, messaging, and spreading disinformation	Paid/hired by political candidates or strategists
Grassroots operator	Volunteer and fan-based online groups of specific candidates	Not paid; volunteers
General public	End consumer of social media content	Not paid

This entrenched system of networked disinformation was also seen operating in the 2019 mid-term elections (Ong et al., 2019). Unlike in the 2016 elections where social media strategy was peripheral to the traditional campaign run by strategists, the 2019 elections showed that campaigns at all levels include social media as a major part of their overall strategies, and that where social media is central to the overall campaign strategy, it eats up a significant portion of campaign funds (Ong et al., 2019). The disinformation system is widely popular in political marketing circles. There are reports that other countries are tapping Philippine experts to replicate the system in their respective elections (Bengali & Halper, 2019).

Modes and Patterns of Misinformation and Disinformation

The persistent modes of misinformation and disinformation in the Philippines include the use of fake accounts and distribution of fake news including shocking content (Smith, 2019); trolling and use of cybertroops (Cabañes & Cornelio, 2017; Howard & Bradshaw, 2018); use of political parody accounts; hyper-partisan news; closed conspiracy groups; and use of pop and hyper-sexual content (Ong et al., 2019). The following are documented as common themes for social media disinformation: anti-establishment, anti-elitism, dismissal of mainstream media, historical revisionism, rejection of human rights, conspiracies, and shocking and viral news (Schudson et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2018; Ressa, 2016; Hofilena, 2016).

One pattern of misinformation uses social media platforms and trolls to dismiss legitimate and evidence-based arguments for public issues by flooding platforms with messages that support an opposing message with the goal of quashing and destroying an unpopular public opinion (Cabato, 2020). Another mode mobilizes trolls to decimate individual accounts by bullying those who criticize key political figures, especially those in government (Elemia, 2018). Vice President Leni Robredo, who belongs to the opposition party, remains a heavy target of trolls (Antonio, 2020).

Another pattern of misinformation is not directly related to creating or pushing for specific messages,

but is rather aimed at serving as a distraction from the main legitimate issue and employing misdirection to deflect the issue away from the responsible actors. The goal of message misdirection is to divert the discussion of critical issues by drawing public attention towards shocking and dramatic but fringe issues (Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang, 2020; Starbird, Arif, & Wilson, 2019). This was observed in the government's push for federalism (Punzalan, 2018) and Mocha Uson's viral song and dance about Charter change (CNN Philippines Staff, 2018).

Table 3. Modes, Patterns, and Themes of Disinformation

Mode	Patterns	Themes
Fake accounts	Fake news, likes, fake engagement (debate), trolling	Hyper-partisanship, anti-UN, anti-human rights, anti-elitism (Dilawan), criticism of mainstream news, alternative news
Cyber trolls	Likes, trolling, fake news	Hyper-partisanship, anti-UN, anti-human rights, anti-elitism (Dilawan), criticism of mainstream news, alternative news
News pages	Spread of fake news, shocking and viral videos and photos, conspiracy theories and videos, hyper-partisan videos	Anti-establishment, historical revisionism, criticism of opposition and mainstream media, viral videos related to show business, sports, and culture containing subtle political content, fake videos
Influencers	Opinion pieces, viral photos with politicians and other celebrities, conspiracy theories, fake news, likes	Criticism of mainstream media, anti-establishment, anti-foreign/UN institutions, photos with key individual figures photos of events, etc.

In March 2019, Facebook announced the removal of over 200 pieces of content from their sites because of inauthentic behavior. Around 65 of the accounts contained content supporting President Duterte with the number of likes ranging from 3,500 to 450,000 (Smith, 2019). The same report observed that the content shared by these pages was mostly political and pro-government. There were also pages that focused on spreading conspiracies about Duterte's opponents. Other pages carried content on Imee and Bongbong Marcos (children of the late President Ferdinand Marcos), as well as Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, while other pages focused on content about sports, culture, and entertainment that contained subtle fake political news content (Smith, 2019).

Policy Response, Threats to Civil Liberties, and Weak Institutions

In the Philippines, there is no specific policy measure that addresses the production and proliferation of fake news. Instead, there is an umbrella law called the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 or the Republic Act 10175 which prohibits violations of the existing Revised Penal Code using computers and other information and communications technologies. The law also prohibits specific acts such as illegal access, illegal interception, data interference, misuse of devices, cybersquatting, forgery, identity theft, child pornography, cyber sedition, and cyberlibel.

The controversial aspect of the law is the inclusion of cyberlibel, which has been used in recent

years to prosecute journalists in the country. Maria Ressa of the online media organization Rappler was convicted in 2020 on grounds of cyberlibel. She was prosecuted because of an online re-publication of a “libelous” story seven (7) years ago. In the Philippines, libel and oral defamation are still considered crimes. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights organizations have cried foul over the use of the anti-cybercrime law to prosecute individuals who criticized the government’s handling of the health crisis (Conde, 2020).

The Philippines remains one of the few countries in the world without a Freedom of Information (FOI) law. Experts and advocates claim that passage of an FOI law would provide citizens with the power to exact information accountability from duty bearers in the government. This would force the government to provide timely, accurate, and open government data that can be used by citizens to verify and validate news and information coming from government agencies. The absence of such a law has contributed to the weak social accountability system.

Another policy that is absent that is the protection of citizens from criminal liability from libel and oral defamation, which is considered an important legal lever to fight fake news and disinformation. While other democracies have placed libel and defamation under the ambit of civil law, these infractions remain under the Revised Penal Code in the Philippines. However, there are also advocacy efforts to decriminalize libel.

Table 4. Policies Related to Addressing Cyber Crimes

Policy	Description
E-Commerce Law RA 8792	Provides a policy and legal framework to govern all commercial and non-commercial online transactions
Cyber Crime Prevention Act RA 10175	Criminalizes all crimes defined under the Revised Penal Code if ICTs or computers are used to commit the crime, including libel and sedition
Anti-Child Pornography Act RA 9775	Seeks to punish child prostitution and acts relevant to the use of ICT to violate the rights of children
Data Privacy Act RA 10173	Provides a policy and legal framework to protect the data rights of citizens, particularly online data rights
Anti-Bullying Act RA 10627	Provides legal protection of children in schools against any acts of bullying, including online bullying

In March 2018, a series of Senate hearings were conducted to discuss policy measures on how to address the proliferation of fake news and disinformation. The hearings served as a platform for stakeholders to expose the extent and seriousness of fake news in the country. While there were several policy proposals, none went very far given the lack of policy attention and the reservation of stakeholders on the possible impact of legislation on existing civil liberties related to free expression (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The hearings also exposed how some government agencies have been allegedly using taxpayer money to engage in online strategic communications, including the use of trolls and fake news (Tapao & Imperial, 2018). During the hearing, government representatives denied their engagement in the spread of disinformation.

Table 5. Policy Proposals Addressing Fake News and Disinformation

Title of Bill/Proposal	Summary
House Bill 6022—An Act Prohibiting the Creation and Distribution of False News	The proposal aims to address the distribution of false information and encourage responsible journalism.
Senate Bill 1492—An Act Penalizing the Malicious Distribution of False News	The proposal seeks to penalize any person who spreads false news or information. Furthermore, the bill proposes to penalize any mass media enterprise or social media platform that fails to remove such false information within a reasonable period upon learning of its existence.
Senate Bill 9—An Act Prohibiting the Publication and Proliferation of False Content on the Philippine Internet	As the Anti-False Content Act, the bill seeks to protect the public from the deleterious effects of false and deceptive online content. Furthermore, it seeks to promote the responsible use of the internet.
Senate Bill 1479—An Act Prohibiting Public Officials and Employees from Being the Source of Misinformation	The proposal aims to hold public officials to higher standards with the advent of the unavoidable continuous rise of the influence and internet penetration brought about by social media by amending pertinent provisions of Republic Act No. 6713, otherwise known as the “Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials and Employees.”

Civil Society Response

Since the spread of fake news and disinformation is left unregulated, civil society organizations in the Philippines have stepped up to fill the gap. For instance, the media advocacy group Vera Files and Rappler IQ were tapped by Facebook as independent fact checkers of posts on the social media platform. Both institutions have been consistently providing fact checked information about statements and disclosures from the government on issues and achievements (Vera Files, 2018). With fact check reports proving to be unsavory for the government, supporters of the Duterte administration have questioned the legitimacy of Vera Files and Rappler IQ in serving as Facebook fact checkers. In fact, online trolls have regarded Rappler as a purveyor of fake news and claimed they are biased against President Duterte (Mogato, 2018). Both Rappler and Vera Files, particularly the fact-checking reporters, have been subjected to attacks from online trolls on various platforms (Elemia, 2018).

Aside from fact checking, several organizations have launched efforts to combat fake news and the dissemination of misinformation. Some organizations have developed a citizen reporting mechanism to report suspicious news content found on social media (National Union of Journalists of the Philippines and the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility); training and capacity development for fact checkers (University of the Philippines, De La Salle University); research, knowledge generation, and advocacy (Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation); issuances of pastoral letters and religious orders against fake news/advocacy (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines); and citizen education (Foundation for Media Alternatives, UNESCO, and UNDP).

Activists who have been observing and acting against disinformation and fake news have claimed that their initiatives remain limited in terms of impact given the country’s hostile environment and the

prosecution of media personalities, lack of institutional safeguards to protect journalists, absence of a Freedom of Information law, and the adversarial rhetoric and actions of the government against Philippine media organizations (Posetti, Simon, & Shabbir, 2019; Wingfield). The following case studies illustrate the active propagation of misinformation and disinformation through the use of social media.

Case 1: Dengvaxia vs. the Anti-Vaxxers

In April 4, 2016, the Department of Health under then-Health Secretary Janette Garin launched a dengue immunization program for grade 4 students to be implemented in three regions, namely the National Capital Region, Calabarzon, and Central Luzon with Sanofi Pasteur's Dengvaxia (Dayrit, Mendoza, Valenzuela, 2020). But even then, some doctors expressed reservations on the supposed haste in using the vaccine for mass vaccination despite the lack of comprehensive guidelines from the World Health Organization on how to use it (Bonalos, 2016).

A few weeks after the launch, reports about an 11-year-old boy who died days after receiving Dengvaxia in Bataan appeared in the news media, proposing a possible link between his death and the dengue vaccine. But findings by the National Adverse Event Following Immunization Committee (NAEFIC) claim that the child had a pre-existing congenital heart condition and that the administration of the vaccine was coincidental to the case (Francisco, 2016; Maslog, 2016; Refraccion & Orejas, 2016). In November 2017, a few months into the Duterte administration, Sanofi released a statement saying that their new analysis of six years of clinical data showed that the risk of developing severe dengue was higher among seronegative individuals (i.e. those who have not yet had dengue infection prior to vaccination) if they were infected with the dengue virus after receiving Dengvaxia. They therefore proposed updating the recommendation for Dengvaxia to be given only to seropositive individuals or those who have already been infected with dengue in the past (Cepeda, 2017).

By December 2017, a series of responses from different government agencies were implemented. The Department of Health suspended the Dengvaxia program and congressional hearings were held to investigate the matter (CNN Philippines, 2018). The Department of Justice also ordered the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) to probe and build a case for endangerment of public health caused by the alleged rushed procurement and implementation of the mass vaccination program, and the Public Attorney's Office (PAO) committed to providing free legal assistance to victims who wished to file possible criminal charges (Caliwan, 2017). Within the month, PAO presented to the media the first two cases they were working on, with PAO Chief Persida Acosta stating, "Mala-king kasinungalingan ang sinasabi nila na walang biktima ang Dengvaxia na yan. Nakamamatay yan" [Saying that there were no victims of Dengvaxia is a big lie. That (Dengvaxia) is deadly.] (Pilipino Star Ngayon, 2017, paragraph 2).

According to a study by Mendoza et al. (2020), articles and videos that mentioned Dengvaxia on YouTube and in select news organizations peaked around November and December 2017, the majority of which discussed "(1) the adverse effects of the vaccine; (2) the alleged graft and corruption of the DOH and Sanofi; (3) legislative hearings involving the officials of the previous administration, and (4) PAO's legal assistance to the families of children who allegedly died due to Dengvaxia and the autopsy results"

(pp. 19-20). Media coverage of the latter has raised concerns from both lawmakers and health advocates. In February 2018, Senator Leila de Lima was among the first to call out PAO for creating a “panicky mess” and “hysteria campaign” blaming the Aquino administration and pinning the cause of the deaths of some recipients of the vaccine on Dengvaxia despite the lack of a conclusive causal link between the vaccine and the deaths of the children autopsied by PAO (Senate of the Philippines, 2018). She added that Acosta’s “alarmist drama antics” were affecting other vaccination programs as parents refused to participate in these publicly funded programs.

The Doctors for Public Welfare were joined by ex-DOH chief Esperanza Cabral in echoing similar sentiments, and urged the Department of Justice to stop PAO from conducting autopsies on 14 children who allegedly died due to receiving Dengvaxia (Bueza, 2018). The group cited the findings of a group of pathologists from the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital (UP-PGH), which stated only three out of the 14 total deaths could be associated with the immunization, two of which may have been due to vaccine failure; that is, the supposed immunity did not develop and the two contracted dengue which the vaccine is supposed to prevent (PGH Dengue Investigative Task Force, 2018). Some Members of the Lower House also asked for the president to intervene and demand PAO cooperate with the UP-PGH task force after PAO Chief Acosta refused to share tissue samples from their own forensic unit with the UP-PGH task force (Cupin, 2018).

Dr. Erwin Erfe, PAO’s Forensic Laboratory director, made statements claiming that Dengvaxia caused hundreds of deaths. Erfe told reporters through a text message that, “Those who say otherwise—that Dengvaxia is safe—are misleading the Filipino people and betraying the memory of those hundreds who have died because of the deadly vaccine” (Galvez, 2018b, paragraph 4). He also stated that all 105 bodies they autopsied manifested a “Dengvaxia Death Pattern” (Galvez, 2018b, paragraph 4). The term “Dengvaxia Death Pattern” was first mentioned in a hearing in the House of Representatives on Dengvaxia during which Erfe presented the results of their forensic examinations (Rappler, 2018).

The Doctors for Truth and Public Welfare asked PAO to stop spreading unproven claims attributing deaths to Dengvaxia and implicated their accountability in plummeting vaccine confidence in the country. They also criticized Erfe “for spreading falsehoods on social media” that the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine can cause autism (Galvez, 2018a, paragraph 6). The group was referring to a series of social media posts made in November 2018, when Erfe juxtaposed the Dengvaxia investigations with the supposed autism epidemic in the United States being linked to the MMR vaccine and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) being linked to the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine (Manglinong, 2018). However, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) itself still affirm that there is no link between autism in children and the MMR vaccine. Further, a 2018 systematic review of available studies on the possible relationship between the HPV vaccine and MS found no significant association found between the HPV vaccine and the disease (Meggiolaro et al., 2018).

In a related case, a Facebook page bearing the name “Friends of Public Attorney's Office - PAO” carried content that criticized Dengvaxia. Created on April 26, 2018, the majority of the posts shared on the page were Dengvaxia-related posts from other Facebook accounts, news media reports, and other websites. Facebook live videos were among the primary original content from the page, which often

featured PAO staff led by Acosta visiting the families of children who allegedly died after getting vaccinated with Dengvaxia; Erfe interviewing the parents and explaining the results of their forensic examinations; ongoing autopsies (some even contain the exposed face of the body resting on the autopsy table); and the filing of complaints and hearings, press conferences, and mass mobilizations related to Dengvaxia. However, some of the page's posts are arguably misleading, particularly those that include phrases such as "Dengvaxia child dead victim" and "Dengvaxia dead victim" as these may be interpreted as factual claims that the deaths of those featured in the videos were already proven to be caused by the vaccine.

Among the more problematic posts is one that was shared on April 6, 2019 which included the term "Dengvaxia Death Syndrome" and a listing of three supposedly common patterns in the autopsies (Friends of Public Attorney's Office - PAO, 2019). The same phrase was used in Acosta's Twitter account post on August 2, 2019 (Persida Rueda-Acosta [@persidaacosta], 2019) around the time when the Duterte administration expressed willingness to reconsider the use of Dengvaxia in the wake of the rising number of dengue cases across the country (Yap & Salaverria, 2019). The term DDS accompanied by a description full of medical terms was seen as an attempt to put a scientific-sounding label on claims pinning the reported deaths on Dengvaxia. But it also rides on a trend among Duterte supporters who have been creating group names to fit the DDS abbreviation, which brings to mind the history of the Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group in Davao believed to be responsible for several summary killings of suspected criminals since the 1980s (Nawal, 2015).

In a 2018 year-end report by Vera Files, Dengvaxia-related events were among the top five triggers of the circulation of fake news which the organization flagged during the year. These posts were shared from April to November 2018, coinciding with key time periods when news of Senate hearings and recommendations on filing charges against past Aquino administration officials for the Dengvaxia issue were being reported. This content came in the form of videos with computer-generated voiceovers, photos with origins unrelated to the story, generated website articles that attempt to look like legitimate news stories, and quotations from speeches and old news stories that were taken out of context that expressed criticisms, allegations, and negative imagery against Aquino III, his family, and his administration. Based on the Vera Files articles, Facebook groups and pages that were identifiably supporters of Pres. Rodrigo Duterte, Mayor Sara Duterte, and former Pres. Ferdinand Marcos based on their site names and content they shared were among the top social media and website traffic generators for the viral posts. Further, the viral posts have had a potential reach of between 217,000 and 2.7 million online users.

A year later, a measles outbreak was declared in Metro Manila followed by the Calabarzon, Western Visayas, and Central Visayas regions (CNN Philippines, 2019). Criticisms resurfaced against the PAO. Among the critics was Sen. Risa Hontiveros, who said, "Acosta's scaremongering and politically motivated investigations on the Dengvaxia issue, that defied science and the advice of experts, sowed fear in the hearts of so many parents to have their children vaccinated since the past year" (Cabico, 2019, paragraph 4). Notably, Metro Manila and Calabarzon were among the regions involved in the Dengvaxia immunization launch. There were already local measles outbreaks declared in the first quarter of 2018: in Davao City (Basa, 2018), Zamboanga City (Aurelio, 2018), in a barangay in Taguig City (Reysio-Cruz &

Santos, 2018), a province of Negros Oriental (Cepeda, 2018), and Kabankalan City in southern Negros Occidental (Espina, 2018). To measure the impact of the Dengvaxia controversy on vaccine confidence, Larson et al. (2019) conducted a survey with a representative sample of 1,500 participants in 2018. They implemented the same method they used in a 2015 study as part of the Vaccine Confidence Project. Upon comparing the results from before and after the Dengvaxia controversy, a dramatic drop in vaccine confidence was witnessed in terms of belief in vaccine importance for children, vaccine safety, and vaccine effectiveness.

Case 2: Misinformation and Misogyny: The Case of Senator Leila de Lima

In 2009, then-chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), now opposition Senator Leila de Lima, announced that she would be taking the challenge of then-Davao City mayor Duterte to prove the existence of the dreaded Davao Death Squad (DDS) (MindaNews, 2009), a vigilante group that allegedly carried out the extrajudicial killings of alleged drug dealers, petty criminals, and street children in the city since the mid-1990s (Human Rights Watch, 2009). This was followed by a series of public hearings attended by local and national government officials, police officers, and “non-state actors” (Gavilan, 2017). In 2012, the CHR released a resolution recommending that the Office of the Ombudsman investigate the “possible administrative and criminal liability of Duterte for his inaction in the face of evidence of numerous killings committed in Davao City and his tolerance of the commission of those offenses” (Gavilan, 2017). In August 2016, as Chair of the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights, newly elected Senator De Lima initiated an inquiry into the killings of thousands of alleged drug users and drug dealers said to have taken place since President Duterte took office in June 2016 (Inter Parliamentary Union, 2019).

De Lima was arrested and detained on February 24, 2017 on the basis of accusations that she had received drug money to finance her senatorial campaign. Alongside this, De Lima was also observed to be slut-shamed for her illicit relationship with her former personal driver/security aide, Ronnie Dayan, whom they said also became her bagman for the drug money he alleged she received. (Claudio, 2016)

Duterte said in a speech, “Here is an immoral woman, flaunting, well of course insofar as the wife of the driver was concerned, (her) adultery. Here is a woman who funded the house of her lover and yet we do not see any complaints about it. That money came readily from drugs” (Ramos, 2016). In addition, social media accounts floated the existence of a sex video featuring the De Lima and her lover.

In 2019, online news site Rappler published an analysis on the key role that social media played in the character assassination of De Lima. Networked websites on social media spread numerous claims discrediting De Lima’s credentials and ethics. While many of these claims have been found false or misleading, they were nevertheless deliberately amplified by the same set of connected Facebook pages (Macaraeg, 2019). The viral claims began in 2016 and were often disguised as news. The negative propaganda against the neophyte senator often came from websites and pages that shared pro-Duterte content, many of which were meticulously fabricated (Macaraeg, 2019).

The manipulated online content included spliced videos (De Lima, 2019) and edited photos (Cordero,

2019) that further reinforced the accusations hurled against De Lima. Each triggered thousands of responses, including sexist and misogynistic remarks and death threats. One example was a spliced and edited video showing De Lima's supposed "admission" that she protected drug traffickers operating in the National Bilibid Prison (AFP Fact Check, 2019). In 2016, the video garnered more than 86,000 engagements. While it was eventually taken down, it resurfaced again in 2019 when it was further amplified to over 100,000 engagements (Macaraeg, 2019). Additionally, screenshots of De Lima's supposed sex video also went viral. Although it was never established that it was her, this did not matter in the netizen comment section (Occenola, 2018).

During the second Senate hearing on fake news in January 2018, Rappler CEO and executive editor Maria Ressa said women in the Philippines, as in other countries, are three times more likely to be targeted by fake news than men. "Patriotic trolling" occurs in three steps in the Philippines and can be observed in the case of De Lima. Ressa (2019) explained: "*First*, attack the credibility of the person, allege corruption. It doesn't matter if it's true, you repeat it a million times. *Two*, you use sexual violence, especially with women. You inflame the biases, you fuel misogyny, you degrade that target as a sexual object. You can't really have credibility when you've been torn apart this way on social media. *Finally*, the third step was to trend this hashtag: '#ArrestLeiladeLima.' This is what happened to her."

The attacks against De Lima did not stop even after she surrendered in 2017 (Macaraeg, 2019). In 2018 and 2019, Rappler still flagged fake news that circulated online claiming that De Lima would be transferred to the NBP (Imperial, 2018), and that she was partying inside the NBP and that her sister was the wife of Communist Party of the Philippines founder Jose Maria Sison (Pobre, 2019). Several media outfits came out with their own fact-checking initiatives to refute false information against De Lima. In November 2019, De Lima's office also launched the *True Leila Project* in an attempt to combat all of the fake content thrown against the senator. They envision the website as becoming a "one-stop destination for the Filipino populace, including journalists and researchers, to confirm the veracity of malicious information and false narratives" (Tantuco, 2019).

Following the shame tactics against De Lima as well as proposals to show their so-called sex video during a congressional inquiry, the hashtags #EveryWoman and #BabaeAko also trended on social media. A self-incrimination campaign to express solidarity with De Lima and all women victimized by sexual shaming (Claudio, 2016), it carried the message, "I would like to testify in Congress. It was me in the sex video. #Everywoman." *EveryWoman* later on evolved into a coalition of individuals and groups advocating for women's rights and calling out misogyny and sexism in the government and public spaces.

Internationally, the United Nations Human Rights Council Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) has expressed concern over De Lima's arbitrary detention, referring her case to three UN Special Rapporteurs tasked with investigating the violations committed against her. Foreign parliamentarians and groups from the US, Canada, Australia, Europe, and Asia have also called for her release. Moreover, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously passed US Senate Resolution 142 condemning the Philippine government for the continued detention of De Lima and calling for her release. The US 2020 budget also included a provision banning the entry of Philippine government officials involved in De Lima's detention.

Conclusion

The two cases presented in this article exhibit the utilization of modes of misinformation and disinformation that rely heavily on the use of social media, dramatic messaging, shocking news, and the amplification of vitriolic messages using popular online influencers (Keller et al., 2020). In the case of Dengvaxia, the role of the Facebook posts by the account dedicated to the allegedly adverse effects of the anti-dengue vaccine featured shocking images, conspiracy theories, and sensational news. Popular online influencers and the Facebook pages of government agencies were utilized to spew alleged misinformation including memes and opinions that brought the issue to the public's attention. In the case of the prosecution of Senator De Lima, suspicious news websites reposted by digital influencers and the running of hashtags using commissioned "patriotic trolling" that discredited the senator helped shape public opinion about her public prosecution.

Strong populist regimes led by populist leaders use social media effectively to spread populist messaging (Faris et al., 2017; Deb et al., 2017). In the early years of the Duterte administration, the focus was on quelling the country's drug trafficking problem and criminality. This "tough-guy" and penal populism messaging was consistent during the regime's actions against Senator De Lima. Penal populism involves "tough against crime" messaging where citizens rely on the promise of leaders to eradicate corruption and crime and deliver peace and development in a swift manner (Curato, 2016). The action against De Lima was contoured as signaling a robust message against drug trafficking. Observers have viewed the case of Dengvaxia as one of medical populism. Lasco and Curato (2019) indicate that Sanofi Pasteur's admission of oversight created a moral panic context. While the DOH decided to address the issue with a technocratic response by suspending the Dengvaxia program and commissioning an independent panel of medical experts from UP-PGH, Acosta's actions were that of a medical populist. Her actions were based on two populist logics: (1) casting doubt on the credibility of "the establishment" and their knowledge claims, and (2) claiming to speak on behalf of "the people" who fell victim to a corrupt government that colluded with a large pharmaceutical company to make money at the expense of endangering public health.

Another pattern that can be observed from both cases is the weakness of democratic institutions and political socialization actors in educating citizens on important political and policy issues (Diamond et al., 2019). Netizens resort to social media as source of political knowledge. Knowledge claims by experts carried by mainstream media (MSM) were questioned given the perceived notion that MSM represents the elite and is "compromised and controlled by oligarchic interests." Distrust (and persecution) of media organizations can arguably contribute to the rise of citizen attention to political propaganda on social media. In the Philippines, the political party system—which can be a platform for citizenship education—is weak and non-functioning (Thompson, 2016). Mechanisms (such as a Freedom of Information law, a People's Participation law, and internet rights) that allow for better access to government data which can be used to educate citizens and hold governments accountable are still absent.

While this scoping study and cases provided an illustration of patterns and modes of misinformation and disinformation used on social media, it did not cover the equally important and interesting research

puzzles that may help further understand the issues of and links between democracy and disinformation. An interesting question is related to the demand-side of disinformation. Why do citizens consume fake news and disinformation? What is the profile of the publics that consume disinformation? Do populist publics have a tendency to read, spread, and believe misinformation? Institutional questions that link up democratic institutions with the public prevalence of disinformation consumption would be an important research thrust. While this research partially touched on the role of institutions in democratic education and political socialization, there is a need for deeper investigation. Further studies can consider avenues for how to strengthen democratic institutions to check the adverse effects of political disinformation. From an advocacy perspective, it is important to devise collective action mechanisms to protect democratic values and practices against the adverse effects of systemic disinformation.

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Country Case 9: Thailand

Social Media and Democracy in Thailand

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Introduction

The role of social media and the internet in politics, and its influence on the lives of many people, has increased significantly. Over the past decade, people have increasingly begun to access information via smartphones. According to Hootsuite and We Are Social, more than four billion people worldwide use the internet, and approximately 3.2 billion people use social media in their daily lives (WP, 2018). The growing numbers of online internet users show that social media has become essential to political communication. Political parties often use social media to run political campaigns and communicate with voters to gain votes as was the case in the 2008 presidential election in the United States (Vonderschmitt, 2012) and in many other countries.

In Thailand, the internet has become a new means for ordinary citizens to access political information. More than 55 million people out of the total population of 69.3 million have access to the internet via smartphones (Marketingoops, 2019). There are 51 million Facebook users in Thailand and 22 million users in Bangkok alone (Brand Buffet, 2018). As a result, Bangkok has one of the highest numbers of Facebook users in the world (Leesanguansuk, 2019). During the 2019 national parliamentary election campaigns, political parties and candidates used social media to set agendas, send messages, and introduce policy initiatives to targeted voters (Pornwasin, 2019). In comparison with the previous election in 2011, social media was used extensively in 2019 to reach more voters and groups through channels such as Facebook, LINE, Twitter, and YouTube.

Although social media provides an opportunity for people to participate in political activities, it can be misleading and promote hatred, conflict, and polarization among citizens. Politicians and their supporters can use social media to destroy and delegitimize opposition parties via fake news, propaganda, and hate speech. Social media, therefore, can be considered a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it encourages public participation and involvement in policy-making processes and increases freedom of speech in cyberspace. On the other hand, it can be used as a weapon by anyone to create polarization

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among civilians by sharing misleading, misinformation or fake news, resulting in conflict and violence.

This research will study the role of civil society, public authorities, and political parties in using social media to promote freedom, civil liberties, and democracy in Thailand, especially in relation to the March 24, 2019 election. The role of the government and civil society in responding to fake news and misinformation in Thailand is explored. Recommendations to protect citizens from the negative aspects of social media and the proliferation of fake news are also discussed in this study.

Objectives

1. To study the roles of civil society, public authorities, and political parties in using social media to promote freedom, civil liberties, and democracy in Thailand.
2. To study how the government and civil society respond to fake news in Thailand.
3. To provide recommendations to cope with the misuse of social media and on how social media should be used to strengthen democracy in Thailand.

Methodology

This study is based on a literature survey of articles, books, journals, newspapers, and official documents such as election laws and regulations regarding social media, the 2017 Computer Crime Act and social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter), observations about the political campaigns leading up to the March 24, 2019 election in Thailand, and monitoring of the post-election situation, as well as observation of parliamentary activities. Interviews with politicians, civil society participants, and journalists explore the key success of social media platforms in gaining votes and popularity in the election. Focus group interviews with academics, journalists, politicians and NGOs also offer insights and information into how social media relates to their political activities.

Literature Review

Social media is defined as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allows the creation and exchanges of user-generated content”(Kaplan & Haenlein in Samphaokaeo, 2013). Social media encompasses a wide range of online digital media including websites, blogs, discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, and social networking sites (Mangold & Faulds, 2009 in Samphaokaeo, 2013).

Jürgen Habermas’s Public Sphere Theory explains social media as an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems and influence political action through that discussion. Such discussion is called public debate and is defined as the expression of

views on matters that are of concern to the public. Habermas defined “the public sphere” as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space (Wikipedia, 2019).

The original definition of public sphere has relevance to the “sense of public.” In previous times, the public sphere was used to mean political negotiation among the middle classes to exchange knowledge and ideas in a democratic system. However, Habermas’s viewpoint on the public sphere differs from this traditional meaning and is more detailed. First, the public sphere relates to a space where people are willing to gather together to share and discuss public issues with common interest. Second, the public sphere is identified as a space where individuals can discuss topics free from state, juridical, and economic power. As a result, the state cannot control people who want to talk about political problems. Third, the discussion has to be rational. Fourth, media institutions are a key factor in facilitating public debate and negotiation. Fifth, the result of the conversation will lead to change and an implementation process. For example, public debates will strengthen civil society to act against political unfairness (Santawee, 2014) and put pressure on government decision making.

The perspectives of Habermas (1995) and Castells (2008) identify the public sphere as a “sociopolitical” element that opens an opportunity for public participation and citizenship engagement in political decision making. The public sphere also represents interaction between the state and civil society in the democratic system. The public sphere, therefore, encourages not only the middle class to engage in public discussion and debate but allows all people to share their ideas and thoughts through communication, which helps to stimulate public participation in a democratic society. In the past, public spheres coalesced in spaces such as coffee shops, salons, and public squares. Today, that space has been restructured and dominated by the mass media, beginning with newspapers and then shifting to radio, television broadcasts, and social media (Wikipedia, 2019). This has encouraged political parties to engage in political marketing so that they can win votes in elections.

In addition, social media opens and requires political institutions to integrate digital media into governance practices and service provision (Perea, Jensen, & Jorba, 2012). It is comparatively difficult for a government to restrict the use of social media by its citizens because social media is available on the internet, which is broadly accessible via computers and mobile phones. This allows citizens to easily and actively monitor the state, and permits citizens to be not just consumers of information provided by the state but also producers of information of their own (Abbot, 2012 in Samphaokaeo, 2013). According to Woody and Weare, social media makes political information more compelling as it lowers the costs of participation and creates new opportunities for involvement (Turnšek, 2008).

Social media promotes political participation because political views can be expressed online with fewer barriers than real life. This encourages users to participate politically, (Samphaokaeo, 2013) and for this reason, social media can be a tool for sourcing information, interacting with others, and supporting collective action, which is the essence of democracy. Thus, social media is related to information, communication, and action functions (Chareonwongsak, 2007).

The Context of Thailand

Law and Regulations

For decades, Thailand has been confronted by the proliferation of fake news.³ This was a problem even before the advent of the internet and social media platforms. Fake news is considered to be a powerful weapon in the cyber world and is an enormous threat to Thai democracy, as it can create distrust and panic. Sometimes, fake news and disinformation have the capacity to influence election outcomes even if that is not the intention (Resende, n.d). Today, fake news and cyberbullying are significant problems in Thai society, and the government has promulgated laws and regulations to address misinformation and fake news. Some examples include:

1. The Official Information Act (1997) guarantees the people's right to have access to government information. It provides a principle and mechanism to serve people's right to know and protect personal information within state agencies or state enterprises (Thailand law forum, 2010).
2. The Computer Crime Act (2007)⁴ is aimed at controlling illegal posts and sharing by internet users and preventing the dissemination of misinformation and fake news that threaten national security.
3. Sections 35⁵ and 36⁶ of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand (2017) enshrine the protection of a person from the unlawful exploitation of personal information in relation to oneself as provided

³ "Fake news" is defined as a type of exaggeration that offers little or no legitimate well-researched news, is scandal-mongering, or is sensationalist that is disseminated through the publishing of biased stories or reports of events on digital platforms, including mass media. Trivial information and events are sometimes misrepresented and exaggerated as important. Fake news is usually written and published with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or lead to financial or political gain. It often uses sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership and advertising revenue. The intent and purpose of fake news is important. In some cases, what appears to be fake news may be news satire, which uses exaggeration and introduces non-factual elements that are intended to amuse or make a point rather than to deceive.

⁴ The Computer-Related Crime Act (2007) as amended by the Computer-Related Crime Act (No. 2) 2017 Section 14 states that any person who perpetrates the following offenses shall be subject to imprisonment of up to five years and a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand baht, or both:

- (1) With ill or fraudulent intent, put into a computer system distorted or forged computer data, partially or entirely, or false computer data, in a manner that is likely to cause damage to the public, in which the perpetration is not a defamation offense under the Criminal Code;
- (2) Put into a computer system false computer data in a manner that is likely to damage the maintenance of national security, public safety, national economic security, or public infrastructure serving the national public interest or cause panic in the public;
- (5) Disseminate or forward any computer data while being aware that it is computer data as described in (1), (2)

⁵ Section 35. A person's family rights, dignity, reputation and the right of privacy shall be protected. The assertion or circulation of a statement or picture in any manner whatsoever to the public, which violates or affects a person's family rights, dignity, reputation or the right of privacy, shall not be made except for the case which is beneficial to the public. A person shall be protected from the unlawful exploitation of personal information in relation to oneself as provided by law (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2017).

⁶ Section 36. A person shall enjoy the liberty of communication by lawful means. Censorship, detention or disclosure of communication between persons including any other act which discloses the content of a communication between persons shall not be made except by virtue of law specifically enacted for security of the State or maintaining public order or good morals (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2017).

by law. A person shall enjoy the liberty of communication by lawful means; however, he or she should not abuse the rights of other people.

4. The Cyber Security Act (2019) aims to protect people from both external and internal threats which affect national security, economic security, military security, and national order (Gazette, 2019).
5. The Personal Information Protection Act (2019) aims to protect people from internet and human rights abuses. The law offers measures to compensate a person who is abused on the internet (Gazette, 2019).
6. Election Commission regulations aim to control and limit the use of social media by political parties, including all violations, and to monitor posts that “spread lies, slander candidates, or use rude language” (Tanakasempipat, 2019). The rules also include penalties for sharing or “liking” defamatory content or spreading “false information.”

Administrative Means

Important organizations established in order to prevent the misuse of social media, particularly the spread of fake news, include:

1. The Ministry of Digital Economy and Society launched the “Anti-Fake News Center” after the 2019 election to combat fake news. The center cooperates with different departments such as the Department of Special Investigation, the Department of Intellectual Property, the Internal Security Operations Command, and the Food and Drug Administration.
2. The Technology Crime Suppression Division (TCSD) aims to protect people from technology crimes and fake news.

The Role of Civil Society

Thai civil society is aware of the risks posed by the use of social media in politics. Therefore, the following mechanisms have been established in cooperation with the government.

1. The “Thai Netizen Network” was established in 2008 to observe the state of internet freedom in the country, monitor human rights issues, and monitor the Computer Crime Act, which impacts internet freedom in Thailand (ThaiNetizen, 2019).
2. ThaiCERT is the Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) for Thailand (2000). It provides an official point of contact for dealing with computer security incidents in the Thai internet community. ThaiCERT collaborates with the Thai government sector, organizations, universities, ISPs, and other relevant entities to deal with computer security incidents in Thailand. Additionally, as a full and active member of the Forum of Incident Response and Security Teams (FIRST) and the Asia Pacific Computer Emergency Response Team (APCERT), ThaiCERT coordinates with both globally and regionally trusted CSIRTs in responding to computer security incidents (ThaiCERT, 2019).

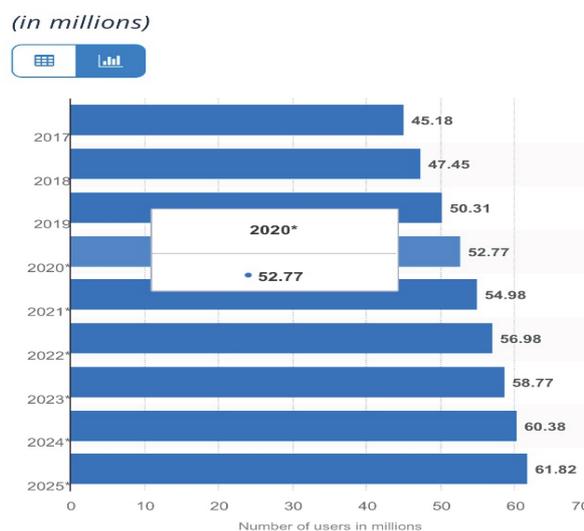
Utilization of Social Media in Thailand

According to the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center, the number of internet users in Thailand increased from 30 in 1991 to 47,450,000 in 2018 (Pongsawat, 2019). Thai people spend approximately 9 hours and 38 minutes on the internet each day, longer than anywhere else in the world. In addition, Thailand has 51 million Facebook users, 22 million of which are in Bangkok (Pongsawat, 2019).

Considering internet use by age group in 2018, youths aged 15-24 used the internet the most, with 91.4 percent of this age group using the internet. In descending order, the age groups that had the next highest rate of internet use were 25-34 years (84.4 percent), 6-14 years (69.6 percent), 35-49 years (62.1 percent), and those aged 50 years and over (21.2 percent). The National Statistical Office (2018) found that social networks were the most common online activity (for example Facebook, Twitter, LINE, and Instagram), with 94.1 percent of users participating. In descending order, the next most common online activities were downloading images, movies, videos, playing computer games, and listening to the radio or music (89.3 percent), uploading information, images, videos, music, and software on sharing websites (57 percent), and searching for general information (45.2 percent) (National Statistical Office Thailand, 2018).

In 2018, 89.9 percent of Thai internet users accessed the internet via a smartphone, while 67.5 percent accessed it at home, 31.2 percent while at work, and 23 percent at an educational institution (National Statistical Office Thailand, 2018).

Figure 1. Projected Number of Internet Users in Thailand (2017-2025)

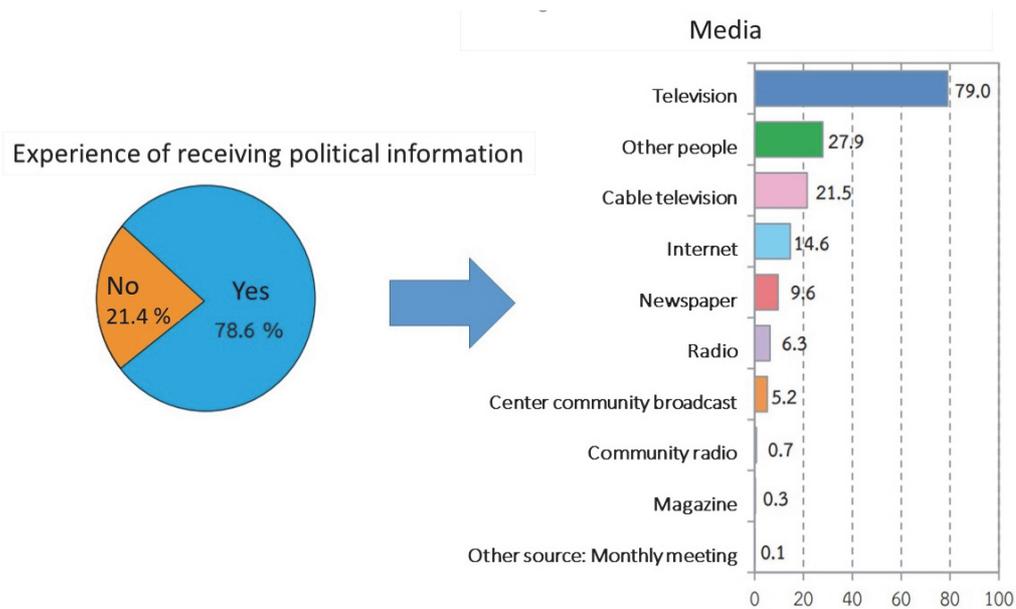


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Source: Statista Research Department, July 17, 2020

Statista Research Department projected that the number of internet users in Thailand will increase from 45.18 million users in 2017 to 61.82 million users in 2025. This illustrates the increasingly crucial role of the internet in Thai society. Thai people can access political data via different media platforms, including free TV, cable TV, newspapers, the internet (including internet news websites, social media, blog sites, etc.), the radio, and magazines.

Figure 2. Accessibility of Political Data in Thailand in 2018



Source: King Prajadhipok’s Institute, 2018

As shown in Figure 2, most Thai adults receive political news via free TV (79 percent), followed by face-to-face communication (27.9 percent), cable TV (21.5 percent), the internet (all sources, 14.6 percent), newspapers (9.6 percent), commercial radio (6.3 percent), community radio broadcasts (0.7 percent), and magazines (0.3 percent) (KPI, 2018).

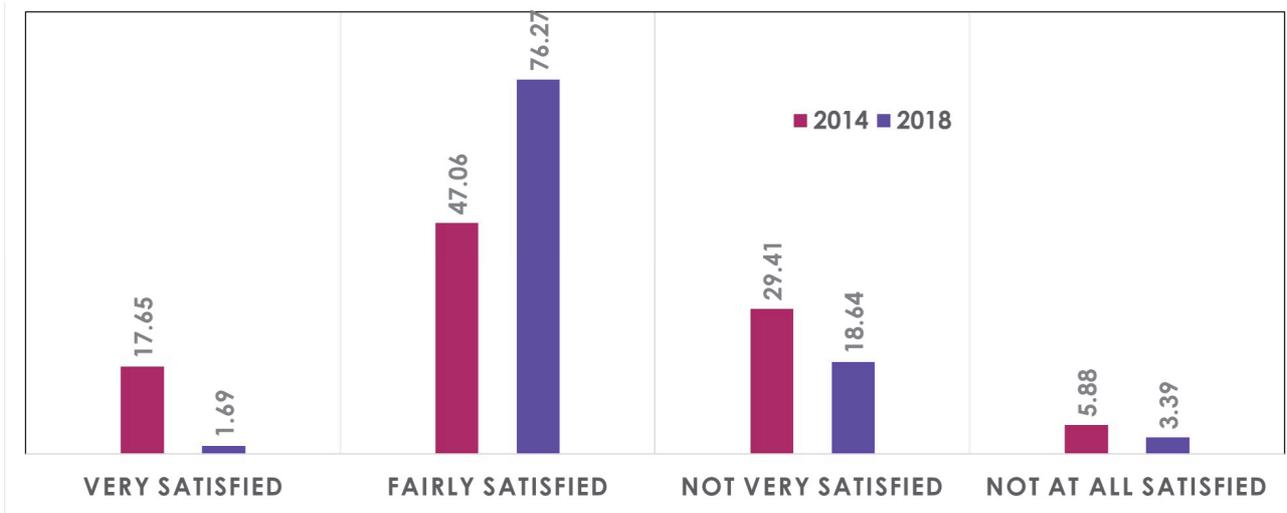
Table 1. Percentage of People who Follow Political News on the Internet, Classified by Social Media Network Membership

Social Media Members	Percentage
Total	100
Members	89.4
Non-members	10.6
Channel	
Facebook	95.4
LINE	93.8
Instagram	24
Twitter, Skype	3.6
Average daily online communication hours	3.03

Source: King Prajadhipok’s Institute, 2018

Table 1 shows the results of a 2018 study conducted by King Prajadhipok’s Institute in which 89.4 percent of people who get their political news and information from the internet are also social media members, 95.4 percent have access to political news via Facebook, 93.8 percent via LINE, 24 percent via Instagram, and 3.6 percent via Twitter and Skype. This indicates that social media has become the primary type of platform through which people access political information, with average online engagement being 3.03 hours per day (KPI, 2018).

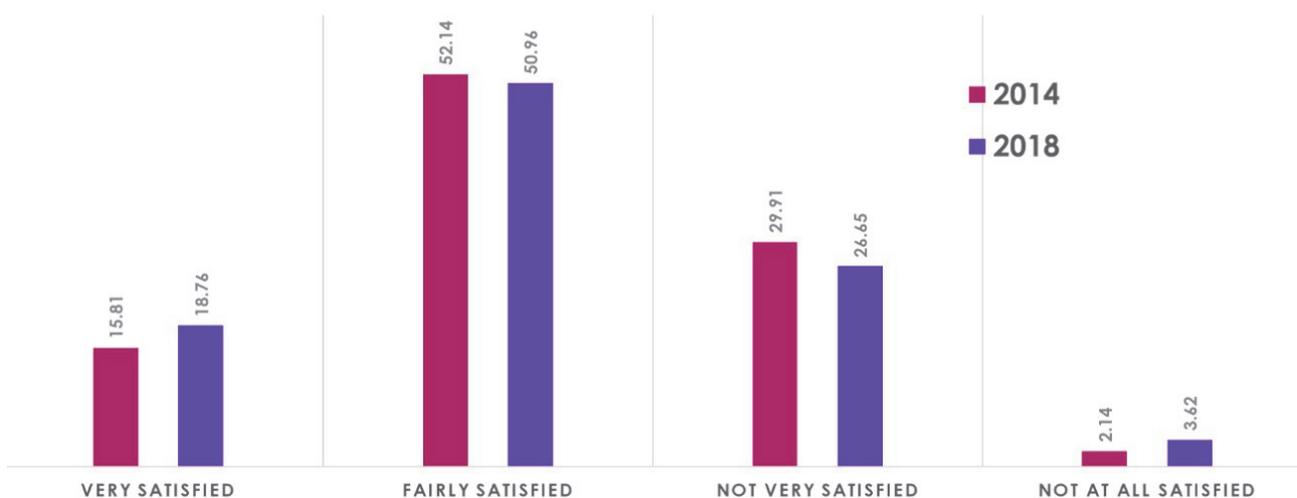
Figure 3. Registered Bangkok Residents' Social Media User Satisfaction with How Democracy Works (2014 and 2018)



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

According to the Asian Barometer Survey (2018), between 2014 and 2018 Bangkok social media users were satisfied overall with how democracy worked in Thailand (Figure 3). Furthermore, Figure 3 shows that the satisfaction of social media users with democracy in Thailand increased from 64.71 percent in 2014 to 77.96 percent in 2018 (combination of the fairly and very satisfied categories). However, Figure 4 shows that during the same time period, social media users living outside Bangkok experienced a drop in satisfaction with the way of democracy works in Thailand from 67.95 percent in 2014 to 69.72 percent in 2018 (combination of not very and not at all satisfied categories) (Asian Barometer Survey, 2018).

Figure 4. Non-Bangkok Registered Residents' Social Media User Satisfaction with How Democracy Works in Thailand (2014 and 2018)



Source: Asian Barometer Survey

Social Media and Thai National Elections

The most recent Thai general election was held on March 24, 2019. It was the first election to be held after the coup de'tat in 2014 and after the promulgation of a new Thai Constitution in 2017. The election was held to select 500 members of the new House of Representatives. Seventy-seven parties contested the elections, including the two major parties, Pheu Thai (which supported former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra) and the Democrat Party. The Palang Pracharat Party (which supported General Prayut Chan-o-cha) also participated, as well as several new parties, which mostly campaigned on a pro or anti-military government stance (Wikipedia, 2019).

The elections were held using a new mixed-member apportionment system, in which voters cast a single vote for both a constituency candidate and a nationwide party list, with the nationwide list used as leveling seats to achieve proportional representation. Under the new constitution, the prime minister need not be an elected member of the House, and is chosen by the full Parliament, which also includes 250 members of the Senate rather than only members of the House as was the case previously.

During the election period, social media emerged as a surprising and effective tool in the political sphere. With social media, politicians were able to share visions, political stances, values, ideas, and policies to gain support from voters through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. The use of social media in the 2019 elections illustrated the fast-growing power of social media platforms compared to the last general election in 2011 (Pornwasin, 2019). There were approximately 7.4 million first-time voters eligible to go to the polls in the March 2019 election, which accounted for more than 10 percent of the electorate (Petersen, 2019). Hence, the party that made the best use of social media was likely to increase their chances of winning the election (Pornwasin, 2019).

According to the election results, most of the political parties that targeted voters by using social media received high scores. This indicates that social media had a significant influence on people's decision to vote, and this was especially the case with the new Future Forward party, which was led by new, young politicians. The election results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. National Election Results of the Top Five Political Parties

Political Party	Popular Vote	Representatives	Facebook Likes ⁷
Palang Pracharat (PPRP)	8,441,274	116	137,466
Pheu Thai	7,881,006	136	458,795
Future Forward	6,330,617	81	722,906
Democrat	3,959,358	53	754,421
Phumjaithai	3,734,459	51	86,755

Source: The Election Commission of Thailand

As shown in Table 2, the five political parties that received the highest number of votes in the March 24, 2019 election were Palang Pracharat (8,441,274 popular votes and 116 seats in the House of

⁷ As of October 1, 2019.

Representatives), the Pheu Thai Party (7,881,006 popular votes and 136 seats), the Future Forward Party (6,330,617 popular votes and 81 seats), the Democrat Party (3,959,358 popular votes and 53 seats), and Phumjaitai (3,734,459 votes and 51 seats), respectively (Election Commission of Thailand, 2019).

Utilization of Social Media by Political Parties

The Palang Pracharat Party (PPRP)

The Palang Pracharat Party is a new political party established in 2018 just a few months before the election. During the election campaign, the PPRP used social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and LINE to support the policies of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, leader of the ruling military junta and incumbent Prime Minister whose bid for continued leadership the party backed. On the party's policy page, they listed populist policies such as "taste, shop, and use for free" that have been shown to attract the support of voters.

The Pheu Thai Party

In the March 2019 election, the Pheu Thai Party used Facebook as its main social media platform to connect with wider internet users. The party leader, candidates, and assistants used social media to inform internet users about the party's strategies, policies, and laws to address national problems. The candidates used Facebook by posting the locations and dates on which they intended to hold events.

The party's social media strategy was to encourage grassroots Thais and young people to vote in the election by publicizing policies that addressed social problems, especially in relation to political and economic issues. The Pheu Thai party's Facebook page got 459,315 likes and 497,356 followers.⁸ Facebook served as a very convenient mechanism for the party to contact voters.

The Future Forward Party

The Future Forward Party is one of the new progressive political parties in Thailand. The party used social media as a key part of its strategy to reach out to voters, especially the younger generation (Petersen, 2019). During the election campaign, the party made its political debut under the powerful leadership of millionaire businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit with a strong stance against the military government. This helped the party use social media effectively to attract young voters (Pornwasin, 2019).

The Future Forward Party was found to be the most active user of social media to spread its messages and policies to the public, with more than 722,906 likes on Facebook.⁹ As a result, the party came in third in terms of its support ranking, attracting 6,330,617 popular votes and winning 81 seats in

⁸ As of October 14, 2019.

⁹ Future Forward party Facebook page. (2019).

the election (Election Commission, 2019). Party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit also used his personal Facebook page, Twitter, and Instagram accounts to attract voters. His Facebook page received more than 1 million likes and had 1.1 million followers.¹⁰

The Parliament and Social Media

In addition to political parties, the Parliament also used social media to present debates and government discussions to public audiences by using Facebook Live. One of the most popular Facebook Live parliament debates was the national budget discussion held in the Thai Parliament on October 19, 2019.

Parliament used Facebook Live to enable people to follow the discussion on the 3.3 billion baht national budget plan.¹¹ This illustrates that Facebook Live encourages public participation because people can watch the parliamentary debates and national budget discussion online, and they can easily access information about budget spending, laws, regulations, and policies. The public can also criticize projects launched by the government. As a result, social media can be an oversight mechanism for strengthening the transparency of the government and the state authorities.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Social Media for Thai Democracy

Advantages of Social Media

Firstly, social media is an essential media channel in every period of a political campaign. Political parties can reach their target voters via social media. With social media, politicians can easily share news, political activities, and policies with the voters and get instant feedback, enabling them to improve their policies, marketing strategies, and political campaigns to gain greater support in elections. At the same time, social media is an effective channel for people to monitor candidates and political parties during election campaigns and afterwards when a party gets into power (Bromfield, 2019). Thus, social media is a public sphere where people can access various sources of information, interact with other users, and encourage people to participate in politics (Chareonwongsak, 2007). Social media helps in enhancing digital equity, promotes checks and balances, good governance, and political transparency, and supports human rights. The Thai parliament has also created an internet platform called “Parliament Hackathon,” which aims to encourage members of the Thai public to participate in political activities.

In addition, both Thai leaders and opposition politicians use their Facebook accounts to communicate with targeted voters. For example the “Thaicufah” Facebook page presents the government’s work and policies, including details of the PM’s activities and the cabinet diary. The president of the Parliament, Chuan Leekpai, also has a personal Facebook account that he uses to share his political activities on

¹⁰ As of October 14, 2019.

¹¹ There were 164,780 likes on the Facebook page of Parliament as of October 22, 2019.

social media. The opposition leader, the Thai Parliament and other politicians also use social media to gain support from the public. Thus, in Thailand, social media is a tool for political parties and politicians to interact with voters in the community.

Second, civil society groups and organizations also use social media as an online campaigning platform to empower the people. For example, in Thailand approximately 800,000 people enrolled on the website Change.org to encourage the National Anti-Corruption Commission to check and investigate the Election Commission of Thailand for transparency shortly after the announcement of the election results. Change.org is a nonprofit organization and the advantage of this platform is that people can support online engagement without going out to protest on the street. Moreover, a campaign on Change.org can protect people from fake news by making open data available and letting people decide for themselves what they agree and disagree with (Change.org, 2019). Finally, social media creates change in Thai politics because it induces a greater number of people to engage in political activity, and it can be used to monitor the government's activities.

Disadvantages of Social Media

Social media can be used as a weapon by key influencers, moderate influencers, and minor influencers to discriminate, propagate misinformation, and destroy political opponents. Misinformation and fake news spread through social media can also mobilize people by encouraging specific groups to come out and protest specific events, such as laws, policies, and opposition parties. Social media is a channel for the proliferation of fake news.

Further, social media can be used for cyberbullying, as it allows offenders to mask their identities behind a computer. Cyberbullying results in public humiliation and occasional violence because people can be victims of mean or hurtful comments posted online as well as rumors circulated online and via cell phone text messaging (Resende, n.d.).

Measures to Cope with Fake News

Laws and Regulations

In Thailand, the government has passed laws and regulations to address fake news. For example, the Computer Crime Act (2007), the Cyber Security Act (2019), and the Personal Information Protection Act (2019) aim to protect people from internet and human rights abuses.

The Organic Act on the Election of Members of the House of Representatives B.E. 2560 (2019) aims to control and limit the use of social media by political parties while monitoring for posts that “spread lies, slander candidates, or use rude language” including all other violations (Tanakasempipat, 2019). The rules also include penalties for sharing or “liking” defamatory content or spreading “false information.”

Administrative Measures

ThaiCERT or the Computer Security Incident Response Team (CSIRT) for Thailand (2000) has placed an emphasis on increasing cybersecurity in the country by establishing the Cyber Security Operations Center (CSOC) in order to monitor and respond to cyber threats. The center posts warnings on websites and smartphones, and sends emails to the public. This is part of its “threat arrangement process,” which operates according to the National Institute of Standards and Technology of the United States by using the four functions of preparation, detection and analysis, containment, and post-incident activity (ThaiCERT, 2018). Moreover, it provides an official point of contact for dealing with computer security incidents in the Thai internet community.

After the election, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society launched an “Anti-fake News Center” to fight against fake news. The center cooperates with partners such as the Department of Special Investigation, the Department of Intellectual Property, the Internal Security Operations Command, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Technology Crime Suppression Division (Kornvika, 2019). The aim of the Anti-fake News Center is to provide a mechanism that protect people from fake news. The Anti-fake News Center functions both online and offline, similar to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) in the United States. The Center also has a web application and a website to fight against fake news. In addition, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society cooperates with social media networks such as Facebook, LINE, and Google and smartphone companies to run public workshops aimed towards engaging people to work together in fighting against fake news. The four major areas of concern on which the Anti-fake News Center focuses are disasters, the economy, illegal products and services, and government policies, including threats to national security (Kraivichit, 2019).

While the government claims to be counteracting fake news, there are debates and concerns that it could use social media campaigning restrictions as well as laws and regulations intended to address the proliferation of fake news to limit freedom of expression and citizen’s rights to access information, including press freedom. These regulations also affect the ability of political parties to run political campaigns and disadvantage the smaller political parties in spreading their messages during the election period, thus limiting their chances of winning an election.

To illustrate these problems, we can look at the Computer Crime Act (CCA), the enforcement of which could be used to obstruct freedom of speech and freedom of expression in the online community, because the state authorities can claim to use the Act to protect citizens from illegal posts and sharing on social media. The Election Commission law has the power to impact the freedom of political parties to run political campaigns because if a political party disobeys the regulations, it can be dissolved and candidates can be jailed or disqualified from politics. Thus, by threatening to prosecute internet users for criticizing the government, the government is creating fear and invoking self-censorship among citizens (Funk, 2019), which means that freedom of expression in Thailand is still limited, even though the 2017 Constitution of Thailand specifically protects the rights and freedoms of the people to express their views or opinions provided that in doing so they do not create a threat to national security (Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media has the potential to play a considerable role in enhancing democratization in Thailand because it increases accessibility to information and provides an open public space for people to communicate with each other. It encourages the younger generation to vote and promotes a higher voter turnout. It also provides an opportunity for people to speak the truth, compared to the older media forms that could not offer two-way communication. Moreover, people can use social media to bring up the topics they want to discuss (Naewna, 2019). Political parties also make considerable use of social media to attract Thai voters, as illustrated by the Future Forward party's effective use of a variety of social media platforms to attract the younger generation of voters.

Thus, social media has changed the political communication landscape in Thailand from one centered on face-to-face political interaction to one primarily occurring via online communication platforms. Most political parties now use social media to disseminate information and reach targeted groups in efforts to win elections. Social media is not only a new means of political campaigning, it is also used by civil society to fight against fake news. Social media has helped increase the younger generation's interest in politics and has led to a greater level of engagement in political activity, including oversight of Parliament and government activities. However, social media can be also used as a weapon to spread fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, and for cyberbullying.

The proliferation of fake news has led to severe political conflicts in Thailand, and has affected the level of trust in government. This is because it is perceived that the government cannot control the widespread and overwhelming dissemination of messages and information on social media. In its attempts to address this situation, the government has enacted new laws and regulations, including administrative measures, to fight against fake news. Examples include the Computer Crime Act (2007), the Cyber Security Act (2019), the Personal Information Protection Act (2019), and the Election Commission law and regulations (2019). Other measures include the establishment of the Royal Thai police's Technology Crime Suppression Division (TCSO) and the Anti-fake News Center (2019) launched by the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society after the 2019 election.

Important steps to cope with fake news can be taken by implementing relevant policies and mechanisms to reduce its effect. There should be the promotion of digital and media literacy skills to protect people from misinformation and fake news. Greater media literacy will help people strengthen critical thinking skills and develop the ability to analyze and evaluate information, which can build "immunity" among the Thai people against fake news and misinformation. The schools should be able to demonstrate and teach students about appropriate behavior online. This should include cyberbullying prevention to reduce its impact and prevalence. Civic education is also needed, and the student curriculum should be improved.

The government and public authorities should promote ethics in sectors such as the media, political parties, and among politicians to encourage them to post appropriate content on social media. Civil society should also fight against fake news and promote online security. There should be risk management policies to prevent the negative impacts of fake news on social media. Political parties, the

media, and the public need to be encouraged to post more useful content on social media. This will lead to the sharing of ideas, solutions, and innovations that will improve life in Thai society.

The government and civil society can support social media in empowering citizens by amending laws and regulations to strengthen the rights of the people. Moreover, the decentralization of local government also needed in order to strengthen political participation in the local communities. Lastly, open data will allow people to use social media to monitor the government's work and political activity. This could help people cope with fake news and misinformation effectively as well.

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Country Case 10: Bangladesh

The Role of Social Media in Governance

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Introduction

Governance is the process of decision making and decision implementation. It indicates how institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources. Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries that struggles with natural disasters, political unrest, chronic corruption, lack of justice, and inequality. A weak democratic environment and the absence of strong opposition or the presence of a non-active opposition party in parliament, as well as a highly polarized society, further reinforce the adverse effects on governance indices. In this situation, citizens are actively using social media to increase awareness and responsiveness among the public as well as the government.

Social media is an internet-based participatory medium, hub, or platform that generates opportunities for users to participate, collaborate, create, and exchange content comprising information, opinions, and interests while establishing identity, connectivity, and relationships in a many-to-many manner (Khan, 2017).

Social media is a web-based technology which creates interactive dialogue among a wider community across the globe. The increased availability and rapid spread of internet access in different countries have been accompanied by the development of social media platforms, especially Facebook. As a social interactive tool, social media has a high potential to bring about changes in the socio-political arena. It also creates a scope to increase opportunities for citizens to participate actively in socio-political discussion and opens new horizons for the public to actively participate in social change. It is evident that the masses in Bangladesh use social media quite often to organize protests and proactively play an activist role to fight social and political problems. They also use social media to report or address mismanagement and corruption issues to put pressure on the government. The number of people using social media to protest is increasing daily, and nowadays millions of people interact with each other through social media to discuss social issues, politics, business, education, entertainment, and personal issues.

In this research study, the term “social media” is used to denote Facebook because statistics show that 96 percent of social media users in Bangladesh are active users of Facebook (2020). This report focuses on exploring the role of social media in shaping governance, the perceptions of users, and its

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effects on different governance indicators using different incident-based instances to establish a research hypothesis.

Background of the Study

Social media comprises web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate, and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination. These tools become “social” in the sense that they enable users to share and communicate with one another (Bohler-Muller & Van der Marwe, 2011). This includes social networking sites, blogs, microblogs, video blogs, discussion forums, and others.

Zavattaro and Sementelli (2014) illustrate that social media has had a significant impact on government since 2011, when the Arab Spring began, which also created a changing relationship between governments and their citizens. Mishaal and Shanab (2015) cited different scholars like Mergel, Mossberger, and Picazo to illustrate that the popularity of social media and its characteristics allow citizens and different stakeholders to obtain the information they need to become more closely acquainted with government activities.

In Bangladesh, the most visited social media site is Facebook, which has the highest number of users of any social media platform in the country followed by blogs, Twitter, and Instagram. Different statistics reveal the scenario concerning the use of the internet and various social networking sites. Every study indicates an increasing trend of internet and social media use. According to the Bangladesh government telecommunication authority (2019), about 93 million people, or 57.2 percent of the Bangladeshi population, are active internet users, and about 34 million or 20 percent of the population are active social media users. Among those social media users, 96.1 percent are users of Facebook, 1.6 percent use Twitter, and the rest use other social media platforms.

It is widely known from corruption and other governance indicators that Bangladesh is facing multiple and diverse governance challenges. Although Bangladesh is known as a country with a parliamentary system, for more than a decade the parliament session has run in absence of the major opposition party of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Consequently, opposition parties have become inactive or effectively unable to play an active role in holding the government accountable or ensuring good governance.

Governance in Bangladesh has been ranked near the middle by most international surveys for the last two decades. The country’s score on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) changed for the better, increasing from 17 points in 2005 to 26 points in 2016 out of a total of 100 points, with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean (Transparency International, 2016). However, Bangladesh’s rankings have trended downward in other governance areas in recent years. The Worldwide Governance Index (WGI) by the World Bank assessed the country’s Government Effectiveness at 21.6 percent in 2014, a big fall from 39 percent in 1998. Similarly, the Voice and Accountability score was 33 percent in 2014 compared to 45.2 percent in 1998. Political stability has also been disrupted; the WGI ranked Bangladesh 16.2 percent

in 2014 for Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism compared to 29.5 percent in 1998.

Historically, the media has most frequently been shaped and used by those in power or elite groups to maintain their positions of power. A fundamental question is whether the role of social media is actually different from that of mainstream media or whether social media influences governance and whether it influences or challenges the existing socio-political structure when opposition political parties are dysfunctional or inactive.

In this context, citizens are more likely to search for alternative sources via which to vent their opinions or stresses related to any sort of poor governance. As a result, citizens become dependent on social media and it perhaps plays a vital role in flagging different irregularities or mismanagement within both government and non-government machineries. Social media empowers individuals to raise their voice against any kind of injustice, discrimination, or violation of rights or entitlements. Social media organizes citizens to challenge various socio-political issues and empowers individuals to express their views and reactions, which may improve their human rights situations. Social media allows citizens to influence public debate and public opinion, and provides a chance for government machineries to tackle urgent issues.

Information Socialization

Both simple and complex information socialization has the potential to occur through the incorporation of social media channels into government websites or the creation of official government social media pages. Such channels provide information on services, events, and rules and regulations in the governance structure and process. They also provide a channel through which citizens can seek support and services from the government.

Participation in Political and Civic Processes

The internet, mobile phones, and other forms of “liberation technology” generate an enabling environment for citizens of different strata to express opinions, give feedback, and mobilize protests that increase public participation together with accountability of the government. Moreover, social media has the potential to foment transformative change in the governance structure. Social media plays an important role in global environmental activism and communications. It is used to share information and news, connect associated organizations, prepare documents, report on issues, and mobilize activists and supporters to initiate campaigns across the globe in an effort to hold organizations accountable.

Generating Space for Transparency and Accountability

Social media is depicted as a tool of empowerment in that regardless of their gender or ethnic identity, individuals can overcome the digital divide. Social media allows anyone to raise their voice against

different forms of rights violations and violations of fundamental freedom wherever they are, and that in turn makes it more likely to improve the overall human rights situation in certain contexts. Consequently, social media plays a role in improving transparency and accountability. By and large, social media has an impact on governance as it ensures citizen engagement in political economy communication as well as reporting and mapping different issues in society, which may increase pressure on government machineries to respond.

In Bangladesh, there has been very limited or no research undertaken to understand the relationship between social media and governance issues. UNESCAP (n.d.) stated that good governance includes the participation of civil society in decision making, institutionalizing rule of law, anti-corruption transparency, accountability, poverty reduction, and human rights. Therefore, it is evident that democratization is the nucleus of good governance and it is important to understand which factors are influential in order to improve governance in the current global context.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to understand the role of social media, especially Facebook, in strengthening the governance situation in Bangladesh with a particular focus on the following:

- Understanding user perceptions, including those of key civil society stakeholders, of social media (Facebook) concerning its impact on governance issues in Bangladesh
- Exploring the challenges and opportunities of social media use for the discussion of governance issues
- Understanding to what extent citizens are able use social media freely to create pressure on the government or engage in activism
- Seeing how parliamentarians or government officials use social media to connect themselves with citizens
 - Understanding the explicit impact of social media on the governance situation in Bangladesh

Methodology of the Study

As an exploratory study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in this research to gain better insights into the current scenario and an in-depth understanding of public perceptions and impacts. Samples were drawn by using stratified random sampling methods and a questionnaire survey was performed. A total of 100 university graduates studying for their master's degree or higher who were social media users (students and professional groups) were interviewed. Respondents were selected from urban areas, especially Dhaka. Individual users were the unit of analysis for several findings.

Existing literature, newspapers, and Facebook posts were reviewed to gain a greater understanding of social media and governance issues. A questionnaire survey was adopted to understand the perceptions of social media users. We also conducted in-depth individual interviews with different occupational groups and key informant interviews in order to expand our understanding of the issues and explore underlying

causes and effects of social media. These interviews allowed the research team to analyze the data concerning challenges as well as opportunities encountered by social media users and their impact on governance. The research team held informal discussions and also conducted group discussions with academics, government officials, and politicians to explore their thoughts and perceptions of social media and governance. However, a checklist was developed to keep the interviews and discussions on track. Finally, several impact cases (both negative and positive) wherein the Facebook content of the users had an impact on governance issues were reviewed to understand the holistic scenario in relation to the study objectives.

Limitations of the Study

The survey findings were generated from a small sample size. However, qualitative discussions with different groups brought the linkage between social media and governance to light. This research clearly reflects the need to conduct a longitudinal research study equipped with mixed methods with a representative sample size covering people from all walks of society. Thus, this study had several limitations. Firstly, the primary data was collected from a small number of social media users in an urban setting and the survey was unable to cover all occupational strata across the country due to the COVID situation. Social media users in urban settings are less likely to feel comfortable discussing challenges they have faced. Time constraints and the COVID situation were other limitations which prevented us from increasing the number of social media users surveyed. The sample selection was not scientific enough to make any recommendations or draw broad conclusions.

Social Media Users and Perceptions

Social Media and its Wider Uses in Bangladesh

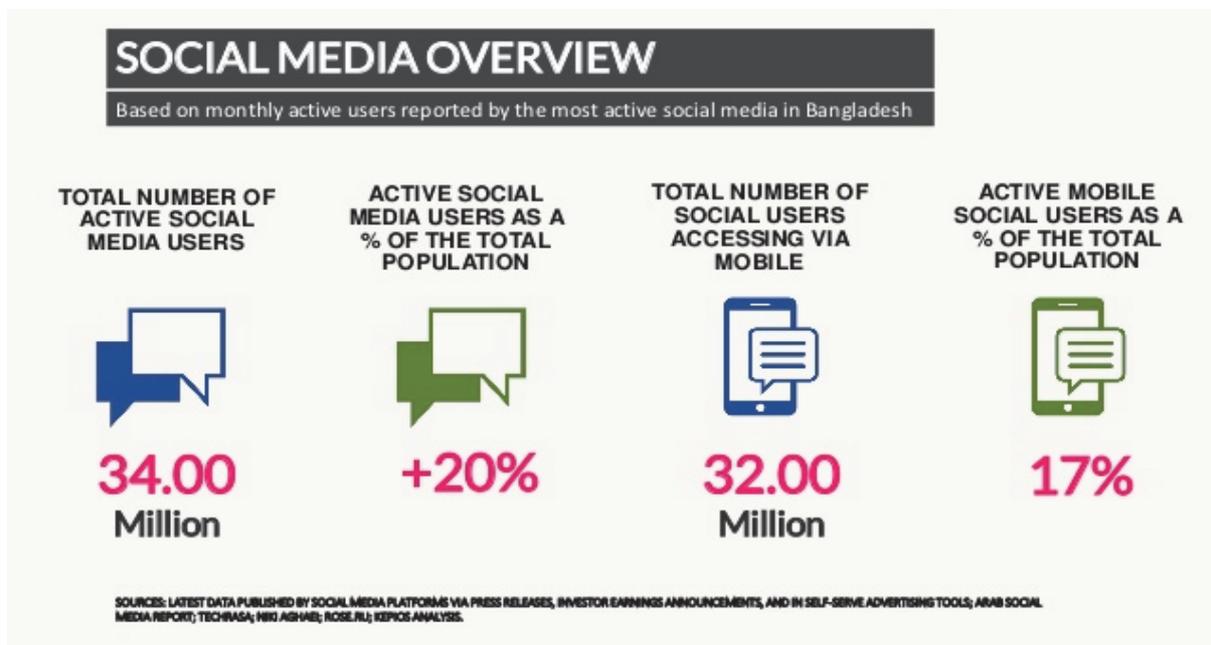
According to the Internet Service Provider's Association of Bangladesh (2018), 88 Gbps of the country's total 436 Gbps bandwidth is used for Facebook. Social Media Stats (2020) claims that nearly 92 percent of social media users in Bangladesh are active users of Facebook. This makes it appear as though there is a Facebook craze throughout Bangladesh, but least 65 percent of users are from the capital city of Dhaka. Most Facebook users across the country are youths aged between 18 and 34. Nowadays, Facebook is a more effective way to reach people than mainstream media, as people are always active on Facebook.

Figure 1. Percentage of Social Media Users by Platform



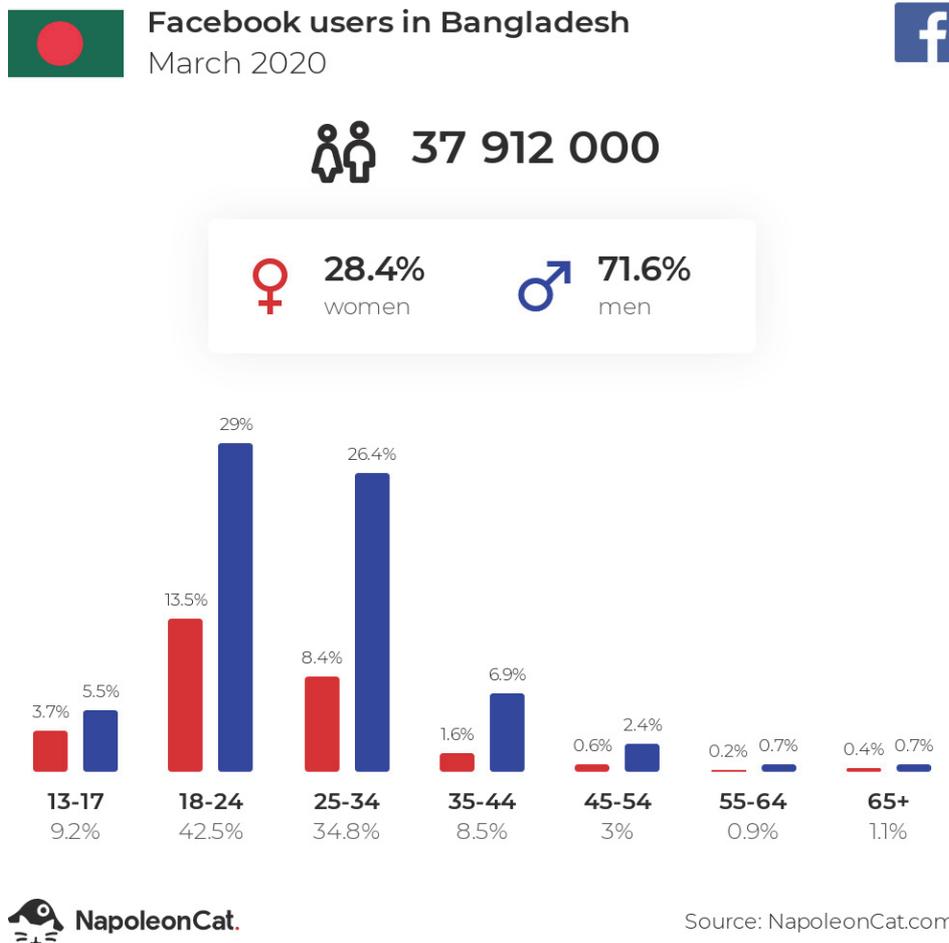
The Financial Express (2018) cited the Digital Report 2018 jointly created by We Are Social and Hootsuite, which showed that 18 percent of the country’s population were active users of social media, and 94 percent of these accessed social media, especially Facebook, on their mobile phone devices. The report also revealed that there were 30 million monthly active Facebook users in Bangladesh. The number of users is growing so fast that in 2019, active social media users comprised 20 percent of the total population, or 34 million people total.

Figure 2. Social Media User Overview



NapoleonCat (2019), which performs social media analytics among other services, also found that 33.7 million use Facebook. The majority (73.8 percent) of users are male. Nearly 78 percent of the users are between 18 and 34 years old.

Figure 3. Facebook Users by Age Group



Our study found that 90 percent of internet users in Dhaka city (students and professionals) are frequent users of social media. Students spend more time on social media, with a daily average of two to three hours. Discussion with the students revealed that they don't have many options for how to spend their leisure time. As a result, youths are more likely to spend time on social media, in particular on Facebook. Redowan, a private university student, said, *“We do not have anything to do when we have free time. For that, we spend time on Facebook. We can discuss various issues ranging from personal to social problems on Facebook. We can protest if any incident occurs.”*

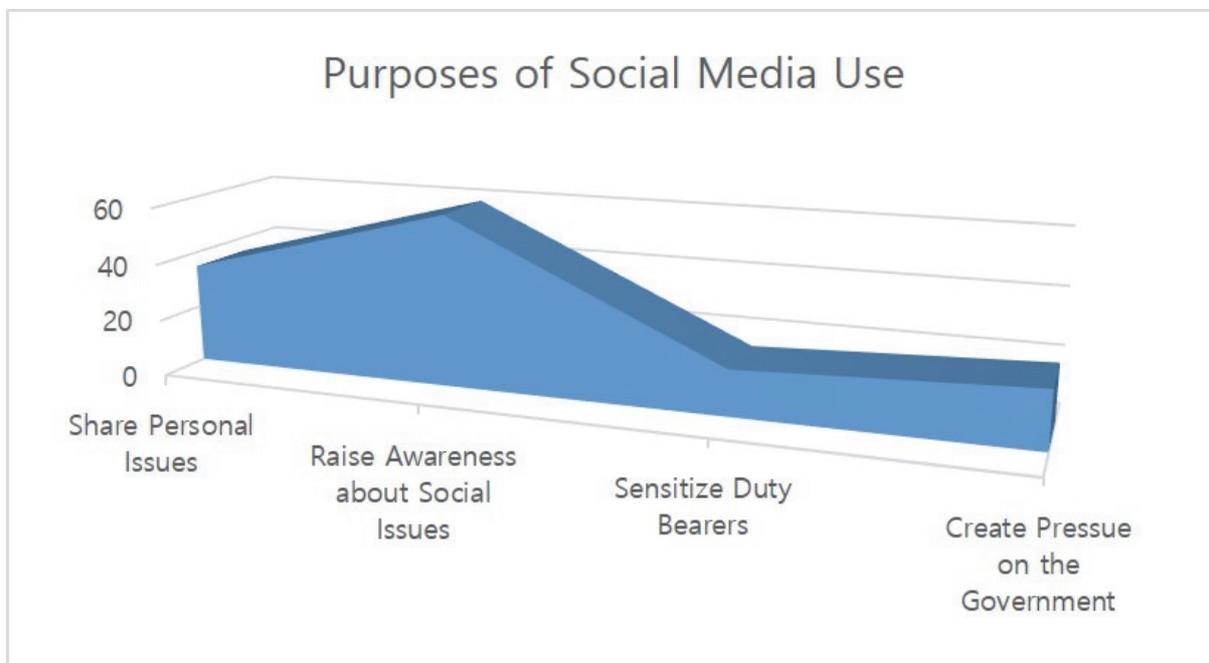
Social Media as a Citizen Platform: Public Perceptions

Ordinary people and activist groups remain active on Facebook, and a significant number of Facebook-based groups which actively participate in Bangladesh's social and political issues have emerged. A review of the discussion and content of the Facebook posts of ordinary people suggests that people usually use social media to discuss personal and social issues, and their posts or shared items reflect their thoughts and intentions. However, people also occasionally actively participate in political discussions on social media platforms, especially when a major news story breaks. This mostly happens

when the issue is related to the public interest, which could be governance-related irregularities, a scam, or some kind of success story.

Our study findings revealed that social media users in Dhaka mainly use Facebook to raise awareness about social issues. Specifically, 60 percent of users claimed that they use social media to raise awareness about different social issues, 35 percent of respondents indicated that they talk about personal issues, and 25 percent said they engage in religious discussions. Just 5 percent said that they used social media for political discussions (multiple answers were allowed). In our discussions with professionals, it was apparent that most of them are less likely to feel comfortable discussing or sharing information about political issues or concerns freely on Facebook.

Figure 4. Purposes of Social Media Use



There have been incidents of harassment by law enforcement agencies due to political discussions or criticism against government decisions. The professionals we interviewed said, “*We have become afraid to discuss any political issues or to criticize the government’s decisions or actions on Facebook.*” But discussants also admitted that Facebook has at least created the opportunity to have political debates or discussions, though the extent of such discussions and debates is limited. Our discussion participants said that while nowadays no other alternative paths to discuss political issues are evident, at least Facebook is there. The enactment of the ICT Act has become a serious concern for social media users, especially those who actively take part in political debates or discussions.

Twenty percent of users said that they use social media to a create minimum level of pressure on the government. Our group discussions revealed that there are currently no politically organized groups to place pressure on the government, which has made social media platforms and particularly Facebook the main alternative platform for ordinary people. Group discussants also claimed that sometimes this platform has a huge impact on different issues and produces results.

Social Media Influence on Governance in the Bangladesh Context

Social media influences governance in various ways, and this may enhance opportunities for political participation, transparency, accountability, and internal governance. There have been many occasions where it was evident that the pressure from social media accelerated the impetus to take the right steps against negative incidents and corruption. The key strength of social media is its ability to develop interactive connectivity between a government and its citizens. This study has attempted to understand this impact from group discussions and an analysis of social media content. We found that different types of influences on governance indicators were apparent, such as increased public participation or active citizenship, transparency, accountability, and responses from institutions and the government. The major influences that we identified are as follows.

Influences on the Human Rights Situation

Bangladesh is one of the signatory states to the UDHR and ICCPR. However, violations of human rights and fundamental rights are a common phenomenon, and violent behaviors and religious extremism are also spreading. The powerful are able to avoid punishment after committing crimes and there is a culture of impunity. In 2016, Freedom House gave the rights situation in Bangladesh 49 points out of 100 with a downward trend due to a series of murders, enforced disappearances, attacks on minorities, crossfire deaths, violence against women and girls, attacks by Islamic militants, increasing restrictions on press freedom, and other such incidents.

Our study findings suggest that people in Bangladesh are very active on Facebook when it comes to protesting against any form of violence. In many cases, Facebook users are able to place a huge amount of pressure on law enforcement agencies, ruling party politicians, and the local power structure. About 70 percent of users interviewed claimed that they had shared or posted about at least one instance of violence or injustice on Facebook within the last three months. Sixty-five percent of users thought that administrative and law enforcement agencies pay additional attention to cases that go viral on Facebook and that victims are more likely to see justice. When a post goes viral it draws the attention of the mainstream media. Ultimately, this becomes a source of pressure on the authorities. Discussion with social media users revealed that just one positive result from their social issue sharing encouraged them to share more stories about violence or injustices on Facebook.

Due to the pressure from social media users, it was possible to ensure justice in response to a list of incidents of violence or corruption. The authorities felt pressure from the masses and even the top-level leadership responded. The administrative and law enforcement agencies keep track of the public mood, and higher political authorities place pressure on administrative and law enforcement agencies to take immediate action.

For instance, in 2015, a movement called “No VAT on Education” was started. This movement was organized by private university students. The government had imposed a 10 percent VAT on private university tuition fees. A huge protest from private university students was started using Facebook’s platform. Students organized themselves and came out to protest against the VAT issue, winning

undisputed, unanimous support from the public. At last, the government withdrew their decision and cancelled the 10 percent VAT on tuition fees. Several university students interviewed agreed that the success of the “No VAT on Education” movement would not have been possible without this Facebook activism. “We got immense support from wider community.”

This was not a one-shot game—it continued. Such activism seems to be a remedy for different types of irregularities. Whether it is a case of violence against women or road safety, it has become clear that social media-based activists directly or indirectly question governance failures or irregularities. In April 2019, Nusrat, a student at a madrasa (Islamic school), lodged a sexual harassment complaint to the police against the principal of the madrasa. A group of the principal’s supporters set the student who had complained on fire, and within a week Nusrat was dead due to the severity of her burns. Newspapers covered the story, but local administrative and law enforcement agencies tried to distort the case. Despite their efforts, the news went viral on Facebook, and a huge protest and appeal was launched by an uncountable number of social media users. Consequently, the government and high-ranking police officials started to handle the issue. Local police officials were suspended and all 16 criminals were arrested. The Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal took the case seriously and all 16 criminals were sentenced to death in a fast track trial.

One successful case becomes an inspiration for other cases. It is possible to post video clips as evidence using anonymous IDs. At the same time, the number of smartphone users is growing. Such activism can easily be run through a cheap smart device. However, surfing popular blogs, pages, and individual accounts clearly reveals that rural Facebook users don’t bother to take part in such activism through comments, likes, or other reactions. Let us look at another case.

Very recently (October 2019), an undergraduate engineering student at a renowned university in the capital city of Dhaka was brutally killed in his dormitory by several leaders of the ruling party’s student wing. Within a few hours, his killing had gone viral on social media. A huge online-based protest happened and students organized themselves. Students started protesting in the streets and demanded that the killers be expelled from university. People across all occupational groups supported the student protest and repeated demands for justice. As a result, law enforcement held the killers in different corners of the country and the ruling party Awami League expelled them from their political party.

Influence on the Transparency and Accountability of Duty Bearers

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in its Digital Bangladesh initiative. As of March 2019, the internet had reached 93 million people, of which 87 million were mobile internet users, and e-commerce and online transactions have been progressing quickly. In Bangladesh, ICT is used in education and health services. E-Governance is also expanding—central public procurement uses an online process, and government forms and applications can be processed online. All of the local government institutions, around 6,000 units, will soon be connected to a national server. Nearly 5,000 Union digital centers have been established that allow people to use their services through digital devices. Another key focus of the government is the capacity building of duty bearers and grassroots citizens so that transparency and

accountability is ensured in selected public sectors, and ordinary people can speak up and demand their entitlements. Facebook activists also played a vital role in bringing about these changes.

Influence on Strengthening Public Institutions

Strengthening public institutions and access to services provided by these institutions is a key concern of the Bangladeshi public. Accordingly, this study tried to examine selected public institutions with a core emphasis on citizen engagement through the use of social media. This may ensure effective public service delivery, i.e. health, education, agriculture, road maintenance, social security, conservation, water supply, and other local government services.

This study has attempted to understand the strengthening of public institutions through three major parameters in response to social media pressure. Those parameters are a) to what extent duty bearers, e.g. public institutions, fulfill their obligations towards rights holders; b) to what extent right holders, i.e. people, have space to express their needs or make themselves heard; and c) whether the mechanisms, rules, regulations, and overall systems are people-oriented and able to engage the public in the development process.

In our discussions with the duty bearers, we found that government officials feel embarrassed when Facebook posts about irregularities go viral. Our discussion with social media users found that they want to share posts about issues that affect their daily lives. Most of the time users share such posts when the mainstream media makes an issue public. Otherwise, most social media users simply follow a few social media activists.

For instance, Barrister Syed Suman, a popular social media activist and government prosecutor, maintains a Facebook page where he publicly uploads and posts contemporary social and corruption issues. More than 2.4 million social media users follow his page and share these posts to create a protest wave and raise awareness among the public and different relevant stakeholders. The government has taken several steps in response to Barrister Suman's live sharing of different problems or irregularities at hospitals, educational institutions, construction sites, and police stations. In addition to Barrister Suman, there are now a good number of social media activists who have become popular and have a huge number of followers on their posts related to issues of public interest, including governance.

Creating a Culture of Accountability, Transparency, and People-oriented, Demand-driven Service Institutions

Through in-depth discussions with professional groups, this study has explored how social media is able to make significant changes concerning the accountability and transparency perspectives of service institutions. To a certain extent, a culture of accountability has developed among government service providers. Different institutions demonstrate a positive attitude towards the community as they invite the community to attend different events and allow them to participate in local-level decisions. Social media has made significant changes in people's thought processes and their bargaining power with service providing stakeholders. It has contributed to an increase in people's understanding about their rights, how to claim those rights, and their bargaining capabilities. On the other hand, social media is also able to

influence officials at service providing institutions to recognize the importance of building a better relationship with the public so that people can benefit from their institutions. Overall, these changes have ultimately enhanced the image and acceptability of service institutions and also gradually started to erase their negative images.

Bangladesh has also enacted a Right to Information Act. This has also encouraged public institutions to disclose information directly on their websites in an effort to engage in the proactive disclosure of information. Our discussions with different professional groups also revealed that changes are now evident in the attitudes and behaviors of service providers due to mass mobilization through social media. Now they are more or less responsible for providing services to the public and are more accountable.

Influence on Policy

Bangladesh is facing a critical juncture because of the absence of the main opposition party, the BNP, in parliament and the absence of strong, active protest from any opposition party in parliament or on the streets. A result of this absence is that the government considers social media the people's voice through which they can address policies or practices. For instance, a huge protest erupted demanding road safety and security after a school girl was run over by a public bus in Dhaka. After that incident, school and college students instantly organized a series of protest events, and citizens protested against that accident and sought punitive punishment for the perpetrator. Ordinary people hugely supported those events by sharing them through Facebook and even came out to the streets to encourage their children. A good number of people were apprehended by law enforcement agencies, including globally renowned photographer Shahidul Alam. At last, due to enormous pressure from the public, the government of Bangladesh changed the existing policy. These protests took place on social media and in the streets in August 2018. As a result, the Motor Vehicle Ordinance 1983 was canceled by the government and a new law, the Road Transport Act 2018, was enacted to ensure greater public safety and security.

Disinformation in Social Media and its Effects in Bangladesh

The extensive use of social media across the country by different socio-political and cultural groups is the critical factor that generates information as well as disinformation as everyone has different norms, values, beliefs, and political backgrounds. Due to the varying aims and socio-political backgrounds of Bangladesh's social media user base, the potential for information distortion is quite high. Moreover, the people of Bangladesh are politically divided into two strong groups. Over the past few years, it has been a repeated occurrence for a movement to coalesce due to the sharing of information and then to fail due to the sharing of disinformation related to those movements. Disinformation is primarily used to disband social movements, defame the reputation of individuals, and create or exacerbate communal conflict.

In our discussions with different professional groups, respondents stated that although Bangladesh is overall an example of communal harmony, a few secret communal groups continuously use social media to spread hate speech and try to motivate people to act against religious minorities. Their hatred, however, is more political than religious. A very minor section of people was against the independence of

Bangladesh and fought against the freedom fighters during the liberation war against Pakistan in 1971. This anti-liberation force historically plays a key role in transmitting hatred and disinformation to create communal conflicts. Several local political and economic issues are also associated with such heinous disinformation. In most cases, the hidden agenda behind the disinformation is not disclosed to the public. The Dhaka Tribune, an online newspaper, reported that the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) cyber unit in Bangladesh identified around 2,500 Facebook pages trying to create communal hatred in Bangladesh by spreading hate speech and disinformation (2017). Security forces say these posts have led to communal attacks such as the recent torching of Hindu residences in Thakurpara village in Rangpur, and warn that they are also being used by militant organizations to recruit members. The authorities have put a lot of effort into preventing the spread of hate speech and disinformation on social networking sites such as Facebook. The problem is so acute that the CTTC said that if they shut one page down, three more pages pop up. Nevertheless, the government is very keen to handle those fanatic groups, and law enforcement officials always give top priority to dealing with any disinformation or hate speech on social media which may create communal violence.

In recent years, several violence incidents have taken place where Facebook disinformation and hate speech played an important role. A number of violent clashes in Bangladesh happened due to rumors and fake news spread through Facebook and resulted in the deaths of innocent people. In October 2019, it emerged that a Hindu man had written a derogatory post on Facebook about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It was quickly shared by locals, and hundreds of Muslims came to the streets in the town of Borhanuddin in the Bohla district of Bangladesh to protest against the derogatory Facebook post that was allegedly written by a Hindu man. Clashes ensued between protesters and police and the mob quickly spiraled out of control, causing the deaths of four people. After some investigation, the police said that the Facebook account of the Hindu youth had been hacked and that the hackers had been working to form a clash between the two communities.

In June 2019, another rumor spread on Facebook that children were being kidnapped and sacrificed as offerings for the construction of a bridge, and consequently people began looking for the kidnapper. Agitated mobs in Bangladesh beat several people on the street to death after suspecting them of being kidnappers. The rumor spread all over Bangladesh, and ultimately law enforcement agencies took stern action against agitated groups of people in different areas.

Since the beginning of 2020, COVID-related disinformation has been widely shared on social media. In the initial days of the pandemic, different types of distorted information related to COVID confused the public. These included such statements as COVID-19 is a Chinese virus lethal for countries with cold weather, meaning countries like Bangladesh would remain safe from this virus due to its hot, wet, and humid tropical climate. More interestingly, some fallacies included religious fabrications. Religious groups started sharing posts saying that Muslims would not be affected by the virus. For the Hindus, the remedy prescribed on social media was drinking cow urine. False suggestions about preventative measures and healing methods also went viral. Human minds are more driven by such misinformation or misleading information than logical scientific information. People confined to their homes during this pandemic have shared every audio clip they come across that contains medical or behavioral advice, spreading such clips

across social media rapidly. The public is more likely to rely on such information without doing any fact checking. As a result, the spread of fake news has already confused and misguided the public and worsened the COVID-19 situation in Bangladesh. The aftermath has seen an average of 3,000 new infections per day during the last two months, and this number is continuing to climb.

Challenges of Social Media

Social media is an open, popular, and widely accepted tool via which people of all ages and economic or political status can vent their thoughts, beliefs, and ideology. Citizens usually discuss problems related to the ethical issues which emerge from malfunctioning institutions, society, and local or geopolitics. Different types of challenges arise for both platforms and their users. Several challenges identified by this research are as follows.

- Hate speech or distorted information cause confusion among platform users. This happens more frequently in politically polarized societies like Bangladesh.
- Freedom of expression is another feature people enjoy through social media, but often a good number of citizens become polarized or abusive and misuse social media for political purposes.
- A section of the public uses social media platforms to promote their own self-interest and increase or spread hatred. They use social media and intentionally expose negative information about their opponent groups, sometimes with the intent to defame, which results in wider public mistrust of the information that is available on social media platforms.
- Some people mock even important social, political, and economic issues. Therefore, on many occasions, serious discussions or debates over these issues fail. Sometimes political factions engage with these problems and purposely mock or disparage attempts to address the issues in an effort to make movements fail.
- Secular discussion is very challenging as several fundamentalist religious groups are highly active on social media. They create super waves through their ally groups, and these groups are very organized. Sometimes, secular discussants are even harassed or attacked (physically or verbally) by the fundamentalist groups.
- Social media is used, in some cases, to spread religious hatred and extremism and in many cases, it is the primary source of rumors and confusion. Youths tend to use advanced technology and digital spaces to a greater extent than older generations to challenge existing social values and norms. Some youths become radicalized and reverse their ideas and notions to impede the social progress and openness of society.
- Social media is used to spread hatred among different social subgroups, which is a big obstacle to the creation of cohesion in society.
- Bangladesh's Right to Information Act allows citizens to demand information from the government or non-government organizations, which is an empowerment tool for citizens. However, the sharing of sensitive local or regional political issues may lead to maltreatment from the higher state

authorities or the ruling political party.

- Section 57 of the ICT Act of Bangladesh punishes citizens for posting fake news, obscene content, or disinformation which can disrupt law and order or hurt religious sentiments on an electronic platform. Convictions under the law are punishable with imprisonment for up to 14 years and fines of up to 10 million Bangladeshi Taka (equivalent to approximately 118,000 USD). Recently, law enforcement agencies have begun using this law against activists and journalists who post sensitive information against the government or state. This law has been widely criticized by journalists, authors, and activists over the years.

Conclusion

This study tried to understand the role of social media, especially Facebook, in various governance issues. The study clearly shows the growth of the internet and social media users creating changes in the socio-political arena. Social media has allowed the public to increasingly address and deal with both local and country-wide socio-political problems. Social media continues to reveal structural problems associated with marginalized, suppressed, and oppressed peoples and create mass awareness among the wider community while sensitizing duty bearers.

Despite its demerits like the ability to spread disinformation or be misused, social media, without a doubt, is contributing to the positive creation of institutional norms and culture. This is playing a significant role in making the duty bearers responsive and accountable to the citizens of Bangladesh. In neo-normal life, the role of social media will be more crucial as compared to the recent past. It will obviously be a driving factor in re-shaping governance mechanisms in the coming days.

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Country Case 11: India

Social Media Influence on Electoral Democracy: A Perspective from India

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Participatory Research in Asia &
Digital Empowerment Foundation

Introduction

The idea of democracy stemmed from the ideal of holding people in power accountable and expecting “rule by the people” in the form of a commitment to serve the citizens. Historically, the idea of direct participatory democracy developed in ancient Greece, characterized by a system in which major decisions were made by citizens constituting the assembly. Citizen-centric participation was considered the ideal form of democracy, as in effect, this meant people rule themselves (Srinivasan, 2008). Although the model of participatory democracy was considered ideal, growing populations rendered such a model irrational, and in its stead the representative model of democracy was adopted throughout the world. Political theorists such as Rousseau & May (2002) remarked that representative democracies where the government is chosen through popular elections do not give freedom to individuals to participate actively, directly, and continuously. In India, direct democracy has been associated with the *Gram Sabha*⁴ level, but at the macro level, representatives provide the means to participate by establishing a link between the government and the citizens. However, for proponents of representative democracy, social media has become a possible solution that is first used as a medium by candidates to engage directly with the electorate and which secondly works as an alternative solution to attract more deliberation with two-way engagement. Trevor Smith (2017) terms this “web-enabled democracy” where a range of platforms have given the represented and the representatives a way to connect with each other. Similarly, Macpherson (1977) put forth that the real potential of placing politics online is, in a way, reviving the council system of participation. Specifically, the nature of participation on social media not only provides an ease of time and space, but more uniquely reduces the emotional strain of political participation (Smith, 2017).

An ideal democratic discourse would revolve around dynamic citizen participation in the form of

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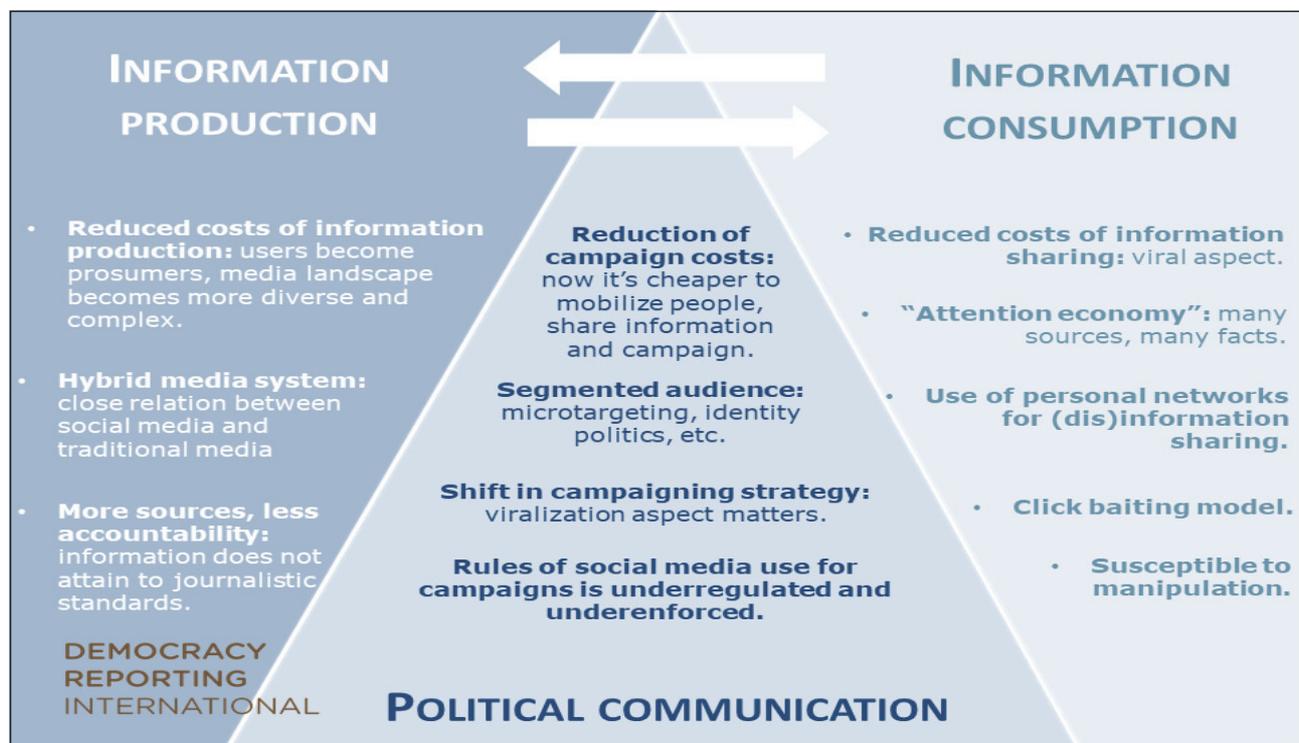
³ Director, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

⁴ Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) is a participatory forum in the villages as mandated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment or Part IX of the Indian Constitution. The development plans prepared by the Gram Panchayats (local governance institutions) are discussed, approved, and monitored in the Gram Sabha. All of the electorates in a Gram Panchayat are members of the Gram Sabha.

discussing issues, directly participating in areas that allow direct decision making, and even voting in elections. The imagination behind a healthy democracy therefore subsists on citizens as active participants and not as just mere recipients of information. Political communication on social media is one such practice that is responsible for generating and disseminating information. Political communication operates downwards from the state to the citizens, horizontally in linkages between political actors, and upwards from citizens to the governing institutions (Norris, 2001).

Social media as the new media⁵ for political communication has been studied by various scholars (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Norris, 2001). Walter Lippman’s (1922) fundamental work on *Public Opinion* centered around the belief that propaganda-based public discourse could control public opinion. He further argued that given the complexity of the issues faced by citizens in a modern democratic society, it was unreasonable to expect an individual to meaningfully inform themselves and contribute as an aware citizen. A quantitative study done by Paul Lazarsfeld (1940) seemed most relevant to evaluate the effectiveness of media (created by propaganda) on voting behavior (public opinion). This was further explored by Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (2009) two-way communication theory, where opinion leaders first receive messages from mass media, and then these opinion leaders interpret and pass this information on to the public. Therefore, the link between social media and elections revolves around the field of political communication and the resultant political discourse created by opinion leaders.

Figure 1. Indicating Information Production and Consumption on Social Media



Note: Reprinted from “Graphics on Monitoring Social Media in Elections” by Democracy Reporting International Organization, (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://democracy-reporting.org/country/social-media-and-democracy>

⁵ New media, differentiated from old media (newspapers, magazines, television), refers to an interactive form of digital media that entails two-way communication. Communication taking place on social media is also considered utilization of new media as it includes active production of content and information. It further is associated with social networks and virtual communities among others.

In India, political debates revolve around the puzzle of “politics of recognition” (Ruparelia, 2008). Demonstrating identities based on caste, language, and religion thus forms a dominant part of the political discourse and discusses the ways in which the state can accommodate various minority groups and identities. In this drive, in an increasing digitally networked democratic society, the traditional forms of social and political mobilization and recognition of social and minority groups are now gradually shifting towards online mobilization. One example of this is a study by Arvind Kumar Thakur (2019) describing online mobilization among Dalits⁶ as a part of the counternarrative from the physical to the digital space.

India being a multi-party system⁷ debates on equality, justice, and secularism among other tenets entrenched in Indian politics. These form the basis of exchange for arguments which are addressed by the elected representatives as a response to this homegrown public discourse. Political communication within this cultural and socio-political context has experienced a paradigmatic shift in the last decade. The recent 2019 general election in India was termed to be contested within a paradigm defined by digital consumption. Researchers observed that approximately half the voting population had access to digital technologies, and one-third had access to social media (Mehta, 2019). In the past decade, India had the “second highest smartphone penetration in the world” (Canalys, 2019). The availability of cheap internet data led to a widespread adoption of digital technologies, but also altered political communication between the political leaders and the citizens. Rao (2019) opines that the 2014 general elections made political actors realize that social media was a game changer. Further, Rao (2019) states that with political parties jumping to hop on the social media bandwagon, political communication in India has never been this fragmented, energetic, chaotic, inclusive, and polarizing. Social media strategies used for campaigns online to maximize electoral gains, gain feedback on policy discussions, or for the promotion of major legislative reform not only inform the netizens⁸ online but also have an effect in the offline world through the circulation of news between new and old media.

Objectives and Research Questions

Scholars have assessed the ways in which social media is used by politicians and political parties for electoral gains and governance. The other major contribution to the study of understanding the role of social media in democracy is the extensive research conducted after the incidents of the Iranian elections in 2009, the Arab Spring in 2011, and the Occupy Wall Street movement, all of which represented dissent. However, most of the studies have been conducted in the context of “highly wired and economically developed” societies and there is a need to explore the established “difficult democracies” (Ahmed, Jaidka & Cho, 2016). There exists a dearth of research on the role of social media in political campaigns and elections in developing countries characterized by uneven internet access yet having a

⁶ The scheduled caste known as Dalits means the oppressed caste.

⁷ The multi-party system in India includes national and regional parties. According to the latest figures, the total number of parties registered with the Election Commission of India is 2,599 with eight national parties (INC, BJP, BSP, CPI, CPI-M, NCP, AITC, NPP). This includes 53 state-level parties and 2,538 unrecognized parties.

⁸ Active participant and user of the internet.

“high-tech urban hub of educated and employed internet users” (Ahmed et al., 2016). This propels our interest into mapping the response to social media campaigns and tools used to gather electoral support in India. Significantly, it also opens an opportunity to discuss the ways in which regulations, ethical codes, and policies can be designed to manage the downsides of social media by adopting a multi-stakeholder approach. The paper acknowledges the proxies regarding the influence of social media on political participation but also goes beyond to comprehend certain challenges posed to policy makers and social media companies in steering political communication. Broadly, the attempt is to inquire further into the following research questions.

Primary Research Question

What is the role of social media in the electoral processes as used by various political parties and political leadership?

Secondary Research Questions

How do political figures (incumbent and opposition) use social media platforms to engage with the public? How is social media shaping the face of the democratic discourse in India? What policies and regulatory practices are required to tackle the downside of misinformation and fake news on social media?

Methodology

There is an ongoing attempt to deploy an appropriate method and a holistic approach to measure democracy. Internationally, the World Value Survey conducted in 1981 was the fundamental research project which employed the survey method to monitor public opinion and its effects on democracy. Following the survey method, other democracy-related projects and democracy barometers⁹ have been developed to measure the quality of democracy in the past such as the Afro Barometer, the New Russia Barometer, and the Latino Barometer among others. India has been included in the Asian Barometer Survey¹⁰ which covers topics ranging from economic conditions to political participation. India has also been included in the Democracy Index,¹¹ where it is currently ranked 51st and categorized as a “flawed democracy,” which has free and fair elections but also faces issues such as infringement on media freedom. India has also been included within the Variety of Democracy project (V-Dem), which is based on five high-level principles of democracy: electoral, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and liberal.

While the traditional method of collecting data through sample surveys remains fundamental to obtain

⁹ These are instruments to measure the quality of established democracies based on indicators such as freedom, control, and equality. They do not define whether a country is a democracy or not, but compare the quality of different established democracies.

¹⁰ Comparative barometer survey comprising 18 states and territories.

¹¹ The Democracy Index is compiled by a UK-based company, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), for 167 countries. It is based on major indicators, measuring pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture.

standardized information, it can also suffer from certain biases and may not be promising enough to provide objective measurement to understand broad attitudes. Lutz and Toit (2014) opine that social media provides an important source where one can analyze “opinion-rich” data. Short messages, tweets, likes, images, blogs, and others need not replace the traditional research methods, but could complement the data collected by surveys. For instance, data collected by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) under the program Lokniti includes various India-related surveys based on democratic politics and elections, and is often cited with other qualitative methods to compliment the analysis.

This study involves content analysis of primary data gathered by taking screengrabs of political communication by political figures and parties online. It uses tweets collected through “Twitonomy,”¹² a data collection and analytics tool. Twitter was specifically chosen as the platform for analysis as Twitter emerged as the first battleground for the parliamentary elections fought online in India. Ahmed et al. (2016) opine that Twitter’s usage as a campaign tool was the “country’s first experiment” in social media campaigning. It provides a unique interactional space with prompt dialogue, and unlike other platforms, Twitter is specifically known for providing a space for political discussion. Through “trending news” or a tweet from a political personality, Twitter is a source for journalists to decide what specific stories have to be run on television. Daniyal (2019) states that despite the Twitter numbers being small in India as compared with other platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, Twitter has managed to gain an inordinate political focus and is uniquely influential. While digital impact is not the sole factor influencing elections in India, Twitter Inc. worked closely with politicians in the 2014 general elections and observed how media firms and mobile companies partnered to distribute tweets offline (Kalra, 2014). The majority of political research is based on data gathered from Twitter, as the planning and execution of any political campaign has become a “norm” on this platform (Ahmed et al., 2016). While the 2014 general elections marked the start of India earning a name in the international milieu through the success of the Bhartiya Jana Party (hereafter, BJP) and its social media presence, this research will focus on a descriptive analysis of this “space” from the period between 2015 and 2019.

This urge to make one’s presence visible through trending features also encourages Twitter users to grapple with different forms of speech making as part of political communication on social media. Keeping Twitter as the main source of data, this paper will attempt to map the growing influence of all political parties and representatives on the platform and will provide a glimpse of features such as the “hashtags” which are seriously monitored by the IT cell¹³ of each political party. In addition, this article will descriptively discuss the changing nature and theorization of old and new media used for political communication in India. Lastly, the paper also contributes to an understanding of the ethical lows of fake news and misinformation. While many studies contribute to this issue, the present research will discuss the newer challenges and policy actions taken to regulate content online.

Apart from primary screengrabs, this qualitative study will also majorly rely on secondary data

¹² Visit- <https://www.twitonomy.com/>

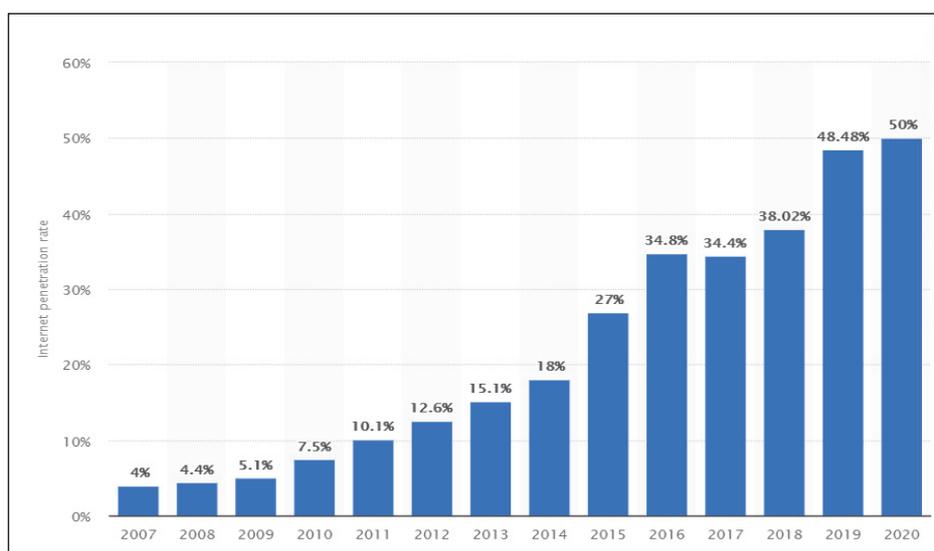
¹³ Political parties make use of their IT cells to strategize and implement their social media propaganda. These cells often wage propaganda wars on social media platforms and focus particularly on creating and circulating content near elections. Overall, these cells manage a party’s social media posts and website.

sources such as government orders, think tank reports, academic articles, and newspaper editorials.

The Indian Internet Ecosystem

India is called the “next center frontier of the internet” (Iyengar, 2018). With 451 million active monthly users, India stands next to only China, occupying second place in terms of internet users per a report by the IAMAI (Mandavia, 2019). The overall internet penetration in India experienced a spike of 50 percent between 2007 and 2020. Further, the share of the population accessing social networks in India is expected to jump from 24 percent in 2018 to 31 percent by the year 2023 (Statista, 2020). Lokniti’s recent report on “Social Media and Political Behavior” (2019)¹⁴ indicated that a major part of social media exposure occurs through smartphones. Data shows that the share of social media users who access platforms via smartphones has increased from one fourth to one third in the last two years. The report also suggested that currently only one third of the electorate in the country is exposed to social media, while the remaining two thirds do not use any social media platforms. It also notes that unlike 2014, where only one national party dominated the social media front, other parties in the opposition have now made extensive use of social media to gain popularity and support (Lokniti, 2019). The report concludes that the social media space is no longer just an “innocent space” in which to connect with people—rather it is becoming influential in creating a space for political activity and polarized conversations (Lokniti, 2019).

Figure 2. Internet Penetration Rate in India from 2007-2020



Source: Statista, 2020

The Indian internet ecosystem comprises a regulatory design situated within the legislative framework of the Information Technology Act of 2000. This statutory law stipulates fundamental rights like freedom

¹⁴ The collaborative report between the Lokniti program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung analyzes maps and the growth of apps and social networking sites in India. It was conducted to assess the role of digital media in shaping attitudes and preferences in the 2019 general election.

of speech and expression (mostly Article 19 in the context of regulating content), the right to equality, and others. The Department of Telecommunications (DOT) is the body that issues licenses to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on behalf of the Central Government (The Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, Section 4). The Indian internet ecosystem faces a dilemma in that most content service providers fall outside the jurisdictional control of the Indian license regime and may not comply with Indian constitutional rights and principles. In such a scenario, the state relies on the expertise of non-state actors (the internet giants) to regulate content. Theorized by many scholars, such as Hancher & Moran (1998), such a phenomenon has been described as blurring the line between the regulator and the “regulatee.” As a result, in the Indian context, social media platforms have time and again been subjected to questions about the spread of fake news, the use of bots (automatically enabled accounts), and the dissemination of misinformation with an army of commentators. Certainly, this is having wider ramifications in terms of keeping intact the essence and fundamentals of Indian democracy at a time when every citizen and voter is “empowered” or “disempowered” by the power of social media.

Assessing the Interface of Netizens on Social Media

Use of Social Media by Political Leaders and Political Parties in India

In the West, following the 2004 US elections, scholars argued that the Obama and McCain campaigns provided a watershed moment for modern political communication on social media. To confront a decline in citizen participation and interest, political parties in western democracies took the route of connecting with voters on new media, such as Twitter, which has been used to “revive” their relationship with citizens (Coleman & Blumer, 2009).

In India, the need to create a support base on new media emerged from the realization that youths were actively engaged in the use of social media. One of the first Indian politicians to use social media, the current Prime Minister of India, understood the importance of garnering support from the youth in elections. He managed to gain the support he sought by reaching out to the youth through social media. Breaking away from the old patterns of traditional media, the Prime Minister announced his win via Twitter on the @narendramodi account for his more than 5 million followers. Grasping the technological bent of voters, he took the exercise further by using tweets as a tool with the hashtag #selfiewithmodi on Twitter. Jaffrelot (2015) argued that this phenomenon of crafting a strategy to become a technology-savvy leader and transforming India on the basis of information technology is “high-tech populism.” Since the elections, the Prime Minister’s social media strategy has included taking advantage of two-way communication on the platform by trying to involve citizens through direct dialogue. For instance, the figure below depicting the Prime Minister’s invite to the citizens of India to share their input for a momentous day is not only symptomatic of including the voices of citizens but also suggestive of a participatory form of democracy.

Narendra Modi’s deliberate Twitter strategy has been captured by Ralph Schroeder (2018) in his book *Social Theory after the Internet*. He dedicates a brief analysis of changing media systems by

studying China, India, and Sweden’s media systems and politics online. Schroeder (2018) categorizes Modi as the “high tech icon” in his study. His analysis of Narendra Modi indicates a difference from other leaders. He opines that Modi, unlike others, has used Twitter to communicate and engage with ordinary members of his own BJP party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in addition to ordinary citizens. Studies have also shown that his social media team operated a media campaign outside the party that was run by the American advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather.

Figure 3. A Screenshot of Narendra Modi's Online Invite Asking for Input on his Independence Day Speech



Source: Twitter, July 19, 2019.

Even after the elections, Modi used Twitter and Facebook to engage in direct contact with people by maintaining a “near total lack of contact” with old media such as news channels (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015). However, as shown in the figure below, traditional news channels such as Republic and ABP News on Twitter retweeted Narendra Modi’s tweets to update news online.

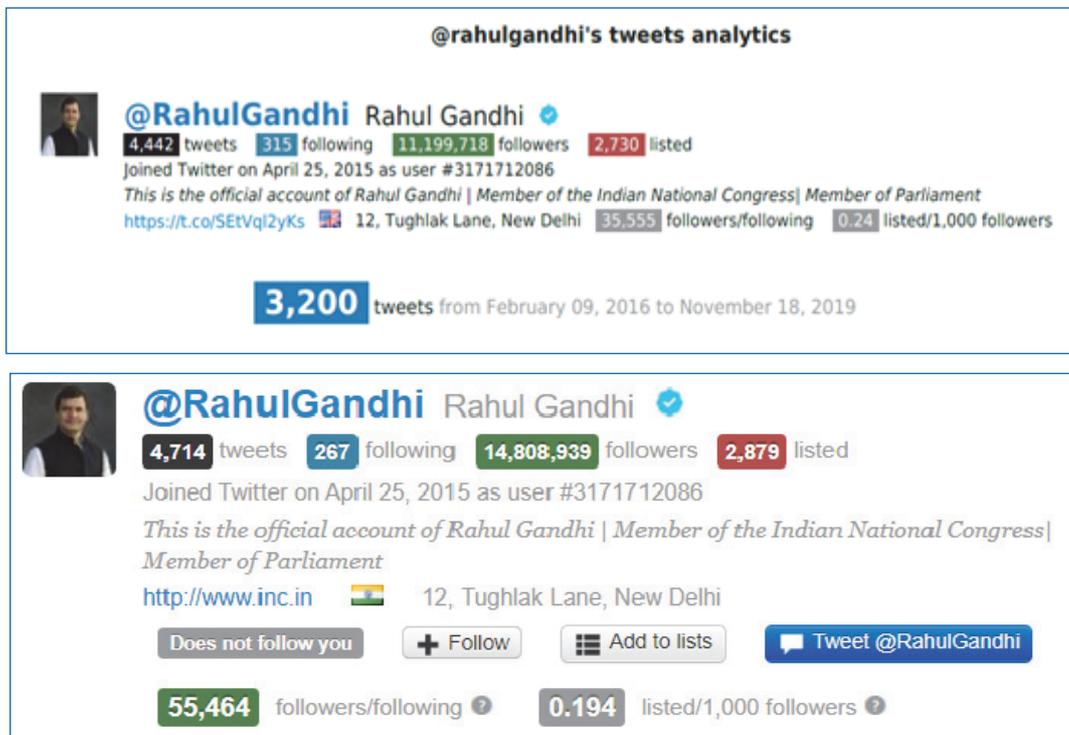
Other political leaders have also attempted to utilize social media platforms to make their media activity noticeable. Research suggests that even though the BJP occupied most of the public’s attention in the first half of the decade, other political parties such as the Indian National Congress (hereafter, INC) have also gained attention from the wider public on social media, weakening the BJP presence online. The former INC president Rahul Gandhi, who was slow in joining the medium, sped up the implementation of his social media strategies to gain a significant number of followers after 2015 (Lokniti, 2019).

Figure 4. Old Media Channels Retweeting Narendra Modi's Post to Gain Followers, Ranked in Order of Popularity from 2015-2019



Source: Twitter (Accessed on July 20, 2019)

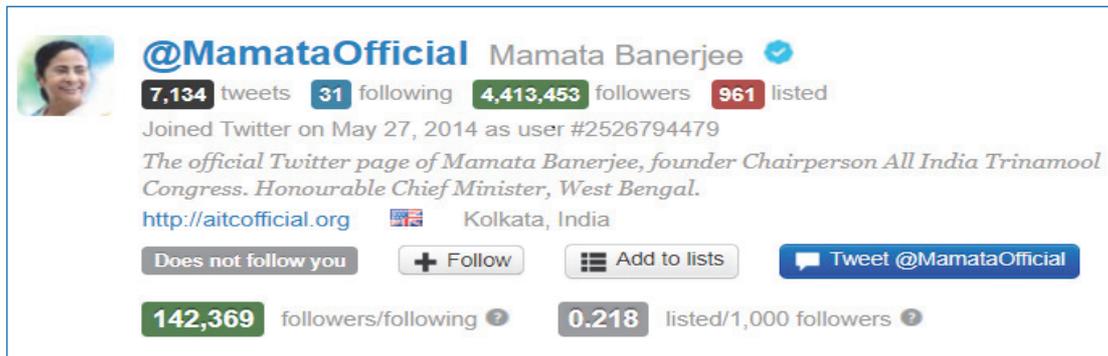
Figure 5. A Steady Increase in the Number of Rahul Gandhi's Followers, Surpassing 14 Million Followers after 2015



Source: Twitonomy (Accessed on July 20, 2019)

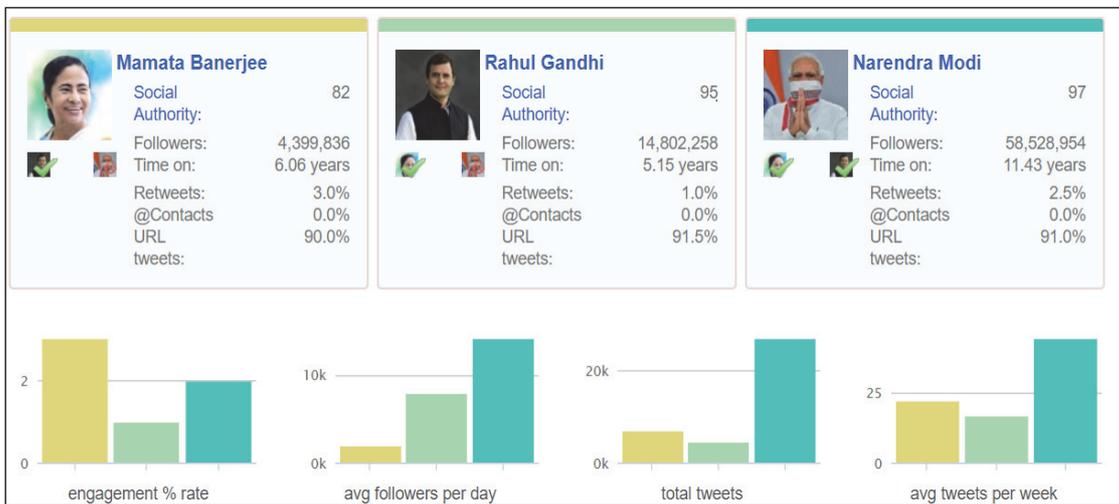
The above examples of national-level political leaders represent the faces of their respective parties. Leadership may have been dispersed throughout social networks, but it has at the same time been individualized by creating a public association of a party with one face during elections. A significant example of this can be understood through an analysis of the popularity of Mamata Banerjee on Twitter. Following BJP's Narendra Modi and INC's Rahul Gandhi, the All India Trinamool Congress (hereafter, AITC) founder and West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has the third largest number of followers among the eight national party leaders.

Figure 6. Mamata Banerjee's 4.4 Million Followers on Twitter



Source: Twitter (Accessed November 20, 2019)

Figure 7. A Comparison of the Engagement Rate, Average New Followers Per Day, Number of Tweets, and Average New Followers Per Week for Mamata Banerjee, Rahul Gandhi, and Narendra Modi



Source: Twitonomy (Accessed November 20, 2019)

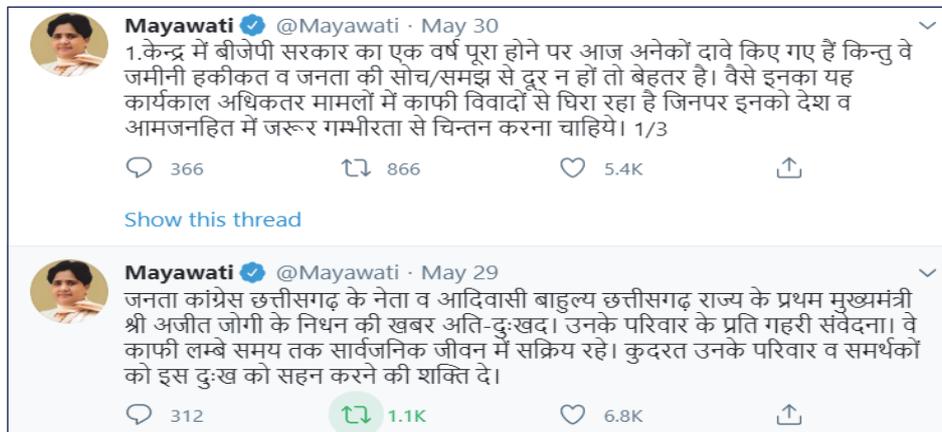
During the Lok Sabha 2019 elections in India, both Rahul Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee claimed to be fighting against the right-wing BJP. Despite their defeat, the coalition was seen as momentous. In a news article titled “From Rahul Gandhi to Mamata Banerjee: Shaken opposition leaders rant on Twitter” (TeamMyNation, May 20, 2019), these leaders used Twitter to express their resentment towards the exit poll results and asked for the other opposition parties to raise their voice against the BJP leadership.

While the three most popular national leaders have managed to represent their parties in this space, Mayawati, President of the Bahujan Samaj Party (hereafter, BSP) is the fourth most popular national party leader with 1.1 million followers on Twitter. This party believes in uplifting the lower caste groups in India, referred to as the *Bahujan Samaj*. The party enjoys the support of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and other religious minorities. It has been observed that the BSP, despite being one of the main national political parties in India, does not have a verified account¹⁵ on Twitter unlike the other national parties. However, as the face of the party,

¹⁵ A verified account on Twitter shows that an account of public interest is authentic. This is not an endorsement, but allows users to distinguish between the real and fake accounts with the same name.

Mayawati not only enjoys popularity with a large number of followers but chooses to communicate with them in Hindi.¹⁶

Figure 8. Mayawati's Twitter Account with her Posts in Hindi



Source: Twitter (Accessed on November 24, 2019)

In India, the Dalit and other lower castes are constantly fighting on various fronts against substantial inequalities, such as the ascribed¹⁷ roles which contribute to their economic and educational backwardness. The BSP leader has chosen Hindi, a language more easily understood by the citizens in the north and central India, as her language of political communication to reach out to minorities on her Twitter page and to build a non-elite narrative. The Lokniti (2019) report proves that upper castes continue to dominate online social networks.

Significantly, national parties often occupy the social media space on various occasions apart from the charged environment nearing every election. However, the capture of the social media space by youth leaders has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Apart from student-led agitations and protests which are also read under activism, several young leaders have carved out spaces in mainstream politics and championed for the same ideal public discourse. With social media space still being “young” (Lokniti, 2019) as it is most regularly used by voters in the age group between 18 and 22, these leaders have enjoyed an unprecedented following on Twitter.

For instance, Hardik Patel, a member of the INC, led the historic Patidar¹⁸ reservation demonstration¹⁹ in July of 2015, demanding OBC status for the Patidar community. The movement faced strong opposition from OBC members in Gujarat, who rose in protest against granting status to the community. Hardik Patel continued to go on a “fast unto death” in 2018 and is known as the champion of the community. Active in organizing rallies in the state of Gujarat, as Hardik Patel built his agenda addressing severe unemployment, agrarian distress, and expensive education in the state, his massive rally support can also be seen in the number of followers he gained within such a short span of time.

¹⁶ Hindi, which has around 551 million speakers, is the most widely spoken language in India.

¹⁷ Ascribed role is a role that is given by society based on caste, gender, age, and community.

¹⁸ Patidar is an Indian caste founded in Gujarat, India.

¹⁹ The OBC status to the Patidar community would have given them official recognition in the social and educational domains.

Figure 9. The Increasing Popularity of Hardik Patel. Political Communications on Twitter Invoking Article 15, the Right to Equality in the Indian Constitution, with Calls and Updates on Frequent Rallies Conducted for the Cause



Source: Twitter (Accessed March 4, 2020)

Another notable young leader is Kanhaiya Kumar, a member of the Communist Party of India (hereafter, CPI) who apart from making his mark in mainstream national politics was also hailed as “Social Media’s New Hero” (Hebbar, 2016). With a whopping 2.2 million followers on Twitter, his fiery speech championing freedom of speech and expression in India has drawn renewed attention to the civil liberties and freedom guaranteed under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. Hebbar (2016) stated in her article that as the speech resonated with young netizens, Twitter as well as Facebook were flooded with slogans related to #azadi (meaning “freedom” in Hindi).

These young candidates in the Indian political realm have not only stood as competitive candidates in elections, but more crucially have championed for India’s political discourse. While their presence in mainstream politics has posed challenges to veteran leaders, their co-optation within the mainstream parties is deemed favorable due to their ability to garner the attention of citizens, particularly the youth who can relate better to their political communication on social media platforms. A stark example of this was witnessed in Bangalore, where Tejasvi Surya, a 28-year old MP from the BJP, won the election in

the Bangalore South Lok Sabha constituency. Aligning with the mainstream party ideology, Tejasvi Surya is also known for his social media presence and controversial remarks made in the recent past. He joined Twitter using the name Chowkidar in his handle, which is a reference to the adoption of the name by the face of the party Narendra Modi in response to charges of corruption against the BJP. With this name, Tejasvi Surya unapologetically declared his affiliation and took a stand (Figure 12).

Figure 10. Social Media's New Hero



Source: Huffington Post, 2016 (Accessed March 4, 2020)

Figure 11. A Rhetorical Tweet by Kanhaiya Kumar, Reaching Out to his Followers Using Hindi



Source: Twitter (Accessed March 4, 2020)

Addressed as the “young disruptors bringing an alternative brand of politics” (Chaudhary, 2019), these leaders shape their political communication by bringing it in line with their respective party ideology. They simultaneously reiterate the ideal political discourse revolving around the issues of education, employment, and values of social and economic equality which are entrenched in the constitutional imagination of India.

Figure 12. A Screengrab of Tejasvi Surya's Twitter Handle Chowkidar Tejasvi Surya

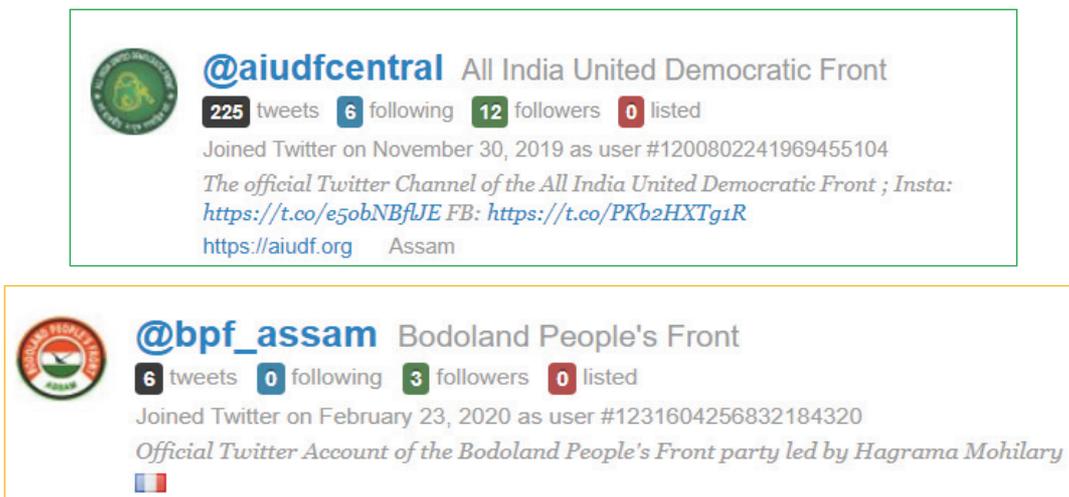


Source: Twitter (Accessed March 5, 2020)

While the reach of a leader is driven by both personality and party ideology, the influence of social media as a platform available for political communication has been unevenly grasped in the regions of India. The number of followers of different political parties varies in different regions. As the Lokniti report (2019, p. 16) reveals, the Eastern part of the country (which includes Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and rest of the Northeast) lags in social media usage as compared to the Southern, Northern, and Western parts of India. The survey shows that the other parts of the country have higher exposure to social media as compared to the Northeastern part of the country.

Another trend is the differentiation of regional and national political party presence online. A closer look at the presence of the regional political parties of Assam on Twitter illustrates this trend. For instance, while Assam has three major regional parties, two of them are an ally of the BJP, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People’s Front (BPF). The third major regional party, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), is a party in opposition to the other two. BPF recently joined Twitter in February 2020 (as shown in the screengrab below), while AGP was founded in 1985 and joined Twitter in August 2019. The principal opposition party AIUDF, founded in 2005, joined Twitter in November 2019.

Figure 13. A Screengrab Showing the Online Presence of Major Regional Parties in Assam



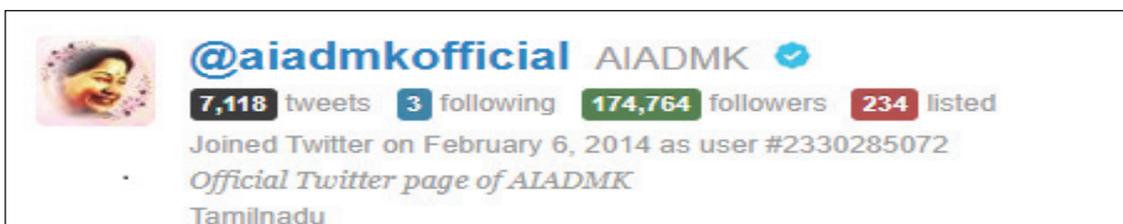


Source: Twitter (Accessed September 27, 2019)

The disconnect of the regional parties of Assam who joined Twitter later than others indicates that they joined the space to follow the trend rather than due to a need to mark their visibility on social media. Trends also show a relatively stronger presence of other regional parties of the Southern and the Western part of India on Twitter. The Lokniti report (2019, p. 17) suggests that South India, per the national-level survey conducted, registered the highest percentage of social media users. South India was followed closely by the North and the Western region constituting Gujarat, Goa, and Maharashtra, all of which showed a high usage of social media platforms.

In this present research, data shows that Shiv Sena, a regional party in Maharashtra, has the highest number of followers. All India Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK), a major regional party in Tamil Nadu, has the second highest number, followed by Akali Dal, a prominent regional political party in Punjab.

Figure 14. Twitter Accounts of Regional Parties from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab, which Have a Much Higher Number of Followers as Compared to Parties from Northeast India



Source: Twitter (Accessed September 27, 2019)

In relation to the data above, factors such as differing literacy rates and regional internet penetration are vital in contributing to the increased number of followers, but cannot be seen in isolation. In addition to these factors, the offline political campaigns aligned with online political efforts by political parties and leaders in the Western and Southern regions clearly demonstrate that these regional parties enjoy a greater number of followers on the platform. While the number of followers depict the popularity of a political leader or party, certain interactive features such as likes, dislikes, hashtags, and retweets enable easy participation and propel discussion by allowing users to register agreement and disagreement with personal or collective causes. More can be gathered from an analysis of the tools used on social media, such as the hashtag on Twitter, which is discussed in the following section.

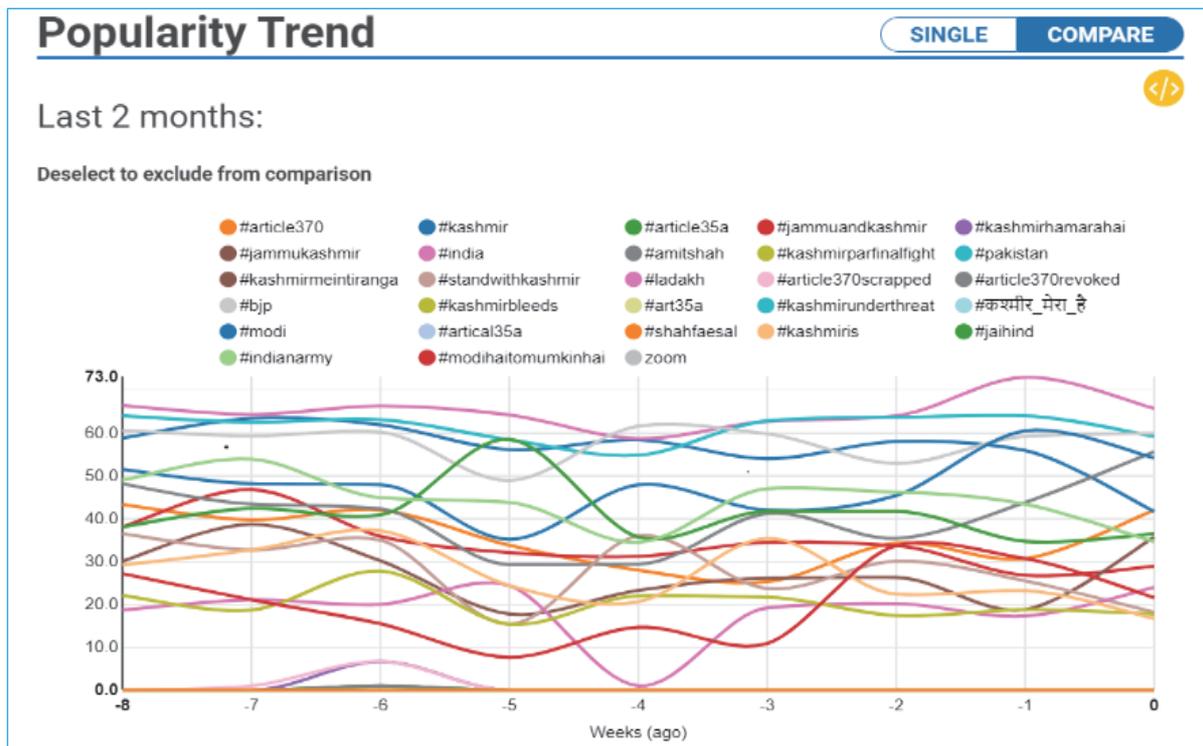
Polarizing Participation through Hashtag Activism

Hashtags (#) are seen as speedy and unstructured, yet they have a coordinating power on Twitter. As such, the hashtag has attracted considerable attention from practitioners, journalists, and researchers. Giglietto and Lee (2017) analyze the use of hashtags on Twitter and observe that hashtags were initially seen to facilitate aggregation of related information circulating on the platform. The use of the hashtag served not just as a “marker of the shared conversation,” but also led users to include them in their posts on Twitter if they wished to join an established discussion running on the platform (Bruns, 2011). Interestingly, as hashtags vary between being spontaneously organized to being well planned by content creators, hashtags are referred to as “ad hoc publics” that can depict concrete political results in an ongoing and inconclusive debate (Bruns and Burgess, 2015).

The use of hashtags on Twitter has gained special attention when it was done by political rivals occupying center stage. One example of this is #Chowkidaarchorhai, coined by Rahul Gandhi in response to BJP’s #Main bhi chowkidaar, which led to a hashtag battle online. Data revealed that during the campaign, the hashtag battle heated up, and the hashtag Main bhi Chowkidar was tweeted 3.2 million times on March 18, 2019, almost three times as often as Congress’s Chowkidar chor hai was used on Twitter (Sharma, 2019). Media in India reported the usage of hashtags such as *Modi hai toh mumkin hai*, *modi he aayega*, and others, stating that the huge “traction underscored public approval for a second term for the PM” (ibid). Hashtag activism has been used as an area of inquiry for researchers seeking to understand the sentiment and trends among social media users. In addition to being used to determine electoral support, such analysis is also used to sort opinions on issues affecting the political discourse.

Recently, the Indian government imposed a 170-day internet shutdown in the State of Jammu and Kashmir starting from August 4, 2019 as a “preventive measure” in the background of the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution (revoking special status to the State). This blanket internet shutdown in Kashmir would naturally lead one to expect a low online presence of people’s participation and representation on this decision in this region while enabling wider participation for rest of India. As shown in the figure below, Twitter data revealed that the hashtag #Article370 and all of the related hashtags depict a form of increased political participation in mainstream India which is characterized by an increased consciousness felt in contradiction to the dominant political party’s support to abrogation of Article 370 in erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir province, and consequent internet shut down in that region.

Figure 15. Popularity of #Article370 in November and December, 2019



Source: Twitter (Accessed on January 18, 2020)

This issue sparked debate amidst the imposition of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), which curtailed movement and gatherings in the region. Social media platforms experienced different narratives which were backed by the ideological battles that were fought over the issue. Hashtags such as #Kashmirbleeds depicted the protest against the government's decision, while hashtags such as #Kashmirmeintiranga and #modihaitohmumkinhai incited long-standing debates around the narrative of nationalism. #Pakistan, #Jaihind, and #indianarmy were also used in historical contestations on the issue. In addition, fake news incidents that fueled military retaliation between India and Pakistan and contributed to hostilities around the issue have maintained an online presence. (Bagri, 2019). Therefore, the dominant narrative flowing from the tweets for #Article370 also channeled a discussion on related issues through tweets such as #Pakistan and #India in addition to others online. It also demonstrates the visibility of a subdued political expression which is otherwise guaranteed by basic freedoms such as freedom of speech and expression in the real social and political landscape in the country.

Another recent issue related to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC)²⁰ has sparked raging reactions all over India and even among Indian diaspora accusing the government of discriminating against Muslims in India. Amidst the decision to conduct a phased implementation of the nationwide NRC and CAA, there was a downplay of the government's narratives

²⁰ The CAA amends Indian citizenship to include illegal migrants who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India before 2014 following religious persecution. The bill does not mention Muslims and other communities who fled from the same or other neighboring countries. The amendment has been widely criticized as discriminating on the basis of religion, particularly for excluding Muslims.

real world. Demonetization was an exercise that the government took with the main objective of curbing black money, increasing the tax base, and expanding the number of taxpayers. Their intention was to accomplish this through the digitization and integration of the formal and informal economies (Deodhar, 2017). However, the impacts on citizens were significant as revealed by long queues to withdraw cash, inefficient ATMs, and greater inconvenience for workers and the elderly (Ganapatye, 2016). As tweets followed, hashtags related to the issue flooded Twitter, drawing attention to the specific concerns and problems that stemmed from the inconvenience it caused the citizenry. After three years of implementation of the reform, users on Twitter continued to denounce the progress of demonetization. Newer hashtags potentiated participation, with hashtags such as #DemonitisationDisaster, #BlackDay, and #3yearsofdemodisaster trending under the top 10 hashtags in India. Deccan Hearld (November 8, 2019) published a news article with the headline, “Twitter goes crazy on 3rd anniversary of Demonetisation.” Twitter witnessed arguments between the party in power, which defended the reform, and the parties in opposition and common citizens, which took a critical stand on the reform (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Screengrabs of Varied Opinions on the Issue of Demonetization

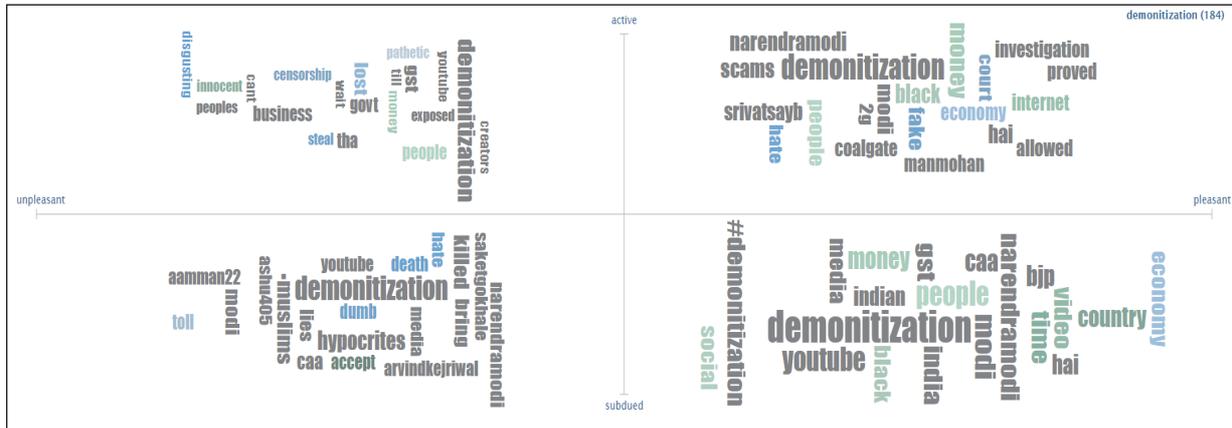


Source: Twitter, November 8, 2019

A similar sentiment analysis of #demonetisation found that the mixed reactions to the reform were reflected in the use of the hashtag on Twitter. The active-pleasant portion of the scale was dominated by hashtags such as #coalgate, #scams, and #demonetisation, whereas hashtags such as #exposed, #censorship, #gst, and #steal were used to express active unpleasant sentiment with respect to the issue (Figure 18). The negative impact of the demonetization reform was also reflected in the voting patterns regarding the BJP in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections. The median voter in India is both rural and poor, and the negative impact of the reform affected the livelihoods of those in the agricultural sector. Sen's (2019) analysis found that a 100 percent decrease in the sales of the mandi (market) closest to the constituency resulted in a one percent fall in the BJP mean vote share in that particular constituency. His

assessment also found that the negative economic impact of the exercise was short-lived and could be of “less salience to the voters in the run up to the 2019 general election” (Sen, 2019). Therefore, the reform did not have a visible effect on voting behavior in the general elections.

Figure 18. Sentiment Analysis for #Demonetisation



Source: Twitter (Accessed January 20, 2020)

The growth of the internet as a new political communication technology is thus facilitated by convenient features such as likes, retweets, and hashtags, which has altered the speed of movement coordination and solicited public opinions on critical issues. Virtual opinions display sentiments that cross language barriers through such features in addition to being efficient enough to attract prompt support for a cause. Both real world and virtual coordination on issues of national importance underpin further inquiry on the effect on citizens in the real world. The next section tries to assess this realization by evaluating the online-offline world divide through the synthesis of old and new media. This research demands an understanding on the issue, as the literature (Lokniti, 2019) shows that old media formats such as the radio, newspapers, and prominently television continue to play a major role in molding public opinion during elections.

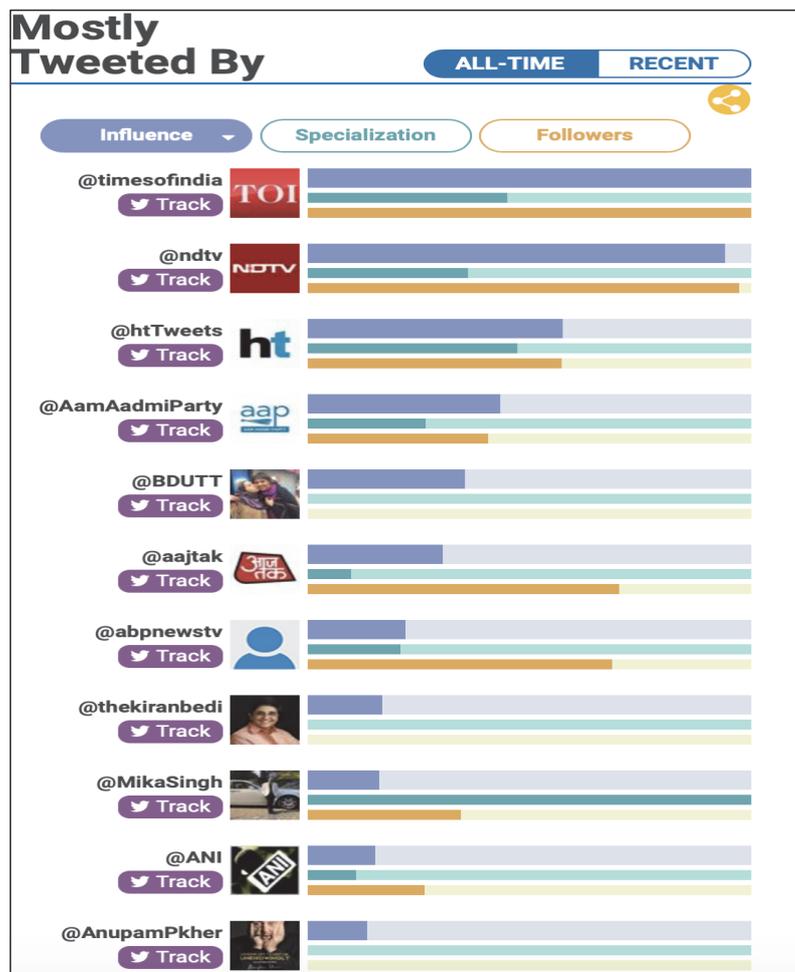
News through Old and New Media

Old or traditional media formats, which comprise newspapers in the form of print, television, radio, and billboards among others, target mass audiences and rely on a one-way, slow dialogue channel from the receiver. The traditional form of media, although still impactful, is often the first “visible” presence of political ideas, dialogues, and partisan representation in the real world. New forms of media such as social media, websites, and podcasts surpass the limitations of a passive “mass audience” to reach an active “mass and an interpersonal audience.” This form of media moves beyond disseminating information from just one focal source of information with its ability to circulate user-generated content available from many focal points to a mass audience. Additionally, the feasibility of prompt exchange of information has also shaped the ways in which new forms of media contribute to old forms of media by

informing people about activities centered around national debates and leadership. As participation forms the basic difference between old and new media, Chadwick (2013) terms this synthesis “hybrid media.” This also opens an area of research to map the ways in which hybrid media is steering political communication and participation in India.

Theoretically, the idea of “influencing the influencers” as proposed by Andrew Chadwick (2013) fits well as substantiated by the response of old media channels sharing news with netizens by tweeting. The old media has revamped its platform by sharing tweets, and newspapers often quote tweets for offline readers. For instance, news channels used #oddeven on Twitter after the implementation of the Odd Even²¹ scheme in Delhi (Figure 19). Off social media, Business Standard published an article titled “Hashtag odd-even plan gets a thumbs up on social media” (Business Standard, 2016). The Hindustan Times newspaper also shared the headline “Follow it for your kids, tweets Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal on Odd-even rule” (“Follow it for your kids,” 2019).

Figure 19. List of News Channels Taking the Lead in Tweeting #oddeven



Source: Twitter (Accessed September 13, 2019)

²¹ Odd-even is a scheme introduced by the Delhi Government in 2016 as a car rationing system allowing the movement of vehicles based on the number plate. Number plates ending with even numbers (0,2,4,6,8) were allowed to drive on one day and those ending with odd numbers (1,3,5,7,9) could be driven on the alternate day. This scheme was introduced to keep the pollution generated by transport in check.

This strategy is also discussed by scholars such as Pande (2015), who examines the concept of “performative power” proposed by Daniel Kreiss (2014). He espouses a strategy which aims at reaching out to the maximum audience by making use of hybrid media²², despite the challenge of uneven internet penetration. The reliance of old media on new media may seem to facilitate a holistic coverage of content for the public. However, the hybridity of this form of media also has its own perils of being overly reliant on news. This can be summarized by the “information cocoon” theory propounded by Cass Sunstein (2018). The information cocoon symbolizes the problem of personalization of information which effects the manner in which we make decisions regarding any political news on social media. The content available through the cocoon is based on netizens’ social media search history and conforms algorithmically to provide social media users with similar news in the future. The citizen is thus exposed to a tailored form of news on the internet based on his or her search history.

Amber Sinha (2019) also shows in his work how research analysts have determined that Twitter’s trending topics and graphs privilege “breaking news” stories over other kinds of stories. However, breaking news stories are dependent on the velocity of tweets or comments. This information exposure on new media will also have a significant impact on the real-world situation when broadcast by old media. More gravely, these concerns can have an impact on the nature of information by deepening ideological locks and prejudices instead of giving a fair variety of content to media users. Targeted attacks on Northeastern people in different parts of India in 2012 and the riots in Muzaffarnagar in 2013 were incidents attributed to the spread of misinformation on social media platforms (Sinha, 2019). These cases of incitement to violence create a push for social media to fact check the information being floated on different platforms, which has a high likelihood of being acknowledged simultaneously by old media formats.

The Changing Credibility of the Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is an autonomous body constitutionally authorized under Article 324 of the Constitution of India. It exercises administrative oversight over state and Union elections in India. The autonomous status of the ECI not only allows this institution to enjoy supremacy over the incumbent government and opposition, it also plays the vital role of guarding elections through directives such as issuing the Model Code of Conduct (MCC)²³ for contesting candidates and political parties. Indian research scholars such as Anupama Roy and Ujjwal Singh (2018) opine that the “legal doctrine of electoral exceptionalism” manifests into the MCC, ensuring electoral integrity and electoral management to ensure democratic outcomes. This institution has in the recent past dealt with issues concerning multiple stakeholders in the real and the virtual world. Recently, BJP MP Meenakshi Lekhi filed a

²² Hybrid media is the strategic and tactful way of using old and new media to communicate the message to a large audience in a more effective way.

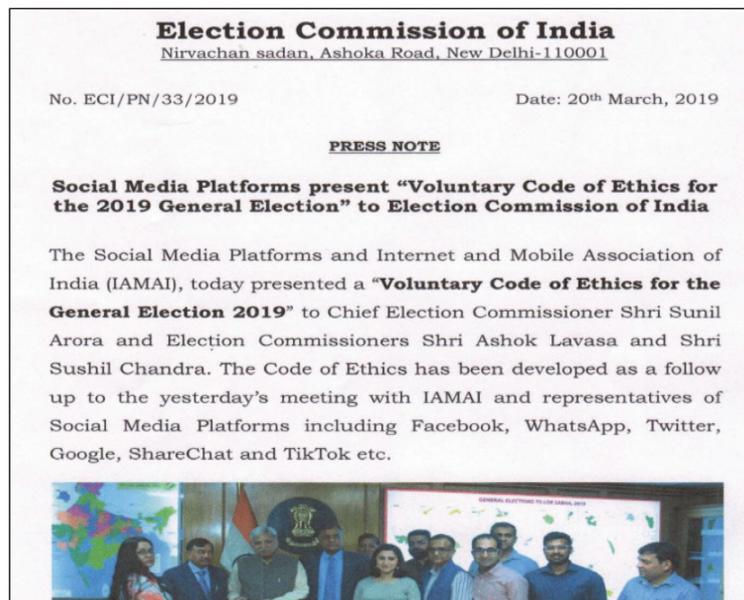
²³ The Model Code of Conduct is announced by the ECI prior to election campaigning. The MCC contains guidance for political parties and candidates distributed in guidelines for categories such as General Conduct, Meetings, Procession, Polling Day, Polling Booths, Observers, Party in Power, and Guideline on Election Manifesto.

complaint with the ECI against a news channel accusing it of violating the MCC by telecasting the “would be results” of the Delhi elections (DD News, January 7, 2020). The MP also tweeted a copy of the complaint, bringing it to public notice. The ECI is seen as the custodian of furthering the MCC, and has moved beyond the mere role of managing controversies to a role of preserving the essence of representative democracy by dealing with issues such as booth capturing, low voter turnout, and problematic behavior by politicians and political parties.

The ECI on its social media platforms thus makes an attempt to inform and disseminate decisions made during elections. For instance, the ECI barred Anurag Thakur and Parvesh Sahib²⁴ from campaigning in the Delhi Assembly Elections 2020 for a period of 72 hours and 96 hours respectively on January 30, 2020 (Election Commission of India, 2020). The impugned statement by the politicians violated Part 1 of the Model Code of Conduct as it led to the promotion of “hatred between different classes of the citizens of India on grounds of religion, race, caste, community, or language” (ECI, 2020). Similarly, the ECI ended up putting curbs on four senior politicians: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, BSP Chief Mayawati, Union Minister Maneka Gandhi, and Samajwadi Party candidate Azam Khan for violating the MCC. These curbs restrained them from giving interviews or making any comments on print, electronic, or even social media in connection with the Lok Sabha elections at the time (The Hindu, June 9, 2020). The Commission issued the notices and uploaded the order on its official account via social media platforms.

As discussed before, the ECI also marks its presence on social media sites with the help of a flagship program known as the Systematic Voters’ Education and Electoral Participation program (SVEEP). The ECI’s official accounts include Twitter with the handle “Election Commission of India, #SVEEP AS @ECISVEEP,” Facebook with the “Election Commission of India” page, and Instagram with the account “Election Commission of India (SVEEP).” The ECI uploads all important notices on all three platforms. The vibrant visibility and the increased interaction rate on social media platforms are what first led to a need for a virtual presence of the institution online. Wider dissemination and dialogue on social media also led to the adoption of the Voluntary Code of Ethics in the Lok Sabha elections for all State polls. This voluntary code was mandated to social media companies including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Share-chat, Google, and TikTok. The IAMAI acted as the channel between the ECI and the social media companies to ensure that the Code of Ethics—ensuring free, fair, and ethical usage of social media platforms—remains consistent in upholding electoral integrity in the consequent elections.

²⁴ Anurag Thakur is a member of Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament) and Parvesh Verma is the Member of Parliament from the West Delhi Lok Sabha. Both are members of the BJP.

Figure 20. Voluntary Code of Ethics presented by Social Media Platforms

Source: Election Commission of India, Issued on March 20, 2019
 (<https://eci.gov.in/files/file/9468-voluntary-code-of-ethics-by-the-social-media-platforms-for-the-general-election-2019/>)

While the ECI is the custodian of preserving trust in electoral processes through routine checks and balances, the institution's credibility has been questioned by many analysts and research scholars in the time of digital politics. Nalin Mehta (2019) opined in his article that the 2019 general election “shifted paradigms in Indian politics” as this was the first election where social media companies decisively came up with self-regulated rules. However, the problem of regulating content in the midst of free-floating information and dynamic actors online renders absolute self-regulation ineffective. Press Trust of India (2019) stated that Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube among others were asked to take down over 900 posts during the “silence period.”²⁵ Twitter took down 49 posts and WhatsApp and Google took three and two posts down respectively. Out of the 628 total posts taken down, 477 of these featured political content during the silence period (Dhingra, 2019). This also garnered attention towards the issue of political advertising under the check of the MCC, which implied that political parties were now required to disclose expenditures incurred on social media advertisements. Advertisers were now allowed to register with the ECI and the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC).²⁶

Amber Sinha (2019) draws attention to the gap in defining political advertising, which is neither defined by the ECI nor by the Representation of People's Act. He further argues that this lack of a clear definition led to internet platforms individually determining their course of action in governing political advertisements. Thus, the regulatory void created by multiple actors in the internet realm challenges the credibility of public institutions such as the ECI, which is now catching up and making its presence visible on social media.

²⁵ A period which starts 48 hours before the hour set for the conclusion of polling in a particular phase.

²⁶ The Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC) at the state and the district level work to examine the pre-certification of all advertisements promoted by political parties and political leaders in India.

Co-regulation to Tackle Disinformation on Social Media

Following the 2019 elections, debates regarding the ethical dilution of political communication have dominated the discussion around the usage of social media. The election concluded by noting that ethical standards in political communication worsen when unethical practices are used to circulate misleading information to a majority of a digitally illiterate²⁷ population. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting planned to set up a “Find, Assess, Create, Target” (FACT) checking module to prevent the spread of fake news. This was followed by the Press Information Bureau under the same program, which set up a FACT checking unit to validate the news (Press Trust of India, 2019). This initiative by the government has been recently revamped to identify fake news in different regional languages (Dutta, 2020). Apart from the institutional measures taken by the government, an onus to self-regulate content falls on the social media companies as well. Such an expectation has led to a growth in fact-checking websites and activities. Fact-checking websites such as Alt News, SMHoaxSlayer, and BOOM have partnered with social media companies like Facebook. Media houses like India Today Group and Times of India have their own fact-checking websites.

Think tanks and many NGOs have also emerged as important stakeholders in assessing democratic and transparent functioning through lawful regulation of content online. For instance, Freedom House’s report on the Freedom on the Net 2019 places India under the category of “Partly Free” from digital election interference. The report by Freedom House also indicates critical issues behind this ranking including taking technical measures in the form of blocking access to content and taking legal measures such as punitive actions against dissent, thereby weakening democratic ethos. In order to understand the co-regulatory technique closely, it is vital to first delve in the governance structure regulating online content in India.

Figure 21. PIB Fact-Check Handle



Source: Twitter (Accessed on September 13, 2019)

²⁷ Digital illiteracy refers to the inability of an individual to find, evaluate, and compare clear information through media on various digital platforms. It requires both cognitive and technical skills.

Regulating Online Speech in India: Governance of Internet Intermediaries

The debates around governance of internet intermediaries have occupied center stage in parliament discussions. A social media platform cannot “evade their responsibility and larger commitment to ensure that its platform is not misused on a large scale to spread incorrect facts projected as news and designed to instigate people to commit crime,” IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad stated in the Parliament on July 26, 2018. He further stated that the law of abetment²⁸ also applies to social media platforms if they fail to take adequate and prompt action (Pahwa, 2018). In 2019, UK-based technology research firm Comparitech collated transparency reports from top internet giants and concluded that India, followed by Russia and Turkey, sent the most takedown requests to social media companies (Mandavia, 2019). The report created regulatory dilemmas at a time when the Indian government was trying to hold social media companies accountable for the content posted and shared. Privacy analysts and free speech activists found this move to be a pretext upon which the citizens could be subjected to surveillance and in turn attempts to harness big data online. However, the major challenge emanates from this balance between ensuring security by combating fake news while ensuring the constitutionally protected rights of free speech, expression, and other civil liberties.

To strike a balance, it is crucial to understand how platforms govern speech in the form of “content” and how these social media platforms are themselves governed. As briefly discussed before, the internet ecosystem in India is circumscribed within the statutory framework of the Information Technology Act of 2000. This legal framework, termed intermediary liability, provides safe harbor to internet intermediaries (social media companies) under Section 79 as long as they do not have “actual knowledge”²⁹ of the infringing content on their platforms. These liability protections allow the platforms to function without compromising on the content posted and shared by billions of users online. Experts explain that “it is impossible for platforms to have actual knowledge of each piece of content when there are billions of pieces of content uploaded each minute” (Pahwa, 2018). Therefore, under intermediary liability, removal of unlawful content was only operational after receiving a judicial order or a receipt from the government. However, the scale and speed at which varied types of content are uploaded, posted, and shared online also makes this system redundant as waiting for an authorized order and acting upon it can render the internet governance agenda ineffective. The Supreme Court of India ordered that content related to issues such as rape, gang rape videos, and pre-natal sex determination³⁰ on social media be “auto blocked” by internet intermediaries, subverting the earlier established rule of bringing down content on the issuance of an order by the said authorities. As internet intermediaries have been coaxed to make data more accessible to governments, the platforms themselves have also created policies to which they

²⁸ Offenses relating to abetment under Section 107 of the Indian Penal Code basically mean the action of instigating, encouraging, or promoting a person into committing an offense or can also mean aiding the offender while he is committing a crime.

²⁹ The term “actual knowledge” has been debated before in the case of *Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India*, wherein the Court read down Section 79(3)(b) under the IT Act, 2000, stating that the term constitutes a situation wherein the intermediary “upon receiving actual knowledge from a court order or on being notified by the appropriate government agency that unlawful acts relatable to Article 19(2) are going to be committed then fails to expeditiously remove or disable access to such material.”

³⁰ *Prajwala vs. Union of India* (2015)

commit internally. For example, Facebook has “community standards” and Twitter has “The Twitter Rules,” which have attempted to clarify established categories of lawful and unlawful content to its users. These in-house content moderation functions have to be revised for effective regulation and have adopted a middle path to balance content regulation with technology assisted by human moderation.

The need for such interventions follows from cases that show failures despite the necessary liability compliance, safe harbor rules, and self-regulation of social media companies with the conformity to jurisdiction specific constitutional standards. Content regulation on the internet has emerged as tricky in nature to the Indian government and has again challenged the technical expertise within the government. For instance, many internet research scholars have differentiated between content aggregators and content creators and how liability should differ for each. Therefore, news websites such as Print, Wire, Scroll would be considered to play an active role in creating content as opposed to Daily News or Google News, which are news aggregators of content posted on other websites. Sinha (2019) argues that similarly, Twitter allows users to express themselves using words, images, GIFs, tweets, and retweets but does not have a role in deciding what content is produced. The debate therefore treads along a thin line of appropriate regulation, over-regulation, and lack of effective regulation in tackling misinformation. More importantly, to study electoral cycles and beyond, the debate has significant consequences on the public discourse, as social media has definitely assumed the function of a public forum if not a complete public sphere.

A co-regulatory approach to combatting the issues of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news is required to sustain ethical political communication. The need of the hour is to encourage a multi-stakeholder approach to creating a public policy oriented towards encouraging dissent, installing constructive fact checkers, preserving free speech and expression, and enacting strict penalty measures for spreading fake news and profile targeting.

Ways Forward

As social media facilitates easy voicing of opinions and participation, it also facilitates “clickvatism”³¹ and “slacktivism.”³² These rise with the intention of participating through impulsive online engagement and may become problematic by not promoting quality contributions to the building of content for societal consumption on social media. As political communication becomes routinized on social media, netizens need to be alert enough to differentiate between fact and delusion. Issues such as information cocoons and uneven internet penetration as discussed in this article further steer our attention towards the danger of consuming unchecked digital content and communication on social media platforms. There is a need to ensure a multi-stakeholder approach to policy formulation with regard to content regulation on social media. It demands engagement of policy makers, political representatives, civil society, the private

³¹ The use of social media and other online methods to promote a cause.

³² The practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment.

sector, and most importantly the citizenry. Their voices need to be channeled through effective collaborations and consultations which will further enable an informed policy dialogue on issues such as managing fake news, cybersecurity, and guarding against unlawful surveillance and targeted political advertisements on social media.

Within the larger approach of addressing policy issues from a multi-stakeholder approach, the second recommendation is to ensure inter-ministerial coordination within the government and coordination between the private sector and civil society. For the government, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, IAMAI, and the Election Commission of India must coordinate and work together on issues such as tackling electoral content online. With shifting innovation and new features available online, newer technological possibilities must also remain within the limits of lawful electoral promotion and campaigning. For this, inter-sectoral coordination between social media intermediaries, independent fact checking units, and the civil society feedback need to be maintained to ensure that social media platforms work towards a technical framework contributing to functional safeguards online in addition to following the due diligence criteria mentioned in the IT Act of 2000.

As coordination and a multi-stakeholder approach to policy formulation form the basic pillars in uplifting ethical standards in political communication, it is essential that even the act of endorsing free speech as discussed in this paper be checked in a balanced way within this approach.

Conclusion

The data provided above demonstrate the ease with which netizens can engage in political dialogue. It is also clearly up for debate whether the usage of social media is reflective of the ground election results. However, the data is justifiable in explaining the popularity of certain political parties and political leaders compared to others. This gap also exists with respect to the support a few mainstream political parties enjoy compared to other national and regional parties that have failed to create a support base on social media platforms. The democratic discourse encompassing pluralistic views on social media platforms remains a concern in a country like India, characterized by the slow growth of internet penetration and a lower relative degree of digital literacy. Nevertheless, it is vital to remember that electoral processes online are a subset within the larger democratic discourse of the real world. Therefore, as ways of political communication on social media advance together with increasing interaction, the dangers emanating from delusional content and misleading facts on social media loom for both political leaders as well as citizens in the real and the virtual world. Addressing such a problem in the longer run may result in curbing social media usage. Moreover, any over blocking or uneven attempts to regulate content will in time compromise the ethics of democracy and the participatory nature of this platform. In such a scenario, in a conversation on the subject of social media and democracy, Dr. Amir Ullah Khan³³ rightly opines that “social media needs careful nurturing not strict regulation.”

³³ Personal Communication with Dr. Amir Ullah Khan, Professor of Economics, Maulana Azad National Urdu University.

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Country Case 12: Pakistan

Social Media, Democracy, and Disinformation in Pakistan

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The Political Economy of Social Media and Internet Freedom in Pakistan

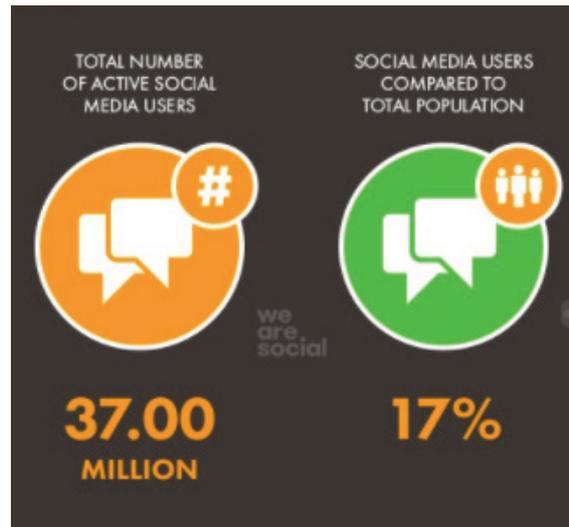
With a population of nearly 220 million, Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world. Pakistan's is one of the "youngest" countries in the world and the second youngest in the South Asian region after Afghanistan. Sixty-four percent of Pakistan's total population is below the age of 30, while 29 percent is between the ages of 15 and 29. In 2018 when Pakistan held its 11th general election, 44 percent of voters were 35 or below, and more than 46 million people in Pakistan were between the ages of 18 and 35. Pakistan also offers some interesting figures on internet usage (Kemp, 2020):

1. In January 2020, there were 76.38 million internet users in Pakistan.
2. The number of internet users in Pakistan increased by 11 million (+17 percent) between 2019 and 2020.
3. Internet penetration in Pakistan stood at 35 percent in January 2020.
4. There were 164.9 million mobile connections in Pakistan in January 2020, equivalent to 75 percent of the total population.
5. The number of mobile connections in Pakistan increased by 9.6 million (+6.2 percent) between January 2019 and January 2020.

Social Media Usage in Pakistan

With the boom in internet connectivity and its usage in Pakistan over the years, social media platforms have taken center stage in Pakistan's political and democratic landscape. While social media platforms have become a new communication tool for political discourse, it must also be kept in mind that a majority of the population does not use social media and among those who do, a majority use it for infotainment and do not use it to access or spread political content.

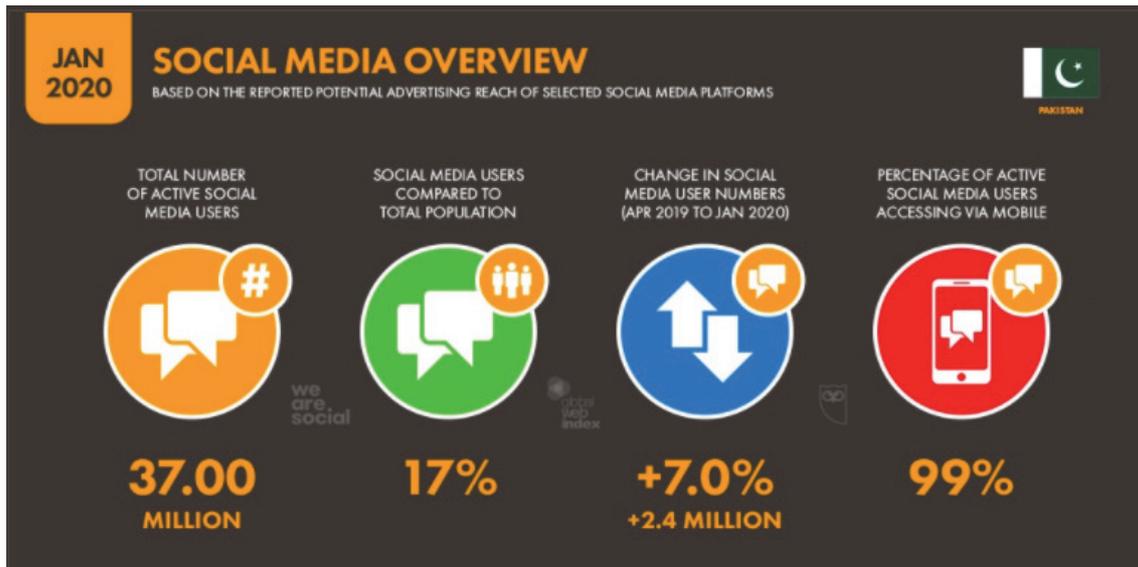
¹ Joint Director, Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT)



Source: dataportal, Accessed March 1, 2020

In South Asia, the number of active social media users compared to total population stands at 27 percent, while in Pakistan the number of active social media users compared to total population is just 17 percent.

1. In January 2020, there were a total of 37 million social media users in Pakistan. The number of social media users increased by 2.4 million (+7.0 percent) between April 2019 and January 2020.
2. Data compiled by dataportal showed that YouTube generated the greatest amount of traffic monthly, with 126,600,000 visits. The average time per visit was recorded at 30 minutes and the average number of pages per visit was 13.2.
3. Google generated monthly traffic of 119,800,000 visits, with an average time per visit of 15 minutes 18 seconds.
4. Facebook, at number three, generated monthly traffic of 43,890,000 visits, with an average time per visit of 15 minutes.
5. WhatsApp recorded monthly traffic of 10,940,000 visits with an average time per visit of 2 minutes 47 seconds.
6. Twitter, at number eight in the list of most visited websites, below google.com.pk, Yahoo, and Wikipedia, generated monthly traffic of 4,386,000 visits and an average time per visit of 13 minutes 36 seconds. The average user viewed 13.2 pages per visit.



Source: dataportal, Accessed March 1, 2020

Despite a relatively smaller percentage of the population using social media, social media has become a major platform for communication and transformed and revolutionized political discourse in Pakistan. However, where social media has facilitated a more open and equal medium of communication for citizens and allowed easier access to individuals, parties, and organizations to spread their messages more openly and effectively, it has also made it that much easier to spread propaganda and disinformation. Unlike traditional media, which can verify the veracity of a news article or information and thereby play a gatekeeping role against propaganda and misinformation, social media can now be used just as easily as a means to control and inhibit the spread of verified information. Given the crucial role of social media in people's lives, this capacity has also meant that much like governments work to control traditional media, similar efforts have begun towards controlling social media.

The Legal Regime Governing Cyber Usage and Cybercrime in Pakistan

In August 2016, the Parliament passed a federal law titled the *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016* (PECA, 2016). A slightly different version of the law was in place in the shape of an ordinance called the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Ordinance 2007, which expired in 2009. The multiple issues relating to cybercrime were first dealt with through the promulgation of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance 2007 (PECB, 2007). This ordinance, comprising 49 sections, was re-promulgated on a number of occasions. Its key features were:

- i. Criminalization of unlawful access and damage to or misuse of electronic data, equipment, and systems
- ii. Criminalization of the creation and spread of computer viruses
- iii. Introduction of cyberstalking as an offense
- iv. Introduction of spamming (sending bulk unsolicited mails) and spoofing (creation and use of

- fictitious websites) as offenses
- v. A provision criminalizing cyberterrorism
- vi. Establishment of exclusive investigatory and prosecutorial powers in the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)
- vii. Establishment of a specialist Information and Communication Technologies Tribunal
- viii. Provisions relating to international cooperation with foreign governments and agencies

The offenses defined by Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance 2007 were criminal access, criminal data access, system damage, electronic fraud, electronic forgery, misuse of electronic systems, unauthorized access to code or system design, misuse of encryption, malicious code, cyberstalking, spamming, spoofing, unauthorized interception, and cyberterrorism. The offenses also included offenses as defined in the Electronic Transactions Ordinance 2002, the Pakistan Telecommunications Act 1996, the Telegraph Act 1885, and the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1933. The 2007 Ordinance also provided for enhanced punishments in case of misuse of sensitive electronic systems relating to the security, defense, and international relations of Pakistan.

However, the scope and coverage of Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance 2007 was somewhat beyond the provisions of the internationally accepted Budapest Convention. The federal government at the time therefore introduced the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Bill 2015, which was eventually passed by the Parliament in 2016. The law goes further in some matters while providing safeguards against possible abuse of certain provisions which were not present in the 2007 Ordinance. For example, it gives the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) the power to issue directions to a service provider to remove any intelligence or block any access to such intelligence if the PTA considers this to be necessary for the interests of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security, or defense of Pakistan, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court or incitement of an offense (PILDAT, 2015).

The Key Features of the Cybercrime Law in Pakistan

The cybercrime law is generally seen in the context of affecting constitutionally guaranteed fundamental rights relating to life, privacy, freedom of speech, and freedom of information. In addition, it is criticized on the following accounts:

- i. The law is too harsh, and punishments are not proportionate to the crimes
- ii. The law's language leaves it open to abuse by law enforcement agencies (LEAs) and the government
- iii. The law restricts freedom of expression and access to information
- iv. The offenses are too numerous and overlap with other existing laws
- v. The wording of the law leaves many clauses open to interpretation

- vi. The law can specifically be misused to target journalist sources and whistleblowers
- vii. The criteria for surveillance is even more open-ended than the Fair Trial Act 2013
- viii. The authority designated under the new law should have been independent of the executive
- ix. The authority has been given sweeping powers to block and destroy online material without a court order (Khan, 2016)

Key features of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 are as follows:

- i. Up to three years imprisonment, Rs. 1 million fine or both for unauthorized access to critical infrastructure information system or data
- ii. The government may cooperate with any foreign government, foreign or international agency, organization, or 24x7 network for investigation or proceedings relating to an offense or for collecting evidence
- iii. The government may forward to any foreign government, 24x7 network, or foreign or international agency or organization any information obtained from its own investigation if the disclosure assists their investigations
- iv. Up to seven years imprisonment, Rs. 10 million fine or both for interference with a critical infrastructure information system or data with dishonest intentions
- v. Up to seven years imprisonment, Rs. 10 million fine or both for glorification of an offense relating to terrorism, any person convicted of a crime relating to terrorism, or proscribed individuals or groups. Glorification is defined as “depiction of any form of praise or celebration in a desirable manner”
- vi. Up to six months imprisonment, Rs. 50,000 or both for producing, making, generating, adapting, exporting, supplying, offering to supply, or importing a device for use in an offense
- vii. Up to three years imprisonment, Rs. 5 million fine or both for obtaining, selling, possessing, transmitting, or using another person’s identity information without authorization
- viii. If your identity information is used without authorization, you may apply to the authorities to secure, destroy or prevent transmission of your information (Khan, 2016)

The PECA 2016 empowered the PTA to block or remove unlawful content “*against the glory of Islam, against the integrity, security and defense of Pakistan, public order, contempt of court, against decency & morality, and incitement of any offenses.*” In 2019, the PTA reported that it blocked 824,878 URLs with 31,963 blasphemy websites (PTA, 2019).

In three sections under the PECA 2016, which are cognizable offenses, the FIA can make arrests without a warrant. In other cases, the FIA has to get a court order before acting, which has only become possible due to the struggle of digital rights organizations. Initially, the government at the time wanted to include a blasphemy section, but ultimately did not upon the demand of civil society organizations. A

future worry is that the state might begin issuing character certificates according to social media presence, especially for public jobs. The state appears to be looking for more and more ways to govern the internet, and in doing so appears to be inspired by the Chinese model. There has been an import of surveillance technology from China while the PTA has also signed an agreement with Sandvine Corporation, a US-based firm allegedly working with Israeli intelligence, to obtain filtering and blocking technology (Feldstein, 2019; Jahangir, 2019; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2019).

National Security Concerns and the Legal Regime

A conversation on the legal regime governing social media cannot be complete without taking into account the security environment in Pakistan. The legal regime put in place to manage online freedoms has to be viewed from the perspective of the impact of terrorism on Pakistan.

Terrorism and terrorist incidents were at their peak when on December 16, 2014, a heinous terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar took the lives of 144 young students. While the country had been battling with terrorism and violent extremism for nearly a decade by then, a National Action Plan (NAP) was put in place to combat terrorism and violent extremism (NACTA, 2014). Achieved through a rare civil-military consensus and agreement of otherwise bitterly opposed political parties, the 20-point NAP became the guiding policy principle against terrorism and violent extremism in Pakistan. The NAP was termed by the then-Prime Minister as a “defining moment” in the fight against terrorism. Addressing the nation, he said that “*a line has been drawn; on one side are cowardly terrorists and on the other side stands the whole nation*” (Khan et al., 2016).

Even before political use of social media became common in Pakistan, the country first saw the use of social as well as traditional media by terrorists and terrorist organizations to spread their message of hate and to enlist support. Owing to this, four out of 20 points of the NAP lay down Pakistan’s policy on dealing with the spread of terrorism in terms of its abuse of both traditional and social media. These include the following:

- NAP Point 5: Strict action against literature, newspapers, and magazines promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism, and intolerance
- NAP Point 11: Ban on the glorification of terrorists and terrorist organizations through print and electronic media
 - NAP Point 13: Communication networks of terrorists will be dismantled completely
 - NAP Point 14: Measures against the abuse of social media for terrorism

At the end of 2019, the Global Terrorism Index 2019 recorded the number of deaths as having fallen 37 percent to just 537—81 percent lower since their peak in 2013, and terrorism incidents falling 36 percent to 366—77 percent lower since their peak in 2013 in Pakistan (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019). The report acknowledged that the reduction in terrorism incidents in Pakistan reflected the

management of this menace through the effective implementation of the NAP.

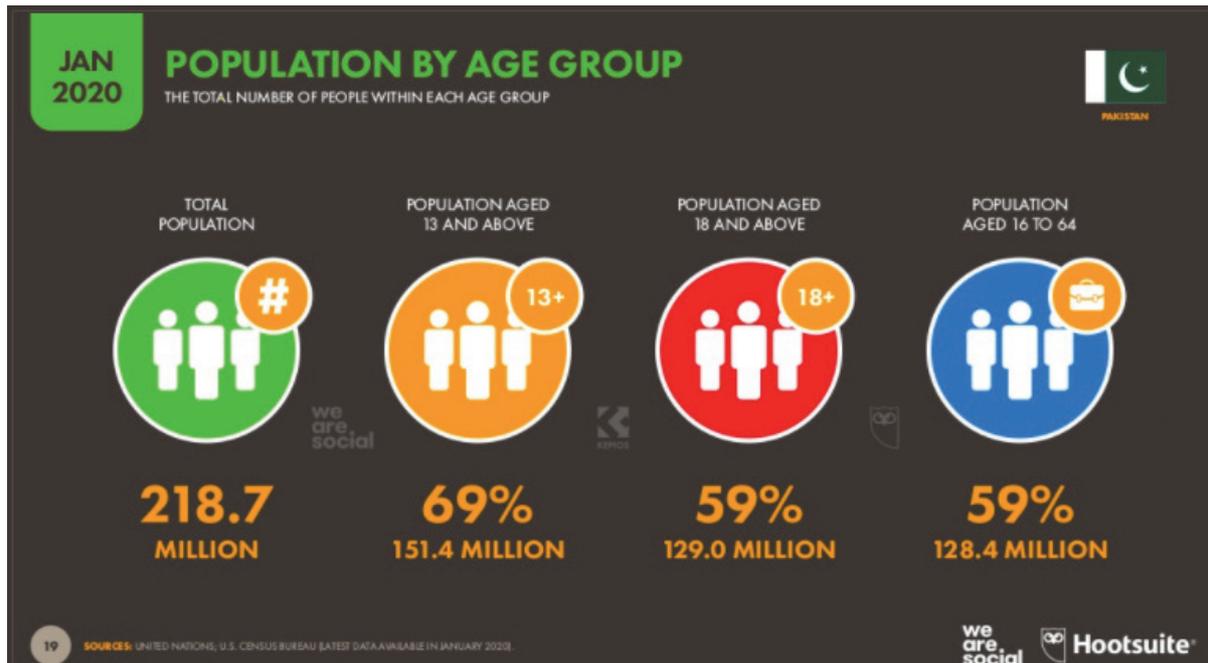
As in other countries battling national security concerns while balancing human rights requirements, there are obvious concerns regarding the legal overreach allowed in managing cybersecurity that can impinge on citizen human rights. However, LEAs believe such legal controls are required to manage national security issues. In addition, they maintain that as is the case globally, social media is also an effective tool of surveillance against terrorism.

The Utilization of Social Media Platforms

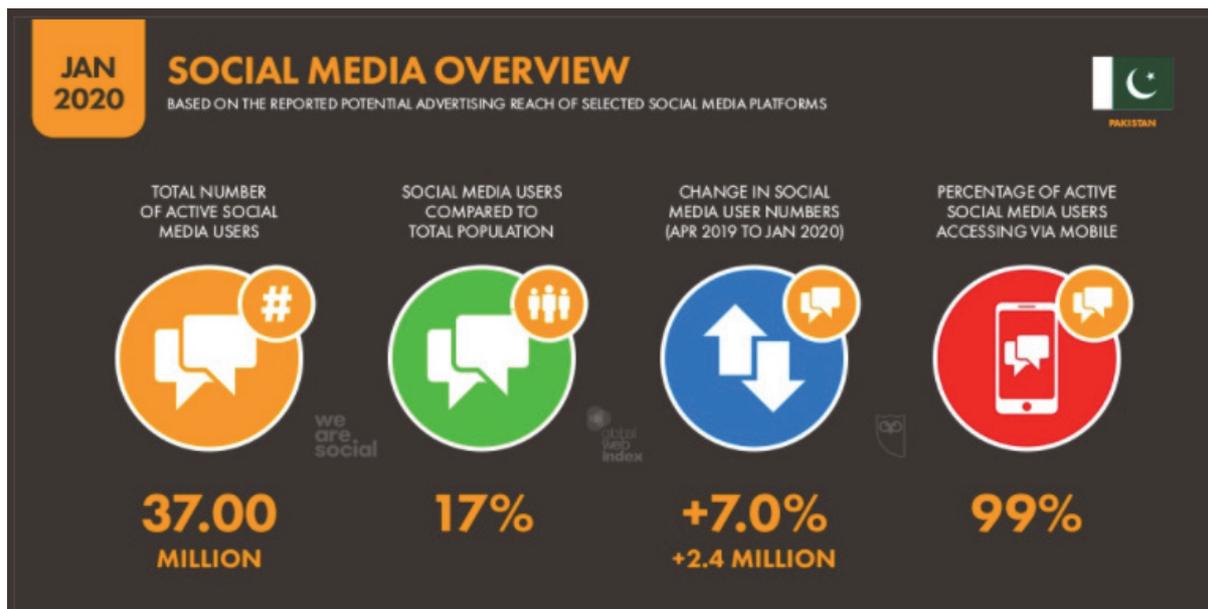
Much like the rest of the world, social media platforms have irrevocably changed the landscape of political discourse in Pakistan. Not only does the average citizen have an equal opportunity to post his or her opinion, political actors across the political spectrum in Pakistan also have equal access to social media platforms to spread their messages.

Conversations around politics are increasingly shifting online. The shift is quite visible as political parties are increasingly focusing on their online presence. For a long time, the space remained unregulated. It was freer compared to traditional media. Since the introduction of the NAP, the focus of successive governments has shifted towards online spaces as they have begun to develop infrastructure to regulate online spaces. This infrastructure, however, is not transparent.

In the peculiar case of Pakistan, these political actors do not just mean political parties but also include powerful state institutions such as the military and its intelligence affiliates, those political groups or rights-based movements that are otherwise suppressed by the state, as well as those terrorist groups state is fighting against. As a result of this mix, political discourse on social media platforms has become acutely partisan. The toxic environment includes regular manipulation of information and spread of disinformation through bots, trolling of political opponents and citizens supporting political views opposed to another group, misuse of data to support partisan political considerations, and generation of online trends that have no basis in evidence.



Source: dataportal, Accessed March 1, 2020



Source: dataportal, Accessed March 1, 2020

With the majority of Pakistan's population consisting of young people, the partisan political use of social media platforms is directed at influencing the soul and future of Pakistan. In 2017, the UNDP Pakistan National Human Development Report showed that in a microcosm of Pakistani society, only 15 young people out of 100 have access to the internet and 52 own a cell phone (Ahmad, 2018). However, with the PTA reporting improvement in broadband growth and a total broadband subscriber base of 76.3 million at the end of 2019 (PTA, 2019), it is clear that both the amount and quality of access has been improving.

An overview of the landscape of political actors using social media platforms to influence young

Pakistanis shows that from 2013 onwards, Pakistan has seen increasing use of social media by political parties, popular leaders, and other stakeholders in promoting their political messaging. Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), the party that was elected to form the federal government, provincial governments in KP and Punjab, and the coalition government in Balochistan through the 2018 general election owes a lot to the support of Pakistan's young, educated, urban citizens who voted the party into power for the first time (Election Commission of Pakistan). The PTI was essentially able to capture the imagination of its followers mainly through using social media. In many ways, in Pakistan, it is the PTI that began the trend of using social media to engage citizens, support its political message, employ social media teams, and initiate cybertrolling of its opponents.

Following suit, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), now the principal opposition party in the Parliament and earlier in government from 2013-2018, also began using social media for political messaging and political opposition online, as is the case of the third largest national party, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). A brief look at the social media following of key political leaders shows the popularity they enjoy on the biggest social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram:

1. The Chairman of the PTI and now Prime Minister, Mr. Imran Khan, has 11.2 million followers on Twitter (Khan, n.d.). The Imran Khan Official Facebook page is liked by 9,758,720 while 10,069,894 follow the page (Khan, n.d.). Imran Khan's Instagram page has 3 million followers (Khan, n.d.).
2. Ms. Maryam Nawaz Sharif, PML-N's Vice President and daughter of PML central leader, Mr. Nawaz Sharif, who has continued to lead the party's social media management, has 5.3 million Twitter followers (Sharif, n.d.). Her Facebook page has 867,512 likes and 905,480 people follow it (Sharif, n.d.). Her Instagram account has 182,000 followers (Sharif, n.d.).
3. Mr. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Chairman of the PPP and son of late Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, and Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, former President of Pakistan, has 3.7 million followers on Twitter (Zardari, n.d.). His Facebook page is liked by 220,428 people and it has 238,260 followers (Zardari, n.d.). His Instagram account has 120,000 followers (Zardari, n.d.).

In the context of Pakistan's political realities, however, a snapshot of the social media following of political leaders alone is not enough to provide a clear picture of the influence of these platforms on democracy. While Pakistan is *de-jure* an electoral democracy and has seen its third successive transfer of power through elections since 2008, the dynamics of *de facto* power sharing between the military and elected leadership lend to Pakistan's characterization as a hybrid regime (Hassan-Askari, 2008). However, given that this power sharing has changed further post 2018 and the military appears to be playing the role of a senior partner in governance management, the system of power is also categorized as a hybrid martial law or hybrid+, signifying that essentially the military is in charge of the country's affairs with only a democratic facade of an elected government (PILDAT, 2020). The Armed Forces of Pakistan have a public relations agency known as Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) which manages public messaging on behalf of the military. The ISPR Director General's official account has 3.5 million

followers on Twitter (DG ISPR, n.d.). The official ISPR Facebook page has 4,918,935 likes and 4,926,249 followers (DG ISPR, n.d.). The official Instagram ISPR page has 150,000 followers (DG ISPR, n.d.).

One of the coveted terms of use by the Inter-Services Public Relations has been the “fifth-generation warfare” or “hybrid war” faced by Pakistan. Though the term has never been fully defined, it is understood to mean that it is no longer traditional security alone which can guarantee the safety of Pakistan and Pakistan must accordingly employ traditional and social media to change hearts and minds and shape a cohesive national discourse. “Your target through perceptions and narrative is to reach the youth,” said the then-Director General of the ISPR in December 2018 addressing the media, urging them to report positively “for six months on Pakistan’s potential and progress within and outside and see where the country reaches” (Desk, 2018). The term was used repeatedly, such as when attributing rumors regarding the establishment of relations between Pakistan and Israel, to have spread as part of “fifth-generation warfare” (Dawn.com, 2019) or when praising the “voluntary passion” of fifth-generation warriors (Daur, 2019). However, to critics of the military’s increasing influence in politics, use of the term fifth-generation warfare has provided “further evidence that the Pakistani military considers the media to be a potential tool for propaganda rather than a source of independent information that should hold the powerful to account” (Pabani, 2019).

Online spaces have also recently witnessed the appearance of troll armies. They dominate conversations online and build narratives around events which are blatantly disinformation. This has become much more systemic than previously thought, ensuring that people resort to self-censorship. Journalists and activists have realized that whatever they say online has consequences. The state has also been pushing dissenting voices to the fringes. Political activists have been complaining about feeling unsafe while sharing their opinions online. They face threats and harassment from unknown persons. Smear campaigns are systematically run against journalists and others, and if one looks closely at these campaigns, one can see that the troll accounts keep changing their handles. They retweet each other. Some accounts are dedicated to harassing certain journalists and individuals who criticize the current government or the role of the army in politics.

Those working on digital rights believe that the ISPR has been better at using social media platforms compared to political parties. One blogger has said that whenever a new application goes viral, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, etc., the ISPR creates a new cell within the organization devoted to it. They have recently appeared to change this strategy due to a lack of resources to make a cell for each application. Many online publications have been blocked by the PTA because of content criticizing the role of the military in politics. The Pahtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) is another interesting example, as they face a complete blackout on traditional media and there is also pressure to remove it from digital media. A lot of journalists have complained of receiving anonymous parcels that include screenshots of their tweets alongside bullets. Manzoor Pashteen of PTM has mentioned this in his Lahore Jalsa (NTV News, 2018).

In April 2019, Facebook took down profiles, groups, and pages from three separate networks in India and one in Pakistan, citing their “deceptive behavior,” and explained that they used a network of fake accounts to conceal their identity and make these pages look independent when in fact they were not.

“These pages, groups and accounts represent themselves as independent but in fact are part of a coordinated operation,” said Facebook in a statement while claiming that in Pakistan, the network of accounts was run by individuals who were all employees of the ISPR. The network consisted of 103 pages, groups, and accounts on both Facebook and Instagram. Collectively, these pages, groups, and accounts on both platforms were followed by 2.8 million accounts, and 4,700 accounts had joined the groups that were taken down while 1,050 accounts followed the Instagram accounts (Husain, 2019).

In December 2019, an investigation by Dawn showed that almost 95 percent of the trending political campaigns in Pakistan are boosted artificially to mislead the public, giving a false impression that there is genuine grassroots support or opposition for a particular group or narrative (Jahanir & Popalzai, 2020). While trends are artificial, those creating the trends are real people and not bots, and run real and authentic accounts. They propose and trend a campaign every day for Twitter users and sub-networks to amplify, rally retweets, and celebrate when any of their hashtags makes it to the trending panel. As the Dawn story quotes, “(they) operate openly, and rather proudly, each with their unique team labels such as ‘IK warriors’ and ‘Team Pak Zindabad’ and believe they are cybertroops fighting Pakistan’s information wars.”

“Fifth-generation warfare is real,” said a gentleman associated with “Team Pak Zindabad” when he spoke to Dawn. “Our friends and family are exposed to negative fake news and misinformation on social media. They are being misled. They don’t know the reality. We want to show them the truth. Foreign and anti-Pakistan elements want to create divisions within the Islamic community and in the country. Negative sentiment sells on media. Everyone is against each other. We want the nation to unite...for Pakistan” (Jahangir & Popalzai, 2020).

The artificial trending of campaigns is also used by political parties. In July 2019, when Prime Minister Imran Khan unfollowed journalist Mr. Hamid Mir from his official Twitter account in response to Mr. Mir’s criticism of the PTI government, Dawn quoted a leading hashtag merchant associated with the PTI who claimed that “journalist Hamid Mir lost around 25,000 followers after (Imran Khan’s) team trended #UnfollowHamidMir as a campaign” (Jahangir & Popalzai, 2020).

“Once seen as spaces to freely exercise political expression, social media platforms are now seen as toxic spaces,” said a blog post by *Bolo Bhi*, a civil society organization geared towards advocacy, policy, and research in the areas of digital rights and civic responsibility (Bhi, 2020). All parties, irrespective of how big or small they are, have functional media cells whose job it is to not only to put forward a positive image of their parties but also to counter any criticism directed at them. Such criticism is drowned out through coordinated attacks as a result of which critics, including prominent figures of opposition parties, are attacked through hashtags trending on social media (Bhi, 2020).

However, online space does not just face the issue of state control. A lot of other organizations, including right-wing religious factions, are also the problem. It is unsafe for private individuals, journalists, academics, and women to voice their opinions freely. An example of this is the criticism faced by movements for women’s rights such as the *Aurat March*, which has remained a target of petitions and legal cases (Farooq, 2020). The Mashal Khan incident started with Facebook posts as well (BBC News, 2018). When Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) attacked a PML-N candidate, they identified his location through Facebook live (Malik, 2018).

Social media has also changed the complexion of electioneering in Pakistan. In the past, it was common to see a close friend or personal assistant managing the election campaign of a candidate. During and after the 2018 general election, however, each candidate has had at least one social media person in charge as part of the campaign. While past election debates used traditional media, they have now shifted to social media platforms.

The use of social media platforms as “toxic spaces” is not only problematic in the political and democratic sphere, it is equally dangerous for citizen rights, especially the rights of marginalized groups. For instance, the misuse of blasphemy laws which already existed as a problem in Pakistan has become particularly acute in the digital age as false accusations about a subject as evocative and sensitive as blasphemy can be spread within seconds, leaving the accused deeply vulnerable (Talat, 2015). Digital rights organizations also caution voter data privacy as a concern for vulnerable communities such as Ahmadis in Pakistan. A Facebook post led to the Gujranwala incident, where the homes of Ahmadi families were burned (Mirza, 2014). As technology has helped streamline voting lists through the much-needed digitization by the National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should consider applying a provision on voter data privacy. Similar concerns on individual data privacy have been aired as well when political parties such as the PTI created an application to mobilize people to vote. Under the law, every political party and candidate running in an election has access to the complete voter list. Such access being available to parties such as the TLP, which has been using the blasphemy law as tool of manipulation and attack, also poses serious concerns.

The use of social media for faking popularity of individual leaders, posts, and trends, and for making them more visible to the public to gain or sustain popularity points to a larger problem of lack of transparency about the use of money and resources to buy and use online advertising or manipulation. Lack of transparency about such spending is unwelcome in political parties, but even more problematic when it is used by official state-backed entities that run opaque, anonymous campaigns leading to trolling, online harassment, and slander against opponents.

The ever-increasing state control of social media to manage such security concerns also means citizens are more routinely subjected to state surveillance using social media and urban surveillance programs in addition to increasing content regulation of Pakistan’s online spaces. This has particularly put journalists at risk, who, with increasing media control, have resorted to using social media platforms. Digital rights activists are also exposed to prohibitive laws and regulations in addition to online trolling and harassment. A study has specifically documented the experience of surveillance for female journalists that is gendered and takes place in the form of sexualized threats and attacks on character and appearance, which is true for both state and social surveillance (Zahid & Khan, 2017).

Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020

On January 21, 2020, the government of Pakistan announced the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020 under sections of the Pakistan Telecommunications (Re-organization) Act 1996 and the

Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016. The rules were announced to target “terrorism and fake news” and obligated social media companies to “block and remove” any unlawful online content within 24 hours of being asked to do so by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (Ministry of Information and Technology, 2020). The rules also required social media companies to set up a physical presence in the country and appoint a contact person who will report to a “National Coordinator” at Pakistan's Ministry of Information and Telecommunications.

The rules were widely criticized both nationally and internationally. While digital rights organizations asked for immediate retraction of the rules on account of the fact that they were in violation of the fundamental/constitutional rights, particularly Articles 14 and 19 (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020), the government promised to conduct a “review” of the rules, though nothing much of substance has reportedly changed (Jahangir, 2020).

Conclusion

In the introduction to the Freedom House Freedom on the Net Report 2019, its authors provide a compelling assessment of the state of global internet freedom: “What was once a liberating technology has become a conduit for surveillance and electoral manipulation” (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019). The report also notes that of the 65 countries assessed, 33 have been on an overall decline in terms of internet freedom since June 2018.

Pakistan, with its 32.9 million internet users, is among the 65 countries covered in the 2019 report that represents 87 percent of the world’s total internet user population. The Freedom on the Net Report 2019, however, has termed Pakistan *Not Free*. With a score of 26, Pakistan was placed in category “C,” which illustrates violations of user rights (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019).

The Freedom House analysis is based on three forms of domestic digital interference. The first is informational tactics, where coordinated use of hyper partisan commentators, bots, group admins, or news sites takes place to disseminate false or misleading content, often with the backing of the state or a political party apparatus. The second is technical tactics, where intentional restrictions on connectivity are applied, blocking social media platforms and websites, and cyberattacks from suspected domestic actors on political websites or social media accounts are made. The last is legal tactics, where arrests of individuals for online political expression occurs alongside the establishment of new laws and regulations that criminalize online speech. In its analysis, the 2019 report determines that both informational and technical tactics are employed in Pakistan (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019, p. 10).

In assessing instances of government censorship and control of the digital sphere which took place between June 2018 and May 2019, Pakistan was placed into the category of countries where political, social, or religious content was blocked during this period (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019, p. 30). The report also notes that in February 2019, Pakistan announced a new social media monitoring program meant to combat extremism, hate speech, and antinational content. However, only a month later, the Interior Ministry launched an investigation into journalists and activists who had expressed support for murdered

Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi on their social media accounts (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019, p. 16).

The report correctly concludes that the future of internet freedom rests on our ability to fix social media. In its detailed recommendations (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019) for policy makers in the areas of securing elections, preventing abusive social media surveillance, and protecting internet freedom, the Freedom House report recommends the following:

- i. Improve transparency and oversight of online political advertisements, especially during electoral campaigns
- ii. Address the use of bots in social media manipulation, protecting elections from cyberattacks
- iii. Strictly regulate the use of social media surveillance tools and the collection of social media information by government agencies and law enforcement
- iv. Enact robust data privacy legislation
- v. Restrict the export of sophisticated monitoring tools
- vi. Ensure that all internet-related laws and practices adhere to international human rights law and standards

The report has also provided broad recommendations for the private sector around ensuring improved cybersecurity. In its advice for citizens, the report asks global citizens to be more vigilant in regular monitoring around election interference in their respective countries and join hands with scholars, human rights lawyers, and other stakeholders to investigate the use of social media surveillance tools and their impact on targeted communities, particularly marginalized groups, and to continue to raise awareness about government censorship and surveillance efforts (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019). All of these recommendations apply equally to Pakistan, where owing to its unique security environment, the state has swung the pendulum towards greater monitoring and lesser regard towards citizen rights of free expressions and privacy.

Social media has assumed a considerable role and impact on the quality of democracy and democratic discourse in Pakistan. Despite restrictions, social media platforms provide a much-needed civic space for democratic discourse. There is, however, a need for a greater and more encompassing assessment of its impact on elections, democratic discourse, and governance. While digital rights organizations are regularly engaged in this struggle, a systematic monitoring of its impact across democratic governance and inter-institutional relations is required.

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Country Case 13: Nepal

Social Media, Democracy, and Disinformation in Nepal

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Background

Democracy has a checkered history (Whelpton, 2005) in Nepal. The trajectory of democratic exercise, which started in 1950, has been one with many fluctuations. Since the history of media proliferation is entwined with this tumultuous history of Nepal's democracy, it is imperative to engage with the history of democracy as we try to understand the evolution of Nepali media. This paper mainly tries to engage with the impacts of existing mass media and the attempts made by the government to handle them. In doing so, this paper will first provide a snapshot of the recent political history of the country. This brief discussion of the history will be followed by a discussion on significant constitutional arrangements made to ensure freedom of speech and press freedom. With the examination of a few outstanding cases, this paper will finally deal with the impacts of disinformation spread among the public through digital media. Since disinformation has impacted politics, culture, and society at large, this paper focuses more on real cases than on theoretical engagements made by experts in the field.

History of Democracy in Nepal

The end of the Rana autocracy heralded fresh experiments of democratic exercises in Nepal. A successful democratic movement—led by the Nepali Congress under the leadership of revered B.P. Koirala—was followed by the first democratic constitutional arrangement in 1959. Under this new constitution, a new political dispensation came into existence, making Koirala the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Nepal. Unhappy with the democratic experimentation, monarch Mahendra Shah staged a coup, imprisoning Koirala and several other democratic leaders and banning political parties and imposing his direct rule. Later, he created a new constitution and started the Panchayat System, which was hailed as “controlled democracy” by apologists.

Panchayat continued for 29 years until the successful people's movement led by the banned political

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parties, including the Nepali Congress, CPN (UML), and other smaller communist parties. The major change following the movement was the separation of powers arranged by the constitution promulgated in 1990. Power was distributed among the legislature, the executive, the judiciary, and the palace. The system was popularly referred as a constitutional monarchy.

As the new democratic arrangement was being practiced, the then-CPN (Maoist), the radical communist party, started the People's War² in 1996. The decade following the beginning of this war saw huge political instability, frequent change of governments, and a series of violent clashes between Maoist guerrillas and armed forces deployed by the state. The Maoist party was mostly joined by people from marginalized communities—who felt neglected by the existing political system—and the insurgency continued for the whole decade.

Meanwhile, in July 2001, the Royal Massacre took place, killing the entire family of then-monarch Birendra Shah. The late king's brother, Gyanendra Shah, succeeded the throne. The new king wanted to have a new experiment of direct rule and for the same, he took all of the power into his hands. Once again, the nascent democracy faced a huge challenge. With the unpopular Royal Massacre as the backdrop, the new king could never become popular among the masses. Thus, his direct rule quickly encountered critical problems after he assumed the Kingship. Capitalizing on the disillusionment of the people with monarchy, the parliamentary parties and the Maoists came together and signed the popular 12-point understanding to start a peaceful movement against the monarchy. Before this crucial juncture was reached, several attempts to bring the Maoists into the parliamentary fold had failed. Even the new King Gyanendra had initiated conversations with the rebels through various channels. These unsuccessful attempts eventually made way for the signing of the 12-point agreement in New Delhi. It is widely believed that the-then Indian government played a pivotal role in bringing these parties together to sign the document.

In April 2006, the nation witnessed a countrywide people's movement in Nepal, popularly known as the Jana Andolan II. The 19-day-long movement ended the direct rule of the king and forced him to return power to the newly reinstated parliament. Many analysts of the event acknowledge the crucial role played by the mainstream Nepali media in the movement. Anyone who followed the popular press of the time would conclude that without the proactive role of the media, the movement would not have gained momentum in such a short time span. Media outlets from the largest selling dailies to the locality-based community radio stations played an important role in the mass uprising for the restoration of democracy. This change created a conducive environment for the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government and the rebel Maoists in November 2006. Eventually, the monarchy was abolished and the process of state restructuring started with the election of the Constituent Assembly (CA).

The first CA, which comprised 601 members, failed to deliver a new constitution even after several extensions of the deadline. The second CA in September 2015 passed a landmark constitution of Nepal where the representation of Dalits and other excluded communities was considerable. However, compared

² The CPN (Maoist) went through a huge transformation and has now merged with another communist party (UML) to become a robust ruling party now known as the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN).

to the first CA, the second CA comprised a lesser number of minority community members. As a result, these communities were unable to trigger much debate on the “restructuring” agenda. While the first CA had agreed to lay out the model of federalism on two major bases—viability and identity—the second CA dismissed these bases to envision the numbers and boundaries of provinces. The majority of “reluctant federalists” overshadowed the genuine concerns floated by the excluded communities. The majority supported the model of federalism proposed mainly by the then-UML. While the movement in Madhesh was ongoing, the constitution was drafted and prepared for its promulgation. Many criticized the move as a kind of “majoritarian arrogance” of the bigger parties. Eventually, Nepal became a federal democratic republic with a semblance of the progressive provisions of secularism and proportional representation of minorities and marginalized communities.

The promulgation of the new Constitution of Nepal on September 15, 2015 formally initiated Nepal’s transition to a new federal state. As the constitution came into effect, elections for federal parliament, provincial parliament, and local government took place. The local level election was very crucial as it was the first one in the new federal state structure. In addition, the Parliament of Nepal passed a bill for the representation of marginalized communities in local elections in reference to the inclusion policy of Nepal which aims to ensure more inclusive representation of women, Dalits, Madhesis, Muslims, and indigenous peoples in the decision-making structure. As a result of this policy, 5,162 women were elected as local leaders, out of which 38 women were elected as chairperson of local bodies and 238 as vice chairperson, with the remainder as members. A total of 2,230 Dalit women were elected. This achievement is historic in Nepal’s political history. The local bodies have an official term of five years and will act as the key driving force of local development through the planning and mobilization of local budgets and policies.

Features of the 2015 Constitution

The constitution—largely written in gender neutral terms—consists of the following major features:

- The constitution restructured Nepal into a federal republic with a federal parliament at the center, seven provinces, and 753 local governments.
- Nepal is defined in Article 4 as an “independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican state.”
- A bicameral parliamentary system has been created with two federal houses and unicameral parliamentary systems in each province.
- A mixed electoral system has been adopted for the elections of the lower federal house with both a first-past-the-post and a proportional representational system.
- The constitution claims to have ended all forms of discrimination and oppression created by the feudalistic, autocratic, centralized, unitary system of governance.
- The rights of gender and sexual minorities are protected by the new constitution with provisions of special laws to protect, empower, and develop minority groups as well as allowing them to obtain

citizenship in their chosen gender.

- The rights of women have been explicitly recognized in the constitution with the statement that “women shall have equal ancestral rights without any gender-based discrimination.”
- The rights of the Dalit community have been recognized in the constitution. This is the first ever formal constitutional recognition of Dalit rights.
- Secularism—defined trickily as protection of Sanatan Dharma—has been incorporated into the constitution.
- Provisions for proportional inclusion of minorities and marginalized groups have been incorporated into the constitution.
- More than two dozen different human rights provisions have been recognized as fundamental rights.
- Full press freedom and an independent, fair, and competent judiciary is guaranteed.

Article 17 Ensures Freedom for the Citizens

- 1) No person shall be deprived of his or her personal liberty except in accordance with the law.
- 2) Every citizen shall have the following freedoms:
 - I. Freedom of opinion and expression,
 - II. Freedom to assemble peaceably and without arms,
 - III. Freedom to form political parties,
 - IV. Freedom to form unions and associations,
 - V. Freedom to move and reside in any part of Nepal,
 - VI. Freedom to practice any profession, carry on any occupation, and establish and operate any industry, trade, and business in any part of Nepal.

Article 19 Ensures the Right to Communication

- 1) No publication and broadcasting or dissemination or printing of any news item, editorial, feature article, or other read, audio, or audio-visual material through any means whatsoever including electronic publication, broadcasting, and printing shall be censored. Provided that nothing shall be deemed to prevent the making of Acts to impose reasonable restrictions on any act which may undermine the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or nationality of Nepal or the harmonious relations between the Federal Units or the harmonious relations between various castes, tribes, religions or communities, or on any act of sedition, defamation, or contempt of court or incitement to an offense, or on any act which may be contrary to public decency or morality, on any act of hatred to labor, and on any act of incitement to caste-based untouchability as well as gender discrimination.
- 2) No radio, television, online, or other form of digital or electronic equipment, press or other means of communication publishing, broadcasting, or printing of any news item, feature, editorial, article, information, or other material shall be closed or seized nor shall registration thereof be cancelled nor

shall such material be seized by the reason of publication, broadcasting, or printing of such material through any audio, audio-visual, or electronic equipment. Provided that nothing contained in this clause shall be deemed to prevent the making of an Act to regulate radio, television, online or any other form of digital or electronic equipment, press, or other means of communication.

- 3) No means of communication including the press, electronic broadcasting, and telephone shall be interrupted except in accordance with the law.

Article 27 Ensures the Right to Information

Every citizen shall have the right to demand and receive information on any matter of his or her interest or of public interest. Provided that no one shall be compelled to provide information on any matter of which confidentiality must be maintained in accordance with the law.

Article 28 Ensures the Right to Privacy

The privacy of any person, his or her residence, property, documents, data, correspondence, and matters relating to his or her character shall, except in accordance with the law, be inviolable.

Right to Information Act 2007

- 1) Every citizen shall, subject to this Act, have the right to information.
- 2) Every citizen shall have access to the information held in the Public Bodies.
- 3) Notwithstanding any of the provisions in Sections (1) and (2), the information held by a Public Body on the following subject matters shall not be disseminated:
 - a) which seriously jeopardizes the sovereignty, integrity, national security, public peace, stability, and international relations of Nepal.
 - b) which directly affects the investigation, inquiry, and prosecution of a crime.
 - c) which seriously affects the protection of economic, trade, or monetary interest or intellectual property, banking, or trade privacy.
 - d) which directly jeopardizes the harmonious relationship subsisted among various castes or communities.
 - e) which interferes in the individual privacy and security of body, life, property, or health of a person. Provided that, a Public Body shall not refrain from the responsibility of dissemination of information without appropriate and adequate reason not to share the information.
- 4) If a Public Body has both the information in its record that can be made public and that cannot be made public in accordance with this Act, the Information Officer shall have to provide information to the applicant after separating the information which can be made public.

The Press Council Nepal, set up by the government of Nepal, is an autonomous and independent media regulatory body that oversees the development of Press Freedom in Nepal. It also advises the

government on policy developments in the Nepali media industry. It provides its services under the supervision of the Ministry of Information and Communications. With the consent of the Federation of Nepalese Journalists, the Press Council Nepal has enforced the Journalist Code of Conduct 2016. It has identified 15 duties and responsibilities of journalists and mass media along with what they cannot do. It has also set up a complaint registration procedure.

Media in Nepal

The printing and publication history of Nepal goes back to the first printing press brought to Nepal by the then-Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana in the year 1851. Prior to that, printing and publication was done in India. Gorkhapatra was the first newspaper in Nepal and is one of the oldest in South Asia. First published in 1901, it has seen 119 years of publication.

The Press Commission was established in 1957 and was later restructured into the Press Advisory Council in 1969. The Supreme Court of Nepal renamed it the Press Council of Nepal in 1972. The Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) is an umbrella organization of more than 13,000 media persons working in all areas of media—print, electronic, and online. Initiated on March 19, 1956 as the Nepal Journalists Association (NJA), it was formally converted into the FNJ on June 25, 1995. It is a full member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX).

Nepal ranks 106th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index as of 2019 (Online Khabar, 2018). It ranks third among South Asian countries behind Bhutan (80th) and the Republic of Maldives (98th). According to Press Council Nepal's 2019 annual report, there are 32 television channels, 342 online radio stations, and more than 1,826 online media outlets under operation. It has also been monitoring around 912 print outlets under regular publication.

Social Media as a Digital Public Sphere in Nepal

Though the mainstream media—including print, radio, television, and digital portals—still has greater influence among the public, social media has become the most democratic of forums for the people to voice their issues. However, legal and cultural problems abound in the use of social media in Nepal.

A recent Nepal Media survey shows 95% of households own mobile phones with an average of 2.5 devices per home (Nepali Times, 2019). More than 10 million Nepalis have Facebook accounts and almost 88 percent use Facebook frequently (NapoleonCat, 2020). Forty-five percent are on Facebook messenger, 35 percent use IMO, and 34 percent regularly access YouTube. Facebook is increasingly becoming the preferred source of news and information about local, national, and international happenings. The survey shows that almost five percent of the respondents use Facebook to learn about local events and nine percent rely on it for national and international news. Yet, the level of trust in

Facebook content is relatively low (two percent) compared to radio, television, and newspapers. This indicates that Nepali internet users do not necessarily trust popular internet sites. However, a considerable section of the populace increasingly depends on Facebook for information and also knowledge of the issues that they grapple with in their daily lives.

Social Media and Party Politics

Society as a whole has been affected by the proliferation of digital media and wider access to smartphones and other electronic devices, and party politics has not escaped this impact. As politicking by the existing big and small parties operates in the social landscape, they are bound to engage with the increasing prevalence of the digital public sphere. While street processions, mass meetings, posters, and pamphlets do dominate elections and other political campaigns, no parties can avoid campaigning on social media these days. There is no proper survey that would show how the absence of party activities in the digital public sphere would impact the campaigns, but one can easily surmise that the absence of a party from Facebook would certainly hamper their reach to the general public.

With due recognition of this reality, I would like to draw your attention to some of the party-based activities on social media. For the same, I will discuss some real events that have occurred in the recent past.

Sabin Magar is a youth from Rolpa, one of the least developed and remotest districts of Nepal. One fine day, I met him on my way to the village. He said to me, “There is no internet connection in our village, so we have to walk to the district headquarters to use Facebook.” Sabin often walks miles to use his Facebook account that he opened during his SLC examinations. One of 4.7 million young social media users in Nepal, Sabin has maintained connections with many of his friends and relatives through the social media platform. This huge influence of social media among young people, who comprise 15.6 percent of the total population of Nepal, is a potential area of research and intellectual engagement.

The existing political formations in Nepal are very aware of the likes of Sabin, and they compete with each other to draw the attention of users like him. During elections, political parties actively engage to reach out to people through Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. They have chosen these digital platforms because they know that not just urban voters but voters like Sabin Magar are fond of using these platforms for entertainment and information. In the last few elections held in Nepal, political parties invested a considerable amount of money into making attractive digital posters, videos, and social media posts and at the same time set up a group of people to mobilize their cadres in the sphere.

Most interestingly, the case of Ranju Darshana, candidate for the mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan representing Bibesksheel Party, is outstanding. A young lady—very likely to be dismissed as too young and too meek to take on such a challenging job by the old guard of Nepali politics—was regarded as the harbinger of change in Nepali politics by a considerable section of the population. Her speeches, laced with robust challenges to systemic corruption and to the existing larger parties, went viral on social media platforms. This changed the perception of voters, eventually ensuring the support of more than a quarter of the voters from the city. Darshana's campaigners used social media platforms such as Twitter,

Facebook, and Instagram to extensively influence potential voters through audio/video message, texts, GIFs, and memes. They also used analytics describing varied indicators to compare the achievements made by the preceding governments.

However, not all election campaigns on digital platforms were as healthy. Party workers and members engaged in unhealthy debates and tried their best to defame the opposition and those who differed from them in terms of ideology. This has posed a risk for those who are neutral and large in number. A considerable amount of disinformation, fake news, doctored images, etc. were used by the party cadres of almost all of the major parties to defame their rival candidates. The hatred and animosity cooked up on social media would sometimes spill out to the streets, creating different scuffles and chaos. Personal slander against rival candidates was equally visible in the digital public sphere. Some of the leaders who were made the target of personal slander on Facebook reportedly filed cases in the court.

One of the worst examples of violence is the Saptari incident; the role of social media is crucial here. Five people lost their lives in a sudden spray of gunfire at the end of the then-CPN-UML's mass meeting in Saptari on March 6, 2017. Ironically, those who lost their lives in the political agitation had nothing to do with the political campaign. One of the victims, Sanjan Mehta, was a 24-year-old graduate who was planning to sit the public service examination soon. Another victim, Birendra Mahato, was the father of three daughters and a son, who had come out of his house to buy candies for his children. Anand Shah, a senior healthcare worker, was caught in the gunfire when he was returning home from an anti-polio campaign. Likewise, Pitambar Mandal was a street food vendor and Inardev Yadav was a farmer with no distinct political or ideological leaning.

The political parties of Madhesh point to the then-CPN-UML leader KP Sharma Oli, who, according to them, always gave insensitive anti-Madheshi and racist speeches. Many in Madhesh believe that the speeches by Oli, mainly circulated through Facebook, fueled the sudden protest in Madhesh which killed these innocent people. The cadres of Madhesi Morcha had made a public announcement to prohibit Oli and his party from entering the Madhesh region. Paying no heed to this announcement or the impact his speeches had made on the psyche of Madhesi youths, the then-CPN-UML led by Oli started a mass meeting in Tilathi of Saptari. Already angry with the social media circulation of “anti-Madhesh” speeches, a huge crowd gathered to stop the meeting. The clash ensued, police opened fire, and random shooting at the group resulted in the death of innocent onlookers. Human rights activist Mohana Ansari blamed security forces for using excessive force. After four days of observation, she said, “Those who died were in fact murdered. The government should be answerable.”

Viral – A New Phenomenon

These are some of the outstanding examples of how the presence of social media among us has already made a conspicuous dent in the larger political landscape. Beyond political campaigns and protests, the “viral” phenomenon of social media is making an unprecedented impact on mass culture and psychology. Independent YouTubers—who act as journalists without any specific training and with no strict

compliance to any of the standard norms or values of the fraternity—have been superseding the impact of the professional media sector in Nepal. Sensationalizing every big and small event through YouTube, they aspire to get as many hits as possible to earn quick money from the platform.

More than anything else, the reality of some of the viral stories doing their innumerable rounds in the browsers of Nepali users will help us understand how disinformation is raging like wildfire in the Nepali digital public sphere. Kantipur Daily, the largest-selling mainstream press, has published two investigative stories on some of the largest trending viral YouTube stories in Nepal. Kantipur reporter Janaka Raj Sapkota³ has brought out the hidden kernels in these viral stories. Though these well-researched reports are widely shared across digital platforms, they are not as popular as the videos investigated in these pieces.

The following is an excerpt of an outstanding example from Sapkota (2020).

Amidst the corona crisis, first appeared a few photos of a man with his son tied in his shirt, pedaling a rickshaw in one Kathmandu gully. The photos, posted on Facebook, were accompanied by a short story: Arjun BK was left with no choice but to tie his son on his back to pull the rickshaw after his wife left him four months back. With no one to attend to the kid at home, he is compelled to carry his son on his back and work. Once the story with the photo appeared on Facebook, a couple of popular YouTubers tracked down the address of Arjun and started flocking to his door. He set aside his real work and became busy recounting his heart-wrenching stories to the several cameras pointed toward him. Thousands of social media users in Nepal started posting these videos and made Arjun go viral within no time. At the same time, most of the users cursed his wife for abandoning the little child and her husband.

There are more than one hundred thousand comments on one of Arjun's videos and millions have shared the story. Kantipur reporter Sapkota went to meet Arjun, tracked down the address of his wife—who, according to the viral videos, had abandoned her son when he was just four months old—and found the viral story to be a concocted one. Actually, when the first few photos of Arjun were posted on Facebook, his wife was still with him in the rented room in Kathmandu. Following a scuffle between husband and wife, she decided to leave for her parent's home the next day. While he accompanied her to the bus park, he didn't let her son go with her.

Before this investigation was published in Kantipur, the YouTubers had already held interviews with many people who knew Arjun including his landlady, his mother living in his village, and his neighbors. All of these people, interviewed by the YouTubers, accused his wife Laxmi of abandoning her son and husband. Laxmi has been portrayed as the main villain of these viral stories and people poured accusations and slander against her in their social media posts accompanying these videos. While Arjun

³ Widely known for his investigative pieces on labor migration.

became a hero, a savior of the child, a man with great compassion, his wife—apparently with no grave mistakes—appeared to be the major culprit.

At the same time, the video has also been used by many who are irritated by the voices raised by women’s rights activists and feminists against the patriarchy-entrenched Nepali society. This story was used to claim that the stories of oppressed males hardly come to the surface. With the aim of defaming feminist activism as a borrowed western idea, this video was used as a very effective tool in the digital public sphere. For example, one male, famous for his anti-women posts, wrote on Facebook, “Where are the feminist revolutionaries? Don’t they hear the plight of this man? Don’t they have big enough heart to realize the pain of this poor man victimized by his woman?” With few shreds of truth and a largely concocted story, the sensational video went viral and people actually believed it to be true. When he was asked about the reality by Kantipur, Arjun confessed, “Actually, it was my mistake to give a false story in the very beginning.”

The second part of the same story goes on to track a YouTuber who took the videos of Arjun’s family living in village. The YouTuber, named Milan Bista, followed other YouTubers who had gone viral by sharing Arjun’s story. Bista came to this job of independent YouTubing after a short stint teaching at several colleges in Kathmandu. A science graduate, Bista also tried his hand at song composition early on. When he was writing popular songs, other YouTubers interviewed him as a subject. He gave nearly a hundred interviews to these YouTubers. He found out they were earning good money making videos and posting on YouTube, and so he jumped in as well. Out of the four colleges where he was teaching, he left one and started making videos. He would find some interesting issues, reach out with the camera, come back home, edit the stuff, and post it online. He said to Kantipur, “I started making 20 thousand to 1 lakh 20 thousand rupees per month from these videos.” Earning way more than his teaching job, he decided to work more on this independent YouTubing business.

All of these YouTubers, with no professional training and no compliance with the strict ethical standards set by journalism, are free to post whatever they think has the potential to go viral. The major intention behind the work is obviously the perks they earn with this completely independent—with no one to censor or edit above them—job. There is some exemplary work done by sensible people who give due attention to the ethics and values of journalism on YouTube, but they hardly get any traction on social media. Random interviews related to gruesome rape cases have also gone equally viral on social media platforms in Nepal. Most of these videos carry half-truths, lies, or completely concocted stories.

Another genre pulling the attention of thousands of viewers in Nepal is video analysis of current events and politics. A set of people known as political and cultural analysts are interviewed widely by YouTubers for their acerbic tone against the perceived “ills of society and politics.” Rather than critical analysis, they spew venom against politicians, institutions, and random events. The Kathmandu grapevine says that some of these interviewees receive a good amount of money from the YouTubers who film their interviews and post them on social media platforms.

Coronavirus Crisis – Disinformation Campaigns

Demographically, social media platforms are primarily used by youths, and all of those who are independently YouTubing are also youths. This doesn't mean other age groups don't use social media platforms. Even elderly people—those who have access to the internet and who can read and write—mostly rely on Facebook for their information. Many form opinions on issues on the basis of the videos and text that appear in their timelines. However, it is largely youths who are caught in this digital whirlwind created by the proliferation of social media. Several campaigns about the coronavirus crisis have been started online and all have youths at the forefront.

There are several social media startups and campaigns which generally focus on health issues, health precautions to be taken to remain safe during the pandemic, home deliveries of basic supplies with a view of decreasing mobility in market areas, and other such topics. These are good efforts being made by youths during the current crisis. In addition to this, young doctors, virologists, and experts have taken to social media platforms to tackle the misinformation and disinformation being spread during the pandemic. The most worrying aspect is that there are an equal number of campaigns being run by Nepali social media users with the aim of dismissing the whole crisis on the basis of some popular conspiracy theories.

Let me give an example of a Facebook user with a huge following who has been consistently posting links, videos, messages, etc. against the use of masks, sanitizers, and social distancing. Almost every day, this user tries to convince his viewers to speak up against the “conspiracy of a handful of capitalists and imperialists for selling vaccines, medicines, sanitizers, and masks to gullible people.” He provides several examples and cases to explain why the coronavirus crisis is in no way a pandemic and how it is a simple flu tackled easily by some herbal medicines. Out of nearly fifty comments on each post, the majority applaud him for speaking the truth. A few of them try to argue against his ideas in the comment section, but the majority of his viewers remain oblivious.

As the coronavirus crisis has unfolded, these kinds of posts have proliferated on social media. The number of shares, likes, and comments these posts gather is far ahead of the number of likes and shares that genuine coronavirus-related links and videos receive. Though I am unable to cite any genuine research done on this kind of disinformation surrounding COVID-19 spread through social media and the devastating impacts it might have already had, I can, at least, say that this has contributed to the consistent downplaying of the grave risks posed by this disease by the authorities.

One glaring example of the government downplaying the risk of COVID-19 is the statements made by the Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli himself. PM Oli has repeatedly said that coronavirus is nothing but a simple flu and can be easily prevented by the regular use of turmeric and warm water. Though many scientists and experts have already commented on the falsity of this information, he has not stopped repeating the same statement, let alone asked for forgiveness for spreading unproven misinformation. Encouraged by the PM's statement, many people—with and without experience in herbal medicines and treatment—have taken to social media platforms to talk about how some natural plants can help cure the disease caused by coronavirus. These appear to be deliberate campaigns designed to downplay the risks of coronavirus contagion.

Conclusion

American political scientist Larry Diamond has laid out four key elements for a functional democracy:

- i. A system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections;
- ii. Active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life;
- iii. Protection of the human rights of all citizens; and
- iv. A rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

Citizen participation in politics and civic life has been a major challenge in the context of Nepal. Political representation has not been as inclusive as envisioned in the constitution. Nepali politics lacks a culture of consulting with the public and the elected leaders barely create opportunities to interact with their voters. This results in an increased gap between the public and political leaders that nurtures a feeling of isolation and neglect among the citizens.

The digital public sphere could be an interesting idea to foster critical debates and serious civic engagement in the issues pertinent to larger society. But the flow of fake news and disinformation have impacted the whole process. At the same time, there have been attempts by the government to curb the freedom of speech ensured by the government to the people. Dissenting posts—mostly the loudest ones—made by artists have irked the administration. Several failed attempts to stop them through arrest and harassment have already taken place. Despite these failed attempts, there are no real signs that the government has realized the risks of oppressing free voices on digital platforms.

The deluge of fake news and disinformation on the one hand and the government's attempts to stifle dissenting voices on the other hand have discouraged critical debates. Without critical debates and a free flow of dissenting voices, democracy becomes dysfunctional. Thus, it is pertinent to find ways—both by civil society groups, individual citizens, and government agencies—to foster informed and critical debates to lessen the bad impacts made by fake news and disinformation.

This issue becomes more pertinent as the coronavirus crisis further exacerbates our situation. We are enduring a political, cultural, and even psychological crisis at this time. Disinformation campaigns have increased the vulnerability of minority groups, including Dalits, women, Madheshis, and Janajatis. Simultaneously, increasingly large-scale scams have been surfacing amid the crisis. While many business and service sectors are suffering the devastating blow of the crisis, a small section close to the government is trying its best to extract more from already dwindling resources.

At this juncture, social media platforms appear as a double-edged sword. One end serves the democratic purpose by providing an apparently free space for critical discussion and important dialogues to take place. At the other end, it has become the most potent source of devastating fakes, disinformation, and smear campaigns, further increasing the vulnerability of the weaker sections of society. Thus, to reject it fully is not a choice, but neither we can ask the state to curb the rights of all social media platforms. The only option left is to engage with it. At the same, it is important for all of

us to start thinking about the impact of social media while duly considering its pervasiveness. Escaping from it is not going to bring about any positive changes in the present scenario. Rather, studying it, investigating it, and helping the professionals who are trying to make these platforms more secure can be the first steps towards positive engagement. Nepal's hard-earned democracy is seeking a well thought-out, collective, and intellectual intervention. With no such intervention, our democracy is doomed to fail.

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Country Case 14: Sri Lanka

Information Disorder and Mainstream Media in Sri Lanka: A Case Study¹

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Verité Research

1. Introduction

A great deal of research on information disorder⁴ focuses on social media as the source, producer, and distributor of false content. Within this research, mainstream media⁵ is often positioned as an inadvertent distributor or amplifier of false and harmful content, not as a producer of it (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 96; Philips, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 25). Similarly, research on the problem of information disorder within Sri Lanka often focuses on social media as a producer of it. In Sri Lanka, only 37 percent of the population uses the internet, and only 61 percent of internet users use social media (Amarasinghe et al., 2019, May 22, pp. 46, 74). Meanwhile, 51.9 percent of the population reads newspapers, and 91 percent watches television (Kantar Lanka Market Research Bureau, 2017). In a country where mainstream media has a far greater reach than social media, it is important to examine the mainstream media's role in the production of information disorder and its consequences.

Research on the production and impact of information disorder in Sri Lanka's mainstream media is perhaps sparse due to two reasons. The first is the perceived credibility of mainstream media. Mainstream media is linked to larger organizational structures with editorial boards that are expected to verify sources and facts to meet a standard of credibility. The second reason is impunity. Adequate checks are expected to be in place to prevent unethical media practices. However, the accountability mechanisms for Sri Lanka's mainstream media are ineffective. The Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (PCCSL)—an independent, self-regulatory body for print media—lacks legal powers to act against unethical media practices. The Sri Lanka Press Council (SLPC) wields legal power up to and including allowing “for imprisonment of persons for certain publications” (Legal Team - MOM Sri Lanka, 2018, p. 40). Due to

¹ The team comprised of Samesha de Silva, Edward Uthayathas, Mahoshadi Peiris, Jonathan Cruse, Arthur Wamanan Sornalingam, Rochel Canagasabay & Dayan Surendranathan. Overall research supervision was provided by Nishan de Mel and Deepanjali Abeywardana.

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⁴ This term is further detailed in the Defining “Information Disorder” section.

⁵ In the context of this study, “mainstream media” generally refers to widely consumed TV channels, print media, and radio stations. The specific media outlets selected for the purposes of this study are detailed in the Methodology section.

the extent of legal measures allowed by the SLPC law, it is perceived to facilitate “authoritarian abuses” (Johnson, 2015, July 16). As this power can be easily abused, it is not a viable regulatory body for instances of information disorder. TV and radio are regulated by the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (TRC). However, this institution largely deals with spectrum allocation as opposed to unethical media practices. The combined effect of perceived credibility and impunity can make information disorder in the mainstream media particularly dangerous. The production and impact of information disorder in Sri Lanka’s mainstream media is further exacerbated by the media’s dual presence both online and offline. By maintaining a significant presence in both domains, information disorder in mainstream media has the potential to reach a wider audience than social media.

This study aims to contribute to literature that analyzes the role of Sri Lanka’s mainstream media as a distributor *and* producer of information disorder. For this purpose, a case study approach is used to evaluate reporting on Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi. The study focuses on the Sri Lankan mainstream media’s role in three parts. First, it examines the phenomenon of information disorder in a global and Sri Lankan context. The case study of media reporting on Dr. Shafi is located within this broader phenomenon. The study next presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of five weeks of monitoring primetime TV and press news. Second, it analyzes the impact of the information disorder surrounding Dr. Shafi. Finally, the study examines responses by the government, media, and media regulatory bodies to the production of information disorder in this specific case.

2. Phenomenon of Information Disorder in Mainstream Media

2.1 Context

2.1.1 Defining “Information Disorder”

“Information disorder” is a term used to explain the complex phenomenon of the production and dissemination of erroneous information. It is sometimes referred to as “fake news” or “disinformation.” This definition was selected based on the Council of Europe’s report on information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 20), which establishes a robust theoretical framework to address the lack of precision in the language used to discuss the phenomenon. This framework is comprehensive and is cited in academic papers on types of information disorder (Ireton, & Posetti, 2018; Kaur et al., 2019; Reppell & Shein, 2019, p. 3). The Council’s report identifies three constituents of information disorder which rely on two factors: the truth value of the information and the intent behind publicizing the information. These are:

- 1) Disinformation: Information that is false, known to be false, and deliberately shared to harm a person, social group, organization, or country;
- 2) Misinformation: Information that is false and not shared with the intention of causing harm, and;
- 3) Malinformation: Information that is true and shared to inflict harm on a person, organization, or country.

The report also identifies three phases of information disorder. The phases describe the process that information disorder goes through. The phases of information disorder are:

1. Creation: The message is created.
2. Production: The message is turned into a media product.
3. Distribution: The message is distributed or made public.

This study draws from and engages with these definitions and uses them to analyze a selected case study.

2.1.2 Research on Information Disorder: Global and Local Contexts

A great deal of research on information disorder focuses on social media being the creator, producer, and distributor of false content, thereby participating in all three phases of information disorder. Discussions on information disorder often position mainstream media as participating in the third phase, i.e., a distributor/amplifier (Philips, 2018). Mainstream media is often perceived as susceptible to inadvertently running falsified content which has been maliciously developed on social media (Ireton & Posetti, 2018, p. 96). For instance, the Council of Europe's report on information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 25) states, “The role of the mainstream media as agents in amplifying (intentionally or not) fabricated or misleading content is crucial to understanding information disorder. Fact-checking has always been fundamental to quality journalism, but the techniques used by hoaxers and those attempting to disseminate dis-information have never been this sophisticated.” Similarly, First Draft, an organization dedicated to tackling information disorder, positions mainstream media as “woefully unprepared to tackle the increasingly effective and dangerous tactics deployed by those intent on disrupting the public sphere” (Wardle, 2018).

In Sri Lanka, mainstream media has a greater reach than social media (Amarasinghe et al., 2019, May 22, pp. 46, 74; Kantar Lanka Market Research Bureau, 2017). Despite this reach, research on information disorder often focuses more on social media as a source and driver than mainstream media in Sri Lanka. This focus is often supported by the fact that information disorder, coupled with hate speech on social media in Sri Lanka, has contributed to a pattern of violence and antagonism towards minorities (Samaratunga & Hattotuwa, 2014). For instance, social media was used as a tool of information disorder and hate speech targeting Muslims between 2018 and 2019 (Taub & Fisher, 2018).

The Sri Lankan government also tends to focus on social media, restricting it in times of increased tensions (Funke & Benkelman, 2019) while overlooking the role played by mainstream media. This oversight is harmful for two reasons. First, it undermines several occasions where Sri Lanka's mainstream media has acted as a producer of information disorder. Second, it overlooks the consequences of information disorder produced by mainstream media.

The mainstream media's role in producing information disorder has had a negative impact in Sri Lanka. For example, as highlighted by Ethics Eye (2019, November 13), in the week leading up to the 2019 presidential election, three well-established media outlets, *Aruna*, *Mawbima* and *Ceylon Today*, carried a false statement attributed to an MP of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), M.A. Sumanthiran.

The newspapers claimed that Sumanthiran had stated, “the Sinhalese can be defeated only by voting for Sajith [Premadasa].” This claim was published amidst allegations of a “secret pact” between Sumanthiran’s party, the TNA, and presidential candidate Sajith Premadasa. It factored into existing ethnic fault lines, which were heightened prior to the election, by suggesting that Premadasa was politically compromised and would mainly work for the betterment of the Tamil minority. The veracity of this claim was subsequently countered by Ethics Eye—a social media platform dedicated to improving media ethics.

Similarly, popular channel *Hiru TV* misreported United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) MP A.H.M Fowzie’s statement. According to the channel, Fowzie had stated that to “protect the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Gotabaya Rajapaksa should be killed” (Ranawana, 2019, October 25). Fowzie debunked *Hiru TV*’s claim and clarified his statement. He mentioned that Rajapaksa should be defeated at the presidential polls to save the SLFP—as several party members were joining the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), which had fielded Rajapaksa as its candidate. This serious claim is another example of the production of information disorder by the mainstream media. This type of information disorder is often seen in the mainstream media in Sri Lanka. The consequences of the production of information disorder by the mainstream media are far reaching, especially in a country with a history of ethnic conflict. Despite the impact, the media is rarely held accountable for its failure to meet ethical standards or for the harm it causes to society.

2.1.3 The Dr. Shafi Case Study: A Trial-By-Media

Having briefly outlined the extent of information disorder produced by Sri Lanka’s mainstream media, this section evaluates this phenomenon through the case of Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi, known widely as Dr. Shafi. This case study was selected based on the significant public and political interest it generated and the volume of reporting surrounding it, allowing for an in-depth study. This section provides the context for the case study and a brief description of Dr. Shafi.

Context of Anti-Muslim Sentiment in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is still recovering from a nearly three-decade conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the state. According to Gunatilleke (2015), despite the war ending, “ethnic and religious violence has continued to take place in the country. Post-war discourses have produced fresh tensions and fault lines and have fostered an environment in which attacks on religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians, have taken place with impunity.” The post-war years have particularly been marked by a resurgence of animosity and violence against the country’s Muslim minority.

Following the Easter Sunday attacks of April 2019,⁶ which were reportedly perpetrated by suicide bombers connected to the organization Nation of Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), the insecurities felt by segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist population increased. Incidents of violence against Muslims and Muslim-owned property arose in the weeks that followed. Some of these incidents included widescale

⁶ The bombing of three churches and three luxury hotels on April 21, 2019 by an Islamic extremist group which resulted in the deaths of 259 people.

riots in Kurunegala and Gampaha. Large-scale suspicion rose towards Muslims, and they were subjected to economic, socio-cultural, and political policing. In the aftermath, the government took steps to ban face coverings, including burqas and niqabs. Muslim-owned businesses were boycotted, and Muslim politicians were asked to resign by certain Sinhala-Buddhist segments. The Dr. Shafi case arose in this context, one month after the attacks.

The Dr. Shafi Case Study

Dr. Shafi was a senior house officer in gynecology and obstetrics at the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital (KTH). He was a member of the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC), which campaigned under the United National Party (UNP) in the 2015 general election. He secured 54,000 preferential votes and placed 8th in the list of candidates on the basis of preferential votes received. However, he was not elected as an MP as the UNP only obtained seven seats in the Kurunegala District, in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka. After his election defeat, Shafi reportedly appealed to the Ministry of Health to be reinstated at the hospital. Following a cabinet vote, he was reinstated (Perera, 2019, May 28).

On May 23, 2019, the *Divaina*⁷ newspaper reported that the police had commenced investigations into an unnamed doctor who was reportedly a prominent member of “a Thowheed Jamath organization.” The doctor was alleged to have “illegally sterilized” more than 4,000 Sinhala-Buddhist women after caesarean operations. On the same day, Prof. Channa Jayasumana from the Rajarata University of Sri Lanka shared the name and picture of Shafi in relation to the *Divaina* article. On May 24, Shafi was arrested over charges of earning assets through suspicious means. The following day, the hospital director of the KTH, Dr. Sarath Weerabandara, convened a media briefing. At the briefing, he requested that any women who suspected that they had been illegally sterilized by Shafi lodge complaints against him. According to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) report (2019), over the course of the following weeks, several hundred women lodged complaints against Shafi with the hospital and the CID. The CID’s report eventually noted that the sterilization-related claims were untrue, as were the claims of terrorist links and illegal assets. However, the media had already widely reported on the story without substantiating its claims.

⁷ *Divaina* weekly (Sunday edition) reaches approx. 6.88 percent of national readers, whereas *Divaina* daily has a readership share of 1.25 percent. This totals 8.8 percent. (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017, *Divaina*)

Timeline of the Dr. Shafi case study

24 May 2019

- Press quotes Police Spokesperson Ruwan Gunasekara saying that he had not received any complaints and that an investigation had only been launched into an incident pertaining to a doctor from Kurunegala on allegations of acquiring a large amount of assets
- Press reports that Speaker Karu Jayasuriya had requested the CID to investigate on the truth behind the *Divaina* article

27 May 2019

- Press reports that the Acting IGP C.D. Wickramaratne has handed over details pertaining to the investigation on Shafi to the CID
- Press reports that Director of the KTH, Dr. Weerabandara had requested mothers to lodge complaints if they have suspicions that they have been physically affected during caesarean surgeries conducted by Shafi
- Press reports that Gunasekara requested mothers to submit complaints to the CID on suspicions of sterilisation surgeries

23 May 2019

- *Divaina* publishes an article with the headline "Thowheed Jamath doctor sterilised 4,000 Sinhala Buddhist mothers after caesarean surgeries."
- Prof. Channa Jayasumana reveals Dr. Shafi's identity via his Facebook account

25 May 2019

- Shafi is arrested for acquiring assets through suspicious means

29 May 2019

- Press reports that between 50 and 123 complaints were lodged about Shafi
- Press reports of a protest in Kurunegala against Shafi, demanding zero political interference into the investigations

Timeline of the Dr. Shafi case study

- 29 May 2019 (Cont.)**

 - A six-member committee is appointed by the Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Nutrition & Indigenous Medicine (MoH) Wasantha Perera to investigate complaints filed against Shafi
 - Press reports that the entire KTH staff has rejected the request made to testify before the committee appointed by the MoH to investigate allegations levelled against Shafi
- 30 May 2019**

 - Press reports that the CID has initiated an investigation into the allegations levelled against Shafi and that a group from the CID had left for Kurunegala to conduct the investigation
- 5 June 2019**

 - Press reports that the interim report on the initial investigation into the complaints on Shafi of the committee appointed by the MoH was submitted to Wasantha Perera
- 7 June 2019**

 - Press reports that 421 complaints were lodged against Shafi
- 8 June 2019**

 - Press reports that 700-835 complaints were lodged against Dr. Shafi
- 22 - 23 June 2019**

 - Press reports that between 1000 and 1042 complaints were lodged against Shafi
- 26 June 2019**

 - Press reports that Attorney-at-Law Rushdie Habeeb files a Fundamental Rights petition to abolish the detention order on Shafi who was arrested under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The petition also states that Shafi's assets were earned through legal businesses
- 27 June 2019**

 - CID presents a 210-page report before the Kurunegala Magistrate Sampath Kariyawasam and states that according to the investigations conducted thus far it has not been revealed that Shafi has damaged fallopian tubes while conducting caesarean surgeries. CID also states that Shafi will be further detained under the PTA and two private banks will be examined in relation to Shafi's assets
- 25 July 2019**

 - Shafi is granted bail by the Kurunegala Magistrate's Court

2.1.4 Methodology

Prior to presenting the quantitative and qualitative findings that emerged from monitoring media reporting on the Dr. Shafi case, we will explain the methodology used for such monitoring. This study includes the collection of primary data from mainstream media reports and the analysis of secondary literature. The definition of mainstream media in the context of this study is limited to TV, print, and radio. A representative data sample containing only data from primetime TV news and print media was collected. Collection was restricted based on public availability of reporting.

TV channels and newspapers were selected on the basis of viewership and readership (Media Ownership Monitor, n.d.). In print media, the four most-read Sinhala and Tamil newspapers and the three most-read English newspapers were selected. For TV, every national news channel with primetime news segment available online was selected. This sample was representative of the three main languages in Sri Lanka, i.e., Sinhala, Tamil, and English (see Table 1).

Table 1. Media Monitored

Mainstream Media	Language		
	Sinhala	English	Tamil
Television	(i) Hiru TV (ii) TV Derana (iii) Sirasa TV	(i) TV 1 (ii) Ada Derana	(i) Shakthi TV
Print (weekday and weekend editions)	(i) Divaina (ii) Lankadeepa (iii) Mawbima (iv) Silumina/ Dinamina	(i) Sunday Observer/Daily News (ii) Sunday Times/Daily Mirror (iii) The Island	(i) Virakesari (ii) Thinakkural (iii) Thinakaran/ Thinakaran Vaaramanjari (iv) Tamil Mirror

The above news sources were monitored for a period of five weeks, from May 23, 2019 to June 30, 2019. These dates covered the production and distribution of the information disorder, including the peak of the discourse, Shafi's arrest and responses to it, and the majority of discussions over the legal proceedings. This time period was selected to evaluate the media's immediate response to the allegations.

All statements within the sample that were relevant or considered to be of relevance to the case study were maintained in a database. These statements were coded and organized into six categories:

1. False narratives – Proven false sometime after reporting
2. Misleading content – True information presented in a way that makes readers infer false information
3. False connection – Disconnects between the headline/associated images and the article in a misleading way
4. Direct disinformation – Provably false at the time of reporting
5. Counternarratives – Statements questioning or contradicting the false claims about Shafi
6. General news reporting on Shafi's case

Categorization Limitations

From a practical standpoint, it is difficult to determine with certainty the intent of anyone producing information. The difficulty in outlining intent makes it challenging to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation as defined in Section 2.1, as the chief distinction relies on intent. It also poses a challenge as far as identifying malinformation as defined in Section 2.1. Furthermore, this framework does not adequately account for instances where an agent shares information that is presumed to be true (yet turns out to be false) and is likely to cause harm.

Therefore, the label “direct disinformation” was only extended to statements that were proven to be false at the time of publishing. Any statement that was proven to be false after publishing was classified as a “false narrative” and not as misinformation or disinformation, as it could be argued that the reporter had no knowledge that the statement was untrue. However, it is possible that some statements classified as “false narratives,” “misleading content,” or “false connections” were published with negative intent and can therefore be classified as disinformation. Similarly, it is possible that some reports categorized as “general news reporting” were published with negative intent and can be categorized as malinformation.

2.2 Findings

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to assess the primary data collected through media monitoring. The quantitative findings demonstrate the extent of information disorder on Shafi and its many forms. The qualitative findings demonstrate what elements were used by the mainstream media to produce information disorder.

2.2.1 Quantitative Findings

Table 2. Number of Reports on Shafi

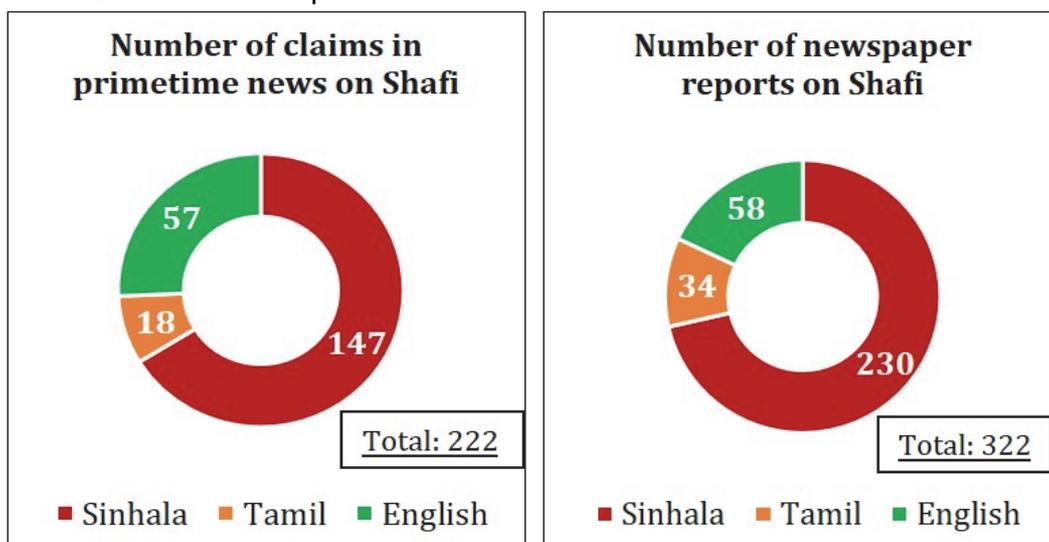
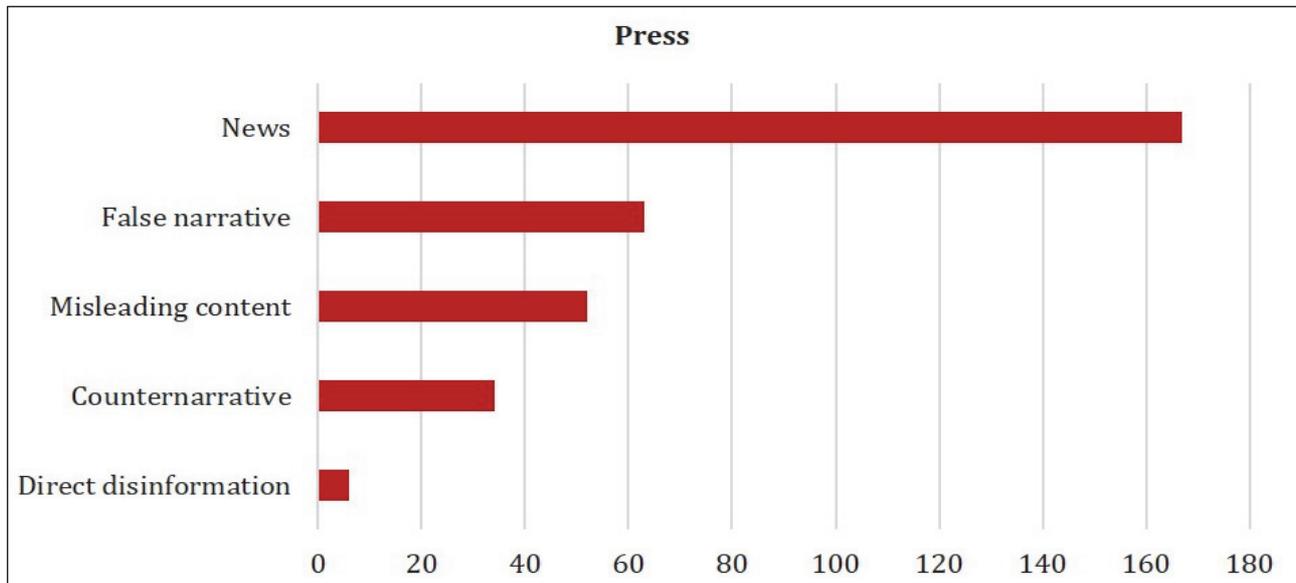
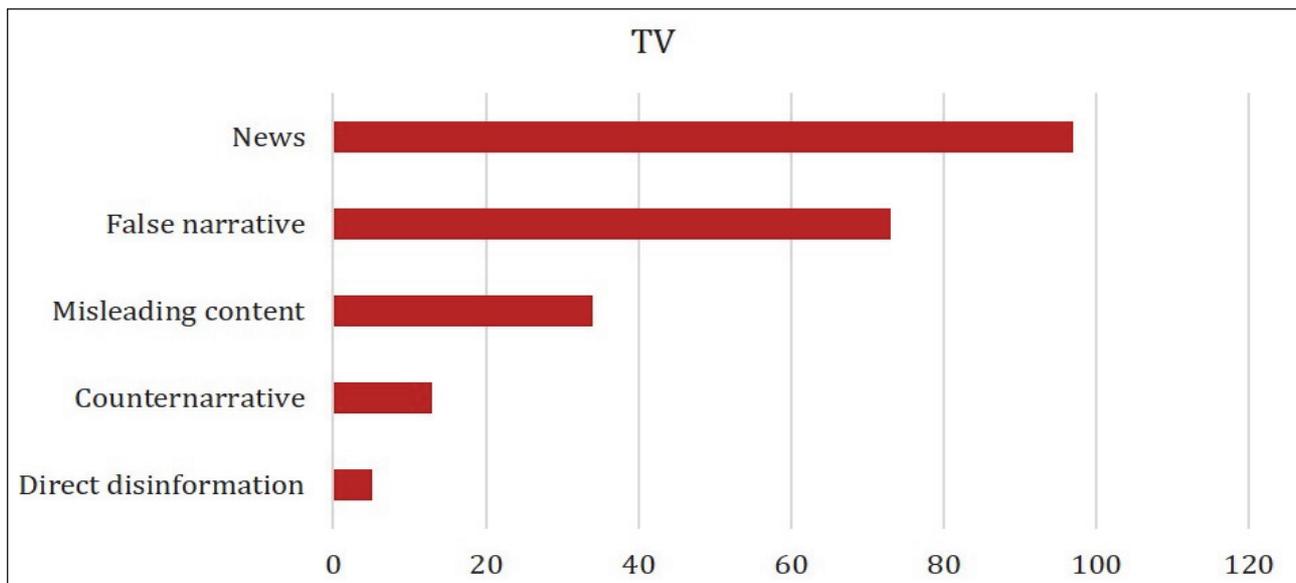


Table 3. Press Category Breakdown⁸**Table 4.** TV Category Breakdown

Detailed findings from each category are expounded below.

Table 5.1. False Narratives

False Narratives		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	55	53
Tamil	2	2
English	6	18

⁸ No reporting fell into the category of “false connection” in the press or on TV. False connections are usually utilized to drive traffic and clicks to media content. Therefore, there is a possibility that this type of information disorder was not prevalent in mainstream media because audiences received reporting through mediums that rarely use web traffic or clicks to measure success, as online content is simply a replication of print and TV content.

All reports that were proven false sometime after reporting were classified as false narratives. Reports under this category featured claims about Shafi performing sterilizations with little or no attempts to check the veracity of these claims. There was also no indication that these claims may have been false as they were not referred to as “alleged.”

Table 5.2. Misleading Content

Misleading Content		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	41	24
Tamil	3	1
English	8	9

All reports that presented true information in a way that led readers to false conclusions were classified as misleading content. Most reports in this category strongly suggested that Shafi was arrested due to performing “illegal sterilizations.” This suggestion disregarded the grounds of his arrest being the acquisition of assets through reportedly suspicious means and possible links to terrorism.

Other reports in this category implied Shafi’s guilt by connecting certain related claims. For example, one article stated, “It was reported that several members of the Ministry of Health are trying to save the gynecologist and obstetrician Dr. Shafi Siyabdeen who is under arrest” (Thathsara, 2019, May 30). Such reports implied Shafi’s guilt by emphasizing undue political interference in the attempts to “save” him.

Table 5.3. Direct Disinformation

Direct Disinformation		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	4	4
Tamil	0	0
English	2	1

All reports that contained information that was proven false at the time of reporting were classified as direct disinformation. By definition, disinformation is false information that is deliberately shared with the intent to harm. Given the difficulty in proving a reporter's intent, as elucidated in the methodology section, there were very few statements in this category.

Table 5.4. Counternarratives

Counternarratives		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	11	7
Tamil	4	2
English	19	`

All reports that contained statements questioning or debunking the false claims about Shafi were classified as counternarratives. The media carried two types of counternarratives. The more common type tried to logically counter the claims. The less common type drew attention to the underlying anti-Muslim sentiments surrounding the claims.

Table 5.5. General News Reporting

General News Reporting		
Language	Press	TV
Sinhala	119	59
Tamil	25	13
English	23	25

The majority of items on the topic of Shafi were classified as news. These spanned a range of topics and did not overlap with any of the above categories.

2.2.2 Qualitative Findings

The continuous reporting of information disorder in this case resulted in the production of an overarching false narrative: a “Muslim” doctor of gynecology and obstetrics, i.e., Dr. Segu Siyabdeen Mohamed Shafi, intentionally and “illegally sterilized” thousands of Sinhala-Buddhist women while carrying out caesarean operations to “exterminate” the Sinhala race.

A qualitative analysis of the monitored data suggests that mainstream media not only acted as an amplifier of this narrative, but also as a producer. The message was first disseminated through mainstream media, particularly Sinhala-language media, and not through social media. The analysis also suggests that the mainstream media produced the false narrative by using four interconnected elements: building on pre-existing narratives; establishing legitimacy through authoritative sources; creating an emotional connection through sympathy, sensationalism, and justice; and giving prominence to the story. By using these elements, the media turned false information into a narrative that became a successful media product. These elements may be viewed as a framework through which to examine all information disorder across both mainstream and social media.

Element 1: Building on Pre-existing Narratives

From the outset, several articles on the Dr. Shafi case were linked to pre-existing negative narratives on Sri Lanka’s Muslim community. These articles drew from two main pre-existing fears: (1) that Muslims are strategically “exterminating” the Sinhala-Buddhist population by trying to render Sinhala-Buddhist women infertile, and (2) that Islamist terrorism is a significant threat to the country, especially in the aftermath of the Easter attacks (Verité Research, 2019a). Notably, it was mainly the Sinhala media that featured element 1. The English and Tamil media only used pre-existing narratives when necessary to report on the proceedings of the investigation.

Anti-minority sentiments and violence that have led to attacks against Muslims have been attributed

to a long-standing existential insecurity prevalent among segments of the Sinhala-Buddhist majority population by scholars. One such existential insecurity includes the fear that the Muslim population is increasing while the Sinhala population is decreasing (Gunatilleke, 2018, p. 74). It is in this context that the first fear arose.

The fear of “extermination” through a variety of means has been seen in information disorder campaigns in the past. For example, the anti-Muslim riots in Ampara in 2018 were fueled by social media posts that alleged “sterilization pills” were mixed with the food sold at Muslim-owned restaurants (Gunaratna, 2018). These attacks were led by Buddhist militant groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) and the Mahason Balakaya.

In this vein, in addition to reporting on the alleged surgical “sterilization,” the articles supplemented the main story with other accusations. For example, a report from *Mawbima* stated, “It has been said that Dr. Shafi provided *pani walalu*, *boondi* and *wattalappan* (food items) to a canteen in a major girl's school in Kurunegala... Since the police are also investigating the matter, we thought that this cannot be simple and were concerned about it. Information on mixing medicine that causes sterilization in food items has emerged from time to time for years” (Poramadala, 2019, June 9). These reports draw on the existing fears and beliefs of the Sinhalese regarding the existence of “sterilization pills” and attempts to sterilize women through food items. These pre-existing narratives on sterilization were then used to lend credibility to the claims about the doctor, strengthening the misinformation.

The second fear was apparent from the outset of this case. The very first article published on the incident was titled, “Thowheed Jamath doctor sterilized 4,000 Sinhala-Buddhist mothers after caesarian surgeries” (Randunu, 2019, May 23). By using an association with the (Nation of) Thowheed Jamath, which was proscribed as a terrorist organization following the Easter Attacks, the report contextualized this doctor within the narrative of Muslim jihadists in the aftermath of the attacks. This article, and many others that followed, further entrenched the idea of Shafi as a terrorist and used existing narratives around religious extremism that surfaced after the attacks to legitimize the allegations against him.

The media also included comparisons between Shafi and Zahran Hashim, who is considered to have been the orchestrator of the Easter attacks. For example, *Mawbima* reported UPFA MP Udaya Gammanpila stating “Shafi is a greater terrorist than Zahran” (Udukumbura, 2019, June 25). Reports like this relied on existing knowledge of Zahran Hashim as the feared terrorist who executed one of the deadliest attacks in Sri Lanka, and connected it with Shafi, who was framed as a collaborator or even bigger threat.

This contextualization of Shafi as one part of an organized effort to strengthen Islamist terrorism and carry out “genocide” of the Sinhala people helped make the sterilization claims seem both believable and consumable. Such contextualization further entrenched the information disorder being produced by the media.

Element 2: Establishing Legitimacy through Authoritative Sources

When reporting on the Dr. Shafi case, media of every language and medium featured the voices of

highly authoritative sources. Sources such as high-level political actors and religious leaders are respected by society and expected to meet a higher standard of reliability. Similarly, medical professionals are expected to have a more credible understanding of medical practice, while other authorities such as lawyers and police are believed to be credible sources on legality. Therefore, by featuring the responses of these individuals, the media strengthened the legitimacy and trust in this information disorder.

However, due to Shafi's political involvement, religion, ethnicity, and position at the KTH, it is possible that even trusted sources had their own intentions. Despite possible vested interests, several media reports quoted statements made by MPs, Buddhist monks, and doctors, both directly addressing the allegations and providing complementary narratives.

In the political sphere for example, *Divaina* reported that UPFA MP Rohitha Abeygunawardana stated, “he and the SLPP offer respect and are thankful to *Divaina* for the revelation of Dr. Shafi Siyabdeen” (Balasuriya, 2019, May 28). The UPFA and SLPP are political rivals of the UNP, the party Shafi campaigned under. However, the MP's statement was likely used to bolster the paper's claim and strengthen the false narrative of sterilizations.

Similarly, in the political and religious sphere, *Divaina* reported that Gampaha District MP Ven. Athuraliye Rathana Thera “stated that allegations levelled against Shafi have been covered up by the government” (Dharmasena, 2019, June 25), implying that the allegations were credible and needed to be concealed. Ven. Rathana Thera is a Buddhist monk and politician who is considered a representative of the Sinhala-Buddhist force (Verité Research, 2019b). As he is a trusted figure among the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency, reports such as these had a higher likelihood of enhancing the believability of the claims.

In the medical sphere, the media quoted several doctors engaging with the accusations against Shafi. For example, *Mawbima* reported Prof. Channa Jayasumana of the medical faculty of the Rajarata University as stating that “there are 13 [Muslim] doctors from nine other hospitals who have conducted organized sterilization surgeries” (Ranaweera, 2019, June 21). Professor Jayasumana is not a medical doctor but a medical researcher who is a member of an influential organization called Viyathmaga, which is associated with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sinhala-Buddhist values. Such reports not only bolstered the credibility of the information disorder, they also fed into pre-existing narratives of injustices carried out by Muslims towards Sinhalese.

When quoting medical professionals, the media also added “scientific” explanations to “prove” the possibility of sterilization surgeries taking place. One such example is the reference to the fragility of the fallopian tubes (Palandeniya, 2019, June 2). These types of reports further strengthened the scientific credibility of the sterilization claims and helped entrench the portrayal of Shafi as a “villain.”

Element 3: Creating an Emotional Connection through Sympathy, Sensationalism, and Injustice

The media also provoked emotive responses from its audiences in a manner that legitimized Shafi as a “real” threat. While the scientific language used by authoritative sources led the false narrative to seem rational, the emotional language led it to *feel* believable. The media mainly inspired three emotions.

The first was grief, which was inspired by drawing sympathy. Media of every language featured the

narratives of mothers who complained of their inability to conceive after having caesareans carried out by Shafi. The English media only presented these narratives on TV news. The Tamil media presented very few on TV and in print. However, the Sinhala media featured these narratives regularly, especially in print, and provided detailed descriptions. For example, an article in *Divaina* reported, “These mothers with tear-filled eyes complained that even though they tried for another child, they could not have a second child” (Randunu, 2019, May 23). Such detailed reporting, coupled with clips of mothers crying on primetime news, provoked sympathetic responses from audiences.

The second was fear, which was inspired by sensationalizing the narrative. Particularly the Sinhala media used emotionally heightened language to describe the alleged sterilizations. Fifteen reports in the Sinhala press and one in English referred to the alleged events as a “massacre” (Abeydeera, 2019, June 9a, June 9b; Alahakoon & Perera, 2019, June 23; Arasakularatne, 2019, June 14; *Dosthara Shafi*, 2019, May 30; Duminda, 2019, June 19, June 28; Fernando, 2019, June 13; Gunaratne, 2019, June 2; Jinapriya, 2019, June 5, June 23, June 25; Munasinghe, 2019, May 29; Ratnaweera, 2019, June 23; Weerasekara, 2019, June 2; Wimalasurendra, 2019, June 12). Several media outlets also used the word “genocide” (Ada Derana, 2019, May 29, 20:22 – 20:27; Gamage, 2019, May 29; Gunaratne, 2019, June 2; Gunathilake, 2019, June 2; Ranaweera, 2019, June 14; Warnakulasuriya, 2019, June 2). For example, *Mawbima* reported that the National Organization for the Protection of Patients' Rights stated that this was “a massacre similar to the scenario that occurred during World War II, under Hitler's army” (Munasinghe, 2019, May 29). The use of this kind of language sensationalized the accusations and stoked the fear felt by the Sinhalese.

The third was anger, which was inspired by appealing to a sense of justice. For example, *Divaina* quoted UPFA MP Wimal Weerawansa as stating, “even though a month has passed after the sterilization incident, the mothers who were victimized due to the incident have not received justice” (*Winditha mawwarunta*, 2019, June 14). Reports like these, including those that used the incendiary rhetoric of genocide and massacres, appealed to a sense of anger at the extent of the injustice. These types of articles too featured prominently in the Sinhala media.

By inspiring grief, fear, and anger, the media was able to make audiences connect to the narrative on an emotional level. This connection helped establish the idea that Shafi was a “real” threat to the Sinhalese, which in turn lent credibility to the narrative of his guilt.

Element 4: Giving Prominence to the Story

In addition to the three narrative elements, the prominence given by the media to the case contributed towards the production of the false narrative on Shafi. By overwhelming the daily news cycle with regular reporting, new components, and details on the Dr. Shafi case, the media routinely produced a false narrative. The prominence given comprised two factors: volume and prioritization.

The sheer volume of coverage on Shafi in the media, coupled with the relative importance afforded to that coverage, likely contributed to the spread of information disorder. Having Shafi's name consistently presented in connection with the notion of “illegal sterilizations” may have strengthened the audience's association between Shafi and the sterilizations, regardless of whether the articles contained

information disorder, presented a counternarrative, or were merely featuring truthful content. In fact, in the Sinhala media, even general news reporting without any mis- or disinformation was often negative in sentiment, which could have strengthened negative associations with Shafi despite presenting truthful information. This negative sentiment, if intentionally included to cause harm, may allow for these reports to be classified as malinformation, contributing to the information disorder produced by the Sinhala media.

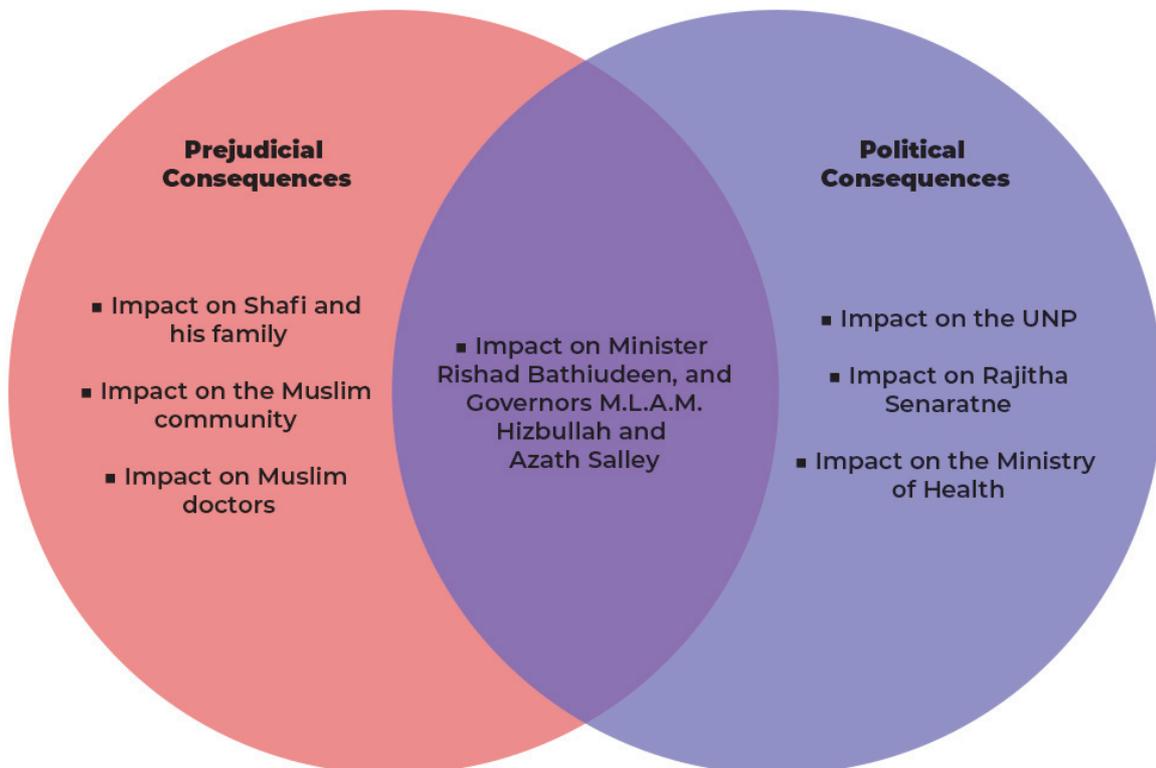
In terms of prioritization, the prominence given to the false narrative on Shafi was particularly evident in the Sinhala language media. Reports on Shafi were clearly prioritized above other potential news. The Sinhala press featured the highest number of articles on the Shafi case, i.e., 230 articles from May 23 to June 30, 2019. Moreover, close to half of these articles, i.e., 113 articles, were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers. Of the 35 reports in the Tamil press, a relatively high proportion, i.e., 25 articles, were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers. Despite the neutral tone of the majority of these reports, the prominence given to the story by the Tamil press likely had an amplifying effect on the information disorder. By contrast, of the 58 articles in the English language press, only five were featured on the front pages of the monitored newspapers.

Similarly, the Sinhala TV news also prioritized the Shafi case by dedicating significant primetime coverage to it. Sinhala TV news featured 147 statements about Shafi on primetime news. This was significantly higher than the 57 in English primetime news or the 18 in Tamil primetime news. By featuring this narrative prominently during peak viewing hours, the Sinhala media likely elevated the perceived importance of the sterilization claims and strengthened the false narrative. It is likely that these two factors subtly contributed to the entrenchment of the false narrative in society.

3. Impact of Information Disorder

Several consequences can be traced to the information disorder produced by the mainstream media on Dr. Shafi. These consequences can be classified into two interconnected categories: prejudicial and political.

Consequences of the Shafi case



Based on selected Sinhala, Tamil & English newspapers & prime time TV news segments for the period 23 May- 30 June 2019

3.1 Prejudicial Consequences

The prejudicial consequences of the information disorder were a result of the high degree of anti-Muslim sentiment present within the narrative produced by the media. These consequences were felt at a private and personal level and at a communal level.

On the private and personal level, the damage of the trial-by-media was already underway, despite the verdict of innocence given by the CID and the court. While most media outlets reported at least minimally on the CID's report and the court's verdict, *Divaina* continued to present Shafi as guilty (Duminda, 2019, June 28; *Wanda dosthara*, 2019, June 30). Shafi's name was inextricably widely linked to allegations of sterilization in Sri Lanka, and he is still perceived to be guilty by some. This will likely impact both his personal relationships and his professional career in Sri Lanka.

This negative impact has extended to Shafi's family as well. In an interview with *The Sunday Times* published on June 30, Shafi's spouse, Dr. Imara Shafi, elaborated on the consequences the mainstream media's information disorder campaign had on her family. She and their three children had to leave their home for their own safety after Shafi's arrest and are now unable to find a place to live, as no one is willing to rent to them out of fear. Their children had to leave school because of ostracism by their peers (Wijedasa, 2019, June 30).

At a communal level, growing anti-Muslim sentiments especially affected Muslim doctors. Following

the negative coverage of Shafi, similar allegations were levelled against several other Muslim doctors. For example, an article in *Divaina* stated, “It was reported that a [Muslim] male and female doctor from the Peradeniya Hospital had been engaged in sterilization surgeries in 2001 and 2004 and had done 6,000” (Jinapriya, 2019, June 23). These types of statements demonstrate that the prejudice against Shafi was extended and generalized to the broader Muslim minority community. Such a generalization may potentially generate a long-lasting negative perception around the entry and practice of doctors who are Muslim.

3.2 Political Consequences

The information disorder on the Shafi case also had consequences in the political sphere of Sri Lanka. Politicians and political parties associated with Shafi, both directly and indirectly, were subjected to scrutiny. Their association with Shafi was used as a measure to delegitimize them.

Specifically, the UNP (a prominent political party that was part of the 2015 government), the ACMC (a Muslim party that ran under the banner of the UNP in the 2015 election), and Minister of Health Rajitha Senaratne faced political consequences. Several reports on Shafi cited his political history as a candidate belonging to the UNP-affiliated ACMC (Balasuriya, 2019, May 27; Kurunegala doctor, 2019, May 26; Wijayawardhana, 2019, May 30). By highlighting Shafi's political links in conjunction with the allegations against him, the media in all three languages called into question the trustworthiness of the parties he was affiliated with.

Similarly, the reporting also emphasized the relationship between Shafi and Minister Senaratne. Several reports questioned the legality of Shafi's reinstatement following his loss in the 2015 general election (Palandeniya, 2019, June 2; Poornamal, 2019, May 28). This reinstatement was attributed to an alleged relationship between Shafi and Minister Senaratne and was interpreted to reflect a bias in favor of Shafi. In light of this, the Ministry of Health's appointment of an expert committee to investigate the allegations of sterilization against Shafi were viewed with suspicion. Minister Senaratne's own credibility was questioned in view of the false narrative surrounding Shafi and the perceived negative outcomes of his reinstatement. This in turn could have led to a loss of credibility for the Ministry as a whole, weakening its position as a government institution.

The information disorder produced by the mainstream media had the power to weaken the position of particular democratically elected political actors and platforms. This power signals the potential dangers of continued production of false narratives by the media.

3.3 Prejudicial and Political Consequences

In addition to the purely political impact, some of the consequences were at the intersection of the political and the prejudicial. At this intersection were politicians who were Muslim. Those particularly impacted were Minister Rishad Bathiudeen, Governor of the Eastern Province M.L.A.M Hizbullah, and Governor of the Western Province Azath Salley. These three individuals also previously faced racially motivated accusations following the Easter Sunday attacks and were asked to resign by segments of the public, the media, and the political opposition. This negative sentiment was sought to be justified through

allegations that the political actors were connected to Zahran Hashim, and that they supported terrorism. All three, along with other Muslim politicians, resigned from their posts on June 3, 2019 (Bastians & Mashal, 2019, June 3). Rishad Bathiudeen was eventually reappointed.

Minister Bathiudeen is the leader of the ACMC and was a prominent member of the 2015 government. Shafi's relationship with Bathiudeen received specific attention in the media (Balasuriya, 2019, May 27; Kurunegala doctor, 2019, May 26.) Whenever Shafi's political history and membership in the ACMC was reported on, Bathiudeen's leadership of the party was almost always specified. Several reports also critically noted that Bathiudeen played a role in reinstating Shafi to his position in the hospital after he resigned to participate in the 2015 election. By linking Bathiudeen to Shafi, the media was able to cast Bathiudeen as guilty by association and characterize him as indirectly responsible for the alleged sterilizations. This delegitimized Bathiudeen's position as an authoritative political figure.

Governor Hizbullah was appointed governor of the Eastern Province in January 2019 by President Maithripala Sirisena. Unlike Bathiudeen, former Governor Hizbullah was not directly connected to Shafi. However, reports on Shafi built on allegations against both Bathiudeen and Hizbullah and connected them to the narrative on illegal sterilizations, framing them as “Islamist terrorists” (Gamage, 2019, May 30; Jayasena, 2019, May 31). This too served to further delegitimize their political positions.

Governor of the Western Province Azath Salley also did not have a direct connection to Shafi. But Salley did state that the allegations against Shafi were baseless (Selvanayagam, 2019, May 28). The media used this response to draw a connection between the two individuals. One report from *Mawbima* stated, “Shafi is an individual who planned to destroy the future generation of children. Governor Azath Salley is trying to release such a person, which is also a wrongdoing. This means Azath Salley is also an extremist” (Bandara, 2019, June 3). This narrative clearly demonstrates the long-reaching impact of the information disorder surrounding Shafi. The false narrative was so entrenched that by defending Shafi, Governor Salley implicated himself in the eyes of the media.

The perception of guilt by association towards high-level Muslim political figures was not just damaging to the individuals concerned, but to minority representation in government. The information disorder surrounding Shafi and the ripples of its impact worked to delegitimize Muslim leaders and legitimize demands for reduced minority representation in government. This impact demonstrates the ways in which information disorder has the power to weaken vital facets of democracy within the country.

4. Response to Information Disorder

Public responses relating to the production of information disorder by the mainstream media on the Dr. Shafi case were limited, despite the case receiving significant attention from the media and government officials. The limited response supports a persistent issue identified by this study—i.e., the mainstream media is often overlooked as a producer of information disorder in Sri Lanka. This section maps out the limited responses of the media, media regulatory bodies, and the government to the information disorder surrounding the Dr. Shafi case.

4.1 Media and Media Regulatory Body Response

The counternarratives that identified and debunked the information disorder in the mainstream media received marginal coverage (see Section 2.5.4). These counternarratives only represented 8.8 percent of overall reporting, most of which were from the English press. Meanwhile, *Divaina*—the paper that published the initial article on Dr. Shafi—did not issue any retractions or corrections of the article, and neither did any other media outlet, despite the CID report clearing Shafi of all charges.

The PCCSL, the regulatory body in print media, wrote to *Divaina* and explained the paper's noncompliance with the Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) by the Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka (n.d.). According to PCCSL President Sukumar Rockwood, the PCCSL also communicated these violations verbally. However, the PCCSL did not receive a verbal or written response from *Divaina* regarding the latter's willingness to comply with media ethics (Media: A circus, 2019, June 16). The PCCSL's lack of power to take action against journalists and newspapers, such as by revoking credentials, likely factored into the absence of a correction issued by the print media. The lack of a regulatory body to monitor the ethical compliance of Sri Lanka's electronic media enabled these media outlets to contribute to the production of information disorder without penalty.

4.2 Government Response

Following the accusations against Shafi in the press, the government launched an official investigation into the complaints. As described in Sections 3 and 4, several political figures from both the government and the opposition made statements about Dr. Shafi. These statements were made while the CID's investigation was ongoing. Individual political figures both commended and condemned the reports on Shafi. However, there was no coordinated government response following the submission of the CID report to address the information disorder produced by the media from either the president or the parliament.

The journalist who wrote the original article and the editor of *Divaina* were questioned by the CID and revealed their source to be member of the police. However, the media reported that investigations thereafter seemed to focus on the police officer (Sri Lanka Top, 2019, June 18). No further action was taken against *Divaina* or the journalist. No inquiry was launched into other media outlets for reporting the false information. Furthermore, the government did not emphasize the need for media accountability.

5. Conclusion

This study attempted to nuance existing discourse on information disorder by demonstrating that the mainstream media can be a producer and distributor/amplifier of information disorder akin to social media. The study also highlighted the need to recognize the mainstream media's involvement in all three phases of information disorder, i.e., creation, production, and distribution, to gauge its wider social impact. For this purpose, the study undertook an in-depth analysis of media reporting on the Dr. Shafi case.

The findings of this case study suggest that it is not only social media, but also the mainstream media, in this case, the Sinhala media, that acts as both a producer and amplifier of information disorder. The Sinhala media produced the initial story on Dr. Shafi. The English and Tamil media acted as re-distributors/amplifiers of the information disorder.

A total of 322 articles and 222 claims about the Dr. Shafi case were reported in the press and on primetime news respectively in the first five weeks after the initial article in *Divaina*. This reporting led to the Sinhala media creating a media product of a false narrative involving Shafi. The production of this false narrative can be examined through a framework of four elements: the use of pre-existing anti-Muslim narratives; the use of authoritative sources to lend legitimacy to the claims; the use of emotional language and descriptions to inspire grief, fear, and anger; and the prominence given to the narrative.

The damage caused by the information disorder fell within two interconnected categories of consequences: the prejudicial and the political. These consequences can not only weaken the occupational and political positions of individuals, but can also harm the position of the entire Muslim community, as they form the perceived basis for calling for the removal of persons from various posts due to their religious and ethnic affiliations.

Despite the far-reaching consequences of this case of information disorder, there was no coordinated official government response. The only official response was by the PCCSL. This too did not result in rectifying the damage caused or holding the media accountable to ensure nonrecurrence.

The grave consequences and the limited responses outlined through the Dr. Shafi case urge further studies into the role played by the mainstream media in information disorder. Not all of the findings of this study may be generalizable to every instance of information disorder. However, this study can be used to further examine the methods by which information disorder in both mainstream and social media is produced, and to help address the growing concerns regarding the prevalence and influence of information disorder in society today.

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