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Taiwan Demonstrates How We Can Defend Canadian Democracy Against Information Warfare

by Marcus Kolga
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Over the past decade, the term “disinformation” has re-emerged from the long-forgotten Cold War lexicon into a place of prominence in Western democracies. A term previously used to define [Soviet influence and information warfare](#), “disinformation” is now a regular concern. Most Canadians were first exposed to the term in 2016 after Russian intelligence agencies used disinformation to interfere with and disrupt the U.S. presidential election, Canadian security and intelligence experts [warned of similar threats](#) in Canada.

Disinformation refers to the efforts of malign foreign and domestic actors who create and amplify information that is intentionally misleading – including false narratives and conspiracy theories.

The scourge of disinformation threatens Canada and its allies, but few have faced it with the same intensity as Taiwan, whose citizens are forced to contend with a daily barrage of Chinese government propaganda and subterfuge. The disproportionately massive scale of China’s information attacks against Taiwan puts the island nation near the [top of the list](#) of countries facing the most intense disinformation attacks in the world.

Despite ample warnings and evidence, Canada lags behind its allies in developing a robust strategy to defend against this problem, which will expand with our increasing reliance on digital and social media platforms. Canada should learn from Taiwan’s whole-of-society approach, which leverages expertise in civil society groups, individual experts, media and within the private sector to support the development of long-term democratic resilience against foreign interference.

The Threat to Canada’s Democracy

The objective of foreign disinformation and influence operations is to manipulate policy debate and decision-making and destabilize democracies by undermining public trust in our institutions, elected officials, media and each other. The corrosive effects of foreign interference are intentionally designed to spread into our foreign relations with the objective of breaking down the alliances, like NATO, that keep our borders and citizens safe, and that defend our values and interests.

According to the [2019 report](#) of Canada’s National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP), the threat of foreign information warfare and influence operations represents “the greatest threat to Canadian prosperity and national interests.” The report warns that foreign interference threatens to undermine the “democratic rights and fundamental freedoms of Canadians” and “the ability of Canadians to make informed decisions and participate in civic discourse.”

The report also cautions that “foreign states will seek to influence deliberations and decision-making, and to curb initiatives deemed contrary to their interest ... foreign states will mobilize third parties, proxies and lobby groups to carry out interference activities, and ... may seek to interfere with policy actions by attempting to discredit or attack senior public officials.” The



NSICOP report states that both the [Russian](#) and [Chinese](#) governments actively engage in such activities against Canadians – representing a significant public safety and national security threat.

The COVID-19 pandemic has expanded the attack surface for malign actors. The European Union’s Eastern StratCom [warned](#) in March 2020 that “Russian media have deployed a ‘significant disinformation campaign’ against the West to worsen the impact of the coronavirus, generate panic and sow distrust.” They later [noted](#) that “a network of **fake and hijacked Twitter accounts** originating from China ... were used to spread disinformation about COVID-19.”

In January, Chinese state media [resuscitated](#) a broadly debunked disinformation narrative about the origins of COVID-19, [claiming](#) that it was developed and grown inside a U.S. military lab in Fort Detrick, Maryland. The claim, originally made in March 2020 to deflect focus away from the Chinese government’s [failure to stem the early outbreak in Wuhan](#) and its failure to honestly and transparently share information to the world about it, was broadly [debunked](#) by journalists and the World Health Organization (WHO), which [labelled](#) suggestions that the virus originated in any lab as “highly speculative”.

Most recently, [Russian](#) and [Chinese](#) state media campaigns have focused on disinformation about the efficacy of Western vaccines. This lends legitimacy to anti-vaccination conspiracies which threaten to lower vaccination rates, foment division and generally intensify the broad damage caused by the pandemic.

Defending Taiwan’s Information Environment

Taiwan’s response to the coronavirus pandemic has been broadly recognized [as being among the most successful in the world](#). Much of that is due to its [effectiveness in combating foreign disinformation surrounding COVID-19](#), which is rooted in its experience of defending Taiwan’s democracy and society against the Chinese government’s relentless information onslaught.

Unlike the Canadian government, which has a tendency to place the threat of disinformation in silos, such as [elections](#), social media [platforms](#) and [political movements](#), Taiwan has recognized that the threat of foreign information warfare is not just limited to elections or specific issues, but to the nation’s overall well-being. It has adopted a whole-of-society approach to defending the nation from disinformation – a system that incorporates government, civil society, social media and the public in general.

Taiwan has developed a broad set of public and private [partnerships](#) that allow for the monitoring, exposing and blunting of disinformation narratives. New [legislation](#) imposes costs on actors who engage in malign influence and interference operations. Democratic resilience is strengthened through digital [media literacy](#) programs targeting all segments and facets of society, while healthy media consumption habits that promote critical thinking are taught in schools.



Digital minister Audrey Tang is responsible for Taiwan's digital development and defence. The country's success in combating disinformation is rooted in Tang's philosophy of "[radical transparency](#)" and open tech culture. Tang's philosophy and system promote active civic engagement in policy development using various platforms that enable direct citizen engagement. Citizens can offer policy ideas and suggestions online, directly to Tang, and through community-organized hackathons. Their contributions are reviewed, and those that are successful are elevated and voted upon, with the best being adopted as official policies by the government. This same approach has been applied to Taiwan's defence against Chinese government disinformation, which includes broad collaboration between civil society, government and tech companies, including popular Taiwanese social media platform Line and Facebook.

An Integrated Total Society Defence

Taiwan's successful defence of its democracy against information warfare relies on co-operation between government, civil society and the private sector, who act on tips about disinformation that are detected both through crowd sourcing and civil society organizations dedicated to monitoring disinformation.

In Canada, the effort to combat disinformation has fallen on the shoulders of a few journalists and experts, working discretely, who often come under attack by the same foreign actors and their proxies. The situation is unsustainable and erodes Canadian resilience against disinformation. In contrast, Taiwan's proactive, whole-of-society approach ensures that the work is shared broadly and supported by private and public organizations.

This includes co-operation with social media companies. Among the biggest in Taiwan is Line, a social media app that [90 per cent](#) of Taiwanese use. Much like Telegram, which combines messaging with news sharing, the Line platform allows users to share and consume news with a fair degree of anonymity – making it an ideal platform for disseminating disinformation.

Recognizing this threat, Line developers worked with the Taiwanese government and civil society groups to create a chatbot to which users can submit suspicious stories which are then fact-checked by a group of five organizations, including [Cofacts](#), a crowd-sourced fact-checking platform. The [Taiwan FactCheck Center](#) also monitors and collects examples of disinformation in its database and exposes them on its website – much like the European Union's EUvsDisinfo and Canada's independent civil society disinformation monitoring platform, DisinfoWatch.

Perhaps most remarkable of all has been the unique success of the Taiwanese government and civil society to work with social media platforms, including Facebook, to limit the reach of disinformation narratives as part of a system called "Notice and Public Notice". When the Taiwan FactCheck Center detects and confirms disinformation narratives, they are swiftly sent to Facebook's Taiwan office, which then de-throttles Facebook's local algorithms to effectively demote content that contains disinformation. A fact-check notice (seen recently more broadly on COVID-19-related disinformation) is then added to the post. Tang told me in an interview last



year that thanks to their collaboration, Facebook users “have to scroll for two hours to see [the disinformation story].” She said: “It’s like moving this into the spam folder: once they do that, it stops spreading.”

In contrast to [recent suggestions in Canada to regulate social media by effectively imposing censorship](#), the Taiwanese system avoids social media takedowns and censorship in favour of a defensive algorithmic approach and clear warnings about the nature of the posts, which ensures the protection of freedom of expression while simultaneously defending Taiwan’s information environment from the threat of disinformation.

Within Taiwan’s government, a highly co-ordinated early-detection and [rapid-response system has been implemented](#) whereby each ministry has a team tasked with countering foreign disinformation narratives within two hours of being made aware of them. Tang told me that Taiwanese ministries are required “to roll out clarification of 200 characters or less and at least two pictures.” The government’s counter-narratives are promoted through prominent accounts such as that of President Tsai Ing-wen. According to Tang, her government’s system is “now good enough that most [ministries] can deliver the clarifications within 60 minutes.”

The Canadian government should learn from Taiwan’s approach and establish partnerships with civil society and digital media corporations. It should consult with senior civil society experts to develop a sustainable whole-of-society approach to combating foreign disinformation.

Raising the Cost

Presently, the cost to malign foreign actors who engage in information warfare against Western democracies is relatively low, yet can cumulate in enormous destruction and acrimonious division, as we have witnessed in the U.S. over the past four years. Russian information operations since at least 2015 have contributed to serious polarization and political violence over the past year.

Government-sponsored actors and their proxies are able to engage in information and influence operations in many Western nations, Canada among them, with relative impunity. This includes former elected officials, diplomats and academics who are paid to advance the interests of these regimes, and individuals who set up fake community and non-governmental organizations that surreptitiously support malign foreign regimes. As noted in the aforementioned 2019 NSICOP report, foreign regimes often co-opt ethnocultural communities to the same ends, through “threats, harassment, detention of family members abroad and refusal to issue travel documents or visas”.

The Taiwanese government [recognized](#) the growing threat of Chinese government influence operations ahead of its own 2020 presidential election. To address this threat, Taiwan’s parliament passed [an anti-infiltration](#) bill in 2019, which outlaws any political activities, including lobbying, the disruption of assemblies or the spreading of disinformation on behalf of, or with the



financial support of, hostile foreign actors. The penalties imposed on violators are stiff, including up to five years' imprisonment, or nearly US\$400,000 in fines.

However, in Canada, individuals and groups who engage in such malign activities face few or no consequences in an environment that is unregulated, murky and dangerous. Unless things change, foreign actors will continue to take advantage of inadequate laws and insufficient policy, thereby threatening Canadian democracy and security.

Lessons Learned

Taiwan is a primary target for Chinese disinformation and influence operations. As Taiwan's foreign minister, Joseph Wu, [said](#) in 2019, "Taiwan is the first line of defense in an ideological battle that is taking place in Australia, Japan, the United States, Europe, and in like-minded societies all over the world. We have felt the brunt of China's intensified campaign to subvert Taiwan's democracy every day, through military intimidation, economic coercion, diplomatic assaults, disinformation, and political subversion, seeking to undermine our elected government and interfere with our elections."

The threat to its democracy and sovereignty is existential but Taiwan has risen to this challenge.

Our intelligence agencies and experts have made clear the threat to Canada's democracy, yet we have failed to address it. If we wish to build long-term resilience against foreign efforts to undermine and destabilize our democracy, Canada must learn from Taiwan's successes.

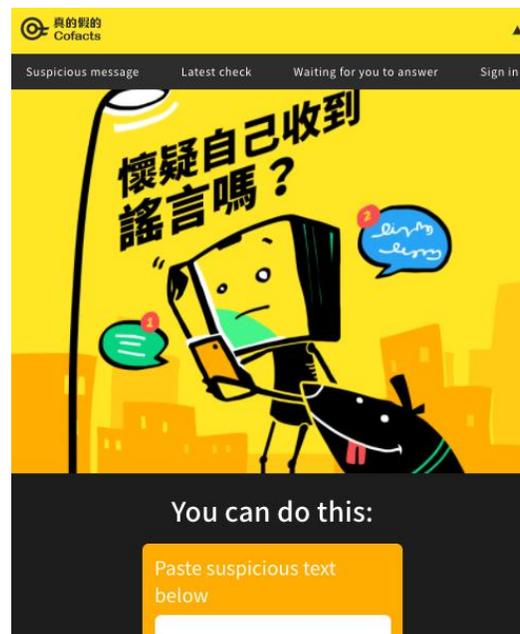


Figure 1. The interface of the Cofacts platform where users can paste links and text which are checked against a database or debunked through crowd-sourced fact checking.



Figure 2. A viral social media post created by Chinese bloggers from 2016 includes a false quote from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. <https://gizmodo.com/9-more-viral-photos-that-are-completely-fake-1754282672> Source: Instagram/screenshot



Figure 3. Disinformation about the origins of COVID-19 shared on Twitter by Chinese state media in January 2021. Source: Twitter/DisinfoWatch.

► About the Author

Marcus Kolga is a documentary filmmaker, journalist, human rights activist and a leading Canadian analyst of foreign disinformation and influence operations.

He is a regular commentator on international affairs and human rights and his articles have been published by *The Toronto Star*, *The National Post*, *The New York Daily Mail*, *Macleans*, *The Atlantic Council*, *The Globe and Mail*, and other European publications.

Marcus led the Canadian civil society campaign for Magnitsky human rights sanctions legislation and has actively led and contributed to similar efforts in Estonia, Latvia, Sweden and Australia. He has spoken and testified in the U.S. Capitol and the UK, Australian, Canadian and Estonian Parliaments about Magnitsky Sanctions, foreign disinformation and Interpol reform.

He has produced several internationally screened and broadcast documentary films that have focused on international affairs and human rights including the Soviet Gulag, and NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan.

In 2018 he received a Magnitsky Global Human Rights award for his advocacy work on human rights.

He is a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute Center for Advancing Canada's Interests Abroad.

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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