

Manufactured Public Opinion Online: The Beijing Factor and Taiwan's Local Elections in 2018

Chin-fu Hung

*Professor, Department of Political Science,
National Cheng Kung University*

Abstract

Chinese leaders have over the decades put ever-increasing pressure on Taiwan for political unification under the “one country, two systems” framework that is currently being applied to both Hong Kong and Macao since the handover of sovereignty in the late 1990s. Chinese President Xi Jinping has also repeatedly urged Taiwanese people to accept that it “must and will be” re-united with Communist China. While Taiwan is widely recognized as a vibrant young democracy, the island is, like other countries, currently under real threat from China's increased sharp power. Arguably, China is now becoming more adept at integrating its ever increasing sharp power to better realize their objectives of influencing as well as manipulating both decision-makers and the general public in democracies. The techniques developed usually include, but are not limited to, misguiding, deception, posturing, soft annexation, and information warfare, to shape favorable public opinion and desirable compliance at home and abroad. This article argues that the Chinese authorities and its allies manipulate Taiwan's Internet volume through fake news, misinformation and disinformation, and accordingly create manufactured public opinions and polls. This ultimately dampens Taiwan's hard-earned electoral democracy. In the fight against the growing influence of China's sharp power, it is only when like-minded countries work and stand together can democracies continue to play a role in safeguarding democratic systems, strengthening and energizing civil society, and promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms of information and speech in the information age.

Keywords: Manufactured Public Opinion, Sharp Power, Cross-Strait Relations, Social Media, 2018 Taiwanese Local Elections

I. Introduction

Democracy is under threat all around the world. It is particularly critical and vivid in young democracies like the Republic of China on Taiwan (hereafter referred to as Taiwan) where propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation have always been part of the tactics primarily originating from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and facilitated online. Social media and other new online platforms have given it new life and reached through which the fake news phenomenon could possibly reach many corners of Taiwan. This has effectively resulted in the "manufactured" public opinion mediated in cyberspace, and it has increasingly posed fundamental challenges to Taiwan's young democracy, putting both democratic practices and national security in alarming danger.

Sharing universal principles with the world, Taiwan is indeed a front-line state that is striving to defend democracy, freedom and human rights. It is evident Taiwan is now confronting increased state-sponsored infiltration by disinformation, misinformation and fake news from the PRC. Admittedly, Taiwan has been under military threat by the PRC and its related international assaults for the past few decades, yet the political dynamics across the Strait are taking place in a subtle way in the Internet age. Notably, the Chinese authorities increasingly find it an integral part to incorporate Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) with its existing united front work to effectively influence Taiwan's public opinion and associated voting behavior.

In light of the united front work across Taiwan, top Chinese leaders have for decades put ever-increasing pressure on Taiwan for political unification with the island under the "one country, two systems" framework that is currently being applied to both Hong Kong and Macao since the handover of sovereignty from the late 1990s. Chinese President Xi Jinping in particular has repeatedly urged the Taiwanese people to accept that it "must and will be" reunited with Communist China. Recently, as Xi commemorated the 40th anniversary of the so-called "Message to Compatriots in Taiwan" on January 2, 2019, he articulated the current important mission for China as being to further explore the "one country, two systems" scenario for Taiwan.

Following his remarks on "one country, two systems" for Taiwan, this article argues that the information and communications do have a pronounced significance

in light of Taiwan's deepening democratic society and political future amid the current cross-Strait dynamics. Undoubtedly, Taiwan is widely recognized as a vibrant young democracy in the contemporary world. Yet, amid the recent retreat of liberalism and advancement of populism across the globe, Taiwan is, like other countries, under a real threat from China's increased sharp power. As a matter of fact, with the timely help of new information technologies, China is now becoming more adept at integrating its ever rising sharp power to better realize their objectives of influencing as well as manipulating both decision-makers and the general public in democracies. The techniques developed usually include, but are not limited to, misguiding, deception, posturing, soft annexation, and information warfare, to shape favorable public opinion and desirable compliance at home and abroad.

China under Xi Jinping is quickly transforming into a dystopian digital dictatorship,¹ with chilling technological advancements in its tightened social and media control over Chinese society. The forcibly strict monitoring and censorship both in cyberspace (social media) and traditional media are being relentlessly imposed. What is even worse, China is now an all-seeing state that has the world's biggest camera surveillance network. Many of the cameras use artificial intelligence, mostly facial recognition technology. One astonishing example is that China's *CCTV* surveillance network took just seven minutes to identify a *BBC* reporter, in an experimental test.² This shows that China is dramatically becoming a powerful police state with sophisticated and advanced monitoring systems and technology, and which they have heavily invested in over the past few years. It truly enables the state and its police do their job in a more efficient and effective manner.

While China's digital dictatorship continues to tighten control over various aspects of society, China is also increasing its presence globally and projects its influence internationally. Amid these developments in China's digital dictatorship and sharp power, Taiwan is arguably a front-line state "with experience in resisting China's attempts to erode its democracy and defending fundamental democratic values."³ In

1. "China's digital dictatorship: Big data and government," *The Economist*, December 17, 2016, <<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/12/17/chinas-digital-dictatorship>>.

2. Joyce Liu, "In Your Face: China's all-seeing state," *BBC News*, December 10, 2017, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-42248056/in-your-face-china-s-all-seeing-state>>.

this regard, Taiwan as a beacon of democracy would, and should not, be extinguished; it ought to continue to inspire peoples and countries oppressed around the world who are determined to free themselves.

II. The Politics of Cross-Strait Relationship in the Information Age

Cross-Strait relations have been a thorny issue that involves much of the historical legacy of the Chinese Civil War between 1945 and 1949, with each side proclaiming absolute sovereignty over the whole of China. It was not until the early 1990s that cross-Strait relations moved forward, with the first round of the Koo-Wang Talks held in Singapore in 1993, and at which four agreements⁴ were signed to inaugurate at least a more constructive mechanism for official dialog. Nevertheless, the political standoff between Taiwan and China largely remains and mutual mistrust has severely deteriorated from time to time. It is manifest especially during critical events, for example, the missile crisis during 1995-1996, following former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's visit to the US, as well as the Taiwan's first directly-elected president. Undeniably, relations further degenerated under the Chen Shui-bian administration when he pursued the "one side, one country" policy toward the PRC. It is generally perceived that the fundamental cross-Strait political deadlock has been unchanged since 1979, and it has become worse since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

While military and political tensions are deadlocked in current Beijing-Taipei relations, trade and investment relations by contrast are soaring across the Taiwan Strait, marking a potentially pivotal area of interaction between the two sides. This trend is even more prominent since Taiwan has suffered from a low growth since 2008 and has to make adjustments and relocate its high tech industry in the new global production network. With China's expansive "One Belt One Road"⁵ (OBOR) initiative and the "Made in China 2025"⁶ plan continuing to take root in many parts of the world, it

3. "Taiwan a frontline state against authoritarian influence: official," *Focus Taiwan*, May 28, 2018, <<http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201805280028.aspx>>.

4. Such as the document authentication, mail, and future meetings between the sides of Taiwan's Strait.

5. It refers to the so-called "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road."

6. The "Made in China 2025" focuses mostly on upgrading its manufacturing sector to improve innovation, to integrate informatization and industrialization, and concentrates on the development

certainly calls for massive investment in and development of trade routes across the globe. Consequently, as more Taiwanese electronic and computer industries are gradually integrated into a strengthened production network, distribution, and management of goods and services within this irreversible globalization context, that trans-border investment and trade further reinforces economic integration both within the Greater China region and within inter-continental business transactions. Serving as an essential component of the expanded globalized production and supply chains, information technology, together with social media and the more recent artificial intelligence applications, are set to become one of the major driving forces that help reshape the changing socioeconomics. More importantly, it leaves a distinctive yet dynamic era of unsettled power relations across the Taiwan Strait in the information age in this regard.



Figure 1. Made in China 2025

Source: “Made in China 2025: The domestic tech plan that sparked an international backlash,” June 28, 2018, *SupChina*, <<https://supchina.com/2018/06/28/made-in-china-2025/>>.

III. “Virtual” Chinese Sharp Power over Taiwan’s Local Election in 2018

With respect to its social-political environment, and with the increased free competition of the media market, Taiwan has become a country with a free press and a high degree of free speech. The rapid social and political changes, combined with

of fully-automated “smart” factories in the PRC. It includes, for example, new information technology, high-end numerically-controlled machine tools and robotics, and biological medicine.

the increasingly centralized and conglomerated market structures in Taiwan, have brought about a media culture that emphasizes business profits over public benefits and goods. Operating in this fiercer business environment, media practitioners in Taiwan tend to sacrifice the grand objectives of promoting public deliberation and satisfying the public's right to know. Instead, media survival and prosperity seem to be the top priority in their daily media management.

Arguably, Taiwanese society is now undergoing political polarization and socioeconomic divide, rendering it difficult, if not impossible, for a public space of healthy, meaningful and inclusive dialog to exist and be sustained. This then raises the public's expectations and anxieties regarding the watchdog role of the media and its general performance in informing society. However, later developments seem somewhat discouraging after the higher degree of marketization, and sinicization/de-sinicization in Taiwan's news and media industry. The fierce competition among media outlets that followed the opening and continued deregulation of the Taiwanese media over the past few decades, has not led, as one may expect, to general quality assurance and enhanced delivery of news contents and coverage. We may doubt whether media reform since Taiwan's democratization has assuredly given the audience greater access to the media.

1. Internet as a Subtle Maneuver in Repositioning Dynamic Cross-Strait Relations

With the growth of the Internet, extremism and unruly as well as uncontrolled populism, we have witnessed a sharp rise of misinformation, disinformation, and increasingly common fake news in Taiwan in recent years. One aspect concerns the integrity and reputation of reporters and journalists working for Taiwanese media platforms. Whereas the media as a whole presents and broadcasts many sensational, entertaining, and gossip stories, one alarming trend is yet emerging with the facts that deliberate news bias, misinformation, and fake news are in sharp increase. It is coupled with China aggressively promoting its external propaganda and strengthening its conventional united front work overseas by exerting sharp power strategies to better project itself on the world stage, ambitiously aiming to better protect and further its national interests.

In fact, President Xi Jinping has repeatedly remarked at several meetings and on

several occasions on the need for greater initiative in publicity and ideological work to ensure the correct political direction in the information era. Xi identifies the Internet as the country's "unruly" media and calls for the Party's propaganda machine to build a strong army to seize the ground of the new media. To be specific, instead of being passive, the propaganda government would be more combative and take the initiative to wage a war to win over Chinese and Taiwanese public opinions, which can be symbolized as "positive propaganda, public opinion struggle" in the new era.



Figure 2. Xi Jinping Visited the People's Daily Building

Source: 〈習近平：推動媒體融合向縱深發展 鞏固全黨全國人民共同思想基礎〉, *Xinhuanet*, January 25, 2019, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-01/25/c_1124044208.htm>.

To successfully fulfill the positive propaganda, public opinion struggle toward Taiwanese society, China's sharp power has been launched in relation to issues like informational domination and intrusions connected to Taiwan's socio-political and economic domains. The National Endowment for Democracy in the United States of America firstly coined the term "sharp power" in 2017, in an article entitled "The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence." In this article, contrast is made between hard power, which connotes a country's military and economic might that functionally uses aggressive coercion to pursue its (national) interests,⁷ and soft power, which directs a country's culture, political values/ideals, policies, and

vibrant civil society, to attract or co-opt other countries through persuasion that will ultimately influence their decisions in favor of them.⁸

Instead of using openly using hard power to promote their national interests, China is effectively wielding vigorous influence over established and young democracies around the world through more adept initiatives, in re-molding and affecting media outlets and public opinion in target countries. According to the most recent publication from the distinguished media's nongovernmental organization, Reporters Without Borders, China is now spending extensive amounts of money on developing media that is capable of reaching a wider international public, training foreign journalists in China, pursuing a Trojan horse policy, such as advertorials with Chinese characteristics, investing in foreign media, commercial blackmail, and intimidation and harassment on a massive scale in those target countries, in order to put its propaganda into the foreign media.⁹ In this respect, China is actually seen as an emerging digital dictatorship that uses "sharp power" to make a new world order in the media to better serve their national interests. Conceptually, sharp power is:

.....not principally about attraction or even persuasion; instead, it centers on distraction and manipulation. These powerful and ambitious authoritarian regimes, which systematically suppress political pluralism and free expression to maintain power at home, are increasingly applying the same principles internationally.¹⁰

7. Kurt M. Campbell & Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 8-9.

8. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), pp. 5-11. Specifically in Nye's words, "Soft power is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will." Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power: Propaganda Isn't the Way," *The New York Times*, January 10, 2003, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/10/opinion/IHT-soft-power-propaganda-isnt-the-way.html>>.

9. Reporters Without Borders, *China's Pursuit of A New World Media Order*, March 2019, pp. 20-44, *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, <https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/en_rapport_chine_web_final_3.pdf>.

10. Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian

By the nature of power and the use of power, it is “the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants, and that can be accomplished in three main ways — by coercion, payment, or attraction.”¹¹ Authoritarian governments like China are exerting their state power to censor and manipulate information home and abroad, achieving their political ends and interests while undermining the integrity of independent institutions in foreign democracies. Christopher Walker makes it clear: “Sharp power takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems. Open, democratic systems are rich targets for authoritarian regimes whose commercial activities and political initiatives are now regular features of life in democracies. It is within this context that sharp power, neither really soft nor hard, is able to flourish.”¹²

In this aspect, China for years has spent enormous resources in reaching out to the outside world, hoping to achieve greater influence and gain a louder voice on the world stage. The rapid development of the Chinese media presence in overseas countries, together with the proliferation of Confucius Institutes operating on Western university campuses under *Hanban* (Office of Chinese Language Council International) sponsorship are the embodiment of the Chinese Party-State, and whose content, activities, and programs are positioned to better project a more positive image of China.

States Project Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>>.

11. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “What China and Russia Don’t Get About Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, April 23, 2013, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>>.

12. Christopher Walker, “What is ‘Sharp Power?’” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 3, July 2018, p. 17.



Figure 3. Xi Jinping Unveiled the Confucius Institutes in Australia

Source: 〈英國人權機構：孔子學院威脅學術言論自由〉, *New Tang Dynasty Television*, February 20, 2019, <<https://www.ntdtv.com/b5/2019/02/20/a102515671.html>>.

2.Virtual Chinese Sharp Power in Full Operation in Taiwan

What is even alarming is that Beijing has targeted Taiwan by initiating and developing virtual sharp power and associated measures in the hope of manipulating public opinion, polls, and elections that are integral to Taiwan's democracy. The 2018 local election in Taiwan is a good example. Chinese sharp power toward Taiwan is highlighted by currently fostering manipulated and manufactured volumes of Internet traffic, among many other things. Taiwan in particular saw a series of high profile fake news cases, and/or misinformation and disinformation widely circulated and disseminated a few months prior to the local election in November 2018.

Beijing's sharp power is currently being consolidated and extended, and large volumes of Internet traffic and posts have seriously affected online public opinions in Taiwan. A notable case is arguably a victim of fake news, Su Chi-cherng, who is the late director of the Osaka branch of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office. Su said in his suicide note that he had been troubled by false Chinese media reports claiming that Beijing had outdone Taipei in rescuing Taiwanese citizens that were left stranded at an airport by Typhoon Jebi in September 2018.¹³ Furthermore, in the run-

¹³ Stacy Hsu, "Osaka envoy commits suicide," *Taipei Times*, September 15, 2018, p. 1.

up to a 2019 Taiwanese by-election, a farmer in Tainan claimed that two million tonnes of pomelos were thrown into the Zengwen Reservoir in the aftermath of a flood in August 2018. The sensational news was further broadcast and later roundly criticized and denounced as fake news that would possibly have an impact upon the then heated by-election in Tainan. The farmer later claimed two million kilograms instead were thrown into the Zengwenxi bank.¹⁴ Yet his altered rhetoric might have effectively destroyed the price of the pomelo market and further gave rise to the rage of local Tainan residents.

For what reasons, and with what interests are there large volumes of Internet traffic? To what ends and with what consequences for Taiwan are the ever-expanding, manufactured, public opinions? Arguably, the online traffic has already affected general public opinion and the recent local elections, and it is believed it will continue to pose a remarkable challenge to Taiwan's upcoming Presidential and general elections in January 2020. Undoubtedly, Taiwan has been on the front line of China's sharp power and its associated disinformation campaigns, mediated and facilitated online. For most people, it is virtually difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate adequately between content that is correct, false, or misleading on social media. It is more conspicuous to see the polarized political orientations/identifications and media bias in issues that are directly or indirectly related to a pro-China/pro-Taiwan dichotomy.

One may argue that the general lack of digital literacy lies beneath the many challenges. Media literacy, according to United Kingdom's Office of Communications (Ofcom), is "the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts."¹⁵ As such, media literacy relates to all media, including the Internet and other associated digital communication technologies. The European Commission takes the concept of media literacy a step further, arguing that "it is the ability to access, analyze and evaluate the power of images, sounds and messages which we are now being confronted with on a daily basis and which are an important part of our contemporary culture."¹⁶

14. Shelley Shan, "NCC defends fake news probe," *Taipei Times*, March 15, 2019, p. 3.

15. "About Media Literacy," April 1, 2019, Accessed, *Ofcom*, <<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/media-literacy>>.

In modern society, citizens are equipped with less information necessary and the critical and analytical thinking skills to comprehend online content, let alone distinguish between correct and manipulated or manufactured information in social and print media. The government in Taiwan, and the National Communications Commission (NCC) in particular, is aware of this, and has vowed to tackle dis- and misinformation, and to combat the increasing fake news by establishing a fact-checking platform.¹⁷ Figure 4 shows Taiwan's first fact-checking platform, Taiwan FactCheck Center. Its set-up marks orchestrated efforts both by the government and media practitioners to provide fact-checking portals in order to prevent fake news and help monitor disinformation that is likely to destabilize Taiwanese society. While Figure 5 demonstrates some of the most helpful tips in helping spot and stop fake news circulated online, the app "Aunt Meiyu," shown in Figure 6, was designed by a Taiwanese developer in December 2018 to assist in combating disinformation dispersed among private popular chat groups such as LINE.¹⁸ Meanwhile, one way of tackling this is to provide citizens with the right of alternative access to independent and trustworthy news outlets, including social media. The government, mass media, and civil society as a whole, should act altogether to not only respect and safeguard the general democratic principles of freedom of information, speech and press, but also to boost genuine civil engagement in public affairs and encourage citizens to cast votes in national and local elections. In so doing, this may help alleviate the negative impact of disinformation and fake news undermining Taiwan's young democracy, when the difficulties and challenges in Taiwan are in particular coupled with global populism and worldwide economic recession.

16. Gabinete de Comunicación, *Study on the Current Trends and Approaches to Media Literacy in Europe* (European Commission, Brussels, 2009), p. 13, *European Commission*, <http://ec.europa.eu/culture/library/studies/literacy-trends-report_en.pdf>.

17. Wu Po-wei, Wu Po-hsuan, & Jake Chung, "Fact-checking platform to fish out fake news: NCC," *Taipei Times*, December 10, 2017, p. 1.

18. "Who is Aunt Meiyu? Taiwanese youth found a new way to challenge fake news in private chat group," March 7, 2019, *g0v News*, <<https://g0v.news/auntmeiyu-70294724df57>>.



Figure 4. Taiwan FactCheck Center

Source: Taiwan FactCheck Center, April 2, 2019, Accessed, *Taiwan FactCheck Center*, <<https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/>>.



Figure 5. How To Spot Fake News

Source: The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "How to Spot Fake News," April 2, 2019, Accessed, *The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions*, <<https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174>>.



Figure 6. Aunt Meiyu in Messaging App LINE

Source: Guanrong Chen, “Clarifying the online rumors in real-time: adding Aunt Meiyu into your Line messaging app,” *TechNews*, December 25, 2018, <<https://technews.tw/2018/12/25/fake-news-in-line-platform/>>.

IV. Virtual Chinese Sharp Power and Taiwan’s Engendering Democracy

While we foster greater digital literacy in public understanding of the actual use, scale, importance, and influence, of digital communications and social media over our daily lives, we will have to be fully conscious and alert to the increasing extent and capacity of China’s “virtual” sharp power on Taiwanese society and public opinion through fake news and disinformation. Globalization, largely backed by a market-oriented economic philosophy—liberation, privatization, and deregulation—has indeed helped boost the significant growth and diffusion of Internet technology that underpins further globalization in both established democracies and developing ones. The information revolution has swept across the globe having not only a tremendous economic impact, but also broadening access to wider and alternative sources of information for citizens. Sharing and disseminating information via multimedia tools and applications in a swift, direct, and interactive manner means such communication has become indispensable in daily life.

In a similar vein, ICTs in general, and social media such as Facebook, PTT, Line and Twitter in particular, are becoming a hub of online activity for creating, discussing, and dispersing information. PTT, for example, is deemed to be the most popular online forum in Taiwan, but it was accused of having Beijing-based users who deliberately spread false news on the platform, and therefore suspended applications for new accounts following the Osaka airport bus story.¹⁹ Figure 7 shows the announcement. The process of political socialization is now depending more on social media than school education or print media for many citizens, and primarily for the youth. Social media has not only contributed information to on- and off-line heated debates, but it has also chiefly helped facilitate the increased misinformation and disinformation campaigns in Taiwan, leaving some people and voters blindly trusting and following the online traffic volumes when casting votes. It will fundamentally harm and endanger a young democracy like Taiwan in the mid- to long-term.



Figure 7. Taiwan's PTT Announcement to Suspend Applications for New Accounts

Source: Keoni Everington, "Beijing-based PTT users spread fake Osaka airport bus story."

¹⁹ Keoni Everington, "Beijing-based PTT users spread fake Osaka airport bus story," *Taiwan News*, September 17, 2018, <<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3531772>>.

The basic framework of China's virtual sharp power over Taiwan's democracy can be conceptually illustrated as follows:

manipulated Internet volume → **manufactured** public opinions and polls
→ **distorted** election → democracy **endangered**

Amid continued low economic growth and harsh domestic reforms in pension and energy sectors in Taiwan, some citizens may tire of the increasingly polarized society and populist practices, including frequent political quarrels over independence and reunification. When Taiwanese people are accustomed to receiving and exchanging information from social media, it poses serious challenges if the information circulated on- and off-line is eventually proven to be false and manipulated for specific agendas that destabilize society. It is primarily that online rumors, fake news, and disinformation can easily be eye-catching when broadcast news and information is sensationalized. Timely, and sometimes generous, support from local and international broadcasting networks has contributed to a worsening situation of distrust between the government and the public. The amplified online volume of certain issues may further misguide citizens into believing the authenticity and correctness of news stories due to inadequate knowledge and experience of any serious deliberation and comprehension.

Consequently, when the Internet traffic is being manipulated and amplified to create powerful psychological effects with respect to public and political affairs, there exists manufactured public opinion and polls that are effectively not genuine reflections of the public's general will. It is "manufactured" in the sense that the manipulator of online traffic will project a biased political picture that mislead citizens into accepting their favorable and preset agendas. The heightened Internet volume perfectly converges with mainstream media, mostly (cable) TV and newspapers, together with social media apps such as LINE, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, to attract and accumulate further viewers and audiences who are imprudent and unable to detect fake news and/or mis- and dis-information distributed by online media and traditional media.

When citizens are misguided in constructing their opinions that largely comply with the manipulators' agendas, the polls carried out are short of credibility, and therefore untrustworthy. Society may be further divided. The genuine meaning of electoral democracy is significantly undermined because elections as such cannot

truly reflect what voters may hope and favor in terms of desired policy agendas, party platforms, and candidates. Instead, voters are maneuvered to cast their votes without much consciousness but by manufactured opinions driven by mis- and disinformation as well as fake news. This will ultimately endanger a young democracy like Taiwan, as the supporting democratic principles and practices underneath Taiwan's hard-earned free and democratic society will be severely challenged. In other words, Taiwan's democracy is jeopardized by China's increased sharp power. To the Chinese authorities, while they can continue to forcibly intimidate Taiwan in the diplomatic and military arenas, yet they may find it useful and even convenient to exert more subtle and nuanced cyber strategies to create manipulated Internet traffic volumes, resulting in manufactured public opinions and polls for the greater benefit of distorting and managing Taiwan's elections at ease. In a sense, the future of Taiwan could be under the sway of the Chinese Party-State in the information age.

V. Concluding Remarks

“In today's world, information is not scarce but attention is, and attention depends on credibility. Government propaganda is rarely credible. The best propaganda is not propaganda.”²⁰ Joseph Nye is right to draw our attention to the ways in which the Chinese government was not effectively promoting their soft power in the past. The old truth in international politics has likewise reminded us that “.....having power is having the ability to influence another to act in ways in which that entity would not have acted otherwise.”²¹ Nowadays, the digital dictatorship in China has yet found another easier way to better advance their ends while limiting many of the economic and sociopolitical costs involved. The key lies in their increased use of sharp power, although it is still in its early stages and is far from perfection in its implementation.

It is a commonly shared belief that the new communication technologies, symbolized by the Internet, demonstrate the most far-reaching force in the changing

20. Joseph S. Nye, “China's Soft Power Deficit: To catch up, its politics must unleash the many talents of its civil society,” *The Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2012, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>>.

21. Ernest J. Wilson, III, “Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 616, No. 1, March 2008, p. 114.

role of nation-state, in the shaping of new players on the international stage, and hence the transforming of a novel paradigm in world politics.²² ICTs and social media will impact the future developments of power relations across the Taiwan Strait. It also changes the traditional definitions of public opinion, opinion polls, freedom of speech and information, electoral democracy, and the like, which in turn will also change the dynamics of cross-Strait relations.

Worldwide democracy is backsliding. We must enhance the resilience of democracy to help democracy survive these challenges. This will also help Taiwan weather China's increased sharp power through disinformation, misinformation, and fake news. It may be too soon for the outside world to see the end of one-party rule in China. Yet Taiwan, together with the free and democratic world, should indeed stand on the front line to defend democratic values, and to reach out to the oppressed and disenfranchised by genuinely supporting them and exposing the realities behind the fantasy of "China Dream." In the fight against the growing influence of China's sharp power, it is only when like-minded countries work and stand together can we democracies continue to play a role in safeguarding democratic systems, strengthening and energizing civil society, and promoting human rights and the fundamental freedoms of information and speech in the information age.

²² W. Lance Bennett & Robert M. Entman, *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 1-17.