

Disinformation and Sociotechnical Regime

My paper is a think piece that seeks to embed disinformation operations into the communicative cities. It is borne out of the empirical collaboration amongst a cyber criminologist, myself from media and communication research and a Taiwanese Lab, DoubleThink, with big data capacity in tracing disinformation campaigns.

Disinformation is **the systematic** spread of malicious content. It takes a level of coordination, and it usually wants to advance certain **strategic goals**.

Let me give you an example.

Started this march. 'Covid-19 is out of control in Taiwan'. Posts circulating this statement relied on empathetic storytelling to achieve credibility. It said things like 'friends working in local hospitals say there no beds not testing kits. hospitals have to send old people home without diagnosing. That's why the country maintains a low confirmed rate. I've already booked my flight back to China. China is so much better at concentrating to achieve big things'. For those who don't know, 'China is better at concentrating power on the big things' is used to justify the one-party leadership. It's a correct answer to many questions that the students have to memorize in high school. This message smuggles in the nationalistic rationale alongside a pedagogical vernacular.

Similar series of messages appeared around the same time, exchanging Taiwan with other countries, like Japan, France, Canada, States, Australia. If you read Chinese, and came across one or two of these posts, you don't think they are manufactured in a batch. But you'll feel that the world is out of control, except for China that excels at concentrating on the big things.

Now, we can think of these messages as the 'cognitive warfare', as the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) would call it. Or we can understand them as the adversarial narratives, as GDI (Global Disinformation Index) had proposed. In that line, these messages appeared in March when China managed to control the pandemic and declared to reopen. It serves to shift the discourse from China's inability and opacity to China's success and excellence of its political system. Narratives like this sent a message that China is doing well, while western democracies are not.

However, understanding disinformation operations as a pure narrative might have reduced their complexity in assuming a one-directional input-output model, with clear separations between the perpetrators, victims, and channels. Which is reminiscent of the magic bullet metaphor.

In this talk, I propose another metaphor that sees disinformation as the virus, bequeathed with a contagious quality, that requires particular actors, sustenance, pathways and processes to exist and to spread.

I want to put forward an emplaced reading of disinformation operations. An emplaced approach can be helpful to embed the disinformation transactions **into** the communicative cities.

An emplaced approach implies a few things. First, the examples I draw on is between two places – China and Taiwan. As geographer Yifu Tuan would say, place can be small as an armchair and big as nation states. During the pandemic, we see that the places are quite central in some of these campaigns – such as the origin of the pandemic, and the naming of it (China virus, Italy virus, US virus). Second, I seek to situate disinformation in a ‘body-mind-environment’ ensemble and ‘a constellation of processes’. I see disinformation manifests through these networks and processes, and feeds back into sustaining them.

On the **disseminating end**, I build on the empirical findings of my collaborators from the Lab DoubleThink. They proposed 4 major modes of CCP-sponsored disinformation campaigns.

First mode is **the classic propaganda machine** that we know more or less about throughout the history of the Third Reich. In China, it’s known as 大外宣 or the outreach mode. It’s carried out by the state media, propaganda department, foreign department, diplomats on Twitter.

The second mode relies on the **little pinks**. They are the patriotic millennials netizens. They can be amazingly organized in advancing action plans and coordinating. Mostly because they take a fandom structure and worship the state as their idol. They’re not part of the government, although sometimes they take instructions from the Chinese Youth League.

The third mode is the **content farm**. They are companies that employ large numbers of freelance workers to generate online content, copy/paste, clicks or likes, to feed the algorithm and to satisfy search engine optimization. One boss can organize multiple content farms across a few countries. Last time I checked, 1000 clicks are worth 40-90 USD depending on the whereabouts. Content farms are purely economically motivated. They take orders and are indifferent to the content, and the political motivations behind.

The last mode is to collaborate with **Taiwan-based actors**. Like the pro-beijing media, mainstream political commentators, microcelebrity agencies and the local temples and their associates. Being in Taiwan, these actors are traceable by digital footprints and cash flow. But they are more problematic, as they spread tailored and glocal content into their immediate surroundings.

DoubleThink’s categorization is evidence-based and might not be inherently coherent or theoretically robust. Quite often, the four modes overlap and mingle and it’s hard to separate them. And at the end of the day, there is no clear distinction between the perpetrators and the victims.

Nonetheless, it shows a more comprehensive image.

We see finer divisions of the disinformation production chain with separated creator, sponsor, manufacturer and distributor.

We also see the unlikely alliances being united under the umbrella of the anti-American sentiment: for example, Russian conspiracy theorists and Taiwanese pro-Beijing

commentators. If that's not unusual to you, there are also HK pro-Democracy protesters and Trump supporters being unified under **#stopthesteal** due to the anti-communist sentiment.

We see the unfolding of a vast range of motivations, from organic participation to orchestrated actions, from commercial incentive to the emerging sustained business models. To echo what Nikos said the other day, their agency cannot be projected onto a linear spectrum.

Most importantly, from what little I can show, I hope we are beginning to see that, disinformation is operated beyond the cognitive domains and is attached to bodies and networks in places. It involves a set of entangled components, evolving processes and heterogeneous actors and flows. It extends beyond the moment of the intrusive narrative, embeds itself into the participatory media, the platform economy, local polity and transnational relationships, and becomes further part of a sustained and interrelated sociotechnical ecology.

On the other side **of the recipient**. Bruno Latour's 'action at a distance' helps further my understanding of disinformation as not only a process but also a regime. For Latour, action at a distance explains how forms of rule and order are carried out from afar or distributed across networks, through calculation and translation. For everyday media consumers like ourselves, disinformation wields the mechanism of chaos and confusion at a distance.

It rules with distance. As atoms and hyperindividuals, we long for places through mediation and in abstraction, more than our lived vicinity. Disinformation squeezes in through the cracks, when we no longer rely on our sensorial faculty to know things, and when we lose our ability to relate to the place we dwell.

It rules with time. As part of the acceleration scheme, disinformation is packaged as easy and digestible bite-sized livestream, memes, and localized content to be consumed and shared in no time. It aims at short-term actionable results as well as long-term influence.

It rules with hierarchy. Not all information is open to everyone. Not all nodes of the actor-networks enjoy equity. Our knowledge infrastructure is hierarchical, powered by geopolitics and geared towards capitalism. Disinformation is seeded as small doubts in micro-situations and thrives in distrusting the mainstream.

It rules with affect. As the tactics of disinformation evolve, it manifests as **decontextualised truth** that are embellished and inserted into local agenda. It is experienced in suggestive realms as small moments of life, when emergency calls from China wake me up at midnight, asking if Australia was in a pandemic chaos, "because it's all over the Chinese internet".

As I wrap up, I want to revisit the metaphor of disinformation as contagion and discuss the antidote by connecting the macro-and micro politics. In co-existing with the virosphere, some nation-states resort to a discourse of elimination and compete for a magic cure of vaccine. Yet, more often, our everyday negotiations with the viruses happen as small adjustments and gestures in life, like social distancing, wearing masks and enhancing immunity.

Perhaps the post-truth era prompts similar ways of co-existing with disinformation. I don't mean to normalize nor naturalize disinformation, but propose we learn to live with it at a sombre distance, not only relying on the actions of the states for fact checking. The media literacy of our publics needs to be accounted for. Our civil society and the 4th estate need to be empowered with decentralized knowledge infrastructure. We need to rediscover slowness and regain attachment to our body-mind-environment ensemble. We also need to beware of the elimination discourse. Because an absolute sense of right and wrong leads to the sterility of mind, and the illusion of absolute security.

To conclude, I see the importance of further ethnographic work in this area to complement the big data approach. I'd like to point out that the regime knows that a narrative is never a simple thought, nor a single incident. In the sociotechnical ensemble where actors, algorithms, networks, affects, capital, alliances and contingencies coalesce into durable statecraft, we need to recognise that, disinformation is not only a 'sanitation' issue of the public cognition, but also an emplaced issue of democracy, and a mode of co-existence.

Thank you.

For **Latour**, the post-truth era is a testament to his idea that truth is networked. Whether a statement is believed depends less on its veracity than on the conditions of its "construction", and the networks that uphold it.

Facts, **Latour** said, were "networked"; they stood or fell not on the strength of their inherent veracity but on the strength of the institutions and practices that produced them and made them intelligible. If this network broke down, the facts would go with them.

Also, thinking about our second day discussion of the *pandemos* as bodies not only experiencing forms spatial governance, but also emotional and cognitive turbulences, an emplaced approach has some utility in articulating some counter-measurements that connect the macro-and micro-politics.

An example was the statement that "**U.S. is the true origin of COVID-19**, not China". It started in February. At a point, Italy, France, Germany have all been claimed as the true origin of Covid.

Another example - #saysrytotedros Twitter - 60

or at a pro-Californian independence rally, the protesters waving the CCP to come and liberate California

Disinformation has similarities to performance – it makes me wonder is it an honest invitation for us to believe in its dishonest message, or is it an extended performance, a dalliance between states and organizations and the commons

One **disclaimer**: I refer to CCP-sponsored rather state-sponsored because I see the importance to separate the two. Another disclaimer: **CCP-sponsored is not CCP-manufactured**. There is rarely direct proof of CCP giving command or payments to the quasi-state media, troll army or content farms. There are high correlations being observed or detected by big data. To reverse engineer the process is harder than piecing together a multidimensional jigsaw puzzle without knowing the original pattern.

Anthropologist **Xiang Biao** from Oxford, laments on the atomized and hyper-individualized interpersonal relations of this hyper-industrialized world. He calls this the loss of the nearby.

we lose ability to sense what's around us because it's in a constant state of mobility. We know less about **Uber drivers** but rely more on Uber as a complex technical system.