

Open and transparent information promoting social stability

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The global spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has gripped the entire world. The biggest difference in how authoritarian states and democracies have addressed the disease lies in whether the reality is presented honestly to the public. Many authoritarian states have hidden the truth about the pandemic and imposed strict surveillance on their citizens, while most democracies have confronted the outbreak by offering information in an open, transparent fashion without infringing upon civil rights. The world has paid a terrible price for authoritarian China's decision to hide and be opaque about information concerning the virus. Taiwan, a vibrant democracy, has faced the situation openly and provided information transparently, for which the government has won the trust of the people. Taiwan's achievements in corralling the epidemic have become a model for the world.

1. Information updated daily to ensure people's safety and national calm

From January to early June 2020, Taiwan's Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC) hosted a daily press conference to update the public about the latest developments concerning COVID-19, as well as new disease prevention measures. This boosted local confidence in the government's efforts to contain the outbreak. The first case in Taiwan was a businesswoman who returned from Wuhan on January 21. She was also the first non-Chinese national to be confirmed as having the disease. Taiwan upgraded its disease prevention level. The CECC held at least one press conference daily, hosted by the CECC

Commander. The public was briefed on the latest developments from a professional standpoint, including information on confirmed cases, both imported and indigenous, as well as efforts concerning contact tracing and other prevention measures. Following Taiwan's containment of the spread of the virus, the CECC on June 8, 2020, started holding press conferences only when there were serious new developments with regard to COVID-19, providing the public with updates and related information.

The purpose of these press conferences is to share factual information with the public and to alleviate fears. These press conferences provide a psychological boost to the public, with each CECC team member playing an indispensable role. Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung, Commander of the CECC and the leader in the fight against the epidemic, reports in person to the public on the latest developments most of the time, regardless of how busy he is. Deputy Commander and Deputy Minister of the Interior Chen Tsong-yen speaks about the latest border control measures. CECC Expert Advisory Panel Convener Dr. Chang Shan-chwen shares medical information in language that is readily understandable. Executive Officer and Director General of Taiwan's Centers for Disease Control (Taiwan CDC) Chou Jih-haw is the right hand of the Commander, and provides information on infection investigations and policy implementation. Surveillance and Response Officer and Deputy Director General of the Taiwan CDC Chuang Jen-hsiang is responsible for monitoring pandemic data and acts as spokesperson for the group.

Without star actors, without a script, these live-streamed press conferences presenting objective data and scientific fact have become the highest-rated

programming for their time slots. At times, the heads of other related agencies attend to further explain CECC disease prevention measures. These efforts have given the public a strong sense of the cross-ministerial cooperation going on to prevent the further spread of this disease. These press conferences have also been opened to unlimited questions from the media. Information on the epidemic is open and transparent, and measures taken and medical information are explained fully, which has engendered trust. Fighting an epidemic is akin to the waging of a war: having the best commanding team will put the people's fears to rest. Even as the pandemic reaches around the globe, the people in Taiwan, from hard-working medical professionals on the front lines to members of the general public, can have peace of mind as they trust the commanding team.

2. Employing multiple media channels to disseminate information at any time and to any place

In addition to live streaming press conferences, the government's agencies and departments provide the latest information and announce new prevention and containment measures through both traditional media outlets, such as television and broadcast media, and new media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LINE.

Being kept in the dark causes anxiety, and widespread public anxiety would potentially be more difficult to deal with than the epidemic itself. Thus, the government's highest guiding principle is to provide people with the most up-to-date and accurate information in as timely a fashion as possible. The Ministry of Health and Welfare's official website and 1922 hotline are

providing public access to such information. Popular media outlets, such as television stations, Facebook, Instagram and the Taiwan CDC's official LINE account, have also disseminated up-to-date information through clear and humorous infographics. The MOHW, for example, has even created Zongchai, a cartoon Shiba Inu, to serve as its "spokesdog." In educating the public on best practices and ameliorating concerns over COVID-19, Zongchai has proven hugely successful, providing the Taiwanese people with accurate information and timely updates about prevention and containment measures.



The official LINE account, developed jointly by the Taiwan CDC and a team from the private sector, has allowed the government to disseminate accurate information directly and in real time. The account also addresses public concerns by functioning as a Q&A service. At one point during the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of subscribers skyrocketed from less than 100,000 to one million in one week. The account now has more than 2.23 million subscribers. Meanwhile, Taiwan's 1922 24-hour disease-prevention hotline helps respond to any and all questions about the COVID-19 pandemic. Personnel manning

the hotline have also been able to provide immediate support to people undergoing home quarantine or home isolation, while updated chatbot functionality has given citizens firsthand access to domestic and overseas information about the situation as it develops.

Building on the MOHW's frontline provision of information through multiple channels, a root-and-branch mobilization of government is getting information to even more people. Through regular Facebook posts, President Tsai Ing-wen and Premier Su Tseng-chang are spelling out the government's latest efforts and calling for public cooperation. The majority of President Tsai's Facebook posts have focused on the general direction that epidemic prevention policies are to take, which have received wide exposure. Premier Su's Facebook page has been used to introduce and explain these policies. And given that some people may not watch television, listen to the radio, or use the internet or LINE, the government has taken the initiative of sending key messages to cellphones through the Public Warning System or Public Warning Cell Broadcast Service. On April 4, the message warned the public not to visit crowded scenic spots, and reminded people of the importance of social distancing.

The government team is going all out to fight COVID-19—not only battling the disease through physical action, but also fighting an information war to deliver information across the airwaves and throughout social networks. The first phase, which could be likened to a war of attrition in which a rotating roster of combatants seeks to engage with the enemy, employed multiple channels to ensure a proper understanding of certain concepts, preventing unnecessary worry and thereby helping contain the pandemic. The second

phase involves using effective and already well-established communication channels to respond to and clarify disinformation in real time, thus protecting the public from incorrect information, and the unnecessary worry this would entail.

3. Real-time responses providing rapid clarification, exposing disinformation

Faced with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak, the government is drawing on advanced prevention and containment technologies, using the most authoritative data available to prevent disinformation from confounding the public. In addition to ensuring that its press conferences deliver accurate information about the pandemic, the CECC is also monitoring public opinion around the clock, attacking disinformation and strengthening public trust by responding to unfounded rumors through immediate clarifications. Moreover, punitive clauses in Article 63 of the Communicable Disease Control Act and Article 14 of the Special Act on COVID-19 Prevention, Relief and Restoration promulgated in February 2020, define the criminal responsibilities of those spreading disinformation about the pandemic, providing for jail sentences of up to three years and fines of up to NT\$3 million.

All manner of disinformation has gone viral on the internet since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Some 200,000 instances were documented in February 2020 alone, an increase of 203 percent. Even before COVID-19 was present in Taiwan, netizens were spreading the rumor that cases had already been confirmed in Taiwan. Later rumors said that an unnamed hospital had implemented control measures because of a suspected COVID-19 case on its

premises, and that patients were allowed to enter but not to leave. After the government placed controls on the production and supply of masks, online rumors started to spread that the government was requisitioning masks in order to profit; other rumors said that toilet paper was going to run out. There were even forged official documents and related disinformation. All of these examples highlight attempts to cause social disquiet and exhaust the government's administrative resources. Fortunately, the CECC's press conferences, government Facebook pages, and the LINE account have come to serve as major sources of up-to-date information, and the government has thus been able to clarify disinformation immediately, and shield the public from its impact.

Although citizens are now highly vigilant regarding disinformation about the pandemic, the government has still continued to investigate its sources, and found that a high proportion originates from China. Investigations by the Ministry of Justice's Bureau of Investigation have found that most of this comes from users of China's Weibo microblogging site, where posts have swapped or altered stories about Taiwanese current affairs, commentary by political figures, and place names. These posts have then found their way onto Facebook groups and other social media throughout China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

The Taiwan FactCheck Center, an independent private institution, has identified three features of disinformation:

1. The source is unknown. For example: "My friend's uncle said ..."; "My friend in the Ministry of National Defense told me ..."

2. The presence of simplified Chinese characters or use of language more common to mainland China, such as *xiaoqu* to mean *community* and *bao'an* to mean *security*.
3. Content that falsely claims Taiwan's pandemic prevention efforts have become dysfunctional.

In addition, Facebook also found that Chinese netizens had directed disinformation about COVID-19 at Taiwan, and it thus deleted more than 60 accounts in early March 2020. Most of these accounts had purported to represent Taiwanese people by using names written in traditional Chinese characters, but Facebook was able to distinguish their origin through such technical details as account creation date and IP address. The accounts had intentionally spread rumors about the government, mostly regarding COVID-19, with the apparent purpose of creating social unease and scapegoating the Taiwanese government.

The times we live in have been characterized by a vast and almost overwhelming upsurge of information, so it is difficult to completely contain disinformation. However, the government is providing open and transparent information about COVID-19, and actively and swiftly responding to and clarifying various kinds of disinformation. This has effectively strengthened public trust in the government, offsetting the impact of disinformation.