

Commentary



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Fighting disinformation: Japan's unique situation and the future of Canada- Japan cooperation

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Introduction

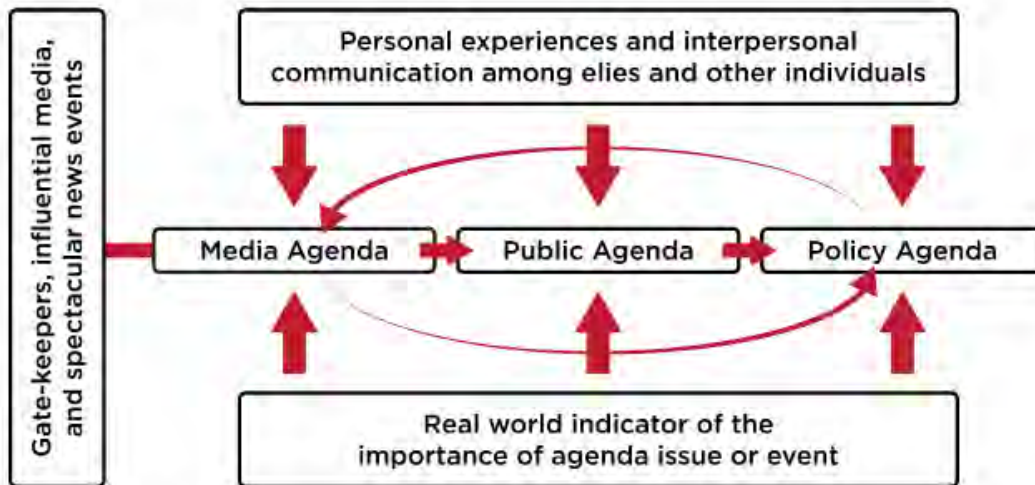
An open democratic society is one that allows its members to access information from both inside and outside the country, presenting a diversity of viewpoints in the process, to freely express their own thoughts, and to involve themselves in free and fair national governance. The role of the media has traditionally been emphasized with regard to accessing information. Traditional media play an important role in shaping public opinion and in providing information that enables members of the public to participate actively and effectively in a democratic society (see Figure 1). Freedom of the press, as guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution of Japan, is also one of the core values of democracy.

However, democratic processes worldwide are now facing great challenges due to disinformation threats.

“Disinformation” refers to false or misleading information created to obtain political or economic benefits or to deliberately deceive the masses. It hinders sound democracy because it can undermine public confidence in government and traditional media, impede citizens’ ability to make deci-

sions based on sufficient and accurate information, and even encourage radical ideas and activities (European Commission 2018a). Disinformation does not include inadvertent misinformation, satire or parody, or clearly partisan news and comments (European Commission 2018b).

Figure 1: Agenda setting model



Source: Prepared by author based on Rogers and Dearing 1988.

“Disinformation campaigns” are activities through which various domestic and foreign actors distort public opinion and create social or political instability by spreading disinformation, and they can even have a serious impact on national security (European Commission 2018b). Disinformation campaigns by third countries are also a part of hybrid warfare.

This commentary will explore the threat posed by disinformation, the particular situation that faces Japan in this information environment, and ultimately what Japan can learn from our allies in the G7, especially Canada, as we try to deal with the challenge of disinformation campaigns. Some thoughts on the future of Canada-Japan cooperation against disinformation will be explored at the end.

Why is “disinformation” garnering attention now?

In recent years, there have been a series of disinformation campaigns primarily in Western countries. Russia’s activities in this area are well known, including its intervention strategy in Crimea and Donbass in 2014, spreading disinformation to US voters in the 2016 US presidential election, and allegedly interfering in the election by hacking into Democratic Party accounts and leaking emails to undermine Hillary Clinton’s campaign. In the 2017 French

presidential election, rumors spread online that President Macron had hidden accounts in tax havens. Many of these disinformation sources were suspected to have ties to Russia. This past July, Russian President Putin used an article that emphasized the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine, which can also be considered part of such a strategy.

Today, however, disinformation is widely recognized around the world as a serious threat to democracy. What are the main factors behind this trend? The following two factors are particularly noteworthy.

The first factor is the rapid progress of communication technology. Not only has the amount of information accessible to the general public increased dramatically due to the wide use of the Internet, but the ways the general public is involved with information have also changed significantly, thanks to the penetration of social and online media. This has increased the influence of public opinion on government decision-making processes. New technology is being used to disseminate disinformation instantly and extensively with accurate targeting via social media. As has been pointed out, this has made social media an echo chamber for disinformation campaigns (European Commission 2018a).



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The second factor is the coronavirus pandemic. With the spread of COVID-19, a variety of disinformation about the virus and vaccines have flooded Europe, the US and the rest of the world, and the threat of disinformation has become clearly acknowledged globally. US President Joe Biden has said platforms such as Facebook are killing people by allowing COVID-19 vaccine misinformation on their services, thereby threatening the lives and livelihoods of citizens.

People are more susceptible to suspicion and disinformation in times of crisis. If Internet users in this state of mind come into contact with disinformation through social media, which has the technological feature of being able to spread information instantly without the limitations of physical space, they are more likely to believe it and spread it intentionally or unintentionally. This can lead to social and political instability.

During crises, people in general tend to become distrustful and anxious. This psychological state makes them more receptive to conspiracy theories and disinformation. Importantly, a flood of disinformation in such crises could give rise to social turmoil, impairing effective policy-making and public health activities and possibly leading to social and political instability.

The first and second factors interact with each other. Disinformation is a familiar threat that not only polarizes national public opinion but can also endanger the safety and health of citizens and political stability.

Possible threats and current circumstances in Japan

Chinese activities to influence public opinion in Japan is widely recognized. There is significant interest in China's influence activities in and against Japan. Japan's security could be adversely affected by influence operations and disinformation campaigns conducted by Japan's neighbours or other countries, and prompt consideration must be given to this serious issue. China's aim, in general, is to reach out to public opinion in target countries with the objective of creating a favourable environment to advance its own policies. One of its objectives in Japan is to foster a positive view of China and, more strategically, to weaken the Japan-US alliance.

The reality, however, is that it is extremely difficult to prevent disinformation campaigns coming in from overseas because there are insufficient political or economic incentives and countermeasures against such disinformation in Japan. According to the database of fact-checking websites compiled by the Duke Reporters' Lab at Duke University in the US, the three organizations accredited and registered as active fact-checking institutions in Japan accounted for less than 1 percent of the 348 such institutions worldwide as of September 2021. Even in South Korea, which has about half the population of Japan, there are 11 registered organizations.

On the other hand, there are few electoral and other disinformation campaigns being conducted in Japan from overseas in comparison with other Western countries. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, and the 2018 Okinawa gubernatorial election all prompted the spread of false rumors, but these do not correspond to the disinformation campaigns discussed here. Regarding the fire at the Cosmo Oil refinery in Ichihara City, Chiba Prefecture, false rumors were spread online that "hazardous materials would fall from the sky with the rain" and "one must avoid contact with the rain." Following the Kumamoto quake, a false tweet was retweeted more than 20,000 times saying a lion had escaped from the zoo and was on the loose in Kumamoto City.

Nearly all the rumors running rampant during disasters arise domestically and are not deliberately spread for political or economic gain. In the case of the Okinawa gubernatorial campaign, it was generated by unidentified sources, and it could have been intended to achieve political gain given that the criticism therein was directed at a particular candidate (Denny Tamaki) and that it was spread in some instances by politicians and celebrities (Ryukyu Shimpo 2018).

Various reasons can be cited for the relatively slight impact of disinformation campaigns and other influence operations in Japan conducted from overseas, especially from China. Some Japanese experts describe the country as having a “Galapagos Syndrome,” which captures its relative cultural, linguistic and economic separation from the western and other countries (Stewart 2020).

It is also true that there is little foreign media presence in Japan. One of the main reasons for Japan’s low foreign media presence is the dominance of a few Japanese media companies. As the report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies confirms, five major media conglomerates – consisting of NTV-the Yomiuri Shimbun, TV Asahi-Asahi Shimbun, TBS-Mainichi Shimbun, Fuji TV-Sankei Shimbun, and TV Tokyo-Nikkei Shimbun – along with NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) dominate the major Japanese media. Thus, it is said that the information space is limited, leaving little room for foreign interference (Stewart 2020).

In fact, Japanese newspapers have long enjoyed high trust among the Japa-



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nese public. According to a survey conducted by the Japan Press Research Institute, which had respondents rate how much they trust the information from each media source, “newspapers” maintained its top position with 69.2 points, up 0.3 points from the previous survey (100 points for full trust, 0 points for no trust) (Japan Press Research Institute 2021).

It has also been noted that China’s influence operations in Japan have had more limited success than in other democracies because many Japanese are skeptical of the influence of the United Front Work Department (Stewart 2020). The impact is also believed by some to be dampened by the fact that communication between political elites and regular citizens via social media is less active than in other countries, thereby reducing the impact of social media (Istituto Affari Internazionali 2021).

However, disinformation campaigns by other countries, along with cyberattacks, could present serious threats to Japan. These could be employed as part of hybrid warfare to win over public opinion in a target country or to disrupt its society at a stage prior to using force. In Japan, for example, China is trying to deepen exchanges with Okinawan organizations that advocate independence for the Ryukyu people. Their activities can be manipulated to achieve Chinese national goals by shaping public opinion in ways advantageous to China: polarizing public opinion in Japan, alienating Japan from the US, and eventually removing US forces stationed in Okinawa. In addition,

some analysts believe that, in the event of a Taiwan emergency, a great deal of Chinese disinformation could be spread in Japan (Kanehara 2021).

Examples of disinformation countermeasures in Canada

The international community now recognizes that disinformation is a threat to the security of all members. Democracies have lessons and experiences they can share and learn from each other regarding disinformation threats and countermeasures.

During the discussions on the third day of the 2021 G7 Summit, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga pointed out, with China and Russia in mind, that information controls and the spread of disinformation are serious problems that threaten the very foundations of democracy, and that it is important for countries to work together to deal with these problems.

However, as mentioned above, Japan has not had much experience in being exposed to severe disinformation campaigns from abroad, and therefore has not taken sufficient countermeasures.

The G7 Summit has provided Japan with a precious opportunity to ascertain the real nature of the threat caused by disinformation campaigns from abroad, and to promote cooperation with like-minded countries. In order to do so, Japan first needs to have the same level of threat perception as Western countries. This threat perception means recognizing that disinformation is a threat to the lives of the people and the security of the nation, and that improving the literacy of the people is a part of national defence. Having this threat perception with a sense of crisis is the first step to making the various measures effective.

In this context, it will be necessary for Japan to make efforts to learn the status of efforts and good practices in other G7 countries, including Canada.

The most important deterrent for all nations is to build a public resilient against online disinformation. In order to do so, public-private partnerships are an indispensable measure. Canada, a G7 member state, has also been taking measures for some time from which Japan could learn. The Digital Citizen Initiative, for instance, is a strategy that aims to strengthen democracy in Canada by building citizen resilience against disinformation and building partnerships to support the information ecosystem.

There might be a similarity between Canada and Japan regarding the disinformation environment. Canada reportedly has less of a problem with electoral disinformation than do other countries, in particular the US, and it is said that disinformation did not play a major role in the 2019 Canadian national election campaign. This could be partly because of the resilience of the media

component. According to the Digital Democracy Project, the Canadian political information ecosystem is more resilient than that of the US, for example, because of a high trust in traditional media and media preferences (Gaumond 2020).

Nevertheless, such resilience, which Japan shares, is not necessarily effective against disinformation itself. According to one opinion poll, although nearly 90 percent of Canadians were concerned about the quality of information online, about 60 percent said public concern over fake news is exaggerated (McQuigge 2019). This might show that a growing sense of crisis at the level of general public opinion does not translate into resilience against disinformation threats.

There is growing concern among experts about Russian influence in Canada. Canada is alleged to be a prime target in the information wars conducted by Russia and thus needs to be ready for a new surge in online disinformation campaigns. Canada has also been targeted by China's "wolf warrior diplomacy." Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Zhao Lijian has publicly accused Canadian media of spreading "fake news" about Xinjiang while keeping silent about "human rights violations" and even "genocide" in Canada (Zhao 2021a; 2021b). In order to fend off criticism of its human rights issues, China is using the same human rights theme to level accusations against other countries and to assert its own legitimacy.

Foreign influence operations could influence public opinion and ultimately the outcomes of elections. Influence operations largely take place in social media to fuel anxiety on hot-button policy issues such as immigration and refugees that affect election outcomes.

The need for international cooperation

Authoritarian countries could exploit the vulnerabilities of democracy. The freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, and the democratic procedures that our countries value provide opportunities for disinformation campaigns. A critical issue for democracies such as Japan is thus how quickly it can become more resilient to disinformation campaigns by other countries and minimize their impact on public opinion, the government's policy-making processes, and the health and security of its people.

Measures should include strengthening cross-ministerial efforts as well as the government's strategies for disseminating information publicly, expanding fact-checking functions, collaborating with fact checkers, experts, and online platform companies, and continually analysing public opinion and information. Education to cultivate the public's media literacy is another important means of cultivating public resilience.

Meanwhile, international cooperation in this field has become essential. There

are new moves underway in Western countries, including endeavours aimed at having Japanese experts participate in an international network organized to tackle disinformation and other issues pertaining to platform governance. There has been considerable interest and discussion among Japanese government officials and researchers on those measures to combat disinformation and other countries' efforts against disinformation.

The extent of disinformation now puts it beyond the ability of any country to address on its own, necessitating cooperation between nations sharing the same democratic values and experience. With little experience and insufficient countermeasures, Japan has much to learn from other democracies, including fellow G7 members, confronting the same disinformation threat. Canada and Japan have many things in common, such as freedom of expression under a constitutional order and disinformation environments, and cooperation with Canada holds great potential for Japan.

About the authors



Kyoko Kuwahara is a Research Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA). She is also a Visiting Research Analyst at Institute for Future Engineering (IFENG) and a Specially Appointed Assistance Professor at Kyoto University. She served as an Official of Office for Strategic Communication Hub at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2018-2019. After completing master's program at Osaka School of International Public Policy, Osaka University, she served as a Research Fellow at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation in 2017-2018. She specializes in Public Diplomacy, Strategic Communications, Soft Power Strategies, Media Studies, etc. Her recent books include *Naze Nihon no Tadashisa ha Sekai ni Tsutawaranai noka: Nichi chu kan Shiretsu na Imoji Sen* (Why is Japan's "Righteousness" Difficult to Convey to the World?: The Fierce Image Competition between Japan, China and South Korea) (2020), and *After Sharp Power: Beicyu Shinreisen no Makuake* (After Sharp Power: The Dawn of the New Cold War between the U.S. and China), co-author (2019). Her most recent published article includes "The Disinformation Threat and International Cooperation" (JIIA Strategic Comments, June 2, 2021).

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Endnotes

- 1 See the Duke Reporters’ Lab “Fact-Checking” website available at <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/>.
- 2 More information on the Digital Citizen Initiative can be found at: Government of Canada Undated.

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