

Taiwan's Fight for Global Democracy: The Role of Civil Society



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and Will Kielm

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About the Global Taiwan Institute

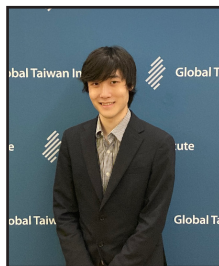
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Introduction

Globally, democracy is in retreat. Notably, there are now more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world¹ and an emerging axis of authoritarian powers are increasingly aligned in their geopolitical ambitions. Now authoritarian nations are exerting ever greater pressure to influence democracies and reshape the international order to make it safer for their autocratic rule and interests.

The most serious long-term threat to the international order and the global democracy movement is the People's Republic of China (PRC). As US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken explicitly stated:

*China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years.*²

It is within the geopolitical context that the United States launched the Summit for Democracy in 2021, assembling leaders of global democracies to “renew democracy at home and confront autocracies abroad.” As the only Chinese-speaking democracy, Taiwan has a critical but still under examined role for the global democracy movement. As a beacon for the global “third wave” of democratization, Taiwan's democracy continues to consolidate into the 21st century despite the ever growing threats it faces from the PRC. The role of a vibrant and robust civil society is indispensable and provides valuable lessons for other democracies facing similar challenges from authoritarian influence.

Taiwan's quest to maintain its global presence and af-

firm its identity as a *de facto* sovereign democratic nation faces significant challenges due to the diplomatic pressure exerted by the PRC. Despite such pressure directed against both Taiwan's democratic society and its international space, Taiwan, mainly through its active civil society due to its diplomatic isolation, has carved out a significant role for itself as a prominent member of the global community of democratic nations. This has been seen not only in terms of international engagement and narrative messaging, but also in terms of support to other embattled front-line democratic states such as Ukraine.

In events throughout the preceding year, the Global Taiwan Institute (GTI)—supported by a generous grant from the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD, 財團法人臺灣民主基金會)—sought to explore these issues in greater detail, through both staff research and public seminars involving a range of expert voices, including civil society representatives from Taiwan. The findings of this research are summarized in the report to follow.

1 V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2023–Defiance in the Face of Autocratization*, March 2023, https://v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf.

2 Antony Blinken, “The Administration's Approach to the People's Republic of China”, (Speech, The George Washington University, May 26, 2022) <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>.

Part 1: Challenges Faced by Taiwan's Democratic Society in the Face of Chinese Pressure

Taiwan's Challenge of Diplomatic Isolation

The government of the PRC maintains a “One China Principle” (OCP, 一個中國原則), which holds that: there is only one China in the world; the PRC is that China; and Taiwan is an “inalienable” part of China’s territory, over which Beijing rightfully holds full authorities of national sovereignty.³ Accordingly, the PRC will not maintain diplomatic relations with any state that affords formal recognition to Taiwan (as the Republic of China, or ROC), and denies any legitimacy to Taiwan’s own democratically-elected government.

In recent years, Taiwan has lost several of its diplomatic allies to Beijing, often following lucrative aid or investment promises by the PRC. This has left Taiwan with fewer than fifteen formal diplomatic partners.⁴ PRC pressure has also effectively barred Taiwan from formal participation in most international organizations—to include organizations for which *de jure* statehood is not necessarily required for membership, such as the World Health Organization (WHO).⁵

Despite this lack of widespread *de jure* recognition, Taiwan continues to assert itself as an active participant in the global community. Its government and civil society have become adept at utilizing unofficial channels, NGOs, and international forums to build networks and engage with other nations. Moreover, Taiwan is increasingly recognized for its proactive

response to international crises—such as providing aid during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Its humanitarian diplomacy and technological expertise in areas like cybersecurity have further demonstrated Taiwan’s value as a responsible global partner. These actions bolster Taiwan’s diplomatic credibility, proving that it can meaningfully contribute to global challenges despite the constraints imposed by its limited formal recognition.

Taiwan’s resilience in the face of diplomatic isolation has become an integral part of its global image. While the PRC’s diplomatic offensive has undeniably weakened Taiwan’s international space, the island’s government and civil society have demonstrated creativity and perseverance in maintaining unofficial yet impactful relationships. This underscores not only Taiwan’s enduring commitment to democratic values, but also its determination to contribute positively to the global community.

Political Warfare Intended to Undermine Taiwan's Society and Democratic Politics

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long employed political warfare, in multiple forms, in its efforts to shape public opinion both within Taiwan and internationally, and to weaken the resistance of Taiwan’s citizens to annexation on the CCP’s terms.⁷ GTI

3 PRC State Council Information Office, *The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue*, Feb. 21, 2000, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/taiwan/7956.htm>.

4 Thomas J. Shattuck, “The Race to Zero?: China’s Poaching of Taiwan’s Diplomatic Allies,” *Orbis* 64, no. 2 (January 1, 2020): 334–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2020.02.003>.

5 “Taiwan Excluded from WHO Annual Assembly Following Chinese Opposition,” *Reuters*, May 22, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-excluded-who-annual-assembly-following-chinese-opposition-2023-05-22/>.

6 “Taiwan Can Help, and Taiwan Is Helping!,” ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, undated, <https://en.mofa.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=2318>.

7 While the definition of “political warfare” may be subject to interpretation, a separate GTI report has defined it as follows: “Concerted and purposeful—and primarily, though not necessarily, non-violent—actions taken by a political actor to undermine a targeted group’s morale, social and political cohesion, and psychological resistance to the imposition of the initiator’s desired end state. These actions include, but are not limited to, directed propaganda and disinformation (in both traditional and online media), elite cooptation, political subversion, economic sabotage, and coercive military and economic actions intended for psychological effect.” See: John Dotson, *The Chinese Communist Party’s Political Warfare Directed Against Taiwan: Overview and Analysis*, Global Taiwan

held multiple events in 2023 that focused on different aspects of the PRC's efforts to undermine Taiwan's open society and democratic political system.

A significant component of the PRC's political warfare strategy involves the manipulation of media and the spread of disinformation. The CCP's goal is to manipulate public perception, discredit the Taiwanese government, and amplify pro-Beijing perspectives. GTI's July 20, 2023, seminar titled "Lessons from Taiwan: Enduring PRC Media Infiltration" highlighted the CCP's enduring attempts to infiltrate Taiwanese media, either by outright control or by disseminating narratives through proxies. In this event, Ms. Shu-ling Ko noted the prominent role played by pro-CCP proxies in purchasing traditional media outlets and orienting them towards Beijing's preferred narratives. Similarly, Ms. Amber Lin noted Beijing's "breaking the whole into parts" (化整為零) approach of shifting towards efforts to control local media—thereby paralleling efforts by the CCP to garner influence among local government officials in Taiwan.⁸

Another tactic employed by Beijing is the dissemination of "America Skepticism" (疑美論) narratives, which seek to sow distrust of the United States, and to inhibit closer US-Taiwan relations. The CCP strategically exploits existing political sentiments and skepticism within Taiwan, particularly narratives suggesting that the US views Taiwan merely as a "pawn" in

Institute, May 2024 (p. 5), https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/OR_CCP-Political-Warfare.pdf.

⁸ Global Taiwan Institute, "Lessons from Taiwan: Enduring PRC Media Infiltration," July 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/live/Wo0_TRYRvVw?si=Fu_boE5A9LjrfBEX.

A significant component of the PRC's political warfare strategy involves the manipulation of media and the spread of disinformation. The CCP's goal is to manipulate public perception, discredit the Taiwanese government, and amplify pro-Beijing perspectives.

a larger geopolitical scheme to contain China. By promoting this line of thinking, the CCP aims to undermine Taiwan-US relations and weaken confidence in American support for Taiwan. This topic was discussed extensively in a special research report prepared by GTI staff.⁹ It was also discussed in the August 9 event "Anti-American Propaganda and Its Impacts in Taiwan's Information Environment." In this seminar, guest speaker Chihhao Yu of the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG)—which issued its own parallel report on the subject, from a data analysis perspective—provided a particularly worthwhile insight, in discussing the extent to which such narratives emerge from Taiwan's own discourse, but are then actively amplified by the CCP's propaganda system.¹⁰

Election interference is another tool in the CCP's arsenal. The October 26 event "CCP Political Warfare and the 2024 Elections" shed light on how Beijing attempts to sway electoral outcomes in Taiwan. The CCP leverages disinformation campaigns, coordinated online activity, and diplomatic pressure to amplify divisive narratives and influence voter behavior. This interference is intended to sway the electorate toward political outcomes that align with the PRC's goals, such as the election of more pro-Beijing candidates or the fracturing of the elec-

⁹ John Dotson, *Chinese Information Operations against Taiwan: The "Abandoned Chess Piece" and "America Skepticism Theory"*, Global Taiwan Institute, August 2023, https://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/OR_ASTAW0807FINAL.pdf.

¹⁰ Global Taiwan Institute, "Anti-American Propaganda and Its Impacts in Taiwan's Information Environment," August 9, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/live/0fKbfn-5FUzs?si=HQ_z7rXsDRJ3Uu9k.

torate through heightened polarization. The CCP's disinformation strategies have gradually shifted from creating original content to amplifying existing narratives through a coordinated network of fake accounts and automated bots. This amplification strategy makes their efforts harder to trace and more effective in spreading misinformation rapidly.¹¹

The CCP's information warfare continues to be a substantial challenge to Taiwan's democracy, with civil society organizations and independent media at the forefront of combating these efforts. Despite these challenges, Taiwan remains vigilant. Civil society and independent media organizations work tirelessly to counter Beijing's narratives, fact-check information, and promote media literacy. These efforts demonstrate Taiwan's commitment to safeguarding its democracy from external interference, and protecting its society against the divisive tactics of authoritarian influence.

11 Global Taiwan Institute, "CCP Political Warfare and the 2024 Elections," October 26, 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/events/october-26-ccp-political-warfare-and-the-2024-elections/>.

Part 2: The Response of Taiwan's Government

Narrative Discourse in Support of Democracy Worldwide

The presidential administration of President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) began in 2021 to more heavily and directly emphasize the idea of Taiwan as a member of the global community of democratic nations. This was often tied to—and contrasted with—the authoritarian system of the PRC, and the PRC's coercive pressure directed against Taiwan. A significant benchmark in the administration's messaging on this issue came with President Tsai's speech on the occasion of the ROC's National Day (國慶日), or “Double Ten Day” (雙十節), in October 2021—when she spoke of Taiwan not only as a member of a broader international coalition of democracies, but also as standing on the “front line” of confronting creeping international authoritarianism. Noting PRC actions such as the suppression of Hong Kong and expanded military activity near Taiwan that threatened Taiwan's security, President Tsai stated that:

[T]he more we achieve, the greater the pressure we face from China. So I want to remind all my fellow citizens that we do not have the privilege of letting down our guard. [...] Free and democratic countries around the world have been alerted to the expansion of authoritarianism, with Taiwan standing on democracy's first line of defense. [...] In contrast [with the actions of China], democratic countries are working to strengthen our broad-based, mutual cooperation in order to respond to regional and global developments.¹²

This theme was reinforced in Tsai's Double Ten speech the following year, which also saw a noticeable narrative shift in terms of further emphasizing Taiwan's expanding ties with fellow democracies, and the importance of the global democracy move-



Image: Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (center) and Vice-President Lai Ching-te (right) in the reviewing stand for the 2022 National Day Holiday ceremonies. Tsai's speech that day placed a strong emphasis on Taiwan's role in the worldwide democracy movement.¹³

ment in the face of authoritarian pressure. Tsai stated that Taiwan's government and citizens should:

[C]ontinue deepening Taiwan's international cooperation and close ties with democratic allies. As the expansion of authoritarianism has gradually come to threaten the global order, friends from across the world have traveled to Taiwan to express their heart-warming support. In fact, Taiwan is now receiving more international attention than ever before. The Republic of China (Taiwan) has become an important global symbol of democracy and freedom. The international community fully understands that upholding Taiwan's security means upholding regional stability and democratic values. The destruction of Taiwan's democracy and freedom would be a grave defeat for the world's democracies.¹⁴

Taiwan's narrative messaging under President Tsai effectively positioned the nation as a frontline democracy confronting authoritarian expansion. This has includ-

¹² “President Tsai Delivers 2021 National Day Address,” ROC Presidential Office, October 10, 2021, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6175>.

¹³ Image source: Ibid.

¹⁴ “President Tsai Delivers 2022 National Day Address,” ROC Presidential Office, October 10, 2022, <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/6348>.

ed Taiwan's outspoken support for aid to Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression—even in matters such as arms deliveries, when military aid to Ukraine has competed with backlogged deliveries of purchased weapons systems to Taiwan. Taiwan's then-Foreign Minister Joseph Wu (吳釗燮) spoke to this issue in a May 2024 article in the journal *Foreign Affairs* that characterized Ukraine's fight for survival as the common cause of democracies around the world.¹⁵

Taiwan's Participation in International Fora for Democratic States

Taiwan's emerging role as a member of the global democratic community is symbolized by its participation in the Summit for Democracy (hereafter "Summit"), a forum for representatives of democratic states first hosted by the United States in 2021. The Summit has provided a platform for Taiwan to share its experiences and strategies in countering authoritarian threats. Taiwan's senior representatives for the inaugural Summit in 2021 were Digital Minister Audrey Tang (唐鳳) and Hsiao Bi-Khim (蕭美琴) (then serving as Taiwan's de facto ambassador to the United States).¹⁶ At the 2021 summit, Minister Tang expressed Taiwan's support for liberal democratic measures such as maintaining press freedoms, supporting measures against corruption, and countering online disinformation. In her speech, she stated:

Although Taiwan is a young democracy, it's standing firm on the front lines of the global struggle with authoritarianism. It also plays a leading role in advancing freedom, democracy and human rights worldwide. [...] As democracies, we

*must trust our citizens and invest in public infrastructure in the digital realm. This is the best and only way to protect and advance our shared values. Today's summit is the perfect platform to bring democracies together and explore ways to collaborate.*¹⁷

The Summit for Democracy served as a crucial opportunity for Taiwan to foster partnerships with like-minded nations and reinforce its identity as a key player in the global democracy movement. Taiwan's involvement underscores its determination to actively contribute to the protection of democratic norms and its readiness to work with allies to promote freedom and human rights.

Since the 2021 Summit for Democracy, Taiwan has remained actively engaged in other international fora for democratic states—such as the Copenhagen Democracy Summit (organized by the Alliance of Democracies Foundation, founded by former Danish Prime Minister and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen), where Digital Minister Tang again presented a speech in May 2024 as a representative of Taiwan.¹⁸

Taiwan's engagements have been particularly resonant with Eastern European states that were formerly subject to Soviet domination. As a result of the ideological sympathy born out of this experience, some Eastern European states have tended to be more forward-leaning in terms of their relations with Taiwan. Then-Foreign Minister Joseph Wu spoke to this common ex-

15 Jaushieh Joseph Wu, "Defending Taiwan by Defending Ukraine: The Interconnected Fates of the World's Democracies," *Foreign Affairs*, May 9, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/defending-taiwan-ukraine-jaushieh-joseph-wu>.

16 John Dotson, "Taiwan's Participation in the 'Summit for Democracy'—and Beijing's Coordinated Propaganda Campaign in Response," *Global Taiwan Brief*, December 15, 2021, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2021/12/taiwans-participation-in-the-summit-for-democracy-and-beijings-coordinated-propaganda-campaign-in-response/>.

17 Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Remarks-Digital Minister Audrey Tang-Summit for Democracy-Dec. 9-10, 2021," <https://ws.mofa.gov.tw/Download.ashx?u=LzAwMS9Vc-GxvYWQvNDAYL3JlbGZpbGUvNzQvOTY5MjkvZDNkN-DIzNjAtNWNjOS00N2I4LTkwODYtNGU3ZmQ4MjQxMjg-zLnBkZg%3d%3d&n=UmVtYXJrcyBieSBEdWdpdGFsIE1pbmlzdGVyIEFuZlJleSBUYW5nICJoi7Hml0cpLnBkZg%3d%3d>.

18 ROC Overseas Chinese Affairs Council, "Minister of Digital Affairs Audrey Tang Attended the Copenhagen Democracy Summit via Video Conference," May 20, 2024, <https://www.ocac.gov.tw/OCAC/Eng/Pages/Detail.aspx?no-deid=329&pid=64669440>.



Image: Taiwan Minister of Digital Affairs Audrey Tang addressing the Copenhagen Democracy Summit via remote link in May 2024.¹⁹

perience at the “Future of Democracy: High Level Forum on Defending Against Authoritarianism” held in Vilnius, Lithuania in November 2023. Speaking at the forum, Minister Wu stated:

*Let me tell you how the people in Taiwan think about the name Lithuania so that you know why I get emotional in coming here. Lithuania is a country that fought against Russia to regain independence and democracy. [...] Both Taiwan and Lithuania and other frontline states in Europe are proud democracies that emerged from a struggle for self-determination and human rights, despite that we are on the front line, living under the shadow of authoritarian expansionism. [...] We understand the value of democracy and the rule of law, as well as the essential role they play in fostering peace, stability, and prosperity. Nevertheless, we also recognize that these cherished principles are not to be taken for granted; they must be defended, upheld, and advanced.*²⁰

19 ROC Overseas Chinese Affairs Council, “Minister of Digital Affairs Audrey Tang Attended the Copenhagen Democracy Summit via Video Conference,” May 20, 2024, <https://www.ocac.gov.tw/OCAC/Eng/Pages/Detail.aspx?no-deid=329&pid=64669440>.

20 “Remarks by Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu at the Future of Democracy: High Level Forum on Defending Against Authoritarianism,” (Vilnius, Lithuania), Nov. 10, 2023 https://en.mofa.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=1575&s=116139.



Image: Taiwan Foreign Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu delivering an address at the “Future of Democracy: High Level Forum on Defending Against Authoritarianism” conference held in Vilnius, Lithuania on November 10, 2023.²¹

Frameworks for International Cooperation

In addition to its contributions to international discourse supporting democracy, Taiwan has also sought to actively participate in multinational frameworks—ones for which *de jure* diplomatic recognition is not a requirement—that are intended to pursue cooperative progress on global issues alongside other like-minded states.

One important initiative in this regard is the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF, 全球合作暨訓練架構), a multilateral partnership between Taiwan, the United States, and Japan. The GCTF exemplifies Taiwan’s commitment to global cooperation and democratic values by facilitating training and knowledge exchange on public health, environmental protection, and cybersecurity. These programs also cover digital literacy and the best practices for countering disinformation. Through the GCTF, Taiwan shares its expertise while securing its place in the international

21 Image source: “Foreign Minister Wu Delivers Speech at Lithuanian Forum,” *Taiwan Today*, Nov. 13, 2023, <https://taiwanreview.nat.gov.tw/news.php?unit=2&post=244642&unit-name=Politics-Top-News&postname=Foreign-Minister-Wu-delivers-speech-at-Lithuanian-forum>.

community as a valuable contributor to global challenges.²²

Taiwan's active engagement with like-minded nations through the GCTF demonstrates its ability to form strategic partnerships even without official diplomatic recognition. This framework allows Taiwan to collaborate on shared challenges like cybersecurity and public health while showcasing its technical expertise. The framework also serves as a platform for Taiwan to amplify its values and reinforce its commitment to international cooperation.

Through summits, international frameworks, and proactive government messaging, Taiwan has cultivated strong international relationships and demonstrated its unwavering commitment to democratic values. Such consistent calls for international cooperation have not only solidified Taiwan's position in the global democracy movement, but have also strengthened its alliances with fellow democratic nations in confronting the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes.

22 “About GCTF - Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF),” GCTF, 2015, <https://www.gctf.tw/en/IdeaPurpose.htm>.

Part 3: Taiwanese NGOs and Their Work

The Civil Society Landscape

Taiwan's civil society has also taken an active role in countering disinformation and fact checking. Their efforts have not only been recognized by local actors, but by international organizations as well, with Freedom House's 2022 *Beijing's Global Media Influence Report* praising Taiwan's civil society for having "a high degree of expertise and knowledge on China," which can be leveraged as Taiwan works to counter PRC influence operations.²³ Additionally, as the civil society response has developed, NGOs have diversified their operations to counter disinformation through a variety of approaches and focus areas—ranging from observational research to media literacy education to AI bots.

As Benjamin Sando noted during GTI's August 9 event on "America Skepticism Theory," building a society that is more resilient against disinformation consists of three "builds": 1) building scrutiny of mis/disinformation, 2) building reliable sources of news, and 3) building individual autonomy.²⁴ Even though societies need to have a healthy skepticism of news and search out additional information, there also need to be reliable sources of information people can turn to. Additionally, because disinformation often draws upon narratives of fear—in the case of America skepticism, it draws upon the fear that the United States is using Taiwan for its semiconductor industry and that the United States will abandon Taiwan in the event of a Chinese invasion—building up Taiwan's own capacity to defend itself will help make people less susceptible to these fear-based narratives. While civil society can take an active role in all three of these areas, this

report will focus mainly on the first build: building scrutiny of dis/misinformation.

The goal of building scrutiny can be reframed through three main action tasks: researching information operations, fact-checking, and promoting media literacy. To make people aware that information they encounter may be untrue, they first need to be aware that misinformation exists and what to do if they are questioning information. Within Taiwan's information environment, awareness about disinformation can be built up through the publication of research reports and media literacy education, while fact checking databases can then be used to verify or disprove information that is suspect.

Researching Information Operations: Doublethink Lab (DTL) and Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG)

Doublethink Lab (DTL), founded in 2019, is perhaps one of the most well-known Taiwan think tanks working to counter disinformation. With the goal of "researching malign Chinese influence operations and disinformation campaigns and their impacts," the group's focus is more globally-oriented in comparison to their peers and their publications are widely available in English.²⁵ In addition to their in-house publications, Doublethink Lab also works to bring together China experts as part of the China in the World Network. By collaborating with China experts across different regions, Doublethink Lab has been working to map China's influence internationally, through a project called the China Index.

The most recent China Index was released in 2022, and included three guidebooks: one for use by civil society, and two for media (one version in English and one in Spanish). By evaluating the PRC's influence in 82 countries using the same methodology across all, the report aims to show how local PRC

23 Angeli Datt and Jaw-Nian Huang, "Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022–Taiwan," Freedom House, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/taiwan/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

24 Benjamin Sando, "America Skepticism Theory: Anti-American Propaganda and Its Impacts in Taiwan's Information Environment," Global Taiwan Institute, August 9, 2023, <https://globaltaiwan.org/events/august-9-america-skepticism-theory/>.

25 Doublethink Lab, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://doublethinklab.org/>.

influence connects to a global context and patterns. The guidebook for civil society focuses on how activists can use Doublethink Lab's data for advocacy purposes, while the guidebook for media gives advice about how to report on PRC influence and how to write under censorship.²⁶ Some critics have noted that because the China Index relies on expert opinions, there could be biases inherent within the report, and have urged for DTL to be more transparent.²⁷ However, as a representative at DTL has noted, since DTL conducts research in areas that are heavily affected by PRC influence and under the control of authoritarian governments, identifying their sources could at times put those individuals in danger.²⁸

In contrast to Doublethink Lab, the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG, 台灣資訊環境研究中心) focuses more on accessing and reaching domestic audiences and accordingly they publish their research mainly in Mandarin Chinese. Originally called the Information Operations Research Group—hence their continued use of the acronym IORG—the organization decided to change their name to the more neutral Taiwan Information Environment Research Center due to polarized views among the public regarding disinformation.

Regarding their research methods, both organizations primarily examine social media platforms to find evidence of coordinated campaigns to spread misinformation. Observational research is then complemented with surveys and experiments to verify their findings. Rather than doing the fact-checking them-

selves, both rely on databases compiled by organizations such as Taiwan FactCheck Center, Cofacts and MyGoPen. In addition to freeing up DTL and IORG to devote more resources to identifying patterns and overarching themes, drawing upon databases that are independently collected rather than conducting all research in-house increases transparency of their methods and helps reduce potential biases.

In coordination with observational research, both organizations also use polling and surveys to answer more focused questions about public opinion. In order to examine Taiwanese people's usage of YouTube and how YouTube impacts political attitudes, IORG worked with National Cheng Chung University's Public Opinion and Market Research Center (國立中正大學政治學系民意及市場調查中心) to conduct survey data, ultimately finding that Douyin users were more likely to agree with questionable narratives that are pro-China and skeptical of the United States.²⁹ Doublethink Lab's most recent surveys—which covered questions about where the respondents got their political information, views on the United States, and support for democracy—consisted of exit-polling in Taoyuan City and pre-election telephone surveys that were conducted during the first week of January 2024.³⁰

Following the incident of Lin Hsien-yuan (林獻元) being charged for publishing fake election poll results,³¹ it has become even more important for any institution conducting polling to not only uphold open and transparent processes, but also to communicate their polling processes to the public. In closed-door

26 China in the World and Doublethink Lab, *China Index—A Guidebook for Civil Society*, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OybkRUXvhitjEB4nGcQN5cx7MaEpK/view?usp=sharing>; China in the World and Doublethink Lab, *China Index—A Guidebook for Media*, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/14CPth0kKqHJeD9GWtUthAgnP34Qowfef/view?usp=sharing>

27 Katrin Kinzelbach and Lars Pelke, "How (not) to measure China's autocratic influence", *The Loop—ECPR's Political Science Blog*, May 31, 2023, <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/how-not-to-measure-chinas-autocratic-influence/>.

28 From conversations that the author had with Doublethink Lab, March 25, 2024.

29 Taiwan Information Environment Research Center IORG, "October 2023 IORG Taiwan YouTube usage habits and political attitudes survey", (December 11, 2023) <https://iorg.tw/a/youtube-in-tw-2310#h2-5>.

30 Eric Hsu, "2024 Taiwan Election: Exit-poll in Taoyuan City—Research Data", (Doublethink Labs, January 18, 2024), <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/2024-taiwan-election-exit-poll-in-taoyuan-city-research-data-e573f80434fb>

31 Stuart Lau, "China bombards Taiwan with fake news ahead of election," *Politico*, January 10, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-bombards-taiwan-with-fake-news-ahead-of-election/>.

discussions that one of this report's authors had with Taiwanese politicians, some expressed distrust of polling results, further highlighting the need for any institutions conducting surveys and polling to build credibility among Taiwan's domestic population. One solution could be to find trusted partners outside of the field to participate in surveys and verify results—which may have been one motivation behind IORG's decision to partner with CCU. However, in Taiwan's increasingly polarized environment, institutions that are trusted by all sides of the political spectrum will likely become more difficult to find.

Fact-Checking: MyGoPen, Cofacts, and Taiwan Fact-Check Center

As mentioned earlier, the work of Taiwanese fact-checking organizations compliments the work of DTL and IORG. Three fountrunners of Taiwan's fact checking landscape—termed the “three musketeers” in one *Taiwan Insight* article³²—are MyGoPen, Cofacts, and Taiwan FactCheck Center.

Founded in 2015 by Charles Yeh, MyGoPen (麥擱騙) initially focused on helping elderly family members, relatives, and friends debunk disinformation.³³ While it first began as a blog, MyGoPen later evolved into a full website that also provides fact checking LINE by using a smart chatbot. While the core team behind MyGoPen has stayed small with only three full-time employees, the scale of its operations has expanded dramatically largely due to efforts by volunteers—in 2020 the organization had over 300,000 LINE subscribers and received about 2,000 enquiries daily.³⁴

32 Chiaoning Su and Wei-Ping Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation: Assessing Citizen-led Fact-checking Practices in Taiwan,” *Taiwan Insight*, March 31, 2023, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2023/03/31/three-musketeers-against-mis-disinformation-assessing-citizen-led-fact-checking-practices-in-taiwan/>.

33 “About Us| The Direction of Our Efforts,” MyGoPen, accessed April 12, 2024, https://www.mygopen.com/p/blog-page_19.html.

34 Su and Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation.”

Currently a for-profit company, MyGoPen is “funded by collaborative partnerships (e.g., Facebook), content authorisation (Yahoo!) and reader donations.”³⁵ In a Q&A on MyGoPen's website, they also clarified that they do not accept funding related to the government, politics, or any groups that could raise questions about their fairness.³⁶

Inspired by MyGoPen, a group of g0v computer programmers built Cofacts (真的假的) in 2017.³⁷ Initial funding from the project came from a g0v.tw Civic Tech Grant and it is currently funded through crowdfunding, with the help of the Open Culture Foundation.³⁸ Both open source and multilingual, the Cofacts chatbot can be used to check the validity of images and multimedia on LINE.³⁹ Fact-check responses to suspicious messages are also shared on Cofacts website and can be added to and edited by other users. Additionally, all fact check responses are visible when someone enquires about a message and they can vote on which replies were most helpful. Similarly to MyGoPen, the team behind Cofacts is small and the operation relies on three to five members.⁴⁰ Despite their small size, they have been successful at processing a high volume of messages—as of 2022 they had over 87,000 suspicious messages stored in their database and over 2,000 contributors participated in fact-checking.⁴¹

Cofacts' open-source programming has also given way to other chatbots such as Auntie Meiyu, which was de-

35 Ibid.

36 Q&A | MyGoPen's clarification and reply,” MyGoPen, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.mygopen.com/p/mygopen-mygopen-mygopen-mygopen.html>.

37 Su and Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation.”

38 “Cofacts,” Rights Colab, accessed April 12, 2024, https://rightscolab.org/case_study/cofacts/.

39 Billion Lee, “The Bot Fighting Disinformation: The Story of Cofacts,” *Taiwan Insight*, October 12, 2022, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2022/10/12/the-bot-fighting-disinformation-the-story-of-cofacts/>.

40 Su and Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation.”

41 Lee, “The Bot Fighting Disinformation.”

veloped in 2018. Based on the programming behind Cofacts and drawing from the databases of MyGoPen, Cofacts, and Taiwan FactCheck Center, the chatbot can also be added to LINE to check the validity of suspicious messages.⁴² In 2020, Auntie Meiyu also partnered with Gogolook to help its users check phone numbers against databases of known scammers.⁴³ Currently, the service can be used for fact checking, checking suspicious phone numbers and LINE friend requests, and monitoring personal data leaks.

In addition to making fact checking more convenient, chatbots also play a crucial role in countering disinformation in the LINE messaging app. LINE, which was used by approximately 90 percent of the Taiwanese public in 2019, has faced the same problems as other messaging apps with how to counter disinformation while maintaining user privacy.⁴⁴ After noticing that the app was being used to spread disinformation in the lead-up to the 2018 Taiwan elections, LINE partnered with Taiwan FactCheck Center and Cofacts to launch the “LINE Digital Responsibility Plan” in July 2019 and launched their own official LINE Fact Checker Account.⁴⁵ By collaborating with local civic society to provide fact checking, LINE is able to counter misinformation while still preserving end-to-end encryption.⁴⁶ Another method of flagging misin-

formation that may help preserve user privacy is perceptual hashing, a method of assigning unique hashes to images, which then can be compared to a database of banned manipulated images.⁴⁷

Taiwan FactCheck Center (TFC, 台灣事實查核中心) was established in 2018 by the Taiwan Media Watch and the Association for Quality Journalism.⁴⁸ In comparison to prior initiatives that were born out of civic tech communities, TFC stands out as an initiative born out of a journalistic background. TFC became a verified signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)’s Code of Principles in November 2018 and was legally registered as an independent foundation in December 2020.⁴⁹ (MyGoPen was the second Taiwanese organization to become a signatory to ICFN in 2020.⁵⁰) With the mission of “fact-check[ing] claims related to public interest issues to promote reliable information, digital literacy, and improve the information ecology in Taiwan,” TFC’s main activities are publishing fact checking reports and conducting media literacy education.⁵¹

Media Literacy: Furthered through Partnerships and Private Sector

Similar to other areas of countering disinformation, media literacy programs have largely been a result of collaborative efforts between different organizations. Since 2020, IORG has also collaborated with Taiwan Pàng-phuānn

42 Su and Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation.”

43 Auntie Meiyu, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://checkcheck.me/en/>.

44 Elizabeth Lange and Doowan Lee, “How One Social Media App Is Beating Disinformation,” *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/23/line-taiwan-disinformation-social-media-public-private-united-states/>

45 “The “LINE Message Verification” platform is launched online to invite the public to join forces to fight counterfeiting and simultaneously organize media literacy education to inspire new thinking from the inside out,” LINE Media Relations News, July 22, 2022, <https://linecorp.com/tw/pr/news/tw/2019/2791>.

46 Andrew Deck and Vittoria Elliott, “How Line is fighting disinformation without sacrificing priva-

cy,” *Rest of World*, March 7, 2021, <https://restofworld.org/2021/how-line-is-fighting-disinformation-without-sacrificing-privacy/>.

47 Deck and Elliott, “How Line is fighting disinformation without sacrificing privacy,”; Julio C.S. Reis, Philipe Melo, Kiran Garimella, and Fabricio Benevenuto, “Can WhatsApp Benefit from Debunked Fact-Checked Stories to Reduce Misinformation?,” June 2020, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2006.02471.pdf>.

48 Taiwan Factcheck Center, “Strengthening fact-checking with media literacy, technology & collaboration: Taiwan Fact-Check Center,” *Meedan* (blog), April 2, 2022, <https://meedan.com/post/strengthening-fact-checking-with-media-literacy-technology-and-collaboration>.

49 Taiwan Factcheck Center About Us, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/en/about-us>.

50 Su and Li, “Three Musketeers Against Mis/Disinformation.”

51 Taiwan Factcheck Center About Us, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/en/about-us>.

Association of Education (台灣放伴教育協會) to create information literacy education programs for middle schools and high schools.⁵² From July 2020 to February 2021, the partnership was responsible for 68 workshops which taught media literacy skills to over 1,700 participants.⁵³ The IORG's work to support media literacy is also in line with government policy initiatives such as the Ministry of Education's (MOE, 教育部) 2023 Digital Era Media Literacy Education White Paper (數位時代媒體素養教育白皮書).

Beyond collaborative efforts between civil society organizations, media literacy efforts have also been furthered through support from social media companies. In 2021, with the support of USD \$1 million from Google.org, Taiwan FactCheck Center launched the “Taiwan Media Literacy Education Initiatives.”⁵⁴ In the run up to the 2024 elections, news organizations and social media companies also helped by spreading fact check information and limiting the spread of misinformation—with Yahoo! News and the Central News Agency sharing election-related fact checking on their platforms, and Meta labeling disinformation on its platforms.⁵⁵ While there could be more engagement

In addition to civil society playing an important role by holding the government accountable, Taiwanese NGOs can contribute to the fight against disinformation by taking a seemingly more neutral stance in Taiwan's increasingly polarized environment.

between the government and social media organizations to counter disinformation, these existing collaborations are a promising starting point.⁵⁶

Civil Society's Unique Role: Independent and Transparent

Despite the government's efforts to counter the spread of disinformation through policy, the government is still limited in what actions they can take. Part of the sensitivity over government involvement is due to lingering fears from Taiwan's period of martial law and the censorship and publication control that occurred during that time. However, another factor is that some people blame the government for originating fake news. In a telephone survey conducted ahead of the 2024 election, Doublethink Lab found that 26.6 percent of respondents believed that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) was responsible for disinformation—in contrast with only 15.2 percent who believed

that fake news and disinformation originated from the People's Republic of China, while 40.4 percent of respondents chose not to answer.⁵⁷ In addition to civil society playing an important role by holding the government accountable, Taiwanese NGOs can contrib-

52 IORG, “About IORG,” https://iorg.tw/_en/about.

53 Angeli Datt and Jaw-Nian Huang, “Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022–Taiwan,” Freedom House, 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/taiwan/beijings-global-media-influence/2022>.

54 “Taiwan Media Literacy Education Initiatives” launched with Google's US\$1 million funding,” Taiwan Fact-check Center, April 29, 2022, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/7275>.

55 You-Hao Lai, “Disinformation and Civil Defence: How Did Taiwan's Civil Society Counter Foreign Information Manipulation?,” *Taiwan Insight*, February 5, 2024, <https://taiwaninsight.org/2024/02/05/disinformation-and-civil-de>

fence-how-did-taiwans-civil-society-counter-foreign-information-manipulation/.

56 See also Willian Hung, “Media Literacy Education: Taiwan's Key to Combating Disinformation,” *Global Taiwan Brief*, March 6, 2024, <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/03/media-literacy-education-taiwans-key-to-combating-disinformation/>

57 Doublethink Lab, “2024 Taiwan Election: Pre-election Telephone Surveys — Research Data,” *Medium*, January 18, 2024, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/2024-taiwan-elections-pre-election-telephone-surveys-research-data-23ed084fd60e>

ute to the fight against disinformation by taking a seemingly more neutral stance in Taiwan's increasingly polarized environment.

Against this backdrop, Taiwanese NGOs face pressure to remain staunchly independent from the government. For instance, for those who believe that the DPP is an originator of misinformation, the fact that Doublethink Lab Chairperson Puma Shen was included on the DPP's legislator-at-large list for the 2024 elections does not help Doublethink's credibility.⁵⁸ Efforts to maintain neutrality may come at the expense of obtaining government funding and limit the resources available to these civil society organizations, which can make it difficult to expand their operations. In order to meet costs, some organizations instead rely on crowdfunding, private partnerships, or grants from foundations. Taiwan FactCheck Center, for instance, rejects any funding from government sources, political parties, and politicians, instead receiving funding mainly from enterprises, foundations, and individuals.⁵⁹ Some organizations also keep costs down by relying on volunteers—this is true in the case of Cofacts, which has built up its database through crowd collaboration.⁶⁰

Another important factor for maintaining credi-

Taiwanese NGOs could benefit from increased support and funding from international partners who share Taiwan's democratic ideals and are viewed as non-partisan.

bility is by being transparent about the organization's practices and research methods. g0v ("gov zero")—an open source, open government collaboration and social movement that began in Taiwan in 2012—laid the foundation that many of Taiwan's current disinformation research and fact checking NGOs follow while carrying out their research. The communities themselves are highly integrated—IORG Co-Director Yu Chihhao (游知濤) was a g0v contributor and the co-founder of g0v's international task force, and Cofacts itself was born from

a g0v initiative.⁶¹ Values from g0v's manifesto, which notes the importance of confronting problems through technology and collaboration, and making projects open source are also present in Taiwan's approach to countering disinformation.⁶² As signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)'s Code of Principles, Taiwan FactCheck Center and MyGoPen are also

committed to uphold transparency in their practices and funding.⁶³

Although being viewed as a neutral, non-partisan, and transparent organization is important for these organizations credibility, upholding these high standards does come with some challenges: organizations need to be very careful in evaluating their funding sources and perceived ties to the government—which could limit their access to resources and ability to scale; and they need to prioritize transparency without endangering international collaborators and data privacy. Due to these challenges, Taiwanese NGOs could benefit from increased support and funding from international partners who share Taiwan's democratic ideals and are viewed as non-partisan.

58 Chen Yun and Jason Pan, "DPP unveils legislator-at-large list, with Kuma Academy's Puma Shen," *Taipei Times*, November 16, 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/11/16/2003809253>

59 "About Us," Taiwan Factcheck Center, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/en/about-us>.

60 "What is Cofacts?," Cofacts, <https://en.cofacts.tw/about>.

61 "About IORG," IORG, https://iorg.tw/_en/about.

62 "g0v Manifesto," g0v, <https://g0v.tw/intl/en/manifesto/en/>.

63 IFCN Code of Principles, <https://www.ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/>.

Technology and Disinformation

Technological advancements have had both negative and positive effects on efforts to counter disinformation. With the growing ubiquity of AI tools and platforms, online trolls have increasingly begun to use AI generation to conceal their efforts and fabricate disinformation. In a report examining the AI-generated content used by online trolls, Taiwan AI Labs showed that trolls used AI tools to create fake profile photos for social media accounts and generate video content.⁶⁴ AI was also used to create fake audio, such as a fabricated audio clip of Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) criticizing Lai Ching-te's (賴清德) stopover in the United States.⁶⁵ As AI tools continue to improve, it will become both more difficult and more essential for researchers and public audiences to find ways to discern what content has been manipulated.

However, AI and technological advancements have also improved efforts to counter disinformation by making it easier for the public to fake check disinformation. Some most notable examples of this are the numerous chatbots (MyGoPen, Cofacts, Auntie Mei-yu) that provide fact checking. Additionally, DTL's machine-learning algorithm was used by Freedom House when constructing their own China Dissent Monitor.⁶⁶ As technology continues to improve, civil society will need to develop technological tools that match or outpace advanced methods used by actors spreading disinformation. This should also be coupled by commitments from the civil society to both

protect sensitive user data and be open about their own processes.

International Engagement: Familiar Challenges, Opportunities for Cooperation

As governments begin to recognize the vital role that Taiwan plays at the front line of PRC disinformation campaigns, Taiwanese NGOs have gained more opportunities to share their expertise with the international community. In addition to Doublethink Lab's collaborative China in the World Index project, DTL participated in numerous global events in 2023, including events in the United Kingdom, South Korea, Canada, Thailand, Costa Rica, Kenya, and Ukraine.⁶⁷ With support from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, representatives from Doublethink Lab, IORG, Taiwan FactCheck Center, Cofacts and the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau (MJIB) have also been able to share their expertise with the United States and the European Union through a April 2024 tour of the two regions, which included two events at the National Press Club and European Parliament in Brussels.⁶⁸

By cooperating with transnational partners, Taiwanese NGOs have also been effective in targeting programs that extend beyond national boundaries. In 2020, TFC participated in the IFCN-led CoronaVirusFacts Alliance.⁶⁹ Spanning from January 2020 to February 2022, the alliance consisted of participants from over 110 countries, and over 17,000 fact checks.⁷⁰ TFC

64 AI Labs, *2024 Taiwan Presidential Election Information Manipulation AI Observation Report*, December 30, 2023 to January 6, 2024. <https://ailabs.tw/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-Jan-W1-2024-Taiwan-Presidential-Election-Information-Manipulation-AI-Observation-Report.pdf>

65 Tommy Hall and Margaret Siu, "Computational Propaganda and Democracy in Taiwan: AI's Impacts on Pre-existing Challenges," *Taiwan Insight*, November 24, 2023. <https://taiwaninsight.org/2023/11/24/computational-propaganda-and-democracy-in-taiwan-ais-impacts-on-pre-existing-challenges/>.

66 "China Dissent Monitor," *Freedom House*, Issue 4. (April-June 2023): 1-6 https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/CDM_4_Report_8_23.pdf.

67 Information provided to the author by Doublethink Lab, April 9, 2024.

68 "Foreign Interference and Information Manipulation: Taiwan's Experience," The National Press Club, April 8, 2024. <https://www.press.org/events/foreign-interference-and-information-manipulation-taiwans-experience>; "Countering FIMI and Election Interference in Taiwan: Implications for the EU," Spinelli 5G1, European Parliament in Brussels, April 16, 2024, <https://sites.google.com/view/fimi-in-tw/home>.

69 "About Us," Taiwan Factcheck Center, <https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/en/about-us>.

70 "Fighting the Infodemic: The #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance," *Poynter*, July 11, 2024. <https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/>.

also partnered with Filipino non-profit VERA Files to target the spread of misinformation among Filipino migrant workers in Taiwan.⁷¹

The challenges that Taiwan faces do not exist in a vacuum. Declining trust in media organizations, increasing political polarization and ongoing debates of how to protect against foreign influence operations without jeopardizing free speech are all issues that are currently plaguing modern democracies. While Taiwanese civil society has ample experience in combating disinformation, these debates are constantly evolving and knowledge sharing benefits both Taiwan and its international collaborators. For instance, following DTL's trip to Ukraine, Doublethink Lab CEO and Co-Founder Wu Min-Hsuan (吳銘軒, also known as "Ttcat") pointed out that Taiwan has a lot to learn from Ukraine when it comes to widening the scope of their operations and building up Taiwan's "lawfare and mental health preparedness."⁷²

Conclusion

Despite immense pressures from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan continues to flourish as a resilient democracy through its proactive involvement in the global democratic movement. Strategic

international cooperation and a strong emphasis on national and media literacy further solidify its position on the frontline of defending democratic values. Civil society organizations, independent media, and government initiatives collectively combat disinformation, reinforce Taiwan's identity as a beacon of democracy, and safeguard its society against authoritarian influence. As Taiwan stands at the forefront of the struggle against expanding authoritarianism, its contribution to the global democracy movement is more crucial than ever. The nation's resilience, strategic alliances, and unwavering commitment to freedom make it an indispensable leader in the international fight for democracy.

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of democracy, and safeguard
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influence.

71 Shalini Joshi, "Addressing misinformation across countries: A pioneering collaboration between Taiwan FactCheck Center & VERA Files," *Meedan*, September 19, 2022, <https://meedan.com/post/addressing-misinformation-across-countries-a-pioneering-collaboration-between-taiwan-fact-check-center-vera-files>

72 Wu Min-Hsuan, "Rip off the Blindfold: Let Taiwanese Civil Society Learn From Ukraine," *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/rip-off-the-blindfold-let-taiwanese-civil-society-learn-from-ukraine/>

