

Special Issue: Media Manipulation, Fake News, and Misinformation in the Asia-Pacific Region

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The call for papers for this Special Issue flagged a shifting appetite for regulating media-tech platforms on the back of a series of scandals in recent years. Initially this gave rise to Congressional and European Commission hearings and the imposition of large fines, but now one recent stocktake indicates that there are over 30 separate reviews or investigations into aspects of platforms, datafication, misinformation and disinformation, and over 10 legislative interventions (Gillett, 2019).

It would be fair to describe this policy turn in digital platform governance as a global ‘techlash’ against platform capitalism, and the unbridled power of digital platform corporations. There have been a number of distinctive varieties of forms of global pushback observed, and the Asia Pacific has its own versions. Two standout responses from this region are the Australian Competition and Consumers Commission’s) ACCC’s ‘Digital Platforms Inquiry’ and Singapore’s *Protection From Online Falsehoods and Manipulation* law.

The former refers to the ACCC’s final report handed down at the end of July 2019 (ACCC, 2019). At over 600 pages the report makes 23 recommendations for the Coalition government to evaluate that attempt to address the consequences of a market that is dominated by Facebook and Google. Relevantly for this Special Issue the report recommends the establishment of a digital platforms branch within the ACCC which would inquire into the supply of advertising tech services in Australia.

Several recommendations have implications for journalism, including a staged harmonising of media regulation between the frameworks for traditional media in Australia and digital platforms; the introduction of codes of conduct to govern relationships with new media businesses, and notification of changes to news ranking or content display. The ACCC recommends stable and

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adequate funding for the public broadcasters and grants for local journalism (increased to \$50m, administered by a body called ‘journalism Australia’, and replacing the existing regional scheme), in addition to actual tax breaks for journalism.

There are recommendations for digital literacy and strengthening protections of personal information in the Privacy Act. Broader reform of the Privacy Act and a code administered by the Office of the Information Commission are recommended. The need for a statutory tort for serious invasions of privacy gets a guernsey as does protection for unfair terms in contracts. The ACCC recommends the establishment of an ombudsman scheme to resolve complaints and disputes for consumers and businesses involving digital platforms in Australia.

The new Singaporean law imposes jail time and fines for Internet publishers who fail to correct ‘online falsehoods’, that harm the public interest. Critics note the potential to chill speech and academic research, and its overreach for generally protecting the interests of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) which has dominated party politics for 50 years since the withdrawal of the British from the island state. They point to a convenient fine line between autocratic censorship and the policing of content for public safety. It is worth noting that Singapore was ranked 151st out of 180 by Reporters Without Borders in its 2018 Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2019). Under the new laws Individual ministerial fiat allows the identification of speech deemed to be false or offensive, with sentences of up to 10 years and fines of up to \$735,000. In more extreme cases, the law requires online news sources to take down ‘online falsehoods’ (Pierson, 2019). Somewhat problematically though, opinion, satire, parody or criticism are not referred to, and nor are they specifically exempted. The media-tech corporations are not happy with the scope it provides to executive government to have content removed from their platforms.

For its part, the Singaporean government claims it wishes to remove malicious trolls, bots, fraudulent accounts from the online Chinese, Malay and Indian communities, that undermines free speech and democratic processes. In short, it wishes to keep in place “the conditions for Singaporeans, as individuals and civic society, to build a health and robust public discourse, informed by the facts” (Pierson, 2019).

Although the Singaporean law was clearly an intervention aimed at what is popularly referred to as ‘fake news’, (and they join Russia, Malaysia and France in that quest), the term is not universally embraced. For example, the [European Commission’s High Level Expert Group’s Report on Fake News and Online Disinformation](#) notes a preference for ‘clear and unequivocal abandonment of the term’ since the terminology is a misleading simplification and constitutive of the attack discourses deployed by well-known political figures including the incumbent US president (European Commission, 2019; Farhall et al., 2019). There have been some encouraging efforts made in media literacy spaces to identify categories of misleading information, including for example, Luc Steinberg’s ‘10 Types of Misleading News’, encouraging discussions of the money and power underpinning the categories of propaganda, clickbait, sponsored content, satire and hoax, errors, partisan, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, misinformation and bogus news (Steinberg, 2017).

Indeed, the connection of fake news and disinformation debates with the long history of media and news literacy and media education debates has been underscored in recent assessments from that field of research (Kajimoto & Flemming, 2019). These authors point to the excellent online public bibliographic resource established by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen that was created in order to respond to the urgent need for evidence-based research into the global problems of misinformation (Nielsen, 2018). The research includes a number of studies into the platform dynamics of news consumption and sharing activities. My book *Sharing News Online* (with Fiona Martin) occupies a similar terrain; using an approach which analyses how the industrial scale algorithmic manipulation on news sites and platforms intersects with a commodifying affective capitalism (Martin & Dwyer, 2019).

Literature documenting the wider industrial context of the economic decline of journalism over the past two decades forms an equally important background to the fake/disinformation/misinformation story. Napoli has explored this transition from legacy to online and social media news, the rise of ‘parasitic’ journalism (or recycling of a limited number of original reporting), the economics of fake news, landing on the observation that ‘the evolution of the media ecosystem, then, has made the production of fake news and information easier than ever...the relative production of legitimate news and information compared to false news and information is the midst of perhaps an unprecedented decline’ (Napoli, 2019).

It is only in recent times that research is beginning to expose some perhaps surprising dimensions in relation to the perpetrators of disinformation. For example, a study by the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University reported in the *New York Times* notes that the techniques of disinformation campaigns deployed by governments around the world using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is growing. Findings from the research include that ‘the number of countries with political disinformation campaigns more than doubled to 70 in the last two years with evidence of at least one political party or government entity in each of those countries engaging in social media manipulation...Facebook remains the number one social network for disinformation ...organised propaganda campaigns were found on the platform in 56 countries (Alba & Satariano, 2019). The article notes that in recent years governments (both smaller and larger states) have used ‘cybertroops’ to shape public opinion, networks of bots to amplify messages, groups of trolls to harass political dissidents or journalists, and large numbers of social media accounts to misrepresent how people engage with an issue. These campaigns were found to be mostly domestic, but there are a number of countries that run these outside their borders. Operationally, at their centre, campaigns are built on the same kinds of structural affordances (e.g. microtargeting ads) and focused on algorithms as the business models of the platforms.

Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu has made an argument that countries in South East Asia have varied disinformation landscapes with context-specific fractures that can be vulnerable to exploitation via disinformation campaigns. These kinds of campaigns can be directed by government bodies, syndicates, and terrorists (ABC, 2019).

This Special Issue brings together original papers which delve into broader misinformation and disinformation campaigns in a number of guises and national settings. The contributions are adding weight to the accumulating empirical and theoretical resources that are available to indicate

information manipulation conducted on intermediary platforms that are undermining democratic processes on an unprecedented scale. Algorithmically mediated and computationally generated, this manipulation is inevitably working against the public interest in the provision of transparent and accurate information.

Tim Dwyer and Jonathon Hutchinson assess the position of the news portals Naver and Kakao within the South Korean news media ecology. By outlining their unique national media ecology we hope to provide an account of the shifting industrial composition of the Korean news in terms of a rather asymmetrical dialogue between traditional and new media platform corporations. Our analysis argues that the directive role of the state in the Korean news industries is paramount, both in terms of editorial pressures and state endorsed news content.

The dominance of news accessed on the portal platforms in South Korea is the focus of Sunny Yoon's article. He backgrounds the so-called 'Druking' news manipulation scandal where President Moon Jae-in's electioneering team's playbook was found to have included computational interventions in the 'reply journalism' or comments space of news articles. His article points to the failure of both human and AI content moderation processes at the most popular news portal, Naver, with Yoon noting "some academics now argue that contemporary key concerns around fake news are a matter of technology rather than of journalism". As an exemplar of mass scale news media manipulation, the Druking scandal is a warning flare for democratic processes on news platforms.

Midori Ogasawara unpacks the 'Net-rightists' (or 'Neto-uyo') phenomenon on the Japanese Internet, which has supported the right-wing government and amplified its historical revisionist views of Japanese colonialism. Ogasawara argues that collective memory was challenged by the survivors of war crimes after the 1990s and later enlisted young Net-rightists. She provides an account of how they emerged on the Internet by reprising voices from colonial days. Building on her analysis, she explores the disinformation impacts of social media platforms which do their work through 'emotional shouting and persistent murmurings of Japanese colonialism.'

Melanie Radue's article analyses 'racist propaganda', 'information operations' and 'negative campaigning' in Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand as expressive forms of disinformation. Framing these as discourses of hate speech and fake news her analysis compares the specific 'connotative context factors' in the formation of the political communication (control) mechanisms in these three east Asian nations. Her core argument is that although 'harmful manipulative political communication, of course, routinely takes place on the Internet but is by far not limited to online communicative spaces, and particularly does not originate from the structures, processes and agents of online communication technologies.' Singular, universalist conceptions do not advance our thinking but rather, 'we need to understand their cultural and historical trajectories; to find context bound legal and political solutions for the protection of human rights abuses effected by harmful disinformation.'

The harms arising for citizens from news manipulation, fake news, misinformation and disinformation campaigns is becoming more widely known around the world. It was in this mood of changing platform responsibility for these harms, while preparing this Special Issue of JCEA,

that the major platforms Twitter and Google have announced modifications to their rules and policies on political advertising (with the latter opting for a lighter touch approach.) It does make you wonder why the other major Western platform, Facebook, with around 2.5 billion users worldwide, is still holding out.

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