COVID-19 pandemics and disinformation issues in Taiwan:
Analyses on YouTube videos

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Combating COVID-19 disinformation

• With effective technological pandemic prevention measures, Taiwan has kept low coronavirus infection rate since early 2020
  • Covid-19 public health crisis by utilizing ICTs & data innovations (Yen, 2020)
• V-Dem Annual Democracy Report (2019):
  Taiwan is subject to the most intensive international disinformation operations globally.
• To prevent Covid-19 infodemic during crisis in Taiwan (Lin, 2021):
  • Regulated heavy fine for rumor spreaders
  • Implemented fact-check mechanisms
YouTube & disinformation

• YouTube has become the global influential platform for socio-political videos & a hotbed of spreading disinformation (Hussein, 2018)

• Topical YouTube videos: participatory culture shaped by socio-political systems, diverse Perspectives, strong affects (Lin, 2015)

• YouTube as popular social media and OTT in Taiwan (Statista, 2021).
  • 89.6% penetration rate

• Research aims:
  • To examine Covid-19 issues and disinformation on YouTube, this study analyzes media sources, content/presentation and purposes of YouTube videos regarding Covid-19 & disinformation in Taiwan.
Method

- Data driven research
  - Disinformation issues during 1st wave of COVID-19 outbreak
  - Five-months data (January-May 2020): YouTube videos (Taiwanese professional media & YouTube UGVs)
  - Data collection platform: Uminer big data platform
  - Keywords: Boolean logic keywords (i.e., disinformation, Covid-19)
  - Final dataset: 438 related YouTube videos
Results: Traditional media vs. new media

• Video sources: traditional vs. new media
  • 78% traditional media (342): majority broadcasting news
  • 22% new media: web-only videos (26), alternative media (35), YouTubers (34)

• Video types
  • Traditional media news reports (Covid-19 & disinformation) dominated
  • Traditional TV view counts: Political commentary programs > traditional media news
  • Most-viewed new media show political inclinations (pro-blue, pro-green, pro-red)
  • Taiwan Center for Diseases Control (CDC)’s daily live streaming:
    • Innovative, huge viewership and citizens’ appraise channel
    • Ease public’s anxiety about Covid-19 pandemic and clarify disinformation
  • Highest Popularity: YouTubers’ political mockery contents
    • Reasons: criticizes & mocks Covid-19 domestic and international issues
Results: Disinformation videos at stages

Due to good epidemic control, Taiwan’s YouTube videos do not emphasize Covid-19 infections and treatments.

- 1st stage: most videos focus on awareness & publicity
  - Urge the public not to spread Covid-19 false information
  - Report disinformation cases
  - Inform regulations for punishing rumor-mongers
Results: Disinformation videos at stages

- **Watershed event (March 26, 2021)**: WHO Director-General Ghebreyesus accused Taiwan of mocking his ineptitude & pro-China stance
  - **Video viewership**: disparity between average video view counts regardless of media types (before & after 03.26)
  - **Increasing videos of Internet armies** (e.g., China, Taiwan, Thailand) to manipulate public opinions via media framing & computational propaganda
- **April-May 2020**: TW viewers increasingly video search Covid-19 & disinformation
  - **Average view-count > five times**
  - April: Top 10 highest view count videos (sensational & factual contents)
Results: Traditional media video analysis

- Traditional media affiliated videos, especially political commentary programs, garner greater viewership
  - **Most active traditional media news**: FTV News, CH51, CTV, TTV News
  - **Critical Moment (關鍵時刻)** (ETTV’s sensational political commentary program): 8 of top 10 grossing videos mostly related to WHO issues
    - Ghebreyesus denounced Taiwan: Highest viewed in early April
    - Covid-19 salient news topics: Wuhan infection, Chinese internet army activities & China-Russia border tensions
Results: YouTube UGVs (2<sup>nd</sup> most viewed)

- YouTuber’s self-generated videos (sarcastic political parody)
- Eye Central Television (眼球中央電視台)
  - 2 positions in top 10 most viewed videos; 2<sup>nd</sup> highest viewership after Critical Moment
  - Tackled controversial & sensitive topics (e.g., young Chinese cyber-nationalists, former Kaohsiung mayor Han, & Taiwan’s mask donation to China)
  - “Bat” social media war between Thailand & China & the formation of the “Milk Tea Alliance” (Positively received in TW; appeal to youth)
- Popular video characteristics: geo-political or cross-strait controversies; witty political satire
Contributions

• Understanding YouTube videos’ characteristics and content/presentation (popular topics, forms, tones) of Covid-19 & disinformation in Taiwan

• Reflect socio-political controversies affected by international relation, disinformation and internet armies’ campaigns across media types

• Sensational & factual

• Topics: (technological) epidemic prevention, internet armies, national image, international relation