

There have been reports about an oversupply of bananas, pineapples and dragon fruit — which will soon be in season — and collapsing prices. Pictures of bananas and pineapples being dumped have also appeared online. However, a closer look reveals that many of these photographs are either from China, or simply fake.

Spreading fake news about a price collapse could affect consumers' choices, or even mislead them to think that they are being overcharged. Such fake news affects trading and hurts farmers' incomes.

Some people are clearly trying to use rumormongering to sabotage the government's credibility.

Minister Without Portfolio Audrey Tang (唐鳳) has said that the term “fake news” should be replaced by “false information.”

There is no complete definition of “fake news,” but the key is that it is the sharing of information that you know to be untrue.

A lot of online content just comes from people speculating about their experiences. For example, a large portion of the news on PTT — Taiwan's largest online bulletin board — lacks logical reasoning and judgement.

Internet users often take such information seriously and journalists like to report it as news, which leaves room for manipulation by the “cyberarmy.”

Releasing the results of fake opinion polls is another political trick, especially spreading false results through Chinese-funded media outlets to change the outcome of an election.

News spreads fast on the Internet and it is no longer possible to effectively respond to or

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correct intentional fake information using traditional media. As a result, fake news quickly shapes society's first impression of a matter, and untrue comments are hyped up to complete the attack on the target.

Thanks to its low cost and high level of destructiveness, fake news can be used as a marketing tool or a powerful weapon during elections. A case in point is Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je's (柯文哲) use of a cyberarmy to attack his opponent Sean Lien (林錫山) during the 2014 mayoral election campaign.

This year, cybertroops are set to stage a comeback.

During the 2016 US presidential campaign, Russia fabricated 80,000 fake-news reports, reaching nearly one-third of the US population.

It is reasonable to assume that China will imitate Russia and manipulate Taiwan's year-end elections using its "50 cent army" (五毛黨) — Internet users hired by the Chinese government to manipulate public opinion — to help pro-China candidates gain votes.

Beijing will train this army during the elections, and then adjust and improve it before using its full force in the 2020 presidential election.

Incorrect news leads to wrong decisions, and democratic election results are irreversible in the sense that an election cannot be redone. This means that the upcoming elections could be the most serious challenge to Taiwan's democracy so far.

The problem is, if the government deals with fake news by checking facts and intervening, it is likely to be accused of suppressing freedom of expression.

Even so, the government cannot sit back and watch the rampant spread of fake news. It should face the problem head on and discuss whether online platforms should be held accountable

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and demand that they meet their social responsibilities.

The spread of fake news is likely to make the public lose confidence in the system, eroding the essence of democracy. Fighting fake news is a civic responsibility and dealing with it is a test of media literacy.

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