

Rumors are spread for a reason

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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“A lie can travel halfway round the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.” And to make matters worse, their effect on the electorate when an election enters the home stretch can be enormous — providing the undecided a defense, in Taipei’s case, to fall back on for not voting for a certain candidate. Lies are “lies” only when they have been proven wrong; until then, they are called allegations, or simply “rumors.”

An interesting example can show how people are easily duped, maybe willingly, by rumors citing neutral data, but accompanied by political aspersions.

A message has recently been passed around via Line, a communication app widely used in the nation, with a link attached in which legislators’ votes on a proposal in November last year are recorded. The crux of the message is the introductory comment to the link, which explicitly says that the vote was on an amendment to the Act Governing Food Safety and Sanitation (食品安全法) to raise the penalties for violations.

“You can see from this who is colluding with black-hearted manufacturers,” the message says.

The linked Web page showed that the opposition parties were “against” the proposal. The truth is, while the Web site provided neutral data on how the lawmakers had voted that day, it was not in fact a vote on the food safety law amendment, but on the legislative agenda proposed by the ruling party, which had placed the motion concerning food safety at the very end of the agenda (and blocked the amendments to the act proposed by the opposition parties).

Although the rumor was quickly exposed on the social network, it could easily sway those who are not in the social networks of people who cared enough to find out the facts.

There is no evidence that the rumor was spread by the ruling party or its affiliates, but there is no shortage of examples of similar tactics used on behalf of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) in the local election campaign. The MG149 account hubbub and allegations of tax evasion on earnings from speeches targeting independent Taipei mayoral candidate Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) are aimed at spreading rumors rather than gaining a conviction.

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The use of personal bank accounts for the management of the MG149 account is controversial indeed, despite all the justifications, as the team concerned is playing in a gray zone where clear established rules are wanting. However, to accuse Ko of corruption seems to be an overreach, especially when the money was not used to line his pocket.

The tax evasion allegation about Ko's earnings from speeches was a greater travesty, which ended not only in people finding out Ko has been donating his speech earnings back to the groups that had invited him, but also in a revelation of the ruling party's blatant abuse of state power.

It has been said that insofar as Taipei has a predominantly pan-blue constituency, the only thing the KMT needs to do is to cajole this majority of pan-blue voters, who have been unwilling to openly voice their support for KMT candidate Sean Lien (連戰) or remain "undecided" over their dissatisfaction with Lien, into going to the polling stations on election day. What they need according to this vein of thought might simply be a push, or a reason to vote against Ko, who, without official party affiliation, could be their tentative pick.

Confirmation bias is a problem that bedevils everyone, but it could come in degrees. After all, it is not difficult to determine the degree of veracity between a former physician's "corruption" and the sincerity of a candidate with second-generation wealth, who is from a billionaire family, with his father and grandfather having served as public officials, when he said that his still-prominent father once warned him that going into politics leads to either jail or starvation.

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