

Fake news and public ignorance

Written by Chiu Yu-chien 陳玉謙

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Following the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) disastrous performance in last month's nine-in-one elections, there has been no shortage of commentators and hacks offering their opinions on where President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) administration has gone wrong.

Yet, although her government's performance has not lived up to the public's expectations, can anyone really say it has done any worse than the administration of former president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九)?

During Ma's eight-year tenure, national debt increased by NT\$1.73 trillion (US\$56.2 billion at the current exchange rate) and base pay rose by NT\$2,728. By contrast, after two-and-a-half years in office, the Tsai administration has reduced national debt by NT\$9.5 billion, while base pay rose by NT\$3,092.

While Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Kaohsiung mayor-elect Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) loves to sound off about the economy, since the Tsai administration took over exports have risen for 24 months in a row. Compare this with exports data just before Ma's time in office ended: They had contracted for 16 straight months.

Given these facts, why is the public so quick to give Tsai's government a bloody nose through the ballot box and how is it that Han struck a chord by issuing vacuous political slogans?

The answer is perhaps ignorance, or more specifically: political ignorance. The current generation of Taiwanese, instead of trying to understand politics, allow themselves to be driven by feelings. When voting, instead of relying on their intellectual faculties, many resort to emotion.

During the Martial Law era when the media was under tight control, those of us working in the industry naturally regarded any censorship of the news as the enemy of democracy. As a consequence, we agitated for freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

However, in his book *The News: A User's Manual*, British philosopher Alain de Botton says: "The modern world is teaching us that there are dynamics far more insidious and cynical than censorship in draining people of political will; these will involve confusing, boring and distracting the majority away from politics by presenting ideas in such a disorganized, fractured and intermittent way that a majority of the audience is unable to hold on to the thread of the most important issues for any length of time."

Is this not exactly what is happening today as the media spoon-feeds the public with their daily fix of news?

As for important topics that the public should be engaging with over the long term, such as the so-called "1992 consensus," the majority clearly do experience feelings of confusion, boredom and distraction. Most do not even understand the meaning of the "1992 consensus," which is why Google saw a spike in searches for the term directly after last month's elections.

Another example is the public's understanding of the government's energy policy.

A recent survey by National Taiwan University's Risk Society and Policy Research Center showed that despite already having voted in the referendums, 44 percent of respondents were unaware that the nation's primary source of energy is coal, instead mistakenly believing that the main source was nuclear power — which in fact only accounts for 9.3 percent.

According to international research institute Ipsos MORI's 2016 Index of Ignorance, which ranks nations according to knowledge of domestic and international issues, India topped the index as the most ignorant, followed by China in second. Taiwan was ranked the third-most ignorant nation among 40 countries surveyed.

The veracity of this internationally authenticated truth was without a doubt on display in the nine-in-one elections.

Taiwanese media are able to take any item of fake news and easily manipulate the public so that emotion trumps rational analysis. If the public's ignorance can be used to influence public

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policy and manipulate politics, there should be concern that one day the nation would be utterly destroyed by ignorance.

De Botton has summed up the situation perfectly:

“A contemporary dictator wishing to establish power would not need to do anything so obviously sinister as banning the news: he or she would only have to see to it that news organizations broadcast a flow of random-sounding bulletins, in great numbers, but with little explanation of context, within an agenda that keeps changing without giving any sense of the ongoing relevance of the issue that seemed pressing only a short while before, the whole interspersed with constant updates about the colorful antics of murderers and film stars. This would be quite enough to undermine most people’s capacity to grasp political reality.”

Does this not precisely describe the current state of affairs? It is just that the dictator resides on the other side of the Taiwan Strait.

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Translated by Edward Jones

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