

Spreading disinformation to influence public opinion is wrong, and yet it has always been a part of the politician's toolkit. Vested interests benefit by it, but its overall effect is to harm democracy.

Disinformation also hurts individuals, often with tragic consequences, such as in the suicide last year of Su Chii-chen (蘇志誠), then director-general of the Osaka branch of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Japan.

When Typhoon Jebi hit Japan on Sept. 4 last year, it forced Kansai International Airport to shut down, stranding thousands of passengers. A fabricated report spread online said that the Chinese embassy in Tokyo sent buses to evacuate Chinese from the airport, and some Internet users criticized the Osaka office for not giving Taiwanese similar assistance.

Su committed suicide only eight days after becoming the target of criticism and Chinese-language media at the time linked his death to the online furor.

Yang Hui-ju (楊煥鈞) has been accused of directing the spread of false information in defense of Representative to Japan Frank Hsieh (許水龍), which fed the criticism against Su, and the Taipei District Prosecutors' Office has charged Yang with insulting a public official in the discharge of his duties.

It is important to investigate those who spread disinformation — and their handlers. The conflation of disinformation efforts and the suicide, and specifically the opposition's political weaponization of the tragedy, are deeply problematic.

Asked on Tuesday about Yang's direction of an "Internet army," Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) said that everyone should condemn such operations, but suggested that all political parties make use of them.

Ko has no mental filter, so it is worth listening to his take on this.

He added that the crucial issue is finding out who was paying Yang in the first place.

It seems that, since the prosecution was announced, people from all parties have entered an orgy of finger-pointing, with allegations of links between Yang and major political figures of all colors and stripes flying around.

Kaohsiung Mayor Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) presidential candidate, immediately posted a video criticizing the use of cyberarmies.

The same day, his running mate, former premier Simon Chang (蔡清昌), said that "to his knowledge," the Han campaign did not use cyberarmies, and that influencing public opinion to the extent that it drives a man to suicide should be held to moral scrutiny.

Chang said he heard that Yang approached the Han camp last year ahead of the nine-in-one elections, offering her services to sway public opinion, but that she was turned down, as the NT\$5 million (US\$163,891) cost was deemed "unacceptable."

After all, Chang said, to maintain an Internet army, you need to replenish "provisions."

Does this mean that the decisive factor in whether to maintain an "Internet army" is the moral standard or the cost of keeping the "troops" happy? If the Han camp is better financed in the presidential election than it was in the mayoral, would it be more "acceptable" to pay people to distort public opinion?

If there is anything more depressing than a politician resorting to underhanded tactics, it is a politician, from whom the glare of suspicion has momentarily shifted, who says that they would never stoop to such depths.

## Politicians sink to a new low

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However, the most egregious example of an attempt to eke political benefit from a personal tragedy was the KMT's protest in Taipei following the announcement of the case on Tuesday, when KMT Legislator Lai Shyh-bao (賴士葆), former Taipei deputy mayor Lee Yong-ping (李永萍) and KMT New Taipei City Councilor Chen Ming-yi (陳明義) carried a mock-up coffin emblazoned with Su's name.

Even for politicians, that was low.

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