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How disinformation on X imperils Japan's democracy

The nation's information space is under attack



Japan's heavy reliance on X makes it particularly vulnerable to foreign and domestic disinformation, requiring stronger fact-checking and platform transparency to protect democratic resilience. | REUTERS

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Today's Indo-Pacific is hyperconnected. Information is no longer merely a medium for public discourse. It has become a strategic battlespace between authoritarian and democratic states. Across democratic societies, the weaponization of false narratives threatens

the fundamental consensus required for self-governance. Arguably, nowhere is this vulnerability more acute and yet so dangerously underappreciated than in Japan.

To understand the scope of the threat, one must first establish conceptual clarity. As Kyoko Kuwahara, a leading scholar on foreign interference and information warfare at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, has argued, we must distinguish between “fake news” and “disinformation.” Fake news often refers to inaccurate or sensationalized reporting, sometimes born of carelessness or commercial clickbait. Disinformation, by contrast, is a deliberate, coordinated and covert effort to propagate falsehoods with the intent to deceive, polarize and manipulate public perception. It is not an accident of the digital age; it is a weapon of political warfare.

On X (formerly Twitter), this weapon is deployed against the Japanese public daily. Consider three recent, illustrative examples that reveal the mechanics of modern digital manipulation.

First, during recent political demonstrations in Tokyo, photos circulated widely on X purporting to show a massive, spontaneous uprising against Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi at the Shibuya Scramble intersection. The images were carefully framed to imply that

the vast crowds filling the famous crossing were all united in anti-government protest. In reality, a small group of a few dozen left-wing activists had assembled, while the overwhelming majority of people in the frame were simply ordinary pedestrians navigating Tokyo's busiest transit hub. The manipulated narrative turned a marginal protest into a viral illusion of widespread national rejection.

Second, state-backed actors, largely linked to China, have orchestrated systematic disinformation campaigns targeting Japan's national security policy. Whenever Tokyo announces necessary increases to its Self-Defense Forces spending or updates its strategic posture to deter regional aggression, Chinese state and proxy accounts flood social media depicting these defensive measures as "revived Japanese militarism." Takaichi and serious security-focused policymakers are routinely vilified as Nazi-like fascists, intent on dragging Asia back into the 1930s (code for Japan's imperial past). This Beijing-directed narrative is engineered to exploit residual historical sensitivities, stoke domestic hesitation and drive a wedge between Tokyo and its regional partners.

Third, a virulent wave of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim disinformation has saturated Japanese X feeds. Fabricated posts repeatedly claim that Muslim residents are desecrating Shinto shrines,

vandalizing local cultural heritage or demanding the cancellation of traditional nursery and primary school events on religious grounds. These stories — virtually all unsubstantiated or completely fabricated — feed on societal anxieties regarding Japan's demographic decline and its increasing reliance on foreign labor, fostering xenophobia and breaking social cohesion.

These three cases demonstrate how disinformation distorts reality, shaping how Japanese citizens perceive their leaders, their security environment and their neighbors. And in Japan, the impact of X is exponentially magnified because of the country's unique social media ecosystem.

Japan is a global anomaly when it comes to X usage. Over 65 million Japanese citizens actively use the platform, representing over half the nation's population. By comparison, penetration rates in South Korea, Taiwan, Canada, the United States and Western European nations are significantly lower, with users more evenly distributed across Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube.

Why does Japan rely so heavily on X for news? The answers lie in culture, geography and language. Culturally, Japanese internet culture places a premium on anonymity, allowing users to discuss politics and

personal views without exposing their real-world social identity.

Geographically, in the wake of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, Twitter became the premier real-time emergency communication tool for natural disasters, embedding it deeply into daily life. Linguistically, the Japanese writing system allows a user to convey a complex, complete thought within a single 140-character post, making the platform far more expressive and functional in Japanese than in English or European languages. Consequently, X has effectively become Japan's primary digital town square and its primary news source.

This reliance creates unprecedented vulnerability. The primary perpetrators of this information pollution fall into clear categories. First are foreign autocratic regimes, principally China and Russia, and then come domestic political extremists, all seeking to exploit tribal grievances.

Their motivations differ, but their goal is singular. They want to disrupt democratic decision-making. Authoritarian states engage in this asymmetric warfare because their own domestic information environments are strictly protected. China maintains its "Great Firewall," isolating its citizens from foreign influence, while Russia has

virtually banned Western news outlets and independent journalism. Open democracies offer them an unrestricted target zone.

It is worth remembering that Western nations are not historically immune to these tactics. During the Cold War, the United States engaged in covert information operations to shape foreign political debates and state actors continue to maneuver in digital spheres globally. But the modern autocratic objective in Japan is distinct: It aims not necessarily to make citizens pro-Beijing or pro-Moscow, but to dilute truth, corrupt public trust and ensure that Japanese citizens cannot reach a unified consensus on history, defense or social policy.

We have seen the devastating efficacy of this strategy elsewhere. A prominent example is documented in Canadian Security Intelligence Service reports regarding foreign interference in Canada's recent federal elections. Beijing-linked actors targeted ethnic Chinese-Canadian voters on WeChat and social media with coordinated disinformation campaigns, falsely portraying Conservative candidates as dangerously "anti-China." By weaponizing the local diaspora's information ecosystem, these covert operations successfully suppressed votes for hawkish candidates, ultimately contributing to electoral outcomes more favorable to Beijing's strategic interests.

The crisis on X has deteriorated significantly following its acquisition by Elon Musk. Under the guise of absolute “free speech,” the platform dismantled critical content moderation teams, discarded trust-and-safety guardrails and monetized viral outrage through blue-check verification measures. Instead of fostering vibrant democratic debate, X has increasingly devolved into a vector for hate speech, violent language and unverified, state-sponsored fabrications.

What, then, must Japan do to safeguard its democratic integrity without resorting to authoritarian censorship? Tokyo cannot simply stand by while a foreign-owned private platform serves as a pipeline for national destabilization. The Japanese government must take concrete, structural steps to build digital resilience and provide trusted alternatives.

First, Japan must support the establishment of an independent, nonpartisan Public Information Verification Network. Modeled on successful civil-society frameworks in Scandinavia and Taiwan, this network should bring together academic researchers, journalists and cybersecurity experts to provide real-time, transparent fact-checking of viral claims, particularly during national elections, security crises and natural disasters.