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Reality Decoupling: Rumours, Disinformation, and Studying the Politics of Truth in Digital Asia

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Abstract

This article explores what conflicts over information and meaning-making in digital Asia can tell us about politics in advanced networked societies, using examples from East Asia. It interprets the construction and spread of unverified information as part of near-ubiquitous political practices that threaten to lead to a decoupling of realities. The article makes the case that digital Asia is a crucial site for researching such practices: Asian societies are characterized by a long-standing engagement with rumours, and they also maintain highly developed digital infrastructures across diverse socio-political and economic environments. To explore the relevance of rumours and conspiracy theories in such contexts, the article suggests a three-step research agenda that analyzes the anatomy of rumours, traces their genealogy across complex socio-technical systems, and assesses their pathology – that is, the way in which they are products of, and in turn produce, power in translocal networks.

Keywords

Asia – conspiracy theory – digital technology – disinformation – epistemology – methodology – misinformation – rumours

1 Introduction

As a ferry capsizes in South Korea (see So & Kim 2017), leading to the death of nearly three hundred people, right- and left-wing social media users quickly come up with their own explanations about who might have been behind the

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accident, often instrumentalizing grieving family members in the service of competing conspiracy theories; the controversies surrounding the disaster later contribute to the downfall of South Korea's President Park Geun-hye, a political figure shrouded in scandal and rumour (see Doucette 2017).

After the Great Tohoku Earthquake hits Japan in 2011, smartphones and digital devices across the East Asian region are abuzz with speculation about the fallout of the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, creating worries that residents of the stricken prefecture might spread contamination and causing a run on salts and seaweed rumoured to protect against radiation poisoning (see Schäfer 2012; on related rumours in China, see Yu 2011).

In Taiwan, online networks are flooded with rumours about various progressive administrators – their sex lives, ethnic background, and alleged political missteps (Lin 2018). In one case, they reportedly lead a Taiwanese diplomat to commit suicide (Lu & Shih 2018).

Meanwhile, rumours abound on the mainland: in Guangdong Province, a mysterious illness spreads when young men with a hotchpotch of symptoms conclude that they contracted a previously unknown sexually transmitted disease; when medical practitioners dispel such worries as the psychosomatic effects of a digital rumour, the enraged sufferers react online with claims that the state was covering up an outbreak of a new type of HIV (Carrico 2016).

These examples illustrate how internet users construct, spread, and consume unverified information and how those practices connect to digital politics. In the early twenty-first century, these and other incidents have shown that digital information and communication technologies (ICT) and their use in complex networks can reframe understandings of reality. The global COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (both still ongoing at the time this article was written) offer vivid and often disturbing examples of how various actors deploy digital and social media in the service of their political or commercial interests, often ignoring or reframing factual information in the process. Whereas pandemics, military conflicts, and trade wars have led to many warnings about a decoupling of diplomatic channels, economic systems, and global political institutions (e.g. Johnson & Gramer 2020), a more subtle yet far more profound phenomenon has emerged in parallel with these geopolitical and geoeconomic developments: the decoupling of realities.

The implications are serious. Around the world, users from casual consumers to high-profile influencers, from media organizations to powerful political officials, have intervened and shaped discussions about current affairs by seeding, sharing, and reinforcing what Kellyanne Conway infamously called 'alternative facts' while she served as councillor to US president Donald Trump (NBC 2017). Rumours, conspiracy theories, and misinformation have become

more ubiquitous in digital media environments over the past few decades, to the point that entire segments of society seem have gone down partisan, post-truth rabbit holes.

Consequently, discussions about misinformation, especially on social media, have been the subject of in-depth study (see Rainie et al. 2017; Tandoc et al. 2018), for instance, in contexts such as the US (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Lazer et al. 2018; Spohr 2017: 155–156), the UK (Bastos & Mercea 2019; Spohr 2017: 156–157) and continental Europe (Fletcher et al. 2018; Schäfer & Schadauer 2019). For example, these studies illustrate that the Brexit vote, the success of right-wing movements, and the popularity of agitators such as Donald Trump rely on the effective mobilization of groups that feel disenfranchised (see Fuchs 2018). Self-serving manipulators, who strategically use information of dubious provenance, can push these demographics to engage in defeatist self-fulfilling prophecies about their impending social irrelevance, leading large groups of people to embrace toxic political agendas, many of which, ironically, are not in their self-interest.

As societies in North America and Europe come to terms with these phenomena, and with the 'semantically confusing' buzzwords (Waisbord 2018) such as 'fake news' and 'post-truth' that accompany them (see also MacKenzie & Bhatt 2020), the networked societies in Asia continue a long-standing engagement with controversial and contested information flows. The profound social and political implications of sharing rumours and conspiracy theories online are not new to actors in hyper-networked Asia, which is a region at the cutting edge of digital processes (Holroyd & Coates 2012). Asian societies are extremely dynamic adopters of digital technologies, often ahead of societies elsewhere, and they highlight what it means to integrate advanced ICTs into evolving local modernities. More people now access the internet in China alone than Europe has residents, and the vast majority use advanced smartphones to do so (Liu 2020: 18). Across the region, US-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are extremely popular for sharing information (see e.g. Golota 2018; Jennings 2018). At the same time, they are challenged by local social media giants, such as Kakao, Line, and Tencent, which have proven that virtually all aspects of modern existence can be subsumed into so-called super-apps. These apps now offer everything from communication and information, gaming, and media sharing to e-commerce, dining, banking, and transportation services on a single platform. Across Asia, digital media technologies are no longer just everyday conveniences – they have become essential infrastructure (Plantin & de Seta 2019).

In these digitally saturated environments, the spread of unverified information through ICT has produced new social and political dynamics. Whether

it is sudden and unexpected shifts in public opinion, bursts of seemingly irrational collective behaviour, or online vigilantism against perceived moral transgressions, the phenomenon of 'false online rumours' has long been a driving force in Asian politics (see Bernadi et al. 2012; Dalziel 2013; Dentith 2013; Gelfert 2013; Nogami & Yoshida 2014; Wu & Cao 2011). Those politics map onto a broad spectrum of norms, mechanisms, and institutions that range from the authoritarian to the democratic, the capitalist to the socialist, providing a crucial prism through which to view diverse practices in rumour mongering and conspiracy thinking. Across the region, societies with very different political systems and traditions are each coming to terms with the political implications of digital rumours, often by regulating against the proliferation of unverified information and at times engaging in the spread of such information themselves.

In this article, I explore what conflicts over information and meaning-making in digital Asia can tell us about politics in advanced networked societies, using examples in East Asia. I review state-of-the-field debates on topics such as rumours, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories, and I connect them to scholarship on digital media technologies. We are witnessing the decoupling of realities, and this decoupling is best understood as the outcome of technologically accelerated practices that construct narratives in the face of uncertainty. These practices interact with political and commercial interests in ways that re-programme power relations in our societies. To study these processes, I distinguish three dimensions in digital rumour mongering: the anatomy of rumours (their discursive components, narrative structures, and intertextualities), their genealogy (how they travel and evolve within socio-technological systems), and their pathology (how they are products of, and in turn produce, power in translocal networks). This conceptual exploration is followed by a methodological discussion on how we can study these processes empirically, and I conclude with a programmatic call for an interdisciplinary research agenda for studying rumours and conspiracy theories across digital Asia.

2 Rumours and Conspiracies Theories in Advanced Socio-technological Systems: Anatomy, Genealogy, and Pathology

Questions about communication and technology are fundamentally about the human condition. Today, we live in a 'computational knowledge society' (Berry 2011: 176) that offers access to abundant networked streams of information and promises to create what some hoped would be a 'see-it-for-yourself'

culture in which arguments can be immediately supported by evidence (Benkler 2006: 218). Yet ICT users frequently demonstrate impressive resistance to fact checking, often ignoring or outright rejecting empirically verified information from authoritative sources, such as journalists, academics, or mainstream political organizations, and often attacking the very credentials of these established actors of the 'information society' (Castells 2010).

Scholarship on rumours, urban legends, and conspiracy theories has long argued that the issue with shared information is not so much whether that information is factual but what meaning the act of sharing has in specific socio-political situations. Critical theorists in particular have moved away from the idea that the main concern about rumours should be how to classify, measure, and ultimately refute them. Instead of viewing rumour mongering and the often-extreme views to which it can lead as signs of psychological problems (e.g. Keeley 1999: 126) or 'crippled epistemologies', as Hardin (2002) puts it, critical schools of thought have begun to stress that, even where information is demonstrably inaccurate, the sharing of rumours or conspiratorial suspicions is nevertheless often gratifyingly entertaining, socially rewarding, or relevant as a political critique (Dean 2000; Schäfer 2012). Rumours can also provide 'cognitive shortcuts' (Grewal 2016: 34) when making sense of the complex conditions that characterize modern life and when confronting the 'agency panic' (Melley 2002) that modern societies often engender. This is especially true during seemingly existential crises such as pandemics and wars.

What exactly, then, are 'rumours', and how should we make sense of rumour mongering in ICT networks? One traditional definition holds that a rumour is any 'proposition for belief of topical reference disseminated without official verification' (Knapp 1944: 22; see also Simon et al. 2016: 184). To update this definition for digital contexts, and building on critical scholarship in the field, we can say that digital or online rumours are unverified topical statements that ICT users creatively assemble and circulate using digital technology as they discursively and socially construct meaning in the face of ambiguous information (see also Schäfer 2012). Rumour mongering can lead to complex narrative structures, such as urban legends (Heath et al. 2001) and conspiracy theories (Keeley 1999: 116), the latter of which tend to speculate about secret machinations of powerful forces outside the speaker's sphere of influence, 'in circumstances where causal attribution proves difficult or impossible' (Grewal 2016: 34; see also Poppe et al. in this issue).

These narrative structures, as well as the unverified propositions that fuel them, can be conceptually mapped along three axes (see also Sunstein & Vermeulen 2009: 206–207). The first axis captures the degree of truth or falsehood contained in the narrative. For instance, theories about how Park

Geon-hye, South Korea's former president, was being influenced by members of the shaman-like cult Church of Eternal Life turned out to be accurate; however, theories that attributed her impeachment to pro-North Korean plots to destroy the conservative leader were utterly false (see Seo 2022: ch. 7). Captured on the second axis, rumours and conspiracy theories can be benign or harmful. For instance, newspaper horoscopes are largely harmless (at least if their predictions are not leveraged to defraud gullible believers). Misinformation about COVID-19, by contrast, has demonstrably damaging effects (Kim et al. 2020). Finally, rumours can be sensible or not, captured on the third axis. Following Sunstein and Vermeulen (2009), one could argue that it is often sensible for people in autocratic political systems such as North Korea to speculate about the machinations of their leaders; however, it is less sensible to assume that such machinations arise in liberal systems such as South Korea, in which it is far more difficult to hide elite activities from public scrutiny. Therefore, even before the relevant evidence came to light, Park's affiliation with a religious cult would not have made for a particularly sensible conspiracy theory, even though it was both true and dangerous (see Figure 1).

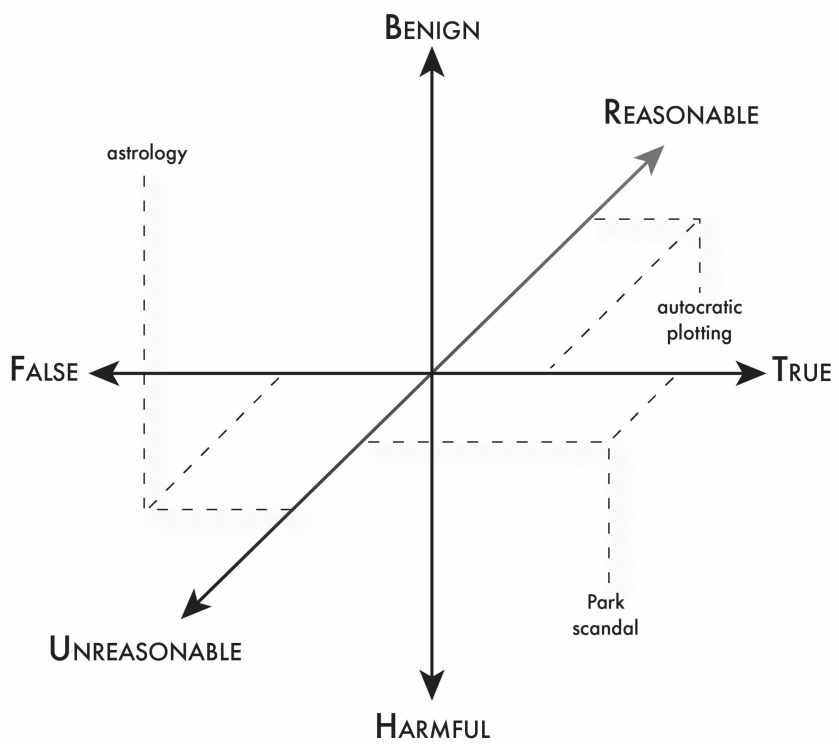

FIGURE 1 Three dimensions for characterizing rumours, with three examples

Figure 1 depicts the focus that many scholars of mis- and disinformation place on truths and falsehoods (e.g. Sunstein & Vermeulen 2009), with the added dimension of reasonableness, which complicates a singular concern with truthfulness. Despite the importance of positivist reality checks about factuality to public discourse, journalism, and online content moderation, they risk obscuring that those who generate and share unverified information do so for reasons that can nonetheless be entirely sensible (Wood 1982). Confronting those who spread this questionable information with a factual reality check is unlikely to change their views. As Moore (2016: 9) puts it, rumour mongering is frequently a 'symptom or response – albeit perhaps misguided – to real anxieties about causality, moral attribution, and the location of power in complex societies'. In that sense, it is often less relevant to establish which rumours are in error or which conspiracy theories are wrong. Instead of understanding where facts and fiction diverge, it may be more important to understand (1) the discursive rationale of these narrative structures (their anatomy), (2) their creation, proliferation, and consumption through digital technology (their genealogy), and (3) their role in wider socio-political and economic power dynamics (their pathology).

2.1 *Rumour Anatomies: the Rationales of Unverified Information*

Rumours and conspiracy theories are governed by their own logic. This logic is socio-psychological in that sharing information allows actors to fill perceived information gaps, express social or personal anxieties, keep family and friends informed, signal social status within their group, and satisfy emotional needs (see also Allport & Postman 1947; Difonzo & Bordia 2006; Feinberg et al. 2012). However, the logic of rumours is also political. Rumour mongering is often a response to the structural complexities observed by scholars such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1990) in our (hyper)modern 'risk societies' (for a discussion, see Zinn 2008). Rumours, especially the structured narratives of conspiracy theories, provide practical ways for reducing complexity and dealing with the uncertainty that they generate. In fact, the distinction between 'reasonable' and 'unreasonable' rumour mongering illustrated in Figure 1 can be interpreted as a difference in the type of uncertainty that these narratives address. Rumours spread in reaction to either 'resolvable' or 'radical' uncertainty. As Kay and King explain (2020: 14):

> Resolvable uncertainty is uncertainty that can be removed by looking something up (I am uncertain which city is the capital of Pennsylvania) or which can be represented by a known probability distribution of outcomes (the spin of a roulette wheel). With radical uncertainty, however,

> there is no similar means of resolving the uncertainty – we simply do not know. Radical uncertainty has many dimensions: obscurity; ignorance; vagueness; ambiguity; ill-defined problems; and a lack of information that in some cases but not all we might hope to rectify at a future date. These aspects of uncertainty are the stuff of everyday experience.

Understood in this way, radical uncertainty can be viewed as a relatively new phenomenon – or at least the degree to which this uncertainty dominates our lived experience appears to be fairly recent: it is result of complexity, and modern societies generate complexity as a matter of course (Beck 1992). Hence, speculating about radical uncertainty can be seen as a reasonable response to life in complex (hyper)modern systems, whereas speculation about resolvable uncertainty is arguably far less sensible. In that sense, rumours are meaning-making practices that restructure unknown (or even unknowable and, therefore, unresolvable) elements of meaning into more comprehensible realities, making it ostensibly possible to answer both the ontological question 'what is going on?' and the normative one 'what ought to be done about it?'

In this, the logics of spreading rumours are an extension of governing rationales, or what proponents of Foucauldian discourse theory call 'governmentality', that is, the process of imagining 'the world as governable' (O'Malley 2008: 56); governmentality establishes

> how problems and people are thought about, what solutions to problems are dreamed up, what ends are imagined as ideal outcomes. It is in this aspect of government that inventiveness is made explicit, together with the 'made-up' nature of things. This is not intended to suggest that life has no reality, or that problems don't 'really' exist – only that we can only recognize or imagine them in certain ways, and can never have unmediated access to the certainty of what lies 'behind'.

Spreading unverified information and creating meaning about uncertain circumstances can also empower marginalized groups against the status quo (see Wu 2018), an activity that could be called 'spreading rumours from below'. I borrow this distinction between processes that happen 'from below' and 'from above' from the game-studies scholars Woodcock and Johnson (2018), who explore how various actors deploy playfulness and gamification for different purposes, for example, playful grassroots activists trying to provoke a public reaction through 'situationist' performance art ('from below') or, in contrast, commercial enterprises manipulating consumer behaviour by adding a playful dimension to their public relations campaigns ('from above';

the metaphor loosely has its roots in Hal Draper's [1966] discussion of 'socialism from below').

The idea of 'spreading rumours from below' certainly should not be mistaken for a moral judgement – for instance, by dismissing the respective actors as somehow 'low class' or, conversely, elevating them to noble 'underdogs'. 'Spreading rumours from below' can empower individuals and groups in complex ways – for example, by giving opponents of former South Korean president Park the discursive tools to delegitimize her administration (Sarfati 2018: 289–290) or by providing Chinese internet users with the ability to challenge the authorities (Wu 2018). As Jiang (2016: 43) writes about spreading rumours in the People's Republic of China (PRC), 'in a fundamentally flawed legal system, "rumor" is often used as a means of social protest and proves to have an unusual degree of truth and accuracy'. At the same time, such bottom-up weapons of the weak can have insidious and toxic effects, especially when they are turned against vulnerable social groups (see e.g. Kim 2017). Studying the rationale of a statement or narrative structure requires sensitivity to these ambiguities and their normative implications. In China, for instance, these practices can be interpreted as part of socio-political transformations that asymmetrically empower different actors, such as when traditional surveillance practices collide with citizen monitoring of government malfeasance ('sousveillance') or one another's transgressions ('co-veillance'), creating a complex system of what Callahan (2020: 291) calls 'inter-veillance'.

In order to better parse how actors construct idiosyncratic meaning from unverified pieces of information and how the meaning of this information shifts in digital networks as actors respond to and spread specific rumours, it is worth taking seriously the argument that meaning-making is a form of creative labour (Rogers 2003). In particular when communication in social networks is involved, such labour is, to appropriate Bruno Latour's terminology, net *work*: actors create connections between themselves and one another, and between technologies and memes, which leads to complex 'actor networks' (Latour 2005: 132). Through these networks, actors weave various strands of discourse into broader systems of personal and social meaning, such as when they construct conspiracy theories (see Coady 2007; Dean 2000; Grewal 2016). This labour is highly creative, because it takes the semantic components from one field or area, that is, from what Fauconnier and Turner (2002) call an 'input space', and juxtaposes it with elements from another, often initially unrelated input space. Actors draw parallels between these two spaces (in a mental 'generic space') and auto-complete the resulting networks of meaning through pattern recognition; they combine seemingly common elements into a 'blend' of information to create new, emergent patterns of

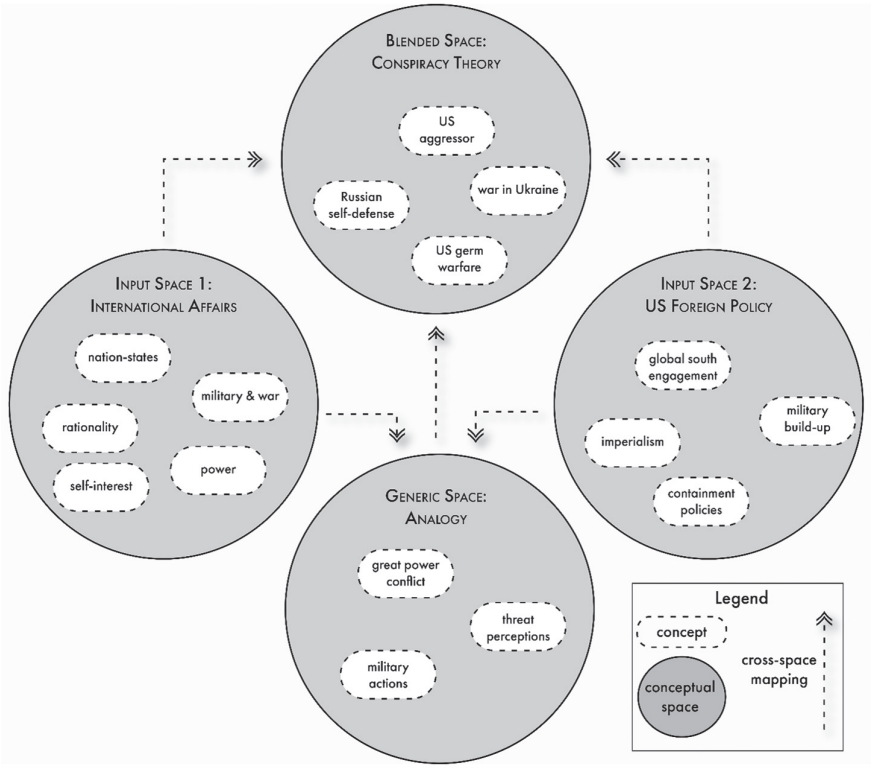

FIGURE 2 Blending semantic patterns into US biolab conspiracy theories

meaning with enough verisimilitude to seem realistic, even if they have little to do with reality.

For example (see Figure 2), unverified claims hold that the US military maintained biological weapons labs in Ukraine – a conspiracy theory that trended on Chinese social media when Russia began its war on Ukraine (Koetse 2022) and that state media such as the *Global Times* (2022b) perpetuated. These narratives draw meaning from one input space related to international affairs, specifically understanding of how so-called Great Powers behave. This input space provides discursive elements, such as major actors (nation-states), activities (military intervention), and motivations (states reacting rationally to provocation). These elements of international relations are then juxtaposed with another set of inputs related to understanding of the United States (US), in ways that specifically frame US foreign policy as imperialistic. This input space contains historical facts, such as past US activity in the global South, but it also includes contemporary observations, for instance, about the US military build-up in Asia and elsewhere. These inputs do not all need to be

factual or verified, but because many of them are, the rest become plausible by association.

Starting with these two input spaces, statements about US bioweapon labs select ostensibly analogous elements that seem to match the situation at hand: great power conflict between Russia and the US, the perceived threat emanating from US imperialism in the region, the supposedly rational motivations for a beleaguered great-power's military actions, and so on. These elements are then 'projected' into a 'blended space' in which actors 'make sense' of them. To do so, they add elements that were not in either of the original input spaces but seem to fit the emerging pattern. In this case, the narrative relies on a long-standing but erroneous Chinese trope about the Korean War (1950–1953): the claim that the US military engaged in germ warfare against China (for an analysis and discussion, see Yang 2004). Because this piece of disinformation is strongly engrained in China's collective memory (and actively kept alive by the authorities), the idea that sinister US imperialist agents would be working on another round of germ warfare today fits neatly into the emergent narrative structure. Equipped with this narrative pattern, some of the general public can then revel in the sinister machinations of a perceived antagonist.

In this way, how creative processes connect to (or disconnect from) facticity becomes clearer. In extreme cases, some (or even all) of the cultural components in the input spaces may well be accurate, but the blending of different frames of references imposes a new logic on the narrative components that invites ad-hoc completion and, consequently, is more than the sum of its initial parts. After some of the components are verified (whether through personal experience or reliance on credible sources), other unverified or unverifiable components start to 'track' as well, as actors fill in the gaps in the meaning-making process. This is one of the ways in which misinformation develops power: it is often partially correct, based on some verified elements, and it generates verisimilitude through the intrinsic logic of its overarching narrative. This logic is then extended to conclusions that do not necessarily follow from the individual initial inputs. Confronting a single element in this narrative network with counter-factuals is unlikely to unravel the narrative as a whole: actors either dismiss them as not fitting the pattern or simply circumvent the inconsistency by introducing new elements into the network that compensate for the noise. To believers invested in the narrative, its structure must be maintained, even if it is (as in this case) false, harmful, and unreasonable (Figure 3).

Examples such as this illustrate that rumours are both discursive and social practices at the same time. In fact, they serve as a useful reminder that the very distinction between discursive and non-discursive activities is a fallacy

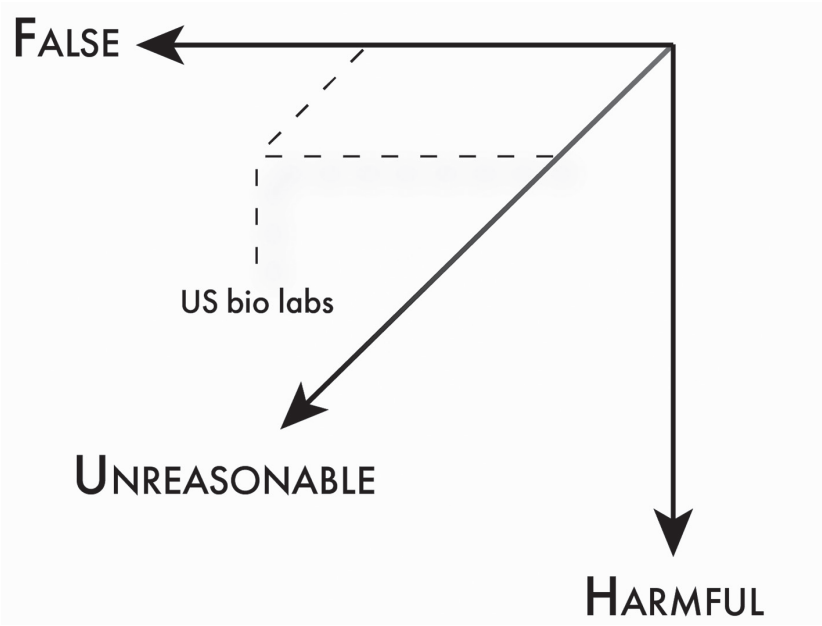

FIGURE 3 The dimensions of US bioweapon lab conspiracy theories

and that we should consider communicative acts and artefacts as material elements in our world. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 109) put it in their discussion of Foucault, Wittgenstein, and Marxist understandings of ideology:

> the practice of articulation, as fixation/dislocation of a system of differences, cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured.

Rumours and conspiracy theories can be understood as communicative practices that also 'pierce the entire material density' of institutions, social relations, communities, and human actions in ways that have lasting effects on the world. Some, such as Latour (2005), might even argue that rumours are 'actors' in their own right, meaning that they act on (and are acted upon by) the materiality of human activity and technology.

2.2 *Rumour Genealogies: Discursive and Social Practices in Socio-technological Systems*

So, what, if anything, changes about rumour-spreading practices and conspiracy theories when digital technologies are involved? Historical and political

analyses have shown that rumour mongering and conspiracy thought rely on established patterns (for an overview, see Moore 2016), and ICT adds to them by selecting, accelerating, and, in some cases, transforming the way in which unverified information works (see Kim 2017). Ignoring the medium in which rumours are spread risks creating a blind spot. As Winner (1980) famously put it, 'artefacts have politics', and this is certainly true of ICT design elements such as algorithms and interfaces, which are made by someone for a specific purpose. Like all technological innovations, ICT reproduces the ideologies and power relations of those who create them. This is not to say that the study of digital rumours should fall back on simple technological determinism. Melvin Kranzberg (1995: 6) forcefully argues that 'technology interacts in different ways with different values and institutions, indeed, with the entire sociocultural milieu'. This is visible across Asian contexts, as policy makers, designers, technicians, media workers, and users continuously negotiate and calibrate what diverse ICT can do within their respective socio-political and economic contexts. Consequently, a unified approach for capturing these complexities must include the study of the affordances that different digital technologies offer to specific people in specific milieus.

Affordances describe the 'functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object' (Hutchby 2001: 444; see also Liu 2020: 53). The way in which technology opens up possibilities for use has implications for the study of misinformation and disinformation. Digital rumours are based on socio-technological interactions and, as such, rely on the affordances of the different media technologies that users deploy to create, alter, and spread them. Rumours, legends, and conspiracy theories are memes that travel. They are filtered through chains of social interactions along which actors add, subtract, and re-arrange semantic elements. In the case of digital communication, these 'interaction ritual chains' (Collins 2004) involve humans, but they also involve technical interfaces, automated systems, and, increasingly, artificial intelligence.

Throughout these systems, information does not simply travel in a linear fashion. It often loops back on itself, creating recursive feedback that can mute or amplify discursive practices. Viral content is an example of this: it becomes radically amplified due to a series of socio-technical factors in circular systems of content creation, distribution, and monetization (see also Schneider 2021, 2022). This usually includes, but is not necessarily limited to, the network power of individual users spreading the information, the algorithmic logic that pushes content to other users, the wider socio-political and cultural agenda that allows the attribution of relevance and urgency, and so on.

Taking technological affordances seriously means exploring, for example, how a platform such as Sina Weibo facilitates the construction and exchange of unverified information through its interface and algorithm. It means establishing how the app differs in this regard from Twitter or Tencent's chat app Weixin or the Japanese app Line. And it means empirically examining the moments in which interaction chains cross devices or platforms and the role that design features play in facilitating or hampering this technological border crossing. To fully understand the socio-technical systems that generate unverified information, we need to analyze the medium-specific factors that act on that information and its proliferation, taking cues from the kind of scholarship that studies how digital interfaces, algorithms, and architectures filter perception (Benney 2014; Brussee 2022; Pariser 2012) and affect epistemologies (Berry 2011; Manovich 2013; Rogers 2013).

2.3 *Rumour Pathologies: the Socio-Political and Economic Agendas behind Misinformation and Disinformation*

When Chinese internet users perpetuate the conspiracy theory that the US maintains secret bioweapon labs in Ukraine, they are spreading information that may seem plausible but is factually incorrect – what we might refer to as 'misinformation'. This misinformation can be beneficial to ICT users, who may derive pleasure from juicy stories, reassurance from how the narrative reduces uncertainty, and satisfaction from the belief that the complexities in the world still fit established worldviews. But beyond individual users, the spread of misinformation is big business. Platforms that build their profit model on the proliferation of viral information benefit directly from the spread of exciting or even scandalous information, regardless of whether that information is verified. In fact, unverified information arguably has particularly strong potential to feed what Aral (2020) calls the 'hype machine', creating chains of further speculation that generate ever more lucrative user engagement within social media's 'attention economies' (Celis Bueno 2017; see also Nurvala 2016).

Consequently, studies of digital rumours must take seriously those who create favourable conditions for such misinformation sharing. This includes the platform providers as well as authoritative actors such as journalists, who at times unwittingly become the vector for misinformation due to the speed of news cycles, work pressure in the newsroom, and the industry's pervasive need to feed the attention economy.

For example, in December 2013, two years after Kim Jong-un had become the 'Great Successor' to North Korea's dictator Kim Jong-il, news outlets around the world reported that he had executed his uncle Jang Song-thaek, the second-most-powerful man in North Korea at the time. The reports were grisly.

Kim Jung-un had his uncle stripped naked, so the story went, before throwing him and his closest aides into a pit that contained 120 starved hunting dogs. The ravenous animals apparently devoured the 'counter-revolutionaries' while Kim watched the spectacle.

It is a compelling story that relies on the perception that, of course, a North Korean dictator would be crazy enough to feed his own family members to the dogs. However, the report was fabricated (for a full account, see Kaiman 2014). Kim's uncle Jang was indeed executed, probably by firing squad, but the gruesome details about the pit of hungry dogs had originated in China, where a satirical social media account posted the story to the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. A Hong Kong tabloid, apparently unaware of the ironic nature of the post, picked up the story and sold it as fact. From there, it travelled to the highly regarded *Straits Times* in Singapore, where journalists reproduced the story. After it had received that level of credibility, other international news outlets followed suit, and audiences around the world gasped in shock (and in fascination) at the brutality of North Korea's new leader (see Figure 4).

The Jang execution shows how closely intertwined news circuits are today and how quickly news can travel around the world. It also illustrates how, in an environment in which information is scarce, a single piece of misinformation can become credible. Like anyone else, the journalists who picked up this piece of misinformation knew very little about the inner workings of North Korea, let alone the politics of the isolated state and party apparatus. In addition

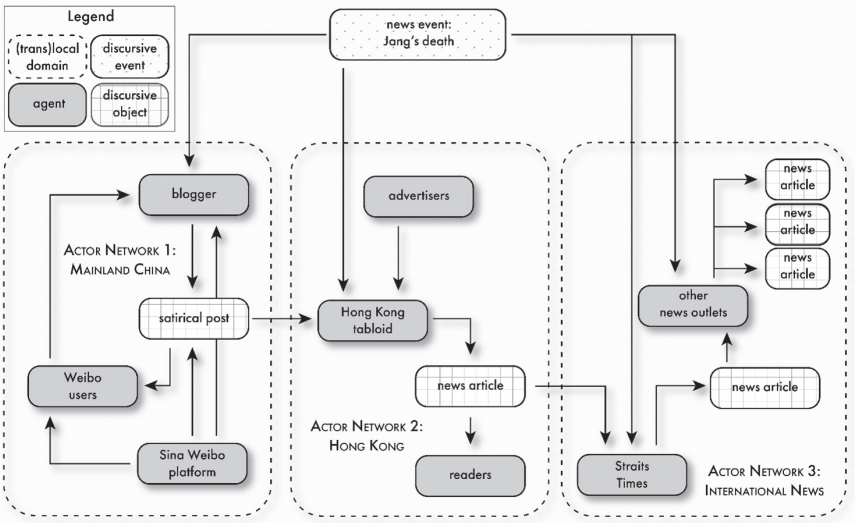

FIGURE 4 Actor networks and the production of misinformation: the case of Jang Song-thaek

to being faced with such arguably radical uncertainty, they worked within a discursive context in which the cruelty and craziness of the Kim regime had become normalized as the baseline for making sense of North Korea. More detailed ethnographic and interview-based research would be needed to establish precisely what motivated the respective outlets to reproduce this specific misinformation, but it is not hard to see how ideological assumptions and economic imperatives could feed off each other to create incentives for spreading these rumours transnationally.

However, the case of Jang's execution is still an example of misinformation: the satire account in China was not pushing an explicit political agenda, and neither were the journalists who were duped, even if they may have acted in accordance with their political biases. Cases such as the US bioweapon labs narrative are more complex, because they do not merely involve false information: this false information is employed strategically by authoritative actors to achieve certain political ends. In other words: it is *dis*information. Leaving aside the most immediate benefit of that narrative, that is, to legitimate the Russian invasion and justify the PRC government's ongoing positive relations with Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, this conspiracy theory also serves the PRC's authorities in a much more immediate way. If it becomes possible to establish a reality in which the US military conducts secret bioweapons tests, then it is only a small step to insinuate that the COVID-19 pandemic may not have originated in China after all; rather, that it was the result of evil American machinations – a conclusion that had been implied earlier by PRC officials such as the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian (see Westcott & Jiang 2020) and that state media revived in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (e.g. Global Times 2022a).

These disinformation practices are examples of 'spreading rumours from above'. In these cases, powerful actors strategically weaponize uncertainty to gain or maintain power (see Fuchs 2018). Official actors frequently leverage ICT intentionally to seed ideas or test the waters for political controversies. At the same time, they stigmatize their opponents' political activities as rumour mongering, and they discredit as 'fake news' any factual information that would contradict their agenda. For instance, it is telling that authorities in the PRC threaten to prosecute anyone whose 'harmful online rumours' are shared more than 500 times on social media (Boehler 2013), and that although they encourage internet users to denounce one another via a state-run anti-rumour platform (Reuters 2018), party officials and journalists for state-run media produce rumours unimpeded.

The control over who is permitted to propagate rumours, and who is not, extends to democratic societies as well. For example, in South Korea, the

Park administration attempted to track down and prosecute rumourmongers on the popular Korean chat app Kakao Talk – a self-serving activity that reportedly motivated over 600,000 users to 'seek asylum' with foreign services (Associated Press 2014). Indeed, such powerful political actors often create the networked environment in which spreading rumours becomes a reasonable form of communication, at least for some. In complex, networked societies, digital rumours have become part of the political toolkit, a rationale for politics, or, in Foucauldian terms, a part of governmentality.

3 Studying the Politics of Disinformation in Digital Asia: a 'Firehouse' Approach

It remains an empirically challenging task to study the high-speed viral spread and transformation of unverified information in digital networks. Rumours are by no means confined to clearly demarcated linguistic or national borders. What is more, they can transcend online/offline dichotomies, move across platforms, and spawn entirely new rumours within networks far beyond those from which they emerged. As translocal processes, they raise questions about what we should consider 'local' in the first place. Digital interactions such as spreading digital rumours are often poorly explained by physical proximity and can be understood much more fruitfully as networks that are not restricted by the geographies, time frames, or technical systems that they cross. Local 'context' simply becomes the span of interactions that we can trace within a rumour network (see also Latour 2005: 202). As such rumours become translated and re-translated across networks, they create idiosyncratic meaning-making dynamics that can have lasting cultural and political impacts within interconnected, translocal milieus.

Take the following example of anti-Korean rumours in China (see Guex 2011): after a controversy over disputed territory between the PRC and the Republic of Korea prompted a high-profile political gesture by a South Korean sports team at the 2007 Asian Games, anger erupted on Chinese online platforms in reaction to rumours about Korean appropriation of Chinese national culture, such as supposedly claiming Chinese historical figures as part of Korea's own national heritage or insisting that the Chinese writing system was Korean. Rumours that South Koreans believed that Confucius was Korean became so pervasive that one Chinese film maker reportedly made a movie about Confucius specifically to clarify that the sage was, indeed, Chinese. The rumours became so powerful that political figures such as Ma Ying-jeo, then president of the Republic of China on Taiwan, felt compelled to clarify that

Koreans in fact held no such bizarre views (ibid.). Events like these rely on interconnected communication networks that span diplomatic exchanges, newspapers, a sports event, social media networks on various platforms, movie production, and a press conference. How can we unpack this complexity?

As mentioned earlier, such studies should incorporate three interconnected issues: the narrative structures of unverified information (their anatomy), the socio-technical systems that enable their construction, spread, and evolution over time (their genealogy), and the political-economic actors and factors behind such processes (their pathology). To design a research architecture for tackling this task (shown in Figure 5), it is again useful to recall that the spreading of rumours and the construction of narratives such as conspiracy theories are extended, interactive cultural innovations. Writing about the study of innovation, Rogers (2003: 76–766) suggests that researchers adopt what he calls a 'firehouse' approach: a flexible set of methodological protocols for identifying and studying cases as they emerge in real time. Just as firefighters are prepared to deploy when needed, a firehouse approach prompts researchers to have

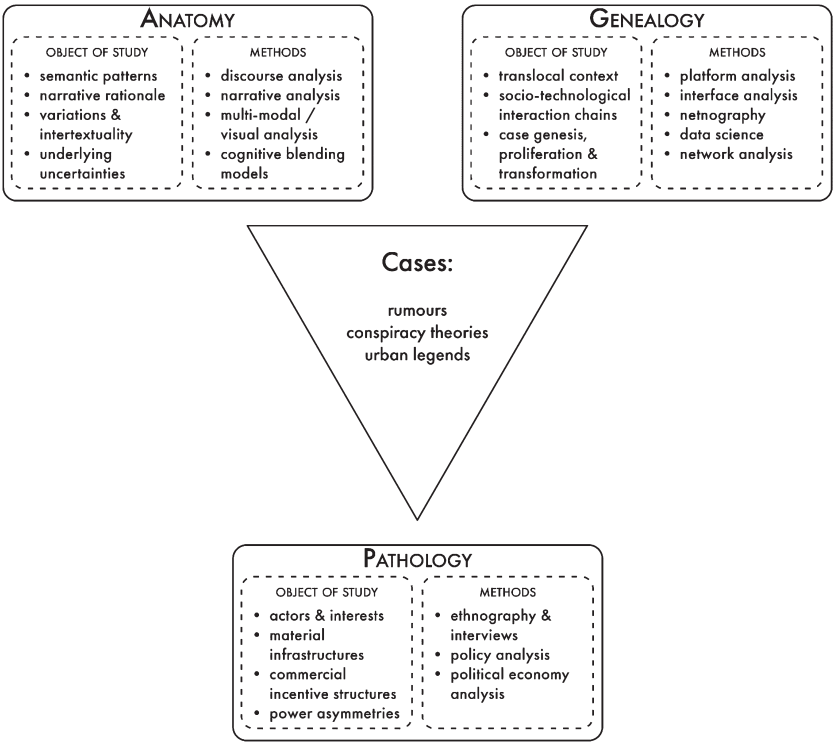

FIGURE 5 Analytical framework for studying the anatomy, genealogy, and pathology of digital rumours: a firehouse approach

various work steps and protocols ready for studying instances of viral unverified information as they develop.

In practice, this means monitoring relevant social media platforms for trending topics and reacting to relevant events that fit defined criteria for 'digital rumours' (e.g. topical, unverified, and popular statements or memes), 'conspiracy theories' (e.g. unverified narratives, presented as true, that speculate about secret machinations of powerful elites), and 'urban legends' (e.g. unverified narratives, presented as true, that serve as a humorous or negative object lesson). After an event is identified, the researchers should unpack its semantic patterns and narrative rationale, along with those of any potential variations, using qualitative methods such as discourse, narrative, and multi-modal or visual communication analysis. Which elements are present in which input spaces? What do these spaces imply in terms of the semantic network's auto-completion? How do verified, unverified, and unverifiable elements interact to create the narrative, what kinds of uncertainty are addressed by that narrative, and how might it map onto the dimensions of rumours: truthfulness, harmfulness, and reasonableness?

A parallel step would then be to track the genesis and evolution of the event across hybrid media systems, for instance, by creating an actor-network diagram to depict the interaction chains involved in the proliferation and transformation of the event. This is arguably the most difficult and complex research step, and because the information may resist verification and tracking, it might not be possible to explore its full genealogy. Still, even a limited study of the proliferation process can unravel the interaction chains and explore how meanings are made and shared in digital contexts, such as on a specific platform. A useful methodological tactic is the use a mixed-methods approach that combines 'netnographic' strategies (see Hine 2005; Kozinets 2010) with digitally enabled data analysis. Depending on the project's scope, the latter could be limited to 'small data' scholarship (Rogers 2013: ch. 9) but could conceivably be extended to the study of large computationally generated public data sets, gathered through scraping methods and free application programming interfaces (API). The goal is to track the information flows, establish how cultural artefacts spread through socio-technical networks (see also Sperber 1996), and potentially map relevant network processes (see Scott 2012). If the scope of the project allows for it, following the rumours could also include studies on individual platforms or in new contexts, including the appearance of misinformation on television or in film.

Finally, the project should be rounded out by examining the political-economic conditions that enabled acceptance of the digital rumour as well as of the authoritative actors that may have been involved in creating, spreading,

and benefitting from it. To this end, researchers could look at company profiles and public discourse on unverified information in the respective society, including policy documents (see also Creemers in this issue) as well as interview data and ethnographic observations. Equipped with this dimension of how the rumour proliferates, researchers are in a position to connect the representations and socio-technological affordances with a much broader concern: the question of power and governmentality, that is, what a specific event reveals about the role of unverified information in wider political processes.

4 Conclusion

This article explores how digital rumours and conspiracy theories have become part of nearly ubiquitous political practices that have decoupled the realities of many populations around the world. Digital Asia is a crucial site for researching this decoupling of reality, especially considering that Asian societies maintain a long-standing engagement with questions of truth and power in political communication as well as because of their highly developed digital infrastructures and diverse political norms, mechanisms, and institutions. To explore the relevance of unverified information sharing in these contexts, I offer a three-step research agenda for analyzing the anatomy of an event (its discursive components, narrative structures, and intertextualities), tracing its genealogy in complex socio-technical systems (how information travels and evolves), and assessing its pathology (the way in which it connects to questions of power and governmentality in each milieu).

Recent developments show how high the stakes are. The differences between the pro-Russian views on the war in Ukraine that held sway, for instance, in China (Repnikova 2022; USCNPM 2022) and the pro-Ukrainian views that predominate in public discourse across Europe and North America (IPSOS 2022) were so diametrically opposed at the beginning of the war that bridging them seemed an almost insurmountable challenge. The risks from the decoupling of reality are at the heart of contemporary political, social, and environmental crises, many of which are taking on transnational dimensions.

At a time when technology is pervasively present between us and our realities, like a filter (Pariser 2012), we need scholarship that critically explores how digital designs and technological affordances interact with the well-established social, psychological, and economic rationales for spreading rumours, and how the resulting disconnects in the perception of reality reshape the politics of different societies. These insights will allow us to better intervene in digital practices that create fertile ground for frightening ideological positions

and conspiratorial thinking, especially when they target vulnerable minority groups (see also Poppe et al. in this issue). Research on digital rumours and disinformation also has a responsibility to inform public and policy debates about strategies that do not simply fight malicious rumours but address their underlying causes. Specifically, we need to question the notion that those who propagate rumours are merely psychologically deviant or morally reprehensible. Instead, it would be prudent to promote debates about how rumour-sharing practices (whether ill-informed or not) are often pervasive reactions to the realities of modern life, which is saturated with information-sharing technologies (see also Dean 2000). This does not mean giving up on efforts to establish accountability. These behaviours demand public sanction in particular when powerful actors, such as politicians, entrepreneurs, and celebrities, wilfully undermine perceptions of reality and seed doubt to serve their own partisan interests. That said, if scholarship on rumours and conspiracy theories has revealed anything, it is that a culture of individual blame will not solve the wider problem. Rather, the solution requires a substantial rethinking of the socio-technological and economic structures that form the foundations of contemporary society. Research in *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, with its cross-sectional focus on area studies, digital studies, and the social sciences, is in a unique position to act as a forum for this rethinking.

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