



Two Cheers for Unfiltered Information

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In the early hours of December 31st, 2019 weeks before the coronavirus was recognized as a budding pandemic, Taiwanese Centers for Disease Control Deputy Director Luo Yijun was awake, **browsing the PTT Bulletin Board**. A relic of 90s-era hacker culture, **PTT is an open source internet forum** originally created by Taiwanese university students. On the site's gossip board, hidden behind a warning of adult content, Yijun found **a discussion about the pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan**. However, the screenshots from WeChat posted to PTT described a SARS-like coronavirus, not the flu or pneumonia. The thread identified a wet market as the likely source of the outbreak, indicating that the disease could be passed from one species to another. Alarmed, Luo Yijun warned his colleagues and forwarded his findings to China and the World Health Organization (WHO). That evening, Taiwan began screening travelers from Wuhan, acting on the information posted to PTT.

A niche Internet forum, not the WHO or Chinese Communist Party (CCP), notified Taiwan, and the world more broadly, of the seriousness of COVID-19 – the disease caused by the new coronavirus. The same day, Wuhan's Municipal Health Commission **described the disease as pneumonia** and cautioned against assumptions of human-to-human transmission. While Chinese health authorities downplayed the seriousness of the outbreak, a lightly governed website helped information about the disease to escape China's Great Firewall. As viral misinformation inspires skepticism of free speech in the west and **conservative legal scholars express admiration for China's system of information control**, this episode illustrates the value of unfiltered speech. PTT's gossip board is not fact checked by experts, and while the board has some rules, it is a place for gossip rather than verified information or news. The forum is governed far more liberally than contemporary social media platforms with extensive community standards and tens of thousands of paid moderators. While bulletin boards have largely fallen out of favor with western Internet users, PTT probably is most comparable to 4chan, the Something Awful forums, or Hackernews. In the past, it has **hosted leaked government surveillance proposals**, and Chinese officials have recently **complained about the site** as a source of abusive speech about the WHO.

There is a real difference between lightly governed or unmoderated spaces, essentially ruled by the First Amendment (which inevitably play host to the good, the bad, and the ugly) and platforms that are specifically curated to highlight vulgar or illiberal content. 4chan contains image boards dedicated to fashion, travel, umpteen forms of Japanese animation, and /pol, a board for politically incorrect conversation that receives an outsized amount of attention in mainstream media. The Daily Stormer is a blog for white nationalists. We must resist the urge to condemn ungoverned fora alongside badly governed forums simply because both provide platforms for noxious speech.

Because the Daily Stormer is specifically curated to highlight neo-Nazi speech, we can safely assume that it won't host valuable information. Its gatekeepers explicitly select fascistic speech

for publication before the content goes live and are unlikely to grant a platform to anything else. It certainly isn't a hangout for anonymous epidemiologists. 4chan, on the other hand, contains its fair share of extremist speech but the platform is not moderated by fascists, nor, for the most part, anyone at all. 4chan hosts almost any sort of speech; despite being unverified, useful information may still be posted there. Due to its lack of formal gatekeeping, users' comments are not screened for either accuracy or good taste. As a result of 4chan's norm of anonymous participation, prominence, and popularity with particularly active internet trolling communities in the mid-aughts, the site gained a reputation as an informational free-for-all, rendering it a useful dumping ground for both leaks of authentic **nonpublic information** and unhinged conspiracy.

Even as its prominence has diminished, 4chan's reputation ensures that it remains a popular space to share privileged information, often in concert with other essentially unmoderated publication services such as Pastebin. Last year, **News of Jeffrey Epstein's death** was first leaked on the site. While it can be difficult to prove the veracity of any one claim, the existence of such a place--an ungoverned information clearinghouse--has undeniable value. Ungoverned fora allow arguments, assertions, and media to be freely shared and considered without giving undue authority to unproven assertions.

Because users participate anonymously or pseudonymously, they cannot rely upon, and subsequently do not risk, their permanent personal reputations and credentials. Likewise, it is the very popularity of these message boards as information clearinghouses that makes them attractive to bad actors. If you want to publish a sensitive message, for good or for ill, lightly moderated platforms are good tools for the job.

Although these platforms may spread disinformation, if read with a healthy dose of skepticism the content they carry is not per-se dangerous. Crucially, they fail differently than, in this case, Chinese state health authorities, which had political reasons to downplay the seriousness of the outbreak. Rather than providing filtered, authoritative information that can cause widespread harm if incorrect, such as the **WHO recommendations against mask use published throughout March**, open fora host many unfiltered claims that, without supporting evidence, carry little authority whatsoever. A healthy information ecosystem will contain both trustworthy authorities, and bottom up information distribution networks that can correct institutional failures. In a world in which seemingly authoritative sources are not trustworthy, unfiltered platforms will gain credence, for good and ill.

However, as Luo Yijun's late night discovery on PTT demonstrates, unverified information can inform and illuminate, especially in the absence of trustworthy authoritative information. Furthermore, if used effectively, open-source information hosted on ungoverned platforms can enhance the capability and legitimacy of traditional institutions, such as the Taiwanese CDC. Liberally governed platforms are often blamed for their role in transmitting falsity and hate but seldom lauded when they facilitate the spread of life-saving information.

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