

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Being a Member of an Online Group Can Make You More Accepting of Fake News: The Case of Thailand

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X Site of the Anti-Fake News Centre @AFNCThailand at <https://twitter.com/AFNCThailand>. Accessed 13 February 2024.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


- In Thailand, various online political communities have emerged since the 2014 coup d'état, as the traditional public sphere became constricted. Since then, every major Thai political party has built an active presence on at least one social media platform.
- Despite their large memberships, little scholarly attention has been given to the role of online groups and how they contribute to the circulation of fake news and disinformation during the campaigning season.
- This paper explores the dynamics of information sharing in online political groups. It tests whether being a member of an online group can make individuals more susceptible to fake news. Preliminary findings from a nationwide survey of 1,225 respondents suggest that membership in an online group can heighten susceptibility to fake news from both the believability and the shareability perspectives.
- However, this survey alone cannot determine why dis/misinformation is more prevalent in online pages and groups. Rather, we can only conclude that there is something about being a member of online political communities that is associated with individuals' tendency to believe and share fake news.


## INTRODUCTION


In Thailand, various online political communities have emerged since the 2014 coup d'état, as the traditional public sphere for freedom of expression became constricted. In the 2020s, more such groups are flourishing and garnering public attention, coinciding with the advent of the youth-led, pro-democracy movement. A remarkable example of such an influential online political group is the Royalist Marketplace founded by political-exile scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun. This private Facebook group, originally with over 2 million members, has been catching the attention of the public from both sides of the ideological spectrum, through frank and sometimes satirical discussions about the monarchy, a longstanding institution with an exalted position in Thai society. When the first version of the group was geo-locked by the government, Pavin created another, and this gained over 1.1 million members within the course of its first week.<sup>5</sup> Presently, the group has 2.3 million members and sees many active discussions on its platform.

Every major Thai political party has now built an active presence on at least one social media platform. For instance, Move Forward Party (MFP), an opposition party, has over a million followers on their Facebook page, while Pheu Thai Party (PTP), a leading part of the governing coalition, has close to 939k followers. Some political candidates have developed their own fanbase and communicate with their supporters via separate online platforms. Pita Limcharoenrat, for instance, has a total of over 2 million followers on all his social media outlets. Rukchanok “Ice” Srinork, an MFP’s parliamentarian, is also known to be communicating with her half-a-million followers about her daily life as an MP via TikTok and Facebook. In addition, many more unofficial online sites have emerged, set up by supporters of parties and candidates, both paid and organic, which have established themselves as influential information channels.


### Pages


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**พรรคเพื่อไทย** 


Political Organization · Always open · 938K followers · 10+ posts in the last 2 weeks  
เพื่อชีวิตใหม่ของประชาชน Follow
- 


**พรรคก้าวไกล - Move Forward Party**


Political Party · Open now · 1.4M followers · 10+ posts in the last 2 weeks  
แฟนเพจเฟรมักทางการเมืองของพรรคก้าวไกล Follow
- 

**พรรคพลังประชารัฐ** 

Political Party · 597K followers · 10+ posts in the last 2 weeks  
ทีมประเทศไทย- <https://www.pprp.or.th/> Follow
- 

**Democrat Party, Thailand พรรคประชาธิปัตย์** 

Political Party · 791K followers · 10+ posts in the last 2 weeks  
Official Fanpage of Thailand's Democrat Party Follow
- 

**พรรคภูมิใจไทย** 

Political Organization · \$\$\$ · Always open · 132K followers · 10+ posts in the last 2 weeks  
ลดรายจ่าย เพิ่มรายได้ เพื่อปากท้องประชาชน Follow

Despite their large memberships, little scholarly attention has been given to these groups and how they contribute to the information ecosystem during campaigns. This paper explores the dynamics of information sharing in online political groups, with the hypothesis that there is a relevant difference in terms of the behaviour of members on one hand, and of non-members on the other, when they receive and process information. We test whether being a member of an online group can make individuals more willing to believe or share fake news. Our preliminary findings suggest that membership of an online group is indeed associated with a tendency to believe and share fake news.

## **METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

Using data from a nationwide survey conducted by Hicken, Sinpeng, and their team about media consumption behaviour during the 2023 Thai general elections,<sup>1</sup> we explore the linkage in Thailand between group membership and fake news. To ensure the representativeness of the study sample relative to the overall population, the researchers conducted a comprehensive field data collection initiative covering all regions of the country, encompassing both urban and rural areas. The total number of participants was 1,225. Furthermore, the sampling strategy aimed through stratification to encompass all age groups in proportion to their representation in the population.

The questionnaire comprises four principal sections and encompasses (1) general information pertaining to the sample group; (2) behaviour in the reception of media and information concerning elections; (3) experiences related to encountering fake news in the media; and (4) political stances and voting behaviours during elections. We derived data from section 2 and 3 that address experiences of encountering fake news in the media by designing the questions to be in a quasi-experimental fashion. During the survey, respondents were exposed to fabricated news posts on Facebook encompassing political and general topics, followed by inquiries such as “How true do you think the content in this post is?” and “How likely would you be to share this content on your own social media?” The former question aims to gauge the perceived believability, while the latter focused on the propensity for shareability. To account for the possibility of *a priori* exposure to the information, the prompted news posts were completely fabricated by the research team and were never circulated outside the survey.

Based on the individuals’ responses to those questions, we then constructed two scale variables, ranging from 0 to 5, to be used as dependent variables: believability and shareability of fake news. Our decision to separately gauge the effect of believability and shareability aligns with the commonly utilized approach in political communication. As demonstrated in a study conducted by Halpern, Valenzuela, Katz, et al., the phenomenon of receiving fake news is delineated into three primary components: exposure, belief, and sharing of fake news.<sup>2</sup> The mathematical model employed in their investigation elucidated that the measurement of believability and shareability established an intricate relationship referred to as “trust in others”. A believability score of 5 indicates a high level of confidence in the authenticity of fake news, suggesting unquestionable belief in its accuracy. Similarly, for the shareability variable, a score of 5 signifies a strong inclination to share fake news.

Regarding the independent variable, we constructed a dichotomous variable, group membership, based on respondents’ answers to the following question: “Do you belong to a

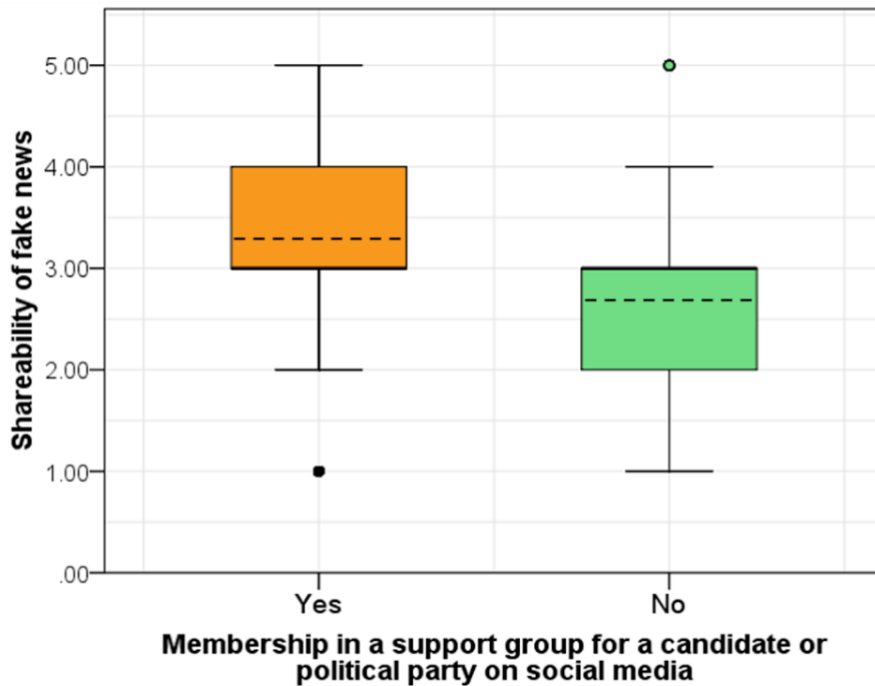
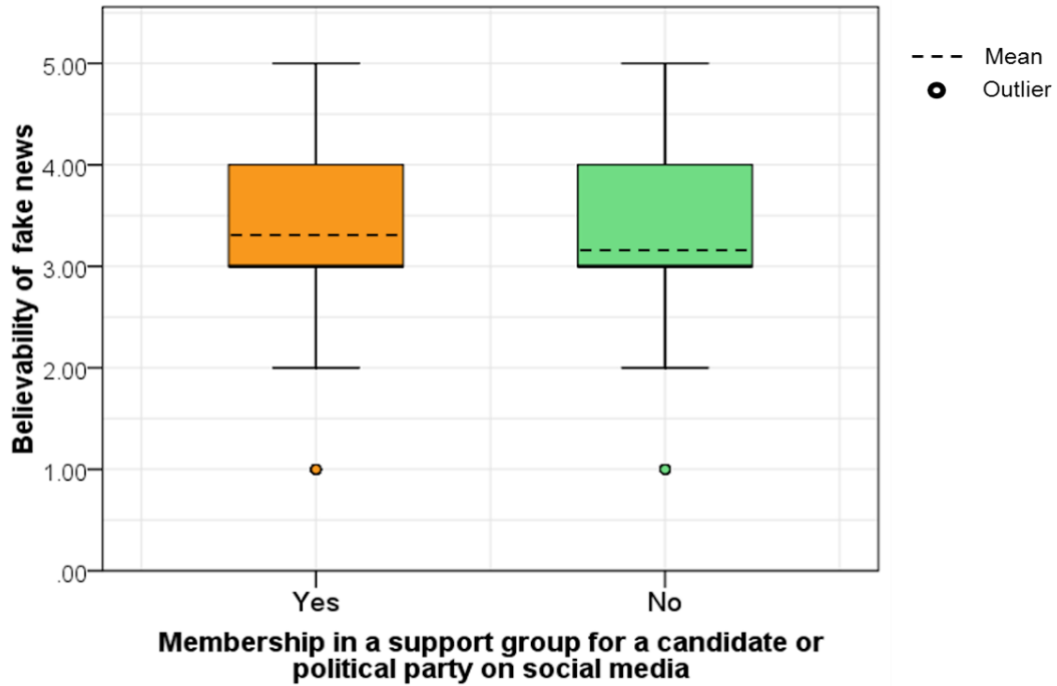
group of supporters of candidates or parties on social media (i.e., LINE group, Facebook group)?” The variable took a value of 1 if the respondent admitted to being a group member; and 0 if otherwise. Then, we ran an Independent Sample T-Test to examine whether there is a statistically significant mean difference in believability and shareability between members and non-members of a political Facebook page and/or Line group. To get a sense of how widespread membership in these groups is among the Thais, we looked at the descriptive statistics concerning the sample’s engagement in online groups. The table below demonstrates the result from our T-Test analysis, showing the difference between the means of the two groups to be statistically significant. In other words, it is supportive of our initial hypothesis that joining an online group has a direct influence on the tendency to both believe and share fake news.

<b>[Dependent Variables]</b> Response to fake news	<b>[Independent Variables]</b> Membership in a support group for a candidate or political party on social media	N	Mean	S.D.	t-test for Equality of Means	Sig. (2-tailed)
a. believability	(1) Yes	357	3.34	1.21	2.84	0.005*
	(2) No	868	3.14	0.98		
b. shareability	(1) Yes	357	3.31	1.25	6.29	0.000*
	(2) No	868	2.82	1.19		

\* Significant at level  $p < 0.01$

Furthermore, the box plot shown below also indicates a significant difference in the likelihood of believing and sharing fake news among the two groups of respondents, since the mean value for the believability of fake news was higher for the “YES” group (members) compared to the “NO” group (non-members). The averages were 3.34 and 3.14, respectively. Correspondingly, the average shareability of fake news among the members was also considerably higher than that of the non-members, with average values of 3.31 and 2.82 respectively.

**Box plot diagram: The distribution of the believability and shareability of fake news score, classified by group membership**



In summary, the data analysis corroborated our hypothesis about information sharing in online groups: There is indeed something significantly different between the behaviour of members and of non-members; it appears that being a member of an online group can make one more

susceptible to both believing and sharing fake news. Since the questions that we used to construct the variables in the analysis asked specifically about individuals' membership to an online group supporting a political party or candidate, we can also infer that the impact of believability and shareability of false information here can potentially affect one's electoral behaviour too. However, it is also imperative to note that there are at least two key constraints intrinsic to the data used in this analysis. One, the nature of the survey questionnaires only allows us to scratch the surface of the dynamics of information sharing in online groups. A deeper study is needed for a better understanding of the taxonomy of contents that are being shared in these online communities (i.e., what types of content shared). Through this survey alone, we cannot deterministically infer that dis/misinformation are more prevalent in online pages and groups; thus, making their members more susceptible to fake news. Rather, we can only say that there is something about being a member to online political communities which one can associate with an individual's tendency to believe and share fake news. Two, the survey question did not ask about membership to a Facebook page and a Line group separately, inhibiting us from distinguishing the different nature of the platforms and their varying ability to monitor and moderate contents, albeit that there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that end-to-end encrypted messages can become a hotbed for disinformation propagation and a potential threat to electoral integrity.<sup>3</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: EXCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES, BIASES, AND TRIBALISM**

Our interest in the effect of membership of online groups, especially political ones, is based on the premise that members can gain access to exclusive content that may not be publicly available to non-members. At the very least, subscribing to a political page or account will enable the person to gain "first access" to the content since most platforms' algorithms tend to prioritize posts from inner circles such as friends, family members, and followed lists. Moreover, becoming a part of such an exclusive community can also serve as a heuristic cue that reinforces the sense of solidarity and belonging among members.

As our findings indicate, being a member of an online group is in fact associated with a stronger tendency to both believe and share fake news. We suggest that this could be due to two reasons: confirmation bias and tribalism. Online platforms tend to function as an "echo chamber" that perpetuates confirmation bias; that is a known global phenomenon. Individuals are likely to believe information that aligns well with their existing beliefs and ideology, thus, reinforcing the perceived credibility and veracity of the information. This concept, however, only partially explains the dynamics of information sharing wherein people share information that they believe in (e.g., high level of believability).

But what leads people to share information that they know is false, especially in the member-only settings? We suggest that tribalism can be one explanation. Once a person joins an online group, subscribing to an exclusive community, they feel that they gain access to things that they would otherwise not have access to; and to some, this even serves as a badge of privilege. This membership thus comes with social costs, and deviating from the constructed norms of the "tribe" may lead to negative consequences. A study of Lawson, Anand and Hakkar in the context of Indian netizens found that group members who do not conform to the behaviours of other group members by sharing the information propagated within the group can be subjected to reduced social interaction over time.<sup>4</sup> So, it is also possible that a group member will share



fake news despite having doubts about the veracity, for fear of losing access to future information shared within the group.

Using the concepts of biases and tribalism allows us to move beyond focusing on the direct impact of content on behaviours. In the final analysis, it may not be the regular exposure to false contents *per se* that contributes to one's susceptibility to fake news, but rather it is the venue in which they are shared which strengthens that tendency.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Hicken, A. & Sinpeng, A. Thai Political Survey. (2023)

<sup>2</sup> See Halpern, Daniel Valenzuela, S., Katz, J. & Miranda, J. P. From Belief in Conspiracy Theories to Trust in Others: Which Factors Influence Exposure, Believing and Sharing Fake News. in *Social Computing and Social Media. Design, Human Behavior and Analytics* (ed. Meiselwitz, G.) (Springer, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See Sriyai, S. The Postings of My Father: Tradeoff Between Privacy and Misinformation. *Fulcrum* <https://fulcrum.sg/the-postings-of-my-father-tradeoff-between-privacy-and-misinformation/> (2023).

<sup>4</sup> See M. Asher, L., Shikhar, A. & Hemant, H. Tribalism and Tribulations: The Social Costs of Not Sharing Fake News. *J. Exp. Psychol. Gen.* **152**, 611–631 (2023).



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