Online Fake News, Elections and Role of Social Media Companies

Afeera Firdous[*]

Abstract

Fake news and disinformation are not new tactics as in ancient times statesmen and rulers have used these techniques against their adversaries. Throughout the Cold War period, the US and Soviet Union also used disinformation against each other extensively. But now weaving of social media into peoples` life has made the demarcation of online and offline spaces increasingly unclear. This paper will discuss important terminologies such as 'fake news', 'disinformation', and 'misinformation' in online paradigm and also analyze how internet has changed the nature, intensity and reach of disinformation campaigns. Role and significance of online disinformation campaigns was brought into light during 2016 US presidential election. This paper will also examine the effects of online disinformation campaigns before and during general elections in different regions, particularly South Asia. International IT and social media companies had not taken into their consideration the threat of online disinformation with regards to elections until it became such an overwhelming phenomenon. After 2016 US Presidential Elections major international social media companies came together to cooperate for the mitigation of emerging challenge from online disinformation. But these companies failed to meet their pledge that online platforms will not be allowed to be used for spreading disinformation specifically information that may affect the General Election results in a country.

Keywords

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[*] Afeera Firdous is working as Senior Researcher with Pakistan Now Project at Pakistan Now Media Pvt. Ltd.

Introduction

Penetration of social media into an individual's daily routine has blurred the offline and online spaces. The online activity has enhanced an individual's ability to increase the quantity of exchange of information around the world. At the same time it has caused some serious challenges in defence and political spheres. Nation states as well as the international community are affected by the impact of global reach of social media platforms.

Fake news and disinformation have broader consequences for states' internal security and democratic credentials. For instance; a whole village in India turned into a mob, and lynched 23 people incited by a fake story over WhatsApp.[1] False news, distorted social media messages and campaigns are common propaganda tools to damage an individual's and organization's reputation[2]; and even to exploit stock markets.[3]

The phenomenon of 'fake news', which can loosely be defined as intentionally misleading information, has been present since long ago. For example, a random news falsely claiming the demise of a public figure, or prospects of life on other planets or moon or fake claims about Neil Armstrong hearing The Prayer Call (Azaan) on the moon when he landed there or India running an online disinformation campaign, named 'Indian Chronicles'[4] for 15 years to target Pakistan across more than 110 countries. However, the phrase 'fake news' entered into political lexicon during run up to the 2016 US presidential election.[5] The impact of online disinformation campaigns has not only forced the governments but also pushed international companies like Google[6] and Facebook[7] to tackle the issue heads-on. Despite some efforts at the international level, the recognition and solution of fake news related problems are still limited.

There is an unresolved debate on the definition of fake news. Some analysts define fake news as fabricated information that mimics

news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent.[8] This definition is in consonance with other information disorders, like misinformation (for example wrong or deceptive statistics) and disinformation (wrong and fabricated information which is intentionally spread to mislead). The five categories[9] of fake news described by Victoria L. Rubin and her colleagues are: (1) serious fabrication entirely to deceive and mislead readers, (2) large-scale hoaxes, pieces of fake news and deception reported in good faith by reputable sources, (3) trolls and satires such as those published by *The Onion*, (4) prejudiced reporting to serve particular agenda, and (5) news pieces where the truth is controversial. Landislav Bittman, former Director of Communist Disinformation Department of USSR in Cold War, defined disinformation and fake news as misleading information which is consciously and covertly spread to mislead and manipulate.[10]

The significant growth of online platforms and online content raised unusual concerns in early twenty-first century. Variety of available online platforms gives the audience excessively diverse opinions and makes it easier for compatible and like-minded people to form online *echo chambers[11]* and *filter bubbles[12]* to detach from exposure to different opinions. Recently, social media platforms attracted more attention among other online platforms due to their potential user-generated content component which has no third party editing, sifting or fact-checking. Individual users of social media platforms could have as much readership and influence as reputed media outlets such as RT, CNN, or newspapers like the New York Times.[13] Available data shows that currently 4.388 bn out of 7.676 bn of world population, which makes 56.6%, uses the internet daily and among them more than three billion use social media platforms on regular basis.[14]

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History of Fake News

Information fabrication, propaganda, and disinformation /misinformation are not new methods used by nations against their adversaries. Natalie Nougayrède, contributing author with the Guardian, explained that using propaganda tool was an ancient tactic, but dissemination of propaganda was transformed with the evolution of technology.[15] Bittman, too, recognized the effects of technology and social media on spread of disinformation and fake news.[16] While assessing manifestations of fake news in contemporary period, it is critical to understand the historical background of the term information disorder.[17] The history of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda can be traced back to 44 BC to Roman times when Roman politician and General Mark Antony met Egyptian Queen Cleopatra. Octavian, a Roman statesman who later became the first Roman Emperor, ran a smear campaign to damage Antony's reputation. He distributed coins with engraved short messages against Antony's character and his relations with Queen Cleopatra.[18] Octavian's disinformation campaign worked to damage the republican system beyond repair.[19] In another instance, the establishment of Gutenberg Printing Press in 1493 transformed the way the information was being distributed in the masses in Europe. It also had huge effects on spread of disinformation and eventually brought up one of the largest news hoaxes of nineteenth century, The Great Moon Hoax.[20] Disinformation and fake news have played a decisive role during World War I and II, Russian Revolution, Vietnam War, Cold War and many other global events.

Motivations

Propaganda and disinformation campaigns always come with the question, why. There are different motivations[21] for deliberate dissemination of fake news on social media. These could be one or

more of the following; such as social, financial, political and geo-political incentives. The financial motivation to spread fake news has also become increasingly relevant and important on social media. In 2016 US election campaign Trump's online followers were heavily targeted by the Macedonian teens with disinformation stories.[22] These teenagers became wealthy in months by creating sensational stories online which brought advertisements. In contrast, the hacking of the Associated Press (AP) twitter account by Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) is one of the best examples how fake news can influence market shares as well. In 2013 SEA hacked AP twitter account and shared a fake story of bombing of the White House resulting in the injury of then US President Barak Obama. This fake story went viral on different online platforms and US stock markets crashed instantly.[23]

While discussing disinformation and propaganda warfare it is essential to examine geo-political motivations behind it. Apart from daily life, fake news and disinformation have become even more common in a country's political life or during the electoral process. In its annual report, *Freedom on the Net 2018*, Freedom House described that the annual decline in internet freedom, in more than twenty-six countries, was linked to elections.[24] Many countries encountered rise in fake news and disinformation on the internet, apart from cyber-attacks before the elections. Previously Freedom on the Net report 2017 had also indicated that the general election in 18 countries had suffered because of fake news and disinformation campaigns, which included 2016 US Presidential Elections. [25]An Oxford University research indicated that French voters were bombarded with fake stories on different social media platforms before the elections and Facebook had to suspend 30,000 automated accounts to disrupt propaganda about different political parties in France.[26] There are several other instances of fake news campaigns during or before the elections such as Philippine's Key board Army,[27] Venezuela's online government

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agents,[28] Kenya's fake story of massacre by police[29]; and Gambia and Zambia's internet shutdowns[30].

While talking about wider national and geo-political interests, disinformation and fake news have always remained an integral part of countries' campaigns against enemy states, for example, Russian disinformation campaign Operation InfeKtion, part of Project Active Measures (Активныемеры) disinformation campaign from the Cold War. Cold War AIDS virus story[31] was actually a political virus created by the Communist government to weaken its enemy from inside without fighting a war. In early 1980s *The Patriot* magazine printed a fake story on AIDS virus that the US had developed it as a biological agent. Within two years the story had spread in half of Africa. Two of Eastern European scientists claimed that they could prove that the virus was created in the US.[32] After 4 years in March 1987, the fake story was run on the US national TV, CBS as well.

Yuri Bezmenov, former operative of Communist Disinformation Department of USSR, revealed that his country had used only 15% of its resources on spying (espionage operations) during the Cold War and remaining 85% of the resources were spent on operations such as forgery, kidnapping, propaganda and disinformation with the objective "to change the perception of reality".[33] Soviets named these operations as *Ideological Subversion or Active Measures.* To carry out these operations, Committee for State Security (KGB) had employed 15,000 strong human resource in its Disinformation Department.[34]

In 2016, Pizzagate Conspiracy just few weeks before 2016 US Presidential elections was recognized as a successful disinformation campaign.[35] A fake news story developed on a rumor got an hashtag (#) on the internet especially social media sites. It instigated a man to open fire on the Comet Ping Pong, the pizza shop, apart from heavily affecting Hillary Clinton's election

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campaign. Comparatively, the two stories 30 years apart, AIDS virus and Pizzagate, have been differently exploited due to the rapid advancement in the available medium. It took 6 years for AIDS virus story to reach every corner of the world, but only few days for the Pizzagate story to impact the US presidential election campaign. Unfortunately fighting against the fake news and disinformation is like a complex game of whack-a-mole, no matter how hard one tries but the lie continues to be believed in some parts of the society.

Tools and Tactics

There are many disinformation tactics used by the governments or state-sponsored actors such as *Computational Propaganda* / use of Bots or automated accounts of social media as used in Mexican general elections. Examples could be *Hacking and leaking of data or documents* during the election campaigns as #MacronLeaks in 2017, Dissemination of fake stories by social media trolls for *Behavioral Targeting* of voters as the news of suicide murder of FBI agent who leaked Hillary's emails.[36] *Deep Fake[37]* is also an emerging phenomenon which will be a grave political or geo-political manipulation tool in the future, for ample video of US President Donald Trump commenting on Climate Change on Twitter.[38] Online election campaigns, specifically on the social media outlets, have turned into a case of Classic Consumer Market places where political elite gain through bulk data capture and micro-targeting techniques with grave implications for the idea of open society and democratic values.

In Hungry[39] and Russia[40] some people with close connections with their respective governments created websites with the editorial guidelines in favor of the government. In the case of Bots/automated accounts used as tools to manipulate discussions on social media, the Mexican President, Enrique Pena Nieto, with

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the help of his supporters procured more than 75,000 Penabots to crush political opposition on Twitter.[41] In another instance, Iranian hackers formed 'mock websites' pretending to be Syrian opposition leaders to spread fake news and propaganda.[42] Hacking of PTI' spokesperson's Twitter account and fake tweets from that account is another example of fake news and disinformation being used as tool for political gains.[43]

Concern over and significance of the role of online fake news and disinformation have been multiplied in last one decade or so. The Oxford Internet Institute (OII) identified that the number of countries where social media manipulations are formally organized have grown noticeably from 28 to 48 worldwide.[44] The Institute also noticed that political parties, disseminating fake news through Bots during or ahead of an election were the major cause for increase in their numbers. Another study at the Computational Propaganda Project at the OII deduced that the most accurate and influential computational propaganda involved both trolls (human component) and Bots (automated accounts) together. [45]

South Asian Context

Propaganda and disinformation during a crisis and war are not new as mentioned before. States have always used these methods to influence and wage psychological warfare against the enemy state. But with the advent of internet and social media, the potential consequences of citizen journalism creating fake news stories, propaganda and misinformation grew exponentially and even outrageously by streams. Some doctored pictures and videos of misinformation on social media[46] and news links from satirical online news outlets have made their way almost pushing two nuclear nations to the brink of war.

The estimated number of India's online citizens were 627 million[47] in 2020, which was slightly lesser a year earlier but they became an

easy prey for exploitation by Indian politicians during and ahead of general elections 2019. Before the elections, Indian political parties were targeting voters by political messaging and spreading fake claims on social media. 87,000 WhatsApp groups were especially active during the election period.[48] A research conducted by the Microsoft indicated that India had *the biggest fake news problem* in the world. The report highlighted that 57% of world population confronts online fake news, on average, as compared to 64% of Indians.[49]

Modi government realized the power and impact of social media on public opinion and efficiently used it to its advantage. It circulated fake claims of targeting terror camps in Balakot in Pakistan, and shooting down Pakistan's F-16 in the wake of Indian Air Force dropping bombs near Balakot in forested area. This helped in whipping war hysteria among Indian voters. Indian fake claims on social media can be analyzed on the parameters of *Seven Commandments of Active Measures or Disinformation Campaign*.[50] During Cold War disinformation campaigns, Internet Research Agency (IRA) and Communist Disinformation Department had extensively worked on seven-point agenda to achieve successful disinformation campaigns against the enemy such as (i) find cracks to exploit, (ii) craft an outrageous lie, (iii) mix that lie with a bit of truth, (iv) make the identification of origin difficult, (v) find useful idiots to spread that lie, (vi) deny everything, (vii) play a long game. The episode of fake news circulated by India on social media has some inspired features from seven commandments of disinformation campaign as discussed below.

- *Find crack in the target society*: The first and foremost step for any disinformation campaign would be to identify a split to exploit in the target society. In India's case, Indian majority population, with the Hindu–nationalist ideology, has become the crack which could be easily exploited to get

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political advantage. Indian political parties, for years, have appealed to the extremist sections of the society and voters for support by Pakistan-bashing and Modi government, too, played anti-Pakistan card during 2019 Indian election.

- *Craft a big lie*: According to former Operative of Disinformation Department of USSR, the lie must be striking and outrageous enough to make it hard to believe that it could be fabricated. So Indian government created a big-fat lie and claimed the targeting of terror camp in Balakot[51] in which 300 terrorists were killed and shooting down Pakistan's F-16[52].

- *Wrap that lie around a kernel of truth to make propaganda more effective*: Indian claims had some element of truth in their claim. The Indian Air Force jets had actually crossed Line of Control in Kashmir, coming five kilometers inside Pakistan and lobbed a few bombs in the uninhabited forest area.[53] But the rest of story of targeting so-called terror camps and shooting down F-16 was totally made-up for which India has yet not provided any proof. The pictures of supposed destroyed terror camp in Balakot, which made rounds on social media especially Twitter, were actually pictures of damaged houses caused by earthquake in 2005.[54]

- *Find useful idiots*: According to seven commandments of disinformation finding the useful idiots is one of the most important features of the campaign. In recent scenario a big proportion of Indian social media users have played the useful idiots' part, who without fact-checking started spreading the fake claims of Indian government on Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter.[55]

- *Play a long game*: Last but not the least, Seven Commandments of the Disinformation campaigns demand to play a long game. Landislav Bittman said that the long

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period accumulation of disinformation operations can have major political consequences. That's what Indian fake news and disinformation campaign has done. Internet was flooded with the fake news stories for several days; and social media sites had been trending those fake stories for over a month.

Role of International Social Media Companies

With the increased usage of social media in one's social life, international IT and social media companies also have huge impact on political life of users. It was stated that Cambridge Analytica[56] acquired access to personal information of 87 million Facebook accounts by questionable ways.[57] Cambridge Analytica had illegally collected and used the online data as an instrument of psychological operations to influence and control users' opinion (about the candidates) with the advertisement and targeted campaigns.[58]

Advancement in technology and evolution of Internet especially social media has considerably reduced the communication time-gap around the world, and increased the impact of news globally. In the emerging situation, the role of social media companies which provide the users unregulated platforms and the non-regulation of the internet (especially social media platforms) have become the mainstay of disinformation campaigns. To prevent online fake news, particularly with regards to election campaigns, there are few countermeasures which can be adopted by the individuals and some by the governments. First, the individuals need to follow and promote the idea of fact-checking before circulating any news story on the social media. Secondly, the national media needs to run primetime shows discussing the disinformation campaigns by the adversary states to debunk them as was done by the Eastern European countries[59] such as Ukraine, Czech Republic etc. In

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addition government, public and private sectors including research institutes must engage people to discuss issues such as consequences of fake news campaigns, necessity to combat disinformation and significance of information literacy. It is also important to understand that impact of all above mentioned countermeasures will be limited in scope without regulation of social media platforms.

Different international IT and social media companies have braced themselves to deal with the threat of online disinformation and fake news but in a limited manner. Most of these companies have started efforts to fight against fake news that may have political consequences after 2016 US Presidential elections. Social media companies, Google, Facebook and Twitter, vowed to collaborate with the advertising corporations to stop the dissemination of online disinformation in Asia[60] and Europe[61] ahead of elections. But these corporations failed to live up to their promises to combat online disinformation campaigns ahead of major European elections and the impact of countermeasures remained limited.[62]

Before Indian General Election in April 2019, social media companies explored ways to stop fake news and disinformation. In India WhatsApp started an online education campaign, titled *Share Joy, Not Rumors,* to promote the responsible norms of using social media platforms.[63] According to the Whatsapp company, the initial phase of the campaign effectively reached out to hundreds of millions of Indians. Earlier a Facebook blog post listed down some initiatives being taken to fight online disinformation especially to preserve the integrity of elections across the world, including Indian general election in 2019. Facebook also assured that it will set up two regional operation centers in Dublin and Singapore to protect election integrity. The primary purpose of these centers is to track different social media platforms owned by Facebook. In early 2019 Facebook extended the span of its third-party fact

checking program which will prevent the dissemination of fake news on online forums.[64] These fact-checking companies are not only equipped to fact-check articles, but can also evaluate photos and videos with available tools. Generally Facebook and Twitter have taken three kinds of countermeasures to stop fake news. First, by restricting the supply through obstructing the ads and accounts that share fake news and violate community guidelines. Secondly, by introducing features to lead the users to accurate stories/corrective information. Thirdly, by altering the algorithm to de-prioritize disinformation to true stories.

In 2018, Google launched Google News Initiative (GNI), a primary project to combat online disinformation by ameliorating quality of news available on the forum.[65] This project mainly concentrated on reinforcement of quality journalism, focus on sustainable growth by progressive business model, and strengthening news groups through technological innovations. Google's representative discussed a white paper[66] at Munich Security Conference (MSC) and explained company's efforts to stop the spread of misleading and deceiving content especially on general search, news and YouTube. The paper emphasized on improving internet media literacy to fight disinformation. It also discussed the future threats which included deepfake which is able to bypass layers of protection. However, the impact of these countermeasures has been efficacious in downgrading online disinformation problem but its scope remained limited. Different research studies revealed that disinformation and fake news remained an issue on Facebook even after alteration of its news feed algorithms.[67] Facebook was not able to flag several articles and news items which had been rated as fake by key fact-checking companies.[68] Some critics have also claimed that fact-checking is not the most accurate way to stop online disinformation.[69] Another research conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) identified that fake news stories are more accessible to people using online platforms

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as compared to true online stories; and re-tweeted more by humans who operate automated accounts.[70]

Conclusion

While dealing with the problem of online disinformation, the key concern remains that how online fake news problem could be effectively countered? The primary users, of the online platforms who are actually targets of fake news and disinformation, need to be aware and attentive while sharing information. It could however counter the problem in a limited way. Human judgment and timely action could be critical in resolving this issue but it requires extensive education and awareness campaigns. Online users, who understand the consequences of fake news, would be in a better position to contain proliferation of disinformation. Currently there are many fact-checking websites that claim to authenticate the reliability and source of a piece of information. Principally the elimination of online fake content would require shared and collective efforts from a single user, IT and social media companies and governments. Technological solutions only cannot effectively work unless they are supported by the people (online users).

In recent elections in different regions, several tools, tactics and players have been exposed for exploiting online platforms for advancing political agenda. Apart from national governments there is a need to increase international partnerships and collaboration and sharing of best practices. With the enormous utilization of online (especially social media) platforms by political parties, it is a challenge for online users (voters) to evade online fake news campaigns. In democratic societies, political parties should commit to be transparent about using citizen information available online. There is an immediate need to address the issues of lack of regulation of social media forums.

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International technology companies store large amount of data which could be of great help in minimizing the exploitation of online spaces. As a part of solution these corporations could give access to that data to external experts so that they can collectively work to resolve the fake news problem. To deal with Bot accounts is one of the bigger challenges for social media companies. Bot accounts have an incredible volume of online traffic, mainly on Twitter. Long-term policies should be adopted about how individuals shape the public opinion on internet and social media platforms.

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