

Fighting a New Battle: Weaponising Social Media

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As regular users of social media, when we say conflict, we might assume the concern is centered on a comment section of a certain controversial post. And while that can certainly influence our thought process about society, politics and social movements, conflict caused by social media renders a bigger, deeper meaning. Social media, while connecting us to the rest of the world within seconds, becoming a powerful tool of connectivity and community, is also a major sphere for conflict, linked to disinformation, diversion and division. Social media is being made to use our susceptibility to being influenced by its available array of information and unfiltered paradigms of headlines to guide world order and human concerns, making us the fuel that weaponizes social media. What if we were one-click away from starting a political riot? Or a war even? What we often take the power of social media for granted. While we are conscious of how it impacts global to local politics, is used relentlessly in campaigns for elections, as well as acquiring unanimity towards social movements, we forget how much we contribute to these powerful changes that social media has become a platform, as well as an enabler for. And this is how, by using the force of the people as tools to create influence and traction, social media is weaponised.

We are all more or less aware of the way social media is being weaponised. Whether state and non-state actors or by global icons of power and influence – have a presence in social media. As the political leaders, global brands, pop icons and religious leaders understood the power of influence through a media that has reach within and beyond the borders. Now-a-days, social media is used to divert attention, create mass hysteria, disinformation and even change public opinion. While we can say that social media is also helps generate protest against the *Bread and Circuses* acts of state actors, the same media is used by state actors to garner support for war, influencing election and altering political views.

In the year 2016, the President of Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, used Facebook to promote his campaign, using positive reinforcement and defaming opponents in the process as well as attacking critics, silencing them. Since then, Duterte has been known to use Facebook to influence and promote his political motives. This is one of the many examples of *Political Manipulation*, one of the prominently used ways of social media as a weapon. The key here is the capacities and capabilities of actors to push content into the information platform, in optimum time and calibrated calculated use of present communication tools. The objective is to manage the perception of the targeted audiences, in this case, electorates, civil societies, or the public sectors, thereby influencing policy-makers. Coordinated disinformation campaigns are designed to disrupt decision making, delegitimize adversaries and corrode social cohesion in the midst of interstate conflict. This is called *Information Operation*.

Terrorists, propagandists and insurgents use social media to quite literally to send messages, using the platform for gaining easy-access to millions of views and shares without much effort. Non-state actors use social media as a weapon to further their intentions in more ways, such as to radicalize and recruit, to initiate propaganda and mass hysteria, disinformation and spread of ideology, etc. the far reaching, transnational attributes of social media, sharing multimedia contents inexpensively and in real time makes is highly sought sought-after by violent extremists and militant organizations as a means of recruitment, manipulation and coordination. ISIS cyber warriors, their trolls and sympathisers innovated their exploitation of social media platforms to generate attention, spreading disinformation and propaganda, attracting people to their caliphate. The actual hashtag #AllEyesOnISIS is just one of their many social media stunts.

In 2019, after the Jaish-e-Muhammer (JeM) terrorist cell attacked an Indian paramilitary convoy, India retaliated by launching an airstrike against the suspected JeM camp in Pakistan, escalating to a military crisis. What came quickly afterwards was another example of weaponising social media, where Pakistan spread disinformation; 'fake news', by using old photographs of wreckages of jets and equipment, and with the help of Pakistani intelligentsia and a few Indian opportunists, successfully generating not only strong outrage in social media, but also successfully turning Indian public against their state leaders. This is an example of state-sponsored weaponisation of social media during an active military crisis. And while Pakistan used social media as part of their 'strategic communication toolkit' method, Indian

government was still handling the situation using traditional mass media, making public statements and getting out press releases, to an audience they had long lost.

We must bring Hybrid War while discussing weaponisation of social media. Russia, the pioneering state of Hybrid warfare, is popularly known to use social media to not only rig elections of other states, as seen in the 2016 US Presidential election, but also influence war. Since 2004, Russia used information operations in several of its regional power plays, like in the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014. The use of Russian trolls, disguised as American users, apparently influenced American voters by leading political debates and discussions on social media, without American Intelligence agencies knowing it. We all know how that ended in the 2016 elections. Another massive psychological operation in 2014 by Russian firms had also brought in slow damage to the cognitive space of Americans, something again, not discovered until much later.

Another common attack for social media is Digital Hate Speech. With an already existent intolerance between communities in Myanmar, incendiary digital hate speech aimed at the Muslim Rohingya people sparked fear and hate, leading to riots and communal violence. This not only deepened the state's communal cleavage but also exacerbated the Rohingya refugee crisis, incurring genocide and mass exodus of the people. This is an example of how Digital Hate Speech works. By amplifying social media platforms and disseminating hate speech in fragile situations, and empowering opportunistic individuals and organized groups to target and prey based on existing grievances and fear, violent actors spark violence and chaos.

So, what makes people so susceptible to weaponised social media? Perhaps the way we are exposed to unfiltered, ready at hand news feeds and unchecked information, or the way social media is evolving at speeds we are yet to fully adhere to, let alone learn to stride along with, or the way people will believe anything as long as it is on a screen, we are vulnerable.

When we talk about prevention, we automatically demand for regulations of governments and influencing policies, collaboration of industry associations advertising technology companies, but it is not enough. Monitoring, detecting and assessing threats need to become more precise. Fine combing these processes, bringing together various stakeholders, not just intelligence agencies but also civil society organisations, might help identify threats better.

But none of these would work if we do not build resilience. Helping fragile populations and vulnerable people by introducing digital media literacy training, as well as online-offline awareness building and education and creating strategies to build and promote social cohesion should become a necessity. Mitigation should also be practiced, reducing harm and violence once weaponised information has already been spread. These can be done in online-offline basis, and can include, but not limit to, referral or warnings and response components into observation and monitoring systems, establishing crisis response plans and addressing and countering Digital Hate Speech, as well as creating better security and counter-narratives against extremist narratives.

As mentioned earlier, it is not that we are not aware of social media weaponization, but we are to some level, all ignorant of it. The dangers of ignoring the weaponization of social media are significant, case in point, the Indian response to Pakistan's social media retaliation, or hate speech that led to riots in the Rohingya crisis. In the age of social media, politics, policymakers, and populaces are highly interconnected. And while information and intelligence are shared in lightning speed, we are yet to find a stronghold against this same platform being used against us. Monitoring, scrutinizing, detecting and assessing threats might help, with government regulations and strong policies in place, but every attempt to prevent disinformation will go in vain if people using the social media do not become educated and most importantly, aware. We might not learn to be immune to disinformation any time soon, but we can learn to be more actively cautious and learn to slow down before deciding to that share button.

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