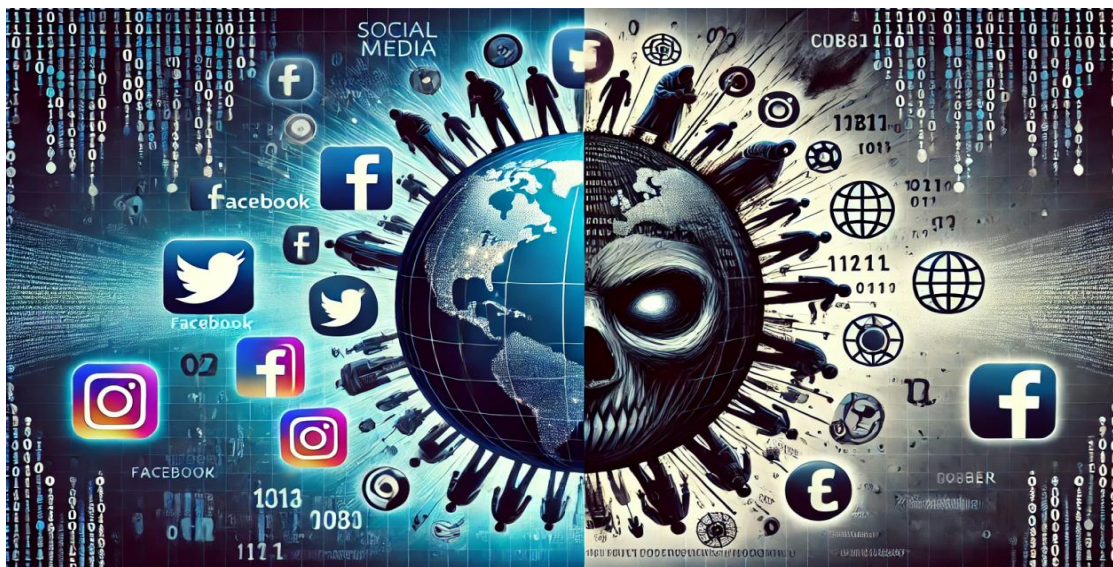


Hostile Social Manipulation: Living in a Changing Information Environment

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Source: LinkedIn

Introduction

In 2024, the world finds itself revolving around an increasingly volatile information environment. The rapid evolution of digital technologies, social media platforms and artificial intelligence has redefined how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed. While these advancements have connected billions globally, they have also exposed societies to new forms of manipulation. Hostile social manipulation—ranging from the spread of disinformation to targeted influence campaigns—has become a pressing challenge for governments, institutions, and individuals alike. As states and non-state actors exploit these tools to shape public opinion, polarize societies, and

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undermine democratic processes, understanding and countering these threats is more critical than ever. This commentary explores the mechanisms of hostile social manipulation and its implications in a world that is both interconnected and increasingly divided.

How Hostile Social Manipulation Occurs

Hostile social manipulation leverages misinformation, disinformation and some inimical influence campaigns to exploit human psychology and societal vulnerabilities. These tactics often exploit cognitive biases, such as the tendency to believe information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs (confirmation bias), making individuals susceptible to false narratives. Manipulators also use algorithms to amplify content that evokes strong emotions like fear, anger, or outrage, ensuring greater engagement and virality. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, coordinated campaigns spread conspiracy theories about vaccines, creating confusion and fueling distrust in public health systems.² This not only undermined efforts to combat the virus but also eroded trust in scientific institutions.

The process typically begins with crafting tailored messages aimed at specific groups. Advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence enable manipulators to micro-target audiences based on their online behavior, preferences, and demographics. A distinct example is the role of foreign interference in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, where actors used social media platforms to deepen divisions among voters.³ By creating and promoting polarizing content, including fake news stories and divisive memes, they heightened political tensions and weakened democratic discourse.

Another form of manipulation involves the use of fake personas, deepfakes and bot accounts to give false credibility and widen the reach of propaganda. In countries like Myanmar, coordinated campaigns on Facebook spread hateful rhetoric against the Rohingya Muslim minority,

²Skafle, Ingjerd, Anders Nordahl-Hansen, Daniel S. Quintana, Rolf Wynn, and Elia Gabarron. 2022. "Misinformation about Covid-19 Vaccines on Social Media: Rapid Review." *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 24 (8). <https://doi.org/10.2196/37367>.

³"Partisanship over Security: Public Narratives via Twitter on Foreign Interferences in the 2016 and 2020 U.S. Presidential Elections." 2016. Firstmonday.org. 2016. <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/11682/10206>.

exacerbating ethnic tensions and contributing to real-world violence. Similarly, authoritarian regimes often deploy manipulation tactics to suppress dissent and control narratives, as seen in China's use of its "Great Firewall" and coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting Hong Kong protesters.⁴

Case Study: Bangladesh's Monsoon Revolution- July 2024

During the Monsoon Revolution of 2024 in Bangladesh, the Awami League, desperate to retain its grip on power, turned to social media as a tool for propaganda and public manipulation. However, their efforts not only failed to sway public opinion but also became a source of ridicule. One striking example was a widely shared post featuring Sheikh Hasina in tears over the damage caused to the metro rail infrastructure during the protests. While the picture was intended to portray her as a leader deeply concerned about the country's development, it backfired spectacularly. The public criticized the hypocrisy of her emotional display over infrastructure damage when her government showed no compassion for the thousands of young protesters killed in the streets by police forces. This insensitivity further alienated the population and galvanized the movement.



Source: BBC

⁴Harold, Scott, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey Hornung. n.d. "CHINESE DISINFORMATION EFFORTS on SOCIAL MEDIA."
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4373z3/RAND_RR4373z3.pdf.

The government's attempts to suppress the movement extended beyond propaganda. The former ICT minister ordered an internet blackout for nearly a week, aiming to disrupt protest coordination and communication among activists. This drastic measure was justified with a fabricated narrative: the minister shared some photos on Facebook claiming that protesters had burned down the main internet grid, which was quickly debunked. The claim was met with widespread skepticism and mockery, as the image itself appeared staged and citizens found alternative ways to organize using offline methods. The blackout ultimately failed to stifle the movement and instead highlighted the regime's desperation and technological incompetence.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Television (BTV), the state-run channel, played its own role in the government's narrative control. Despite the unfolding nationwide protests, BTV chose to maintain its regular programming, offering no updates or coverage of the unprecedented events. By ignoring the reality on the ground, the channel only reinforced its reputation as a mouthpiece for the regime, completely detached from the struggles of ordinary citizens. This absence of credible information from official sources drove people to rely on alternative platforms and independent channels, further eroding trust in government-controlled media. Thankfully, the resilience and ingenuity of the Bangladeshi people prevailed, as they saw through these tactics and remained committed to the movement's goals, ultimately leading to the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government.

International Case Studies of Hostile Social Manipulation

1. Russia's Interference in Western Democracies

Russia's interference in the political landscapes of the United States and Europe has become a textbook example of hostile social manipulation. During the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Russian troll farms, such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), orchestrated an extensive disinformation campaign.⁵ By creating fake accounts and pages on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, they promoted divisive content on issues such as race, immigration, and gun rights. One notable instance was the simultaneous organization of opposing protests—one for pro-immigration and another anti-immigration—by Russian operatives, creating on-the-ground confrontations in

⁵Zhang, Zizhu. 2022. "Study Confirms Influence of Russian Internet 'Trolls' on 2016 Election | Columbia SIPA." [Www.sipa.columbia.edu](https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news/study-confirms-influence-russian-internet-trolls-2016-election). March 29, 2022. <https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news/study-confirms-influence-russian-internet-trolls-2016-election>.

the U.S. Similarly, in Europe, Russian campaigns have sought to undermine EU unity by spreading anti-refugee sentiments and fueling nationalist movements in countries like Germany and France.

2. India's Communal Divide Through Digital Media

In India, social media platforms have increasingly been weaponized to inflame communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. False claims, such as fabricated videos of one community attacking another, have gone viral, inciting real-world violence. For instance, during the 2020 Delhi riots, manipulated content circulated widely, often targeting minority groups, which led to heightened mistrust and clashes.⁶ Political actors have also been accused of leveraging social media platforms to bolster divisive narratives, particularly during election seasons, undermining social cohesion in the process.



Source: Le Monde

⁶Nair, Srishti. 2021. "India's Struggle against Fake News." Internetjustsociety.org. February 7, 2021. <https://www.internetjustsociety.org/indias-struggle-against-fakenews>.

3. Myanmar's Anti-Rohingya Campaign

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Myanmar offers a stark example of how hostile manipulation can incite violence on an immense scale. On Facebook, which served as the primary source of information for many in the country, the military and nationalist groups systematically spread fake news and hate speech targeting the Rohingya. Posts labeled the community as terrorists or invaders, fueling hostility and justifying violent actions against them. This coordinated campaign played a critical role in the 2017 mass atrocities, which led to the displacement of over 700,000 Rohingyas to neighboring Bangladesh.

4. China's Disinformation Against Hong Kong Protesters

During the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, Chinese state-backed actors launched extensive disinformation campaigns on social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook.⁷ These campaigns portrayed the protesters as violent extremists and framed the movement as foreign-funded to delegitimize their demands for democratic rights. Additionally, doctored images and fake news articles were circulated widely to confuse and divide the public, both domestically and internationally. The goal was to undermine support for the protests and shift the narrative in favor of Beijing.

5. The Philippines' Weaponization of Social Media Under Duterte

Under former President Rodrigo Duterte (2016 -2022), the Philippines became a battleground for state-sponsored manipulation on social media.⁸ Troll armies were deployed to silence dissent, attack opposition figures, and glorify Duterte's controversial policies, including his violent anti-drug campaign. False narratives, such as fabricated accusations against activists and journalists, were amplified to discredit critics. The manipulation created a polarized society where political discourse was dominated by propaganda and personal attacks, eroding democratic norms.

⁷Harold, Scott, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey Hornung. n.d. "CHINESE DISINFORMATION EFFORTS on SOCIAL MEDIA."

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR4300/RR4373z3/RAND_RR4373z3.pdf.

⁸ <http://asean.dla.go.th>. 2021. "ASEAN Learning Center, Department of Local Administration:": [Dla.go.th](http://asean.dla.go.th). 2021. <https://asean.dla.go.th/public/news.do?cmd=news&category=1&nid=36356&lang=en&random=1614791307782>.

Key Events of 2025 Prone to Social Manipulation

U.S. Presidential Inauguration: The inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2025 is expected to be a critical flashpoint for hostile social manipulation, particularly due to the polarized political climate in the United States. The period leading up to the inauguration will likely see intensified efforts by both domestic actors and foreign adversaries to exploit divisions among the public. Disinformation campaigns may incite unrest, as seen during the January 6, 2021, Capitol riot.⁹ Online platforms like Telegram or fringe social media networks may become hubs for organizing protests or spreading incendiary content targeting government institutions.

Risks Posed by India to Bangladesh Through Disinformation: Since the resignation of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 and her reported refuge in India, a troubling pattern of misinformation campaigns has emerged, exacerbating communal tensions in Bangladesh. Indian media outlets amplified fabricated narratives of attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh.¹⁰ These outlets falsely claimed incidents like the destruction of Hindu temples and homes, which were later debunked as either misattributed or politically motivated rather than communal in nature. For example, a fire at a political office in Chattogram was misreported as an attack on a temple, and claims of arson at Hindu-owned properties were linked to political affiliations rather than religious identity. Besides, Sheikh Hasina's strategic alliance with certain Indian political factions raises concerns about how she might exploit such narratives to destabilize the interim government. With communal divisions being inflamed by these campaigns, there is a heightened risk of societal fractures. Hasina's influence, coupled with India's support, may aim to delegitimize the Yunus-led interim government by portraying it as incapable of protecting minority rights, despite substantial efforts to ensure communal harmony.

⁹ Timberg, Craig, Elizabeth Dwoskin, and Reed Albergotti. 2021. "Inside Facebook, Jan. 6 Violence Fueled Anger, Regret over Missed Warning Signs." Washington Post. October 22, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/22/jan-6-capitol-riot-facebook/>.

¹⁰"The Daily Star." 2024. The Daily Star. September 4, 2024. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/what-purpose-does-the-indian-media-propaganda-about-bangladesh-serve-3693491>.

How to Combat the Risks?

Tackling hostile social manipulation requires innovative strategies that combine technology, community involvement, and public awareness. One effective measure is the development of a trusted digital verification system. Using blockchain technology, news articles, videos, and social media posts can be tagged with a "truth seal" once verified, allowing users to quickly identify credible content.¹¹ This collaboration between governments and tech companies can reduce the spread of disinformation while holding publishers accountable. Social media platforms could also use this system to flag unverified content, ensuring transparency and trust in the digital space.

Besides, community-driven moderation and digital literacy campaigns can empower individuals to act as watchdogs against misinformation. By training volunteers from diverse backgrounds to review flagged content, communities can take an active role in combating disinformation. Simultaneously, grassroots programs focused on teaching critical thinking, recognizing fake news, and identifying deepfakes can strengthen societal resilience. And also, deploying AI-driven early warning systems to monitor online platforms can provide proactive solutions. These systems could detect bot networks, track unusual online activity, and alert authorities about emerging manipulation campaigns. By combining technological tools with community efforts, societies can create a robust defense against the threats of hostile social manipulation.

Upholding Unity: A Call to Action for Bangladesh

We, the people of Bangladesh, have endured tremendous hardship since July 2024, but together, we emerged victorious. Our unity and resilience enabled us to overcome a dictator's oppressive rule and reclaim our future. This remarkable achievement reminds us of the strength we possess when we stand as one. However, challenges remain, and those who wish to see us divided will continue their attempts, particularly by exploiting religious differences, which they see as an easy target. We must remember the inspiring acts of solidarity we witnessed during the critical days of August 2024. When our Hindu temples were at risk, it was Muslim communities that stood vigil to protect them. Likewise, Hindus, Christians, and others came together to safeguard mosques.

¹¹ "US8862505B2 - Method of and System for Fact Checking Recorded Information - Google Patents." 2013. Google.com. July 19, 2013. <https://patents.google.com/patent/US8862505B2/en>.

These acts of courage and mutual support highlighted that we are not defined by our differences but by the shared values that bind us.



Source: Facebook

Now, as some extremist groups (no matter to which religion they belong) spread false narratives to stir divisions, we must remain vigilant. We cannot allow ourselves to be trapped by hatred or manipulation. Our unity is our strength, and it has carried us through some of the darkest moments in our history. Let us continue to protect and support one another, knowing that our collective resilience will ensure peace, progress, and a brighter future for Bangladesh.

Conclusion

In a world increasingly shaped by disinformation and manipulation, our collective awareness and resilience are our most powerful defenses. Hostile forces may try to exploit our differences, distort our truths, and create divisions among us, but we must remain steadfast in our commitment to unity and understanding. Bangladesh's recent history has shown that when we stand together—across religions, communities, and perspectives—we can overcome even the most oppressive challenges.

As we witness the complexities of a changing information environment, let us prioritize truth, critical thinking, and solidarity. The challenges we face are significant, but so are our capabilities when we work as one. By rejecting hatred and manipulation, and by fostering empathy and vigilance, we can build a society where the forces of division have no place. Our future depends on the strength of our unity and the wisdom of our actions today. Let us move forward together, unwavering in our resolve to protect and advance our shared destiny.