

The weaponization of social media: unconventional but more deadly

Tasnuva Alam Ahona¹

Introduction

The traditional concept of warfare and weapons is coming to extinction in the near future. More new and unconventional ways are approaching and filling their place, one of which would be social media. Previously created and used for communicating with the near and dear ones, these social media platforms are becoming the prime tool for greyzone warfare. Social media platforms have this amazing capability of controlling people's thoughts and desires and even what they might do to some extent, imagine this power being used by a government to have control over its citizens, an extremist group to create radicalistic mindset among the mass, a singular group to manipulate people into disastrous actions or intentional actions. The amount of polarization and massacre it is going to create among society is beyond anyone's assumption. So, how a communication platform is on its way to becoming a deadly weapon? Here we have tried to put some light on that.

Social media turning into a weapon from a harmless communication tool

I. Infiltration to our personal data

Social media should no longer be considered only as a medium of communication or socializing, it has moved to a far greater dimension from that. It has now become a tool for infiltration into our personal space. We can now be easily monitored and our every movement can be tracked and recorded. Google map can track not just the places we visited but also which exact roads we took, even if the device remains on flight mode.² Facebook or other social media platforms reserve the basic information of our age, gender, residence, things we like, things we hate, their AI technology monitors what kind of posts hold our attention the longest, what kind of contents makes us

¹ Tasnuva Alam Ahona is a 3rd year student pursuing her bachelors in Journalism at Jahangirnagar University. She is currently working as a research intern at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies.

² Chopvitayakun, S. (2019). Mobile Application Implementing Location Based Services Framework with Google Cloud Platform Integration: SSRU Development Case. *International Journal of Future Computer and Communication*, 8(4), 119–122. <https://doi.org/10.18178/ijfcc.2019.8.4.552>

interested and spend more time on the app.³ These kinds of information are getting archived by Facebook and other social media platforms every day from their millions of users. One might ask what do they do with this information, well one thing for sure, they use them against us. They sell this information to business companies for more accurate and targeted ads, harmless by the look of it, but everyone might not have the same intention. If someone has control over my personal data, they can certainly use them for plenty of reasons. But, having someone's personal data can be a crime at most, how does this make social media an unconventional weapon? The later part of the essay should connect the dots to that.

II. Manipulating our actions

Human beings tend to get manipulated easily by what they see in general. What best option is there other than fake news to lure us to the trap? Facebook and other social media platforms have become a hub for fake news and disinformation. Not only that but there is also this phenomenon of targeted information feeding. In Bangladesh we see less educated users getting more radicalistic posts and fake news are more prevalent in their feed than someone who possesses a rational way of thinking. If the AI technology can put together that some of us be more prone towards conspiracy theories or fake news, and that group of people get fed by the news and other contents that are carved and customized for them, that information will have a huge effect on them and gradually will succeed in manipulating them towards their desired path.

III. Igniting radicalization

When people keep seeing things that somewhat resonate with their situation, it creates a sense of personal connection to the incident. As during the US election, the people were getting targeted news that showed the immigrants are hogging the jobs of Americans, people started to grow a negative attitude towards that specific group of people. When people reach the highest point of their restraints, they see the man (Donald Trump) who has an agenda that can solve their problem by keeping the immigrants away, they start chanting for him. Similarly, we see the rise of Islamophobic attitude in the west, which mostly comes from the social media content that creates and establish this stereotype strongly in people's minds.

³ Singer, P. W., & Brooking, E. T. (2019). *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Reprint ed.). Mariner Books.

Case Study: Cambridge Analytica

One of the biggest examples of weaponizing the social media of the decade would be the 2016 US President Election. We saw the biggest ever use of technology for political advantage. A UK based organization named 'Cambridge Analytica' bought information on millions of US citizens, potential voters to be exact, from Facebook in disguise of ad agencies.⁴ They only collected trivial and seemingly



harmless information but what they were able to do with that was beyond anyone's expectation. They were successful enough to get Trump to be the President of the United States.⁵ So how did they manipulate the result with that information? They created a database with the information they collected, to identify the vulnerable audience who were comparatively more susceptible towards fake and provocative information or propaganda or conspiracy theories.⁶ Then those users were being fed specific information and to some extent twisted or misinformation. That constant and intentional feeding of information clouded their judgment and somewhat influenced them to think in a specific direction which led them to finally start rooting for Trump.⁷

Case Study: Taliban Sympathy in Bangladesh

Although nothing as severe as the US election happened in Bangladesh, there is still a possibility for us to go in that direction. Recently after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, we saw a huge number of sympathizers among our key demographic posting radicalistic content that was flooding all over social media. These kinds of behaviours were kind of spiraling into producing more sympathizers. Also, the softer tone with the criticism from the progressive panel of the country coupled with the subtle tone of the leading media houses, made things easier for the sympathisers to be more vocal.

⁴ J. Isaak and M. J. Hanna, "User Data Privacy: Facebook, Cambridge Analytica, and Privacy Protection," in *Computer*, vol. 51, no. 8, pp. 56-59, August 2018, doi: 10.1109/MC.2018.3191268.

⁵ Inkster, N. (2016). Information Warfare and the US Presidential Election. *Survival*, 58(5), 23–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2016.1231527>

⁶ Berghel, H. (2018). Malice Domestic: The Cambridge Analytica Dystopia. *Computer*, 51(5), 84–89. <https://doi.org/10.1109/mc.2018.2381135>

⁷ Berghel, H. (2018b). Malice Domestic: The Cambridge Analytica Dystopia. *Computer*, 51(5), 84–89. <https://doi.org/10.1109/mc.2018.2381135>

The thing is, people who promote these radical sentiments are far more equipped and handier with the use of social media than we are. They know how to use this against us to shape our way of thinking. When we get tons of posts on Muslims being harassed or tortured in the other parts of the world, or when we see Taliban are being portrayed as heroes and freedom fighters, when we see the US army taking advantage of their stay in Afghanistan, these things make huge marks on our rational way of thinking. Somewhere down the line, people start thinking like the posts primarily intended to do so. This is a way of manipulating someone's behaviour using social media.

Case Study: rapidly increasing anti-Hindu sentiment

Very recently there has been a series of attacks on the Hindu community during Durga puja, which was mostly initiated by the anti-Hindu sentiment primarily erupted in the social media sphere. The attacks on the temples and destruction of properties infected 28 districts and there were hundreds of casualties from these incidents.⁸ These kinds of attacks taking place with this much intensity and the kind of spontaneity they had, were only capable by the power of social media. It takes just



a few intentional posts about the minority religion getting more importance and grabbing all the higher positions in the government, India's part in all these to set the crease.⁹ This kind of content was already visible on different social media platforms, which created the base for the majority of people to harbour a sentiment against the Hindu community. The latter part was not that hard, that only takes one or two strongly provocative content to start the fire. The anti-Hindu sentiment is growing rapidly among the public and it all links to the impact of social media whereas the first strike was initiated from a Facebook post.

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58999047>

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/indias-role-in-communal-violence-in-bangladesh/>

Conclusion

We still don't know if there is something big and organized like the US election incident going on under the radar in Bangladesh, but if there is, the price will be rather heavy to pay. To avoid being a victim of this social media weapon, we have to increase our social media literacy. As there is high authority involvement, it won't be enough at all. Being a country like Bangladesh, where we have a large number of uneducated and lesser-educated people exposed to social media, and we have so much at stake that can go wrong, our position is way too vulnerable. We don't even have that kind of technological backup to identify most of these operations if anything is happening. We as a nation are in a dire state where we have a lot to lose against this newly found deadly lessen-educated weapon.