Fake News and Cyber Propaganda: A Study of Manipulation and Abuses on Social Media

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Fake News and Cyber Propaganda: A study of manipulation and abuses on Social Media

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(Abstract)

Although, the term 'Fake news' is around for some time, but it caught global attention when many analysts regarded the sensational victory of Donald Trump in the US Presidential 2016 election as an effect of a large number of Pro-Trump Fake News going viral over a number of social media and fake news websites. According to a study of Stanford University, the fake news websites and social media received 159 million visits during the month of US election 2016.

Initially, when the term 'Fake news' came into limelight, people usually perceived it as social media posts with rather incredible story. In fact, fake news on social media is not just a post that been liked, shared or followed, rather it is a powerful technique of multiplying cyber propaganda with its dominant effect on a large area of social media base users.

The term 'Fake news' is just be of recent origin, but, the medium used, *i.e.* social media, is the only new medium to spread it. The practice of spreading propaganda has been around for several centuries. However, social media as the offshoot of internet is the newest means of communication to be abused to spread lies and misinformation in different fronts such as military, political, business, cultural, education, religious faith, etc. In reality, creating and circulating 'fake news' on social media is growing as formidable industry, leaving shocking effects on a large number of public in different parts of the world.

At present, the impact of fake news in not just confined to the western world, it took hold of the third world countries including India with its fair share of news circulation over social media platforms. A section of media and cyber experts believe that the changing mediascape of the new millennium led readers to believe, comment, share and follow those information that fit their ideologies and perceptions. This research paper focuses on the case study of the intensive and far reaching effect of 'fake news' as a tool of cyber propaganda.

Introduction

The term 'Fake news', announced Collins' word of the Year 2017, has been defined as "false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting". Being introduced in the 2017 edition of Collins Dictionary, the uses of the term 'fake news' rose to an unprecedented growth during US Presidential election 2016.

Michael Radutzky, a producer of CBS 60 Minutes, considers fake news to be "stories that are provably false, have enormous traction (popular appeal) in the culture, and are consumed by millions of people". (CBS News, 2017)

The headlines such as 'Pope backs Trump', 'Hillary sold weapons to ISIS' and 'FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead' going viral on Facebook and gaining thousands of shares, likes and followers, played the most important role than offline election campaigns of the US presidential election of 2016. The significance of fake news on social media can be understood from a study of Stanford University. According to the study, the fake news websites received 159 million visits during the month of US Presidential election 2016 and majority of the fake news were found to be pro-Trump. In fact, a number of studies and opinion of experts suggest that online propaganda in the form of fake news attributed in the sensational victory of Trump. Moreover, social media played a crucial role in going viral of a large number of fake news in the US election.

Fake news has existed for a very long time, nearly the same amount of time as news began to circulate widely after the printing press was invented in 1439. (Jacob, 2016). Even though, the term 'Fake news' has been in practice, but the last year's US election provided breeding ground for exponential growth for 'Fake news'. Some experts have the opinion that Donald Trump's anti-establishment rhetoric and distrust of the mainstream media added fuel to growth of sensational news or misinformation on social media. Others believe the changing mediascape of the new millennium led readers to believe, comment, share and follow those information that fit their ideologies and perceptions.

At present, the impact of fake news in not just confined to the western world, it took hold of the third world countries including India with its fair share of false news circulation or misinformation over several social media platforms and fake websites.

Of late, when the term 'fake news' came into public notice, they were simply perceived as social media posts with rather incredible stories. However, it is more than what simply imagined. Fake news on social media indeed is not just a post that been liked, shared or followed, rather it is a powerful technique for spreading cyber propaganda with its dominant and far reaching effect. Lately, it has been emerging as one of the greatest threats for democracy, free debate and discussion.

The word 'fake news' may not be of recent origin, but the medium used *i.e.* Social Media, for spreading it is the only new thing about it. The practice of spreading propaganda has been around for several centuries. Social media as the offshoot of internet is the newest means of communication to be abused to spread lies and misinformation in different fronts such as military, political, business, cultural, education, etc. The unprecedented growth and development of 21st century mediascape has been perceived as the key reason for the scale and power of propaganda to grow in an easy and smart way.

In the recent times, creating and planting 'fake news' for circulation on social media is turning out to an industry, leaving shocking effects on a large public. The unprecedented growth of subscribers of mobile telephony with high speed internet network making easy access to social media sites have made the fake news to flourish in large scale. With the growth of smartphone users and people spending considerable amount of time on social media to get the latest updates on news and information, the possibility of users getting exposed to fake news and producing any serious damage cannot be undermined. This research paper will focus on the study of the effect of 'fake news' spreading across social media as means of cyber propaganda.

In the present world of political, social and economic environment, information plays a crucial role than ever. With the growing importance for information-rich society paired with high speed flow of data dispersed via internet have made many to use information and technology for wrong purposes, propagating false information and manipulating the general public to accept their views and act upon accordingly to message. The following objectives have been set to understand the effect of fake news while manipulating and abusing the benefits of social media sites. To

- understand the meaning and concept of fake news
- comprehend the basic ingredients for the flow of fake news
- determine the intentions behind propagating fake news

- study the effect of fake news as means of spreading propaganda
- assess the countermeasures taken to prevent flow of fake news.

Ingredients for the flow of Fake News

The growth and development of internet, especially after Web 2.0 technology, and social media as the offspring of 21st century mediascape came under serious abuses of hoaxes and falsehoods. Lately, the medium has flourished with the campaigns of organised and misinformation, often maligning business entities, government policies, individuals, political parties, etc. It has emerged as a medium for abusing the democratic right of free speech, discussion and debate. Many cyber troop teams run fake accounts to mask their identity and interests. This phenomenon has sometimes been referred to as "astroturfing", whereby the identity of a sponsor or organization is made to appear as grassroots activism. (Howard, 2003)

Similarly to the 'fire triangle' or 'combustion triangle' or 'fire diamond', which indicates the need of the conducive environment of heat, fuel and oxygen to burn, fake news require three important ingredients to flourish. Without the presence of three ingredients, *i.e.* the tools and services for manipulation, relevant social media network and motivation for action, a fake news is not likely to get spread and reach its target audience.

The first ingredient, tools and services for manipulating and spreading fake news across relevant social media, are easily available either free or paid on various online social media platforms. Of the wide variety of tools and services available, some of them such as paid likes, followers, etc. are relatively simple, whereas some are more unusual, some services provide the facility of conducting online polls and some even force site owners to take down stories. The most important fact is that the tools and services for flow of fake news as cyber propaganda on social media are readily available.

Whether free or paid, for the tools and services to be of any use, the social media platforms need to exist and be active to spread propaganda. With people spending considerable time on such websites to get updated with the world of latest news and information, the fake news gets considerable importance from the users. Nevertheless, there is a difference between merely posting fake news and actually people reacting to such propaganda. In order to maximize

reactions of the people, an array of smart techniques is put into practice to attract users to look into their stories by the spammers.

The third ingredient, the motivation for spreading fake news based propaganda campaign, always comes with the question-'why'. Sometimes, it's simply for monetary gain via advertising and in some other cases the gain varies from criminal to political. Irrespective of the motive, the ultimate success of any fake news depends on the affect it produced in real world.

Methodology for the Study

To understand and evaluate the effect, three different contemporary cases of fake news made viral via social media have been chosen. The study of the cases will mainly concentrate on the affects of these campaigns produced. The following points have been indentified to study each case closely.

1. tools and services used to spread fake news,
2. motivation for social media users and
3. purpose behind the creator to spread the message.

In general, it is observed that the tools employed for each propaganda campaign are similar, paid followers/fans, tempted social media users to like, repost, comment and watch and share videos. Only difference may the quality of the content, some with low or moderate or high quality versions of these products.

Cases for study

For the current study three cases- Twitter account hacking of Associated Press, Fake news of Syrian President Assad's death and Kiran Bedi's tweet with fake video, have been chosen to understand the nature of fake news and their affect from three different perspectives.

(a) Twitter account hack of AP

On 23rd April, 2013, Tuesday, at 1:07 p.m., a Twitter post on the official account of the Associated Press (AP) with more than 2 million followers, one of the most influential American news agencies, reporting two explosions at the White House allegedly causing President Barack Obama
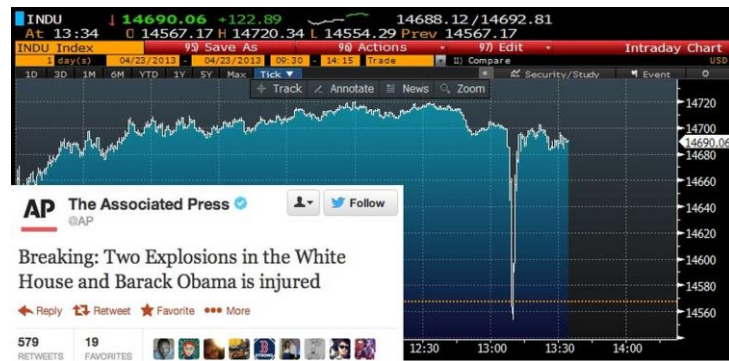

Fig: 2
The fake tweet on AP hacked account, causing the Dow Jones to fall on April 23rd, 2013, erasing $136 billion dollars in 3 minutes in equity market value.

injured, shook up the world. Within a few minutes, the original tweet "Breaking: Two Explosions in the White House and Barack Obama is injured" generated several thousands of retweets with numerous uncontrolled variants and reaching millions across the world. When the other agencies verified this news, it was found that the news of attack was fake and AP twitter account had been hacked. The diffusion of the fake news of a terror attack panicked the Americans and people across the globe. Just after 1 minute, at 1:08 pm, the Dow Jones had a short-lived nosedive. The market dropped close to 150 points, from 14697.15 to 14548.58, before it stabilized at 1:10 p.m., when news of AP account hacked began to spread. As a direct outcome, the Dow Jones plunging 147 points within 3 minutes, one of the notable drops in points of its history. Just after the confirmation of twitter hack of AP, the stock market recovered. However, by that time, the panic of the terrorist attack wiped away $136 billion dollars in the equity market value.

Nearly an hour later, a group of hackers indentifying themselves as Syrian Electronic Army, took the responsibility for the cyber attack in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This incident, diffusing fake news across over cyber space, creating panic and huge financial loss in the real world, made the world to ponder upon the enormous damaged caused by cyber propaganda. It raised concern world over on the possible new forms of cyber attack with fake news, leveraging social media to generate mass hysteria and huge financial loss. The twitter account hack of Associated Press left the world with eyes wide open, concerning the possible risks of security of social media resulting from identity theft. The event introduced the world to the potentially dangerous power and abuse of social media for damaging the real world, especially on the financial institutions and markets.

(b) Fake news of Syrian president Assad's death

On 6th August, 2012, at Monday, at 9:59 a.m. European Standard Time (EST), a Twitter message claiming to represent Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev caused in the rise in price hike by $1for crude-oil per barrel.

In the first tweet from @MiniInterRussia, later deleted, shocked the world stating "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had been killed or injured" A few minute later, two tweets followed claimed that his death had been confirmed.

The Russian Interior Minister responded to the fake news of Assad's death and denied tweeting any message in this context. "This account is an hoax created by Italian journalist Tomasso De Benedetti"- V. Kolokoltsev (@MiniInterRussia, August 6, 2012

As consequence of the fake news of Assad's death, the market panicked in just 16 minutes after the first tweet. Dragging the market with the fake news, the price of crude oil started to increase, topping out at $91.99 a barrel by 10:45 a.m. Finally, the oil prices closed at $92.20 on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

Fig: 3

A series of fake news on a fake Twitter account from @MiniInterRussia

Fig: 4

The price crude oil soaring high with the breaking of the fake news on Assad's death

Fig: 5

Denial of Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev on Assad's death

Later, when the archive of @MiniInterRussia account, which was never the official account of Kolokoltsev, was examined, it was found that it regularly attempted to spread death rumors.

The rumours of the death notable people the account claimed included Nelson Mandela, Francis Ford Coppola and novelist Gabriel Garcia Márquez.

It was not the first time that fake news of death rumours of international leaders went viral. The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un was picked by Twitter after it was initially posted to Chinese microblogging service Weibo. Even the death of Fidel Castro, which was slammed by Cuba, was tweeted when he was ill.

(c) Kiran Bedi's tweet with fake video

On 20th October, Friday, at 9:49 a.m, IST, a tweet posted by retired Indian Police Service Office, social activist, politician and the current Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry, Kiran Bedi with a video of a woman dancing to a famous Navratri song, mistaking her for PM Narendra Modi's 97-year-old mother, Hiraben, got her into serious embarrassment.

Fig: 6
Kirna Bedi's tweet with a fake video of PM Modi's 97-year-old 'mother'

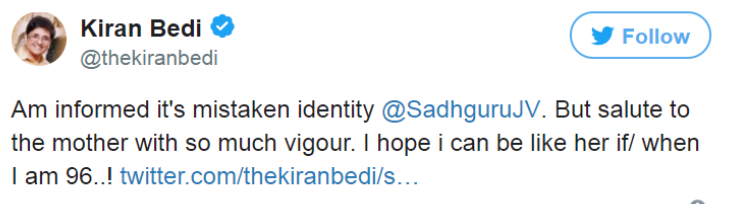In her tweet, she wrote "Spirit of Deepavali at tender age of 97. She's mother of @narendramodi (Hiraben Modi-1920) celebrating Diwali at her own home????@SadhguruJV,". The tweet accompanying 50-second video shows an old lady,

Fig: 7
Kirna Bedi's apology on the fake video of PM Modi's 97-year-old 'mother'

draped in a white saree, dancing to the popular song 'Indhana Vinvaa Gayi Thi More Saiyan'. Mrs. Bedi tagged spiritual guru Sadhguru and PM Modi in her tweet, but neither of them has responded to the tweet. However, Bedi's tweet was shared 3.5K times and has been liked by 9.9K people before she could realise that it was

Fig: 8
Tweet criticizing for Kirna Bedi's blunder

a video uploaded on YouTube on October 3 with the title 'Old woman doing garba dance'. At 1:38 p.m. IST, Mrs. Bedi issued an apology after the mistake and saluted the old woman and hoped to be as active at her age. Despite her apology, she was criticized for her tweet

accompanying the video of mistaken identity. It was a huge embarrassment for someone who enjoyed high respect for her responsible work.

Analysis and interpretation

The study of three cases- Twitter account hack of Associated Press, Fake news of Syrian President Assad's death and Kiran Bedi's tweet with fake video made to understand the seriousness of the far reaching effect that fake news can produce.

Twitter account hacking of Associated Press and followed by spreading of the fake news of "two explosions at the White House allegedly causing President Barack Obama injured" have made a huge loss of $136 billion dollars in the equity market of Dow Jones. It directly means the loss of wealth for the investors, which may be financial institutions, individuals and government. The economy of America and the interconnected world also faced the blunt of the fake news that created the panic in the market. It made investors to feel insecure of their money in the market, thereby creating panic withdrawal of their share of investment. In order to carry out the crisis management, the American government had to work hard to devise mechanism and spend sizeable amount of public money to restore the faith of the investors on the financial markets for any such occurrences in near future. This incident of high profile twitter account hack of AP and several others in the subsequent years have doubted the security concerns of the social media networking sites.

The diffusion of the false news of Syrian President Assad's death by a fake twitter account, created in the name of Russian high profile Interior Minister V. Kolokoltsev, made the world standstill for a while. Although, the Russian minister denied releasing any such news and the subsequent investigation found the account to be fake, but the panic created in the market led the price hike of crude oil nearly by $1 per barrel.

Today, the economy of the world revolves around petroleum, the black gold. The rise in the price of crude oil per barrel can affect badly the world market, especially the economy of the developing countries. It may cause rise in inflation, diminishing of foreign reserve, slowdown in the growth of industrial and service sectors, abrupt fall of equity market, sudden changes in demand and supply chain and several others key aspects of the economy of small and big countries. Therefore, the circulation of fake news over social media can have far reaching affect in the socio-economic and political scenario of a country.

Although, the third case- Kiran Bedi's tweet with a fake video, did not seem to have any direct financial implication, but it was massive loss of face for retired IPS officer, social activists, politician and current Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry. She may have apologized for her mistake, but the array of tweets criticizing her irresponsible act embarrassed Mrs. Bedi in her public life. This case of attachment of wrong video is an example of carelessness on the part of the account holder, which was not really expected from a coveted former Indian Police Service officer, who was known for her responsible and efficient work.

Mrs. Bedi's case of unintentional attachment of a fake video has been taken for study from another perspective. If someone deliberately attaches a wrong or a morphed video with his/her tweet with scenes of communal violence, hate speech or any antisocial activities may create tension, arson, civil disobedience, etc. As part of precautionary measures, we have observed that government of India has blocked internet in several places or parts in the county during riots, communal violence, etc. in the recent times from spreading fake videos of violence, communal riots, or any antisocial activities.

There may have several consequences of fake news. These three cases discussed in the paper have given some insight into the darker sides of social media, the act of manipulation and abuses on the medium.

Initiatives for Countermeasures

Looking at the magnitude of damages produced, the governments or authorities in different parts of the globe have already started to fight actively against fake news. In January 2015, the British Army announced that its 77th Brigade would "focus on non-lethal psychological operations using social networks like Facebook and Twitter to fight enemies by gaining control of the narrative in the information age" (Solon, 2015). Several techniques to identify and debunk propaganda message have been worked out. The public awareness to identify and discourage such fake messages has been promoted by several government agencies. The consideration for imposing ban and regulate web sites that do publish misinformation are in process. The main target of these new regulations would be to control the flow of propaganda via social networking services. Already, the initiatives like the suspension of bot, suspicious accounts, addition of features to identify and report fake news and hiring more personnel to help dealing with these reports have been introduced in various levels.

Conclusion

If we look at the statistics only among the social media giants, there are nearly 2bn Facebook and 330m twitter account holders. With such a huge number of Facebook and Twitter account holders spending a considerable amount of time each week, it is definitely possible that a large number of eye balls have come into contact with fake news stories or campaigns with misinformation. Now, let's imagine, if a fake message is reaching over at least 1 billion people a day, the nexus of the distributors of fake news have been earning billions of dollars every year.

Although, the three cases discussed in the paper of spreading fake news over only popular social media site-twitter, but it's not always twitter to blame for spreading such fake news. Social media sites like Facebook, Goggle and numerous others have been the carrier of such propaganda messages. It is simply because of social media sites encourage to share, like, follow, etc. Thereby, allowing what could be an exponential spread of such messages with little efforts from those responsible to propagate such false news.

Even the critics of social media have the opinion that such sites are purposefully developed and designed with ability to go viral something that consists of sensationalism, unverified facts and incidents attempting to draw emotional reactions from receivers. The sites of social media are also accused of creating "filter bubbles", the phenomenon of presenting people with probable options that they often like or tend to agree with and hiding those that they don't.

The current study observed that the majority of fake news are politically motivated since such messages can be easily be used to manipulate businesses. In addition, the flow of fake news can adversely contribute to malign the image of a company or benefit a company financially in the stock market or where public opinion plays a crucial role.

The recent investigation on popping up of numerous fake news during US Presidential election 2016, which has been looked as the key reason behind swinging of votes till the last hour of the election, it was revealed by *The Guardian* and on *BuzzFeed* that a Macedonian small town of Vales with 55,000 population was the registered home of at least 100 pro-Trump websites. The investigation also suggests that many of them floated sensational and fake news to influence the US citizens during election.

The Asian nation China is not far away from growing as market of distributing fake news. One content service agency, Xiezuobang is known for providing services as per demand to publish fake news, fake advertisement and fake article. It's just one example, the high dividend that

floating of fake news pays has been encouraging many content developers, websites owners and programmers across the world to abuse the internet technology, especially social media networks for mischievous interest.

In addition to it, many social media sites of Chinese origin have been floating with posts shared by influential users, who are paid to promote such fake news. In fact, the remuneration demanded by the user is based on his/her popularity. Furthermore, the technology has enabled public opinions to be measured, modified and automatically posted to a large network number of websites with at a high rate of posts per minute.

Sometimes there is more than one agency or team working on propaganda campaigns, such as in China, where propaganda offices exist at the local levels of government. Here, each of these offices focuses on local issues, but also coordinates broader messages across the country depending on the domestic political issues being discussed at the time (Weiwei, 2012)

In fact, the illegitimate practice promoting fake news does not only prevail in China or Macedonian, the investigations suggest the presence of the foot prints of such activities of propagating fake news are found in US, Russia, Middle East and many developing countries of Asia.

The speed and pace of the hoaxes, gossip and lies spreading is an area of growing concern for business houses, stock market and trade circle. All of them need to be hyper-vigilant and be ready for the risks inherent in the changing mediascape and how to handle any imminent cyber propaganda. In the users' front, they need to be more watchful what media they consume, trust and share.

Although, the cyber and media experts suggest certain means to identify fake news, but the users often get trapped to misinformation. However, whether fake news is politically motivated or inclined to manipulate business and the market, but one thing is for sure that the intentions of fake news is not good, rather inclined to benefit those that propagate it. Nevertheless, it will be interesting in the upcoming days to watch how social media will be the new battleground to stop spreading fake news and be ensured to remain well informed with latest updates.

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