**Information integrity**

BY US A M A K H I L J l 2020-12-28

A DETAILED investigation published this month by a European NGO revealed a disinformation network active for over 15 years primarily targeted at the European Union and United Nations in pushing Indian interests, and undermining the reputation and stance of Pakistan and China in key European capitals.

Whereas disinformation and propaganda campaigns are nothing new in the international relations arena, it is highly concerning how sophisticated strategies are being employed by Indian groups using a mix of traditional platforms such as the UN system and defunct NGOs, in combination with new technology where f ake media outlets are created in 119 countries and promoted on social media.

This should invite international outrage, as well as official investigation by European institutions that have been misled, the members of European parliaments who have been instigated to speak on issues with malicious intent and taken on trips within India, as well as the media outlets that have been misled by news agencies that have peddled disinformation to mainstream Indian media. The UN should investigate how defunct organisations registered with the UN were reactivated by those whom the organisations did not belong to, as well as who was responsible for resurrecting identities of a dead professor to claim legitimacy.

This report has been rightly welcomed by the Pakistan government that has cited it to prove the disinformation campaigns that India has been running internationally against Pakistan. It is important to note that these campaigns were primarily targeted at European institutions and the UN, rather than at Pakistan domestically.

It also helps that Pakistan was successful in getting re-electe d to the United Nations Human Rights Council, and has successfully sponsored a resolution at the United Nations General Assembly calling for the right to self-determination to be upheld, in a diplomatic win for its stance on India-held Kashmir in the conflict with India. However, it is also important to cautiously look at the consequences the report on disinformation campaigns by India can have on Pakistan on the domestic front.

First, the mention of the disinformation campaign co-opting minority rights issues in Pakistan must not mean that minority groups and rights movements in Pakistan are penalised or further scrutinised, especially when, through no fault oftheir own, their differences with the state are exploited abroad.

Second, our state and government should learn from this exposé that it is never a good idea to employ malicious campaigns online or otherwise because they end up being exposed, as the sophisticated campaign by India-based groups is now a cause of global embarrassment for them. It is important to remember that recently a disinformation campaign unearthed by the Stanford Internet Observatory involved `coordinated inauthentic behaviour` by some Pakistan-based groups on Facebook, and the associated accounts and groups were taken down. A similar network originating in India was also taken down last year.

Third, we must not use these disinformation campaigns to clamp down on dissent at home, atrend that has already been observed, especially with allegations of `foreign agenda`levelled against anyone who dares to justifiably criticise some policies of the state. This is especially true in the case of the narrative around the recently proposed draconian rules for content moderation on the internet titled `Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content, 2020`, which give the PTA sweeping powers to censor online content, apart from requiring social media companies to provide access to the FIA to decrypted data. We must not clamp down on basics rights of speech, information, privacy, and due process under the garb of self-defence when the two are not mutually exclusive.

The government has also made other sweeping claims in media reports that quote unnamed senior government officials and ministers saying that the rules as passed by the cabinet do not undermine rights or threaten the digital economy in Pakistan.

This is far f rom the truth. Threatening the blocking of social media platforms as well as service providers something that the rules codify has seri-ous consequences on investor confidence in an economy as has been evident from statements by actors from across industries;including the IT sector, internet service providers, Asia Internet Coalition, the Global Network Initiative, and local independent media groups.

Additionally, a coalition of more than 50 citizen groups including journalist groups, bar associations, human rights groups, and citizen collectives has demanded repeal of the rules and Section 37 of Peca. These demands and criticism must be taken seriously by the government for a robust digital economy rather than taking an approach that lacks inclusivity and democratic process.

Theintegrityofinformationincludesseveralfactors. First, there should be openness where opposing viewpoints can be expressed without the fear of an impending court case or a very real threat of enforced disappearance. Such threats undermine the openness of a democracy apart from violating key fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution such as the right to life, due process, fair trial, freedom of speech, and the associated right of access to information.

Second, integrity of information is also compromised by disinformation campaigns with malicious intentions that target dissidents, critics, opposition parties, as well as people who speak up about their traumatic experiences of harassment. This applies to domestic as well as international actors that adopt such strategies as policy.

Third, the integrity of information is maintained by virtue of a consultative process, which includes not only open deliberations on policy issues, but also response to what one considers criticism or opposing views, including the populist allegations of `fake news` that is intended to undermine not only formal media but also delegitimise investigate journalists and commentators. This not only has a chilling ef fect, but also leads to extreme scepticism rather than a reliable information-sharing process at a national and international level.

It is clear that policies that address the root causes of discontent and ensure integrity of information, rather than censoring and clamping down on criticism temporarily are, in Pakistan`s best interest.  The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

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