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FAKE NEWS & SOCIAL MEDIA NEXUS: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR NATIONAL SECURITY

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The relationship between fake news and social media is emerging as one of the fresh challenges for national security. Easy access to digital tools, mushrooming of social media platforms, easy availability of smartphones with affordable Internet access have bolstered the nexus of fake news with social media. While fake news is content in the form of news items/ videos/photos (morphed photos), generated in the guise of real news with a malafide intent to mislead the reader - social media platforms, which are predominantly user-generated content on various digital communications channels, act as a powerful and swift vehicle to circulate the fake news.

The users of social media are frequently exposed to a plethora of fake news items, which they often believe as real news and share it on their social media platforms. Unlike traditional media like print media, which have gatekeeping of content, social media platforms enjoy a considerable amount of freedom in terms of filtration of the content. With less checking points, the menace of fake news gets circulated by unaware readers to their social media groups, which in turn gets viral in the digital sphere of social media, thus, creating a vicious circle of promoting false information, manipulative information and hoodwinking the consumers of that information.

As per media experts, the US Presidential Elections of 2016 is one of the perfect examples of the negative effects of this lethal relationship between fake news and social media. The event reveals how deeply this nexus manipulated the voting behaviour of the social media users exposed to fake news. As per many commentators, one of the key reasons behind Trump's win was due to the influence of fake news.[1] The impact of the event was so powerful that terminologies like "fake news", "post-truth"

and "alternative facts" will be forever associated with the 2016 Presidential Election.[2]

The plague of fake news and social media nexus has started to impact deeply various facets of human life and day to day functioning of societies, which are gradually embracing digital platforms, and national security is not an exception to it either. The negative impact of this plague can be well understood by the fact that various countries have started acknowledging this nexus as a threat to national security and have initiated measures to tackle this menace.

In January 2018, the UK Government during its review of defence capabilities announced that it would be forming a dedicated national security communications unit to combat the menace of false propaganda and disinformation created by fake news. [3] In February 2018, Dr Salleh Said Keruak, Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Malaysia spoke about the need for a relevant law to deal with the threat of fake news on a country's national security.[4] Subsequently, on May 08, 2018, Mrs Josephine Teo, Second Minister for Home Affairs of Singapore accentuated the impact of fake news and reinforced the view that 'fake news can turn into a national security threat.'[5] The weapon of fake news has regularly been employed by adversaries - state as well as non-state actors - to create misinformation, fictitious narratives, disinformation, misunderstanding, inciting fear, false alarms, infuse mutual distrust, which can further have

'destabilizing implications for national security' of a country.[6]

Although fake news is an age-old ploy, however, what emerges as a bigger challenge at present is how to thwart or minimise or control the impact of fake news, with the accelerated velocity of its dispatch in present day digital dynamic world, where within a fraction of a second it spreads like wildfire in indeterminate cyberspace. One possible answer lies in counter fake news strategy. But the possibilities of using this delicate path needs a holistic as well as a practical approach. A few steps in this direction can be, firstly, a legislation without disturbing the fundamentals like freedom of expression. Secondly, news literacy and knowledge about the modus operandi of fake news should be shared and propagated. Thirdly, the need to speed up a counter-narrative to demolish the impact of fake news should be insisted upon. Fourthly, to increase resilience at the societal level by preserving critical systems, reinforcing defence systems against fake news is essential to enhance security at points which hold information of critical importance. Lastly, learning from traditional media can be adopted; news is a matter of critical importance, which requires years of expertise and training, the work of news production to dissemination should be left only to the experts.

To conclude, it is crystal clear that the menace of fake news and its spread on various social media channels is here to stay. The

unpredictable environment of cyberspace, increased mass communication apparatus capabilities and velocity of information has not only ignited a revolution of its own kind but also produced grave challenges to the countries in general and their national security in particular. The danger of fake news is a product of a human mind, not a machine or Internet or software, and the answer lies with the humans themselves.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

[1]Allcott, H., &Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. The Journal of Economic Perspectives,31(2), 211-235. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/44235006

[2] Facts, F. (2018). Topic: Fake News. www.statista.com. Retrieved 12 May 2018, from https://www.statista.com/topics/3251/fake-news/

[3]Walker, P. (2018). New national security unit set up to tackle fake news in UK. the Guardian. Retrieved 12 May 2018, from https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/23/new-national-security-unit-will-tackle-spread-of-fake-news-in-uk

[4]Fake News Can Jeopardise National Security, Religious Affiliations. (2018). Borneo Today. Retrieved 12 May 2018, from https://www.borneotoday.net/fake-news-can-jeopardise-national-security-religious-affiliations/

[5]Fake news can turn into a national security threat: Josephine Teo. (2018). The New Paper. Retrieved 12 May 2018, from https://www.tnp.sg/news/singapore/fake-news-can-turn-national-security-threat-josephine-teo

[6] Lezzi, I., &Lezzi, I. (2018). Fake news and national security: re-build trust and social resilience in the Post-Truth era. MediaLaws - Law and Policy of the Media in a Comparative Perspective - . Retrieved 12 May 2018, from http://www.medialaws.eu/fake-news-and-national-security-re-build-trust-and-social-resilience-in-the-post-truth-era/