**The dangers of fake news**

[Ikram Sehgal](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/ikram-sehgal/" \o "More Articles by Ikram Sehgal)

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One of the oldest and foremost proponents of telling lies and spreading misinformation as a tool of politics (and economics)is the 24 centuries old “Arthashastra”.   A complete course handbook on how to run a state, it also details devious means to accomplish one’s ends.  An extensive manual for conducting subversion, Arthashastra is the earliest known exponent of hybrid warfare, Modi having finessedits teachings for the spreading of lies and subterfuge into a fine art.  Arthashastra author, Kautilya (or Chanakhya as he was also known) suggested that in order to sow discord and dissention as well as misleading the enemy, the use of disinformation, propaganda and lies to reach political ends was a must.

To fight an information warin the new age of electronics, internet and social media have caused an information flood of previously unknown proportions. Every and any information you need is available to anyone with a computer and an internet access.  Depending on the intentions of the feeder the information can be confusing, misleading or straight-forward wrong, true or manipulated?How is the common person expected to judiciously sift through information to judge whether it is right or wrong? This spread of misinformation is called ‘fake news’

The most notorious user of misinformation was Hitler’s propaganda minister Goebbels who devised a full ‘science’ of what are the characteristics of successful propaganda, including its careful timing, its easy comprehension, appeal to emotion and the need of multiple repetitions as to tie it down in the heads of the public.The electronic age has force-multiplied the opportunities for misinformation, by hacking into webpages and inserting them with fake information so as to make them look real. Specially programmed social robots (social bots) could create buzz in the social networks.

Fake news—news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false designed to manipulate people’s perceptions of reality—has been used to influence politics and not only promote commercial advertising but negative marketing, both for products and individuals, it has also become a method to stir up and intensify social conflict. Stories that are untrue or half-truths and that intentionally mislead readers have caused growing mistrust among people. In some cases, this mistrust results in incivility, protest over imaginary events, or violence. This unravels the fabric of social life, turning neighbour against neighbour. People, organizations, and many foreign govts use fake news for different reasons. First, they intensify social conflict to undermine people’s faith in the democratic process and people’s ability to work together. Second, they distract people from important issues so that these issues remain unresolved. And furthermore, the disinformation is used by opposition to defame govts and get political milage.

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Social media have brought the opportunities of manipulating information to a new level.With data acquired for 87 million Facebook users specifically about a person’s likes, without the users’ knowledge or consent, Cambridge Analyticwere able to predict people’s politicalpreferences and issue interests. Donald Trump’s chief strategist, Steve Bannon, coordinated this information to target political advertisements and memes on Facebook, focussing mainly on discrediting Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and influencing Americans on a number of pro-Trump issues. Often inflammatory, sensationalistic, sometimes violent, and false messages.  This strategy is part of the political tool kit of govts and politicians,undermining the trust of the citizens in the govt and its institutions and in democracy as such. Consider the scurrilous social media campaign resulting in the Capital riots on Jan 6 in Wash DC?  And then Twitter blocking President Trump’s account?

Fake news in international politics have become part of a new cold war and are used to demonize and badmouth other countries. Look at the smear campaigns launched by the West against China, Russia, Iran, and vice versa. Lies and disinformation have become part of Hybrid warfare, used for many years during the cold war era.  It has never been acknowledged by the users. WaleriVasilyevitchGerasimov, Russia’s Chief of General Staff, came out in the open in an article in 2013 where he declared: “Wars are no longer declared, and once they have begun, they run according to an atypical pattern. Non-military means are more important than ever, in some cases even more important than weapons”.  Wars are not necessarily won by those with more weapons but rather by those who control the information.  Why have the British re-activated World War 2’s 77th Brigade, the Chindits, famous for irregular warfare, this time with electronic warfare specialists as soldiers?

Fictitious messages are dangerous, they exploit the functional logic of social networks.  Users can get upset at any time. Certain hot topics can be effortlessly instrumentalized: the fear of alienation, the abuse of power, questions of war and peace.When it is no longer clear what is false and what is correct, people lose their confidence in the state. Mistrust is the poison that can destroy any society. Using fake news, this poison is injected in small doses. It does not always have to be a lie. More effective is fake news that contains a grain of truth, a half-truth given a twist in another directionie embellishing facts with lies. Somegovts use fake social media posts to keep citizens happy by manipulating statistics for instance and distract them from the real issues. While motivations for using fake news may vary, fake news consistently undermines citizens’ ability to participate in the governance of their country and make important decisions regarding the fate of their nation.

Consider the malicious Indian propaganda on the Arthashastra methodabout China and CPEC, quoting from my article on India’s hybrid warfare: “Options for Pakistan” of July 3, 2018 “An anti-CPEC propaganda containing misconceptions and misleading or deceptive statements: (1) Myth: Chinese military bases on Pakistan’s Coast. Fact: total fabrication, no such bases (2) Myth: Pakistan a Chinese colony. Fact: History confirms colonialism and imperialism are legacies of western countries (3) Myth: Exploitation of resources will execute demographic changes. Fact: CPEC investment guaranteesgrowth of Balochistan(4) Myth: Lack ofsecurity for Chinese because of law, and order situation. Fact: 15,000 personnel in two Special Security Divisions (SSD) for CPEC projects. (5) Myth: Pakistan’s rising trade deficit with China. Fact: China’s competitiveness makes US trade deficit multiples more a whopping $347 billion. (6) Myth: Chinese labor and workers will render Pakistani workers  jobless. Fact: only ten thousand Chinese nationals living in several camps (7) Myth: CPEC a thriving ground for trans-national terrorism. Fact: Bringing prosperity CPEC will reduce space for terrorists and thus exposure to extremist teaching and elements.

According to a Geo TVreport Benazir Shah and Zarghoon Shah filed a report in 2019 about PML (N)’s Strategic Communications Cell, dubbed as “Maryam’s Media Cell”, established in 2013 in the PM’s House with 38 employees, some later put the figure rising to 300. The cost in 2013, a whopping Rs. 40 million per monthdirectly from the PM’s “discretionary grant” was Sharif family-specific controlled by Maryam in a page out of Uncle Modi’s handbook Arthashastra. Maryam unleashed the team to smear rival leaders like Imran (or perceived opposition like the Army).  Quite brilliant in facttill with the offending Memo maligning the Army in line with India propagandaMaryam crossed the fail-safe line!

The most effective way to counter fake news’ is to only trust something once verified.This becomes difficult when Tech Giants have their own agendas. Addressing WEF’s Virtual DAVOS Summit, Russian President warned Tech companies not just being economic giants but de-facto competing with States.  He correctly said it is unclear where the line is between a successful global entity and attempts to, crudely at their own discretion, control society.  Some of the tech giants and telcom companies are the new version of the East India Company.   Putin cited the rally in Wash DC which led to the Capitol riot as being controlled through messages on Facebooks, Twitters, Instagram, etc.  InfactTikTok in Russia has emerged as popular platform for the youth to express their political view.   Social media must be reined in by devising tough laws and implementing them, a tall order given media’s rich and powerful lobby.

New “draconian” rules aimedat giving direct powers to authorities to censor digital content, the “Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2020”, were framed under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA). Maintaining the “draconian” data localisation requirements will damage ability to access the free and open internet. AIC membersIT giants Facebook, Twitter and Google threatened leaving the country and making their services unavailable to Pakistani users and businesses. The hue and cry and extensive lobbying madethe govtdecide to back down and review the proposal.‘Freedom of expression’ is the cover under which anti-Muslim hate speeches poison global societies and disturb peace, promote violence and terrorism. Such an understanding of ‘freedom of expression’ is NOT a human right! Fighting the legacy of terrorism that the Afghanistan war has left behind,Pakistan needs data localization for hate speeches, fake news and outright communication of terrorists, ie if the global community means business in eradicating terrorism and fake news.

What to talk of Imran Khan being  targettedby Maryam’s merry band of liars, whether it is President Biden in the US or President Putin in Russia, they have been subjected to fake, motivated news facilitated by the Tech Giants. A global alliance must press the social media giants to change their rules or be replaced by alternative social media platforms! The recent decision of WhatsApp to change its privacy policy and share personal information of users with Facebook has raised a storm among users, however the users from EU countries are secure from this  because of tough EU legislation EU’shistory of taking action against Facebook is the model to be followed! (the writer is a defence and security analyst).