Bangladesh's Digital Diplomatic Combat in the Age of Fake News, Disinformation and Social Media

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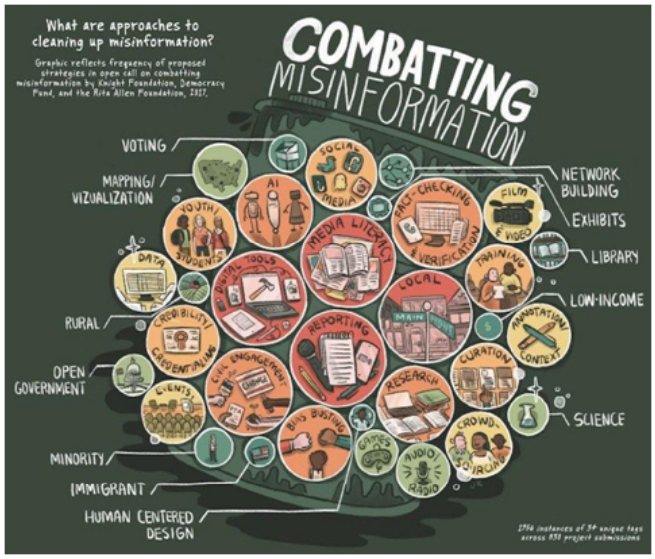


Diplomacy is a fine art, heir to centuries of epochal deal making, system building, peacemaking and conflict avoidance and resolution – it is, in many ways, a profession for the ages. In the minds of men and women at large, however, it is also seen as a profession conducted in rarefied environs, in dizzying ivory-towered heights, away from the hurly-burly of earthling life.

Digital diplomacy has become one of the most important tools of diplomacy for any country that should not be overlooked. With the rapid technological advancement, the media landscape has changed, and there are threats emerge and undermine the trust that the global public has for the institutions of the digital diplomacy.

At the core of diplomacy lies the art of communication – communication with credibility, more precisely. Fluency in communication, eloquence combined with economy in the use of language and possessing the antennae to pick up surround sound, the reverberations from the ground, is what makes good diplomacy tick.

A new diplomatic order

This is the age of the 'naked diplomat', as famously defined by Ambassador Tom Fletcher, lately retired from Her Majesty's British Foreign Service: the naked diplomat with the smartphone, shorn of all the trappings of yesteryear. It is the era of citizen diplomacy, subject to oversight from the population at large that is buoyed by the freedom of the internet and the online, digital world. The demands of openness and transparency in policy deployment and articulation, real-time communication, countering fake news and alternative facts in a post-truth world, clarity and conciseness, are all upon diplomacy.

Diplomacy in an age of social media is beginning to leave its ozone chamber, its protected past, to become interactive, better networked and more people-centred and people-friendly. Many social media platforms boast of followers and subscribers that equal the populations of large-sized countries. As the Australian national security expert Rory Medcalf recently said, "The job descriptions for hacks, spooks, diplomats and wonks are becoming less and less distinct, blurring at the edges into a spectrum of geopolitical knowledge makers and manipulators…when a crisis or event breaks across the 24-hour information cycle, pioneers from each profession find themselves turning to fast-paced, flexible social media – Twitter, blogs, Facebook, YouTube – to help make and project succinct meaning in a world of noise."

Bangladeshi embassies and diplomatic missions across the world are active on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter these days. ICT adviser of Bangladesh, Foreign embassy & ICT minister's Facebook and Twitter timeline is a hub of activity. ICT adviser & minster is the most followed male on Facebook & Twitter. Their presence online is a powerful example of how digital diplomacy connects government with citizens, particularly those in need of consular assistance, often reuniting families and helping individuals in distress. According to Twiplomacy, the most-followed world leaders on Twitter have one thing in common: they have discovered Twitter as a powerful one-way broadcasting tool.

The digital world has no notion of the limits that defined the world of the 1970s and 80s. The underpinnings of how diplomacy was conducted through the centuries are being questioned. New core competencies in dealing with cyber threats and vulnerabilities, the knowledge revolution, the assembling of big data and how to use it, and the coming of artificial intelligence will need to be developed. Nation branding and place branding will be a part of the exercise. This will involve promoting coalitions between governmental departments and outstanding minds in business and industry, scientists and design specialists. And all this combined with authenticity, credibility and trust.

There is also need in this digital universe to size up the competition and opposition that we face. This is not about trolls on Twitter verse but the country's adversaries in the real world, the proxy warriors, the enemies of the people.

Countering propaganda emanating from such groups or stemming the tide of their ideological narrowness and calls to violence will require a carefully-formulated strategy that is constantly being tested for quality and relevance. A journalist recently proclaimed that the next world war would be fought on social media. He did not seem to be joking.

Twenty-first-century diplomacy thus requires an amplification of purpose. All the traditional tasks of diplomacy continue, but we ignore the adoption of all the new information technologies for communication – the social media platforms – at our peril.

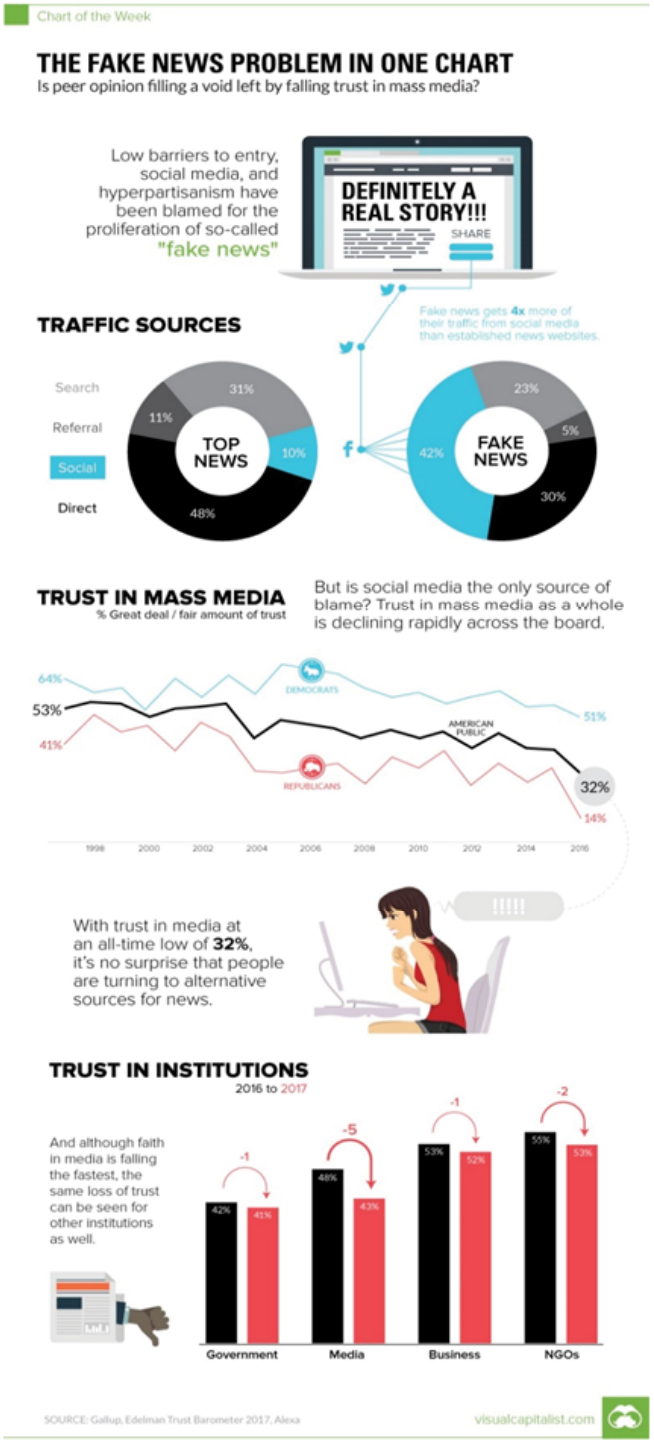
Misinformation:

What is the difference between fake news and disinformation? How does disinformation differ from misinformation? It is a rather rare occasion that reports give a whole chapter dedicated to terminology. Disinformation states that "misinformation is generally understood as the inadvertent sharing of false information that is not intended to cause harm, just as disinformation is widely defined as the purposeful dissemination of false information."

What About the Tech Giants?

social media platforms should be playing a central role to neutralize online disinformation. Despite the fact that tech giants demonstrated their willingness to address disinformation, their incentives are not always prioritized to limit disinformation. Moreover, their incentives are aligned with spreading more of it because of its business model. "Users are more likely to click on or share sensational and inaccurate content; increasing clicks and shares translates into greater advertising revenue. The short-term incentives, therefore, are for the platforms to increase, rather than decrease, the amount of disinformation their users see." three tech companies — Facebook, Twitter and Google.

Despite all the incentives that have been implemented by Facebook in recent years, the social media platform still remains vulnerable for disinformation. The main vulnerability is behind its messaging apps. WhatsApp has



been a great source of disinformation during the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh. The second vulnerability lies in third-party fact-checking services staffed by human operators. Human operators are struggling to handle the volume of the content: "fake news can easily go viral in the time between its creation and when fact-checkers are able to manually dispute the content and adjust its news feed ranking." Twitter became more influential in countering the threat using such technologies like AI. The question of how proactive the company will be countering the threat still remains. Yet, Twitter now uses best practices, according to them With video-sharing platform YouTube and ad platform, YouTube

might be the most vulnerable platform. The website, with its personalized recommendation algorithm (filter bubbles), has faced strong criticism for reinforcing the viewers' belief that the conspiracy is, in fact, real. However, YouTube announced in 2019 that it would adjust its algorithms to reduce recommendations of misleading content. However, it is not just the tech giants who should take responsibility for disinformation. Rumor travels faster than the coronavirus in digital space. False data has flown across social media, and fake remedies have abounded. Conspiracy theories about the covid-19 virus's origins, and about those responsible for its spread, have gained traction as they move across WhatsApp and Facebook.

12 Principles to operate under on how to tackle disinformation:

1. **Verify:** Fact-check information to confirm it is true before accepting and sharing it.
2. **Balance:** Share the whole truth, even if some aspects do not support my opinion.
3. **Cite:** Share my sources so that others can verify my information.
4. **Clarify:** Distinguish between my opinion and the facts.
5. **Acknowledge:** Acknowledge when others share true information, even when we disagree otherwise.
6. **Reevaluate:** Reevaluate if my information is challenged, retract it if I cannot verify it.
7. **Defend:** Defend others when they come under attack for sharing true information, even when we disagree otherwise.
8. **Align:** Align my opinions and my actions with true information.
9. **Fix:** Ask people to retract information that reliable sources have disproved even if they are my allies.
10. **Educate:** Compassionately inform those around me to stop using unreliable sources even if these sources support my opinion.
11. **Defer:** Recognize the opinions of experts as more likely to be accurate when the facts are disputed.
12. **Celebrate:** Celebrate those who retract incorrect statements and update their beliefs toward the truth.

What's Bangladesh government do to fighting against misinformation?

"Extraordinary times absolutely call for extraordinary measures, but those measures should be positive investments in independent and credible information, not steps that will do little or nothing to stop misinformation while doing great collateral damage to fundamental rights," said Rasmus Nielsen, the director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, who has worked extensively on disinformation.

In October 2018, the Bangladeshi government passed a bill that imprisons people for spreading "propaganda" about the 1971 war in which the country won independence from Pakistan. It also bans the posting of "aggressive and frightening" content. The Economist reported that journalists were concerned. In August, a photographer was arrested for "spreading false information" after speaking in support of a student protest. He faces up to seven years in prison for spreading false news against the government under an act that has already been used to detain dozens of social media users over the past year, according to Freedom House. In January, the Dhaka Tribune reported that 22 people had been arrested on cybercrime charges in the past two months. Of those, several were imprisoned for allegedly spreading on social media anti-state rumors and doctored photos of government leaders. As Reuters reported in December, the Bangladesh government itself has been known to spread misinformation online. Facebook and Twitter removed fake accounts and pages linked to the state days ahead of an election. The Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament of Bangladesh) passed the Digital Security Act, 2018 on September 19, 2018. The Parliament passed the bill. The Digital Security

Category	Authentic	Fake
Miscellaneous	2218	654
Entertainment	2636	106
Lifestyle	901	102
National	18708	99
International	6990	91
Politics	2941	90
Sports	6526	54
Crime	1072	42
Education	1115	30
Technology	843	29
Finance	1224	2
Editorial	3504	0

Table 1: Number of news in each category.

Act, 2018 has been ensuring national digital security in Bangladesh along with preventing and prosecuting digital offenses. Also regulating or attempting to pursue efforts to target cybercrime, cybersecurity, or even "fake news,"

Explanatory advice on how government can combat the Problem

1. **Regulation:** The problem of disinformation would be best solved by bringing in new government laws and rules to prevent its production and spread. For example, rules requiring social media companies to remove suspected false posts or laws that only allow official government communications to be published in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.
2. **Technology:** The problem of disinformation would be best solved by investing in better technology to detect fake news and stop its spread. For example, investing in machine learning processes that detect false news posts

and automatically delete them or prevent them from being shared widely. Other examples might include policies designed to slow the spread of all information such as limiting how wide one person can share any one piece of information.

3. **Education:** The problem of disinformation would be best solved by better educating the public and emergency response organizations to identify false news and combat its spread. For example, Emergency Response Organizations could be given training in how to communicate against fake news in a crisis situation. More training could be introduced in schools to allow people to identify credible news sources and to be discerning in their consumption of information.
4. **Fact checking:** The problem of disinformation would be best solved by an increase in fact checking the current system of news distribution. There are several fact checking organizations world over that provide detailed analysis of suspect news stories from a variety of sources and provide advice to readers as to whether to consider them accurate.
5. **Financial Measures:** Much of the fake news that is circulated is produced because it generates heavy virtual footfall on the websites that produce it. This is because false news tends to be shocking driving up clicks and views. This is then translated into revenue for the producers who host advertising on their websites. Often undiscerning advertisers and algorithm driven advertising platforms allow their ads to be featured on these websites as they receive a lot of views. Measures such "demonetizing" certain types of news stories could help to curb this.

Conclusion:

Fake news is now a global problem. But in societies like ours, this evil can do much more damage than anywhere else just because people here are less critical and more prone to believe any kind of campaign or propaganda. At a time when the reader him/herself has to play the role of gatekeeping in the ocean of unverified information about what to believe and what not to, fostering critical thinking is a must. The government has many things to do in this regard. And the people should equip themselves with adequate media literacy and digital education to save themselves from falling prey to fake news.

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