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Indian Disinformation Campaign: Suggestions and Recommendations for Pakistan **Ms. Shawana Binte Sohail**

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ABSTRACT

Indian Disinformation Campaigns against Pakistan are on the rise, targeting Pakistan's internal stability and international stature. India exploits digital technologies, including social media and fake online media campaigns, to amplify false narratives to create polarisation and cause internal instability. This study examines Indian disinformation tactics against Pakistan to fuel anti-Pakistan sentiments among the masses and undermine Pakistan's global image. It also highlights the international impact of negative portrayals and media manipulation. This paper applies to the conceptual framework of the propaganda model of media control. This study provides a way forward for policymakers to counter Indian propaganda. Pakistan aims to focus on public awareness through media literacy and enhance international cooperation.

Keywords: *Indian Disinformation Campaigns, Social Media Propaganda, EU- Disinfo Lab, Indian Chronicles, Hybrid Warfare, Misinformation Networks.*

Introduction

In the current era of digital media, disinformation and propaganda have become potent tools for achieving ideological, military, and political objectives. Disinformation campaigns are systematic efforts to spread false or misleading information to manipulate public perception and influence political and social outcomes. In this context, India has launched a disinformation campaign against Pakistan. (Sarfaraz, 2021)

India-Pakistan relations have been marked by decades of conflict, rivalry, and mistrust since both countries gained independence in 1947. The independence of the subcontinent led to the creation of Pakistan and India, but it also sparked the Kashmir conflict. This dispute led to several wars (1947-48, 1965, and 1999) and remains unresolved, causing periodic military skirmishes and political tensions and military confrontation (Iqbal, 2022)

Both India and Pakistan are nuclear-armed states. Following the Indian nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998, Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests in 1998. The nuclear deterrence factor has prompted India to shift its strategies from conventional warfare to non-conventional methods, such as hybrid warfare, insurgencies, indirect wars, etc. In this context, disinformation campaigns are one of the key strategies used in hybrid warfare to mislead and manipulate public perception. They aim to undermine the image of a state in the international community, including the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), Financial Action Task Force (FATF), and World Trade Organisation (WTO). For instance, EU DisInfo Lab played a significant role in this context by exposing these Indian disinformation campaigns against Pakistan. (American Psychological Association, 2024)

Disinformation is intentionally creating false information spread to deceive someone and thus causing harm. It is often strategic and a part of a larger campaign. (Webwise, 2023). Fake

news refers to false information that is presented as valid news. Fake news is spread for political, ideological, and personal reasons. (Smith, 2024). Propaganda is misleading and biased information used for personal, ideological, and political interests, based on reality, and used for specific purposes.¹ Misinformation refers to fake or misleading information propagating without any aim to betray someone. It mostly occurs because of misunderstandings, bad journalism or unverified news.² India's hybrid war against Pakistan is based on disinformation campaigns, supported by fake news, misinformation, and propaganda. (American Psychological Association, 2024)

The theory used in this research is the propaganda model of media control, which was introduced by Edward. S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book, 'Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media'. This theory describes how propaganda works in the media and explains how the people are manipulated, and how social, economic and political attitudes are formed in the minds of people through propaganda. Through the lens of the propaganda model of media control, Indian disinformation campaigns against Pakistan manipulate public perception through controlled media channels, biased information and fake social media accounts. According to this theory, the media uses advertisements as a tool to sell its products to other businesses (readers and subscribers), rather than circulating the news for a wider audience. Using such tactics, the news is altered from its original form. Such factors are known as filters by the pioneers of this theory. Size, ownership and profit orientation of mass media, funding sources, flaks or negative statements and anti-communism are the five filters used by media. The example of such a tactic can be seen in the recent Pahalgam incident, in which India utilises its media to portray Pakistan as a terrorist state and attempts to defame its image internationally.

DisInfo Lab, an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO), specialises in analysing disinformation networks, with a particular emphasis on exposing fake news, propaganda, and distorted media narratives. (EU DisinfoLab, n.d.). The most significant contribution of DisInfo Lab in this context was the publication of its Indian Chronicles Report in December 2020. (EU DisinfoLab, 2020). Through its Indian Chronicles, the study revealed a broad and systematic disinformation campaign launched by India that was reportedly meant to undermine the image of Pakistan.

India's Disinformation Campaigns against Pakistan

The Digital Data Wing of the Pakistan Ministry of Information conducted an analysis, revealing that social media was being used to target Pakistan through coordinated disinformation campaigns, fake news, and cyberattacks. Fake accounts and bots were used to spread anti-Pakistan narratives, particularly around sensitive topics like the Kashmir dispute. (BBC, 2011) India spread fake news about Pakistan with two distinct objectives. Firstly, to destabilise the country from inside, and second, to spread false information about Pakistan in the global community to weaken its diplomatic and economic position. India is also countering Pakistan's position in South Asia. For instance, India exerted pressure on the Ashraf Ghani government in Afghanistan to oppose Pakistan. India used a similar pattern of indoctrination against Pakistan among the Afghanis, which was used to discredit West Pakistan among the

Bengalis before the 1971 tragedy. As a result, India is attempting to prove a perception domestically and globally that Pakistan is a failed state that serves as a haven for non-state actors. (Iqbal, 2022)

a. Misuse of Social Media

Propaganda operations by India produced fake media sites that shared their story on social media as well. For example, a new Twitter account called "EU Chronicle" was an Indian attempt at the fake media outlet EU Chronicle in July 2020. The EU Chronicle adopted synchronisation by aligning its tweets with bogus news agencies and India-supported accounts, promoting a consolidated discourse. Automated bots and connected channels spread their influence collectively, generating a distorted image. This approach enhances false information engineered as authentic content. (DisinfoLab, 2020). The Twitter accounts of EU Chronicles mostly posted videos appreciating PM Narendra Modi on special events and videos claiming terrorism in Pakistan. (Iqbal, 2022)

India is an expert in manipulating social media as a tool for indirect means of war. Its planned advertisements are not for internal audiences but for the global community, to create hatred for its adversaries, including Pakistan. India's propaganda engine sends out stories aimed at discrediting Pakistan for its positive activities, casting doubt on its legitimacy, and exaggerating the religious and ethnic fault lines within the country, including Baloch and Pashtun sentiments, religious sectarianism, political instability, security situation and economic challenges. (Among the social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter are the platforms exploited for disinformation purposes against Pakistan. For example, the Srivastava Group, an investment firm based in New Delhi, was revealed in an investigative study by Disinfo Lab from the EU for organising a massive disinformation campaign. The research claims that since 2005, these activities have deliberately targeted EU lawmakers and organisations to adversely affect Pakistan. (Perrigo, 2020)

The media troll of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) also launched an online assault during the Covid-19 pandemic, alleging that Muslims for intentionally spreading the virus. Social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, were replete with hateful and misleading posts against Muslims of India (Iqbal, 2022). In a well-planned attack, the BJP's cyber activists used a variety of hashtags, including "Corona Jihad," "Nizamuddin Idiots," and "Covid-786" (a number that has religious meaning for Muslims) to feed the flames of anti-Muslim hatred on Twitter. (Perrigo, 2020)

A planned social media campaign promoting the existence of alleged terror networks and financing in Pakistan was started in February 2021. (National Counter Terrorism Authority, 2021). The plenary meeting of the Financial Action Task Force FATF coincided with the Indian campaign. Pakistan was presented as a deeply indebted, incapable of fulfilling its financial commitments to other nations. Similarly, Indian media outlets flooded social media in September 2021 with false pictures and audio clips from video games that claimed that Pakistani troops were involved in the battle in Panjshir, Afghanistan. (Sarfaraz, 2021). Digital and cyber experts promptly refuted these assertions. Stating that "Indian Television (TV) media have used video game images instead of real footage (of which there is very little available) to depict the assault in Panjshir." (Sarfaraz, 2021)

The Hindutva ideology further sowed deep rifts in society by attacking Muslims and developing anti-Pakistan narratives. (Sarfaraz, 2021). The proponents of Hindutva ideology are

encouraging a culture of deception. (Alam, 2022). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news tasked the Disinformation Unit in India to investigate, evaluate, and report on the dissemination of false information, considering the concerning levels of the infodemic in that country. A group of committed journalists will work to expose misinformation, disprove viral social media posts, and investigate how and why it spreads. (Iqbal, 2022)

b. Fake Online Media Campaigns

EU DisinfoLab, in its 2020 report, reveals that “influencing policymakers with fake media out of Pakistan's investigation into a pro-Indian influence network” (DisinfoLab, 2019). Discovered numerous controversial thinktanks and NGOs spreading India's narratives, as well as a massive network of 265 coordinated fake local media sites in 65 countries. (DisinfoLab, n.d.). This network was active in Geneva and Brussels, producing and spreading content that was mainly intended to criticise and discredit the image of Pakistan internationally. The "network" even pretended to be traditional media outlets, including Voice of America, The Economist, and the EU Observer. (DisinfoLab, 2019)

Another instance of India maligning Pakistan on the international stage is the "Srivastava Group," which has its headquarters in New Delhi. It maintains a website with fake news sources, such as "EP Today," a newsletter that claims to be released by Brussels' European Parliament. (Noor, 2024). It dismisses Pakistan and advances Indian interests. Likewise, in May 2020, the introduction of the "EU Chronicle" led to the emergence of numerous fake news sources, with "Times of Geneva" and "4 News Agency" being the most well-known. The EU Chronicle's operations appear to lack transparency, and there is a clear lack of journalistic integrity, which points to the publication's use as a propaganda tool for Indian interests, mainly spreading false information on Pakistan. (Noor, 2024)

In 2020, the EU DisinfoLab uncovered extensive evidence in their "Indian Chronicles" report, revealing the operation of over 750 counterfeit media outlets across 116 countries for 15 years. These media outlets played a key role in spreading an anti-Pakistan narrative by using suspicious networks like the World News Network and Big News Network. The inquiry located New Delhi as the source of these outlets' protocol addresses. The Indian Internet Protocol (IP) address 208.73.210.140 was found to be the source of several notable domains connected to this operation, including baluchistantoday.com, baluchday.com, JammuKashmir.eu, friendsofKashmir.eu, and foreignaffairs.times.com. This IP address has been used for further propaganda goals, including spreading fake information and hate speech. (Noor, 2024)

c. Disinformation Campaign against Pakistan's Nuclear Program

Pakistan has been portrayed as a failing state by India, intolerance against all religions a haven for terrorists, as a state that restricts minorities, and as the most dangerous place in the world for nuclear weapons. (Murtaza et al., 2023). Pakistan has suffered over \$150 billion in economic losses and \$ 5.3 billion in infrastructure damage in the fight against terrorism, but it has not gotten the credit it deserves and is always kept under pressure to do more. The disinformation campaign has the following consequences for Pakistan. India has always raised allegations about Pakistan's nuclear safety and security program, claiming vulnerabilities in its nuclear infrastructure. These allegations appear to be of political interest. Pakistan always maintains its nuclear safety and security of its nuclear program and ensures good standards for its nuclear weapons. During his visit to Pakistan, Director General International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Mariano Grossi acknowledged Pakistan's technical and

engineering capacity for new nuclear power plants, including Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). Lauding Pakistan's nuclear safety, Rafael Mariano Grossi termed safety measures at Pakistan's nuclear plants as "world-class". (Radio.gov.pk, 2023).

Moreover, Indian security agencies stopped a Pakistan-bound ship from China at Mumbai's Nhava Shava port over suspicions of a dual-use consignment for Pakistan's nuclear and ballistic missile program. (TOI News Desk, 2024). However, Pakistan denied these allegations, stating that the machine was purely used for commercial equipment and destined for Pakistan. The Foreign Office spokesperson, in a statement, said, "These reports are reflective of the Indian media's habitual misrepresentation of facts." (Associate Press of Pakistan, 2024). The media of India exaggerated the situation by dramatising unauthenticated claims and propagating fake news and spreading disinformation about Pakistan's peaceful commercial ports.

Impacts of Indian Disinformation Campaigns on Pakistan

Indian disinformation campaigns also aimed at ruining Pakistan's cultural relations and affecting the country's film industry negatively. For instance, prohibitions were imposed following the Uri attack and the Pulwama tragedy by the All-India Cine Workers Association (AICWA) on Pakistani actors, and they were prohibited from acting in India. Similarly, many Netflix series, web series, and Bollywood films also portray Pakistan as a terrorist state, increasing global psychological warfare. (Zainab, 2023).

On January 30, 1971, among the factors contributing to the separation of East Pakistan was the role of Indian disinformation campaigns. Indira Gandhi used the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to generate hostility by engineering the hijacking of the Fokker aircraft named Ganga from India to Lahore. The Indian authorities claimed that Hashim Qureshi and Ashraf Butt, two Kashmiri freedom fighters, were responsible for hijacking the Indian aircraft. Thus, Pakistan was accused by New Delhi of hijacking the Indian aircraft. (TNN, 2021). The primary goal of the hijacking was to stop Pakistani aircraft from travelling from East to West Pakistan. By using a false flag operation, Indian airlines were able to continue operating, though they had to take a longer route via Colombo, Sri Lanka. It led to frequent supply shortages for the Pakistani forces, causing Pakistan to split into two regions, and East Pakistan emerged as Bangladesh. (Singh, 1980) Even the Indian media used propaganda to promote the false flag military operation's success against Pakistan after the Balakot airstrike. Indian media propagated that the Indian Air Force had shot down a Pakistani F-16 aircraft. They portrayed themselves as winners using fake media news. (Seligman, n.d)

Furthermore, India used disinformation campaigns to influence the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) against Pakistan. On July 18, 2021, during a virtual training event for BJP leaders, the Indian External Affairs Minister Jaishankar openly admitted that India played a role in keeping Pakistan under FATF surveillance, stating, "Due to us, Pakistan is under the lens of FATF, and it was kept in the grey list (Financial Action Task Force, 2024).

Recommendations for Pakistan

To combat India's disinformation campaign, Pakistan needs to take the following actions.

- Firstly, to combat disinformation at grassroots levels, Pakistan should improve media literacy. It should educate its younger generations about the negative impact of the media. It is essential to teach them how India uses media campaigns to tarnish Pakistan's image internationally. The new generation should be taught to recognise and avoid biased

media campaigns against Pakistan and instead work towards promoting a positive image of the country. Pakistan should integrate media literacy programs into the educational system.

- Secondly, to successfully counter India's disinformation efforts, Pakistan should augment its counter-narrative to effectively address Indian disinformation campaigns. It should ensure that its narrative is robust enough to counter these campaigns and protect Pakistan's image from being negatively affected. Pakistan should put more effort into producing its content rather than using foreign films, TV shows, and cartoons to spread nationalistic ideas and keep anti-Pakistan propaganda out of the hands of viewers, particularly the younger generation. Pakistan produces fewer than 50 films a year, while India produces over 700. There is a dire need to support the development of Pakistan's film industry and make movies and documentaries on the nuclear journey of Pakistan and how these nuclear weapons have averted a major Indian attack on Pakistan. These films should highlight Pakistan's role as a responsible nuclear state in the international arena. Pakistan should focus on placing its national heroes and its true cultural values in various international electronic and print media houses, as well as academic and research centres abroad. This would help the international community to stay informed about the actual picture and would promote a positive image of Pakistan.
- Thirdly, on the diplomatic front, Pakistan could engage with international organisations and other countries to share information about disinformation threats and collaborate on best practices. Pakistan has already submitted a dossier to the UN, which highlights how disinformation campaigns in international forums can increase global awareness and put pressure on platforms to act.
- Fourthly, regular evaluation of counter-disinformation strategies will help in adapting and improving these efforts based on findings. Promoting national unity and resilience to disinformation by fostering inclusive narratives and addressing internal divisions can help protect against the exploitation of these divisions by disinformation campaigns. Use cultural and artistic interventions, such as art exhibits, theatre productions, and film projects. To address and highlight the impact of disinformation. These initiatives can raise awareness and encourage public dialogue on the subject in creative ways.
- Fifthly, the Pakistani government should formally request social media companies to conduct thorough reviews of the authenticity of staged anti-Pakistan protests, especially in Western capitals, and seek their cooperation in removing such content from their platforms. Pakistan should actively engage with social media platforms to address the increasing prevalence of Indian disinformation campaigns on their sites.
- The development of new laws is necessary for the digital age by utilising and guaranteeing media independence with relevant legislation to enhance positive journalism. It is necessary to restrict the misuse of cyberspace and social media through domestic laws and ethical awareness. Stakeholders, politicians, security forces, thinktanks, and citizens must be involved in a nationalistic image rather than being fragmented. The use of better narratives should be incorporated into media outlets' policies to comply with certain laws to prevent horrifying images, as well as to use international frameworks to implement a soft and true image of Pakistan.

Conclusion

In the digital age, disinformation has become a potent tool for geopolitical manoeuvring, as evidenced by India's campaigns against Pakistan. By leveraging social media, fake news, and cultural propaganda, India aims to tarnish Pakistan's international reputation and destabilise its internal stability. These tactics significantly impact Pakistan's global standing, diplomatic efforts, and economic stability. To counteract these threats, Pakistan must enhance its media literacy, strengthen its information strategies, and engage in global advocacy to expose and combat disinformation. Adapting to this new era of information, warfare is crucial for Pakistan to safeguard its national interests and maintain its position on the global stage.

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