



Fruits of incitement

Deeply Polarised:

1. The sheer viciousness of the January 6 mob attack, and more than two months of hateful vitriol online and offline following the 2020 election, is proof that political America is deeply polarised, brimming with anger and disenchantment at the ground realities.
2. At the heart of the tsunami of angst that was evident throughout the election campaign is a sense of frustration that grips middle America, including the white middle class and blue-collar workers, over the inevitable changes to the U.S. economy and society.
3. There is a view that the forces of immigration and globalisation have lit the fuses on this explosive combination of racial prejudice and economic insecurity.
4. In reality, Mr Trump's strident rhetoric exploited this sense of alienation and socioeconomic dysfunction for narrow political and personal gains.
5. Now Mr Biden has an opportunity to strike a more balanced note by, on the one hand, seeking to revive the moribund spirit of bipartisan consensus and expediently tackling the thorny issue of comprehensive immigration reform, and, on the other, redressing the ills of runaway free-market liberalisation and forging a post-COVID-19 economic vision that can truly deliver on the American dream.

Background:

The United States Capitol often called the Capitol Building, is the meeting place of the United States Congress and the seat of the legislative branch of the U.S. federal government. It is located on Capitol Hill at the eastern end of the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Do we have a grip on disinformation in 2021?

Disinformation, or "fake news", is a malaise that has been worsened by the infodemic of the social media age. In the last few years, it has been used as an effective weapon to polarise communities and upset democratic processes. Disinformation is increasing and becoming harder to combat, but fact-checking too is evolving.



Indian Context:

1. In the Indian context, disinformation is not evolving in quality but in quantity. Primarily old videos and images are used to represent something in the present, especially if they have an element of violence or are highly politicised.
2. India saw massive spikes of disinformation on the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act protests, elections, the Delhi riots of 2020, and the pandemic.
3. In all of these issues, the kind of disinformation which was perpetrated was pretty simple, and not that difficult to debunk. It's just the organised manner in which it was produced every single day — multiple false claims using photos, images and text.
4. It is just going to keep increasing because political parties have found out that if you put out organised disinformation, then any political narrative can be controlled.
5. At the same time, even though India has a federal structure, the parties which have been targeted are not doing anything about it. They are not introducing any educational reform so that people can be more aware.
6. So, what we are going to see is just a lot more disinformation that is rudimentary, but with a lot of people consuming it day in and day out, and forming their political opinion.

The Four Ps of Disinformation

1. We can think of disinformation as the four Ps: You have disinformation that is spread and created in the pursuit of Power. It often comes from the political establishment: sometimes from the governing party, sometimes from the opposition.
2. Then you have disinformation that is spread for Profit. This is mostly sort of low-grade clickbait.
3. Then you have disinformation that's driven by Profound public disagreement. This is bottom-up disinformation, where people in good faith spread information that others think of as disinformation. We see this around vaccines, climate change, community relations in countries such as India.
4. And the final P is that all of this is enabled by Platform companies. Facebook and WhatsApp, Google and YouTube, Twitter, and others enable the creation



and spread of this information in ways that set us apart from where we were before the advent of digital media.

5. These four Ps of power, profit, profound public disagreement and platforms will continue to drive disinformation in 2021.

Evolution:

1. Then there are some things that are changing. Many disinformation actors have embraced formats that are harder to fact-check and harder to moderate, whether by humans or by automated forms.
2. We're also seeing that platforms have been, on rare occasions, willing to go after disinformation very aggressively. Due to this, we are seeing a migration or a partial migration of disinformation actors away from the large consumer-facing platforms to smaller and more specialised platforms.

Fundamental Drivers and Solutions

1. A fundamental driver of disinformation is powerful people who lie, and who have weaponised the journalistic convention of quoting powerful people verbatim in headlines, even if what they say is untrue. Any fact-checking and debunking happens much later in articles that many readers never get to.
2. We've seen some news organisations, most prominently perhaps in the U.S., showing a greater willingness to have headlines that run along the lines of 'so-and-so have falsely claimed without evidence that this is the case'.
3. The other area in which we see some progress is in journalists making really important case-by-case decisions about when to cover disinformation narratives that are potentially harmful.
4. They are striving to strike a balance between covering them because it's important for the public to know of the harmful claims, and risking bringing people's attention to such narratives by virtue of covering them.

Sources and amplifiers of Disinformation

1. In India, there are two kinds of false news: the ones that come directly from politicians, and the other that is organised disinformation on social media.
2. About politicians themselves, statements by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah have hardly been fact-checked by any news organisations as they do in America for Mr Trump.



3. When it comes to organised disinformation on social media, again, the mainstream media in India has acknowledged the issue but not many news organisations actually do fact-checking.
4. Even if any mainstream media organisations are doing so, they are not looking at the most dangerous claims that are being put out.
5. The main purpose of disinformation in India is to target minorities, and there's very little fact-checking that has been done to reduce that harm.
6. India also has another problem. Not only is the mainstream media, not fact-checking people, but it is actually putting out disinformation.
7. Many mainstream media organisations gave Baba Ramdev unlimited bandwidth to put out his claims on Coronil.
8. Platforms such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and YouTube have amplified disinformation with algorithms that prioritise engagement and revenue.

Solution:

1. It takes very little technological work to have something as basic as a database of images which are being misused.
2. Images are a major vector of disinformation and can be controlled if platforms are willing to go that extra mile.
3. While technology has the potential to deal with these problems, but at a very fundamental level, there are key parts of these problems that are political and social in nature.
4. Science is arguably the single most powerful way we have of arriving at the best obtainable version of the truth. There are clear examples of misinformation and disinformation that is in direct conflict with the best available scientific evidence.