A Literature Review on
Manipulation of Opinions through
the Internet

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Abstract

The Internet can have an impactful influence on our thoughts and how we think about specific individuals or sovereign states. This is least talked about other than being a great platform for emerging businesses, a great mean communication and data house, the internet has also been used to impair and repair images of various administrations and also for creating global dominance which can be seen in the form of soft power.

Keywords: *Internet, Mentality, Soft Power, Influence, Personal Opinions, Social Media.*

1. Introduction

The Internet is one of the most important things in today's world. Over the time it has gradually turned out as a need rather than a luxury. Today, there's nothing that can't be done through the internet, be it ordering food or getting in touch with someone in the far away land or sharing information at a gallop and over the years it won't be surprising to see every minute thing being executed with the help of the internet. Being a very widespread and powerful platform almost all the agencies and organizations utilize the internet to retrieve or send out information. But along all the data shared, there may be some data which may be fake or unauthentic and uploaded with an only sole motive to manipulate a subject

2. Problem Statement

The reach and wonders of the internet is often misused. Some may be to favour a political opinion while others to manipulate attention towards a sensitive topic. Online manipulation has seen a gradual growth in recent years. It is not only about the political agendas but also brands tend to use the same ideology. Brands

participating in online manipulation may just be a casual marketing exercise, but for a consumer creating a feeling of need for a product even when actually there isn't any, is a question of integrity.

3. Literature Survey

Table No. 1

Sr. No.	Paper Title	Author	Year	About
1.	*Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*	*Professor Phillipe Howard*	*2019*	*How Social Media Helps In Manipulation of Opinions[3]*
2.	*Soft Power: the means to success in world politics*	*Joseph Nye, Reviewed by G John Ikenberg*	*2004*	*Effects of Soft Power on World Governments [5]*

As Shown in Table No.1, Professor Phillipe Howard in his article titled Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation spoke about how social media plays an important role in manipulation of opinions through the internet[3]. Joseph Nye also wrote about how various countries use soft power in the current age to create a influence in world map.[7]

4. Background

An unerring example would be, during the independence era, people got their news via newspapers, they could assume their news was unbiased as journalistic integrity. The generation after that got their news through radios and televisions which inturn increased the news source but decreased the time for fact checking and now in today's generation the news can be accessed through the internet. A piece of information uploaded on the internet doesn't even take seconds to reach the masses which may be great as a crucial news article can be broadcasted in no time to a number of people but if the news is not authentic or as called as the news is 'fake' and upload on the internet, if it is not controlled or restricted, people tend to believe that piece of information as the truth. Also if considered that fake news can be administered by cross-checking it with various other news sources, but what about the data that we are being manipulated to believe it as true. How do we audit it or cross check its authenticity. If the majority of the internet provides us with an untrue piece of information it would eventually make it seem like the actual truth and we would have to trust that having left with no other option.[10]

5. Soft Power

Soft power can be defined as the ability to gain power through attraction rather than coercion. It is a term coined by American researcher Joseph Nye.[7] Talking of soft power, there couldn't be any better example than the United States of America. It isn't that people tend to choose American made products over the ones made in India. If we consider hollywood movies, in an average superhero movie, where aliens attack our world, it is an 'American' superhero who steps up to save the world. All the important

decisions are taken at the White House. It may just be a fictional drama, but to some extent it does have an impact on our perspective towards the United States of America. These perspectives not only help to glorify their cinema but also their lifestyle, tourism, education and also culture. But apart from governments, brands also tend to use soft power to make as feel the need to buy their products. For instance, India already had its own chain of cafes and restaurants, yet when Starbucks opened its outlet in India, it saw a very positive response amongst the consumers which in general case would have been difficult for a brand to set itself up in a new atmosphere. The instant success of Starbucks can be credited to the internet and soft power to some extent as it had already created a sense of attraction among consumers of the country.[6] The quality and the growth is a different topic altogether, but the hype created around it through entertainment platforms and social media is where the internet manipulated people to be attracted towards one of the fastest growing cafeteria chains in the world.

6. Internet Manipulation

With the brief information given above, Internet manipulation can be defined as the distortion of digital technology, such as social media algorithms and automated scripts, for social,political or commercial purposes.[1] Such tactics may be brought in practice with the sole intent to manipulate public opinion, polarise citizens, silence political heretics, harm corporate or political adversaries, and improve personal or brand reputation. Data hackers, hired professionals and private citizens have all been said to have participated in internet manipulation using softwares and bots. Cyberattack that aims to change users' perceptions and corresponding behaviors is known as Cognitive hacking. Internet manipulation is also used to overcome Internet censorship or violations of net neutrality.

Issues:

- It has been found that content that triggers high-arousal emotions is more viral and that this also holds when surprisingness, interestingness, or usefulness is taken into consideration.
- Providing simple explanations for complex arguments may be used for online manipulation.
- Prior collective ratings of a web content influences one's own perception of viewing it.
- Filter bubbles might be created to keep out users having certain viewpoints or by the idea to ignore certain viewpoints.
- People may not read the whole fake data, but only reading the headlines may also have an adverse effect.
- Revelations, propaganda busting and fake news exposure often come late when the damage is already done and/or do not reach the bulk of the audience who have come in contact with misinformation.
- Social media activities and other data can be used to analyze the personality of people and predict their behaviour and preferences.

In Politics:

A study conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute showed that computational propaganda and social media manipulation have proliferated massively in the recent years — now prevalent in more than double the number of countries (70) vs two years ago (28). An increase of 150%. Also as per the report:

In 45 democracies, politicians and political parties have used computational propaganda tools by

hiring fake followers or spreading manipulated data and fake media to gather voter support In 26 countries, government entities 'have used computational propaganda as a tool of information control to suppress public opinion and press freedom, discredit criticism and oppositional voices, and drown out political dissent.'[3]

In the run up to India's 2014 elections, both the Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and the Congress party were accused of hiring political trolls to talk favourably about them on blogs and social media. The BJP's IT Cell is often in the news being accused of online manipulation. They are often pointed out in charges of spreading their propaganda, doctored videos, photoshopped images and fake news. Many such instances were seen when a new media trend was set up, with the sole purpose of diverting the attention of masses from a currently trending topic of concern.[8]

In 2016, it was disclosed that Donald Trump manipulated public opinion to rig elections in Latin America. According to analysts with a budget of $600,000 he led a team of hackers that stole campaign strategies, manipulated social media to create false waves of enthusiasm and derision, and installed spyware in opposition offices to help him win the election.[9]

*Shown in dark blue are the countries
that have taken part in social media
manipulation*

Figure 1. Social media manipulation in different parts of the world.

Intelligence and military agencies:

Commonly known under the terms such as 'weaponization of social media ' and 'Psychology Warfare', intelligence agencies and militaries also manipulate data on the internet to maintain or fabricate the dominance of their respective sovereign state at global level.[2] These agencies tend to share fake data or create fake information to baffle its rival nations and sometimes also to share certain news or information which may be questionable

to the administration Restricting public access to counties internal policies and data can be considered in interest of the nation's security, but sharing fake news or twisting and hiding the truth is still considered to be 'manipulation of information'

In a recent event, at the Galwan Valley near the indo-china border tension gradually grew between the two militaries which eventually led to face off between two of the most advanced militaries in today's world. Unfortunately, it also witnessed casualties of army personnel. In no time it became a breaking news in the Indian subcontinent, but when searched for data about the Chinese army men, no data was found regarding their count on fatality. Nor twitter neither any of the biggest media houses in the world had any information on this. Here, China tried to create a perspective among the citizens of India that no casualties were reported on the chinese side and in turn showcase dominance. But many analysts and defence experts came to rescue by stating that China too has a casualty list which states casualties of 40-50 soldiers. Here the Chinese government tried Psychology warfare.[6]

Another example of information manipulation by the military lies within the borders of China. The government of China follows communism to such an extent that it seems very close to dictatorship. The media as well as the internet is controlled by the Chinese government. Also, in mid 2017, a news broke out that the Great Firewall of China had even blocked search engines like Google and Social messengers like Whatsapp.

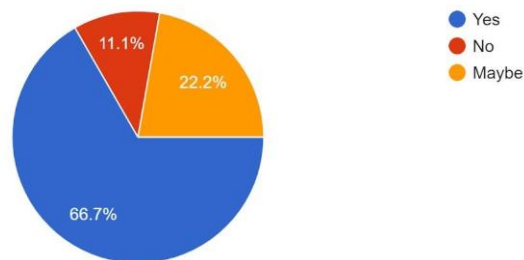**Social Media/Search Manipulation:**

An investigation carried out by a Wall Street Journal found out that Google manipulated search algorithms in several ways which included prioritising large businesses over smaller ones, hiding sensitive information and even blacklisting some websites.In 2012, Facebook conducted a successful experiment in which they tried to manipulate the mood of nearly 6 lakh users. In that experiment they showed either positive posts or negative posts to see how it affected the users. When positive expressions were reduced people would produce more positive posts and lesser negative posts. But when the expressions were negative, an opposite pattern occurred. The experiment ran for a week during which thousands of facebook users who knowingly participated may have felt happy or sad on the basis of what facebook presented on their feed. Various Twitter trends are also triggered by brands to divide attention of the crowd towards or away from them.[5]

Celebrities, Business tycoons and politicians hire reputation consultants who help them to hide undesirable information posted on the internet. PR team and agencies like these, post various fake news articles in accordance with the search engine's algorithm which causes the legitimate articles to bury down in the search stack in the course of time and manipulate the audience when they try to search articles regarding the same on the internet.[4]

7. Survey Analysis

We have conducted a survey as a part of the project based on people's view on manipulation of opinions through the internet via Google Forms. 63 individuals were taken into consideration. We have asked some questions regarding the topic and the summary report of the responses is as shown in figures below in the form of pie-charts. Responses for the following questions:
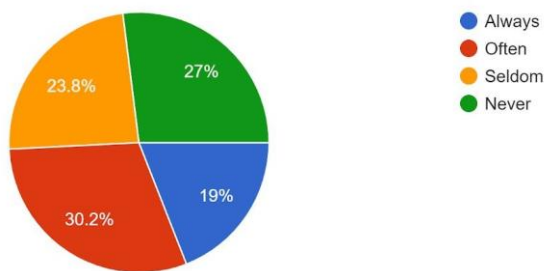
While surfing the web have you ever felt the need to own a product due to the hype created around it?
63 responses

Figure 2.

66% of the respondents agree that they have developed a feeling to own a product just by the way it's advertised.
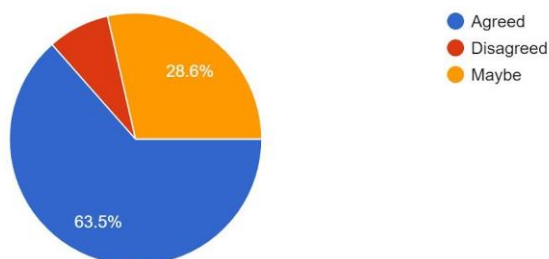
After reading a news information how often do you cross check its authenticity or it's source?
63 responses

Figure 3.

27% of the respondents never cross check the authenticity or source of a news, which in today's generation is quite a high number.
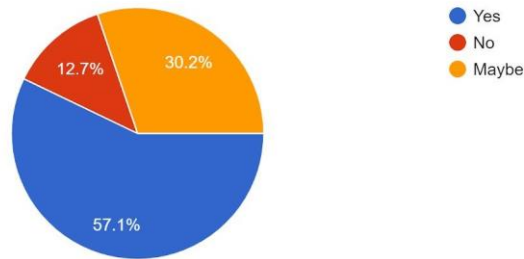
Do you believe that some internet trend are purposely set up only to direct our attention towards or away from current trend?
63 responses

4614

Figure 3.

63.5% of the respondents agree that internet trends are sometimes set up to manipulate our attention yet there's a huge number of fake news articles on the web and also people tend to believe them.

Figure 4.

57.1% of the respondents are quite aware that there should be stricter guidelines while uploading the data on the internet.

8. Solution

Online manipulation can turn out to be very toxic in generations to come. Although there can't be found any specific way to fully restrict it, central governments can bring in new strict laws against this. In open source sites like Wikipedia where every internet user is allowed to edit the content it becomes necessary to fact check the data before one can upload it on the site. Reddit has taken steps such as hiding the vote-count for a specified time to guard against the issue of prior ratings influencing perception on several websites. Content can be thoroughly checked with increase in checking rate and flagged as false or fake. Online manipulation can only be restricted if sites and social media platforms step up with the intent to restrict online manipulation and come up with guidelines to gain control over the same.

9. Conclusion

Though online manipulation is difficult to spot but data should be kept transparent for the sake of the rights of citizens when it comes to government regulations and consumers integrity and brand's moral when it comes to advertising. Users of social media should be more aware regarding any news circulating on any of the platforms and cross check the source as well as its authenticity before forwarding it to anyone else. Manipulated data does not only lead citizens, youth and consumers into the wrong tracks but also hurts various components of democracy like right to information. Thus it is very important as internet users that we have access to unbiased information.

10. Acknowledgement

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