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Disinformation and Social Movements: An Empirical Investigation

Research-in-Progress

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ABSTRACT

Our research study investigates digital disinformation and the impact on the social movement. Disinformation is verifiably false information being deliberately propagated that has the potential to cause public harm (Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan, 2018). Recent IS literature have examined the influence of disinformation and other deviant behavior, such as the varying impact of emotions on online news believability (Deng and Chau, 2021), the emotional triggers of disinformation leading to the spread or suppression of fake news (Horner, Galletta, Crawford, and Shirsat, 2021) or impact of trolling on social movements (Bharati, Lee, and Syed, 2018). In addition, disinformation can impact cross-ideological communications and foster ideological polarization in political organizations (Au, Ho, and Chiu, 2021). However, the mechanisms in which disinformation is spread or combated among social movement participants are not fully addressed in information systems (IS) literature. Thus, we aim to answer the following research question: How does disinformation impact social movement participation?

In November 2020, more than 200 farmers' organizations from 22 states started a road blockade protesting the three farm laws that the Indian government had introduced. The farmers' supporters, such as students, workers, journalists, and film personalities, started being called anti-nationals, terrorists, and separatists. A ruling party supporter tweeted "*Truth behind Farmers' agitation Rs. 350/- [\$5] a day pay to show big number gathering. @HMOIndia pls make a note and stop innocents from getting fooled by #AAP, #Congress #AkaliDal #Leftists #FarmersBill_2020 #Farmers*" (Mehta, 2020). A fact checking website illustrated that this tweet was based on false information. The engagement because of disinformation, especially spreading on social media, can obfuscate facts about the movement. We identified social media accounts and news sources publishing information pertaining to the farmers' movement and categorized the disinformation based on seven fact checking websites. We collected social media data using trending hashtags and keywords such as "#FarmersBill2020" from December 2020 through July 2021 during the farmers' movement. We plan to conduct semantic network analysis (SNA) and non-negative matrix factorization (NMF) to validate the emergent categories. Our exploratory analysis of disinformation categories showed that the farmers and their supporters were targeted by the ruling party leaders and their supporters. Using the disinformation campaign, the farmers were accused of being terrorists and anti-national through old images and videos that implied the farmers were paid protesters and destroyed public property. Our research-in-progress can potentially contribute to the understanding of the impact of disinformation on social movements.

Keywords

Disinformation, social movement, social media, mixed methods research approach.

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