

International

Viral visuals driving the social media manipulation on YouTube, Instagram

Social media sites under scrutiny over online disinformation

LONDON: The success of viral memes, videos and pictures in spreading online disinformation is fuelling organized social media manipulation on Instagram and YouTube, researchers at Oxford University said yesterday. In an annual report on disinformation trends, the Oxford Internet Institute's Computational Propaganda Research Project said Facebook remained the most popular platform for social media manipulation due to its size and global reach.

But a focus on visual content more likely to be shared online means users of Google's YouTube video platform and Facebook's Instagram photo-sharing site are increasingly being targeted with false or misleading messages, said Samantha Bradshaw, one of the report's authors.

"On Instagram and YouTube it's about the evolving nature of fake news - now there are fewer text-based websites sharing articles and it's more about video with quick, consumable content," she said. "Memes and videos are so easy to consume in an attention-short environment." The report's findings highlight the challenges faced by Facebook, Google and other social media companies in combating the spread of political and financially-motivated disinformation, as tactics and technologies develop and change.

A Facebook spokesman said showing users accurate information was a "major priority" for the company. "We've developed smarter tools, greater transparency, and stronger partnerships to better identify emerging threats, stop

bad actors, and reduce the spread of misinformation on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp," the spokesman said.

YouTube said it had invested in policies, resources and products to tackle misinformation on its site and regularly removes content which violates its terms of use. A spokesman declined to comment on Oxford University's findings. Bradshaw said the move to target internet users with visual content would make it harder for social media platforms to identify and stamp out manipulated activity.

Facebook and YouTube both came under intense scrutiny over their ability to monitor and police visual content following a mass-shooting in New Zealand in March. In that incident, a gunman was able to live-stream the killing of 51

people on Facebook before internet users repeatedly shared and uploaded the video across multiple social media platforms. "It's easier to automatically analyze words than it is an image," Bradshaw said. "And images are often more powerful than words with more potential to go viral."

The Oxford University report said that increased awareness of social media manipulation meant such activity had now been identified in 70 countries worldwide, up from 28 in 2017. "Computational propaganda has become a normal part of the digital public sphere," the report said. "These techniques will also continue to evolve as new technologies ... are poised to fundamentally reshape society and politics." — Reuters

Podemos woes mount as rival leftist enters Spanish elections

MADRID: The former number two of Spain's Podemos said Wednesday he would contest November's elections, running against his former close friend Pablo Iglesias who heads the far-left party. The move looks set to further fragment the divided left-wing parties just six weeks ahead of the November 10 vote, which will be the fourth general election in as many years.

Voters were recalled to the ballot box after Socialist Prime Minister Pablo Sanchez failed to secure support to be confirmed as premier despite months of negotiations, primarily with Podemos. Inigo Errejon, 35, said he would run at the head of a new list called Mas Pais—"More for the country"—capping weeks of speculation about whether he would throw his hat into the ring. At a meeting in Madrid, the party confirmed it would contest the elections with Errejon heading a list made up of mostly women.

The move is likely to cement the political and personal split between Iglesias and Errejon who had been part of Spain's anti-austerity "Indignados" movement and who jointly founded Podemos in January 2014. In a 30-minute address, Errejon said the only thing dragging the country back to the ballot box was "the irresponsibility of the political leaders" who had failed to reach an agreement, in a swipe at the Socialists and Podemos.

"I understand the almost unanimous anger... with the current leaders and the political impasse... which runs the risk of translating into abstention," he said. "Spain needs to break the impasse" and for that, it was crucial to ensure that no-one stayed at home "disillusioned, exhausted, drained". "If we want the result to be different, we have to vote in a different way to ensure there is a progressive government," he said, presenting Mas Pais as "part of the solution".

For years, Iglesias and Errejon—who both hold a doctorate in political science—were largely inseparable after becoming friends while studying at Madrid's Complutense University. After founding Podemos, they worked closely together with Errejon serving as Iglesias' deputy until 2017 when they became embroiled in a power struggle that sparked a deep rift within the party.—AFP

US military struggles to weed out soldiers with far-right ties

WASHINGTON: The arrest of a US soldier with far-right sympathies who is suspected of plotting an attack on American soil to spark "chaos" has highlighted a challenge for the Pentagon: purging its ranks of extremists. Jarrett Smith, a private in the US Army based at Fort Riley in Kansas, was arrested and charged in federal court with one count of distributing information related to explosives after offering a detailed explanation to an undercover FBI agent. Smith also expressed interest in targeting members of the leftist group Antifa and heading to Ukraine to fight with a far-right paramilitary group, the FBI says.

But he is hardly the first US soldier to reveal far-right or ultra-nationalist leanings - and some fear the US military is being used as a training ground by extremist groups. "Everything old is new again," says Brian Levin, a professor of criminal justice at California State University, San Bernardino, and the director of the school's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism. "There is a renewed effort within part of the white supremacist world to focus on the military because they have such valuable skills," he added, pointing to Smith's case.

The links between the far-right and the US armed forces first came to light in the 1980s when Vietnam veteran Louis Beam came home, joined the Ku Klux Klan and had links to the Order, an underground neo-Nazi group that called for the overthrow of the US government. Earlier this year, a US Coast Guard officer who espoused white supremacist views, Christopher Paul Hasson, was arrested on firearms and drug charges outside Washington. Hasson - an avowed admirer of Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Breivik, whose attacks in 2011 left 77 people dead - allegedly had drafted a hit list of Democratic politicians and prominent media figures.

Prosecutors have said Hasson identified himself as a "White Nationalist for over 30 years and advocated for 'focused violence' in order to establish a white homeland." And in May, the US Army said it was investigating a 22-year-old soldier over suspected ties to neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division. "Our standards are clear: participation in extremist activities has never been tolerated" and is a punishable offense, Pentagon spokeswoman Jessica Maxwell told AFP.

The Pentagon tries to "learn as much as possible about potential new soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines so we can assess whether



PORTLAND: A far-right demonstrator makes the OK hand gesture believed to have white supremacist connotations during "The End Domestic Terrorism" rally at Tom McCall Waterfront Park in Portland, Oregon. — AFP

they should be extended the privilege to serve in the military," Maxwell said. "While we can't guarantee that every person who enters the service will be free from holding extremist thoughts, various screening tools provide us the best opportunity to identify those who do not share our values."

In Smith's case, an investigation revealed that he had joined the army a year after connecting on Facebook with Craig Lang, an extremist known to US security officials for fighting alongside paramilitaries in Ukraine. "No former military experience, but if I cannot find a slot in Ukraine by October I'll be going into the Army," Smith told Lang in June 2016, according to the FBI.

One year later, he was stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia. Recruiters had not uncovered his leanings - or the risk presented. For Levin, Smith's case is interesting because it implies that white supremacist groups are on the prowl for soldiers sharing their views. He said that while the Pentagon is making a "sincere effort" to combat extremism within its ranks, it was not enough. "The military is acutely aware of the problem and they are certainly working on it," Levin said. "Now what we have to do is to retool our response to it."

Even if the US military is seen as the most ethnically diverse institution in the country, it remains a fertile breeding ground for far-right sympathizers. According to a poll conducted among 829 service members in October 2018 by the Military Times, 22 percent said they had seen signs of white supremacism or racism within the military in the previous year. — AFP