The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Why is political disinformation on the rise?

Lack of transparency creates perfect breeding ground for its spread

As the streets heat up in the lead-up to the general election, another insidious battle is being fought on the cyberspace, with both pro-government and anti-government factions intensifying their efforts to manipulate public opinion through social media and private messaging platforms. A recent investigation by *The Daily Star* has revealed the systematic way in which disinformation and propaganda are being spread by both sides, from the use of fake profiles and bots to the creation of misleading pages impersonating opposition parties to "thirst trap" strategies to build an audience before disseminating disinformation. Many of the social media groups which are intentionally spreading disinformation are categorised as "news sites" in Facebook, though they have no discernible authors or publishers. According to the report—which is based on analysis of several hundred posts on dozens of Facebook pages, groups and messaging apps run by mostly unidentified admins—both sides are spending huge sums of money to spread their manipulated narratives.

At a time when the public needs reliable sources of information to make well-informed decisions, it is alarming that such disinformation propaganda is on the rise. In September alone, fact checkers identified at least 84 instances of political disinformation, up from 32 in January, with a surge in disinformation centred around US visa policies and sanctions, according to Dismislab, a fact-checking organisation. The impact of such doctored content is dangerous, creating as it does a distorted worldview, amplifying existing polarisations and making it difficult for citizens to engage in informed and constructive discussions on the urgent issues at hand.

The blurring of lines between news organisations and propaganda outlets on social media platforms also raises serious concerns about the erosion of public trust in credible sources of information. Unfortunately, over the past decade, we have seen the government take increasingly stringent measures to regulate independent voices and the media, particularly through its indiscriminate use of the Digital Security Act. Ironically, by heavily censoring the press, the government has created the perfect breeding ground for the spread of misinformation, as people turn more and more to unverified accounts where they hope to gain insights that are not readily available in traditional media.

In the lead-up to the election, it is imperative that the independent media continues (and is allowed) to do its job of fact-based reporting and analysis. It is apparent that major parties are capitalising on people's lack of digital literacy and distrust in news media to push forth doctored narratives through various platforms. While the government takes a stern stance against the spread of fake news by pro-opposition sympathisers, it must do the same against those spreading pro-ruling party propaganda. Preserving the integrity of the democratic process requires a concerted effort from the government, tech platforms, and media organisations to promote media literacy, enhance fact-checking capabilities, and foster an environment where accurate information prevails over intentional manipulation.

An exciting time for Cox's Bazar

Connection to railway grid will boost local economy, tourism

A dream long held by Cox's Bazar residents has finally come true: it is now a part of the country's expanding railway network. On Saturday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated the 102-kilometre rail line between Cox's Bazar and Chattogram's Dohazari municipality, as well as the brand-new Cox's Bazar railway station. With this, not only has the country's foremost tourist destination become more easily accessible, but the whole southeast region is also set to see a boost in trade and connectivity.

The rail link project, the latest among several such communication-related projects inaugurated in recent weeks, is part of an elaborate development scheme focused on Cox's Bazar. Enhanced connectivity will be crucial for transportation of goods to and from Teknaf land port, as well as the growth of local industries including fish, salt, vegetables and dried fruits, according to local business experts. There will be nine railway stations on the route, which means the surrounding areas will also see economic transformation.

The rail link is also expected to be a boon to the coastal district's tourism industry, which in turn will contribute to the local economy. The train fares are set to be much cheaper than bus and air fares on the Dhaka-Cox's Bazar and Chattogram-Cox's Bazar routes, offering a more affordable alternative to travellers. As part of the Trans-Asian Railway Network, this rail link is expected to support intra- and inter-regional trade and connectivity as well.

However, like in all communication and infrastructure projects, the quality and consistency of service as well as proper execution of related undertakings are going to determine the success of the railway project. In this regard, the Dhaka-Bhanga rail link via Padma Bridge—which was inaugurated on October 10—serves as a test case for the authorities. That rail link has 12 stations on the route that are not equipped with enough manpower to handle traffic; seven of them don't even have station masters. Because of that, not only is passenger service hampered, but there is an increased risk of accidents. We hope that the Dohazari-Cox's Bazar route will not be marred by similar inadequacies.

On Saturday, the PM also laid the foundation for the first terminal of the country's first deep sea port in Cox's Bazar's Moheshkhali. With this and several other megaprojects underway, this rail link is a major step towards making Cox's Bazar an important investment, trade and connectivity hub. We believe that, once finished and fully operational, all these will bring significant changes to the lives and livelihoods of local communities.

Growth at stake as R&D goes missing

Garment sector sets worst example among industries

Syed Ashfaqul Haque
is executive editor of The Daily Star.

SYED ASHFAQUL HAQUE

After the boom, there comes the gloom.

Big or small, industries in Bangladesh meet an almost identical fate. It happened with jute and tea, and now, a pall of gloom hangs over all manufacturing industries, including ready-made garment, the highest forex earning sector.

Why does a business slip from boom to gloom? There could be a host of reasons, but at the heart of most lies a lack of business innovation.

The challenge is in going to the next level following initial business successes, which is achieved mostly through common sense, intuition and hard work. But most stumble at that stage due to a lack of innovation and new ideas.

Technology has changed the business landscape for good, making research and development (R&D) the most crucial tool for businesses to survive and thrive. As per data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the economy has recovered well from the slump years of 2019-20 and is edging closer in 2023 to pre-pandemic growth levels of 12.33 percent.

But the road to recovery has been achieved with little or no investment in R&D.

A recent study by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) reveals that businesses could not care less about technology, with the R&D expenditure of most standing at next to nothing.

The study, however, did not dwell much on the money that industries spend on R&D. One of the insights is that most firms in Bangladesh spend less than $4.54 (Tk 500) a year per worker on R&D.

Alarmingly, only five percent of large manufacturing industries spend what is ultimately a rather insignificant amount on R&D, while the rest do not even bother with that.

The number is even more shocking for the garment industry, where only two percent of firms spend on research and product innovation. Bangladesh is the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China, with the sector contributing the most ($46.99 billion in FY2023) to national coffers.

Yet, for decades, a majority of the 4,000-plus garment factories have been limping along with skill sets more reminiscent of tailoring shops, such as cutting fabrics and making clothes. Thanks to the owners' lack of appetite for market research, innovation, and product diversification-development, the sector could not yet graduate from one of the world's cheapest clothing destinations to a high-end product market, where the profit pie is significantly bigger.

Just over two dozen manufacturers, according to industry insiders, have notched phenomenal growth through innovation and value-addition to products. They are no longer tailors but designers, developers, marketers and manufacturers of unique products for the world.

Sadly, the rest of the garment businesses are either barely surviving or nearing the prospect of going out of business. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and research organisation Mapped in Bangladesh, 450 factories have remained closed since the onset of the pandemic in 2020, while 1,500 others operate occasionally depending on availability of orders or sub-contracting jobs.

Outside Bangladesh, the road to business prosperity is traversed differently, with insights from painstaking research paving the way.

Armed with knowledge from R&D endeavours, smart entrepreneurs assess the market situation as well as strengths and weaknesses, decide how to develop themselves, find ways to achieve success, and research and innovate to sustain or build on that success.

Countries and companies that are most innovative and ruling the world continue to invest heavily on R&D to expand their knowledge base to ensure sustained growth and dominance over competitors.

Almost $2.5 trillion was invested worldwide in R&D in 2022 despite the ongoing economic downturn, according to a UN briefing.

Quite predictably, the world's top two economies, US and China, are by far the two largest spenders on the segment, with R&D spending of around $680 billion and $550 billion respectively. Smaller countries with tech-heavy economies such as Japan, Israel and South Korea have also invested larger shares of their gross domestic product (GDP) into R&D.

The most valuable companies in the world—Amazon, Google's parent company Alphabet Inc, Huawei, Microsoft, Apple, Samsung and Meta (formerly Facebook)—are also the most generous in their R&D expenditure as they seek to acquire knowledge faster than their competitors to stay well ahead in the race. Together, the seven tech-driven giants dished out $167.7 billion on R&D in 2020, with Jeff Bezos' Amazon being the largest spender at $42.7 billion, which was around 11 percent of its net revenue.

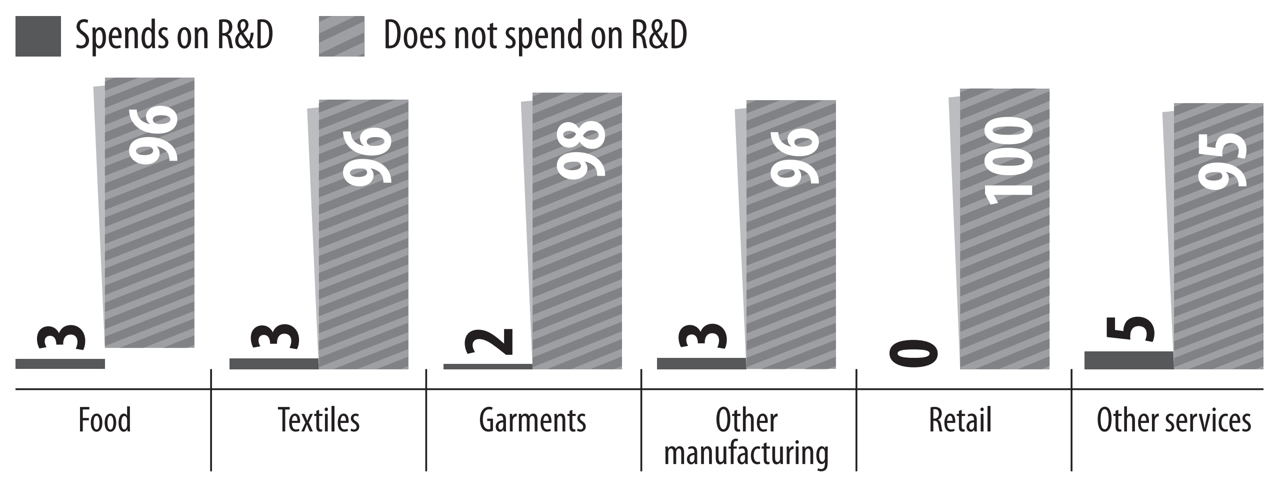
In contrast, Bangladesh, whose national budget size is $70 billion for 2023-24, allocated only 0.03 percent of the GDP in the last fiscal year towards R&D, as per Planning Commission data. In contrast, Vietnam allocated 0.54 percent of its GDP to R&D, India 0.70 percent, and China 2.55 percent, according to World Bank statistics.

The R&D allocation itself is too meagre for an economy like Bangladesh, which has grown at a rate of over six percent for the last decade and will be transitioning from a least developed country to a developing country in 2026. As if it is not bad enough, there are reports that even this sparse allocation remains mostly unutilised every year.

Right now, Bangladesh's economy is in dire straits due to the fallouts of the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and weak governance in the banking sector. Research can give policymakers a deeper understanding of what fixes are needed to address structural vulnerabilities in the economy.

For the sake of economic growth and sustainable development, the sooner we do that, the better.

R&D EXPENDITURE ACROSS DIFFERENT SECTORS



SOURCE: WORLD BANK'S ENTERPRISE SURVEY FOR BANGLADESH, 2022

A2I ACT

Gateway to kleptocracy and highway to oligarchy

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ABU SAEED KHAN

The Agency to Innovate (a2i) bill was hurriedly passed on July 5; the government fast-tracked presidential consent to make it a law within four days. Before the bill was placed, however, it was immediately detected that Section 21 of the law, which allows a2i to form a company, is a tumour that will metastasise.

During this time, something bizarre happened in our parliamentary affairs' history. Mustafa Jabbar, the telecommunication minister, publicly accused his junior colleague Zunaid Ahmed Palak, the state minister for ICT, of staging a legislative coup.

On July 7, Jabbar told *The Daily Star*, "It was unanimously decided that a2i would not be allowed to form a company." At a parliamentary standing committee meeting to scrutinise the bill on June 18, trade bodies thanked the ICT state minister for listening to their demands, Jabbar added. But those demands were not kept.

In fact, Jabbar has accused Palak of doctoring the draft a2i bill prior to placing it before the house for legislative approval.

In the same interview with *The Daily Star*, the software trade body's president, Russell T Ahmed, was infuriated and demanded a cyber-forensic probe.

VISUAL: STAR

The standing committee meeting was filmed, he said. "So, if the video or the meeting minutes are made public, one will see that the decision of the meeting has not been reflected in the law. We all came out of the meeting that day (June 18) with happy faces as all of our demands were met," he added.

Russell further said the bill goes against the interests of the country and the industry. In fact, the remaining ICT trade bodies, which have been historically subservient to the government, have collectively unleashed their anger at the "fabricated version" of the a2i law, suspected to be a commercial trojan horse.

They fear that all the government's ICT projects, which are lucrative sources of revenue, would bypass law to directly engage the preferred suppliers. The industry cannot be blamed for such an apprehension, because a2i functions under the ICT Division, which has earned infamy for brazenly violating the law only to promote the oligarchs in the name of digitising Bangladesh.

For example, the legal framework forbids the deployment of optical fibre without a nationwide telecommunication transmission network (NTTN) licence. But Bangladesh Computer Council (BCC), which functions under the ICT Division, has illegally deployed hundreds of thousands of kilometres of optical fibre cable (OFC) nationwide under a project—without the licence.

Everybody knows about this multi-billion dollar project, which is accused of scandal, but nobody dares to question it. BCC's proximity to the country's political power has bolstered it to not even make payments to the exchequer for deploying OFC by the roads and highways.

The ICT Division, being a part of the telecommunication ministry, now overtly sabotages the OFC business of state-owned Bangladesh Railway (BR) and Power Grid Company of Bangladesh (PGCB).

The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has been forced to prohibit BR and PGCB from expanding OFC coverage beyond the train track or power transmission grid route. Such informal embargo is unheard of anywhere in the world, especially in a rapidly rising economy like Bangladesh.

As a result, today a large majority of the OFC network that hangs overhead across the vast plainland of Bangladesh is BCC's. This is the most humiliating and self-defeating form of engineering by any standard anywhere in the world.

Since both the BR and PGCB are publicly owned entities, they cannot sue the BTRC for sabotaging their commercial interest, which only safeguards the oligarchs being fostered by the ICT Division.

After successfully implementing a destructive policy at the infrastructure front, the ICT Division is now bulldozing the slightest chance of innovation and competition in the technology front of Bangladesh through the a2i law. That is why the entire private sector publicly abhors the act so much!

The Daily Star
Reg. No. DA 781
thedailystar.net
bangla.thedailystar.net/
EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam
Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net
Registered & Head Offices: The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222
Newsroom: Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net
Advertisement: 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257
Subscription: 01711623906