

LTTE and Disinformation; Is Sri Lanka Ready to Win the Intangible War?

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Abstract

In past, war was purely militaristic. However, at present, there is a shift in warfare strategy from the battlefield to online. Disinformation is one of the key ways utilized by extremists, terrorists and political and profit-driven individuals to manipulate the public. Disinformation is deliberately misleading and manipulative narratives or facts. Sri Lanka is a victim of disinformation. Even though, the Sri Lankan government militarily defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) its international networks remain intact. LTTE and its international networks are engaging in disinformation accusing Sri Lanka of committing genocide, human rights violations and international humanitarian law violations. The resultant effects of these false and fictitious claims have resulted in ethnic unrest and Sri Lanka's guiltlessness is questioned in the eyes of other countries. As a result, countries including, Canada and Italy have passed laws, memorandum of associations and resolutions against Sri Lanka. For those reasons, Sri Lanka's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence are threatened. Therefore, the research problem is to inquire whether Sri Lanka is ready to fight disinformation committed by LTTE and its international networks. Research has utilized a qualitative approach, where existing sources are critically analyzed. Research is supplemented by both primary and secondary sources, primary sources such as legislation and secondary sources such as books and journal articles. The research looks into disinformation, its repercussions, Sri Lanka's predicament, international responses, gaps and lacunas to combat and minimize disinformation. In the end, research has identified Sri Lanka's lack of confidence and expertise to fight disinformation and consequentially, research has provided recommendations.

Keywords: Crimes, Disinformation, Falsehoods, Information war, LTTE, Sri Lanka

I. Introduction

(Tekwani , 2006) mentions that, "security has been [Traditionally] defined as military defence of territory, within a state system whose chief characteristic is a security competition based upon (primarily military) power. This concept has evolved in recent years to include, apart from the conventional military and political issues, a variety of economic, social and environmental issues, broadly defined under the umbrella of non-traditional security." Where in past, "terrorism" was regarded as purely a militaristic threat for national security, at present, it has shifted to non-traditional security setting "and in the current global environment is a pre-eminent issue of concern". At present, warfare strategy has been shifted to virtual space where war is fought online.

Information warfare is widely used by terrorists, extremists, politically and profit-driven individuals to attain their illegitimate objectives. As mentioned by, (Church,2000) "The new warfare has variously been labelled "Cyberwar", "Information Warfare", "Network Centric Warfare", "Information Operations" and "Command & Control Warfare" (C2W). Labels aside, nobody has presented an accurate model of what the new warfare will be. The result is that concepts, doctrine and definitions are lacking, so MOEs cannot possibly be developed. Indeed, no quantifiable definition of the term "Information", itself, has been". Nonetheless, terrorists use the internet to fight a war. The Internet has become a necessity

in our present context. It goes beyond information sharing as it is wholly digitalised. The imperativeness and closeness of the internet to human life, itself has made the internet a vulnerability to humans. The reason is, the internet has become a haven to commit crimes, and promote propaganda, hate speech, false news, disinformation and other such acts. “Cyber terrorism includes, hacking, spamming, unleashing of viruses, invasion of databases and critical infrastructures linked to the Internet, theft of identity, and assorted crime for profit perpetrated online, the Internet exposes key vulnerabilities of individuals, corporations and nations.”. However, terrorists go beyond spamming, hacking and phishing, they are now deliberately manipulating content and creating division in the community. Social media is a tool used by terrorists to wage an information war. (Weimann, 2015) mentions that, “Increasingly, terrorist groups and their sympathizers are using predominantly Western online communities like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Myspace, and Instagram, as well as their Arabic equivalents. Counterterrorism expert Anthony Bergin says that terrorists view these youth-dominated websites as recruitment tools “in the same way a paedophile might look at those sites to potentially groom would-be victims”, terrorists’ most important purposes online are propaganda, radicalization, and recruitment. “The rationale and success behind using social media are it is cost-effective, hard to track, widespread and digitalized.

Sri Lanka is a country, which still suffers terrorism irrespective of militarily defeating LTTE. “Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), guerrilla organization [headed by Velupillai Prabhakaran] that sought to establish an independent Tamil state, Eelam, in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka.”¹ (Marks & Brar, 2016) mentions, “Until recently, Sri Lanka was the homeland of an illicit power structure unlike any other. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was an insurgency that privileged terrorism as a method of action yet ultimately fielded land, air, and sea regular forces, rounded out by powerful special operations and information capabilities. LTTE grew in capacity until it was capable of forcing the government to agree to a February 2002 cease-fire and the de facto existence of a Tamil state, or Tamil Eelam. Nevertheless, this victory of sorts produced a host of unforeseen consequences leading to the July 2006 resumption of hostilities. The result, in May 2009, was complete military defeat of the insurgency.” As much as vanquishing of militaristic aspect is commendable, the growing soft threat of online terrorism cannot be left unnoticed. As per, (Samarakoon, 2011) “Lankan government was more successful in getting the LTTE banned in 30 countries including the US and members of the EU, Canada and India. This was a major offline victory. The diplomatic means of the government became more helpful in getting the attention of the world powers to curb the LTTE.” Yet, regardless of massive efforts by the Sri Lankan government, LTTE and its international networks remain intact and they have been capable of infiltrating parliaments, passing laws and lobbying.

LTTE engages in “Disinformation”. According to (Innes, 2020), “Disinformation can be defined as “deviant information.” For where information is imparted to enhance awareness, insight, and understanding, disinforming communications blend intent and action to distort, deceive, and dissemble”. (Bayer, 2019) states ‘disinformation’ and ‘propaganda’ to describe phenomena characterised by four features, namely that: ‘designed to be false or manipulated or misleading (disinformation) or is content using unethical persuasion techniques (propaganda); has the intention of generating insecurity, tearing cohesion or inciting hostility, or directly to disrupt democratic processes; is on a topic of public interest; and often uses automated dissemination techniques to amplify the effect of the communication” . (Innes, 2020) further defines, disinformation as, “Deliberately misleading public communications have been found embedded within a number of information, interference, and influence operations and campaigns, authored and amplified by a range of state and non-state actors, variously targeting: significant democratic events, such as the 2016 US presidential election; “anti-vaxxer” narratives, that have significantly reduced “herd immunity” for highly infectious diseases such as measles; fuelling inter-ethnic conflicts in geo-political “hot-spots” such as Syria; and climate change denial conspiracies” LTTE’s disinformation campaign is mainly run in Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, in addition to web sites. (Kimmage, 2021) states, “Islamic State (IS) [has] produced a great deal of high-quality content that allowed it to craft a particular narrative and project an image of power The group also enjoyed greater freedom of online movement at the time, which made its content and contacts more readily accessible to potential recruits. Today, IS propaganda production is far more difficult. In addition to losing its “caliphate,” the group now operates in a more hostile social media landscape, making the content it does produce far less accessible.”

¹ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannic, 2020. Tamil TigersThe . *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tamil-Tigers> [Accessed July 17, 2022].

LTTE, even though has not reached wide spreads as much as ISIS has achieved which is mentioned afore, LTTE's disinformation campaigns have been more solid and detrimental to Sri Lanka and have successfully tainted the country's image. The main disinformation allegations levied on Sri Lanka are, Genocide, Human rights law violations, Humanitarian law violations, Causing inter-generational trauma and the Loss of the Tamil Homeland. As (Bala, Mytili 2015) state "Conflict-generated diasporas, including Tamils, Irish, Kurds, Armenians, Liberians, and others, are now able to serve as vocal transnational advocates, shaping post-conflict transitional justice agendas. While these new roles may help broker peace, scholars have also questioned whether conflict-generated diaspora groups, motivated by identity politics, may play a destabilizing role". Even though, "Many human rights and civil society organizations express deep discomfort with affiliating with groups linked to the LTTE and want to avoid any appearance of whitewashing LTTE crimes, which included suicide bombings, disappearances, child conscription, ethnic cleansing, and targeted killings" LTTE and its international networks have been capable of legalizing their claim on 'genocide'. The laws, memorandum of associations and resolutions, which are resultant effects of LTTE's disinformation campaign, will be discussed late in the paper. Therefore, the real question remains as to whether Sri Lanka is capable of negating those fictitious claims. Given the technical capacity, information literacy and diplomatic ties in the country, Sri Lanka needs a much more stringent strategy to negate the disinformation campaign of LTTE.

II. Methodology 250

The research problem is to; inquire whether Sri Lanka is ready to fight disinformation committed by LTTE and its international networks. To achieve solve the problem; research has utilized a qualitative approach, where existing sources are critically analyzed. According to, (Creswell, 2012) "qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures...making interpretations of the meaning of data". In addition, (Yılmaz,2013), states that "qualitative research is "an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (Bhandari, 2022) states that, Qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. The research has gone beyond a traditional phenomenon. The research looks at an aspect of terrorism beyond a traditional approach. The research looks into, how LTTE and its international networks engage in disinformation campaigns, which is a seldom-discussed fact. To do that research has completely relied on existing sources, however, has looked beyond the traditional scope and has discussed possibilities Sri Lanka might face. Research is supplemented by both primary and secondary sources, primary sources such as legislation and secondary sources such as books and journal articles were utilized.

III. Results and Discussion

A) Online terrorism

(Samarakoon, 2011) states that, In fact as Curran, Concannon and McKeever (in Janczewski and Colarik 2008: 03) have pointed out, "LTTE became the world's first terrorist outfit to attack a country's computer system in 1998. "In 1998, a terrorist guerrilla [the LTTE] organization flooded Sri Lankan embassies with 800 e-mails a day for two weeks. The messages simply read, "We are the Internet Black Tigers and we're doing this to interrupt your communications." This finely depicts LTTE's sophisticated strategy. Using cyberspace to threaten the sovereignty of Sri Lanka was done years before the upheaval of social media. Now the focus of LTTE from cyberspace has shifted to virtual space, which means social media. As per, (Fernando, 2020) "the spread of this technology means that the line between fact and fiction may be blurred with negative consequences. Either people will believe the videos, which, if released at strategic times, could sway public opinion in an election or incite protests, or people will stop believing in videos as objective depictions of reality, which will make it increasingly difficult to prove a fact." It can be seen that LTTE and its international networks strategy is a success. The disinformation campaigns against Sri Lanka have allowed them to reach heights by infiltrating parliaments

and passing litigation including, 117th US Congress Resolution 413, 46/1 Resolution and Tamil Genocide Education Week Act.

It is imperative to look into disinformation campaigns committed by LTTE and its international networks using websites, which were the primary steps they utilized successfully. (Samarakoon, 2011) gives a range of websites created by LTTE, which endangers Sri Lanka's national security. "The www.tamilnet.com was among popular websites that campaigned for a separate Eelam, launched in 1997. Tamil net was the major organ of news aimed at non-Tamil speakers, which was published in three European languages including English- the other two languages being German and French. LTTE used international languages on the Internet and it enabled them to reach their foreign sympathizers and damage the image of the Sri Lankan state. He further cites a few more websites such as www.tamilnation.org, www.eelam.com, www.eelam.com/tamileelam, www.tamilcanadian.com, www.tamileelamnews.com, and www.tamileditors.com and www.eelamweb.com. In addition, in "Tamil net and the International Press – Global Coverage of radical Press", Ubayasiri has analysed the pervasiveness of the propaganda of the LTTE, by the year 2007, www.tamilnet.com had produced an estimated 21,000 reports since 1997 (<http://ejournalist.com.au/v6n1/ubayasiri621.pdf>). Moreover, <https://pearlaction.org/tamil-genocide/> is another active and successful non-profit organization funding LTTE, which alleges Sri Lanka of committing genocide. LTTE does not stop from the front, cover and sympathetic organisations, it goes beyond that. LTTE vastly uses Online Diaspora. According to, (Tekwani, 2006) Diaspora Sri Lankan Tamils can read Eelam newspapers; listen to Eelam Radio; mail Eelam e-cards showing Eelam maps and flags to friends on festive occasions; to listen to tapes of their 'national leader's speeches; refer to online yellow pages, web directories for information on Eelam Tamils. Moreover, online newsgroups and forums on Tamil websites offer a platform for discussions on the Tamil struggle for a separate state and a showcase for the history, culture, traditions and politics of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. In addition to the websites hosted by the LTTE, pro-LTTE and pro-Eelam sites, personal homepages maintained by expatriate Tamils in cities and universities across the western world provide virtual Eelam and its citizens a dynamic and very visible presence on the World Wide Web. Visible and vibrant that Sri Lankan Tamils are said to 'inhabit a cyberspace Eelam'

The main challenge Sri Lanka faces is, Intra and Intergroup communication, which means, the Internet enables dispersed members of terrorist groups to communicate with each other covertly, and anonymously. Due to privacy settings used by the anonymous cover, where LTTE has functioned using avatars, determining who pro-LTTE are and having terrorist ideologies, are hard factors to be extracted. In addition, networked terrorist groups use the internet to communicate with other groups with similar goals. Another factor, recognized by scholars is, linking diasporic groups to militant networks, which means, "Diasporic groups settled outside their homelands are educated and computer literate³. Further, Asians are known to use the Internet to keep abreast of news from home and to network with others from their community. "Many diasporic groups, such as the Sri Lankan Tamils also use the Internet to support terrorist movements by providing political support in the form of propaganda and lobbying international public opinion." ⁴ Another disinformation tactic, used by LTTE and its international networks is, there acts of Framing news and actions to cater to their ideologies without the intervention of government or media censors.

B) False claims against Sri Lanka by LTTE

The use of the internet by LTTE and its international networks has resulted in disinformation. False allegations posed on Sri Lanka include Tamil genocide, Human rights law violations and Humanitarian law violations.

Sri Lanka is a party to the 1948 Geneva Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (GC). Genocide is defined as, "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a) Killing members of the group, b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in

³ Tekwani, Shyam. "The LTTE's Online Network and Its Implications for Regional Security." *Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Singapore*, 2006.

⁴ Ibid

whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group and e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Now looking at the definition, Sri Lanka has not committed genocide, to commit genocide “a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”. LTTE is a terrorist organization. Sri Lankan government military defeated the ruthless terrorist organization, which was proscribed by many countries. The war was between Sri Lankan government and LTTE and it was never between Sinhalese and Tamils. As per Article 1 of the United Nations Charter, the purposes of the United Nations are, “To maintain international peace and security. To take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace”. This exhibits the ability of a state to defend its rights to maintain peace. Further, Section 2(1) of the UN charter states that the Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members. Art. 2 (4) states Prohibition of the threat or use of force in international relations. Article 2 (7) states, “UN has no authority to intervene in matters which are within the domestic jurisdiction of any state, while this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII of the Charter”. The false allegation of the Tamil genocide is defaming Sri Lanka and at present, Sri Lanka has not defended her rights sufficiently neither legally nor by way of social media.

Sri Lanka is also accused of violating human rights. The Sri Lankan government conducted a humanitarian operation to safeguard the rights of Sri Lankans irrespective of ethnicity, gender, religion or language. The militaristic victory of the government resulted in territorial integrity and sovereignty. On the other hand, LTTE closed the gates of the Mavil Aru reservoir, cut the water supply to villages by preventing access to water, used human shields, detained civilians, used suicide bombers and conscripted child soldiers, where all these acts of LTTE were human rights violations”.

Another deliberate false claim about Sri Lanka is that Sri Lanka has committed International humanitarian law violations (IHL). In reality, Sri Lanka abided by IHL. Sri Lanka did not attack civilians or non-military targets, whereas LTTE attacked non-military targets. They assassinated prominent world leaders, civil servants, parliamentarians, journalists, military officers, police officers and the public as a whole. Additionally, they bombed Central Bank, Bandaranaike International Air Port Colombo, and religious places including the Temple of Tooth Relic, and Jaya Sri Maha Bodhiya⁵ which were economic places and religious places.

C) International responses

As a result of continuous disinformation by LTTE and its international networks, resolutions, laws and memorandums of associations have passed against Sri Lanka, setting precedents. One such example is the 117th US Congress Resolution 413. The resolution recognizes the Traditional Tamil Homeland in the Northeast of Sri Lanka, which was never there. Sri Lanka is a “unitary state”, claiming a separate Tamil Homeland by a resolution gives their claim a legal basis. This false claim attacks the territorial integrity as well as the sovereignty of the country.

Moreover, another result of disinformation is the Tamil Genocide Education Week Act of the Ontario parliament. As per the Act, “The seven days in each year ending on May 18 is proclaimed as Tamil Genocide Education Week. Moreover, “during that period, all Ontarians are encouraged to educate themselves about, and to maintain their awareness of, the Tamil genocide and other genocides that have occurred in world history.” The Act further states that, “Tamil-Ontarians have families still suffering in their homeland in the north and east of the island of Sri Lanka. They have lost their loved ones and have been physically or mentally traumatized by the genocide that the Sri Lankan state perpetrated against the Tamils during the civil war which lasted from 1983 to 2009, and especially so in May of 2009.” Educating the future of the society on a genocide, which never took place, and putting it on law and making it binding has legalised Tamil genocide in Ontario. Following the footsteps, The Palermo City council has signed a Memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Italian- Tamil community recognizing the Tamil Genocide.

D) Gaps, loopholes and weaknesses

⁵ Patabendige, Charani. “Countering the False Claims by LTTE.” *Colombo Telegraph*, 22 May 2021, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/countering-the-false-claims-by-ltte/>.

Irrespective of the victory of the militaristic war against LTTE, Sri Lanka has failed to effectively combat, criminalize and minimize disinformation conducted by LTTE. There are various reasons behind the failure to address disinformation. Sri Lanka must understand the stratagem of LTTE and its international networks. They have shifted from propaganda, Funding, Procurement and Shipping towards, Lobbying, Litigation and Lawmaking. Sri Lanka also lacks adequate technology countermeasures, criminalizing legislation, Diaspora backing, and information and media literacy.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Joseph Goebbels: On the “Big Lie” has stated, “If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it”. Therefore, it is crystalline that LTTE and its international networks are doing the same. Even though Sri Lanka has won the war militarily, due to the disinformation campaign conducted online by LTTE, Sri Lanka’s guiltlessness is questioned repeatedly. The laws, resolutions and memorandum of associations that have passed and the front, cover and sympathetic organisations of LTTE and its international networks are threatening Sri Lanka’s national security. Due to those reasons, it is clear, that Sri Lanka is not ready to fight disinformation committed by LTTE and its international networks. In light of that, the below recommendations can be taken into account to fight disinformation.

Sri Lanka can introduce separate legislation to criminalize online falsehoods and manipulations. The Act can criminalize disinformation. The Act should consist of calibrated remedies, appeal procedures, correction directions, fact-checking methods and reporting procedures. More importantly, Act should have an extraterritorial application to criminalize falsehoods committed outside Sri Lanka as well. It is important to instil media and information literacy in the public including journalists, to spot what is fake and what is a fact. Therefore, if anyone comes with material, secret information relating to terrorism or any such action it can be reported. Introducing a team of cyber warriors to report false narratives and counter them successfully. The said personnel should be technologically trained and given adequate research opportunities on par with international standards.

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