

CHAPTER 7

Justicecraft in the Age of Disinformation: Narratives and Counter-Narratives

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Abstract

This chapter examines how disinformation and counter-narratives shaped Bangladesh's July 2024 Quota Reform Movement and the political uprising that followed, framed through Justicecraft. Drawing on empirical cases, it shows how actors ranging from the Awami League and opposition parties to student groups, civil society, and external players used partial truths, emotive rhetoric, historical revisionism, and coordinated digital campaigns to sway opinion, delegitimize rivals, and mobilize supporters. These strategies blurred fact–fiction boundaries, deepened polarization, and eroded trust in institutions. At the same time, protesters, fact-checkers, journalists, and diaspora activists employed humor, satire, verification networks, and media literacy to resist propaganda and protect the movement's legitimacy. Highlighting the dual nature of digital infrastructures as both enablers of truth-telling and vehicles of manipulation, the chapter calls for integrated responses—combining technology, civic education, cross-sector collaboration, and media freedom—to counter disinformation's destabilizing effects and safeguard democratic discourse in times of political change.

Introduction

The July 2024 uprising occurred in the context of heightened political polarisation and nation-wide protests. Over the last two decades, misinformation and disinformation campaigns by various political actors and interest groups have worsened the political divide for general Bangladeshis. As digital platforms have become central to political communication, discussions on social networks have changed the way individuals interpret events, gained support, influenced political changes and participated in political debates. Meanwhile, social platforms' algorithmic design blur the line between facts and lies, which hurts public trust (Lazer et al 2018). As in many other countries, political actors in Bangladesh these days are increasingly relying on digital platforms to spread partisan narratives, garner support, discredit opponents and mobilize their supporters. During the July uprising we have seen both the former government and opposition actors actively trying to shape how people interpret events. As these conflicting narratives

circulated repeatedly across different media and online communities, many ordinary people found it increasingly difficult to separate fact from lies. (“INFORMATION DISORDER : Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making,” n.d.) For example, a survey conducted in Rangpur determined that 92.7% of students believed that there was ample amount of fake content, of which 72.7% identified Facebook as the leading platform. (Islam et al. 2023) Over half identified such strategies as being politically motivated to harm opposing parties. It is not known, however, whether such findings extend beyond Rangpur.

This chapter discusses how disinformation within narratives and counter-narratives contributed to the July 2024 Uprising in Bangladesh. It will explore how various groups such as the ruling political party, opposition parties, student groups, and civil societies employed these strategies and responded to them, and how the strategies pursued political objectives; it will also illustrate how the strategies impacted the revolution. By analyzing the strategies employed, the reactions of the people, and the broader implications of these actions, this chapter will demonstrate how disinformation and different narratives were employed to inform political debates and social movements within Bangladesh today.

The framework draws attention to five key dimensions of Justicecraft: affect, as emotional appeals and visual content played a central role in mobilization and repression; knowledge, as competing truth claims shaped public understanding; skill, as both state and non-state actors deployed advanced digital tools; labor, as coordinated digital workforces and volunteer fact-checkers engaged in sustained narrative struggles; and materiality, as digital artifacts such as images, hashtags, and deep fakes became battlegrounds of political legitimacy. Taken together, these elements offer a comprehensive lens to understand how disinformation and counter-narratives shaped the contested landscape of political transformation during the July uprising.

Defining and Contextualizing Disinformation

Recent scholarship on disinformation shows that its effectiveness lies not primarily in the outright fabrication of facts but in its ability to blend partial truths, emotional appeals, and identity driven narratives that reshape political debates. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that many of the most persuasive disinformation campaigns begin with a kernel of truth that is stripped of context and reframed to fit political agendas. This is clearly reflected in Bangladesh’s July uprising 2024 where historical grievances such as the use of the word Razakar from 1971 was reactivated and distorted to delegitimize the demands of student protestors. The former government labeled student protestors as descendants of Razakars to discredit their calls for reforming the quota system which had been hurting career prospects of many young people of Bangladesh for a long time.

Starbird and Wilson (2019) builds on this logic by describing how disinformation thrives in participatory digital environments where both state and nonstate actors use emotionally charged narratives to push polarized identities. This is especially relevant to Bangladesh's case where emotionally charged fears of Islamist extremism have become embedded in public discourse. The Awami League's long standing narrative that links opposition groups like jamaat-e-Islami or even student protestors to extremism taps directly into these fears. As these claims circulate repeatedly across media and online networks, they not only discredit political dissent but also produce self reinforcing cycles of public fear making disinformation narratives more difficult to disentangle from legitimate security concerns. This strategy was not used against the protest movement as a whole but targeted individuals. One of the student protestors and the first martyr of the uprising, Abu Sayed was accused of ties with Jamaat's student wing, Shibir. That narrative spread online quickly and served to justify the state's use of lethal force against him.

Waisbord (2018) situates these dynamics within what he terms "truth wars" where political disputes no longer center on factual disagreements but on deeper identity based conflicts that undermine the very possibility of shared realities. This was evident during the uprising as government supporters consumed narratives framing protests as Islamist conspiracies by Jamaat/Shibir, while protestors circulated their own documentation of state violence and repression. Over time these competing versions of reality polarized public opinion and eroded trust in media and institutions which is a pattern Waisbord identifies as central to modern disinformation crises.

This chapter, therefore, adopts a framework informed by elements of Justicecraft for analyzing disinformation and counter-narratives during Bangladesh's political transformation. It focuses on how narrative framing was used to shape perceptions of legitimacy, resistance, and support during the revolution, while also examining strategic mobilization through digital platforms that amplified or suppressed these narratives. While chapter 4 highlighted how youth and diaspora actors used digital platforms to mobilize, build solidarity, and archive protest memory, this chapter turns to the contested digital terrain where those efforts were constantly threatened. To be particular, disinformation campaigns were disrupting grassroots agency by undermining the legitimacy of the protest by weaponizing political memory through distorted historical narratives and manipulating digital mobilization by flooding social media platforms with coordinated false narratives, bots, and algorithmically pushed propaganda.

In this chapter, justicecraft provides a lens to examine how protestors navigated an evolving information war that directly challenged their truth production, memory preservation and political agency. Using this tool, this chapter points out disinformation campaigns and counter-narratives during Bangladesh's political transformation and examines how these shaped the revolution positively and negatively, as well as how people reacted to them. It aims to

provide a broader picture of disinformation campaigns and counter-narratives during the revolution.

The Disinformation Battlefield

The Quota System Reform 2024 movement gained momentum in an environment that is full of rumour, misinformation, and false stories. The rise of fake news globally has made it more difficult to know when information is incorrect. This has also made us vulnerable to being swayed by individuals who don't care about what is best for us (Lazer et al. 2018). Different groups, like political parties within the region, international news channels, and online groups, attempted to shift the way individual perceived issues, manipulate the protests, and dictate how information was transmitted. They soon employed lies and misinformation.

The Awami League (AL) as the ruling party shaped the government's narrative around the Quota Movement. The party controls the distribution of information and suppresses opposing views through media control. They cast themselves as the only champions of national stability and unity. The party's youth wings and online supporters emphasized government achievements while describing the Quota Movement as a threat to peace. The strategy included narratives that stressed the theme of national unity, represented the AL as the protector of social order, and intimated that the movement could lead to chaos and attract foreign interference.

We observed that the official Twitter and Facebook handles of AL propagated fake videos. The videos showed student demonstrators as violent attackers on law enforcers, ignoring verified assaults committed by police officials and Chhatra League members (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). The hashtags #SaveBangladeshFromAnarchy and #QuotaMovementConspiracy represented the movement as a conspiracy by rival groups, backed by external forces like Pakistan and the US.

AL attempted to prove that it was the sole guardian of the unity of the nation. They attempted to tarnish other political parties by labeling their opponents unpatriotic or harmful to the security of the nation. They gave false information regarding how quota reform functions. They altered the facts and used biased comparisons to confuse and instigate fear. As an example, AL party leaders mentioned and promoted that the quota system occupied 56% of government positions but didn't indicate that there were greater quotas for certain industries. For instance, the vacancies for primary school assistant teachers contained greater than 90% quotas but only 4% for merit recruitment.

Fact-checking reports indicated that the Awami League and its affiliates were the most frequently mentioned organizations in misinformation reports, particularly during the July-August movement. BAL's affiliated social media spread false reports about the deaths of Chhatra League activists and claims that attackers were members of rival groups. (The Daily Star 2025)

Otherside, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition party, tried to capitalise people's unhappiness by talking about important social issues and economic struggles. They focused on the anger over social unfairness, corruption, unfair elections where they did not participate and economic concerns to stand against the government.

External actors also played a significant role in the disinformation landscape in Bangladesh. Indian media outlets and online Hindutva groups amplified narratives that linked the Quota Movement to regional security concerns and border issues. These groups occasionally highlighted violent incidents to instill fear and raise tensions between groups by projecting the violence against Bangladeshi Hindus as community issues rather than political ones. Social media monitoring tools identified that most fake news handles that propagated false information belonged to India. The fake news handles employed hashtags such as #HindusAreNotSafeinBangladesh and #SaveHindusinBangladesh to continuously propagate false reports. Some Hindutva handles also requested the help of India and falsely warned that Islamic extremists would capture Bangladesh if Hasina resigned. Different non-state actors such as social media influencers, student groups, and religious leaders facilitated the sharing of information. Social media influencers and citizen journalists live-streamed the protests on Facebook and YouTube to display both thrilling and mundane moments to engage viewers. Facebook was used by the student groups to mobilize the protesters, provide updates, and organize. Religious leaders with large online followers supported the movement on religious grounds. The combination of global and local voices along with false information made it difficult to understand what was occurring during the 2024 Quota Movement and was sometimes ambiguous. False information was created by exploiting issues within society, altering historical events, and through deep fakes and AI-created content. This illustrates how difficult it is to determine what is real and what is not, and how social media influences political discourse and social movements. To further analyse the Quota Movement, consider using a framework that assesses the specific narratives used by each group, the dissemination channels they employed, and the overall impact on public opinion and political stability. This approach could help in developing strategies to counter disinformation and promote more informed public discourse. Additionally, consider researching the specific legislative or regulatory actions that could limit foreign interference during times of political instability.

Awami League's Digital Narratives

The ruling Awami League has emphasized its contribution to the struggle for Bangladesh's independence in 1971. This connection to a hard period during the freedom struggle is meant to provoke strong emotions. The party positions itself as the defender of stability and unity. The followers are made to be proud to be nationalists. The party frames the other parties as threats to the interests of the nation or implies that the opposition is being dictated to by external forces. (Menaldo 2016) It cautions that calls such as quota changes will bring uncertainty and allow

external powers to stop Bangladesh's growth. (Menaldo 2016) The intentional invocation of past knowledge serves to support political power and thus potentially sideline pluralized histories and perspectives present in the country.

On Facebook, fake news, pictures, and trending updates are posted, and groups who believe similarly are formed. Materiality plays a pivotal role as the Awami League extensively utilizes digital platforms. It shares crucial information with hashtags and retweets on Twitter. It provides short edited clips on YouTube in favor of the party. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) All such techniques use social algorithms to communicate certain messages to specific groups. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012) The Awami League uses political framing and historical stories to stay seen as the only protector of unity and stability. (Menaldo 2016) These channels disseminate both official narratives and carefully crafted misinformation. Labor-intensive coordinated efforts involve Awami League's cyber teams producing fake news, doctored images, and misleading content to shape public perception strategically.

Over time, these disinformation tactics increase division and hurt honest public discussion, which can damage Bangladesh's democracy. Regarding quota reform protests, the party calls them phony, saying they come from hidden motives instead of real concerns about the system. This story is strengthened by media control through pro-government outlets, cyber teams, and leaked WhatsApp messages. (Hushen, 2024) Groups like the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami are shown as harmful. As their narrative grows, it highlights the clash between ideals of freedom and the reality of strict control.

Delegitimizing Protest through Extremist Tropes

Government supporters aggressively tried to delegitimize the quota protesters by framing them as Islamist or militant actors. A student leader interviewed in July 2024 recounted how protest leaders like Abu Sayed were labeled Shibir or Jamaat agents—a calculated invocation of historical trauma to dampen public sympathy.¹ My post-event review of official and partisan social media posts confirmed this trend: protest participants were routinely branded “Shibir agents” or foreign conspirators, clearly part of a broader disinformation playbook.

For instance, Supreme Court lawyer Manjur Al Matin—who filed a writ petition on July 30 to halt police violence—was immediately smeared with false claims of family connections to Jamaat and Shibir (Dismislab, “Manzur Al Matin's family not related to Jamaat,” August 6, 2024). Similarly, when teenager Farhan Faiyaaz was tragically killed on July 18, rumormongers circulated a fictitious “Shibir leader” behind the violence; a Comilla University rally photo was also misrepresented, falsely depicting students as Shibir cadres. Extremist video narratives went viral too—clips showing armed individuals allegedly linked to Shibir were later debunked as

¹ Personal communication, July 2024.

misdated or actually connected to ruling-party figures (Dismislab, “How disinformation stoked fear, panic and confusion during Bangladesh’s student-led revolution,” August 29, 2024).

These distortions echo a broader pattern documented by Dismislab and summarized in The Daily Star: a surge of identity-based misinformation during the protests, aimed at framing dissent as rooted in Islamist extremism (The Daily Star 2025).

State Actors’ Digital Strategies

Facebook was the epicenter of information & misinformation during the movement. As Bangladesh’s most widely used social network, it hosted live streams of protests, calls to action, widely used by all student protest leaders on facebook. It was also used to circulate countless fake news posts and doctored images (passing of old photos as new). Many of the false rumours detailed earlier first appeared or went viral on Facebook. Political actors leveraged facebook pages and groups to drive their narrative. For example, Awami League’s verified pages not only propagated official statements but in some cases shared false claims (like denying large protests being held. I would say coordinated networks of pro-government facebook accounts posted identical talking points to trend the idea that the protestors were agitators from Jamaat-e-Islami.

During the height of the July uprising, former prime minister sheikh hasina was facing immense public criticism for her perceived detachment from the suffering of the student demonstrators. One particular moment that drew widespread frustration was her emotional reaction to the damage done to the metro rail when she could have personally visited injured students whose lives had been directly impacted by state violence. To cover up for this backlash, AL supporters used a common disinformation tactic of reusing old photos or videos to frame them as current scenes to mislead the public about the scale or nature of events. While public frustration continued to grow, images of the former prime minister visiting injured students suddenly began circulating across social media platforms. However, visual analysis revealed that these photos were not recent, but had originally been taken in 2021 and were strategically re-uploaded during the 2024 uprising. Both the official Awami League Facebook page and ICT minister Zunaid Ahmed Palak shared these recycled images to project a more favorable image of the government’s response (Zunaid Ahmed Palak’s facebook ID, 2024). Although Palak’s account has been deactivated since the fall of the government, some of these proofs live in posts where people made fun of the government's attempt to manipulate public sentiment.

This tactic reflects how Justicecraft operates through *materiality* as digital artifacts like old photographs are used to shape political narratives and influence public emotions. Simultaneously it also shows the *skill* involved in curating and deploying selective media content to manage public perception in real time. Yet, despite these efforts, independent fact checkers, activists, and ordinary people saw through the disinformation tactics and exposed them. In this sense,

knowledge in justicecraft is not just about having facts but also about the collective work of uncovering, verifying, and defending truth in the face of competing narratives.

Starting July 15, images from past protests and unrelated incidents began recirculating as if they were recent. For example, On July 17, an image of students holding a candlelight vigil in Uttara was misrepresented on Facebook as a march by the Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami's student wing at Dhaka University (Dismislab Team 2024), an attempt to paint the secular student protest as an Islamist gathering. During and after the internet blackout, such misattributions only increased. With limited real-time news, people were susceptible to any visuals that popped up online. Propagandists took advantage by pushing outdated photos as "live" events. For instance, a photo of a July 16 protest in Mirpur was recycled weeks later with claims it took place on July 29, misleading some activists to show up for a non-existent demonstration (only to face police harassment) (Dismislab Team 2024).

The pro-government accounts routinely denied the existence of large-scale protests or strategically misrepresented events, aiming to erase genuine demonstrations from public consciousness. The use of these tactics reflects strategic use of mobilizing *knowledge* by manipulating historical context of protest events, weaponizing *affect* by tapping into communal fears and public outrage, deploying *materiality* through recycled images, doctored visuals and misleading hashtags; exercising *labor* through coordinated digital workforces of party supporters, affiliated activists and etc and systematic reposting efforts and *skill* in leveraging platform algorithms and communication networks to sustain misinformation at scale. Verified official pages participated directly in these manipulations which shows authoritative influence in shaping deceptive narratives. While these efforts temporarily helped deny the scale and legitimacy of the uprising, they also risked eroding public trust in state narratives as repeated exposure to falsehoods invited growing skepticism and resistance among people.

Chhatra League's Role in Disinformation and Coercion

The Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) is a student wing of the ruling party, Awami League. BCL is a significant player in the 2024 Quota Movement. Previously, BCL has been accused of attacking protesters, spreading misinformation, and attempting to intimidate those who dissent. BCL has a past history of being blamed for all forms of violence and intimidation. Previously, BCL activists have been associated with torture, extortions, and killings. It is said that BCL activists attacked protesters with weapons for the most part and collaborated with police and other government forces in the Quota Movement. These attacks escalated violence and silenced opposing voices in protests.

The BCL's history of intimidation and brutality kept people in fear and afraid to criticize them, both on and off social media. Many individuals didn't want to criticize the government or BCL for fear of being persecuted. This fear, coupled with the government using misinformation to

shape what people understood, made it more difficult for protesters to organize and communicate their message. The BCL utilized social media to promote their own message and to dispel what protesters were saying. Utilizing their political knowledge and knowledge of government intentions, the BCL labeled the protests as a threat to the stability of the country. This assisted in helping them justify what they were doing and to garner sympathy from those who supported the ruling party. They utilized this information to minimize what protesters were saying and to quiet opposition.

The BCL participated in the Quota Reform Movement by halting protests with threats and force. The BCL members would gather and intimidate protesters, disrupt their activities, and instill fear. This made it difficult for the protesters to organize and spread their message. The BCL wanted things to remain unchanged and supported the government. Their passion resulted in hardly any protests and muted opposing voices. The government assisted the BCL immensely, and as a result of this support, their activities became effective. They got money, organizational support, and immunity from legal issues. This materiality allowed the BCL to operate with impunity and further suppress dissent. An interviewee who was not a student protestor, but a doctor from Dhaka Medical Hospital who helped aiding wounded students told me there were hospital raids carried out by Chhatra League members to destroy evidence of state-perpetrated violence.² Upon investigating this, I found multiple reports suggesting that hospitals were indeed raided following the crackdown, particularly in Dhaka. While hospitals that were reportedly raided recorded minimal or no casualties, others especially private clinics or those outside immediate government control registered up to 1,119 deaths during the post-protest period (Al Jazeera, 2024; UN 2025). These discrepancies aligned with the interviewee's claim and raised serious concerns about the integrity of official death tolls.³ These stories, first introduced to me by an eyewitness with digital organizing experience, were later corroborated by multiple fact-checking investigations.

The BCL's actions contributed to an environment of fear and self-censorship, making it difficult for protesters to organise and disseminate their message. The spread of disinformation further complicated the situation, as false rumours and propaganda clouded the truth and distorted public perception. Social media was weaponized through culturally charged narratives and historical revisionism, inciting fear and communal conflict.

BNP's Counter-Narratives

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) views these protests as a fair reaction to government corruption, tight control, and unfair rules. They use social media to plan protests, share real-time updates, and show pictures or videos of government actions. (Al-Zaman 2024) BNP leaders believe many people are angry because of money problems, political pressure, and human rights issues. They say the government has not fixed these serious problems.

² Personal communication, May 2025.

³ Personal communication, July 2024.

The BNP points out that student groups worked very hard. These students organized big protests, posted on social media, and reached out to people for support. Their goal was to unite citizens against harsh government actions. They also wanted others to care about those hurt by the government.

Many protesters used Facebook, YouTube, and VPNs to get around internet blocks. (Al-Zaman 2024) This helped them spread uncensored information. According to the BNP, this proves the government is doing a poor job, so major democratic changes are needed. Justicecraft refers to enabling people who are normally not able to speak out to have a voice. (Balasco et al. 2024) The next question is to consider global media reporting on these actions and whether their accounts are more like AL or BNP. We should consider as well the ways in which digital media transformed group organization and whether group action or linked action played a more significant role. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012)

Justicecraft under Siege

One of the most emotionally charged weapons during the 2024 July uprising was trying to take advantage of already existing social tensions. "Razakar" has a potent history which was used to describe collaborators of the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. This word was repurposed in 2024 during the early stages of the July uprising (when it was merely a quota movement) by actors aligned with the former government to smear student protestors as traitors or extremists. After the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina claimed that quota reforms would benefit the descendants of Razakars only, a wave of propaganda started circulating across Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) branding protestors as anti national. In response, students protester hijacked the term with ironic hashtags like #IAMRazakar, using satire and self-aware memes to neutralize its weaponization.

This clash over the word "Razakar" is just one example of how digital platforms were used to rewrite history and shape public emotion. Behind the slogans and hashtags, a larger strategy was at work as online platforms like Facebook and Youtube soon became active battlefields where both sides were actively using visuals, algorithms, and coordinated posts to confuse, divide, and control the narrative. Therefore, social media also became a place where justicecraft was relentlessly challenged and subverted. The core elements of justicecraft — knowledge, labor, skill, affect, and materiality — became tools both sides tried to control. While activists and civil society worked to use them to push back against disinformation, state-linked groups and outside actors used the same tools to spread false narratives and confusion. What follows is an examination of how digital infrastructures and emotional dynamics shaped the contested information sphere, and how justicecraft became both a necessity and a site of conflict.

One of the clearest signs of this battle was how organized efforts both inside and outside the country tried to control what people saw and believed online. Facebook was the biggest source of disinformation, where over 2,330 cases were recorded in 2024. Across this platform, there is evidence of coordinated 'inauthentic behavior' and exploitation of algorithms to amplify certain narratives. Pro-government actors, for example, are known to have digital teams (often informally dubbed "cyber forces") who swarm social media with the party line. During the quota protests, these teams likely mass-posted identical content and comments, attempting to dominate comment sections and drown out dissenting voices. Signs of coordination included multiple new accounts created in July that exclusively posted anti-protest or pro-Hasina content, sometimes copying and pasting the same slogans (like accusing students of being misled by the opposition party).

Investigations by tech watchdogs found that many misleading communal posts were circulated by accounts tweeting the same content nearly simultaneously—often within seconds or minutes of each other. This pattern strongly suggests the involvement of bots or botnets, rather than manual human postings (Shevtsov et al. 2020; Shao et al. 2017; Sultana 2024). These networks exploited the information blackout and political transition, taking advantage of infrastructural vulnerabilities—such as slow fact-checking and moderation gaps—to jam disinformation into digital platforms. This demonstrates how materiality and labor intersect in justicecraft analysis: actors weaponized automation tools to co-opt networked infrastructures for propaganda.

Paid promotions, sharing by users, and algorithms' aid are large contributing factors to the propagation of misinformation. Even during the time the government closed the internet down, political Facebook ads continued to run, 97% of the USD 33,992 spent on the ads attempting to shift the blame to the opposition and to "third parties." This was an attempt to blame the government less and to make the opposition less credible. Algorithms' aid made matters worse by further propagating misinformation, forming echo chambers, and consolidating current convictions.

The algorithms of these platforms generally favor content that is engaging. Here the affective dimension of justicecraft (though often manipulated) comes into play. The contents were often emotionally charged, sensational, or partisan and this bias resulted in polarization like users who engaged with extreme or fake content would get more of the same contents recommended which pushed them further into one narrative camp. Facebook's news feed likely started soiling users depending on whether they interacted more with pro protest posts or pro government posts, which reinforced their existing viewpoint (a classic echo chamber effect). In the same way, Youtube's recommendation algorithm also ended up promoting fake talk shows and other misleading videos because they tapped into the dramatic post revolution atmosphere and got high watch time. On twitter, trending algorithms were manipulated by coordinated usage of hashtags. As a result, false or exaggerated stories (like the fake communal crisis stories that went viral aug

2024) were pushed into the trending topics which reached millions of people as if it were organic news.

In that situation, knowledge – the ability to separate truth from falsehood stood out as a key element of justicecraft. It became a shared practice, a collective effort to uphold reality against waves of disinformation. Yet this element of justicecraft was severely tested. The problem was people were not seeing the same information. Filter bubbles and polarized groups made it difficult to break through each of the echo chambers with facts. For example on Twitter, diaspora activists clustered around protest updates and fact checks while Indian right wing users clustered around communal alarmism. These groups barely interacted. It means that depending on which side you were following, you would end up seeing two very different versions of what was happening in Bangladesh.

It's important to note that platform policies and moderation lagged behind the spread of false content. Meta (Facebook) had some third party fact checkers flagging false posts as part of its program with AFP, Boom, etc. and indeed many of the false claims mentioned were eventually labeled or removed. During the peak of the protests, moderation simply couldn't keep up. YouTube says it doesn't allow fake or manipulated videos, but by late 2024, doctored clips were everywhere, and the rules weren't being enforced properly (The Daily Star, 2025) . On Twitter, things were even worse. After it changed owners, the platform had fewer rules and weaker checks, and new verification policies made it easier for fake accounts to look real.

Crafting Counter-Narratives

The Bangladesh Quota System Movement in 2024 showed that it is not impossible to battle with wrong facts. The student protestors established definite objectives, made effective plans, and adopted clever strategies in order to convey genuine facts. In spite of internet blocks, they made everybody updated and united. Their success explains why independent media, activism, and facts matter in halting false information.

Counter-narratives state that something is wrong on the basis of facts. It also discusses emotions, making them more powerful than facts. A good counter-narrative tells a true story that proves a rumor is false. It doesn't just fix mistakes; it also helps people see the truth in a way that makes sense to them. By sharing stories that focus on truth and fairness, false information loses its power. In the fight between lies and facts, truth has a better chance when it's told in a strong and clear way. (Balasco et al. 2024) It is necessary that counter-narratives determine whether to respond or not respond to things. All false things should not be magnified by replying to them. In some cases, journalists and activists practice strategic silence – deliberately avoiding engagement with fringe or malicious claims so as not to give them more visibility (Sweet 2021). By not passing along annoying or puzzling stories, strategic silence can prevent lies from getting around quickly. Counter-narrative simply refers to choosing to respond or not to respond: to share

authentic and meaningful stories to conceal dangerous lies while sometimes not answering trolls and spammers in order to deprive them of attention.

To tell truthful stories to combat lies, such as in the July uprising, communication professionals employ key tactics. Rather than simply asserting something is not true, powerful counternarratives indicate just exactly what is true. Addressing shared purposes, unity, and ideals draws individuals to the true story. When protests erupt, messages regarding fairness and unity offer individuals something to have faith in while longing to have better things in life, rather than simply perpetuating anger towards lies. Rumors thrive during fear, anger, or insecurity. Successful counter-narratives acknowledge these feelings and provide reassurance or constructive outlets. For example, false claims during the July uprising played on communal prejudices and panic. (Iyer 2024) Activists created messages that dissipated fears by clarifying things to each other about what was occurring, exhibiting solidarity towards each other, and sharing knowledge to prevent fear from expanding. Since they understood the audience's fears, rumors dissipated. A funny joke or an ambiguous question can undermine an unreliable story. Humor and irony have the power to lead individuals to think twice or to laugh, relaxing tension while ridiculing nonsense in falsehoods. Protest supporters in Bangladesh, for example, circulated witty memes and cartoons to mock propaganda, making the government's false claims look ridiculous. (The Business Standard. 2024) These funny remarks instilled an invaluable lesson: to encourage people to think seriously about what officials say without dictating to them what to think, making lying harder than truth. Ultimately, to combat fake information is to have an educated and inquiring public. Counter-narratives in Bangladesh encouraged individuals to check spooky headlines, identify tricks of fake news, and think before sharing. Small things, such as checking where an attention-seeking post comes from or discussing rumors in online communities, established an atmosphere where questioning was encouraged. This meant fewer individuals got misled by false statements over time because they could spot terrible content independently. Counter-narratives work most powerfully where they employ true facts, making free and reliable media essential. When the government censored the media during the Quota Movement, this created an opportunity for fake information to thrive. Citizens and civil society retorted by retweeting or sharing articles by independent journalists and fact-checkers where they could. And by enabling these seekers of truth—by retweeting them or assisting in getting published—these seekers' work was guaranteed to get through to reinforce these counter-narratives.

Counter-narratives are most powerful where they're informed by true facts, making reliable media essential. When the media was controlled by the government during the July uprising, lies propagated in no time. Activists and grassroots organizations disseminated messages by independent journalists and verifiers every time they came across them. By standing by these seekers of truth—by sharing whatever they came across or by resisting to permit them to report unhindered—this movement ensured that there was authentic material to support its

counter-narratives. Freedom of the press can disprove lies in an instant and supply material to craft powerful true stories before falsehoods can change things.

Digital Resistance and Narrative Resilience

Amid the storm of disinformation, many individuals and groups fought back with counter-narratives, fact-checking, and creative “justicecraft” tactics to uphold the truth and maintain the moral legitimacy of the Quota Reform Movement. This section highlights how student protesters, civil society, fact-checkers, diaspora communities, and even some authorities responded to the propaganda war. It also examines the consequences of the misinformation deluge including real-world harms and shifts in public trust and how those outcomes underscored the importance of media literacy and resilience.

Student Protesters’ Counter-Narratives and Humor

The students at the heart of the movement proved remarkably adept at countering propaganda with their own communications strategy. It’s an effort that showed key elements of *justicecraft*: *knowledge, skill, labor, materiality, and affect*. Most of them were aware about the fact that the government was trying to paint them as violent or extremist, protest leaders and participants made efforts to publicly fact-check and debunk rumors in real time. This practice represented the *knowledge* and *skill* elements of justicecraft which shows students cultivated the critical literacy necessary to detect misinformation and rapidly respond to it. For example, when false news of a protester’s death would surface, student groups quickly used their networks to verify the person’s status and then broadcast corrections. They set up Facebook pages and used existing student forums to share accurate updates, such as the actual count of injured or clarification that “no protester has been killed in location X, that’s a fake post.” It shows they used the *materiality* of digital infrastructure. These grassroots verification efforts helped prevent panic.. Protest organizers also proactively provided evidence to counter lies. For example, even during the internet blackout, according to Abdullah Salyehin Oyon, groups like “July Journalists” on WhatsApp were set up by volunteers to organize real-time fact-checking and share crucial updates as events unfolded.⁴ This labor of verification which was unpaid, constant, and often invisible, highlighted the *labor* dimension of justicecraft. It became a collective sustained action to resist disinformation.

One notable tactic was the use of humor, satire, and memes as a weapon against disinformation which is a creative *affect*-based resistance. The quota reform protesters used sarcasm to ridicule the most absurd propaganda coming from the other side. When pro-government pages produced those photo quotes of public figures opposing the protests, the students answered with parody versions featuring random celebrities endorsing the government line ((ফ্যাশ্টডেক ডেস্ক 2024; The Business Standard 2024; The Daily Star, 2025). The inclusion of personalities like Donald

⁴ Personal communication, May 2025.

Trump or Sunny Leone in these fake quote cards was immediately recognizable as satire, thereby exposing the flimsy nature of the original propaganda.

This approach served two purposes: it deflated the power of the misinformation through mockery, and it boosted morale within the movement by showing that students wouldn't be intimidated by lies – instead, they laughed at them. Here, *affect* was key: humor became not only a coping mechanism but also a political tool for reclaiming agency. The “Chalaiden” campaign is another great example of protester-driven counter-narrative creativity (Naher and Hossain 2024). Originally a quote from a BSL member attempting to spread a fake story, the students turned “চলাইদেন” (“spread it”) into an ironic slogan to spread what's true. They flooded social media with the hashtag #Chalaiden accompanying real footage of protests and fact-check links, essentially meme-ifying a would-be psy-op. By appropriating the term, they not only raised awareness of disinformation but also demonstrated a form of justicecraft: using digital *materiality* (hashtags, memes) and *pop culture sensibilities* to seek justice (in this case, truth-telling) in a playful yet pointed way.

Protesters also leveraged *affective storytelling* to counter the dehumanizing narratives thrown at them. When state propaganda tried to label them as “terrorists” or “razakars,” students responded by highlighting their own humanity and patriotism. They circulated personal stories on Facebook. For example, there were posts like, “I am not Jamaati or foreign agent; I am [Name], a student of Dhaka University, fighting for my right to a fair job. Here's what I saw....” accompanied by a selfie from a peaceful sit-in. Such posts, often using the hashtag #IAMBangladesh or similar, garnered huge support and undercut the propaganda that the movement was anti-national. These personal narratives are deeply infused with *affect* which rehumanized the protesters and disrupted official vilification strategies.

The protesters also memorialized the real victims (like Abu Sayed, the student martyr) through graphics and videos that cast them as heroes, ensuring that government attempts to deny the killings or shift blame were met with a flood of evidence of the sacrifices made (Kiron Reports, 2024). Memorialization required *labor* by creating, curating, and circulating images and stories and was another instance of *affect* mobilized for justice.

Importantly, humor and emotional appeals were balanced with fact-based rebuttals, revealing the students' *knowledge* and *skill* in navigating information ecosystems. Student-run pages shared links from trusted news outlets and fact-checkers whenever available. For example, when a fake press release about suspending protests appeared, the student groups quickly posted screenshots of their actual official announcement (which showed they hadn't backed down) and urged followers to rely on their verified channels for updates. By maintaining some officially recognized social media handles for the movement (with clear messaging that “any other notice is false unless it's on our page”), they created anchor points of credibility in a sea of fakes. This

use of *materiality* by creating fixed, trusted digital spaces has anchored the movement's legitimacy.

In effect, the protesters practiced a form of *media literacy activism*, constantly educating their peers on how to spot fake news ("Check the source, check the date, trust verified pages, etc." became common refrains in protest circles). This educational outreach is yet another manifestation of *knowledge* and *labor* which demonstrated how justicecraft was not only about resisting falsehoods but about actively building a more informed and resilient citizenry.

Justicecraft in Practice: Fact Checkers, Journalists and Civil Society

Bangladesh's fact checking organisations and vigilant journalists worked tirelessly to debunk rumors and provide the public with accurate information. As Facebook's design (with viral sharing and limited fact check friction) allowed misinformation to snowball quickly, there were many renowned fact checkers in Bangladesh like the AFP Fact Check, FactWatch, DismisLab and Boom who actively were debunking claims as fast as they could (AFP Fact Check 2024; FactWatch 2024; Dismislab 2024). Their efforts reflected the key elements of justicecraft. However their posts often struggled to keep up with the sheer volume of false content. There is also a local fact check group called Rumour Scanner that reported the flow of rumours was so overwhelming by mid July that they launched a live update webpage on July 16th to continuously publish corrections and verified information including accurate casualty counts (Rumor Scanner Team 2025a).

These fact check reports addressed everything from false death claims to fake foreign news often within hours of rumors spreading which is a testament of *labor* and *skill* required to swiftly investigate, verify, and provide corrections. For example, when death tolls were being exaggerated, fact checkers quickly published the real (lower) figures and traced the false quotes to their fake sources (AFP Fact Check 2024). Another example would be when a photo claiming someone had vandalized a statue of Tagore started circulating, Factcheck tracked it down to a months old incident and published the truth that it wasn't new (FactWatch 2024). Each time a new misleading claim popped up (be it about "Pakistani embassy letter" or "UN gives ultimatum" or "Italian ambassador said this and that"), one or more of these dedicated teams investigated and released a debunk, often with side by side image comparisons or interviews with authorities to prove it false (FactWatch 2024; Rumor Scanner Team 2025b; Dismislab 2024).

These fact checkers were not confined to niche audiences as they were shared widely by civilians as well as media outlets. This kind of wider amplification through the use of social networks, news outlets, and digital platforms as tangible mediums to spread verified information reflects the *materiality* of justicecraft. Just as important was the *collective labor* behind it as well. Prominent newspapers and TV channels in Bangladesh cited the fact check findings (Ajker

Patrika and Dhaka Tribune ran pieces exposing fake news during the protests) to whichever extent it was possible, helping them reach more people (Dhaka Tribune 2024; Rumor Scanner Team 2025a). At the same time, activists and tech savvy volunteers and the fact checkers formed response networks on WhatsApp/ Signal where they could drop a suspicious piece of news and someone else would quickly reply with verified facts or a link if available.

Local journalists who were on the ground provided real time corrections that showed *affective labor*. Each of them risked personal safety to push back against the flood of rumors. Some reporters used Twitter to call out stories that they knew were fake. For example, when rumours of “100 bodies in Hatirjheel” spread, Dhaka based reporters quickly tweeted from the scene that nothing of the sort was found. They did so by attaching photos of the empty location to prove it. Their work showed *skill* (knowing how to report and verify), *knowledge* (understanding what was real and what wasn’t), and *affect* (connecting emotionally with the public). These small but powerful acts of journalism helped keep the public grounded.

A group of young media workers even started a trend “#VerifyBeforeShare” during the height of the chaos asking people not to forward news without verification. This was a key exercise in media literacy activism which is central to the knowledge dimension of justicecraft. We saw community driven initiatives like university alumni associations and volunteer groups abroad who were following the news taking it upon themselves to compile "rumour versus fact" bulletins in Bengali and English to distribute via email and messaging apps showing *affective solidarity* and *knowledge dissemination* among the public.

Taken together these efforts by fact checkers, journalists, civil society actors shows how *justicecraft* can be performed outside formal institutions through *knowledge*, *labor*, *materiality*, *affect*, and *skill* deployed collectively to defend truth and sustain public trust amid information warfare.

Counter-narratives are stories or ideas that fight against disinformation. They give truthful, clear, and meaningful information to help people understand what is real. These counter-narratives are very important during political chaos, like the July Revolution, because they help people see through lies and work together. (Teitel 2017) By giving people real facts and stories, counter-narratives create a sense of hope and purpose, which helps rebuild trust in hard times.

In Bangladesh, people told real stories, used social media, and worked in groups to fight fake news. Activists used Facebook to show the truth about protests and police actions, bringing many people together to support their cause. (Islam et al. 2023) These efforts can rebuild trust and heal communities. But to work well, counter-narratives must connect emotionally with people and be easy to believe. For example, during the July Revolution, local groups pushed back against government propaganda, but their reach was limited because social media often promotes fake or

dramatic stories instead of the truth. To improve, counter-narratives need support from more people, better tools, and stronger platforms to compete with fake news effectively.

Justice systems, especially during big political changes, aim to fix past wrongs and build trust. In Bangladesh, these systems are very important to solve old problems and make peace. (Teitel 2017) Justice includes truth commissions, programs to help victims, and fixing broken systems. To succeed, these efforts must carefully balance historical facts with today's political challenges. When justice systems work well, they show that fairness and truth are possible, even after years of conflict or distrust.

Performance activism, like protests, art, and songs, helps people fight lies and support justice. During the July Revolution, students used performances to show the truth about government actions. These acts used cultural symbols and stories to connect with many people. Disinformation often tries to mess up justice systems by spreading lies about history. Performance activism fights back by showing real stories and standing up for the truth. It brings people together to talk and take action for a better future. The emotional power of performance can inspire people to care about justice and join efforts to make their communities better.

Polarization and Democratic Erosion

Now the question arises how did all this misinformation create issues during the quota movement? It wasn't just spreading false information. It made people more polarized, trust was broken, and the movement itself was affected.

Disinformation deepened societal divides by intensifying mistrust and hostility between opposing camps, the flood of fake news made it harder for any middle ground or shared understanding to survive. During the 2024 Quota Movement, Bangladesh's social media became a fertile ground for false narratives that aggravated polarization and posed a threat to societal harmony. (Vasist et al. 2024) Political figures and extremists employed social media to manipulate individuals and develop an "us versus them" mentality (Rahman 2024).. With different stories circulating quickly, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction.

For instance, politically motivated fake news resulted in a significant rise in hate speech against the governing party – 26% of respondents reported having made such remarks – and generated a highly polarized and incensed public debate. (Vasist et al. 2024) Conversely, ruling party supporters circulated false reports that student protesters were linked to Islamist organizations, attempting to discredit the movement and increase political tensions.

The spread of false information made people stick to their own beliefs, only paying attention to news that matched what they already thought. This effect, called an echo chamber. Fake news

helped produce a “pseudo-reality where we can imagine that only people like us live here” – a world of thoughtless agreement with our own opinions. By reinforcing existing biases and silencing contrary views, disinformation widened the social rifts within Bangladesh’s society. Alongside deepening polarization, the crisis of disinformation eroded public trust in institutions and media. Many young people and students were targeted by false stories that caused fights between different groups. Some false news reports even caused protestors to turn against each other, breaking up movements that were supposed to be working together. Outside groups also used the internet to spread lies and make things worse, trying to change how people saw real problems. One striking statistic showed that about 60% of Bangladeshi internet users trust the misinformation they encounter online (Al-Zaman 2024). Many people began doubting the credibility of mainstream media and official channels, seeing them as biased or unreliable. This trend extended to democratic institutions as well – citizens grew skeptical of leaders and processes amid the constant barrage of misinformation. This growing cynicism undermined the basic trust that holds democratic society together, as people questioned previously respected sources of facts.

Disinformation detrimentally affected democratic debate by concealing facts and preventing actual conversations. There were a lot of rumors, false documents, and lies throughout the movement that made it difficult to locate actual information and hard for you to look at what is real among so many lies.. Coordinated disinformation campaigns operate in exactly this way – organized troll farms and propaganda operatives inject fabricated, inflammatory content into social media to sway public opinion. For instance, governments and strategic communication firms have systematically used social media “psychological operations” to nudge public opinion, as seen when operatives manufactured countless bogus posts during the 2016 Russian campaign to rile up voters. In Bangladesh, observers noted that deceptive narratives were even propagated via newly created news sites in the lead-up to events like the quota protests. (Gjerazi and Skana 2023) The fabricated narrative got in the way of significant political actions. It at times disrupted governmental functioning by distracting from actual issues and highlighting false ones in a propaganda manner. With facts evaporating, constructive debate regarding policy and changes came to a stop.

By replacing honest facts with false tales, disinformation interrupted beneficial conversation regarding policies and made it more difficult for electorates to make sound decisions. Where basic facts were missing or confusing, it became very difficult to have intelligent conversation regarding the quota system. Instead of meaningful conversation, misinformation gave rise to loud arguments without common understanding. Experts warn that fake news deliberately “exchanges fact for opinion” and leads to a scenario where authentic facts are overlooked. (Baron and Ish-Shalom 2024) In such an environment, actual conversation fails because both sides cling to their own tales as fact. You cannot make sound decisions and policy choices when every source of information is questioned. During the Quota Movement, it resulted in confusion and more

confrontational communication. Citizens made decisions on a foundation of disinformation and lies, muddling their minds with false facts. (Gjerazi and Skana 2023) Voters found it difficult to consider possibilities or engage in profound conversation regarding changes when they could not rely on what is presented to them. Disinformation prevented citizens from engaging in well-informed conversations and impaired the quality of decision-making in a democratic process.

When Disinformation Becomes Normal

The 2024 movement also revealed how disinformation can become normalized, lowering the threshold for people to accept unverified information as part of everyday politics. With rumors and fake news flying around constantly, many Bangladeshis became desensitized – exposed to lies so often that they started to feel “normal.” In fact, the government’s tight grip on traditional media (through censorship laws) ironically boosted this normalization. When independent news was censored, people turned to unverified reports on social platforms, effectively making rumor and speculation a primary news source. (The Daily Star 2024) In this environment, you might have noticed that wild claims were shared casually, without the skepticism they deserved. The lines between truth and falsehood blurred, as even international media and respected figures unwittingly propagated some of these false narratives amidst the chaos. (Farhana 2025) Research shows that individuals tend to seek out and believe content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, even if it’s unverified (Gjerazi and Skana 2023).

The spreading of false information can have long-run consequences on what people perceive and engage in within their community in Bangladesh. In a global community rife with fake news, people read and hear information without scrutinizing it – they no longer verify what they read or hear. Hannah Arendt warned that when a society is riddled with lies, people might not be able to distinguish between lies and truths and live in a false reality founded on easy opinions. If false information continues spreading in public discourse, people may stop analyzing information. People have a harder time discerning lies and truths when both are so prevalent and not often questioned. This makes it easy to deceive and mislead. Community engagement is also hurt when people cannot rely on information. Most people become untrusting or only hear what agrees with them. In both instances, a healthy democracy and open public debate based on facts are compromised. To solve this issue, experts claim that we need good journalism and sound media literacy programs. A principal component is educating people to scrutinize sources carefully in order to have an informed public. Without that education, the long-run consequence of accepted false information is a public that cannot help make a positive difference in democracy – a public that accepts lies as normal and has trouble locating truths.

From Disinformation to Violence

The most significant fear was that lies brought about violence and chaos. False rumors made heated arguments become actual brawls during the Quota Movement. False social media rumors

and social media news instilled fear and ire and made people feel that they had to take matters into their own hands. For example, during the protests, a barrage of fabricated reports about student deaths and attacks went viral, inflaming emotions on all sides. Some extremist groups seized on these narratives to incite their followers. In one instance, false claims that Hindu minorities were under attack (amplified by interested parties) led to retaliatory rhetoric and panic, even though many of those reports were later debunked.(Farhana 2025) Studies have shown a clear link between extreme polarization fueled by false narratives and an increased risk of violence in society. (Vasist et al. 2024) In Bangladesh, the torrent of inflammatory fake news deepened mistrust between communities, creating a powder-keg atmosphere. Disinformation preyed on existing prejudices and fears: rumors of “Indian agents” targeting Muslim protesters, for instance, were used to justify real violence against Hindu communities in Bangladesh. (Iyer 2024)

All of this distorted perceptions of reality, making it exceedingly difficult for citizens to respond rationally or hold the real perpetrators accountable. If there are lots of false stories during a crisis, how can you determine who is actually causing the violence? In Bangladesh, incorrect information produced a situation in which both parties blamed one another for things which had not taken place. It enabled the persons who were truly guilty of violence (such as certain influential persons) to use false stories as a means to cover up what they had done. As analysts noted, such false rumors significantly distorted reality, making it hard for citizens to make informed judgments or demand accountability from leaders (Rahman 2024). Instead, people were busy reacting to the latest provocation circulated on Facebook or WhatsApp. In effect, disinformation not only sparked unrest but also shielded the powerful from scrutiny by muddling the facts. The outcome was a vicious cycle: lies spawned violence and violence spawned more lies. In Bangladesh, it demonstrated just how quickly false rumors and hateful gossip can pit neighbors against neighbors, and in this instance with deadly consequences. It is a valuable lesson that maintaining the truth in public conversation is a very significant thing because it can prevent violence and save lives.

Toward Resilient Information Ecosystems

Stopping fake news takes many steps. First, technology can help find and remove fake stories. Platforms need to be clear about how they handle fake content and be fair. Education is also important. Teaching kids in schools how to spot fake news can create smarter citizens. This can include simple lessons on checking facts, understanding sources, and thinking critically about what they see online. Laws and rules can make sure people and platforms don’t spread lies. These laws should include punishments for breaking the rules and rewards for sharing truthful, helpful information.

Working together in local communities can make counter-narratives stronger. Groups like schools, news outlets, and community leaders can join forces to share real stories. On a global

level, countries can work together to fight fake news that crosses borders. Companies that make social media platforms can also help by creating better tools to stop disinformation. Partnerships between governments, tech companies, and communities can create strong networks to stop the spread of fake news and support the truth.

The problems caused by fake news, counter-narratives, and justice systems in Bangladesh show how tricky political changes can be. Using ideas from JusticeCraft, this chapter shows how to make strong plans to fight disinformation. These plans need to mix technology, education, and teamwork. Together, they can help communities see the truth and rebuild trust. By focusing on shared values and working as a team, people can create lasting solutions to protect their societies. The lessons from Bangladesh can help other countries dealing with the same issues, showing that working together is the best way to fight disinformation and create a fair and honest future. By building trust, improving education, and using better technology, societies can grow stronger and make sure the truth wins over lies.

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