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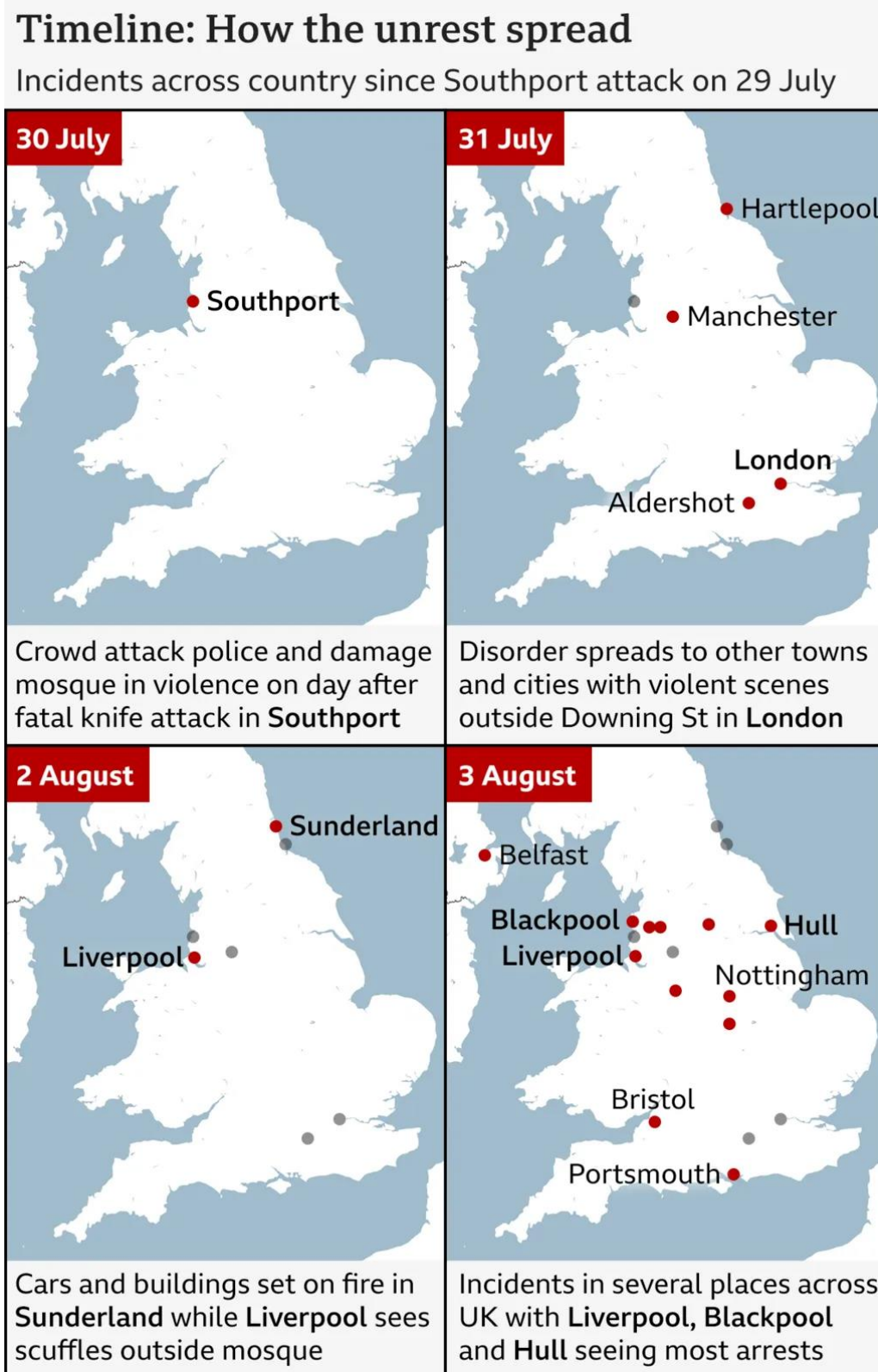
The Role of Social Media in Amplifying Disinformation and Misinformation During the UK's Southport Unrest

INTRODUCTION

1. In August 2024, the United Kingdom experienced a series of violent protests and civil unrest, described by the *BBC* as “the worst unrest the UK has seen in more than a decade”. Violence had flared following a knife attack on July 29 at a Taylor Swift-themed dance and yoga event in the coastal town of Southport, that led to the death of three girls, and injuring another eight children and two adults. *BBC* reported that social media posts falsely speculated that the suspect was an asylum seeker who arrived in the UK on a boat in 2023. An incorrect name was also widely circulated, together with unsubstantiated rumours that the suspect was Muslim. This stoked existing anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiments, leading to anti-immigration riots led by far-right groups across the UK.

2. Even as the *BBC* and other media outlets reported that the suspect was born in Wales to Rwandan parents, and the Police had urged the public not to spread “unconfirmed speculation and false information”, violent protests and civil unrest erupted across several towns and cities across England and in Northern Ireland, cumulating in widespread looting and clashes with the Police ([Figure 1](#)). What emerged as a standalone knifing incident very quickly grew into a series of violent protests across the UK, led by far-right extremists, anti-Islam and anti-immigration groups, with mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers targeted.

Figure 1: Chronology of events within one week of knife attack in Southport





Source: BBC Research

3. The Southport unrest is a timely reminder on how social media can be misused to amplify disinformation and misinformation, worsen societal division and sow discord among the populace. This report examines how the rapid dissemination of false information on social media had contributed to the escalation of unrest.

How Social Media Amplified the Spread of False Information

4. Social media is a double-edged sword in the modern information society. While it facilitates efficient and low-cost communication, it also provides a fertile ground for the rapid spread of information – both true and false. These events revealed several unique attributes where social media had contributed to the spread of inflammatory content and false narratives.

(a) Virality and Algorithmic Amplification

5. Social media platforms are designed to prioritise content that will bring in high engagement, often favouring sensational and emotionally charged content. Despite the Police stating that the suspect was born in

Britain – immediately after the false claims emerged – various narratives had already circulated and gained significant traction online. This set off a wave of online disinformation and misinformation that escalated into violent protests across the UK. The social media platforms’ algorithms played a key role in disseminating and amplifying such provocative content, pushing it to the top of many feeds and recommendations, overwhelming other accurate information sources. *The Guardian* reported that “these algorithms had sent the most outrageous comments viral and set off a chain reaction of anger and disinformation that made the riots that followed the Southport killings inevitable”.

(b) Echo Chambers

6. Social media users tend to engage with information that align with their pre-existing beliefs and biases. Such observations, commonly known as the echo chamber effect, was particularly evident during the UK unrest. This subject social media users to selective biased content that reinforced their pre-existing beliefs, further deepening existing anti-immigration sentiments and fostering far-right radicalisation.

7. *The Guardian* quoted Maria Ressa, 2021 Nobel peace prize winner and Filipino journalist who said “(w)e’ve always had radicalisation, but in the past, leaders would be the bridge and bring people together. That’s impossible to do now, because what used to radicalise extremists and terrorists is now radicalising the public. Because the information ecosystem is designed that way. There’s always been propaganda and there’s always been violence. What’s brought violence mainstream is social media. [The US Capitol attack on] January 6 2021 is the perfect example: people would not have been able to find each other if social media did not cluster them together and isolate them to incite them further.”

(c) Misinformation vs. Disinformation

8. It is important to distinguish between misinformation, false or misleading information shared without malicious intent, and disinformation. Disinformation refers to deliberately fabricated

information disseminated to deceive or to manipulate one's views. During the August 2024 unrest, both misinformation and disinformation were spread on social media. However, disinformation proved to be especially dangerous, as it was strategically crafted and deployed to incite violence and disrupt social order. Far right groups, including anti-migrants and anti-Islam extremists, exploited the situation and made use of disinformation as a tool to put forth their own narratives of migrants and asylum seekers being responsible for violent crimes.

9. Even though there is no single organising force at work, *BBC* reported that activities on social media showed a clear pattern with influencers driving a message for people to gather for protests. It is noteworthy that not everyone who posted about the Southport attacks or participated in the protests held radical views or had links to far-right groups. *BBC* construed that the protests appeared to have also drawn in individuals who were concerned about violent crime or who had been misled by the misinformation that the Southport attack was a result of illegal immigration. *BBC* also quoted a Police source who shared many instances of “locals reacting to what they're seeing on social media, what they're seeing outside in their streets and just joining in”. *Reuters* reported the arrest of more than 1,000 people following the days of rioting involving violence, arson and looting, as well as attacks targeting Muslims and migrants.

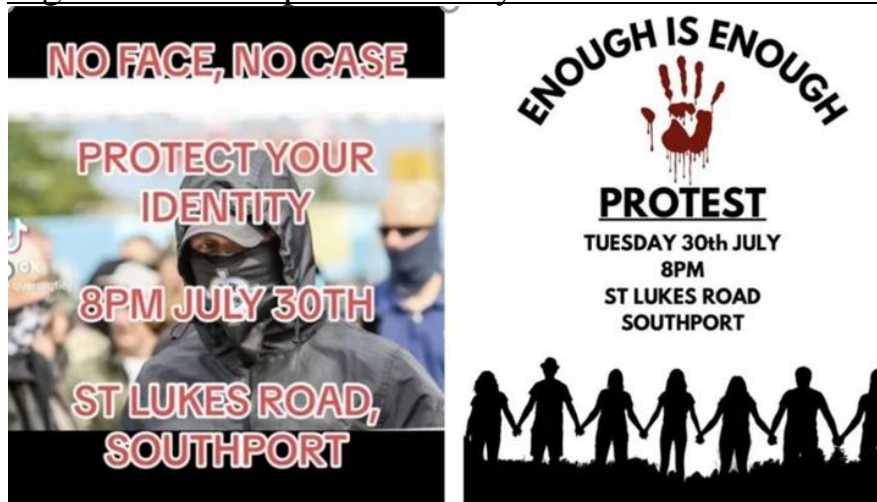
Danger of False Narratives Leading Towards Calls to Action on Social Media

10. The amplification of false information on social media had several profound effects on the trajectory of the August 2024 unrest. *BBC Verify* had analysed hundreds of posts on social media and in smaller public Telegram groups to understand the motives of the main actors, in organising, encouraging and attending the protests. It concluded that there was a clear pattern of multiple influencers within different social media circles amplifying false claims about the identity of the attacker, as well as unfounded accusations that it was an Islamist terror attack. These claims were reposted across other social media platforms, reaching a larger audience, including many ordinary people

without any connection to far-right individuals and groups.

11. A Southport-themed Telegram group set up about six hours after the attack, also became overwhelmed with misinformation about the identity of the alleged attacker and other posts by far-right groups. Several online graphics instigating protests were also shared on the Telegram channel. Although neither the channel nor its associated chat had many followers, these posters subsequently found its way to other platforms including Facebook, X and TikTok, where they were reposted widely (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Online posters widely shared on social media



Source: BBC

The Negative Impact of Social Media Disinformation

12. The UK's unrest in August 2024 had highlighted how the widespread dissemination of false information on social media can easily influence the public's perception and shape their behaviour. The consequential impact includes:

(a) Escalation of Violence: False information about the identity of the attacker, nationality, race, religious affiliation and immigration status, contributed directly to the escalation of violence. Disinformation that the attacker was a migrant Muslim fuelled anger and fear amongst parts of the British population that already harboured anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiments. This contributed to individuals acting

irrationally. The rapid spread of misinformation bolstered by the echo chamber effect, further aggravated the situation.

(b) Erosion of Trust in Institutions: The disinformation circulating during the unrest undermined the statements and actions taken by authorities. Official statements by the Police were contradicted by viral posts of falsehoods on social media that the stabbing was carried out by a Muslim immigrant. This eroded the people's trust in institutions, including the government, the Police, and the media, and made it more challenging for the government to effectively manage the crisis and restore order.

(c) Polarisation and Social Fragmentation: The social media-driven disinformation further deepened the existing societal divides, polarising communities and pitting different groups against each other. The unrest uncovered the fragility of social cohesion, with disinformation and misinformation playing a central role in driving wedges between different segments of society, making future reconciliation efforts even more challenging.

Response to Social Media Disinformation

13. Following the August 2024 unrest, there have been renewed calls to address the role of social media in amplifying disinformation and misinformation. Key areas of focus include:

(a) Platform Accountability: There is growing pressure on social media companies to take greater responsibility for the content shared on their platforms. This includes calls for stricter regulation, improved content moderation, and greater transparency about the algorithms that drive content visibility. Some continue to argue for the introduction of legal frameworks that would hold platforms accountable for the spread of harmful disinformation.

(b) Public Awareness and Media Literacy: Educating the public about the dangers of disinformation and how to recognise it is crucial in mitigating its impact. Initiatives to improve media literacy, particularly among the young, are seen as indispensable in building

resilience against disinformation and misinformation. This includes educating individuals to critically evaluate sources of online information and learning how to spot fake news.

(c) Government Initiatives: Government agencies have also been exploring ways to counter disinformation and misinformation more effectively. This includes partnerships with technology companies, media, NGOs, fact-checkers, as well as the development of rapid response teams to debunk false information swiftly, and committing more resources to prevent malicious actors from exploiting the social media during a crisis.

CONCLUSION

14. The UK's unrest of August 2024 had served as a timely reminder of the power of social media in shaping the public's perception and behaviour during a crisis. Social media had played a critical role in the escalation of the unrest, through the dissemination and amplification of inflammatory content, underscoring the urgent need for more robust measures to counter false narratives online. As the world continues to grapple with the aftermath of the unrest, the lessons learned from this crisis will be crucial in preventing a similar occurrence in the future.

CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at www.acice-asean.org/resource/.

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at ACICE@defence.gov.sg

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