India's WhatsApp Boom:
How Disinformation is growing And Eroding Media Legitimacy in India
(And Why This Might Only Get Worse)

By Kunal Purohit
Independent Journalist, India

https://kunalpurohit1.contently.com;
kunal.purohit06@gmail.com

Just over a month ago, Amit Shah, the chief of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and often-described as the second most powerful man in India, made a startling revelation. Addressing the party's social media volunteers, Shah made critical points-he said the party had benefitted from spreading fake news through WhatsApp, boasting how its attack on the media, through WhatsApp messages, had forced the media to become more 'neutral' in their coverage towards his party. He later said that elections could not be won anymore without such 'cyber warriors' who operate the party's social media.

*Embed video: https://www.facebook.com/brutindia/videos/fake-news-to-spread-bjp-message-amit-shah/546643295788104/

These statements capture the essence of this research project-in India, WhatsApp is turning out to be a deadly driver of disinformation and lies, leading to killings, electoral manipulation and a clear attempt to delegitimise the mainstream media.

This project will go about justifying this hypothesis by a mixed-methodology approach. It will rely on data to show the extent of the problem and touch upon the globalised nature of the problem. It will then use findings of the author's first-hand investigations and reveal how WhatsApp is being employed to spread dis-information and lies by political forces in social, cultural and economic aspects of daily life. The project will also reveal the minutely-crafted strategies that will drive the use of WhatsApp by political parties towards next year's general elections—from collection of data to creation of over 900,000 WhatsApp groups across India to reach voters.

WhatsApp in the Indian Context
To understand just why WhatsApp yields the power that it does in India, it is imperative to look closely at some data. The application (app) has over 1.5 billion users globally and is the leading personal messenger app in 128 countries of the world. However, more than 13 per cent of its users—over 200 million-come from India alone, making it the single-biggest market for the app.

This, coupled with increasing internet penetration in India, has meant that the use of WhatsApp has rapidly shot up in the country. According to a study done by a New Delhi-based think tank, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, the daily usage of WhatsApp has risen by 10 per cent since last year. The same study noted how the use of WhatsApp had doubled in India's rural areas over the last one year. Nearly half of the app's users were under 25, the study found. That the app has gained such popularity when only 31 per cent of the population in India has smart phones shows the possibilities that the future holds, in terms of the reach of the app.

It is, then, barely surprising that India's political forces have seen this development as a chance to get closer to the voter. During the 16th National elections in India in 2014, 150 million people were found to be newly-eligible voters between 18-23, while two out of three people in India were under 35. Hence, political parties saw a great opportunity in catching young voters online and enlisting their support.

In this game, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, the BJP, was far ahead of all its other competitors. An internal Facebook communication showed this-of the 227 million interactions that 29 million Indian voters made during the campaign, 75 million were around Modi. The story was similar on Twitter-56 million tweets were posted by Indian voters, much of it around Modi.

Embed map: http://srogers.carto.com/viz/f336a44e-a57f-11e4-a040-0e0c41326911/embed_map

Amidst this, political forces were silently working away on WhatsApp, using different strategies, some overt and others, not so. The BJP created a social media "war-room" to track voters across India's 92,000 villages, capture their data and establish 'groups' on the app so that they could send political messages to them. For this, the party established "hundreds of small cells" of supporters who would attack opponents and push messages in favour of Modi. These messages were in the form of posters, charts, images, videos as well as data points to show that the opponents had failed whereas Modi's party had succeeded in the past, in governing the country and various regions.

More Social Media, Less Freedom
This rise in the use of social media for political campaigning has not been restricted to India. Globally, political forces have employed such tools to target voters more effectively. However, such attempts have also unleashed a flood of manipulation, lies and disinformation. Last month, Freedom House, an independent freedom watchdog reported how at least 12 countries saw a rise in dis-information, censorship and attacks and arrests of critics in the run up to elections. In 2017, it released a report titled 'Manipulating Social Media to Undermine Democracy,' where it found that digital manipulations and dis-information had played a key role in at least 17 countries.

The role of social media platforms like Facebook has come into sharp focus, especially after its role in facilitating the spread of disinformation during the United States elections in 2016. However, it is only now that the role of messaging apps like WhatsApp is being scrutinised. Most recently, in Brazil, the avalanche of deliberate dis-information on WhatsApp group was so severe that the app had to take unprecedented measures, including banning the son of the far-right candidate (and now President) Jair Bolsonaro.

Why the project
The research project seeks to underline the inadequate attention on understanding why and how WhatsApp has become a more potent tool of spreading disinformation and hateful propaganda. The project will emphasise the urgent need for sharp research focussed on WhatsApp, keeping in mind its unique design as a personal, end-to-end encrypted software, as against public social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

This research project is being driven by events of the past and the dread at what lies ahead. Electoral manipulation and the consumption of disinformation is almost always intangible. Except when it is not. Last year alone, India has seen over 25 people being killed, driven to violence by rumours and hateful propaganda they received on their cell phones through WhatsApp.

The most recent study about the use of WhatsApp in India also underlines the need for more research— an in-depth BBC investigation found that the rising tide of nationalism was driving ordinary Indian citizens to spread fake news with alacrity, abandoning the need to verify and review the messages.

India: Rising nationalism is pushing people to share fake news
Percentage of messages shared on WhatsApp by topic

In fact, the situation is so dire that even those who are campaigning against believing such disinformation are being attacked to death by mobs, as was the case in north-eastern India a few months ago.

While it is difficult to trace the source of all disinformation, this research project seeks to investigate how political forces are spreading disinformation around political, cultural and social issues in order to influence opinions among potential voters.

The Methodology
One of the issues underpinning the inadequate understanding of how WhatsApp facilitates disinformation and rumour-mongering is the lack of data around disinformation. Since WhatsApp is, essentially, a closed medium of communication with even groups only allowing 256 members, it is difficult to gain access and understand the discourse on these groups. As a way of mitigation, this author secretly gained access to six WhatsApp groups created by political parties—two each from the ruling BJP and the largest opposition party, the Congress. The other two, seemed more innocuous-one was named after a Hindu God while the other was named the 'Standing against Fascism'.

Passively, the author observed the discoursed and then analysed the content shared across one week, in all these groups. The content was in the form of images, videos, charts, graphs, 'data' points as well as text messages. The content with political overtones was then categorised into various groups such as disinformation, criticism, outright lies, political rhetoric/propaganda among others, in order to have a better understanding of the extent and nature of disinformation.

Such an analysis, although preliminary, serves the purpose of understanding better how political forces are using the app. Such an understanding gives us an insight into the disinformation that is being deliberately propagated, the changing nature of political campaigning and the larger intent in trying to take control of the discourse on the app.
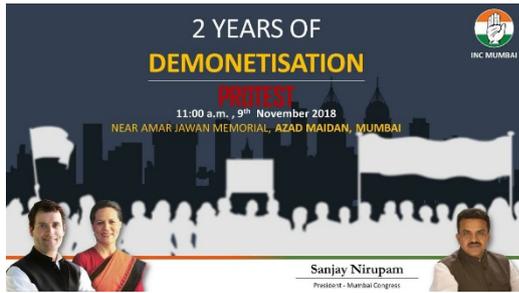
Deliberate disinformation, outright lies and hateful propaganda: Inside India's WhatsApp World

रिजर्व बैंक ने रिपोर्ट जारी की है जिसमे कहा गया है कि नोटबंदी से देश को 9 लाख करोड़ का नुकसान हुआ है

अब यह तो रिजर्व बैंक की आधिकारिक रिपोर्ट है जिसे सरकार भी झुठला नही सकती

इसकी जवाबदेही तय होनी चाहिए, देश को नोटबंदी से इतना बड़ा आर्थिक नुकसान हुआ है, फायदा कुछ नही, इसका जिम्मेदार कौन है?

Figure 1 An example of disinformation on the Congress-run WhatsApp group: Uses a photo of a popular TV anchor in India, Ravish Kumar, to quote a fake report which mentions losses to the Indian

The author spent a week, perusing through hundreds of WhatsApp messages exchanged on all these groups. In the end, the study focussed on four groups which were identified to be the most active in exchanging messages. Supporters of the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress controlled two groups each and thus balance the study.

Over seven days, there were a total of 369 messages across all these four groups. The period of study was between October 27 and November 9, in order to understand any distinct time-specific patterns and trends. Of these, only 101 messages were found in the Congress-controlled WhatsApp groups, while the remaining 73 per cent of messages were exchanged in the BJP-run groups. Of the 101, 83 messages were found to be political in nature; the rest were either ads or festival wishes or entertainment clips.

In the Congress-controlled groups, most messages were related to the party's campaigns, be it for an upcoming regional election or demonstrations against Mr Modi's government for its policies, especially demonetisation of large currency notes two years, whose anniversary fell on November 8.

There was also an unsigned message about how the Indian economy would collapse if the government went ahead with its economic plans, without any attribution to any official data. Apart from this, most other messages were some cartoons lampooning the government.

INSIDE THE BJP GROUPS

The two other BJP-controlled groups, one named after the party itself and the other after a Hindu God, were a study in contrast. Of the 268, 178 were political in nature. The study found that most of these

posts were attacks on the opposition parties and Mr Modi's critics. However, these posts were a mix of falsehoods, disinformation, hateful content as well as abusive in nature.

Falsehood: Many posts, entirely false in content, revolved around two themes-in praise of Mr Modi and his government's performance and in attack against his critics. For instance, one post (**alongside**) spoke of a list issued in the United States of the 50 most honest global leaders. Mr Modi, the post said, topped the list and was only the Indian leader to be featured in it. No such list exists.

Another post says how Mr Modi's government inherited a debt of 32 billion USD but, in four years alone, had managed to pay off all of it. The investigation also found many images which show Mr Modi's rivals making controversial statements, except that none of those statements were actually made. Yet another post, without any attribution, announced that a new list of the 25 most powerful nations in the world had India at number 4. The truth was far from it—India was 15th on the list. This also includes creating distorted versions of history about former political leaders belonging to the opposition parties in order to delegitimise their legacies. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, emerged as a target frequently in the posts shared.

Hateful content: Many images, text and videos were posted to these groups which sought to incite Hindu audiences, which are traditionally the BJP's core supporter base, against people of other religions. One video, nearly 3 minutes long, talks about how Hindus—who form nearly 80 per cent of India—were in danger of being 'converted' to Islam if they did not back Mr Modi for a second term. Another image, talking about the changes in Mr Modi's 4-year-tenure, targets his rivals by saying that he has ensured that politicians who earlier visited mosques are now forced to visit Hindu temples as well. There was also an abusive text post heaping communal slurs on Mr Modi's chief opponent, Mr Rahul Gandhi. It kept referring to Mr Gandhi as a fake Hindu and insinuated that he was, actually a Muslim. It ended with a cry to bring in a 'rabid' Hindu government in 2019 and vote Mr Modi back to power.

Misleading content: Much of the content found in these two groups was also deliberately designed to mislead and paint an inaccurate picture. For instance, one post which celebrated Mr Modi's 4 years in power, titled 'What Changed in 4 years?', says how India's rival neighbour, Pakistan, which would routinely insult earlier Indian Prime Ministers, was now forced to respect India because of Mr Modi. There was no evidence to substantiate this. Responding to concerns that fuel prices are its highest-ever under Mr Modi's government, one post said that it was because India was facing heavy debts for oil purchases under previous regimes and Mr Modi had to pay off the old debt.

Figure 2 A post which claims that since the Modi government came to power, only 14-lane highways are being built in India, in stark contrast to the bad roads in the previous regime. Both photos are unverified.

Analysing the Findings

The investigations reveal the high amount of falsehood, hateful propaganda and disinformation that is being passed around on WhatsApp, unchallenged and unquestioningly. The objective behind these seems multi-fold. Primary, among which, is to run down and discredit opponents using all possible ways, including inventing narratives and distorting reality. The hateful propaganda dished out serves a crucial role-that of keeping your voters mobilised through divisive issues which might be too divisive to be voiced by leaders openly. In fact, many of these posts go against the publicly-stated statements by Mr Modi, the party's top leaders.

The other crucial point this investigation underlines is the use of journalistic techniques in the creation of these posts-be it writing them as though they were news reports, using 'data' to provide comparative pictures (even though the data is dubious) or even creating 'news-like videos or headlines. This is, of course, done so that the post gains more legitimacy. But, at a deeper level, such posts are also created to make the audience feel like they are consuming 'news' and not propaganda.

This way, by ensuring that the app becomes a space for consumption of 'news' which is suited for one's political interests, it amplifies the echo chambers and edges out mainstream media by repeatedly painting it as biased. One constant way that the media is delegitimised is by adding, at the end of messages that the mainstream media would not show the 'truth' that the message exposed because they are biased and corrupt. This is reinforced constantly. This, added to the existing ways in which the media's credibility sags, often accelerates the loss of media legitimacy.

The study found an example that fit the case. There had been a message circulating on WhatsApp about a journalist at a regional-language daily newspaper from a region where Mr Modi served as the chief minister. The newspaper is known to be critical in its journalism towards the establishment. So, the message claims to be an account of a journalist who apologises for his 'biased' reporting against Mr Modi and says that the owner and editor of the newspaper were biased against Mr Modi and his party. It claims to be insider account of the newspaper. A detailed investigation by a fact-checking website found this claim to be completely concocted.

HOW THE WHATSAPP MACHINERY WORKS

While this is not within the scope of this project, it is imperative to give a glimpse of the precision and carefully-crafted way in which political forces operate their WhatsApp strategies in India.

"We believe that the next election is going to be fought on WhatsApp," says a leader of Mr Modi's party, the BJP. This isn't surprising. While all parties have central Information Technology (IT)/Social Media wings/departments, the growing significance of social media in India's electioneering is reflected in the fact that these wings are not sufficient. An United States-based academic, who had been guerrilla tracking the WhatsApp operations of political parties in the southern Indian state was left astonished by the findings. "They had a well-oiled mechanism running, with scores of people employed at different

levels of the region, creating dubious political content. An informal estimate on the costs of these operations revealed it to be around 140,000 USD each year, only for that one state." The academic, who is now working behind-the-scenes to counter such disinformation, did not want to come on record.

Instead, now, both the ruling BJP and the leading opposition party, the Congress, have also established regional social media teams who develop and propagate customised content, relevant to the region. However, political parties have found that even such an arrangement is not enough, especially around election-time.

For instance, regional elections are due in the state of Madhya Pradesh, the second largest state in India, later this month. For this, both the leading parties have hired around 150,000 social media 'experts' each for social media campaiging. Using this social media muscle, both parties will be forming 200,000 WhatsApp groups each. Using the 'experts' that they have hired, these parties have been planning to create customised content in order to reach potential voters more effectively.

The point, as one BJP leader shared from a previous regional election last year, was simple: "Our aim was to capture the mind of the voter. To message them night and day. Whenever they look, they should see us, hear our message."

As a measure of the rising threat of disinformation in elections, the opposition Congress even launched a campaign to "to highlight the use of fake news spread by other political parties and also to create awareness over the communal card" (sic), referring to the hateful, divisive content that makes its way onto social media.

The BJP, on its part, has put one 'expert' in-charge of one electoral booth, which serves roughly 1400 voters. This social media worker will create WhatsApp groups between those voters and try and sway their votes. In its previous campaigns, parties like the BJP have admitted to creating messages which keep in mind the specific cultural and linguistic needs.

The effects of such an intensive WhatsApp-based campaigning have been deadly and venomous.

Recently, there have been WhatsApp messages doing the rounds of regions where elections are due, warning people of "gangs of Rohingya Muslims" being on the prowl to attack and assault people. The message was disguised as being a notice by the local police. These were found to be invented. This was a deliberate, communal slur on the lines of how "gangs of child kidnappers" were on the prowl, the rumours which had led to over 20 deaths. Similarly, there were also messages that groups of Rohingya refugees were "likely to attack Nagaland", a north-eastern Indian State. Shockingly, a leading media news agency in India, the Associated News of India (ANI) even fell for this forward and reported on it and later deleted the story when it was called out.

Similarly, in the lead-up to the elections in Madhya Pradesh, there was an attempt to distort reality after an 8-year-old was found to have been raped. The rape case had resulted in an uproar against the government. In order to possibly distract from the incident, there were fake messages and a fake article on WhatsApp which showed how Muslim groups were carrying out protests to demand the freeing of the accused. These messages were shared by a large number of people on social media and sought to divide people further. A fact-checking website busted this in July.

HOW WHATSAPP LENDS ITSELF TO DISINFORMATION

This piece seeks to underline that it does not believe that WhatsApp is the reason why disinformation exists, in the Indian context. Disinformation exists for various reasons. Dr Claire Wardle, who leads 'First Draft,' the world's first non-profit which focusses extensively on research and practice to address dis- and mis-information, believes that there are four major motivations behind it-"political, financial, psychological (for personal satisfaction) and social (to reinforce our belonging to communities or "tribes")".

What platforms like WhatsApp and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter do is to offer platforms for the expressions of such motivations. The key point of distinction between them is how easy or difficult it is to spread dis and mis-information on these platforms. This is why WhatsApp needs special consideration.

Essentially a personal messaging app, WhatsApp is an app that is employed for personal conversations between close family, friends and acquaintances. Hence, in comparison to public and semi-public platforms like Twitter and Facebook respectively, WhatsApp is a private loop which means the information shared has an added legitimacy since it comes from a close group of people. The news/information shared is more likely to be in tune with one's sensibilities, political or otherwise.

In an interview to the author, Dr Wardle agrees that the fundamentally different nature of the app makes the battle against disinformation more challenging. The key difference, she says, is that the app is not a 'broadcast technology,' it essentially, is about interpersonal messaging, a process that enjoys far more trust. "It is about information traveling between trusted peers in small groups. In addition, there is very little contextual information that travels with the post. We, therefore, disproportionately rely on the credibility of the person sending the information."

A newly-released report, 'News in Social Media and Messaging Apps' by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, says of the news shared on WhatsApp:

"As messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp grow in popularity, they are increasingly being used to share and discuss news, away from the toxicity of political debate that threatens more open spaces. Messaging apps provide an antidote to the problems that arise when engaging with news in Facebook. They feel personal and intimate – rather like Facebook once felt – and the news that is shared feels more relevant. They also feel more immediate and allow greater freedom of expression because they shield users from the public glare of open platforms."

In fact, as part of the study, it spoke to many who have shifted to using WhatsApp as a major tool for consuming news. One of the people it interviewed said,

"The whole thing about social media is [it's] a bit of a mask. So when I'm in my messaging groups with my friends the mask comes off and I feel like I can truly be myself."

However, even on groups with family or friends, there is a sense of performativity that remains in our social behaviour. But, what happens when you find yourself in a group of strangers, bound together with your political beliefs? The mask drops entirely because of the anonymity it offers. This might be a key in understanding people's behaviour in sharing disinformation on WhatsApp groups.

RISKY CONTEXT	SAFER ENVIRONMENT
Open, public environment – posts remain visible forever; stories of people losing/not getting job	Closed, private environment – privacy grants freedom, encouraging relevant, more authentic expression
Broader audience of distant acquaintances, colleagues, as well as closer friends and family	Smaller groups of shared interests, close to each other, something in common defines the group (e.g. family)
Difficult to be relevant to all, easily misunderstood, risk of being judged	Conversations and content remain relevant, less likely to be misunderstood, less fear of being judged
Ads responding to online behaviour can be disconcerting, feel under surveillance	Can be immediate, in the moment, can't ignore friends

(Courtesy: News in social media and messaging apps, by Kantar Media for Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018)

In addition, since WhatsApp is an end-to-end encrypted application, it is not possible to track down the origin of a post. Hence, people feel emboldened by the lack of accountability that WhatsApp offers. This is true, especially, of social media volunteers employed by political parties who spread disinformation freely.

In addition, one factor that weakens the fight against disinformation on WhatsApp is the fact that very few mainstream media organisations in India are willing to publish themselves extensively on the app. Some organisations have, only recently started offering audiences a way to share news stories on WhatsApp by having a 'Share on WhatsApp' button on their webpages.

Dr Wardle, who was part of a massive project involving 24 Brazilian media companies, says that one of the biggest learnings from the Brazil experience in fighting disinformation on WhatsApp was to have more trusted voices. She agreed that the absence of mainstream news sites on WhatsApp allows disinformation and conspiracies to flourish. "We needed the trust of the audience in order to know what the misleading content was. Most of the content was emotional and used fear to drive sharing. The biggest challenge to pushing out debunks is that you need a network of 'truth ambassadors' who are willing to disseminate the quality reporting that we were doing. Next time we would invest more in building those networks."

Why This Will Only Get Worse in India

The BJP's chief, Amit Shah, in the same speech when he hinted at how disinformation was helping his party, also said something very crucial. He said that his party would not be able to fight and win an election without 'cyber warriors' spreading out, across the country. In fact, in keeping with this belief, the party has created a new post, called the 'cell phone pramukh' (the cell phone chief). The party is all set to appoint 900,000 such chiefs, one for each 900,000-odd electoral booths in the country, whose job is to drive the WhatsApp-agenda for the party. So, in every small group of 1400-odd voters, this cell phone chief, armed with a smart phone, will have create three WhatsApp groups and infiltrate a few others. Once that is done, the party worker will propagate specially-designed election content right into people's cell phones within a few seconds.

Similarly, its opponent Congress, though slow to the game, is catching up. It has announced plans to appoint 4000-odd personnel for each legislative assembly, whose job it will be to create social media content for the voters in the area.

With increasing data and cell phone penetration in the rural areas as well, the incidence of people accessing social media like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter, is slated to increase. In fact, WhatsApp

is so buoyant about its future in India that it [has been working to launch](#) its first-ever in-app payment system, called WhatsApp Pay.

Unfortunately, the Indian story has so far not been high on the list of research and practice, driven largely by the Global North experience. The disconnect is so high that the RISJ's report on News in Social Media and Messaging apps did not even feature India, despite the fact that over 30 people have died because of the consumption of disinformation through WhatsApp.

If this apathy, both from within India and beyond, continues then the Indian election of 2019 will be a repeat of Brazil, 2018, but only much bigger.

Kunal Purohit is an independent journalist, based out of India, writing on politics, gender, development, migration and the intersections between them. He is an SOAS University of London alumnus. He has previously written for the Hindustan Times, The Times of India, and The Wire, among other publications. He tweets at @kunalpurohit.(https://kunalpurohit1.contently.com)