The invisible face of (dis)information in the world's largest democracy

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The rise of political cyber troops in India has allowed disinformation to harness the power of the internet to influence citizens. This virtual escalation must be stopped to avoid creating a culture of mistrust and dishonesty.

Kashmir, the Indian-administered region fondly referred to as paradise on Earth (*Jannat-E-Benazir*), has been on official lockdown since August 2019 when Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, suspended Article 370 which grants autonomy to Kashmir. The irony of living in a paradise without freedom of expression or movement did not escape the Kashmiris. They greeted the stale familiarity of armed forces in their neighborhoods with protests against the Modi government. These protests, in the eyes of the rest of India, did not last long. The internet was shut down immediately, and major media outlets quickly started claiming that the Kashmiris secretly supported Modi. The Prime Minister continually announced on Twitter that normalcy was being restored in the state. Stories of a number of initiatives, companies and businesses that fell apart went unreported, except on a few English speaking media outlets and Instagram accounts. What reached the common Indian on WhatsApp was that Modi rid Kashmir of Jihadists. Islamophobic chants filled the air once again, just a few months after Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was reelected into power.

Disinformation: ignorance and mistrust

Disinformation is false information spread deliberately to deceive. In a world where the amount of information collected, dissipated and consumed is increasing manifold, untrustworthy sources can be difficult to spot. In this environment, disinformation thrives, as fact checking becomes increasingly difficult, and so an avoidable choice. Perpetrators capitalise on this phenomenon by treating their audiences as ignorant and gullible, instead of intelligent and questioning.

It is in such a society that democracy, as Asimov describes in his wonderful essay 'A Cult of Ignorance', is nurtured by the notion that "my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge". When the power instilled in scientific knowledge is made less significant, this cult of ignorance rises. Moreover, even those well informed within an ignorant society meet an artificial barrier to information: mistrust. Democratically engaged, active citizens are left wondering which sources they should trust when building a political opinion. In

this environment, democracy can feel deflating and closer to an obstacle course than to an exciting exercise of civil liberties and freedom.

This ignorance and mistrust are compounded if the traditional checks and balances in a democratic system are ineffective, or directly inexistent. In his book 'Manufacturing Consent', Noam Chomsky highlights the missing incentive for traditional media to be an unbiased fourth pillar of democracy. Media houses often push political narratives in compliance with those in power, like the Times of India did with Kashmir. However, in the age of social media, those in power no longer need to worry about strategising around traditional media sources, as they can just refer to them as 'fake' if they do not follow the government's narrative. It is much easier to control the political discourse online, where there is no accountable body, and sources are rarely verified. Unchecked Twitter handles and WhatsApp forwards have become political tools. In a country seeing its highest unemployment rate in 45 years, there is an army of people paid to create and spread government sponsored information. These are India's political cyber troops.

How disinformation spreads: a virtual epidemic?

It is ironic (or simply coincidental) that a year ago The New York Times wrote about India having a public health crisis of disinformation. It suggested that disinformation be tackled like an epidemic. Such an analogy suggests that disinformation is created without malicious intent. However, unlike in an epidemic, the source of disinformation, especially in a political arena, is created to deceive and crafted to spread.

Disinformation is as powerful as its ability to spread. In 1928, public relations pioneer Edward Bernays wrote the book 'Propaganda', in which he detailed how manipulating the habits and opinions of masses allowed those in power to create an 'invisible government', which was the true ruling power of a state. In February 2019, ahead of the general election in India, a terrorist attack in Kashmir killed 40 Indian soldiers. Within a day, a picture of the leader of the Indian National Congress (INC), Rahul Gandhi, standing next to the suicide bomber, had made its way into social media and WhatsApp. Even though the image was debunked as fake on the day, the damage had already been done, reaching mainstream media sources and millions of mobile phones around the country. The 'invisible government' was manipulating the opinions of millions through a single image.

The victory of the BJP back in 2014 was partially attributed to their investment in Information Technology (IT) cells, which were created to lure a new 'young working professionals' category of voters. These IT cells became a cyber army that could reach millions of people through a few Twitter handles and WhatsApp groups. By creating an infrastructure that allows governments to directly reach people, Narendra Modi's party did not need to oppose dissenting opinion but simply drown it in contradicting information that appears to come from reliable sources.

While it is tempting to frame this as a simple case of abuse of power, the reality is more complex. Both the BJP and Gandhi's INC have IT cells within their organisational structures, where trolling and disinformation tactics are commonplace. These cells are hosts to cyber troops, which are defined by the Oxford Internet Institute as "government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online". According to a recent Cyber Troops Profile for India from the same source, cyber troop activity rose sharply in the lead up to the 2019 national election, showing that both parties invested heavily in online tactics.

At this point, it is important to distinguish content creators from distributors. While political parties are presumed to be the source, most of the distribution of their propaganda is done by regular citizens. At this step, disinformation becomes misinformation. As of 2019, India had 340 million Facebook users and 230 million Whatsapp users, and functions such as "Share" on Facebook and "Forward" on Whatsapp could be prompted with just a click. The ease with which these tools were accessed by cyber troops and regular citizens alike facilitated the spread of misinformation, beyond the point where oversight or regulation was conceivably possible.

The effect on domestic political outcomes

It is fair to assume that this online activity influenced the outcome of the general election in 2019. According to a report by a digital marketing company, over 40% of young people kept themselves updated about political developments through social media, with 30% of an estimated 150 million first-time voters being engaged with and influenced by social media. Behind these numbers hid big data analytics techniques employed by both main parties to increase mass outreach. While on the surface these practices may seem harmless and part of the democratic process, they can evolve to become seriously confrontational and spark division within a society.

Transcendentally, societal division along religious lines has been a staple of the Indian state since its creation. Hindu-Muslim tensions, leading to skirmishes and massacres, have occurred continually since the Partition, but the current political climate has brought these to a new level. The passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), in which Muslims who migrated to India before 2014 are practically denied citizenship, has been surrounded by both controversy and a pro-BJP social media apparatus. The anti-Jihadi narrative propagated since the abrogation of Article 370 set the stage for the CAA bill to conveniently become law. With the passing of the law, India was separated into those who support it and those who oppose it.

In this aftermath, the BJP deployed several tactics to increase support for the bill. Some of them include calling those who oppose the CAA anti-national, creating campaign slogans that demand shooting terrorists, which quickly reached social media, and releasing WhatsApp forwards spreading bias against Muslims. The ruling BJP is an openly Hindu nationalist party that no longer hides its dislike of Muslims in public spaces. They

shamelessly glorify the reach that any political narrative, scientifically sound or not, has within the country. Such unchecked power is wielded to favour the government's domestic agenda.

The current political climate clearly benefits the BJP, who is radicalising large masses through its social media presence. However, if these practices cause tension, lead to civil unrest and ultimately chaos, why are both parties engaging in them? Well, the incentive to de-escalate does not exist. In the eyes of the leadership of both parties, this moral conundrum is worth the prize of electoral victories and power. The BJP and the INC continuously accuse each other of propagating fake news, and neither of them is willing to recognise doing so themselves. No party wants to lose the edge these tools provide them, and so it would be naïve to believe the solution to disinformation resides in the hands of political parties.

Across the Western border

It might also be naïve to believe that India as a state is willing to slow down the development of cyber troops, particularly when its neighbour and regional rival Pakistan could take advantage of it. Following the same February 2019 attack in Kashmir, Facebook pages linked to the Pakistan Army started posting inflammatory rhetoric to increase tensions with India, aiming to obtain an edge in their claim over Kashmir. Developing solid cyberinfrastructure to combat this type of disturbance is a current point of emphasis within the Indian army. In 2019, the institution created its Information Warfare (IW) branch in an attempt to fight back misinformation and propaganda causing psychological impact amongst the population.

On top of the historical relationship which has seen multiple small wars over the last half century, India and Pakistan are geopolitical rivals in the current world order. On the one hand, Pakistan does not want India to become powerful enough to culturally, technologically and militarily overwhelm the entire South Asian region. On the other hand, India sees Pakistan as a nuisance to its ambitions of becoming a true regional power in Asia, one capable of competing with China, Pakistan's main ally. Hence, from an Indian perspective, a strong IW branch that uses all available tools, including cyber troops to sway public opinion both in Pakistan and in India, is warranted.

Given that the current conflict in Kashmir is still active, and so is the BJP's belligerence towards Muslims (which are the religious majority in Pakistan), the current cyber arms race between the two countries is likely to amp up, in parallel to the battle between the BJP and the INC. In fact, increasing tensions both domestically and internationally are likely to be a catalyst for more aggressive partisanship and nationalism. Coming back to the attack in February 2019, it was the association of the terrorist and its group to Pakistan that made it so powerful as a piece of disinformation, as it fuelled anti-Muslim sentiment amongst the Hindu majority in India. As long as these tools are still available to both

parties, and the Indian government continues to consider Pakistan a threat, the conflict in Kashmir is far from over.

The responsibility of private players

When the undeniable banalities of disinformation are exposed, the next question to ask is how can they be regulated and who can do it. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are blamed to have aided, abetted and even caused the wave of violence that hit India in 2019. However, the truth is that these technology platforms merely exacerbated dirty politics that existed long before social media. The 2002 sectarian riots in Gujarat or the 1993 Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay did not require WhatsApp.

The decentralised spread of information made easy by these platforms makes everyone responsible for misinformation and thus, no one accountable. Expecting the government to mitigate disinformation is like expecting men to let go of patriarchal supremacy. They are naturally disincentivized. The government merely forces these companies to impose regulation or asks them to hand over their data to identify the source of disinformation. However, the Orwellian idea of regulating free speech could be a dangerous tool handed to the already powerful Indian PM. Regulation could quickly escalate to private message monitoring in a country whose leadership thrives on Hindu supremacy and regards death a fitting punishment to cow slaughter and sexual violence alike.

Even if Facebook and Twitter, the Western companies painted as an enemy are removed, there is no stopping the government from making its own app to spread information (like Narendra Modi's "NaMo App"). Infrastructure like IT cells are set up not to use WhatsApp or Twitter, but to use *any medium* to spread information. Regulating spread by pushing the blame on the platform is a stopgap solution if the content creators are not held accountable.

Fighting disinformation

There is no need for a government to invest in technology that gives it direct power over controlling political narratives. Such a power cannot exist in the hands of one entity, and definitely not a political party. It must be embedded in a system that self corrects for misinformation and punishes disinformation. For such a system to exist, there is a need for new legislation.

Asking political parties not to use social media would be naïve. There are laws that bar politicians from using the media 48 hours before polling, like most countries do. However, with the advent of social media, politicians are always campaigning, making the short ban outdated at best. Campaigning has become prevalent throughout the entire legislative term. Citizens are now perpetually treated as voters and subject to a constant influx of information. Therefore, new laws should redefine the campaigning rules of the electoral

game, require information released from IT Cells to be monitored closely, and shut down any sources of disinformation within political parties.

The truth and democracy

In the summer of 2020, as India battles the COVID-19, the BJP IT Cell continues to battle Indians. A surge of COVID-19 cases were identified after a religious Islamic event in Delhi in early March. The Muslim community, yet again, was painted as the root of every problem India faces. From Kashmir, to CAA, to COVID-19, the past year has seen India shift further away from the truth. As Orwell once said, the further a society drifts from truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.

If left unchecked, disinformation can become a culture that poses a considerable threat to domestic and foreign policy, and public health. This culture, at its core, is of mistrust and dishonesty. Historically, we have fought to weed out dishonesty from society through education, religion and science. If such a culture is not desired in our homes, it cannot be encouraged in politics. The biggest check on dirty politics in a democracy is a questioning citizen which, in turn, will give birth to questioning leaders.

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