ONLINE ATTACKS AGAINST POLITICAL JOURNALISTS

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INTRODUCTION

Social media sustains India's digital journalism industry. A rise in reactionary users in light of rising political polarisation has adversely affected journalists' online experience. This study investigates these effects and journalists' responses to them.

Our findings highlight challenges to professional journalism in polarised environments and risks to socialmedia driven news consumption.

METHODS

- Interviews with 20 journalists, open-coded & analysed
- Digital trace data (Twitter V2 API) visualised and analysed using VADER

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Tactics and key allegations of online attacks
- Responses by targeted journalists
- Characteristic features of attack networks

PRIOR LITERATURE

- Starbird et al. 2019. Disinformation as collaborative work: Surfacing the participatory nature of strategic information operations. CSCW
- Sahana Udupa. 2018. Enterprise Hindutva and social media in urban India. Contemporary South Asia

FINDINGS

01 ATTACK TACTICS



Organized mobbing via tags, comments, reports



Liking & resharing attackers' posts



Using hashtags to trend damaging narratives narratives (see 02)



Sharing targeted disinformation to trigger larger troll networks

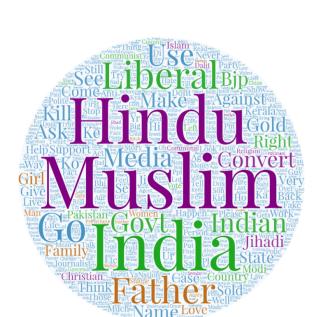


Re-visibilising old 'controversial' posts to new attackers



Major political figures dogwhistle attacks via quote-tweets

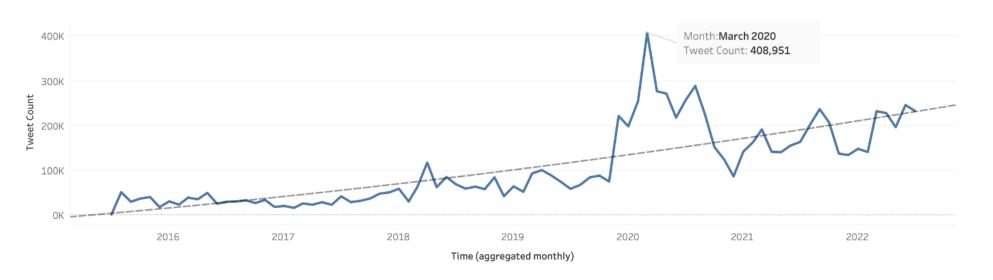
02 KEY ALLEGATIONS



Communalist sentiment -> religious majoritarianism

Political conspiracy -> hyper-nationalism

Deviation from traditionalist gender norms -> constructions of a conservative society



Counts of tweets (N = 7, 865, 332) containing phrases including the term anti-hindu have been increasing in the last 7 years (R2 = 0.712, p < 0.0001)

03 RESPONSES TO ATTACK



Retweeting more posts, creating lesser self-authored posts



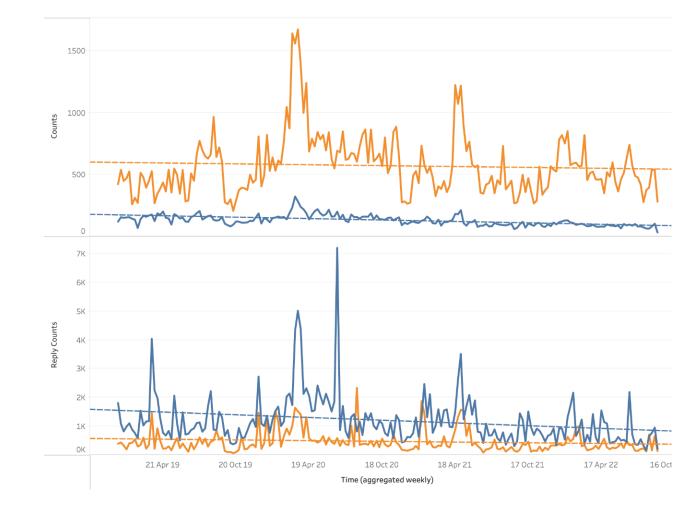
Preoccupation with factual correctness and context setting



Avoiding posting personal details



Experimenting with new affordances and safety features



Top: No. of original tweets (in blue) over time (aggregated weekly) vs number of amplification activities (RT, Quote Tweets, Replies - in orange) (Jan 2019 - Sep 2022).

Below: Replies (measure of engagement) on original tweets (in blue) vs on amplification content (in orange) (Jan 2019 - Sep 2022)

04 ATTACK NETWORKS



Function over WhatsApp groups on local, State, and National levels



Politicians may incentivise attacks via selfies, job opportunities, etc.



Corporations run similar attack networks to silence criticism



Major attacks are often premeditated



Dominated by men but include women

