

The Troll's Toolkit: A mixed-methods study on how journalists are trolled on Indian Twitter

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The rise of political polarization has led to an increase in targeted online trolling of public commentators such as journalists. In this paper, we adopt a mixed-methods approach to understand the mechanisms and consequences of online trolling of journalists on Indian Twitter. We conducted in-depth interviews with 20 high-profile journalists and a large-scale analysis of public engagement with Indian journalists' Twitter activity. We find that (a) high-organized troll networks use a variety of tactics to target journalists' identities and credibility using right-wing populist narratives, and in turn, (b) journalists are increasingly self-censoring using methods such as amplifying rather than authoring tweets. Our work highlights the challenges of professional journalism in polarized environments with organized trolling, underlining the risks to the social media driven news environment.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders ranked India at a worrying 142 out of 180 countries¹. In the same year, an article by The Nation labeled India as '*One of the Most Dangerous Countries for Journalists*'². Increasing attacks against journalists, including physical assaults, illegal detentions, and charges under draconian laws have been documented by human rights organizations³ and international media⁴. These attacks occur in the background of an increasingly polarized environment rooted in the political and social dominance of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)[29, 42].

As right-wing politicians use Twitter to sway vote bases, much of this violence is making its way to the online sphere [35]. Trolling on Indian Twitter is part of an increasingly well-defined, collaborative practice of political narrative-setting. Trolls dominate public discourse on social media and in turn on prime time television where Twitter trends - which egg on reactionary responses to scandals, rumours, and religious debates - become all-consuming topics of daily debate. Using strategies such as repetition and re-targeting which are otherwise found in the abusive tactics of gaslighting [33], trolls post right-wing values as necessary for the progress of the nation and form a monopoly over India's political reality. Trolls on Indian Twitter use violence and vitriol to exalt a narrow set of majoritarian, communalist, masculinist, and hypernationalist values [20]. In doing so, they punish any deviance, critique, or dissent which may hinder the 'awakening of the Hindu nation' and in turn threaten the political power of the ruling BJP party [8]. It is no surprise then, that high-profile left-liberal journalists, who are in the business of truth-telling and have been afforded immense visibility and credibility on Twitter, have become primary victims of trolling on Indian Twitter.

As such, there is a need for robust mixed-methods research on how attacks against Indian journalists play out on Twitter, and what these attacks mean for them. The 20 high-profile journalists we interviewed are keenly aware of their role in the information ecosystem, and are fighting right-wing populism through their work. However, within the hostile environment of Indian Twitter, courage has practical limitations. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of these experiences, we address the issue of attacks against journalists in India through the following research questions:

RQ1: How are Indian journalists attacked by trolls online?

RQ1a: What tactics do trolls use to target Indian journalists?

RQ1b: What do troll networks look like?

RQ2: How do journalists respond to such trolling?

*Both authors contributed equally to this research.

¹<https://rsf.org/en/country/india>

²<https://www.thenation.com/article/world/india-violence-journalists/>

³<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/india-authorities-should-stop-targeting-prosecuting-journalists-and-online-critics/>

⁴<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55906345>

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One of our primary motivations to conduct this research is that trolling on Indian Twitter has various characteristics that distinguish it qualitatively from trolling in other contexts. Insights into the mechanisms of such trolling helps us showcase how and why myriad practices of trolling are deeply intertwined with the rise of a right-wing political system in India. Our primary contributions include a description of trolling networks of varying levels of visibility, an in-depth review of popular tactics used by trolls and mechanisms of self-censorship employed by journalists to co-exist and defend the practice of journalism in the current socio-political info-environment in India.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Right-Wing Populism in India

The funneling of political and ideological demands into a ‘shared antagonism’ which lays grounds for polarization of ‘common people’ vs the other, has come to define an authoritarian Right-Wing populist politics [9]. An ironically democratizing nature of Right-Wing populism motivates political articulations of collective social identities by this public, and in turn, the unity of the public manifests as an articulation of demands [31]. The dichotomization of public demands has been understood to occur along lines of nationality, regionality, religion, and ethnicity through extreme nativist rhetoric [52]. These demands have long been characterized by ideological attitudes of traditionalism and conservatism [19]. In India, right-wing populism takes on the form of ‘Hindutva’, a form of Hindu majoritarian nationalism with authoritarian implications [7] popularized by the ruling BJP government [3, 7]. Hansen defines Hindutva as a ‘conservative revolution’, in which these narrow and problematic ideological values are conflated with those of democratism and freedom [26], positing the Hindu voice as the authentic voice of nation state [34, 41], hence securing Hindu hegemony. The ‘Other’ in the Indian context, first and foremost, is the minority Muslim [3]. Allegations of radicalism [40] and terrorist conspiracy [17] posit the Hindu as the ideal citizen and Muslim as the deviant [48]. Some such examples include ‘corona-jihad’ [17], in which a congregation of the Muslims missionary group Tablighi Jamaat during the COVID-19 lockdown was framed as a jihadist conspiracy towards the downfall of India, and ‘Love-jihad’ or ‘grooming gangs’ [21, 25, 32], which are constructions of a predatory Muslim male that forcibly convert Hindu women to Islam via trickery. The strong anti-secularist narrative of Hindutva means that increasingly, other minority religions such as Christians are also being othered [14]. In addition, hypernationalism is a key characteristic of right-wing ideology in India. Here, a dichotomy is forced between the right and left-liberal. This can be seen in the recent popularization of pejorative catchphrases such as ‘Anti-national’, ‘Urban Naxal’, and ‘Tukde tukde gang’ (‘Break India gang’) against journalists, activists, and scholars, all of which suggest that dissenting left-liberal Indians are conspirators against the progress, freedom, and security of the nation state [10, 37, 44]. Yet another characteristic feature of today’s Hindutva is intense misogyny. Right-Wing populism has come to be characterized by an ‘obsession with gender and sexuality’ [18]. Within the logic of Indian Right-Wing populism, too, the ‘other’ comprises marginalized populations including non-traditionalist women. With the rise of the BJP, A new “Modi masculinity” [45] representing aspirational Indian manliness has produced an affectively hyper-masculinised Hindu collective for the productions of a Hindu nation for mass consumption”. In an already patriarchal Indian public sphere, women’s role has long been characterized by notions of virtuousness and propriety which place on them a disproportionate responsibility of sexual morality [1].

2.2 Trolling on Indian Twitter

Online trolling has long been considered a part and parcel of cyberspace [12, 24, 27, 38, 39, 53]. Over time, however, trolling has been associated less with its once positive entertainment value, and more by the intense and often unforgiving vitriol [53]. The participatory and democratic nature of Twitter has provided a powerful platform for the articulation of collective demands [30] via trolling. One unique form of trolling of recent interest to social sciences and HCI scholars is that of right-wing users on Indian Twitter. India’s ruling BJP party has pioneered the use of technology for political organization in the country, dating back to online groups in 1990 [8]. Today, a sharp rise in polarization stemming from its dominance is increasingly being reflected on Twitter [17]. This expansion of ideology, discourse, and practice of Indian right-wing nationalism to the online sphere has been labeled ‘Cyber-hindutva’ [46] or ‘Online Hindutva’ [16], with trolls being referred to as ‘troll armies’ [15], footsoldiers [8], and ‘Internet Hindus’ [49]. A rise of reactionary user bases has led to a distinctive culture of political trolling described as ‘argumentative, experientially voluntary and fun’ [50]. Udupa characterizes this new development in the political strategy of the ruling government as ‘Enterprise Hindutva’ using the following definition:

A “mediatized form of Hindu nationalism shaped largely by the affordances of social media and the cultural practices surrounding them in urban India... Enterprise Hindutva suggests that it is through the very bickering on social media and repetition of simplified summaries of key ideological principles that Hindutva finds its latest mediatic conditions for renewal.”

This ‘voluntary entrepreneurial work’ molds itself to the engagement-oriented architectures of social media platforms, in which platforms train user activity in the form of self-expression using positive rewards [11]. Right-wing ‘troll armies’ saturate public discourse [28] and engage in politically motivated narrative setting [8] using means such as dog-whistling, threats of physical harm,

and disinformation [5]. Within this technoculture, trolls use tenets of rationalism and morality to justify and popularize nationalist political claims [23]. Reddy, in one of the earliest explorations of right-wing trolling in India noted, "Online Hindutva actors participate in discussions on the grander points of the ideology, gliding around a set corpus of themes, and by commenting, tagging, tweeting, retweeting and posting, reproduce the ideological formation from various points of entry and exit." Right-wing trolling has been described as a method of organizing political activity [15], democratizing political participation [51], and concretizing political fantasies as part of an overarching 'restylization of mass expression and political power' through new media [2, 23].

3 METHODOLOGY

In this section, we describe data collection and analyses processes adopted for this IRB-approved study.

3.1 Participant recruitment

DISMISS (Database of Social Media Influencers Snowballed Sequentially) [6] is a systematically categorized database of influential Twitter accounts created to support studies on Twitter in India. We filtered DISMISS to access a list of journalists who (a) were verified and (b) had more than 10,000 followers. We put this threshold in place because of our interest in how trolls engage with accounts that have garnered moderate-high levels of public interest and visibility. The second and third authors of the study have well-established connections within the fraternity of journalists in India, which we leveraged to solicit interview participants for the study - a pool of 20 journalists agreed to be interviewed.

3.2 Interview and case study

All interviews were conducted remotely over video calls, and participants were interviewed by the first and second authors in English or Hindi. We first conducted a brief pre-interview asking participants to sign a consent form explaining data collection, their rights as participants, and the purpose of the study, and stated that there may be a variety of triggers in this work.

During this time, we verbally reiterated that they could decline any question or terminate the study at any time. We then conducted semi-structured interviews lasting 40-60 minutes, where we asked questions based on 3 broad themes: (a) personal experiences of online trolling, (b) types and themes of trolling, and (c) journalists' online behavior post-trolling. We encouraged participants to share specific event details, and concluded the interviews by asking them about relevant experiences that we may have failed to capture. A sample questionnaire is provided in the appendix.

3.3 Participant demographics

All participants reside in India and have gained online repute for their journalistic work across varying beats including politics, technology, and human rights. Most participants would be considered left-liberal or centrist in their politics. Moreover, due to the nature of their work, all journalists had public Twitter profiles, and all had been the subject of media articles - both of which afforded their work and profile visibility on and beyond Twitter. The journalists interviewed also had a breadth of experience or organizational function including from reportage, editorial work, commentary, and anchoring.

Among the cohort of interviewees are certain highly-influential senior journalists with nearly 2 decades of experience or more. Some of the awards won by the interviewees include one Padma Shri (a civilian award given to citizens with exceptional contribution by the President of India), three Ramnath Goenka awards and one Red Ink award (both are awards for excellence in journalism). The interviewed journalists' affiliations include The Print, The Wire, The Scroll, NDTV, Hindustan Times, Economic Times, The Quint, India Today, BOOMLive, The News Minute, BBC, Indian Express and so on. Most of them had joined Twitter prior to 2010, the earliest date of joining being 2007 (Twitter was launched in July, 2006) and the latest being 2015. Due to their highly-visible online presence, we omit their organizational affiliation as well as their exact follower counts or their years of joining Twitter in the following Table 1.

3.4 Interview data collection and analysis

As researchers with experience working in polarization and hostile engagement on Indian Twitter, our interviews were biased by our intent to interrogate issues around trolling and self-censorship. Consequently those are prominently featured in our research. All interviews were conducted by either the first or the second author, recorded and simultaneously transcribed using automatic transcription software. Post each interview, both authors re-listened full recordings and wrote over the transcriptions to account for punctuation, filler words, Hindi-English code-mixed phrases, and wrongly transcribed text. We framed our procedure for inductive analysis in accordance with guidelines by Thomas outlined in the text "A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis" [47]. We prepared 20 separate raw data files, formatting them uniformly in the form of questions and answers. Both authors closely read the interview text twice to gain an overarching understanding of major themes. We noted 5 upper level categories, namely: (a) themes of trolling, (b) methods of organized trolling, (c) online management of trolling (including self-censorship), (d) professional consequences of trolling, and (e) mental health consequences of trolling. The first author then identified 79 'low level' codes using a process of

Table 1. Demography of Interviewed Journalists (in order of interviews conducted). Follower counts (at the time of writing) have been rounded off to prevent identification of participants

P#	Role in Organisation	Gender	Years in Journalism	Medium	Followers*
P1	Senior Editor	Female	11+	Print, Digital	10k
P2	Co Founder/ Editor-in-Chief	Female	19	Print, Digital	320k
P3	Senior Correspondent	Female	4+	Digital	70k
P4	Principal Correspondent	Female	6+	Digital	200k
P5	Independent Journalist	Male	12+	Digital	20k
P6	Senior Fellow, ex-Editor	Female	27+	Television, Print, Digital	80k
P7	Executive Editor	Female	17+	Print, Digital	10k
P8	Reporter	Male	6+	Digital	10k
P9	Principal Correspondent	Female	12+	Digital	10k
P10	ex-Journalist	Female	18+	Digital	40k
P11	Senior Editor	Female	12	Digital	70k
P12	Editor	Female	22+	Print, Digital	60k
P13	Senior Assistant Editor	Female	12	Digital	20k
P14	Senior Associate Editor	Male	16+	Digital	50k
P15	Editor	Female	5+	Digital	40k
P16	ex-Consulting Editor, Primetime Anchor	Male	30+	Digital, Television, Print	> 5000k
P17	Executive Editor	Female	13+	Print, Digital	150k
P18	Associate Editor	Male	8+	Digital	30k
P19	Correspondent	Female	12+	Television, Digital	100k
P20	Contributing Editor	Male	6+	Digital	130k

manual coding on the five chosen themes. The second first author reviewed the codes, and after a second pass, differences were discussed and resolved. Post this, we refined upper level categories for the purpose of this paper, finalizing on 3 major themes: insights into troll behavior, mechanisms of trolling, and self-censorship. We then assigned quotes to each category, focusing on those which convey the core essence of the category.

3.5 Trace-Data Collection

Using the Twitter v2 API, we collect 3 years worth of historical archives of tweets from (a) the top 20 most followed Indian journalists from the DISMISS dataset ($N = 237, 133$) and (b) all the 20 journalists interviewed as a part of this study ($N = 146, 766$). We had obtained written consent from our interview participants before collecting their tweets. The period of study was set to 1st January 2019 to 1st Sept 2022 for purposes of data collection. We also collected every reply received by sets (a) and (b) of journalists.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 [RQ1a] What tactics do trolls use to target Indian journalists?

Trolls harness their power from a dynamic, complex ecosystem of supporters to ensure the intensity, longevity, and sustenance of attack against journalists. We use the phrase ‘troll network’ in an attempt to characterize trolling as the collaborative work of ordinary trolls, passive right-wing supporters, gossip websites, partisan media outlets, political parties, and politicians who are involved to various degrees of practice and association. A common thread running through the tactics we discuss below is the use of volume and omnipresence by trolls, who rely on a keen awareness and exploitation of the power of the troll network, to silence journalists.

4.1.1 Flooding. Our participants were primarily exposed to mass trolling, in which a large number of trolls organize themselves prior to the trolling event and engage in collective attack. During these events, trolls’ key tactic was the use of the power of numbers to overwhelm journalists into deleting their articles and tweets, posting less frequently, and avoiding critiques of ideas, groups, or entities supported by those troll communities. After a tweet or account is chosen as a target of attack, trolls engage in a timed flooding of aggressive messages that spans comment replies and quote tweets of tweets authored by journalists and organizations associated with them, tag mentions of journalists on tweets authored by trolls, and direct messages (DMs). These messages can also target those who reply in support of a journalist’s message, highlighting that any express of rapport will be attacked. Recounting one such instance, one participant noted,

“I was waking up to thousands of notifications across all platforms. In a span of four days, I may have manually blocked over eight thousand accounts. After a thousand, I just couldn’t keep a count. Three, four months ago, unread popups used to make me feel excited. Now I’m just like, Oh my God, what happened? There is a pit in the stomach after going through something like this. Every time you see a notification, your heart sinks a little. Because you don’t know what more shit is going to be hurled at you.”

Instances such as this make the journalists' account functionally unusable. Notifications take on a symbolic nature, immersing the journalist in an inescapable environment of fear. Since Twitter does not offer options for mass blocking and muting, flooding also makes it impossible for journalists to use privacy features such as blocking and muting effectively. This allows trolls to overwhelm the actual system that platforms journalists' abuse in a way that cannot be tackled by existing policies or legal interventions. Our finding that among all elements of trolling, the volume of attack is most likely to force journalists into silence, is a particularly cruel indication that all-consuming 'suffocation' may be the most effective way for Twitter trolls to induce a level of lasting trauma that leads to the intended outcome of censorship.

4.1.2 Passive trolling. In the process of her interview, one of our participants made us privy to the behavioural patterns of her own trolls:

"I have noticed this for a lot of people who otherwise have no engagement on Twitter... like hardly one person will retweet them. They get a lot of engagement when they abuse me. There are these people who have made a career out of one tweet a day on me. Every two days, they'll have some tweet on me, and then everybody will retweet them. And they keep repeating the pattern. So if it's me for one person, it's someone else for someone else."

Her description sheds light on how trolls, who may have otherwise have few followers and low visibility on Twitter, are routinely rewarded with high engagement from the troll network and passive supporters specifically on vitriolic posts. We also find that some trolls may in fact have favoured targets, either through assignment or choice, and that a key strategy of successful trolling in these contexts is the maintenance of consistency.

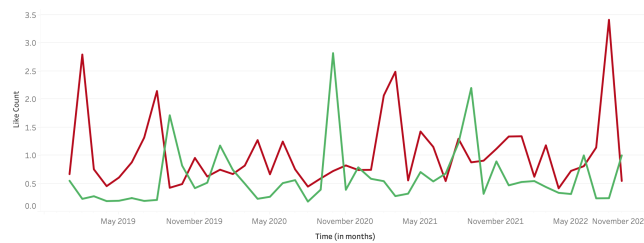


Fig. 1. Replies with negative sentiment on average receive almost twice the number of likes (0.81 vs 0.49) than ones with positive sentiment. We perform an unequal variance T-test to confirm that the difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.0012$)

Our data analysis similarly from Figure 1 shows that negative replies on journalists' tweets receive significantly more likes and retweets than positive replies on left-wing journalists' tweets. This is an indication that it is not just tweet authorship, but even the act of positively engaging with trolls that has become an important aspect of trolling on Indian Twitter. Among the users who provide positive engagement to trolls, we find that some trolls prefer to amplify trolling content rather than author it.

We label this as *passive trolling*. Passive trolls do not create abusive hashtags, participate in trolls' core WhatsApp or Telegram groups, or offer up direct vitriol to the target of trolling. They instead play a role in the percolation of the right-wing narrative by increasing the visibility of trolling content by Liking or Retweeting it. Through this practice, passive trolls can provide psychological support to active trolls, contribute to the sense of omnipresence of right-wing values on the internet by pushing trolls' tweets onto their followers' dashboards, and participate in hostility while at the same time avoiding the legal and moral accountability of tweet authorship. While small Twitter accounts play an important part in passive trolling, larger accounts such as those with millions of followers can provide a significant boost to the visibility of trolling content by Liking or Retweeting it.

4.1.3 Trending hashtags. Hashtags have played an important role in right-wing troll organization on Indian Twitter in recent times. While many focus on left-liberal ideology, popular hashtags such as #KittyPartyJournalists, #LutyensMedia, and #UrbanNaxals, each a derogatory construction in the Indian context, have targeted journalists specifically. We found that trolls also make use of hashtags to consolidate and trend damaging narratives based on rumors, false allegations, and misogyny. One such incident is described by our participant below:

"There was this actor, and I had written about his movie. I was saying that his worst movie was better than Shahrukh Khan's worst movie. So indirectly was praising him. They didn't get it, so they had given me rape threats and some 55,000 to 60,000 tweets. [This guy] comes on my timeline and says, "Wait for it. From 5:00pm, you see what will happen". And then from 5:00 PM, they start trending this hashtag. They were continuously trending "[Participant] is a Prostitute" hashtag. "[Participant]IsBeep".

Such violence - timed to perfection, and following a pattern of flooding - does not just scapegoat the journalists to cause a chilling effect, it can cause immense mental anguish and reputational damage by turning their victimization into a spectacle for public consumption.

We also find that the strategy of garnering engagement from trolls is particularly effective within the engagement-oriented architecture of Twitter, where much like other platforms, ‘popularity fosters popularity’ [13]. One participant who reported on the Sushant Singh Rajput case, for example, recollected that Twitter users used hashtag-trending to increase visibility around the discourse. She noted,

“Anyone can get something trending on Twitter. It’s a rigged game, right? We know those hashtags about [Sushant Singh Rajput’s] justice, or murder accusations, or kaala jaadu [black magic] are being made to happen. Those get very easily picked up by mainstream media, and it’s projected onto the country as the view of the country or the truth.”

The misinformation spread through trending hashtags in this case had a direct impact on the volume of trolling experienced by her team. The participant shed important light on the beginning stages of a process in which trolls determine online narratives by manipulating the platform. These narratives translate into mainstream media discourse. The consumers of this media internalize messaging that exalts right-wing values, and are hence their ideological stances swayed.

When we consider long-term trolling trends, we see that media acts as a *recruitment signal* for trolls who stamp journalists with a permanent ‘scarlet letter’. These journalists, who are systematically targeted, are likely to get trolled no matter what they say online, even being tagged on trolling aimed at others. This trolling acts as caution to up-and-coming journalists that a legacy of resistance - even the pursuit of it - comes with a hefty price. The messaging that a body of work is an unerasable record that will inevitably be turned against them does not just serve as a powerful silencing tool to those who hope to cover polarizing topics, it may dissuade them from pursuing a career in journalism altogether.

4.2 [RQ1b] What do troll networks look like?

In the process of interviews, journalists offered us insight into the troll networks they had interacted with over the span of their career. Since Indian troll networks are notoriously clandestine, we believe that these findings provide valuable context to this study. We found that trolls were given real incentives for their online activity, such as ‘follows’ and selfies from right-wing politicians. We also found that trolls strategized to attack different types of content to varying degrees. One journalist told us that his conversations with a ‘senior right-wing organizer of trolls’ had taught him that if a left-liberal account criticized a right-wing politician, they might get five trolls assigned to them - but if the account criticized Hindutva ideology, that number could jump up to fifty. One participant, who had interacted with several trolls as part of her journalistic work, painted for us a poignant picture of an ordinary Indian troll:

“They are real people. They hail from the same family backgrounds that we come from, but they’ve chosen a different path. If you meet them in person, they are normal people. They will talk normally about Modi, about Yogi, about Rahul Gandhi, about Arvind Kejriwal. They have fun, they have humor. They have aspirations. They want to, you know, climb this ladder. If a person from a lower middle class has joined the [troll network], he has to, you know... They have targets. “I have to get this MLA seat for myself or for my brother.” They are doing it for themselves. But when it comes to social media profiles, they are very toxic and aggressive. Even female trollers have this masculine vocabulary. If they’re friends with any journalist or intellectual or opposition party leaders, they will follow [us], but they won’t refrain from targeting [us]. The moment they go online, they behave as if they don’t know us.”

This narration breaks up the illusion of invisibility and omnipresence of trolls, rendering them as ‘real’ and ordinary citizens who make up the political voter base. While Hindutva is fundamentally masculinist, the practice of gender itself becomes complex - women within trolling networks practice masculinity with certain impunity, but the women that are victims of their trolling must be disciplined into adhering to gender norms. Troll networks are intricately linked to the larger aspirational goal of Hindutva, wherein high ranking politicians often offer promises in exchange of coordinated, targeted trolling services. This causes a dichotomy in identities of these individuals - while they are normal humans offline, online anonymity and aspirational desires affords them agency that defines their troll identity. The ‘troll’ is an online phenomenon that begins to disintegrate offline. Most of these trolls were organized over WhatsApp groups. One participant, who has been made privy to the mechanisms behind her own trolling over several years of journalism, shared with us:

“There’s a pattern to this. I say something about [state], let’s say, in some tweet that I put out. First, it gets circulated in the WhatsApp groups. A particular state group. It will be like 200-250 people. They’ll circulate [my tweet], and then they will start tagging me and they’ll abuse me. For 24-36 hours, it’ll be abuses from the state circles. Then, if it is a really big issue, it then gets transferred to the national WhatsApp groups. Then they start for another 24 hours.”

We learn that troll networks are organized in de-facto hierarchies that enable them to efficiently monitor and manipulate online discourse. It is highly strategized, with a well defined escalation pipeline to deal with the unpredictability of virality. Such established and organized networks also efficiently allot time limits and human infrastructure strategically in order to coordinate multiple

simultaneous trolling events at varying levels of priority. Another participant, who is well connected with prominent troll organizers shared:

"I have a friend in the BJP IT cell who is the head of a state. He looks after a state and then he was into the national team. I know him personally. He used to send me links from their Telegram groups or WhatsApp groups where they were asked to target this journalist, this journalist, this account, that account. I would get this message, this is the tweet I'm going to be targeted at. So what I would do is I would delete that tweet."

Prominent high-ranking politicians play a proactive role in organizing tangible troll networks online. The use of specialized social media like Telegram allows skilled trolls to effectively automate tracking of Twitter activity and broadcast instructions to a larger number of participant trolls whereas use of populist media like WhatsApp allows for a higher percolation of trolling within low-literate, low-internet populations. This anecdote highlights a pre-emptive nature of trolling, where kinds of account or content to be targeted on a particular day is pre-planned, allowing the journalist little leg room to escape from such attacks.

4.3 [RQ2] How are journalists responding to trolling?

4.3.1 Amplification vs authorship. We find that trolls are far more likely to attack journalists on opinion-related tweets than on their reports - even if their reports are more polarizing than their opinion-based tweets. While opinions relating to religion and politics tend to be targeted most frequently, trolls are triggered by a variety of innocuous subjects including pop culture and entertainment. Illustrating this point, one participant noted,

"It's not necessarily touchy stuff. It's not necessarily factually correct or incorrect stuff. It's like, literally everyday stuff. You can tweet about literally anything, and there might be somebody who will find something problematic with it."

Once journalists have been identified as influential within the left-wing ecosystem, trolls keep them under the constant threat of violence in an attempt to eliminate their online expression entirely. This means that trolls do not just want journalists to stop criticizing the establishment, but are attempting to phase out left-wing journalists' Twitter presence entirely, which has worrying implications for free speech. In response to this and other tactics discussed in Section 4.1, journalists are increasingly refraining from posting original tweets (or 'primary tweets') online. Primary tweets carry with them the burden of ownership and are often viewed as statements, which makes them a ripe vector for attack. However a decline in primary tweeting does not just effect content that is potentially polarizing or provocative, but does so for all sorts of primary tweets. This is contrast to the practice of retweeting ('secondary tweeting'), where accountability is deferred. Journalists are hence choosing to retweet tweets as a form of covert speech which allows them to signal their support for specific events, ideologies. On his current twitter usage, one of our interview participants said:

"My Twitter usage now is really very businesslike. I'm certainly less active on Twitter in terms of putting out my thoughts, because that's a rabbit hole you don't want. Increasingly I see it with a lot of journalists too. I now use Twitter mainly to amplify [organization's] stories or to retweet some interesting stuff."

The participant speaks of his overall decline in Twitter usage, especially in terms of primary tweeting. Putting one's thoughts on opinions on Twitter is akin to a *rabbit hole* - one that invites attacks, trolling and exhaustion that other participants have unanimously expressed. He hints at an alternative way of interacting with the platform as a passive amplifier, which still allows him to further his organization's visibility.

On plotting the numbers of primary tweets and combined amplification activities (secondary tweets) such as retweeting, quote tweeting and replying to other tweets, we observe that the number of primary tweets (weekly median: 124) from these journalists are far lower than their secondary amplification tweets (weekly median: 527). A possible explanation lies in Figure 2 where we plot the replies received on the journalists' original tweets as well as on their secondary tweets. From the interviews, we conclude that the primary channels of attacks on social media are (a) replies, (b) mentions and (c) direct messages (DM). Since direct messages are private, we use (a) and (b) as a strong indicator of attack. This doesn't imply that every reply must be an attack but only assumes that a higher number of replies may suggest a higher probability that some of them are attacks. Under this assumption, we observe that primary tweets are far more likely to be attacked than secondary tweets.

In Figure 2, the blue trend line has a statistically significant negative slope (slope = -0.063 , P-value < 0.0001) indicating that over the past 3 years, the number of original tweets authored by the journalists have witnessed a noted decline. Secondary tweets, on the other hand are successful in reducing probability of attacks from trolls (weekly median number of replies: 352, as opposed to 972 on primary tweets). Further, secondary tweets are effective amplifiers. While they do not receive as many replies as primary tweets do, on average, they are retweeted much higher than primary tweets, as shown in 3.

4.3.2 Factual correctness and careful constructions of language. Journalists are increasingly making it a point to avoid (a) specific keywords that trigger trolling, such as names of politicians or religions, (b) tonality that can be perceived as 'aggressive' or 'provocative'

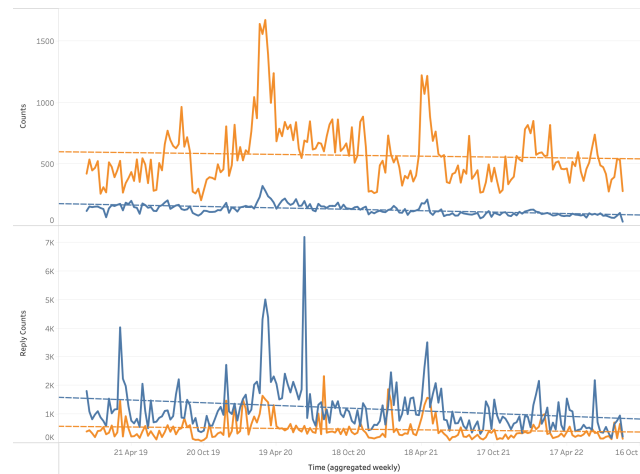


Fig. 2. **Top:** Number of original tweets (in blue) over time (aggregated weekly) vs number of amplification activities (RT, Quote Tweets, Replies - in orange) over time (Jan 2019 - Sep 2022)

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

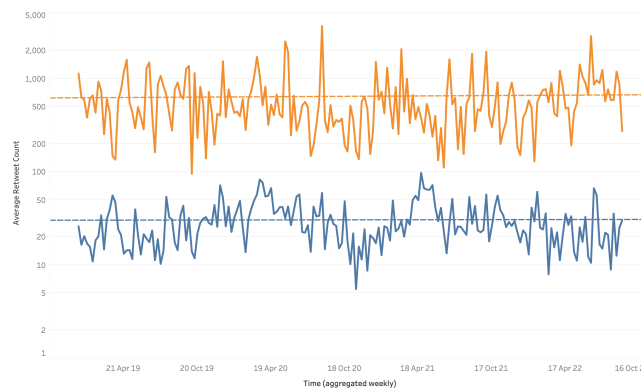


Fig. 3. Retweets on amplified content is higher than those on original content

against elements of the right-wing, or (c) broad ideas altogether, such as mentions of Hindutva ideology. Because of this, tweets published in both personal and professional capacities are rarely reflections of journalists' candid thoughts. This strategization is not incidental to journalists' Twitter activity. It has become, over time, a defining feature of their experience on Twitter. Illustrating this, one participant explained to us the process of authoring a tweet in the following manner:

"I don't post things that come to my head anymore. Any time I have to tweet anything... I compose the tweet. I delete it. I rethink it, I backspace it, I reword it and then I tweet it to make sure that it is as least attention seeking as possible."

The participant recalled steps not only to avoid attack, but also to make the tweet sufficiently interesting to retain the curiosity of her Twitter audience. While this process discourages her from being frank and transparent, she cannot afford to avoid tweeting in totality as inactivity on social media limits the visibility of her journalistic content and disrupts the growth of her account.

Another way of minimizing trolling is by ensuring that the tweet does not include searchable keywords that can be used as proof of provocative language. This is particularly true for journalists who have become 'public faces' of reputed organizations, since any attack against them can also discredit the organization as a whole. Such journalists, who are often in leadership roles, are disproportionately targeted but must maintain their social media visibility because their association adds value and readership to their organization. Explaining one such instance, a journalist who is popularly associated with her organization shared:

'It's easy to find out if someone searches the phrase [participant's username] + Modi'. 'Modi' is a great search phrase because you'll get like, 900,000 tweets in a second. But if I use the phrase 'current dispensation', for instance ... They may eventually find it, but it is a little harder to find and screenshot and send and pull me up for it.'

This approach allows her to communicate the message that she wants to, while avoiding the attention of trolls constantly on the lookout for attack triggers. Her knowledge that specific keywords - such as names of politicians - will trigger attack, indicates the possibility that there may be an actual list of these keywords used or acknowledged commonly by trolls as attack triggers.

We also found that our participants have become preoccupied with factuality, preemptively collecting proof that every tweet they put out can be backed up with multiple sources. One participant, for example, shared with us that before tweeting a 'snarky' comment

on a conservative political issue in the US, she collected six links to articles that would back up her subtle implication of a claim. Another participant shed light on the panic that journalists feel about putting anything out in the public that can be a source of scrutiny or frivolous legal action.

"There is double pressure on you to be absolutely right in whatever information that you put out. Because within seconds of you putting it out, you are in the line of fire. You know there are thousands and lakhs of people who are waiting to punch holes in your story or your information. So you have to be extra careful."

This being said, our findings across Sections 4.1 and 4.2 show that factual correctness is not an effective deterrent for trolls. Trolls may indeed target journalists *because* of the factuality of the content, since it cannot be easily attacked by politicians in power. Ad hominem attacks on the journalist or use of deflection of misinformation is much more effective. Indeed, our respondents even noted refraining from publishing tweets that were completely factual because they still anticipated attack.

4.3.3 Avoiding posting personal information: A majority of our participants refrained from posting pictures and anecdotes revealing family members, friends, incomes, geographical locations, where they hail from, or how they move through their day-to-day lives. Such information was either kept off social media, or relegated to alt Twitter accounts, Twitter circles, private Instagram accounts, finstas, and close friends stories. As with the journalist whose son was dragged into a social media battle, trolls will go after family members or friends, or weaponize personal information about their lives against them.

We noted several such instances in our interviews. One participant, for example, noted that she stopped posting pictures with specific friends, because every time she attempted to crowdfund for her organization, trolls would use those pictures to allege that she would use supporters' money to fund foreign trips. Four participants noted that they stopped talking about their immediate family members on Twitter because trolling events where trolls hurled abuses at them, sometimes even finding their family members' social media accounts and attacking them directly. One participant noted that trolls gained access to her private Instagram account, screenshotted pictures of her family, and posted them on Twitter. Another participant shared with us the aftermath of a trolling event:

"I just don't talk about [my mother] on Twitter anymore. It's scared me so much that these are the kind of horrible things that they said about my mother. I just feel like, you know, I want to protect her from this."

Trolls may go after family members because journalists might feel a sharper sting, or a deeper sense of fear, when these elements of their personal lives are targeted. We also found that minority journalists refrained from as much as hinting their religious or cultural associations and practices. One participant told us that after a particularly violent religion-based trolling event, she stopped wearing a 'kada', a bangle signifying that she belonged to the Sikh religion or in some cases Punjabi culture. Another participant told us that she stopped posting holiday wishes on Twitter. She shared,

"I have stopped talking about religion in particular because I think that is the sensitive part. Anywhere, anyone can walk into a police station and claim, 'I'm offended by her tweet', and they can put you in jail. Number one rule is that I don't engage with religious matters at all."

As discussed in Section 4.1b, troll networks extend into the larger right-wing ecosystem, which may include government bodies and police authorities. Because of this, the fear of tweeting about intensely provocative matters such as religion is not just limited to trolling, but also to legal action, police action, and unwanted attention from major right-wing political figures.

4.3.4 Attempted use of platform affordances. In the Indian Twitter environment, where trolls are tech savvy and operative in large numbers, most safety features are inadequate in protecting journalists. One such example is blocking. While Indian journalists use the blocking feature generously, it is often ineffective in the context of mass trolling. Blocking is a manual process that cannot be done at scale during times of coordinated attacks - where the number of trolls often goes into the tens of thousands - as the platform doesn't allow for automated mass-blocking. Provisions to disable or restrict comments on singular tweets to eliminate common channel of attack are also inadequate. The use of these features leads to more frequent use and development of alternate channels for attack, such as tagging and mentioning the journalist on separately authored tweets. In fact, sometimes, journalists may not want to lower the visibility on a targeted tweet - this is a way of ensuring that trolls remain consolidated on that tweet and do not percolate the journalist's entire profile. Further, trolls' accounts are not homogeneous. Our interviews reveal that troll accounts come in all flavours - anonymous, non-anonymous, large, small, overtly political, and even camouflaged as left-liberal supporters. Because of this, it is difficult to identify specific accounts for the purpose of blocking and muting. Muting certain words or phrases allows journalists to limit the influx of content containing specific words that may be particularly attacking or triggering. Still, even such well thought-out strategies are often in vain, since trolls use multiple tactics to target the journalist. Twitter circles or spaces are new additions to the platform that are often used by journalists when they want to explicitly limit their audience to a select group of people to allow opinions and dialogues more freely. However these always run the risk of being infiltrated by an 'outsider' and putting not just the journalist, but often many co-members of the space at risk.

5 DISCUSSION

At the outset, it is clear that Indian journalists do not have a choice to forego their visibility on Twitter. Their traceable online footprints and journalistic brands, as well as public framings of reputations and influence based on who follows and retweets them, are increasingly becoming calling cards for the stories assigned to them. The stances they visibly take on their profiles have become signals of their ideological leanings. This impacts who talks to them, since a decline of funding for in-depth investigative work has meant that online resources have become a primary way of reaching sources.

Our findings showcase how political parties have refined, and even perfected, the use of organized social media activity as a means of attacking those perceived as rivals or ideological opponents. The sheer volume of trolls and daily frequency of trolling activity suggests that the number of people who have been radicalized is incredibly high. This means that a barrage of extremist violence can be targeted at any story or tweet that receives sufficient online traction and is remotely considered antithetical to the national interest. This list of stories and tweets, unto itself, is ever-expanding - today, this includes any fathomable content including any measure of politics or political relevance. Politicians have immense resources at hand including social media and public relations teams that tackle such online abuse. Journalists, however, are simply individuals living through the intensely isolating experience of trolling. When journalists work through media institutions, their daily work after filing a story is engaging with colleagues who typically have civil and congratulatory exchanges on their work. Social media, however, turns the journalist into a free agent. Their progression and downfall are engineered not through public affect alone, but via a small set of influential social media accounts that have the ability to systematically engage a massive army of trolls.

The self-censoring strategies used by journalists point to ominous directions. While journalists plug away at work, they remain cautious for themselves and their families. If they work within institutions, they fall in line with the exigencies of their employers - in organizations that more often than not require corporate funding for advertising. When the relationship between funding and government gets close enough, journalists can no longer write about business interests. The fear is not that advertising revenues will suffer - it is that journalists do not know if that is where the consequences will stop. Several incidents recounted have included cases of corporations hitting back at journalists through troll armies of their own. If corporations are sufficiently close to the state, the attack can be pitched as righteous anger of netizens acting against journalists who stand in the way of the national development that big business offers.

This is as much a story about India as a warning about the role of social technology in eroding the fourth estate. In the first year of the Modi regime, in 2015, India ranked 136th out of 280 nation states. By 2022, it had fallen to 150th⁵. Changes and consolidation in newspapers and television news have meant that most large media houses are owned by corporations that aspire to be on the 'right' side of a government known to aggressively go after its detractors [36]. Media houses are also financially beholden to the government that they are supposed to keep a check on, since the government's massive advertising budget makes it the biggest money player in the market [43]. What many journalists point to as a trend likely to worsen is the recent aggressive takeover bid of what was seen as India's last major news channel capable of criticizing the government by India's richest man, an industrialist closely allied with the Modi government⁶. What may well be the last standing independent media are small digital news outlets, which are small enough that the financial logistics and pains of litigation present significant challenges. [22]. Digital news also cuts both ways. State-aligned news has also emerged as a player, and as it grows in viewership, what were once fringe elements now boast larger viewership than online news sites established by credible journalists who left traditional news to go online to maintain their independence. [4]

Perspectives on social media communications have traditionally relied on Western notions of free speech and institutional protection or propriety. These perspectives do not apply, and hence certainly cannot be centered, in the Indian context. The institutions that are meant to protect the media no longer have the ability or intent to do so, while the institutions that are meant to exist for public service - be it law enforcement, the government, or political parties - have proven that they can and will actively participate in journalists' persecution. Quite unlike the dreams of a democratized social media space where citizens speak truth to power, we see an institutional capture and its effects on the voices that were meant to speak truth to power.

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⁵<https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2015>

⁶<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/india-pro-government-tycoons-tv-bid-threatens-media-freedom.html>

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A INDICATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

(1) Introductory Questions

- (a) What kind of stories do you publish; what is your beat?
- (b) How long have you been a journalist?
- (i) How has the landscape of Indian journalism changed in the last few years with the changing socio-political atmosphere?

- (ii) Where do you think journalism is headed? [in context of recent events]
- (2) Mechanisms of Attack
 - (a) Do you ever get backlash for your journalism on social media?
 - (i) If yes, on what kinds of themes?
 - (ii) Is it usually when you post a new article, or will you just get trolled on random, opinionated tweets as well?
 - (b) How often would you say you get attacked online?
 - (c) Where do these attacks take place? E.g. DMs, comments, quote tweets, FIRs, etc?
 - (d) What kind of accounts attack you? Are they anonymous, clearly trolls, political, influential?
 - (i) Do you think they are organized in any fashion, or do they come onto you individually?
 - (ii) Are there consistent attackers who will attack irrespective of what you write?
 - (e) How do people attack you? Do they use threatening language, media, misinformation, etc.?
 - (i) Can you tell me a little bit more? Examples? Incidents?
 - (f) Are these attacks against you gendered? In what way?
- (3) Response
 - (a) When you see these attacks, what do you feel?
 - (b) When these attacks happen, do you respond? If yes, how? Comment back, block, report, take legal measures?
 - (c) Over time, has exposure to such attacks changed how you conduct yourself online?
 - (i) Do you self-censor in any way?
 - (ii) Have your posting habits changed?
- (4) Organizational Safeguards
 - (a) Are there any guidelines put in place by your organization to protect journalists or the org itself from politically motivated online harassment?
 - (b) If journalists do face politically motivated backlash, how does the organization deal with it? Are there legal and organizational safeguards?
- (5) Organizations vs the individual
 - (a) How do you see the difference between trolling for an organizational handle versus a personal handle for a story you have written? Is the kind of trolling different for each? Can you give examples?
 - (b) Is it safer to be a freelancer or be part of a reputed, but frequently targeted organization? How? Can you give examples?
- (6) *Concluding Question:* Anything we missed out on, that you would want us to know?