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Politics of Fake News: How WhatsApp Became a Potent Propaganda Tool in India

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While the Internet and multimedia applications have made it easy to produce and spread media, they have also made it possible to distribute fake news to masses. With over 200 million active users in India and growing, WhatsApp's reach and features make it a top choice to spread fake news. This not only influences public opinion in India but has also sometimes created panic and incited to violence. This paper looks into how political propaganda is peddled through the WhatsApp in the form of 'news' (fake news). It also explores what makes the WhatsApp such a powerful application in Indian context, how do people use it and how existing laws in India make it difficult to trace the origin of the fake news.

Keywords: Fake news, rumors, WhatsApp, India, social media

Seven men were beaten to death by mobs in two different incidents in Indian state of Jharkhand in May 2017. The mobs suspected these men were child traffickers (The Wire, 2017). Hours before the killings, 'news' began circulating on WhatsApp that traffickers from outside the state were preying upon the children. The 'news' also urged people to inform police if they spot suspicious person(s). People began suspecting anyone and everyone who seemed unfamiliar. When the dust settled seven people had lost their lives. The case in Jharkhand is not an isolated one. There are several incidents across India when 'news' and messages from WhatsApp created panic often resulting in mass hysteria and violence.

WhatsApp in India

India has more than one billion active cellphones and the number of mobile phone Internet users has surged in recent time. From December 2016 to July 2017, the number of mobile phone Internet users rose from 389 million to 420 million—a jump of 31 million in just six months. For a fairly large number of Indians, the first experience of Internet is on cellphone (Agarwal, 2017).

This spike was fuelled by decrease in data rates after the price war between Reliance owned Jio network, a new entrant in telecom market of India, and other telecom companies. Reliance claims that its 4G Internet data rates are cheapest in the world.

The lowering of prices of Internet data coupled by people buying more smartphones has made creation of media, sharing of content and features like video calling common. It has also facilitated the use of smartphone applications for communication, services and entertainment.

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WhatsApp is the most downloaded application in India. The app has more than 200 million active users in the country—more than combined population of France, Germany, Austria, and Poland. More than 20 per cent of the WhatsApp's total users come from India (Singh, 2017).

WhatsApp's importance has been aptly described by Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, after signing a 19 billion USD deal to acquire it. While declaring the acquisition Zuckerberg acknowledged WhatsApp as: "WhatsApp is a simple, fast and reliable mobile messaging service that is used by over 450 million people on every major mobile platform. More than 1 million people sign up for WhatsApp every day and it is on its way to connecting one billion people. More and more people rely on WhatsApp to communicate with all of their contacts every day."

The app—which allows a user to send media (text, pictures, audio-video) via smartphones—has become a strong alternative of the traditional short message service (SMS), as it is a free application and allows more features. A user just needs an Internet connection and a smartphone to communicate. Also, with Internet and smartphone, the users are just not consumers of media; they can generate, modify, share and discuss content.

Scholars claim, social media is the democratized media. It gave people power to share news and views (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). This democratization becomes more important in the context of India and other developing nations, where the control of media by a few individuals has been a major concern. Digital technologies gave rise to opportunities for many marginalized identities to showcase, archive and share their culture, and histories.

India's latest census report, made public 2011, reveals that about just 19 per cent Dalits (members one of the India's most 'backward' castes) have access to water, while as, 51.5 per cent from the community own a phone. Although the percentage differs from urban (61 per cent) and rural (42 per cent), it is clear that the technology is reaching to even most marginalized communities of India. Even though the exact number of cellphone or Internet users in the community is not clear at present, considering the lowering of prices of telecommunication services and smartphone, the number should be much higher than before (Lahiri, 2012).

Digital technology and Internet have also made the traditional process of content creation and broadcast, which was controlled by a few, almost irrelevant. Now anyone with an Internet connection and a smartphone could share information. Smartphones and applications like WhatsApp enable people create content and share it (Suresh, n.d.).

WhatsApp also eliminates the limitations of literacy to consume and create media. Since it supports multimedia content, a user can create and consume media according to his/her literacy levels. The App's ease of group communication in terms of number of groups that can be formed, the number of members in a group and options to send media back and forth almost without a limit also makes it a top choice of users in India.

These groups range from family user groups to political and religious groups comprising hundreds of members. The members of a group usually come together for same cause or experience.

A member of an online group not only shares and reads messages/information in that particular group but also passes these messages/to other groups she/he is part of. The mobility and ease of creating and sharing content and allowing group communication makes applications like WhatsApp a potent medium for reaching out to masses.

A Persuasive Political Tool

WhatsApp as tool has been well harnessed by political parties in India. For example, in early 2017, ahead of elections for Uttar Pradesh, an important state in electoral picture of India, Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), which came into power at the federal level in India in 2014, employed WhatsApp massively for mobilization, coordination and reaching out to voters. The party formed 10,344 WhatsApp groups just to coordinate and circulate media among their party workers (Verma, 2017). The number of WhatsApp groups other than those formed by the party, the number of members in such groups, the number of such groups formed by the other political parties in the contest and the volume of media that would have been generated during the elections would be difficult to imagine. There is no doubt that data would be enormous.

However, in a politically charged environment, where the opponents do not leave any chance to woo votes, blame game and mudslinging is common. Such situation provides a fertile ground for creation and spread of rumors and fake news, resulting in clashes or riots (Kumar, 2017).

Spread of disinformation and fake news became a trigger for Muzaffarnagar riots in Uttar Pradesh just eight months ahead of the federal elections. A video of people beating two youth to death spread after a politician allegedly shared it on Facebook. Although the politician denied such charges saying that the one of his staff members was operating his Facebook account, this video was shared widely on WhatsApp as well. It was claimed that the two youths killed in the video belonged to the majority community in the state and were killed by the members from the other community over a harassment case of a girl. In reality, the video was from Pakistan (Barry, 2013). Sixty-two people lost their lives and thousands got displaced in the ensuing riots (Suresh, 2016.). In the elections, BJP secured 71 seats of the 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh—highest ever it has scored in the state (Lal, 2014).

Fake news or hoaxes have been used by certain elements create communal polarization even before India got independence from the British. Akshay Mukul, author of 'Gita Press and the Making of Hindu India', describes how the use of printing press to spread fake news and rumors through a pamphlet that narrated of a fictional chilling ordeal of a girl from Bengal, who the pamphlet claims, was raped and humiliated by a certain community members in front of her close relatives and children. The pamphlets conclude with an appeal to the religious heads and ask them what happened to their *dharma*. The girl also rebukes her "brothers for not having blood hot enough to boil on the travails of their sister" (Mukul, 2017). According to Mukul, the pamphlet made rounds in several states even years after India achieved independence in 1947.

Political parties have effectively used new technologies to achieve their goals. In 1980s and 1990s videos produced by Jain studios played crucial role in asserting cultural nationalism in India. Video was a new technology during those days and it pulled people and left an impact on their mind unlike any other media.

In *Empowering Visions: The Politics of Representation...* (2005), Christiane Brosius says: "the BJP proved to be a promising domain of success for Jain Studios, in that, in order to constitute itself as a 'visible' and appealing player at the political platform, the party needed a medium for the production and distribution of 'visibility', or representation. In the late 1980s, video recorders and color televisions had just begun to enter the living rooms of the middle classes."

According to Brosius, "This dynamic development of the Indian media landscape heightened the transformation of the public domain, affecting the political, social and economic fields of power and representation." This would shape the politics of India in

years to come. Years later, the BJP used the Internet extensively during 2009 polls. Advani for prime minister campaign was spread across 2000 websites that Indian frequent (Sharma, 2009).

Although BJP lost the elections in 2009, the extensive use of cyberspace paid dividends in 2014, when the BJP won by a thumping majority. The prime ministerial candidate of the party Narendra Modi not only used conventional means to reach masses but also employed innovative measures like 3D and hologram speeches and social media (Thoppil, 2013).

However, the ease and reach of the Internet soon made it into a powerful tool of propaganda much like the use of social media to spread fake news and rumors reached an unprecedented level in the US elections and Brexit campaign.

According to 2016 Pew Research, most of the fake news in the US spread from social media. However, in India WhatsApp is primarily used to spread fake news and rumors. WhatsApp on the one hand has revolutionized the communication in India but it has become a powerful tool of propaganda.

On practical level, sharing fake news through messaging apps like WhatsApp has some advantages over real news production that work in the favor of propagandists.

Cost: Since fake news creation does not involve much research, production costs—no reporters/journalists are sent on the field for coverage—broadcast expenses and licensing, the cost to produce fake news is much lesser than the real news.

Promotion: While news outlets might have to spend a substantial amount of money, resources and time in the promotion of their brand and content, fake news creators need no promotion.

Anonymity: The origins of fake news are difficult to trace, there is no accountability on what is being shared/forwarded.

Shelf life: A large number of posts shared/forwarded on messaging platforms like WhatsApp are not bound by time. They are historical or religious in nature and tend to reinforce myths, fear, misinformation and hate. This type of content is recycled and keeps resurfacing from time to time. These media—unlike hoaxes, which are easy to bust—are tough to kill.

Impact: Fake news is different from conventional news stories as it reaches users through a network close to them. The same information might reach the user from several individuals or groups, leading to reinforcement of the information. The user has the power to edit/manipulate the content. The sender can twist the information so that it suits the palate of the user/s and meets his/her agenda.

A Tool with Difference

What makes it different from other platforms is how it defies the most of filters of Propaganda Model by Chomsky and Herman. Chomsky and Herman postulated that five filters determine the news presented before masses. The five filters are: Ownership of the medium, its funding sources (advertising), sourcing, flak, and anti-communism or 'fear' (Chomsky & Herman, 1988).

Since the content on the WhatsApp is user driven, it is free from control of big corporations and conglomerates and thus from conflict of interest and biases of owners. The app is also free from the grip of advertisers, who otherwise can control the content on media channels, as Chomsky and Herman suggested.

“Symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest”, Chomsky and Herman say, do not control or regulate the content on WhatsApp. The content and its flow is regulated by people who do not need relationship with powerful sources for information. This is truer about fake news where one does not need powerful sources to produce news at all since the news is fake.

While describing the findings of survey in Israel (Malka, Ariel, & Avidar, 2015), found that “WhatsApp effectively facilitates group activities for diverse needs, including family, social, and professional, both for ad hoc purposes and for managing prolonged projects and preserving relationships among friends and family.” It is this characteristic of the application that makes people believe in a news, whether true or fake. Since the information is mostly sent or posted by someone you know, someone from contact list of the receiver, it is easier to believe it. The relation with the sender of the media also reduces the flak that a person would otherwise attract for sharing fake news in public.

Unlike social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp does not filter content on the basis on sensitivity. Similarly, it also does not have an option to report fake or offensive media. Once a message spreads, there is no way one can stop it. The app's end-to-end encryption makes it almost impossible to trace the source of the message.

One of the main drivers of fake news and hoaxes on WhatsApp is ‘Fear’—Chomsky's addition to the propaganda model. According to Chomsky, “anti-ideologies exploit public fear and hatred of groups that pose a potential threat, real, exaggerated or imagined.” Jharkhand lynching case, Muzaffarnagar riots, a fake viral message claiming that the ‘Ministry of Interior Regulation of India’ (an entity which does not exist in reality and was made up for spreading the rumor) is recording telephonic conversations and monitoring social media, all were fuelled by ‘fear’.

The ‘fear’ factor becomes stronger in a communally or politically charged environment. However, not all the fake news or hoaxes are powered by fear. Fake achievements, taking pot shots at the opposition and creating fake history to legitimize claims, show people in a certain light is common. Ideology and sense of social reform is also one of the major reasons why people create and forward news, whether real or fake.

In her ethnographic research among social media in Mumbai, Sadana Udupa finds ideology as a formidable factor behind use of Internet by activists from the majority community (Udupa, 2015). In such cases, users suspend critical thinking and verifying and cross-checking news or information becomes minimal. By the time a claim is contested and the fake news busted, the damage is already done. This is in line with political theorist Hannah Arendt's observation that movements ‘conjure up a lying world of consistency, which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself’ (Arendt, 1973). Fake news is also a source of money for many, who run websites to monetize the viewership/readership.

Politics and ideology are not the only factors why people create and spread fake news. Money plays a very big role in creation and spread of fake news, people involved in debunking fake news (Khandekar, 2017).

Operators of many websites understand that certain people and issues get more attention and therefore more hits. Using religion, nationalism, patriotism and gender these websites post fake news on different platforms, including WhatsApp. Since there are takers of stories on religion, nationalism, patriotism and gender, a large number of people end up visiting the site. This not only helps these operators earn money but also creates an atmosphere where criticism of certain individuals, organizations and institutions is seen as anti-national. These websites are supported by trolls and paid social media users, who not only share their content but also defend it and confront voices critical to their thinking.

News Media, WhatsApp and Fake News

With digital technology giving power to people to produce media and share it, the user-generated content can hardly be ignored by the mainstream news media. In a tough media market like India, where people have a large number of media outlets to choose from, no media house can afford to lose out on an opportunity to gain viewership and readership. User-generated content can not only be interesting but it can sometimes be exclusive and can therefore be effective to gain readership/viewership.

In a race to be ahead in the market, every media house wants to be the first one to publish/broadcast content. However, in this race media organizations can fall in the trap of publishing/broadcasting fake content.

Just after November 8, 2016, when the Indian government canceled currency notes of 500 and 1,000 denominations, fake news about new 2000 denomination note began circulating on WhatsApp. The most viral news being that the new note has a nano GPS tracker chip by which it can be traced anywhere. This, the fake news claimed, will help the government to keep eye on black money (Indian Express, 2016).

What happened later is a perfect example of how hoaxes make their way to mainstream news. *Zee News*, a more than 18-year-old Hindi news channel, broadcast a special programme on new 2000 denomination note. In this programme DNA (Daily News Analysis), a well-known anchor of the channel narrated almost exactly the same features of the new notes as claimed by the fake news messages on WhatsApp (NewsCrunch, 2016).

Similarly, a video surfaced which showed journalists of another mainstream TV news channel *Aaj Tak* discussing the features of the new notes in the newsroom. They features, they claimed the notes have, were also heavily influenced by the viral messages from WhatsApp and social media. Such cases are not rare in Indian media.

Although free and useful, user-generated content needs to be verified and cross-checked. Many reputed organizations like the BBC have formed special teams to verify user-generated content and debunk fake news. Indian newsrooms will have to brace up for such steps (Jackson, 2017).

Endless Loop of Fake Content

Although fake stories that make it to mainstream media are busted as they come in limelight as happened with the nano GPS story, some stories refuse to die down.

A viral video of a Guatemalan woman lynched has been making rounds in India from almost two years. This video, in which the woman is first beaten and then set afire, is embedded with text, which claims that the victim is a Marwadi woman who married to a Muslim man and that she was burnt to death because she refused to wear burkha (Perera, 2017).

The video is often circulated with an additional message in which the receivers are requested to share the video extensively via WhatsApp so that authorities will be pressurised into taking action.

Similarly, a photograph widely shared on the WhatsApp shows prime minister Narendra Modi sitting with Sachin Tendulkar with a picture of Mukesh Ambani and his wife hanging on the wall in the background. The picture was manipulated. The real photograph, also tweeted by the prime minister, has some other photograph hanging in the background (SMHoaxSlayer, 2017).

Some of these messages often make it to social media platforms and are posted or tweeted by even celebrities. In June 2016, a fake news claiming that the UNESCO has declared

prime minister of India Narendra Modi as the best prime minister in the world. Many on Twitter, including Indian snooker ace Pankaj Advani, shared this message (The Times of India, 2016).

Such messages are re-tweeted, posted on other social media platforms and forwarded/shared on applications like WhatsApp. They disappear, sometimes months, only to resurface again.

Inside WhatsApp World

With its easy to use features and support for multimedia content, the App is a mode of staying connected to dear ones. It is especially popular among family members or friends living apart from each other. A large number of migrant workers within India and many who work outside the country communicate with their family members or friends using this application. Its video calling feature is becoming one of the most preferred options for long distance calls. Besides this friends and relatives stay connected with each other individually or in groups by sharing content.

The lowering of prices of Internet data coupled by people buying more smartphones has made video calling and video sharing common. Huang, Chen, & Wang (2012) say that the "Interpersonal short video forwarding is... one of the most popular activities of Internet users. One of the key factors that affect this online interpersonal behavior is forwarding intention."

This forwarding intention of media forms the core of content sharing on WhatsApp. With digital technology, our relationship to visual images has reached a level that is historically unprecedented. Moving images (video) are more exciting than other forms of media. They are not mundane like text and easy to digest because of the literacy factor. Besides, images have much more retention rate than other forms of media.

Clay Shirky, author of critically acclaimed book 'Here Comes Everybody', posits that "the Internet runs on love" to explain how information flows among people through collaboration. According to Shirky there are four steps in this process – all these aptly fit the WhatsApp universe.

The first step in this process is sharing. Shirky says "me-first collaboration" is the key. People share links, tags, pictures, and eventually come together around a type. This is true with WhatsApp as well. The need to be heard and acknowledged in peers or in public, the idea to keep loved ones updated about their surroundings and warn them about threats and keeping in touch with loved ones are the prime reasons why people forward media on WhatsApp.

The second step according to Shirky is the synchronization of people with each other and the coming together to learn more about something and to get better at it. Normally we see the first formation of a community. In WhatsApp, the synchronization occurs when people develop a sense of social and political service/mobilization, hate and fear or come together for vested interests. Once this happens, content on specific issues, news, people or group/s dominate the conversation between the individuals. This is the basis of formation of community.

In case of WhatsApp, individuals may come together and form a WhatsApp group at this stage. If that does not happen, the individuals will continue conversations separately. However, the cause/reason might influence their conversations. There is every possibility that an individual would share/forward information he/she receives to another person sharing the same viewpoint or interest. Thus, although remotely and unknowingly, even friends of friends who share common interest/cause, might influence the conversations between two individuals.

The third step Shirky talks about is collaboration. Here the group/s is formed under the purpose of some common effort. It requires a division of labor and teamwork. It can often be characterized by people wanting to fix a failure, and is motivated by increasing accessibility. It is also here we see the development of the community, and normally just a few doing the main part of the work.

Forming WhatsApp groups for coordination of elections is one example of how collaborations work. Groups like these work in coordination under supervision of an authority. The individual, who adds members of each group in this network, acts as a node in the network. These nodes connect people on the ground to ideas and causes and there are several nodes in a network. Such collaborations occur when the goals and hierarchy are clear. Shirky says, normally a few in a group will do the main part of the work. However, many of them might work or stay neutral towards a cause or issue from time to time.

The final step in the process is collective action. The key point about collective action is that the fate of the group as a whole becomes important. The collective action, in case of WhatsApp, might be positive like coordination of an election or negative like Jharkand lynching case.

Fake News Busters

Several individuals in India have begun busting fake news, particularly from WhatsApp as most of the news spreads through mobile phones. Altnews.in, SM Hoax Slayer, Check4spam.com and Boomlive are the prominent websites engaged in debunking fake news.

For example, in June 2017, when a prominent TV news channel The Times Now reported that 'rate cards' were circulating in the state of Kerala offering cash rewards for converting Hindus to Islam, Alt News found that the report was based on a fake images put up by fake news websites and spread through WhatsApp since 2010 (Sinha, 2017b). These crusaders against fake news have also exposed the websites and social media pages that spread fake news (Sinha, 2017a), (Sinha, 2017b).

However, these websites cannot single-handedly combat the huge volume of fake news and hoaxes churned out everyday. Besides, it takes much longer to identify and debunk fake news than producing it.

WhatsApp, Law and the Freedom of Speech

In March 2015, when the Supreme Court (SC) of India declared Section 66A of Information Technology Act as unconstitutional and struck down the law saying it violated Article 19 of Indian Constitution, (Sriram, 2015) many hailed it as a great win for freedom of speech in India (Indian Express, 2015).

The Section, whose 2008 amendment allowed punishment for person who sends offensive messages by means of a computer resource or a communication device, came under scanner after people were arrested for sharing their ideas on social media. The 'offensive' term in the law was broad, vague and manipulated by authorities to silence the dissent, it was alleged.

However, post- Supreme Court's verdict, authorities continue to book or detain people for posting messages on WhatsApp. Administrators of WhatsApp groups have been arrested post SC verdict, mostly under other sections of IT Act or other laws (Deccan Chronicle, 2017) (The Times of India, 2015).

According to the law, an intermediary who created a service, in WhatsApp's case the administrator has certain obligations. And, since it is difficult to trace the origins of a message/post in WhatsApp, the administrator is an easy catch.

Notably, the IT Act came into existence in 2000 and was amended in 2008, while as WhatsApp began in 2009. The provisions of the Act do not cover all the features of WhatsApp. For example, Section 79 of the IT Act, which states that an intermediary shall not be liable for any third party information, data, or communication link if the intermediary complies with the provisions of the IT Act, observes due diligence while discharging his duties under this Act, does not break the norms and removes or disables the objectionable content upon receiving actual knowledge, or on being notified by the government. (Alaya Legal, 2013)

While the administrator of a WhatsApp group can notify member and follow other provisions of the law, the material in the group can still not be removed. An administrator of a WhatsApp group cannot delete a post/message in a group and hence cannot regulate the content (The News Minute, 2015).

Conclusion

Spread of mass rumors in India is not a new phenomenon, however, digital technology, Internet and medium like WhatsApp has made it easier to concoct a rumor or fake news, spread it faster and wider and call communicate for collective action. WhatsApp is a powerful smartphone application. Although it has made communication easy, affordable and user friendly, the application has been turned into a potent tool of propaganda in India. Many things contribute to making it an ideal medium of spreading fake news and rumors. These include technological features of the application such free usage, end-to-end encryption—which makes it difficult to trace the origin of a message – its support for multimedia content, ease of use and forming groups for communication.

The other factors that contribute to its position are the usage pattern, especially in India. A large number of users are first time Internet users and get convinced that the news on the application is right. Since the content shared by individuals or in groups come from someone known, there is a strong tendency to trust the source. One of the strengths of the application was the use of use and less reliance on literary strength of a user. A user could communicate in any media (text, audio, video or pictures). This made it popular among sections of Indian society, which do not have good literacy rates and access to or information about other media and sources to verify the news.

A large number of users subscribe to WhatsApp groups or are a part of groups that serve their ideology. Thus the content on the group/s usually reinforces their biases. The use of the application by political parties, which have used to both for communication and propaganda, has turned it into a tool that can influence public thinking over an issue. Fear and hatred are two major factors that fuel the monster of fake news in India. This has become particularly important in the wake of communal incidents in recent years in the country.

While all the major players on the Internet, Google, Facebook and Twitter, have taken steps and pledged to tackle fake news (Wingfield, Isaac, & Benner, 2016), WhatsApp is still out of radar. This is important as WhatsApp has almost as many accounts in India as Facebook (Kemp, 2017) and is a preferred mode of interpersonal and group communication. Apps like WeChat, a very popular application in China, which integrates social media, instant messenger, e-wallet, hopping and dating app, maps and more (Novet, 2017), might turn out to be new super app. Such apps are likely to affect many areas of our life, including personal and public communication and sectors like news industry.

Laws pertaining to modern technology, especially Internet are not effective in India and in certain cases do not fit the requirements. This is the case with WhatsApp as well. There is a need for review of existing laws or for a new law that effectively deals with technological caveats while keeping the right to freedom of speech alive as tools more power effective tools will come into being in future.

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