

# Anti-Social Media Elections '19



**Chaitanya Kalbag**

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? 'I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?' she said aloud. 'I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth...'

— Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865), Lewis Carroll

Today marks the first day of the world's biggest Social Media Election. More than a decade of innovation, investment and imagination by the world's biggest technology companies will converge with 142 million voters across 20 states and Union territories in the first phase of Election 2019. Over the next five weeks, outside the hot and dusty campaign rallies, much of the war will be fought on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok and Instagram.

To put this in context:

- Internet users in India were estimated at 566 million in December 2018. Rural users comprise 250 million, which was the national total at the time of the 2014 election.
- Mobile data in India is the cheapest in the world and costs about one-tenth of what it did two years ago.
- Indians are consuming and creating huge quantities of video.
- The fastest growth in users on any major social media platform is in India.
- Video is most popular because the primary access for information and entertainment for most of the new users is via mobile devices.

WhatsApp, which has about 300 million users in India, is the largest video platform here. But YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are also growing rapidly. The Chinese short-video app TikTok, which was launched in India just last year, is already exploding in usage especially among the rural young. Last week the Madras High Court asked the central government to ban TikTok because it 'encourages pornography'. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear an urgent plea against the order by TikTok's owner ByteDance. TikTok is one of the world's most downloaded apps with over 500 million users.

'You see [TikTok] videos are being created by construction workers, by bike mechanics — it's really percolated down,' Medianama founder and editor Nikhil Pahwa told me. 'For any political party, the primary means of outreach to voters is going to be WhatsApp. Many of the parties are not aware of TikTok, but just give it a couple of years. The next election might well be fought on TikTok.'

Most mobile internet users seem to prefer video over text because they cannot read English, and default



**Forward march**



interfaces in most apps are in English. Video is the first taste of the internet for millions of young Indians.

This election we will head down our own rabbit hole, and as did Lewis Carroll's Alice, spot doors and cupboards as we descend, full of gimmicks, stratagems and blandishments. Careless and gullible users will share and forward millions of text messages and videos that are sometimes hilarious but often sinister and loaded with hate, fake news and propaganda.

Can we keep our heads above the water? Authorities and watchdogs are trying. Social media platforms have appointed India grievance officers. The major political parties have formidable IT cells, but are both perpetrators and victims of divisive campaigns. Social media enable parties to slice, dice and distort existing content. For instance, Congress issued a spoof BJP manifesto, complete with 'Ek Bharat Berozgaar (unemployed) Bharat', ostensibly from the 'Bharatiya Jumla Party'.

To give it due credit, the Election Commission (EC) issued social media guidelines way back in 2013, and has again spelled out rules and cautions for the mega-election starting today. 'Various Social Media platforms shall also remain under the close and stringent vigil of the Commission for any content aimed at vitiating the electoral process or designed to disturb peace, tranquillity, social harmony and public order,' the EC said.

Media Certification and Monitoring Committees (MCMC) have been set up at state and district levels. Every candidate is expected to disclose his or her social media accounts, and every political advertisement on electronic and social media has to be pre-certified by an MCMC, which also includes a 'social media expert'. There is some transparency on political advertising. Google had published details of spending by different political parties, and Facebook — already under fire after the 2016 US election, and the more recent New Zealand mosque massacres — has taken down hundreds of pages and accounts associated with parties for 'coordinated inauthentic behaviour'.

Disseminating incorrect information is not illegal. Platforms cannot shut down fake news websites, but can crack down on inauthentic behaviour patterns like multiple 'bursts' from a single account. Fake news, however, is manufactured and distributed on scale for the purpose of misleading people.

Manipulators of social media also render nonsensical the EC's Model Code of Conduct's limits on campaigning 48 hours before polling begins, because individuals can continue to propagate misinformation. 'It's an exercise in futility,' Pahwa says. You can ask TV channels and newspapers to not publish fake news. But you can't stop individuals from sharing old and poisonous videos.

The weaponisation of social media is also easily amplified in a polarised and divided nation, and we have not even begun to plumb the depths to which our hostile neighbours might be descending to influence and disrupt our elections — on the lines of the alleged Russian interference in the US presidential election. That would mean going down another rabbit hole.

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11/4/2019 E.T.