

Lies, Damned Lies, & Forwards



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There is more than one way to skin a cat. We will be travelling to the outer reaches of credulity as election fever rises over the next six months, fuelled by hundreds of millions of users of social media.

Misinformation can take any shape and is very hard to pin down. We can already hear a faint chorus of hate, bias and divisive stereotypes. It is sure to rise to a crescendo by the time the Lok Sabha election campaign starts next spring. In less than a fortnight, elections to five state assemblies will kick off with the first round of polling in Chhattisgarh, right through to Rajasthan and Telangana on December 7.

The use and misuse of social media in an election was dramatically illuminated on October 28 when the populist and polarising Jair Bolsonaro was declared Brazil's new president in what has been described as a 'WhatsApp election'. The far-right Bolsonaro flooded millions of voters with messages against his opponent Fernando Haddad. Bolsonaro favours military rule and, for years, has spewed misogynistic and homophobic venom.

WhatsApp says it banned hundreds of thousands of Brazilian users for violating rules. Technically, you cannot set up a chat group of more than 256 users. The company says 90% of chats are between two individuals and most of the remainder are among groups of 10 or fewer users.

But as FastCompany noted, "A Brazilian study selected the 50 most shared political images from 100,000

posts, circulated among 347 public WhatsApp groups. Its stunning conclusion: only 8% of them were fully truthful."

Brazil has 120 million WhatsApp users. India, with more than 200 million, is the messaging platform's biggest market. The Indian government met representatives of WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Google, YouTube and Instagram on October 25. It wants to "prevent misuse of social media sites by undesirable elements/miscreants to spread rumours, cause unrest... and other activities detrimental to national interest".

WhatsApp says it is different from other social media and was designed to be a private messaging app, and not to broadcast users' views to the world. It boasts end-to-end encryption. The company insists it cannot see the contents of messages.

But Indians have bent WhatsApp to their own ends, some of them nefarious. Govindraj Ethiraj, founder of BOOM Fact Check, told me the Kerala government had to work harder on fighting communal rumours after the recent catastrophic floods than on relief measures.

India wants WhatsApp to localise

its data, which would essentially mean opening it to official scrutiny. The company is pushing back politely, aware that it needs to be in Delhi's good books to push its potentially revenue-generating business enterprise model. It is waiting for regulatory approval to launch its payments service.

In response to growing concerns over its misuse, WhatsApp has appointed a US-based India grievance officer, Komal Lahiri, who has a day job as head of its global customer support team. Users can file complaints about abuse or fake news in 10 Indian languages. It has launched an education campaign in partnership with the non-profit Digital Empowerment Foundation in 10 Indian cities.

"We want people to know that just because they receive it on WhatsApp it doesn't mean it's true, and that it's important people think critically and look for other sources of information," WhatsApp spokesperson Carl Woog told me. The company says it is also trying to identify and ban users who distribute misinformation.

It bars users who try to broadcast messages to multiple phone numbers. It has met leaders of political



But, Drona, have you fact-checked the news?

parties and officials at the Election Commission to explain that WhatsApp cannot be used to distribute political propaganda. "If you send political messages just because you have someone's phone number, we are going to ban your account," Woog said.

Despite the imminence of legislation to define and protect personal data, Indians are mistrustful of traditional means of communication. Senior government officials continue to correspond solely via Gmail, avoiding the government's own National Informatics Centre-hosted email system. People are also fearful of being surveilled, and millions now use WhatsApp voice or video calls to talk to one another.

In August, First Draft, based at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard, launched Comprova ('proof' in Portuguese), a WhatsApp-based project to detect and expose election-related misinformation in Brazil. Fake news put out by both the country's main political parties was identified by fact-checkers and shared with 24 news organisations. First Draft hopes to launch a similar project in India.

The battle is on. Facebook has taken down about 600 million fake accounts in the US and other countries this year. While we Indians fight to keep our heads above the torrent, we also have to contend with official efforts to throttle even genuine information.

So far this year, Indian authorities have shut down internet access 121 times in different parts of the country. The graph has risen sharply during the past five years: six shutdowns in 2014, 14 in 2015, 31 in 2016 and 79 in 2017.

What lies ahead as we prepare to cast our votes this winter and next spring? "We're simply not in a position to judge what people are sharing privately," Woog told me. Believe it.