

Disinformation is everywhere in India

It is not only social media that is responsible for it, but also news media and some politicians



RASMUS KLEIS NIELSEN

With the Lok Sabha elections coming up, it is critically important that Indians have access to credible and trustworthy information before they vote. The problem is that many do not feel they do. In a brand new survey of English-language Internet users in India conducted by the University of Oxford, we have found that a majority of the respondents are concerned with whether the news they come across online is real or fake.

Who can blame them? After the Pulwama attack, social media and messaging apps were flooded with false and misleading content as people tried to make sense of the horrible violence. As Trushar Barot, a former BBC journalist who leads Facebook's integrity initiatives in India, tweeted, "I've never seen anything like this before – the scale of fake content circulating on one story."

Some of this was ordinary people sharing misinformation in good faith, but much of it was not. As the Central Reserve Police Force noted a few days after losing 40 men in the attack, "It has been noticed that on social media some miscreants are trying to circulate fake pictures of body parts of our Martyrs to invoke hatred while we stand united. Please DO NOT circulate/share/like such photographs or posts." Even as some news media made the occasional misstep and amplified some of this disinformation, other journalists and fact-checkers were working overtime to identify and debunk some of the worst examples shared online, including fake or manipulated material trying to link Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Congress general secretary in-charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, to the attack.

The heart of the problem
Social media and messaging apps are thus at the heart of the disinformation problems that India faces. Of our survey respondents, 52% say they get news via Facebook, and the same percentage say they get news via



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WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook. With an estimated quarter billion Indians having come online since the last general election, companies like Facebook, Google and Twitter have become central parts of the Indian media environment, including the disinformation problems that it faces.

But disinformation is not only a problem of social media and digital platforms. In our survey, strikingly, those who use Facebook and/or WhatsApp for news do not report higher levels of concern over whether the news they come across is real or fake than those who do not rely on them. It seems people are as concerned about information from news media as they are about information from social media. More detailed questions in our survey reveal a far more complex set of wider problems. At the heart of disinformation problems are stories that are completely made up for political or commercial reasons, to try to discredit rivals or make money from clickbait. Of our respondents, 51% say they are concerned about this problem. But strikingly, a similar number say they are concerned about what they consider to be poor journalism (stories that respondents consider marred by factual mistakes, inaccuracies, etc.). And 50% say they are concerned by hyperpartisan political content,

where facts are spun or twisted to push a particular agenda, whether from politicians, pundits or publishers.

So, when many Indians in the run-up to the elections say they are concerned about what is real and what is fake on the Internet, this is clearly in part about social media and digital platforms. But unfortunately, it is also about some news media and some politicians who people see as part of the disinformation problems that India faces. It is only a few years ago that the Press Council of India said that "the phenomenon of 'paid news' has acquired serious dimensions", "goes beyond the corruption of individual journalists and media companies and has become pervasive, structured and highly organised." The Press Council concluded: "It is undermining democracy in India." *Cobrapost's* sting operation last summer, which exposed large media houses willing to peddle propaganda as news, demonstrates that some of these problems persist.

Low trust in institutions
Beyond the rise of digital media, the backdrop of disinformation problems in India is thus low trust in established institutions. Though there are some admirable exceptions, established institutions often seem to fail the people who rely on them. Other

studies have found low trust in politicians and political parties. Our own survey shows that just 36% of respondents feel they can trust most news most of the time, statistically indistinguishable from the 34% who say they trust news found via social media.

Addressing the issues
What can be done to address these issues? It is clear that platform companies have much to do to improve their content moderation and contain disinformation. Facebook has announced that it currently has over 500 full-time employees and at least 3,500 external contractors who focus on election work, on top of the 30,000 people across the company focused on safety and security issues. (Given the fact that India accounts for more than 10% of the global user base of both Facebook and WhatsApp, and is growing rapidly, it would be good to know how many of these people are focused specifically on India.)

Similarly, it is troubling that some coordinated attempts to amplify and spread misleading and false information sometimes seem to emanate from major political parties and activists who support them. This ought to stop, and if it does not, has to be continuously and critically covered by independent journalists to ensure that people are aware of what is going on. Finally, it is clear that Indian news media has a lot of work to do if it wants to gain the trust of the Indian public. Many express high levels of trust in some individual brands, most notably major newspapers and some broadcasters. But many news media are not trusted.

In a situation where disinformation seems to be everywhere, and digital platforms, some politicians and some news media are intertwined in these problems, we can only hope that those news media which genuinely do stand out as providers of credible information are able to convince people that they provide exactly that – news that is worthy not only of people's attention, but also their trust.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Accountable to the public

There is a lot of pressure on legacy media now as unverified information is crowding social media



A.S. PANNEERSELVAM

During election time, there is a lot of pressure on legacy media, especially in this era of information overload. Some readers wonder

why this column, which is primarily meant to address the requirements of both the print and online readers of *The Hindu*, also looks at the impact of social media on our information ecology. This is because information that crowds the social mediascape is often used to question mainstream journalists.

Most WhatsApp forwards from people we know happen to be unconfirmed information and speculation. I often wonder why people compulsively forward messages that they themselves don't believe at times. On the other hand, journalism is an attempt to bear witness and provide news. The act of verification in journalism differentiates it from other sources of information. Even in this digital era, credible news organisations do not depend on copy-and-paste reporting. They try their best to refrain from becoming echo chambers.

Lies on Twitter

I am a social media sceptic, but I am on Twitter primarily to provide a quick forum for the readers to raise questions pertaining to *The Hindu*. I do examine complaints, immaterial of the route through which they reach us. Accuracy and fairness are the central themes of journalism, and legacy media tries to uphold these principles despite the multiple attacks from social media. On social media, a deliberate lie by a politically aligned personality gets amplified in an exponential manner. And some use these lies to question *The Hindu*.

The latest example is a tweet by Madhu Kishwar, editor of the journal, *Manushi*. Her tweet read: "DMK manifesto Page 112...People occupying encroached temple lands will be regularised and ownership transferred. Page 85...Encroached Waqf properties will be reclaimed and handed over to Wakf." After reading this tweet, those who are aligned

with the ruling party at the Centre called and asked us why *The Hindu* has been silent on these crucial issues. The problem does not lie with *The Hindu* because the DMK manifesto was only 76 pages and was widely circulated both in English and Tamil. Can a newspaper buy such disinformation from a partisan social media activist at the cost of truth? Contrary to Ms. Kishwar's religiously polarising politics, the DMK's manifesto talks about functioning without prejudice towards any religion in the country.

When I explained this, some of Ms. Kishwar's apologists tried to invoke the DMK's 2016 manifesto for the Legislative Assembly elections to justify her outlandish claims. But a reading of the 2016 manifesto of the party does not reveal any preferential treatment for any religion. It talks about the party's commitment to protect the assets belonging to various places of worship irrespective of the religion.

Dealing with problematic content

As *The Hindu's* Readers' Editor, I have always pointed out the failures within this newspaper, including inaccurate headlines and the dependence on anonymous sources while reporting. The editors of this newspaper have always exhibited a fair sense of propriety and humility by publicly apologising whenever there have been mistake. As journalists, we are accountable only to truth and not to those who wield power. I would like to request all those who derive their information only from social media to read an outstanding paper, "The Impact of Newspaper Ombudsmen on Journalists' Attitudes", by David Pritchard of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He diligently used data from a national survey of journalists to examine the difference between newspapers with ombudsmen and those without.

Recently, the Election Commission of India met with the representatives of The Internet and Mobile Association of India and various social media organisations to formulate a code of ethics for online platforms. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Google, Twitter, ShareChat and ByteDance have agreed to a voluntary code, where the emphasis is on dealing with problematic content. Ms. Kishwar's tweet is a test for this new code.

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SINGLE FILE

Deconstructing addiction

The simple home truth is that love and work are all we need for a better life

MADHURIKA SANKAR



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Acclaimed musician Sarah McLachlan sings in her addiction anthem Angel: "You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie." She wrote the song inspired by the tragic death of the Smashing Pumpkins keyboardist, Jonathan Melvoin, in the 1990s. In recent years, the stories and statistics on addiction have only escalated in intensity and number. This can be attributed to several reasons, one of them being an increasingly socially disconnected world – and no, the number of friends you have on Facebook doesn't really count.

In the late 1970s, a series of controversial experiments, the Rat Park experiments, were conducted by Canadian psychologist Bruce Alexander. Their results, while widely debated, aimed to prove a seminal hypothesis: that substance abuse is an outcome of environmental isolation, and therefore can be overcome with reintegration of the afflicted individual into society in a meaningful way. While that was not proven as an absolute, there has been further research into this area of psychology that suggests that there indeed exists a positive correlation between environmental enrichment and positive recovery from substance abuse.

There is copious literature about the best approach to treating addiction, ranging from judgment ("what a weak and selfish person") to mollycoddling ("it's a disease; you're not responsible"). There are many psychotherapeutic and chemical-based treatment options as a result, which have, no doubt, been game changers in the field. But I have come to believe the simple home truth: that love and work are all we need for a better life.

First, we must dispense with nouns dealing with addiction. This means not calling a hooked individual an 'addict'. There is a permanency to that label that is discomfiting to anyone who wishes to clear the slate. And isn't that what life's journey is about – salvation? Evolving into a higher being? No pill is needed for that.

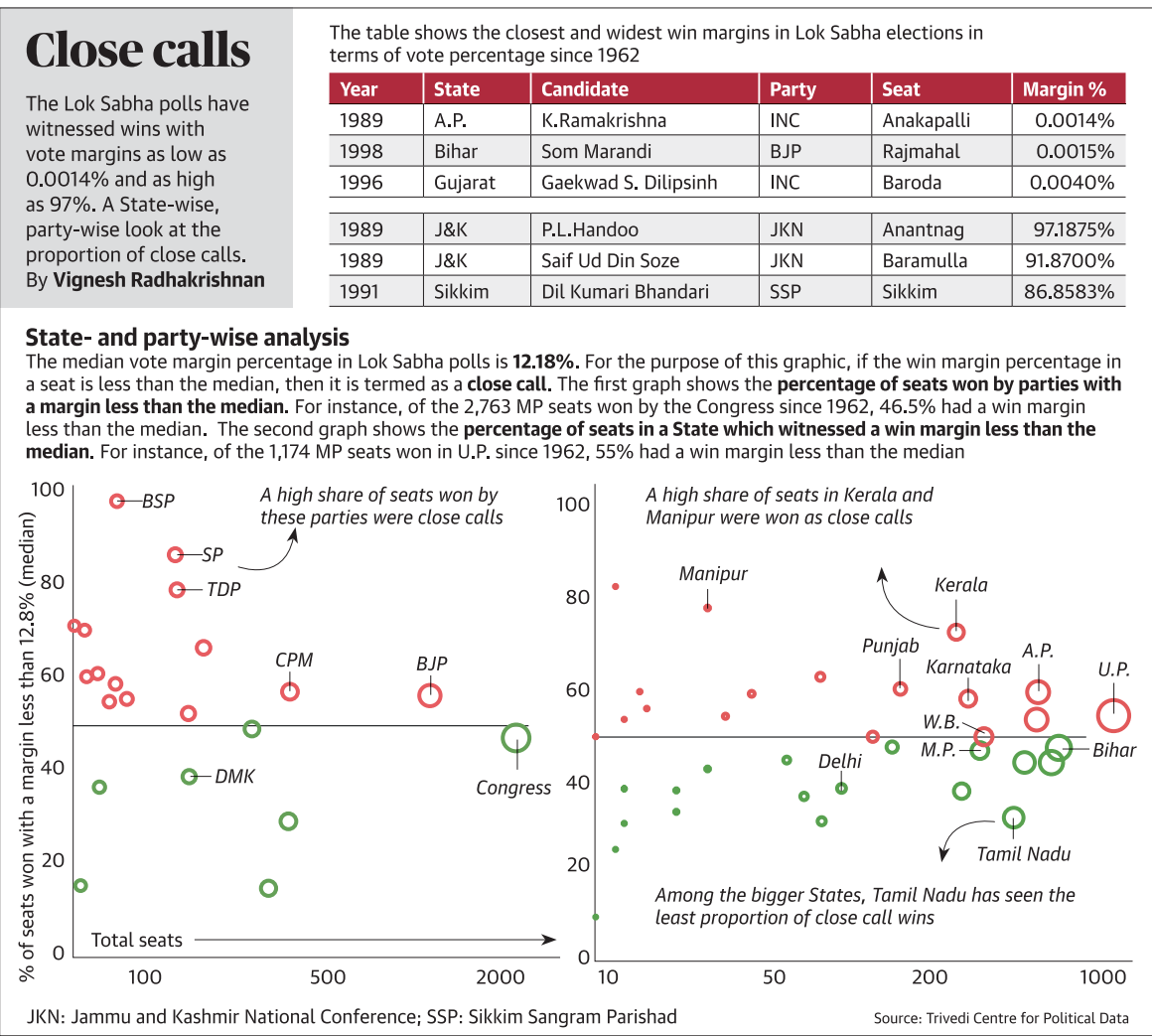
Which begs the question, what if there is unemployment and zero love? That's where self-love comes into play. That everything we need to become a complete, compassionate individual lies within us. This is a realisation that occurs with time, experience, age and having a few dark nights of the soul. But when that dark night passes, the world view that the individual has acquired is infinitely larger – and one that accommodates the humanity required to forgive ourselves and forget.

There is too much adventure and wonderment in this world to sit by the sidelines, no matter how branded a soul you may possess. Having the fortitude to try again is what redeems us.

The writer is based in Chennai



DATA POINT



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 25, 1969

PM wants Telangana's grievances removed

The Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi, is reported to have urged at the meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party executive to-day [March 24] that proper steps should be taken to meet the situation arising from the Telengana agitation, as otherwise, she feared, it might have repercussions in other parts of the country. Mrs. Gandhi said she was ready to meet MPs from Andhra and discuss possible solutions. In her view, there was a sense of grievance among the people of Telengana and steps should be taken to remove that grievance. She is reported to have mentioned that the Swatantra Party was taking political advantage of the present situation. Mrs. Gandhi is expected to discuss all aspects of this problem with the Andhra Chief Minister, Mr. Brahmananda Reddy, when he comes here [New Delhi] to-morrow.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 25, 1919.

Nature's Camouflage.

The word "camouflage" may be a new one, but the thing it means is as old as the hills! And, strangely enough, it is mostly protection from the aviators which it has sought from the beginning. The young grouse among the heather has only to lie still to be invisible even to the telescopic eye of the hovering hawk, so absolutely do its feathers tone with its surroundings. Visitors to the Natural History Museum at South Kensington may see many charmingly set Nature tableaux representing Nature's camouflage. Indeed, so good an artist is Nature that she gives the Arctic fox, the ermine and the ptarmigan the precious gift of turning white to match the all-prevailing snow when winter comes, so that their enemies cannot spot them easily. It is quite possible to examine a plant – say a rose-tree-in the garden with the utmost care and fail to spot a green catterpillar, and the same rose may be infested with green fly which yet require sharp eyes to see them. Doubtless the lovely wings of the butterflies are camouflage too, seeing that these insects so often settle upon the petals of flowers.

POLL CALL

Silent majority

The silent majority refers to a perceived large group of people who do not make their views known in public. The term was popularised by U.S. President Richard Nixon who believed that only a small minority was busy demonstrating against the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War and that most Americans supported him. The term is often used by political analysts and politicians to caution against over-emphasising the depth of support for certain views simply on the basis of high-decibel campaigns or mobilisation.

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