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Disinformation: A New Type of State-Sponsored Violence

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While attempts by the ruling party to control the media and the messaging are not new in India, what we see now is the use of new technology to ‘curate’ and exercise ‘centralised control’ to spread disinformation in order to harass and intimidate critics.

On 13 September 2020, Umar Khalid was arrested by the Delhi Police for his alleged role in inciting the [February 2020 Delhi riots](#) that left at least 53 people dead, the majority of whom were from the Muslim community. The police booked him under the controversial anti-terror Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) based on a speech he made on 8 January.

But there is a problem in the police’s case against the political activist.

As Khalid’s advocate, Trideep Pais, demonstrated in front of a Delhi court on 23 August, the charge sheet filed by the police was based on news reports of the speech on television channels Republic TV and News 18. However, the clip of the speech played on the channels [was taken from an edited snippet](#) put out on Twitter by Amit Malviya, the head of the Information Technology cell of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In fact, Khalid’s speech in its entirety, played by Pais in the courtroom, sounded more like a call for unity than an incitement to violence.

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Beyond the absurdity of it all, three features of this story stand out. First, the source of the misleading information was linked to the ruling dispensation (regardless of whether its release was explicitly directed by the government). Second, the target of the misleading information was a critic of the government and someone who purportedly represents the interests of India’s Muslim community. Third, the information was legitimised by mainstream media, even as the initial source was dubious and the material unverified.

These features are part of a more general pattern of false and misleading information in India, whose increasing pervasiveness adversely affects democratic practice in the country. There has been substantial documentation of the [democratic “backsliding” in India](#) in recent years (Sircar, 2019), with analyses focused on the narrowing space for criticising the government and the stymying of political opposition. However, the role of government-aided disinformation has been less clearly spelt out in these accounts.

One of the classic theoretic justifications for democracy is that citizens have the opportunity to select the best political representative amongst a broad set of choices (Dahl, 1971), whilst sanctioning underperforming incumbents (Fearon, 1999). This ‘political accountability’ perspective is crucially dependent upon citizens having accurate information on the world around them. In modern democracies, the existence of diverse information sources is critical for citizens to form social and political preferences that are independent from the government-provided narrative (Druckman, 2004; Badrinathan et al., 2021).

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Misleading information might cause paranoia and affect responsiveness to reason — as has been alleged about the ‘alt-right’ — but this does not in and of itself constitute democratic breakdown. However, in the Indian context, the sheer scale of government intrusions and control over the media emboldens it to strategically deploy misleading information — what is often called *disinformation* — to develop a national narrative supportive of the ruling BJP and Hindu nationalist ideology, as well as to harass government critic and the Muslim community in India. When the government arrays to itself the power to strategically deploy disinformation against critics and particular communities, democratic breakdowns can occur.

Thus, to understand democratic backsliding, we must understand how disinformation can be deployed in such a manner. In this essay, I identify and explicate two necessary conditions: (1) *curation* — the power to censor information critical of the ruling government; and (2) *centralised control* — the ability to coordinate and standardise messaging from the government and political party across the country.

The (mis)use of disinformation

To grapple with how disinformation impacts Indian democracy, we must begin by how it has been used in the Indian polity, whether explicitly directed by the government or by non-state actors who do not receive sanction for such behaviour. Political disinformation has been used by the BJP and its allies to make false claims about the achievements of the government and to discredit the work done by the Congress party since independence. But its more sinister use has been to intimidate, harass and humiliate political opponents and critics.

The biggest target of political disinformation has been [India's Muslim community](#). Far beyond scoring political points, the goal of such disinformation has often been to question the commitment of Muslims to the Indian nation. This is straightforwardly done to achieve a core aim of Hindu nationalist ideology: to disenfranchise India's Muslims.

We are undeniably in an era of physical intimidation of India's Muslim community, whether looking at the most recent Delhi riots or a string of horrifying viral videos showing the assault of Muslim men in Madhya Pradesh. Yet it does not stop there. The use of strategic disinformation against the Muslim community and government critics must be understood as another form of violence, one with a potentially larger social and political impact than the riots and physical violence that have been so well-studied through the prism of state-sponsored violence (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004).

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Political disinformation is easier to scale up and standardise than physical violence, turning what would otherwise be a localised communal conflagration into a national narrative. The sheer volume of disinformation created, often in short clips and images devoid of context — and the inability to counter it — produces 'events' that can be accepted as 'fact' across the country.

Where the BJP wields state power, communal content and disinformation are far more efficient in generating a political impact. This follows a logic that akin to that of state-sponsored violence. A functioning state, which has a monopoly on the use of 'large-scale' violence, can deploy its powers to attack a subset of the population for political consolidations. Where those sympathetic to Hindu nationalism have established a near-monopoly on media content through curation and where centralised control of information has been established, the Muslim community and political opponents can be targeted with ruthless efficiency.

As the ruling dispensation harnesses the power to deploy information to target certain communities and critics, we must understand political disinformation as one of the biggest obstacles to democratic practice in India.

A theory of disinformation in India

Attempts to control media, promulgate false or misleading information, and harass critics are nothing new for India. What is novel in the current political moment is the increased potency and effectiveness of these strategies — both for technological reasons and the nature of Hindu nationalism.

It is useful to make a distinction between *misinformation*, bad information that is shared by one who believes it to be true, and *disinformation*, bad information that is shared even though the person knows it to be misleading. This distinction is important for analyses of the democratic health of India. If the Indian government is engaged in the spreading of disinformation — as opposed to misinformation — either through an explicit government directive or by [magnifying disinformation](#) furnished by those supporting the government, then such tactics can be strategically deployed for political or ideological ends. Consistent with existing research, government-directed disinformation tends to mobilise and harden support among those backing the government and its Hindu nationalist position.

The definition of bad information is broad; it may be explicitly false, incomplete, misleading, or biased. Its fundamental characteristic is that, if believed, it misleads the person consuming the information. Since the intentions of those spreading bad information are hard to discern and generalise, a large literature in political science has focused on conditions under which consumers believe bad information and the extent to which they can be disabused of these misperceptions (Guess et al., 2020). Individuals are more likely to believe bad information that is consistent with underlying partisan or ideological beliefs and are resistant to any correction of such information (Badrinathan, 2021).

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Governments have greater leeway in shaping attitudes and discourse on matters that are not independently verifiable to citizens. For instance, the government should have a difficult time altering attitudes about performance in one’s own town or village, as work that has or has not been done is directly observable to the citizen. On the other hand, with information on what has occurred in Kashmir or on the border with China, the government has ostensibly wide latitude, as its narrative cannot easily be independently discredited.

Unlike claims about service delivery and benefits, which are independently verifiable, anti-Muslim disinformation feeds into a ‘generalised distrust’ of the Muslim community that is less likely to be questioned by the recipient. This explains why disinformation is a particularly effective tactic employed by those aligned with Hindu nationalism to target the Muslim community. Notably, images and stories using anti-Muslim disinformation are often reductive in nature (Chakravorty, 2019), provided without context beyond religious identity and cannot plausibly be verified. This can continue because government supporters are given licence to further anti-Muslim attitudes without fear of significant sanction. Disparate pieces of anti-Muslim disinformation, otherwise unconnected, are allowed to feed into a more general narrative — hardening support for Hindu nationalism.

Modern technology and media penetration have aided such narratives. Around 70% of households (210 million) in India had television by end-2020, up from about 45% (88 million) in 2000, making the medium by far the biggest source for news consumption. With this significant reach, disinformation spread over television is far more impactful than ever before.

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This is to say nothing of the growth of smartphones and social media in India. Although the penetration of social media, dependent upon wealth and functional literacy levels, is far more limited than television among citizens (Badrinathan et al., 2021), its role in the reporting of news is far more significant. Today, grainy photographs and videos taken on smartphones are commonly used in news reports, often without verification. News items are even generated from a Facebook or Twitter post, not to mention television show guests whose main qualification is the extent of their social media following. Such questionable sources are even used as the basis for legal action. *Article 14* has reported that since January 2020, at least 25 cases have been filed based on unverified videos pulled off of the internet.

In short, the rise of social media has generated disinformation at scale, either directly through social media platforms or by providing content to more widely viewed mass media. This has generated little distinction between material reported in unverified social media and supposedly ‘credible’ news outlets.

Curation: Building a monopoly

When governments can control the media environment, the concerns around misinformation and disinformation change significantly.

Researchers studying bad information usually focus on situations where, when faced with a choice, individuals choose to consume biased media sources or biased information over more credible sources or information. Underlying this workhorse model of bad information is a setting where an individual may either consume biased media that is consistent with her existing political preferences or consume more credible, objective media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These models assume the existence of a largely credible alternative for information — which may not be the case when the government can exercise significant control on the media space.

Establishing significant control in media in a context as socially and linguistically varied as India, where there is a proliferation of diverse media, is far from straightforward. Media control is established by appealing to a portfolio of two methods: (1) a more ‘traditional’ approach using the structures of the state to sanction political opponents and critics, and (2) a ‘decentralised’ model in which supporters of the government police undesirable content. This function of weeding out critical voices is what I call *curation* of media content.

Government-directed disinformation tends to mobilise and harden support among those backing the government and its Hindu nationalist position.

The need to saturate Indian media with pro-government coverage obliges the ruling BJP to stymie criticism and vilify critics. First, the government has resorted to legal cases against critics, often sedition cases and anti-terror cases under the UAPA. A recent analysis found that 96% of the sedition cases filed against Indian citizens for being critical of government or politicians between 2010 and 2020 were filed after Narendra Modi became the prime minister. Government data show that the number of cases filed under UAPA grew more than 72% from 2015 to 2019. Between 2016 and 2019, only 2.2% of such cases ended in a conviction, providing evidence that the government often uses UAPA to keep its opponents locked up for years even where there is no legitimate accusation. Most recently, there was a tax raid on *Dainik Bhaskar*, the largest newspaper in India by circulation, which had extensively covered the government’s mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Second, the government has often sought to restrict the ‘capacity’ of citizens to criticise the government, using a range of measures from removing critical social media accounts to outright surveillance. Most notably, when it feels significant criticism from the population-at-large, as during the altering of statehood for Jammu and Kashmir or the anti-farm-law protests, the government has shut down internet access. According to available data, of the 155 internet shutdowns recorded worldwide in 2020, 109 were in India. (The next closest country was Yemen, with six.)

These methods of curation prove to be effective in an oligopolistic market that controls television news and newspapers, in which a small number of people who own media houses can be intimidated or controlled. However, relying on these ‘traditional’ methods of using state institutions for curation alone would prove to be unwieldy in a dynamic and diverse social media environment.

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The second strategy that is employed for curation is decentralised policing. Members of a sizable, core group of supporters of the BJP and/or Hindu nationalism observe the actions of those critical of the government and use social media to broadcast them to a larger group of partisans. This larger group can then harass the critic, threaten violence, or even mobilise to slander the critic in mainstream venues. This model works because while the government may not always directly identify a critic, or use its machinery against the individual, those engaging in decentralised policing are given a free hand to operate without sanction. The spread of social media magnifies the visibility of a critic, making the person easier to identify, while also making mobilisation easier for those who seek to censor the critic. In this manner, stifling of criticism across the population can be achieved without significant state capacity.

Naturally, disinformation is a key tool in reaching certain political aims. This creates a feedback loop in which greater curation increases the potency of disinformation, which can then be used to more effectively discredit voices critical of the ruling BJP or Hindu nationalism and humiliate the Muslim community.

Centralised control: Disciplining the organisation

From the government’s perspective, an effective media strategy is not just about stymying critical voices. The government must also efficiently appeal to citizens with the content it desires. In the West, the use of biased media and disinformation, often through social media, is seen as a substitute to traditional party mobilisation and organisation. No longer do parties need to go to the doorsteps of voters if they can reach supporters through personalised content on social media. However, this Western model of disinformation is predicated on large-scale social media access.

In India, lower levels of social media penetration imply that the average citizen does not easily have access to such personalised content, whether supportive or not of the government. As discussed in some detail in Badrinathan, et al. (2021), individualised access to

social media implies that the individual is wealthy enough (and has enough freedom) to obtain a smartphone for personal use and that the person is functionally literate. While these conditions might be met in younger populations in the more developed parts of India, it is certainly not true of the population at large. The [latest data](#) show that only 32% of India’s population uses social media. The proportion of people who use social media apps in India stands [much lower](#) than in many other developing countries.

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For this reason, a party’s media strategy, including disinformation, must be deployed in parallel to a strong party organisation. Unlike the West, in India, the use of media is not a substitute but a complement to strong party organisation. For instance, increased penetration of mobile phones in tandem with a strong Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) organisation, was seen as one of the reasons for the party’s victory in the 2007 Uttar Pradesh state elections (Jeffrey and Doron, 2012). Indeed, alongside its media strategy, the BJP has also invested significant financial resources in building a formidable ground-level party cadre with polling booth agents and *panna pramukhs*, BJP workers who are each assigned to 30-50 voters. The ability to centralise and standardise political messages, in tandem with the density of its party cadre, significantly strengthens the potency of the BJP’s appeals to the voter. This is what I call *centralised control* of information.

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To understand why this is the case, it is useful to consider the structure of the modern Indian party and the political economy of party communication. Especially in national-level politics, parties seek to make sure their ground-level cadre ‘stay on message’ by sticking to campaign appeals decided from above. Traditionally, party organisations needed to work through intermediaries at various levels to communicate to the ground-level cadre. This created problems of leakage, as not all intermediaries faithfully communicated campaign appeals; and problems of delay, as informing the entire cadre was a time-consuming process.

Social media has fundamentally transformed this problem. While citizens at large may not all have access to social media, party workers down to the lowest level are typically a part of common social media groups that coordinate party action, although these groups often share much more than partisan content (Chauchard and Garimella, 2021). These groups are often monitored by higher-level party functionaries who also provide campaign content. Campaign appeals, coordinated from above, are now broadly standardised and can be transmitted immediately — making leakage and delay a thing of the past. The BJP, now with a strong party organisation armed with real-time standardised appeals, is more impactful in canvassing and mobilisation.

This model of campaign appeals has also significantly centralised control in the national leadership of the BJP and weakened intra-party democracy. In the past, the dependence on local intermediaries and local factions obliged some modicum of bargaining in deciding campaign strategy and appeal. But when the BJP’s central leadership consolidated power in making campaign appeals, they may at times bolster their own appeal at the expense of more local leaders (Sircar, 2021) — generating campaigns revolving around Prime Minister Modi (Sircar, 2020). Indeed, the BJP has fought its most recent high profile state elections — Assam, Bihar, Delhi, and West Bengal — without naming a chief ministerial candidate, effectively designing state-level election campaigns around Narendra Modi.

Moving past a muddle of factions and contradictory messaging, this centralised control allows the ruling dispensation to effectively craft a national narrative while targeting critics and the Muslim community alike with ruthless efficiency — often with methodical use of political disinformation.

New challenges for Indian democracy

While we must remain attuned to the traditional tools of democratic breakdown — riots, political patronage, electoral fraud — we must start to grapple with the rapid changes in scale and efficiency of the technology of violence, harassment, and suppression. To understand the role of political disinformation in the democratic health of the country, one must juxtapose its use with broader political developments in India — in particular, the ability of the government to curate and centralise control over messaging. The sheer force of media technology and its purposing for harassment and silencing critics and the Muslim community have made it an incredibly efficient form of state-sponsored “violence.”

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