

In Times Of Fake News & Manufactured Outrage, How Do We Reclaim Empathy?

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As misinformation and propaganda become the mainstay of public discourse, the space for reason is shrinking

MAYA MIRCHANDANI

“This is a fine balancing act, but one that can only work if we the public invest in our right to accurate information. So, it is really up to us to recognise now that we are just pawns on a political chessboard. Should we allow malign actors, divisive politicians or automated technologies to take over our thought process, our societal obligations? Does the keyboard replace all our interactions and determine our behaviour?”

Hate for political gain.

Troll armies – both, human and automated, carry out concerted campaigns – especially against religious or caste minorities and refugees – creating enemies out of ordinary people trying to live their lives. These campaigns prey on the most basic human emotions – of fear and anger. Anger against corruption or unemployment or reservations. Anger against real or perceived economic and social privilege, for example. And fear – fear of terrorism and refugees being a threat to security. The goal of disinformation is to divide and polarise society, make us less tolerant, believe that another group is worse than we are.

Hate and polarisation need an enemy, and they need fuel. In India, both are dutifully provided by politicians who harness anger and resentment with populist rhetoric. Politicians who confirm existing biases against minorities and reinforce perceptions about the targets of their hate. These campaigns disrupt beliefs in fundamental basic principles like freedom of speech, the right to life and liberty, to privacy, the right to have different opinions.

They thrive on the chaos they create – forcing us, the citizens to conform to binary identities – national or anti-national, globalist or patriot, Hindu or Muslim. Political groups selectively mobilise genuine devotion or religious emotion in order to manufacture both, offense and a sense of being offended – Hate spin, as media theorist Cherian George calls it. They create an atmosphere of mistrust. And suddenly we don't know who or what to believe, our own convictions of right and wrong are tested.

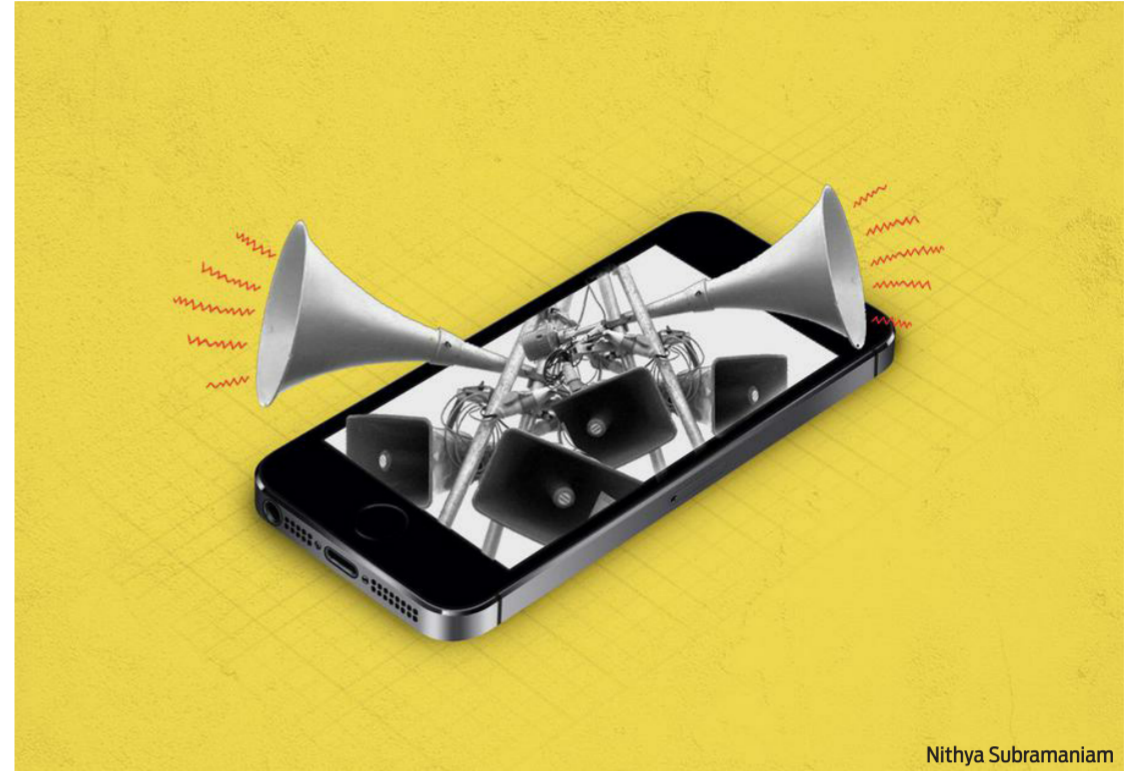
The wedges they drive are filled by populist politicians quickly who claim they speak on behalf of the disenfranchised, when all they really want is to hold on to power. An authoritarian leader who fashions himself both as kindred underling and as a demagogic messiah to the public uses a fractured polity to his advantage. And social media gives hate and division much needed oxygen. Divisive politicians use the media to foment prejudice, create confusion and celebrate ignorance.

Vitiated, ideologically polarised and aggressive politics is fast becoming a cauldron of victimhood and rage. Its objective is met when the support base is widened, a divisive narrative is created, and people are mobilised around a political agenda. The binaries are challenging our definitions of liberal democracy, of identities and nationalism. The success of propaganda and hate speech that fuels populism lies in a careful calculation of the use of state power, the manipulation of public sentiment, the rhetoric of populist politics and the influence of the media.

Liberalism that requires checks and balances and limited governance is trumped by politicians who want us to believe the state is in mortal danger. Misinformation is a common strategy of populist demagogues who try to subvert people's trust in verifiable facts and cultivate cynicism.

Our way out

As the crucible of hate speech bubbles over, space for civil debate in the public sphere has yielded to coarse, abusive conversations, fueled by manufactured outrage in TV studios. Electoral contests or policy debates are no longer based on reason but on personal charisma and tribal loyalties.



Nithya Subramaniam

The question we need to ask ourselves is whether we can lay all the blame at technology's door? If we do that, we open up the possibility of authoritarian governments and companies driven by profit – to try and regulate our responses.

That is a slippery slope.

What we can and must do instead is identify, report, counter each time we see something abusive or hateful. We must push platforms to act. We must ensure governments don't misuse calls for regulation to silence critics.

This is a fine balancing act, but one that can only work if we the public invest in our right to accurate information. So, it is really up to us to recognise now that we are just pawns on a political chessboard. Should we allow malign actors, divisive politicians or automated technologies to take over our thought process, our societal obligations? Does the keyboard replace all our interactions and determine our behaviour?

Technology is making us numb, the absence of human contact has an overwhelming impact on basic values – the respect for rights and freedoms, plurality, intellectual pursuits. And most importantly, it is impacting our ability to empathise with groups targeted by this violent discourse – refugees and immigrants fleeing violence or poverty in detention centres across the world, children separated from their parents, families bereft as the main breadwinner is killed by rampaging mobs – all justified as retribution for perceived, past injustices.

There are examples of suffering all around us. But can we re-center ourselves and be empathetic to the suffering of those at the receiving end of this violence today? Can we initiate truth and reconciliation amongst people so that we can overcome this polarising hatred?

Instead of weaponising stereotypes or past pain and injustice, instead of retreating into nativist, tribal identities fueled by propaganda and misinformation, can we reclaim empathy as an antidote to hate?

Can we ensure we think before we share? And prevent conspiracies from spreading? Can we educate our young? Can we tell them from the minute they have a smartphone in their hands what responsible behavior online is all about? High levels of education from an early age is proving to be one of the most effective antidotes to misinformation and hate in countries like Finland – can we learn from their lessons?

The media is considered democracy's fourth pillar. It creates awareness about our environments, bears witness to our triumphs and to our pain, it is meant to hold power accountable. For one co-opted journalist or media manager, there are many more rededicating themselves every day to ethical, factual reporting each morning. These are committed journalists putting their life and liberty on the line to bring us stories that no one wants us to read or see.

Journalists who exposed Cambridge Analytica's influence operations did the public a service and made both governments and platforms more accountable. Journalists like Pawan Jaiswal who exposed government schools for not doing what they were mandated to do open our eyes to the everyday injustices of false political promises around us. It will take a collective of stories from good old-fashioned journalists, and a public that seeks to build bridges rather than expand gulfs between communities to turn the tide on hate and pull us out of the abyss that today's propaganda has led us into.

*Concluded
This article first appeared
on Maya Mirchandani's blog.*

A Matter Of Fact New Study Shows How Indians Respond To (Mis)Information On Whatsapp

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Ever wondered how you can contribute to combating misinformation on platforms like WhatsApp? A study found that, in the context of Indian WhatsApp users, user-driven corrections were effective in lowering people's belief in misinformation.

Sumitra Badrinathan from the University of Pennsylvania, Simon Chauchard from Leiden University and D. J. Flynn from IE University recently conducted a study titled "I Don't Think That's True, Bro!" An Experiment on Fact-checking WhatsApp Rumors in India", where they investigated the role of users in fact checking mis/disinformation on WhatsApp.

The study revealed that corrections to potentially misleading information on WhatsApp threads can minimise belief in the content of such messages, even when such corrections are low on sophistication (without a source), and the identity of the user is unknown.

The researchers recommended that WhatsApp create a "button" to easily express their doubts over claims made in the app, which would minimise the efforts required by users to report a message and would thus effectively slow down the dissemination of such messages.

"Our findings suggest that though user-driven corrections work, merely signaling a doubt about a claim (regardless of how detailed this signal is) may go a long way in reducing misinformation," Badrinathan said in a tweet,



The Study

The study was conducted by recruiting over 5000 Hindi speakers through Facebook, who were exposed to nine different WhatsApp threads. These threads (screenshot of a WhatsApp conversation) included a claim made by an unknown user using pro-ruling party and anti-ruling party sources, which was followed by a response by another user. The response was varied from a simple "thank you"

(control condition with no correction) to expressing simple disbelief to fact checking the claim using a source.

The subject of the claim in the nine threads were varied from politics, health to sports, while the fact checks by the respondent in the thread used one of these five sources: AltNews, VishwasNews, Times of India, Facebook and WhatsApp.

Existing literature on people's response to fact

checking initiatives in countries like the United States have found that motivated reasoning and partisanship are highly influential factors that contribute to the acceptance of a fact check.

However, in the context of WhatsApp users in India, the study found that motivated reasoning and partisanship had less of a role to play for user's in their interaction with the claim and the fact check.

It also found that the sophistication of the message (cited with fact checks by media organisations) had little to do with people believing in the fact check by the responding user. Rather, an expression of doubt or a counter argument by peer in a WhatsApp group was enough to lower the belief in the initial claim.

The "Beacon" Of Doubt

The study argues that expecting users in real life to consistently counter claims made by their peers with sophistication and details would be unrealistic. The researchers suggested that a button-like feature should be added to messengers like WhatsApp, which would allow users to express doubt over a claim with the simple click of a button.

Last year, a similar suggestion was made by a few researchers at the London School of Economics, who conducted a WhatsApp-funded study in India to investigate the role of the messenger in orchestrating and influencing mob violence around the country. They had suggested the addition of a "beacon" like feature for users to flag potentially dangerous misinformation that may lead to violence.