The False Information Ecosystem in India

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Abstract

Over the past few years, internet access and adoption in India has grown tremendously, giving Indians more access to the online information ecosystem than ever before. Today, India is one of the largest markets for technology platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. However, the adoption of these technology platforms has also enabled misinformation and disinformation to spread at scale in the country. This has resulted in the eruption of violence and even the deaths of dozens of people. This policy brief explores the false information ecosystem in India, highlighting the key players and approaches they have implemented to curb the spread of misinformation and disinformation. It also offers a set of recommendations for how these efforts can be improved going forward.

Introduction

India is the world's largest democracy. With over 1.3 billion citizens, it is also home to the world's second largest population.[1] Over the past few years, India has seen tremendous growth in terms of internet access and usage. Today, India is the second largest online market, ranking behind China, with over 460 million internet users.[2] However, despite the fact that the country boasts a significant share of the global internet user base, internet penetration in the country is still relatively low, at approximately 38 percent[3]. But, access to and adoption of the internet is rapidly increasing and the number of Indians online is expected to grow exponentially over the next few years. India is also one of the largest markets for several global technology platforms. Today, India is the largest market for

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[1] World Bank Group, "India," World Bank Group, https://data.worldbank.org/country/india.

[2] Statista Research Department, "Internet Usage in India - Statistics and Facts," Statista, last modified September 11, 2018, https://www.statista.com/topics/2157/internet-usage-in-india/#targetText=About%20323%20million%20people%20in,37.4%20percent%20respectively%20in%202021.

[3] Laura Silver et al., *Mobile Connectivity in Emerging Economies*, March 7, 2019, https://www.pewinternet.org/2019/03/07/use-of-smartphones-and-social-media-is-common-across-most-emerging-economies/ .

Facebook, with 241 million users[4] and the largest market for WhatsApp with 400 million users[5].

This rise in access to and adoption of the internet and its various services has been sparked by an increase in smartphone adoption as well as decreasing data costs. Most Indians access the online information ecosystem using smartphones. As of 2017, only 27 percent of Indians were smartphone users. However, by 2022, this figure is forecast to climb to 60 percent, with 829 million people using smartphones.[6] Additionally, the entry of telecom firm Reliance Jio into the Internet Service Provider (ISP) market disrupted the market and sparked a significant decrease in prices, making data plans more affordable for the average Indian.[7] This has given more Indians access to the digital information environment than ever before.

Greater access to the internet has democratised information governance and flows for Indians. The advent of the internet, in particular social media and messaging platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, has enabled the average Indian to create, share, and consume user-generated content with greater ease and affordability. Platforms such as WhatsApp, which permit the sharing of multimedia content, have also enabled users to engage in the online ecosystem despite differences in literacy levels. This is because through these platforms, users can share and engage with photo and video posts, in addition to text-based posts.[8] This has enabled Indians of varying literacy levels to access and use the internet. It has also provided Indians belonging to traditionally marginalised communities with a platform for expression.

However, the rise of these internet platforms has also enabled actors with bad or manipulative intentions to spread harmful content at scale. It has also enabled users who lack strong digital literacy skills to spread such content. One of the biggest and most problematic examples of such content is false information. False information can come in two forms. The first is misinformation, which can be defined as "false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead."[9] The second category of false information is disinformation, which can be understood as "information that is deliberately

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[4] Donn Fuscaldo, "Facebook Now Has More Users in India Than in Any Other Country," Investopedia, last modified June 25, 2019, https://www.investopedia.com/news/facebook-now-has-more-users-india-any-other-country/.

[5] Manish Singh, "WhatsApp Reaches 400 Million Users in India, Its Biggest Market," *TechCrunch*, July 26, 2019, https://techcrunch.com/2019/07/26/whatsapp-india-users-400-million/#targetText=According%20to%20research%20firm%20Counterpoint,handsets%20have%20shipped%20in%20India.

[6] Ananya Bhattacharya, "The Number of Smartphone Users in India Will More Than Double in Four Years," *Quartz India*, December 4, 2018, https://qz.com/india/1483368/indias-smartphone-internet-usage-will-surge-by-2022-cisco-says/.

[7] Kanchan Kaur et al., *Information Disorder in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Masato Kajimoto and Samantha Stanley, March 3, 2019, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3134581.

[8] Farooq, "Politics of Fake News: How WhatsApp Became a Potent Propaganda Tool in India".

[9] Andrea Diaz, "'Misinformation' is Crowned Dictionary.com's Word of The Year," *CNN*, November 26, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/26/us/misinformation-dictionary-word-of-the-year-2018-trnd/index.html.

false or misleading."[10] Although false information such as misinformation and disinformation has been a problem in societies across the globe for centuries, technology has facilitated its spread and exacerbated the resulting harms.

Whereas in the United States and other Western nations, research and policy agendas are focused on the role of foreign adversaries in developing and disseminating misinformation and disinformation, in India, these agendas are focused internally, as the majority of misinformation and disinformation is produced and shared domestically. Political parties and their supporters play an especially prominent role in spreading such disinformation.[11] These disinformation campaigns regularly target political opponents, religious and ethnic minorities, and dissenters. Similar to disinformation campaigns around the world, disinformation campaigns in India aim to deepen domestic divisions and stoke conflict based on prominent social issues. In India, however, the consequences of such campaigns have been far more extreme, even leading to mob violence and the deaths of dozens of citizens.[12]

There are a number of factors which have enabled misinformation and disinformation to have a profound impact on Indian society. Firstly, the country has seen a steady decline in trust in media institutions, which has created a fertile breeding ground for both forms of false information.[13] As a result of this declining trust in media institutions, many citizens have turned to alternative outlets for information, such as relying on their social circles, both online and offline. Recent research has shown that media institutions themselves have also become complicit in disseminating misinformation,[14] often due to a lack of training in content verification.[15]

Secondly, most Indians lack basic digital hygiene and media literacy. This is especially true of new internet users who are navigating online platforms for the first time. These individuals are at a greater risk for having difficulty discerning the difference between factual and falsified information. Being able to reliably identify fact from fiction has also become more difficult as the lines between different sources of information have been blurred. Today, across the globe, many users turn to social media platforms in addition to or instead of news outlets.

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[10] Caroline Jack, *Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information*, August 7, 2017, https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf.

[11] Snigdha Poonam and Samarth Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election," *The Atlantic*, April 1, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/india-misinformation-election-fake-news/586123/.

[12] Poonam and Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election".

[13] Rakesh Thukral, "India: High Trust, Higher Expectations," Edelman, last modified February 19, 2018, https://www.edelman.com/post/india-high-trust-higher-expectations.

[14] Aria Thaker, "Indian Media Trumpeting About Pakistani Fake News Should Look in the Mirror First," *Quartz India*, February 27, 2019, https://qz.com/india/1561178/media-in-india-and-pakistan-share-fake-news-amid-border-conflict/.

[15] Poonam and Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election".

Furthermore, as users encounter vast quantities of information every day, they are also less likely to spend time verifying content.[16] Thirdly, major internet platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, are designed to enable rapid information sharing at scale. As a result, the format and nature of these platforms also enable the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. These platforms are widely used in India, and they have therefore played a key role in enabling the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Although many of these platforms have collaborated with the government, NGOs and newly-established fact-checking organisations to combat the spread of false information, their efforts have not yet succeeded as these efforts often lack scale.

Finally, India has a long but recent history of caste and communal violence. Such social, ethnic and political tensions are still very much present in society today, and can be manipulated and deepened with relative ease. The spread of misinformation and disinformation throughout the country has exacerbated these tensions and divides. This often negatively impacts communities that are already marginalised and vulnerable.

The False Information Ecosystem in India

According to a recent study by Microsoft, over 64 percent of Indians have engaged with false information in some manner.[17] Indians encounter such false information from a range of outlets, including social media platforms and traditional print and television news outlets.[18] Over the past few years, the country has seen an array of misinformation and disinformation campaigns, with impacts ranging from minimal to severe. Some of the most prominent and high-impact of these campaigns include:

- In November 2016, the Government of India demonetised all ₹500 and ₹1,000 currency notes and replaced them with new ₹500 and ₹2,000 notes, in an attempt to curb corruption and the financing of terrorism and other illegal activities. Following the announcement, misinformation circulated on platforms such as WhatsApp claiming that each ₹2,000 note had a GPS chip embedded in it which enabled for the bill to be tracked. Additionally, stories circulated that the ink on the ₹2,000 easily bled and was seriously radioactive. Rumors also circulated that the newly issued currencies would soon be withdrawn.[19]
- A video depicting a child being kidnapped by two helmeted men on a motorcycle went viral on WhatsApp, sparking fears that child kidnappers and traffickers were running amok in Indian cities. The video sparked mob violence that led to the deaths of at least two dozen people. The video had been edited from an anti-kidnapping public service advertisement produced in Pakistan.[20] Between July 2017 and July 2018, 33 people

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[16] Santanu Chakrabarti, Lucile Stengel, and Sapna Solanki, *Duty, Identity, Credibility: 'Fake News' and the Ordinary Citizen in India*, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/duty-identity-credibility.pdf.

[17] Samir Patil, "India Has a Public Health Crisis. It's Called Fake News.," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/29/opinion/india-elections-disinformation.html.

[18] Poonam and Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election".

[19] BBC Trending, "False Rumours and Fake News Cloud India's Currency Plan," BBC News, last modified December 17, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38318545.

[20] Shashank Bengali, "How WhatsApp is Battling Misinformation in India, Where 'Fake News is Part of Our Culture,'" *The Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2019, https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-india-whatsapp-2019-story.html.

were killed and at least 99 injured in 69 reported attacks on suspected child abductors, fuelled by such WhatsApp messages.[21] In July 2018, in response to the growing number of mob lynchings across the country, the government established a high level committee chaired by the Union Home Secretary to oversee and prevent such incidents.[22]

▪ In February 2019, a suicide bombing in the Pulwama district of Kashmir killed 40 Indian paramilitary policemen. Two weeks after the attack, a Facebook user called Avi Dandiya posted a live video of a call recording allegedly between India's Home Minister and the President of the BJP party, and an unknown woman. In the recording, the Home Minister allegedly said in Hindi "we agree that for election, we need a war". Within 24 hours, fact-checking service BOOM confirmed the video was fake and had been created using audio clips from previous political interviews. By the time the post was removed from Facebook, it had over 2.5 million views and 150,000 shares. Additionally, four edited copies of the video resurfaced on Facebook, with approximately 36,000 views. A copy of the video also appeared on YouTube, where it was viewed 2,800 times, and on Twitter, where it was viewed 22,000 times.[23]

▪ On February 26, India carried out an air strike against the Balakot region of Pakistan. In early March, the Government of India stated that these air strikes had killed "a large number of militants". However, the Government of Pakistan insisted that no casualties had been identified. Images circulated on social media depicting alleged dead militants and a destroyed training camp. In reality, these were old images of a 2014 suicide attack in Pakistan and of Pakistan-administered Kashmir after an earthquake. The images had been recaptioned and placed in a new, false context.[24] Additionally, old videos of captured pilots surfaced as well.[25]

▪ As misinformation around vaccinations has spread throughout the United States, it has also penetrated the Indian information environment, primarily through WhatsApp. Such messages claim that measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccines are harmful to children. As a result, numerous schools in Mumbai prohibited health officials from implementing vaccination drives. Tens of thousands of Indians acquire these diseases every year, and according to the United Nations Children's Fund, thousands of children failed to receive vaccinations due to these misinformation campaigns.[26]

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[21] Jayshree Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch, last modified April 24, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/24/india-internet-clampdown-will-not-stop-misinformation.

[22] Press Information Bureau, India, "Government Set Up High Level Committee Chaired by Union Home Secretary to Check Mob Lynching," news release, July 23, 2018, https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=180891.

[23] Sankalp Phartiyal and Aditya Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls," *Reuters*, April 3, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/india-election-socialmedia-fakenews/despite-being-exposed-fake-news-thrives-on-social-media-ahead-of-india-polls-idUSKCN1RE08Z.

[24] Kevin Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election," *BBC*, April 6, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-47797151.

[25] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".

[26] Newley Purnell, "WhatsApp Users Spread Antivaccine Misinformation in India: Report," *Business Standard*, April 15, 2019, https://www.business-standard.com/article/technology/whatsapp-users-spread-antivaccine-misinformation-in-india-report-119041400694_1.html.

The political sphere is a major focal point of the false information environment in India. This past spring, India held its latest general elections. Approximately 900 million people were eligible to vote in the recent elections, which began on April 11, 2019[27] and lasted for seven weeks.[28] Of the 900 million eligible voters, approximately 500 million had access to the internet.[29] According to a recent survey, one in two respondents had received content featuring false information during the run up to the elections, primarily through Facebook and WhatsApp.

One example of a widely circulated misinformation campaign during this time was a WhatsApp message that went viral in February 2019, claiming that Indians living overseas could vote in the general elections online. The false message advised people to register on the Election Commission of India's (ECI) website. After the message went viral, the ECI debunked the post on its Twitter account and filed a police complaint against "unknown persons" for invoking "public mischief".[30]

Over the last few years, social media has become recognised as a valuable campaign and engagement tool for political parties. Prior to the 2014 general elections, most Indian politicians shied away from social media. However, during the 2014 general election campaigns, political parties recognised the power of social media in garnering support and influencing opinions. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi was especially a champion of social media. He used it to build a significant following both online and offline. [31] He also used to it to circumvent traditional media outlets as well as opponents in his own party.[32] As political parties have realised the importance of social media in generating influence, they have begun segmenting and targeting voters based on characteristics such as religion, gender and age. These parties are often able to construct vast databases of users for such targeted campaigns, as India has weak data privacy laws.[33]

One political party that has been particularly adept at using social media to its advantage is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party of Prime Minister Modi. Several researchers have indicated that in the lead up to the 2014 general elections, the BJP established cyber armies to help implement its social media strategy. Cyber armies, also known as cyber troops, can be understood as government or political party-affiliated individuals who are responsible for manipulating public opinion online.[34] During this time, the BJP's strategy centered around building a personality following around Modi, and also

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[27] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".

[28] Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch.
[29] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[30] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[31] Amila Banerjee and Mehrazun Neesa Haque, "Is Fake News Real in India?," *Journal of Content, Community & Communication* 8, no. 4 (December 2018): https://www.amity.edu/gwalior/JCCC/pdf/JCCC-16012019-46-49.pdf.
[32] Silvia Majó-Vázquez et al., *Online Audience Engagement with Legacy and Digital-Born News Media in the 2019 Indian Elections*, June 2019, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/Maj%C3%B3-V%C3%A1zquez_Social_media_and_news_in_the_Indian_election_FINAL.pdf.
[33] Banerjee and Haque, "Is Fake News Real in India?".
[34] Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*, 2018, http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2018/07/ct2018.pdf.

around establishing a social media war room in order to track potential voters across India's 92,000 villages.[35]

The scope and scale and the BJP's social media manipulation efforts are impressive. In early 2017, during the lead up to the state elections in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP formed 10,344 WhatsApp groups in order to coordinate efforts and circulate media among party workers[36] and 6,600 groups in order to spread the party's message.[37] In addition, the Delhi division of the BJP reportedly established over 1,800 WhatsApp groups in the lead up to the 2019 elections. Furthermore, after the success of the 2014 elections, the BJP continued expanding its efforts to target smartphone-owning voters at the grassroots level. In order to do this, the BJP recruited over 900,000 volunteers to serve as "cell phone pramukhs". These volunteers were responsible for creating neighborhood-based WhatsApp groups which would be used to spread the word about the BJP's various achievements as well as about Modi's campaign trail.[38]

However, the BJP's vast social media apparatus has also been the source of misinformation and disinformation. In December 2015, for example, the Press Information Bureau tweeted a doctored image of Prime Minister Modi surveying flood-wrecked regions of Chennai, the capital city of the state of Tamil Nadu, from an airplane. The photograph initially featured the Prime Minister overlooking submerged fields and buildings through a plane window.[39] Hours later, the Press Information Bureau shared the same tweet with a different image. This new image depicted a clearer scene below, and had been digitally transferred onto the window. The second tweet was deleted shortly after, but by then it had already caught public attention and criticism.[40] Although this was a relatively harmless instance of false information, it demonstrates how readily false information is used as a tactic, even by government officials.

Today, almost every major political party in the country has a detailed and coordinated social media strategy implemented by a dedicated social media management team. [41] However, in 2014, the BJP was able to harness the power of social media, big data and analytics the best as it had a larger amount of financial and organisational resources at its disposal.[42] In addition to spreading false information, these strategic social media entities have also been found to be the source of divisive content. According to a study conducted at Oxford University, which compiled a large data sample of content circulated before the

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[35] Kalyani Chadha and Pallavi Guha, "The Bharatiya Janata Party's Online Campaign and Citizen Involvement in India's 2014 Election," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016):, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4947/1774.

[36] Farooq, "Politics of Fake News: How WhatsApp Became a Potent Propaganda Tool in India".

[37] Rishi IyengarWhatsApp now has a tip line for Indian election misinformation, "WhatsApp Now Has a Tip Line for Indian Election Misinformation," *CNN*, April 2, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/02/tech/whatsapp-india-tip-line-election/index.html.

[38] Philippa Williams and Lipika Kamra, "Technology Could Torpedo India's First WhatsApp Election," *Quartz India*, March 4, 2019, https://qz.com/india/1563318/indias-2019-election-is-threatened-by-fake-news-on-whatsapp/.

[39] Storyful, *India and Misinformation*, August 2018, https://storyful.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Storyful-White-Paper-India-August-2018.pdf.

[40] Kaur et al., *Information Disorder in Asia and the Pacific*.

[41] Banerjee and Haque, "Is Fake News Real in India?".

[42] Chadha and Guha, "The Bharatiya Janata Party's Online Campaign and Citizen Involvement in India's 2014 Election".

elections for two months, one-third of BJP circulated images on WhatsApp, one-quarter of images circulated by the opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC), and one-tenth of the images circulated by the Samajwadi and Bahujan Samaj Party (SB-BSP) were divisive and conspiratorial.[43]

Existing Approaches to Combating False Information

Curbing the spread of false information in India has been a daunting and challenging process. One of the reasons for this is that the false information ecosystem involves a number of actors who each operate in a strategic manner to further their own goals. In comparison, the entities working to limit the spread of misinformation and disinformation are often under-resourced and lacking in strategy. Below is a breakdown of the key actors in this ecosystem, the approaches they have adopted to combat false information, and recommendations on how these efforts can be improved.

1. The Government of India and Indian Political Parties

As previously outlined, the government and political parties in India both routinely play a role in creating and disseminating false information. This is often done in order to galvanise supporters along partisan lines. However, these entities have also begun exploring potential solutions to this false information crisis

At a local level, district officials in the city of Kannur in the state of Kerala have introduced disinformation workshops in schools. These 40-minute long classes have been launched in approximately 150 of its 600 government schools, and they focus on educating students on how to identify and combat misinformation. This programme is the first of its kind in India, and was created after Kannur suffered from a string of viral misinformation campaigns related to vaccinations and an alleged spread of the Nipah virus through poultry.[44] These efforts are notable, but currently are only taking place at a small scale in certain parts of the country. If the government wants to have a stronger impact, such education programmes should be launched nation-wide.

At a national level, the Indian government has considered passing legislation in order to criminalise and curb the spread of false information. As internet platforms have struggled to keep the spread of false information in check, the government has warned that they may face legal action.[45] In the United States, where many of these platforms are headquartered, the government is restricted by the First Amendment from dictating how platforms moderate and manage content online. However, the Indian government is able to impose such legal rules. However, there is a danger that such rules will incentivise censorship and threaten freedom of expression online. In December 2018, the government proposed amendments to rules under Section 79 of the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000. These

[43] Vidya Narayanan et al., *News and Information over Facebook and WhatsApp during the Indian Election Campaign*, May 13, 2019, https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/India-memo.pdf.
[44] Soutik Biswas, "On the Frontline of India's WhatsApp Fake News War," *BBC*, August 20, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45140158.
[45] Bengali, "How WhatsApp is Battling Misinformation in India, Where 'Fake News is Part of Our Culture".

amendments would require internet platforms to proactively identify and remove "unlawful information or content". The definition of "unlawful information or content" is broad, and it was written to include false information.[46] However, this definition could also include content that the government finds to be unfavorable, such as content posted by dissenters or activists. As a result, many critics have raised concerns that these amendments could be used to infringe on freedom of expression.

The proposed rules also seek to require platforms to be able to "trace" the origin of content shared on their platforms. For some platforms that enable the public distribution of content, such as Facebook and Twitter, this may be easy. However, for platforms that offer end-to-end encrypted messaging services, such as WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram, this is not currently possible.[47] In order to comply with these requirements, these services would have to undermine their encryption services, which is one of the key features and selling points of their products. Encryption enables users to communicate in a private and secure manner, and is integral to the safety of individuals such as journalists, political activists and human rights defenders. If these platforms were to undermine their encryption, they would therefore be putting thousands at risk.[48] The alternative to this is for these platforms to refuse to comply with the requirements. However, this would likely result in them having to leave the Indian market altogether.[49]

Further, the proposed rules would enable the government to obtain user data from internet platforms, often without a court order. Over the past few years the Indian government has demonstrated a trend of requesting increased user data from internet platforms,[50] and as a result these proposed amendments have sparked concerns that the government is trying to incorporate social media platforms into its mass surveillance efforts.[51]

The government has also instituted numerous internet shutdowns in order to prevent and quell violence that has erupted as a result of false information online. In 2018, the Indian government instituted 134 shutdowns. However, there is no proof that internet shutdowns actually help curb violence or the spread of false information. Rather, these shutdowns have cost the economy a significant amount of money[52], and have prevented the free flow of information in certain regions in the country. This has curtailed the freedom of expression of numerous individuals and has prevented platforms and authorities from combating false information in real time.[53]

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[46] Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch.

[47] Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch.

[48] Letter, "International Coalition of Organizations and Experts Call on the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to Withdraw the Draft Amendments Proposed to the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines) Rules," March 15, 2019, https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2019/03/Coalition-Letter-for-sign-on-Indias-Intermediary-Guidelines-March-15-2019.pdf.

[49] Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch.

[50] "India 2nd in Government Requests for Users' Data on Facebook," *The Economic Times*, May 24, 2019, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/india-2nd-in-government-requests-for-users-data-on-facebook/articleshow/69476023.cms.

[51] Patil, "India Has a Public Has a Public Health Crisis. It's Called Fake News".

[52] Sushma U. N, "India's Internet Shutdowns Are Costing the Economy Billions of Dollars," *Quartz India*, July 31, 2018, https://qz.com/india/1341995/indias-internet-shutdowns-cost-the-economy-billions-of-dollars/.

[53] Bajoria, "India Internet Clampdown Will Not Stop Misinformation," Human Rights Watch.

2. Fact-Checking Organisations

As misinformation and disinformation campaigns have grown in scale and scope in India, a number of fact-checking organisations have been established to help review and verify content. These include Alt news, an organisation that uses online video verification and social media tracking tools to debunk false content, and Boom, a Mumbai-based fact-checking agency. News outlets such as the BBC have also developed their own in-house fact-checking departments. The BBC's department operates a WhatsApp tip line through which users can send potentially false content for review and verification. [54]

However, these fact-checking services face an array of challenges. Firstly, most fact-checking services are small, under-funded operations that employ only a few people. Alt News, for example, employs only 11 people and is able to debunk approximately four posts a day.[55] As a result, the impact they are able to have on the overall false information environment is limited. In order for these organisations to be effective, they must be able to review and verify content with speed and at scale. Often times, it takes them days to respond to a user who has submitted a tip about potentially misleading content. This slow response rate can deter users from engaging with these organisations in the future. It is also challenging to evaluate and quantify the success of such fact-checking organisations. This often makes it difficult for these organisations to acquire more financial support. Additionally, in order for these organisations to be effective, users need to be aware that they exist. Currently, most of these companies advertise their services on tech blogs and through word of mouth. Going forward, they need to devote more resources towards promoting and raising awareness about their services.[56] Finally, most fact-checking is conducted only in major languages, such as English, Hindi, Tamil, Punjabi, and Urdu.[57] However, there are over 120 languages spoken in the country, and fact-checking efforts need to include more local languages if they are going to succeed in monitoring and curbing the spread of false information nationwide.[58]

3. Technology Companies

As misinformation and disinformation have continued to spread throughout the country, internet platforms have come under increased pressure to respond and take action.

As the platform responsible for the dissemination of the largest quantity of false information in India, WhatsApp has come under particular scrutiny. Following numerous instances of mob violence which resulted from misinformation spread on WhatsApp, the platform introduced a number of new features which aimed to curb the spread of false information.

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[54] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[55] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[56] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[57] Anumeha Chaturvedi, "Facebook Introduces Fact Checking in More Local Indian Languages, Provides Additional Funding to Partners," *The Economic Times*, April 27, 2019, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/facebook-introduces-fact-checking-in-more-local-indian-languages-provides-additional-funding-to-partners/articleshow/69067097.cms?from=mdr.
[58] Denise Chan, "The Daunting Fight Against Religious Misinformation in India's Election," Groundtruth Reports, last modified April 8, 2019, https://thegroundtruthproject.org/daunting-fight-religious-misinformation-indias-election/.

In July 2018, WhatsApp limited to 256 the number of members a WhatsApp group chat can have.[59] It also introduced a limit on the number of times a user can forward a message. In India, this limit is five times.[60] The platform also removed the "quick forward" button next to messages for users in India.[61] According to WhatsApp, these changes have decreased the forwarding of messages by 25 percent.[62]

In order to flag the spread of potentially misleading content to users, WhatsApp introduced in-app labels on forwarded messages.[63] When a user receives a message that has been forwarded, it is labeled as a forwarded message in the chat screen. Additionally, when a user tries to share a forwarded message, they see a label that reads "we encourage you to think before sharing messages that were forwarded". Further, the platform has also introduced a new set of privacy settings. Previously, WhatsApp users could be added to groups by anyone. This enabled political parties and other groups to easily create group chats and disseminate information to them. However, as per the new privacy rules, users have the ability to opt out of being automatically added into such group chats by both their contacts and users in general.[64] However, whether users know how to take advantage of these settings and understand what impact they have on their overall experience on the platform is still to be determined.

Because WhatsApp cannot review the content of individual messages, it relies on users to flag potentially suspicious or misleading content for review. However, in order for users to do this effectively, users need adequate social media hygiene and digital literacy practices. In order to help develop these skills, WhatsApp has begun hosting digital literacy workshops across the country. However, these workshops have reached only around 1,000 users, and as a result they have had a minimal impact on the overall false information land-scape.[65] WhatsApp has also launched a nationwide advertising campaign in ten languages. These included three 1-minute long video advertisements which aim to educate users about the false information environment, [66] full-page advertisements in numerous Indian newspapers highlighting how to "fight false information",[67] and radio advertisements.[68] These advertisements have reached hundreds of millions of Indians.[69]

In addition, WhatsApp has deployed artificial intelligence tools in order to help identify false information and fabricated news. According to the company, these efforts have resulted in the suspension of over 6 million user accounts[70], particularly accounts that engage in "bulk

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[59] Poonam and Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election".
[60] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".
[61] Storyful, *India and Misinformation*.
[62] Bengali, "How WhatsApp is Battling Misinformation in India, Where 'Fake News is Part of Our Culture'".
[63] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".
[64] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".
[65] Bengali, "How WhatsApp is Battling Misinformation in India, Where 'Fake News is Part of Our Culture'".
[66] Dhruv Shekhar, "The Anatomy of Fake News," *Common Cause* 37, no. 4 (October 2018): https://www.com-moncause.in/uploadimage/publication/1770876145The%20Anat-omy%20of%20Fake%20News%20by%20Dhruv%20Shekhar%20[CCJ%20Oct-Dec,%202018].pdf.
[67] Storyful, *India and Misinformation*.
[68] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".
[69] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".
[70]Kat Devlin and Courtney Johnson, "Indian Elections Nearing Amid Frustration With Politics, Concerns About Misinformation," Pew Research Center, last modified March 25, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/25/indian-elections-nearing-amid-frustration-with-politics-concerns-about-misinformation/.

or automated messaging".[71] Aside from occasionally reported statistics in blog posts or press materials, however, there is little transparency around the scope and impact of these takedown efforts. In addition, research has shown that automated tools are unreliable when it comes to identifying and removing content, especially content such as false information, which is not easily and clearly defined. This raises significant freedom of expression concerns as the use of these imperfect automated tools has resulted in numerous erroneous takedowns of user content, as well as many instances of wrongful account termination or suspension. Companies that deploy automated tools for these content moderation purposes must institute a robust and easily accessible appeals process for their users. This will enable their users to seek remedy for any wrongful content removals and account suspensions.[72]

Finally, in April 2019, WhatsApp launched a new project called Checkpoint[73] which established a tip line in collaboration with New Delhi-based startup Proto, Meedan and Dig Deeper Media.[74] Users can send in forwarded messages, rumors and suspicious messages to this tip line and in response they will receive a response explaining whether the information in the tip is true, false, misleading, disputed, or unverifiable, along with any other relevant information. User tips can include text, pictures, links and videos in English, Hindi, Telugu, Bengali and Malayalam.[75] However, Proto's primary goal with this project is to study the false information ecosystem in India. As a result, providing timely responses is not a priority.[76] In addition, WhatsApp has also launched a tip line with BOOM. However, the line only receives 20-30 tips a day.[77]

Whatsapp's parent company, Facebook, has also taken steps to curb the spread of false information on its platform. Like WhatsApp, Facebook has formed numerous partnerships with fact-checking organisations and new agencies including BOOM and news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) in order to review and verify content.[78]

The platform has also ramped up its efforts to remove inauthentic content and false information from the platform. Facebook reports that content and accounts that violate Facebook's Community Standards are removed from the platform. The company issues a Community Standards Enforcement report, which highlights the scope and scale of its content moderation efforts. It includes data on the number of fake accounts removed and the amount of hate speech and spam removed. However, it does not provide a clear breakdown of how much of this content was misinformation or disinformation. In addition,

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[71] Poonam and Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election".

[72] Spandana Singh, *Everything in Moderation: An Analysis of How Internet Platforms Are Using Artificial Intelligence to Moderate User-Generated Content*, July 22, 2019, https://www.newamerica.org/oti/reports/everything-moderation-analysis-how-internet-platforms-are-using-artificial-intelligence-moderate-user-generated-content/.

[73] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".

[74] Abhimanyu Ghoshal, "WhatsApp Launches a Tip Line in India to Battle Fake News Ahead of National Elections," *The Next Web*, April 2, 2019, https://thenextweb.com/apps/2019/04/02/whatsapp-launches-a-tip-line-in-india-to-battle-fake-news-ahead-of-national-elections/.

[75] Ghoshal, "WhatsApp Launches A Tip Line in India to Battle Fake News Ahead of National Elections".

[76] Ponniah, "WhatsApp: The 'Black Hole' of Fake News in India's Election".

[77] Bengali, "How WhatsApp is Battling Misinformation in India, Where 'Fake News is Part of Our Culture'".

[78] Shekhar, "The Anatomy of Fake News".

Facebook does not issue a transparency report outlining the scope of any removals by WhatsApp.[79]

In addition, in 2018 Mark Zuckerberg announced that the platform was going to be focusing on "meaningful and "authentic" interactions between users, rather than advertisement and popularity-driven content.[80] As part of this effort, Facebook disclosed it was downranking content that is not "authentic and meaningful" on the platform's news feed, including false information. According to the company, this has resulted in an 80 percent reduction of the circulation of debunked and false posts across the platform.[81] Finally, the platform has also introduced new features, such as issuing warnings to users who tried to share content that had been debunked by its fact-checking partners.[82]

Companies such as Twitter have also ramped up their efforts to block fake accounts and stem the spread of false information on the platform. In addition, Google has partnered with fact-checking organisations to train over 8,000 Indian journalists in the crusade against false information.[83] These platforms have also worked with the ECI in the lead up to the 2019 elections to monitor political ads and block defamatory, objectionable and misleading content.[84]

4. Users

Users play a central role in the false information ecosystem as they are responsible for the mass dissemination of content that they receive. Research has suggested that because there is declining trust in the media and other institutions, citizens have turned to alternative sources of information such as social media platforms, and their peers. Many users have a strong sense of trust in those in their social circles, and they are therefore often unwilling to believe that information shared by these individuals is wrong.[85] In addition, as previously mentioned, it can be particularly difficult for first time internet users to decipher fact from fiction in online information.

Some experts such as Samir Patil, the publisher of Scroll.in, an Indian news portal, have suggested that researchers and policymakers can turn to existing models for solving such widespread issues. One example of this is the approach to tackling infectious diseases. After a series of massive outbreaks and epidemics, nations came together to establish a robust common public health infrastructure. This infrastructure relied on public and private actors in order to track outbreaks, fund and conduct research, and develop and distribute medicines and health services. According to Patil, a similar response is needed in order to

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[79] Facebook, *Community Standards Enforcement Report*, https://transparency.facebook.com/community-stand-ards-enforcement#fake-accounts.

[80] Reuters, "Mark Zuckerberg Promises to Make Your Facebook Feed 'More Meaningful,'" *Fortune*, January 11, 2018, https://fortune.com/2018/01/11/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-meaningful/.

[81] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".

[82] Phartiyal and Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls".

[83] "Google to Train 8,000 Indian Journalists on Fact Checking," *The Hindu*, June 19, 2018, https://www.the-hindu.com/sci-tech/technology/google-to-train-8000-indian-journalists-on-fact-checking/arti-cle24200442.ece.

[84] Shekhar, "The Anatomy of Fake News".

[85] Biswas, "On the Frontline of India's WhatsApp Fake News War".

tackle false information.[86] These models have demonstrated the importance of citizen education, as they generated the awareness necessary for interventions to succeed.[87]

Investing in citizen engagement and education is going to be increasingly important, as content distribution and information access will continue to become cheaper. As a result, manipulating these tools will become easier,[88] and it is likely that misinformation and disinformation tactics will become even more complex. Furthermore, as the impact of misinformation and disinformation campaigns becomes more apparent, a greater number of bad actors will be incentivised to carry them out, particularly in a sociopolitical context. Citizen education programmes therefore need to focus on promoting awareness of and developing strong digital literacy and media literacy skills to help thwart misinformation and disinformation campaigns. Users should learn how to evaluate content they engage with and identify potentially misleading information. They should also learn where to seek out more reliable information from.[89]

Policy Recommendations

As outlined in this report, the false information ecosystem is composed of and influenced by a complex and multifaceted set of factors and actors. The introduction and rapid adoption of internet platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have enabled misinformation and disinformation to be spread rapidly at scale. However, the issue of false information existed long before these platforms were introduced, and as a result, remedies adopted by these platforms make up only one part of the solution. Going forward, technology companies, users, policymakers, news outlets, fact-checking organisations and civil society should consider the following recommendations:

1. Public and private entities should allocate more funding and support to independent fact-checking organisations. This will ensure these organisations can operate at scale and enable them to provide services in additional languages. As a result, these organisations will be able to adopt a more localised approach to curbing false information and will also be able to operate with greater impact.

2. Technology companies, government entities and organisations providing fact-checking services and media and digital literacy workshops need to invest more in publicising the existence of fact-checking services and promoting participation in digital literacy workshops. In order to achieve greater scale and impact, these entities should also consider working in concert with one another to host such workshops across the country.

3. Any legislative approach to curbing the spread of false information should be centered on respecting and protecting fundamental human rights, especially freedom of expression and privacy. Going forward, the government should refrain from mandating that companies undermine their encrypted messaging services. Governments should also refrain from

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[86] Patil, "India Has a Public Has a Public Health Crisis. It's Called Fake News".
[87] Patil, "India Has a Public Has a Public Health Crisis. It's Called Fake News".
[88] Patil, "India Has a Public Has a Public Health Crisis. It's Called Fake News".
[89] Chan, "The Daunting Fight Against Religious Misinformation in India's Election," Groundtruth Reports.

using legislation to clamp down on freedom of expression. In particular, governments should not impose time-bound take down requirements or any related types of restrictions on internet platforms, as these incentivise overbroad censorship. In addition, the government should introduce stronger data privacy protections, as this will lay the groundwork for efforts to prevent political parties and other entities from developing lists of users that can then be targeted with content. Further, the government should refrain from instituting internet shutdowns as a means to curb the spread of false information, as this infringes on the freedom of expression of the individuals impacted and curbs the free flow of vital information.

4. Technology companies should introduce educational materials and features that address the problems of misinformation and disinformation directly into their applications. This will generate greater user exposure and awareness. Examples of such features include video tutorials, labels or warnings related to unverified or potentially misleading content, and prompts that provide easy access to content verification services. In addition, when internet platforms introduce new user controls around factors such as privacy, they should develop educational materials, including in-app features, to ensure users understand how to use these settings and how these settings impact their experience on the platform.

5. Internet platforms should provide greater transparency and accountability around the scope and scale of their efforts to curb false information. In particular, technology companies such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and Google should disclose clear and granular information around how many accounts they remove in their attempts to curb the spread of false information. In addition, companies that engage in content moderation, in particular companies that deploy automated tools for content moderation, should ensure that users have a robust appeals process in order to remedy any erroneous content removals or account suspensions.

6. Traditional news outlets and institutions should invest more resources into training journalists in this new false information environment. Journalists should especially be able to develop strong fact-checking skills. As previously mentioned, these outlets and individuals have also been complicit in spreading false information in India. This has further decreased public trust in them.

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