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WhatsApp Vigilantes: **An exploration of citizen reception and circulation of WhatsApp misinformation linked to mob violence in India**

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Acknowledgments

This report contains references to explicit violence in both images and text that readers may find distressing.

Photographer: Shiv Ahuja.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

This research study analyses the relationship between the use of WhatsApp to spread misinformation (also known as fake news) and disinformation in India, and the increase in lynchings and associated vigilante violence in India since 2015. Our focus is on the intersection of disinformation, misinformation, fake news, propaganda, mob violence, socio-political contexts of technology use, technological affordances and infrastructures, user experiences and motivations, media literacy, policy and regulation. This study will have particular resonance outside India for countries such as the USA, Israel, Pakistan, Brazil and Indonesia.

Since 2015, there have been more than a hundred instances of lynching. Many of these incidents victimise individuals from discriminated groups (Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Adivasis) based on allegations of cow slaughter, cow trafficking and cattle theft. There have been further instances of extreme mob violence and lynching that have resulted in death, injury and trauma to individuals accused of attempted child-snatching or organ harvesting. Although the victims are targeted for different reasons, these incidents have in common mobs of vigilantes who use peer-to-peer messaging applications such as WhatsApp to spread lies about the victims, and use misinformation to mobilise, defend, and in some cases to document and circulate images of their violence.

In much public discourse (interpersonal, mediated, policy-related and legal), attention has been diverted from the crime of lynching onto the alleged crimes of cow smuggling or possession of beef that are used by mobs to defend their violence. In cases where the rumours do not include a bovine related allegation, WhatsApp and its parent company are viewed as playing a central role not just in *operationalising* but also in causing lynch-mob violence. A subset of these lynchings in India have come to be known as the "WhatsApp lynchings".

The systematic literature that we documented and analysed for this report highlights that the political atmosphere in India has become increasingly authoritarian, anti-democratic and volatile. Politicians regularly accuse Muslim communities on a range of pretexts, and provide political rewards to those who perpetrate violence against them.

In framing our methods we took the view that digital communication practices take place within particular socio-political contexts and in turn shape socio-political contexts. Our study of WhatsApp use, the spread of misinformation and vigilante violence is therefore situated in the relationship between the technological and the social.

The methods of this study include extended qualitative interviews with expert stakeholders and focus groups with multiple sets of users across four large states: Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh during 2019. In addition, we used textual analysis of WhatsApp forwards – text, still and moving images. During focus groups and interviews with working and middle class users, men, women and young people, urban and rural as well as literate and illiterate users with a spectrum of political opinions, and during expert interviews, we examined the daily practices of WhatsApp usage in the contemporary Indian socio-political context.

Our analysis found patterns in the data suggesting that WhatsApp messages work in tandem with ideas, tropes, messages and stereotypes which circulate more widely in the public domain, in family and community conversations and in the mainstream news media. A variant of a particular stereotype, narrative or trope containing misinformation or disinformation, or that is entirely propaganda, will often appear at the same time on social media and in mainstream news media and even in film (*transmediality*). Therefore, even when users call on some incipient media literacy to "go to more than one source when in doubt", they may find verification of the false information in the mainstream media. Conversely, the fact that mainstream media has been responsible for broadcasting the hate-speech and stereotypes in the speeches of politicians without much criticism or questioning means that messages on WhatsApp which disparage particular communities or call for action against them (for example: Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, Kashmiris, Christians) are less likely to be perceived as misinformation. Likewise, the sensationalism of mainstream media formats and genres works very well when edited and used out of context (*intertextuality*) in WhatsApp-based propaganda or misinformation.

WhatsApp use and WhatsApp content is highly gendered. This is the case in terms of access to smartphones, privacy of use, media literacy and spending power (for device and data). This finding needs to be considered in the context of the allied finding that the ready availability of digital technologies has contributed to new forms of physical and virtual violence. Outside the public domain, such physical, psychological and mediated violence is disproportionately directed against women, more so if they belong to Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, Christian or any other minority groups. Forms of WhatsApp- and smart-phone enabled violence against women in India include unsolicited sexts, sex tapes, rape videos, surveillance, violation of privacy, bullying, forced confrontation with pornographic material, blackmail and humiliation. All of these actions were reported to us both in urban and rural areas.

A key finding is that in the case of violence against a specific group (Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, etc.) **there exists widespread, simmering distrust, hatred, contempt and suspicion towards Pakistanis, Muslims, Dalits and critical or dissenting citizens** amongst a section of rural and urban upper and middle caste Hindu men and women. WhatsApp users in these demographics are predisposed both to believe disinformation and to share misinformation about discriminated groups in face-to-face and WhatsApp networks. Regardless of the inaccuracy of sources or of the WhatsApp posts, this type of user appears to derive confidence in (mis)information and/or hate-speech from the correspondence of message content with their own set of prejudiced ideological positions and discriminatory beliefs.

Another key finding is that there is **a strong affective element at play in the use of WhatsApp** for the circulation of content that is apparently informational. Amidst the flow of hundreds of messages, the ones which stand out are those that convey a sense of immediacy, and those that can and do have shock value. During elections, or during incidents of cross-border military action, simmering sentiments become high-intensity situations where the quality of disinformation and propaganda becomes immediately inflammatory. In these circumstances, the chance of long-term discrimination turning into physical violence against particular demographic groups increases.

We found a diverse range of user motivations that spur the sharing of and belief in misinformation based on rumours about child kidnapping and organ harvesting. These include: the naiveté of older users who choose to believe messages forwarded by known and trusted individuals in their communities; the belief that it is a civic duty to use violence or threat against suspicious outsiders and to pass on information about (even unverified) suspicious activities; the need to be seen as a local "expert" or an authentic "first source" for local information.

In both cases of violence motivated by prejudice (against a particular group or community) and **cases motivated by rumour**, many WhatsApp users we spoke to also acknowledged the affective and temporal labour required to contribute to, circulate and consume misinformation. In some cases, the emotional disturbance felt by users on viewing a clip of spectacular violence or overwhelming content (train or road accidents, harm caused by natural disasters) impelled the recipients of these WhatsApp messages to share them with others and/or discuss them within their networks. In other cases, this kind of content contributed to a sense of emotional fatigue and exhaustion whereby WhatsApp users would forward disinformation without checking the message fully or would bulk delete messages from their most prolific groups.

We found that **for most WhatsApp users in India civic trust follows ideological, family and communal ties** far more closely than is reported in other literature on this topic. We were told strongly and repeatedly that the immediate source of a forward – the person who forwarded the message to the group or the individual – is one of the most important factors in a user's decision to forward a piece of information, misinformation, disinformation or fake news. If this person is regarded as a trusted source, then even the most implausible, or fake-looking messages, are accepted as accurate, and passed on. We were further told that even if a user has some qualms about a particular piece of misinformation or disinformation and has reason to suspect that it contains some inaccurate information, respect for the status or personality of the person who sent it to them often prevents them from reporting it.

This report proposes that the notions of a "WhatsApp user", "fake news", "misinformation" and "disinformation" should be disaggregated, defined, and then linked to flexible, country/context-specific socio-political typologies. Based on our fieldwork, this report includes flexible socio-political and demography-based "typologies" of users and of misinformation/ disinformation in India. We argue that while these typologies would have some overlaps with users and messages in other regions there are also specificities that have to be understood in the Indian sociohistorical context.

Our typologies of misinformation/disinformation and of WhatsApp users counter some deeply held beliefs in the extant literature and amongst the public about who is responsible for the circulation of life-threatening, violence-related misinformation and disinformation. In a majority of instances, misinformation and disinformation which contributes to the formation of mobs that engage in lynching and other discriminatory violence appears to be spread largely for reasons of prejudice and ideology rather than out of ignorance or digital illiteracy.

Our analysis of data on which the typology is based highlights that in India, on the one hand, if a WhatsApp user is male, urban or rural, young or middle aged, technologically literate, Hindu, upper or middle caste, **then they are more likely to share particular types of misinformation, disinformation and hate-speech**. Some user narratives in our fieldwork go as far as to suggest that this type of technologically-literate, male, Hindu user is also more likely to create and administer the groups responsible for ideologically charged misinformation, disinformation and hate-speech on WhatsApp in the first place. On the other hand, if a WhatsApp user is lower caste, Dalit, or Muslim and/ or a woman and/or rural, particularly with lower levels of technological literacy, then such a user **is less likely to create and curate and unlikely even to forward ideologically-charged misinformation and disinformation**. Women in both groups with ties to men who hold prejudices against minority communities admit to forwarding messages for ideological reasons and to reporting the receipt of messages that question or criticise ideological misinformation. This finding does not hold good for health-related misinformation, which we did not examine systematically during our study and which deserves an entire study of its own.

In the arena of malicious rumour-based violence about child snatchers and organ harvesting, user motivations for forwarding misinformation and fake news stories are not based on ideology but rather on a generalised mistrust of strangers, and on affinity to the message sender and extreme trust in the group through which the user received the message. Based on fieldwork, participants in the spread of such rumours seem overwhelmingly to be male; albeit a minority, women, too, participate in online, face-to-face and telephonic sharing of concerns around such issues, and are also sometimes culpable in shielding the perpetrators of violence during the planning and execution of lynchings.

We recommend that the deadly consequences of misinformation and disinformation are always approached in a broader socio-political context where all stakeholders involved including the corporations which own platforms and cross-platform apps, local and national governments, wings of the state, civil society organisations and local WhatsApp users share greater responsibility and are held accountable in a systematic way until justice has been served and the misuse is demonstrably curbed.

Based on expert interviews and focus groups with users, a common view, even amongst those who share misinformation, seems to be that 1) if the mechanisms for reporting misinformation and disinformation were more transparent and effective then it would decline. To that, **we add** that the sharing of misinformation and disinformation which legitimises or leads to violence would decline if:

2) the sharing of misinformation and disinformation in-app or on a platform was easier to track and report

3) the app-related penalties for sharing misinformation and disinformation were clearer (one strike and you're suspended; three strikes and you're banned)

4) investment for widening efforts to include critical media literacy with an emphasis on constitutional values and human rights were increased and

5) mirroring efforts on child pornography, there were concerted international, national and cross-stakeholder efforts to recognise, categorise and take action against anti-minority hate-speech and/or Islamophobic and anti-Dalit content.

With regard to technical fixes to the application, we recommend that:

1) Sharing messages on groups be restricted to one group at a time, if not as default, then at the very least during sensitive occasions (such as elections)

2) It should not be possible to add users to groups without their permission as a default, considering the social, political and historical context

3) There should be special protections for vulnerable groups: the reporting and take-down of disinformation and misinformation especially related to misogyny, rape or planned rape, other violence against women, hate crime and abuse of Muslims, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis should be made far easier than it currently is

4) Any reports of disinformation or misinformation relating to child kidnapping/kidney snatching also need to be prioritised and fast-tracked in order to prevent lynching

5) In order to address violence arising out of disinformation pre-emptively, we recommend that WhatsApp consider introducing a "beacon" feature where users can be warned about disinformation that risks leading to violence.

WhatsApp, in collaboration with Indian law enforcement agencies, needs to persuade the Android operating system to **ban all unauthorised versions of WhatsApp**.

We further suggest that all future actions by WhatsApp take into account that current efforts channelled towards **new legislations, functional media literacy, and changes in the product design of WhatsApp** are **important but insufficient** for preventing misinformation related violence of both ideological and non-ideological types.

In order to curb violence related to disinformation and misinformation, corporations as well as civil society institutions (including academics and activists) need to invest serious resources into working with local civil society organisations, journalists, police forces, schools and universities to develop **critical media literacies allied to human rights literacy**. These include but must not be limited to:

1) Understandings of the ways in which the media treat and should treat considerations of caste, gender, class and religion and the effects of particular forms of reporting, misinformation and disinformation on specific groups

2) Understandings of the balance between the need for freedom of speech, curation of information, user privacy and the right to life

3) Understandings of the influence of, and compromises reached between, corporate profit motives and political motives.

Overall, our report concludes that while it is imperative for the major global corporation which runs WhatsApp to take its responsibility for the ongoing deaths in India seriously and to play a central and transparent role in altering the technological and social aspects of the app in order to curb the potentials for such extreme violence, ideologically motivated mobs will in all likelihood circumvent these measures, and much violence will continue until the underlying political and social causes and encouragements of hate-speech, discrimination, vigilantism and destabilisation of democracy in India are addressed far more widely.

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Introduction: Situating WhatsApp use in India

Recent reports[1] examining mob violence and lynching in India find that filesharing sites and peer-to-peer messaging services, and in several cases the cross-platform app WhatsApp, have played a crucial role in the lynchings and other extreme violence resulting from the spread of misinformation in India. They argue that WhatsApp and messaging services must take some responsibility for preventing future crimes of this type. Our report discusses evidence from analysis of the messages forwarded by users and the users' own justifications of and motivations for passing on information that turns out to be false; in this context, while we find that although the role and influence of media and communications technologies has been overestimated and the role and influence of mainstream broadcast and electronic media narratives, government briefings, ministerial speeches, and local social contexts have been under-estimated, WhatsApp and parent company Facebook can still contribute significantly to preventing the involvement of their products in on-going lynchings and the formation of murderous mobs.

As of 2019, close to 900 television channels go on air in India, with more than 400 of these devoted specifically to news[2]. A tiny number of corporations such as Reliance (owned by Mukesh Ambani), Sun (owned by Maran brothers) and Zee (owned by Subhash Chandra) dominate the market. Since they are broadcast from a satellite, television channels have a default nation-wide footprint, although their commercial value stems from their potential in a specific language market such as Hindi, Telugu, Gujarati and so on[3].

The most important television language market is Hindi-speakers, and the maximum number of television channels cater to Hindi speaking audiences who live across North Indian states – the so-called "Hindi heartland". Regardless of the growing number of news channels, the media sector, in pursuing increasing profits, has failed to allocate sufficient resources for on-the-ground reporting. Most news channels therefore confine themselves to a well-worn format, the studio debate, in which a number of "talking heads" argue, sometimes very acrimoniously, against each other and/or the anchor person who fans the flames, and acts as agent provocateur. With ownership increasingly being concentrated into a few powerful corporate hands, there is evidence that many Indian news channels have chosen to support the BJP government and ruling party's ideology and actions overtly through their television channels, their anchor people and the guests they invite on these debates[4].

Despite the widespread proliferation of media and communication technologies, more specifically of smartphones, since 2003-4, wealth inequality continues to rise in India. Further, basic infrastructural items such as paved roads, pipes for running water and an electricity grid with capacity are frequently unavailable or in poor shape for the majority of citizens; while basic services required for a dignified life and for wellbeing such as health provision, education, housing and the availability of employment that pays a living wage are often absent altogether[5]. Additionally, as sociological research confirms,[6] a multitude of prejudices and

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[1] Michael Safi, "'WhatsApp Murders': India Struggles to Combat Crimes Linked to Messaging Service," *The Guardian*, last modified 2018, accessed September 12, 2018, **theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/03/whatsapp-murders-india-struggles-to-combat-crimes-linked-to-messaging-service**; Vindu Goel, Suhasini Raj, and Priyadarshini Ravichandran, "How WhatsApp Leads Mobs to Murder in India," *The New York Times*, last modified 2019, accessed January 18, 2019, **nytimes.com/interactive/2018/07/18/technology/whatsapp-india-killings.html**; Nahlah Ayed and Stephanie Jenzer, "'The Battle Is Still on': Fake News Rages in India's WhatsApp Elections," *CBC News*, last modified 2019, accessed June 12, 2019, **cbc.ca/news/world/india-whatsapp-fake-news-1.5139726**; Timothy McLaughlin, "How WhatsApp Fuels Fake News and Violence in India," *Wired*, last modified 2018, accessed May 6, 2019, **wired.com/story/how-whatsapp-fuels-fake-news-and-violence-in-india/**; Shouvik Das, "Fake WhatsApp Message of Child Kidnaps Causing Mob Violence in Madhya Pradesh," *News 18*, last modified 2019, accessed August 1, 2019, **news18.com/news/tech/fake-whatsapp-message-of-child-kidnaps-causing-mob-violence-in-madhya-pradesh-2252015.html**

[2] Latest list of television channels is available at the website of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, government of India: **mib.gov.in**

[3] See the Media Monitor India report by Reporters Without Borders: **rsf.org/en/news/media-ownership-monitor-who-owns-media-india**

[4] Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy, "Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (May 2015): 311–322, accessed January 22, 2017; Suhas Palshikar, "Modi, Media and the Middle Class," *Seminar*, no. 656 (April 2014); Rahul Verma and Shreyas Sardesai, "Does Media Exposure Affect Voting Behaviour and Political Preferences in India?," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 39 (2015): 82–88.

[5] Diego Alejo Vasquez Pimentel, Inigo Macias Aymar, and Max Lawson, *Reward Work Not Wealth* (Oxford, 2019).

[6] Ibid.; Michael Forster, Wen-Hao Chen, and Ana Llenanozal, *Divided We Stand: Why Inequality Keeps Rising* (Brussels, 2011), **oecd.org/els/soc/49170768.pdf**; Harsh Mander, "25 Years of Economic Reforms: A Blotted Balance Sheet," *Vikalpa: The Journal for Decision Makers* 43, no. 1 (March 20, 2018): 1–13; Harsh Mander, *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2015).

violent, discriminatory practices have continued to impede wellbeing for many. There is also evidence that the problematic deployment by the government of India of a technologised identification system (Aadhaar/UIDAI) for managing individuals and regulating their interactions with the state have further disenfranchised some of India's most vulnerable citizens[7].

Even while many citizens' day-to-day lives are shaped by these realities, mobile phones and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp are being used on an unprecedented scale[8]. This includes their use by groups who engage in systematic discrimination[9] and who aim to inflict violence upon communities that have been historically oppressed[10]. In this context, as a recent BBC report on fake news in India confirms, the introduction and usage of free, cross-platform messenger services such as

WhatsApp, platforms such as Facebook and ShareChat, and short-form video-sharing apps such as TikTok can be said to have wrought changes in the practices of sharing disinformation[11], mob violence and, in some cases, to have facilitated the perpetrators.

Associated with the speed and reach of the spread of such rumours, mobs of individuals with little previous trust in each other and no history of extreme violence, can be brought together either autonomously or alongside pre-existing politically aligned vigilante cadres, to harass, beat, torture, maim or kill individuals who are falsely accused of crimes via the aforementioned rumours. This report analyses data collected regarding the social and psychological formation of these "WhatsApp vigilante" groupings.

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[7] Shiv Sahay Singh, "Death by Digital Exclusion? : On Faulty Public Distribution System in Jharkhand," *The Hindu*, July 13, 2019, accessed August 12, 2019, **thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/death-by-digital-exclusion/article28414768.ece**

[8] Nilesh Christopher, "TikTok Is Fuelling India's Deadly Hate Speech Epidemic," *Wired*, last modified 2019, accessed August 12, 2019, **wired.co.uk/article/tiktok-india-hate-speech-caste**; Kunal Purohit, "The Islamophobic Roots of Population Control Efforts in India," *Al-Jazeera*, last modified 2019, accessed August 12, 2019, **aljazeera.com/indepth/features/islamophobic-roots-population-control-efforts-india-190808085219969.html**

[9] Omar Khalidi, "Hinduising India: Secularism in Practice," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1545–1562; Edward Anderson and Christophe Jaffrelot, "Contemporary South Asia Hindu Nationalism and the 'Saffronisation of the Public Sphere': An Interview with Christophe Jaffrelot," *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (2018): 468–482; Shakuntala Banaji, "Vigilante Publics: Orientalism, Modernity and Hindutva Fascism in India," *Javnost - The Public* 25, no. 4 (October 2, 2018): 333–350.

[10] Anand Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid* (London: Zed Books, 2010); Y. Chinna Rao, "Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh: A Historical Outline of a Hundred Years," *Indian Historical Review* 42, no. 1 (June 16, 2015): 113–139.

[11] Santanu Chakrabarti, Lucy Stengel, and Sapna Solanki, *Duty, Identity, Credibility: Fake News and the Ordinary Citizen in India* (London, 2018), accessed July 10, 2019, **downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/duty-identity-credibility.pdf**

Mob Violence

Organised pogroms, large scale intergroup violence and mob violence against oppressed and discriminated groups has existed in India and across South Asia since before independence. Since 1947, India has witnessed several distinct types of mob violence. The kind of mob violence which has typically been termed "religious rioting" is perceived as taking place primarily between Hindu and Muslim communities, although in the last four decades it has consisted mostly of Hindu mobs inflicting damage upon Muslim bodies and property, and in the notable case of 1984, on Sikhs, compared to the other way around; and in some places upon Christians (especially on Christians in *Adivasi* regions in Central India and North Eastern states). These have been largely concentrated in urban areas although some violence has also spilled into peri-urban and rural areas.

Some mob violence is closely related to caste hierarchies, wherein dominant castes have inflicted extreme violence and atrocities upon Dalits and other oppressed groups outside the caste hierarchy. Other mob violence is against a specific target (people of a specific region such as Kashmiris, or ethnicity linked to region – those from north eastern states, Rohingya refugees).

Many of these "incidents" have been demonstrated through fact-finding missions[12] to be systematically organised pogroms, which ultimately displace hundreds of thousands from the targeted minority communities, destroy homes and businesses, and leave the families of the dead or missing traumatised and fighting for justice.

It can be seen therefore, that what gets called "mob violence" is not a homogenous phenomenon. Rather than being random and unfathomable, it has a long and politically motivated history as well as a socially disciplinary function in India. Given this diversity of contexts, forms and practices of mob violence, it is necessary to suggest the contours and characteristics of mob violence that this report refers to.

When we write of mob violence in this report, we refer first to a notable increase in mob lynchings both on and off-camera, many of which are perpetrated by groups of Hindus against families, couples or lone Muslims, Adivasis and Dalits, as well as against the occasional caste Hindu who could not "prove" their credentials in time to save their own life or prevent a beating. Most of these beatings and murders are based on a fairly specific set of allegations – that the victims were in possession of beef[13] (cow meat) or that the victims were smuggling cattle, or that the victims were "stealing" and attempting to "convert" higher caste/Hindu girls[14] (this accusation is mostly levelled at Muslim men). More recently, Muslims have been targeted, even beaten to death, for not responding swiftly enough to the demand that they chant "*Jai Shri Ram*" (victory to lord Ram) or "*Pakistan Murdabad*" (down with Pakistan), *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* (victory to mother India)[15]

Since 2012, extreme violence relating to the rhetorical "protection of cows" has been on the rise. Documented deaths include 302 victims through 127 incidents of such violence. 86 per cent of the victims have been men, and the incidents took place largely (76 per cent) when the BJP has been in power at state government level[16]. The second kind of mob violence is to do with unspecified rumours that do not have the aforementioned political history but refer to "strangers" who are apparently involved in child-kidnapping and/or illegal organ harvesting. In the latter type of mob violence, there has not been a discernible pattern with regard to the caste or religion of the perpetrators and victims. The rumours and subsequent allegations of child abduction have resulted in over 40 deaths with a far greater number injured and traumatised[17].

[12] Manjula Pradeep and Gautam Thaker, *Una Fact Finding Report* (Ahmedabad, 2016), **sabrangindia.in/ann/pucl-fact-finding-report-asks-judicial-enquiry-una-incident**; Human Rights Watch, *India Report 2018*, 2019, **hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/india**; Delhi Solidarity Group, *Recent Militant Violence against Adivasis in Assam* (Delhi, 2015), **scribd.com/document/254592636/Recent-Violence-Against-Adivasis-in-Assam-Report-of-a-Fact-Finding-Team-January-2015**; Achiume, Tendayi, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*, UN General Assembly (2018), **undocs.org/en/A/73/305**

[13] Wendy Doniger, "Hinduism and Its Complicated History with Cows (and People Who Eat Them)," *The Conversation*, last modified 2017, accessed August 3, 2019, **theconversation.com/hinduism-and-its-complicated-history-with-cows-and-people-who-eat-them-80586**

[14] Ish Mishra et al., "Fact Finding Report: Independent Inquiry into Muzaffarnagar 'Riots,'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 2 (January 11, 2014), accessed August 7, 2019, **epw.in/journal/2014/2/reports-states-web-exclusives/fact-finding-report-independent-inquiry-muzaffarnagar**

[15] Geeta Pandey, "Jai Shri Ram: The Hindu Chant that became a murder cry", accessed August 1, 2019, **bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-48882053**

[16] Lynch Factchecker previously at **lynch.factchecker.in**; recently taken down without any reason given. For more details, see: **newslaundry.com/2019/09/12/factchecker-shuts-down-hate-crime-watch-samar-halarnkars-stint-with-india-spend-ends**

[17] Pranav Dixit and Ryan Mac, "How WhatsApp Destroyed A Village," *Buzzfeed News*, last modified 2018, accessed July 7, 2019, **buzzfeednews.com/article/pranavdixit/whatsapp-destroyed-village-lynchings-rainpada-india**

A further type of mob violence since 2014 pertains to the gathering of mobs both on university campuses and more generally in cities and towns to intimidate, beat up and physically punish fellow citizens who make their dissenting or critical views known with regard to extreme nationalism, the policies of the Hindu Right and/or caste discrimination. In the last five years, in spite of the Supreme Court striking down Section 66A of the IT Act 2000, there are multiple examples of both harassment by state functionaries[18] as well as organised and politically-motivated mobs gathering to intimidate citizens who post critical political questions in their Facebook statuses, who tweet their scepticism of the government narrative on issues such as the Pulwama attack and its aftermath, or who show solidarity for ordinary Kashmiris[19]. While frequently not fatal, this mob violence is ubiquitous and plays a role in deterring dissent or criticism of any kind.

Importantly, in almost every documented case, WhatsApp and/or a similar peer-to-peer messaging service has played at least three roles – 1) the circulation of information about the victims, 2) the fast-paced mobilisation of a group who come to constitute the lynch mob, and 3) the post-violence circulation either by the perpetrators or by bystanders of still and moving images of the violence, which often then lead to further widespread fear, communal tension and violence.
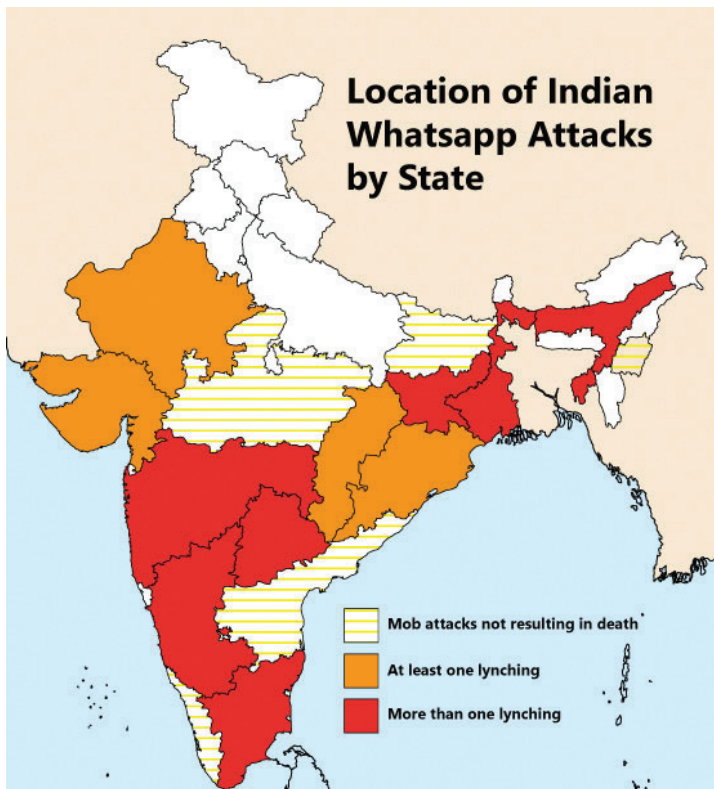
Figure 1: WhatsApp related mob lynching incidents (Image from Wikimedia Commons, July 2018).

[18] Gopal Sathe, "The Supreme Court Struck Down Section 66A of the IT Act in 2015, Why Are Cops Still Using It to Make Arrests?," *Huffington Post*, last modified 2018, accessed August 3, 2019, **huffingtonpost.in/2018/10/15/the-supreme-court-struck-down-section-66a-of-the-it-act-in-2015-why-are-cops-still-using-it-to-make-arrests_a_23561703/**

[19] Mridula Chari et al., "After Pulwama, a Facebook Group Targeted 'anti-National' Indians," *Quartz India*, last modified 2019, accessed August 3, 2019, **qz.com/india/1553592/after-pulwama-a-facebook-group-targeted-anti-national-indians/**

Mis and Dis information

Media and communications are both produced within and subsequently act upon social relations. We take the view that the problems of misinformation and disinformation should be analysed from a perspective that sees social norms and contexts and technological affordances and uses as mutually constitutive and interlinked. Deliberate factual distortions, misinformation and disinformation – all of which get called "fake news" as an umbrella term – are not phenomena that can be fixed through simple media regulatory mechanisms or technological innovations alone, without concomitant interventions in the spheres of law, social policy, politics and social relations. It is only by addressing entrenched problems of ignorance, religious, regional and caste bias, prejudice, hate speech, casteism, racism, misogyny and ethnoreligious political propaganda amongst those with high skills and access to technology that solutions to mob violence such as the so-called "WhatsApp lynchings" can be conceived. By hate speech, we refer to Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), namely "any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law[20]"

At the outset, it helps to clarify terminology. It is disingenuous and unproductive to conflate or use the terms fake news, misinformation and disinformation interchangeably as if they do not have political histories and implications. For instance, while misinformation can be information that is simply inaccurate, disinformation is usually linked to powerful, covert political actors operating either autonomously, or as part of the state and through proxies, to produce and share systematically distorted information in order to gain results that will favour their political goals. The term "fake news", which since 2016 has become a generic coverall term for the manipulation of information and circulation of deliberately misleading

or false information in a wide range of contexts from health and wellbeing to politics, is often used without analysing the historical connections with longstanding political agendas, propaganda and hate-speech, and to systematic discrimination. Further, it is a term which has come to be used by certain politicians to undermine the credibility of any information that is not favourable to their own political party's point of view or their governments' actions[21].

All forms of social relations (including those involved with communication) are necessarily caught up in the flows and pressures of power. Misinformation refers to a broad set of communicative practices that seek to deceive, and includes unintentional deception. Disinformation is a subset that refers to deliberation and intentionality in communication[22].

In this light, we view disinformation as a set of communicative practices that intentionally and deliberately seek to a) discredit particular groups who seek justice, equity and political power through democratic means and come to threaten the interests of powerful political and/or economic actors, and/or b) to normalise and legitimise discrimination and/or c) to fuel brief or extended incidents of spectacular demonstrable violence against certain social groups and/or individuals which in turn cements the identity of ruling groups and warns the victim communities not to seek justice and redress[23]. So, to what extent do all these technological, corporate, governmental, civic and social factors intersect in the spread of misinformation and disinformation?

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[20] India has multiple laws that relate to the issue of hate speech. For a more detailed analysis of hate speech as it relates to constitutional law, Indian Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure and other laws, see Chinmayi Arun, Arpita Biswas, and Parul Sharma, *Hate Speech Laws in India* (Delhi, 2018), **drive.google.com/file/d/1pDoIwlusnM3ys-1GAYbnTPmepU22b2Zr/view**

[21] Indo-Asian News Service, "Facebook Vice President Joel Kaplan To Appear Before Parliamentary Panel On March 6," *NDTV*, last modified 2019, accessed May 6, 2019, **ndtv.com/india-news/facebook-vice-president-joel-kaplan-to-appear-before-parliamentary-panel-on-march-6-2002092**

[22] BC Stahl, "On the Difference or Equality of Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation: A Critical Research Perspective.," *Informing Science* 9 (2006): 83–96; Natascha A. Karlova and Jin Ha Lee, "Notes from the Underground City of Disinformation: A Conceptual Investigation," *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 48, no. 1 (January 11, 2011): 1–9; James H. Fetzer, "Disinformation: The Use of False Information," *Minds and Machines* 14, no. 2 (May 2004): 231–240; Don Fallis, "What Is Disinformation?," *Library Trends* 63, no. 3 (2015): 401–426.

[23] Teltumbde, *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid*; Banaji, "Vigilante Publics: Orientalism, Modernity and Hindutva Fascism in India."

Reliance Jio and the Smartphone Market

Mobile phone usage has been on the rise in India since 2003, and smartphones have taken a significant share of the market since 2013[24]. Due to the structure of the telecom market, spectrum licensing (especially 3G and 4G spectrum) has been auctioned at extremely high costs and the public sector BSNL has not been allotted any 4G spectrum. As a result, a few large private sector service providers have been providing spectrum conducive to data – 3G and 4G spectrum. Given the high levels of investment, these companies – Idea, Airtel, Vodafone and a few other companies have hitherto dominated the market but also have concentrated their data operations in urban areas. The expectation is that the urban consumer will spend more on data and therefore telecom companies will have a faster rate of return (on spectrum investments) from urban areas. Rural areas are still largely serviced by 2G infrastructure.

In 2016, Reliance-owned Jio mobiles entered the market. The entry of Jio phones into the market was eased by multiple competition-busting government-sponsored promotions, what might be considered unfair trading practice by other competitor companies and by the state-owned internet infrastructure. For almost one year beginning in late 2016, Jio was allowed to hand out free voice calls and unlimited data to all subscribers. Such predatory pricing, carried out by Jio with full cognisance of and complicity by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), has led to two major outcomes – it forced a restructuring of the telecom market including the loss of hundreds of jobs, and secondly a driving down of data tariffs. The downward revision of tariffs has benefited some customers in the short run but in the long run has dangerous implications for the telecom market in India. The industry is heading towards oligopoly and companies are locked into debt that they are struggling to repay. It has happened simply because a large company with resources like Reliance has been able to bear losses for a year, influencing the whole market[25]. It is quite similar to strategies deployed by companies like Uber and Amazon that drive down tariffs in order to influence and dominate the market.

As a result of Jio's entry, data has become cheaper and infrastructure for wireless telecommunication has expanded into rural areas at an unprecedented pace. In parallel, the cost of smartphones has also come down 16 per cent in a span of ten years[26]. One of the reasons for this lowering of cost is that China has intensified the range, diversity and density of smartphone manufacturing and exports to India at low prices, and a few Indian manufacturers such as Micromax, have also been able to bring out relatively low-cost smartphones. Given the proliferation of smartphones and of relatively more affordable data packages, smartphone users in India represent a high-volume market for apps. Communicative platforms (and associated apps) such as YouTube, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, ShareChat, ShareIt, Zapya and many others all consider India to be one of their biggest, most important and fastest growing markets. More than 600 million Indians are under the age of 25[27]. If this population can be persuaded to adopt these applications from an early age, the companies who own platforms and applications (a majority of which are based in the U.S. or China) hope that the Indian market will yield high revenues consistently in future decades.

WhatsApp and its emergence need to be situated in this broad context. As a basic cross-platform chat application with minimum frills and complications, it has been adopted quickly and enthusiastically by smartphone users in India. The focus is on sending instantaneous messages to any contact on the smartphone who has installed the app. For a country with relatively low levels of textual literacy, WhatsApp's ability to enable the exchange of audio-visual content has been liberating. So far, it has been expensive to transmit and receive audio-content because of the data usage charges but after Jio, all service providers have been forced to make data usage charges much cheaper.

[24] *Enabling 5G in India* (Delhi, 2019), Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, accessed July 26, 2019, **main.trai.gov.in/sites/default/files/White_ Paper_22022019.pdf**

[25] Daniel Block, "How Reliance Jio Is Monopolising the Telecom Sector," *The Caravan* (Delhi, February 2019), accessed July 21, 2019, **caravanmagazine.in/reportage/government-helping-reliance-jio-monopolise-telecom**

[26] IANS, "Average Selling Price of Smartphones in India down 16% in 10 Years: ICEA-KPMG Report," *The News Minute*, last modified 2019, accessed July 21, 2019, **thenewsminute.com/article/average-selling-price-smartphones-india-down-16-10-years-icea-kpmg-report-99025**

[27] Mihir Sharma, "India's Burgeoning Youth Are the World's Future," *Live Mint*, last modified 2017, accessed July 21, 2019, **livemint.com/ Opinion/2WSy5ZGR9ZO3KLDMGiJq2J/Indias-burgeoning-youth-are-the-worlds-future.html**

Methods and Research Design

We chose to conduct multi-sited, in-depth qualitative research in four states – Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Situated in geographically diverse parts of the country – Centre, North, South and West, all four states have witnessed religious, caste-based, political and "stranger-danger" mob violence since 2014. The field sites were selected partly due to our existing connections and contacts as well as our knowledge of regional languages spoken in these states. In each state, we contacted trusted gatekeepers – individuals or organisations with a track-record of doing grassroots democratic work with local communities and/or contacts in particular local communities with longstanding WhatsApp accounts. They assisted us in contacting a wide range of WhatsApp and smartphone users, and oriented us towards citizens in contexts and places where large numbers of people did not and/or could not use smartphones.

Our research focuses on users aged 18 to approximately 45, although a few users above this age are also included. In terms of caste, class, religion and gender, we incorporated a diverse sample of interviewees and field sites, paying attention to social and cultural mixtures. Our rationale for selecting these diverse locations was both theoretical and methodological. We remain keenly aware that "mob violence" based on mediated misinformation is sometimes disparagingly associated with users in rural areas, with those who are illiterate and poor[28]. What we characterise as a sense of moral panic and elite contempt come together to generate anxiety about how those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder need technology to raise themselves out of poverty, but are also unfit – because of a lack of skills and knowledge – to use modern technologies in productive ways. We note that rumours circulate on social media and that mob violence occurs in both rural and urban areas; this violence is perpetrated by both dominant and oppressed caste members (although dominant castes are usually perpetrators, and victims are mostly from oppressed castes) and by both highly literate and illiterate citizens. Most incidents of mob violence are by men and against men. However, a significant minority of instances of mob violence do target women and, in several cases, Hindu upper or middle caste women are complicit in supporting male dominated mob violence against minority and oppressed groups. Keeping these issues in mind, we chose to gather data in: major metropolises, medium-sized cities, district headquarters, small towns and villages.

Our research questions placed both the messages that are circulated and forwarded on WhatsApp or similar platforms (the texts), and those who receive, share, delete or report the messages (the users) centre stage. Our team carried out in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with users. In order to triangulate opinions about culpability and responsibilities of government, mainstream media, technology companies (such as Facebook as the owners of WhatsApp), we also conducted interviews with experts working in fact-checking, law enforcement, academia, non-governmental organisations and journalism. Over the course of our project conducted in 2019, our researchers interacted directly with approximately 275 WhatsApp users through 65 in-depth interviews, 16 focus group discussions and 10 expert interviews[29]. Further, we also looked at more than 1000 pieces of content that have circulated on WhatsApp. This content was anonymised and shared voluntarily by our respondents in line with the ethical guidelines of our project. Finally, we also reviewed disinformation fact-checked by well-known initiatives in India, such as Boom Live and Alt News.

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[28] Kiran Sharma, "India Lynchings Prompt WhatsApp Action on False Rumors," *Nikkei Asian Review*, last modified July 2018, accessed July 26, 2019, **asia.nikkei.com/Politics/India-lynchings-prompt-WhatsApp-action-on-false-rumors**

[29] Each of these interviews and discussions was conducted only after obtaining rigorous informed consent and following procedures to ensure protection and security of the dataset as well as to protect the identity of our interview and focus group participants. All interviews and discussions were translated to English and transcribed, coded and analysed using key words, themes and concepts that emerged from our research questions.

Bhandardara, Maharashtra. Photo by Nihal Passanha.

Having received permission from our departmental Research Ethics committee, and paying close attention to the data rights and confidentiality of participants, our research sought to investigate the political and cultural contexts within which disinformation is shared and consumed. End-to-end encryption makes it is difficult if not impossible for us as researchers to track who is producing disinformation and in what contexts. Our research therefore focuses on the practices of distribution and reception of disinformation, with the occasional admission by a user to having been the first poster of a particular piece of information/ misinformation. The emphasis is on how users experience, understand, participate in and subsequently articulate these practices[30]. The use of interviews and focus groups helps our informants to converse about sensitive topics either privately or in the presence of peers, and to bring to light shared and divergent perspectives on misinformation and measures to curb its spread[31]. The remainder of this report details findings based on the data we gathered.

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[30] Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Stuart Hall and Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of communication inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 45–60.

[31] Joel D Aberbach and Bert A Rockman, "Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews," *Political Science and Politics* 35, no. 4 (2002): 673–676; Greg Guest, Kathleen MacQueen, and Emily Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (California: Sage Publications, 2012); Frances Montell, "Focus Group Interviews: A New Feminist Method," *NWSA* 11, no. 1 (1999): 44–71; Kenneth J. Gergen, "Exploring the Postmodern: Perils or Potentials?," *American Psychologist* 49, no. 5 (1994): 412–416; RA Zeller, "Focus Group Research on Sensitive Topics: Setting the Agenda without Setting the Agenda," in *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*, ed. DL Morgan (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1993), 167–83; Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, 2011).

Typology of Disinformation and Misinformation

As mentioned in the previous section, we have reviewed a large data set of information that circulates amongst WhatsApp users across four large Indian states. Since WhatsApp is a peer to peer and encrypted application, there is no way to gauge whether this is representative of all the information that circulates amongst users in these states, let alone India. Further, in the course of our research, participants showed us only those messages that they either received regularly, or information that they chose to forward for various reasons, or information that they chose to delete because it agitated or angered them in some way. We also compared the messages we saw from our respondents with the articles published by fact-checking initiatives who presumably counter disinformation that is going viral (based on users forwarding information for fact-checking or based on judgment of editorial staff). Based on this, we propose a typology of disinformation and/or misinformation as per the table given below:

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Overwhelming Content • Accidents • Dead Bodies • Natural Disasters • Unexplained Violence • Group • Individual.	• Still and moving images of man exploding while mishandling explosives • Still and moving images with voice overs that purport to show child kidnapping, kidney snatching, braid-cutting • Still and moving images of industrial or agricultural accidents • Still and moving images of flooding, earthquakes, fires • Still and moving images of dead couples who have hanged themselves or been murdered • Still and moving images of road and rail accidents • Still and moving images of the brutal lynching of individuals by mobs • Still and moving images of incidents of violence against children.	• Provokes users into affective states (shock, awe, disgust, perverse fascination) that disrupt flows of daily life • Promotes voyeurism of the spectacular • Undermines trust in mainstream, non-sensational media. Gives users a sense that ***mainstream media hides the real news*** that one can receive only on WhatsApp and other social media.

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Nationalism/Ethno-religious bigotry • Anti-Pakistan • Anti-Kashmiri • Anti-Muslim • Anti-Dalit • Pro-Hindu • Pro-BJP • Pro-Modi • Anti-Congress • Anti-Rahul Gandhi • Anti-Sonia Gandhi • Anti meat-eating.	• Written or mixed mode mockery of Pakistani military capabilities • Written, visual and/ or spoken questioning of the allegiance of Kashmiris to the idea of India • Memes, moving images and written texts implying Muslims responsible for population explosion • Still and moving images purporting to show Muslims praising Modi, praising BJP (including women praising Triple Talaq Bill) • Infographics and statistics praising Modi or BJP regime • Speeches of Modi or images of Modi praising Modi • Written texts, memes, mixed mode messages, still and moving images accusing Rahul and Sonia Gandhi of arrogance (eg, for having old people touch their feet) • Clips from Rahul Gandhi speeches taken out of context and bracketed with Hindutva commentary • Notes suggesting that the Gandhi family has secret Muslim lineage.	• A feeling of militant nationalism that allows for no questioning or discussion • A feeling of false victimhood in conjunction with conspiratorial exaggeration of Muslims' abilities, motives, resources • Physical violence against discriminated groups • Harassment through filing FIR at police stations • Bullying and intimidation of anyone who dares to question the status quo.

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Religious theme or ethno-religious bigotry • Hindutva/Hinduism • Islam • Christianity • Sikhism.	• Oppression of Muslim women • Still and moving images of Hindu gurus (Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Jaggi Vasudev, Baba Ramdev) defending their version of Hinduism or mocking other religions • Insulting lower-caste communities • Defending and celebrating Dalit and Adivasi leaders • Caste-based rituals and myths (*jaati puranas*) • Still and moving images of large Hindu religious marches or festivals (Kumbh Mela, Kanwariya procession) • Still and moving images purporting to show Muslims killing cattle or defiling Hindu idols or committing violence against Hindus or Muslim men luring and duping Hindu women in order to get them to marry and convert to Islam • Still and moving images of Muslims being attacked, apparently in revenge for something they have done (usually filmed and uploaded by the attackers).	• Provides grandiose illusions about moral/ethical, historical superiority of one religion over others • Provides a religious/spiritual mode of explaining various aspects of daily life • Provides a sense of strength and power in one's own religious community • Reinforces membership of religious community • Creates agitation, anger, anxiety, disgust and other emotions in users who then either share it or participate in violence (either immediate and/or anger accumulates for violence at a later point).
Gender • Sexual Violence • Misogyny • Patriarchal dictats.	• Still and moving images of women getting beaten by men • Still and moving images of dead women • Ideological metaphors with misogynist subtext: India-Pakistan conflict visualised as man raping woman • Jokes about women • Up skirt still and moving images • Pornography • Written rumours about loose character of women.	• Intimidation and self-censorship • Fear of using technology • Policing of technology use by family • Blackmail and sexual violence (including rape) • Depression and withdrawal • Suicide.

Type of Disinformation or misinformation	Description of message	Outcome and Effects
Miscellaneous (which do not contribute to violent outcomes, but are forwarded by the same people who forward violence producing misinformation).	• Stills of farm produce, flowers, landscapes • Moving images of animals • Notes of images showing types of vegetables and recipes that can cure minor and serious health problems • Still and moving images of children singing or dancing from television shows • Science-based moving image clips (usually demonstrating principles of physics through simple objects) • Short moving image clips with slapstick comedy (including many seemingly produced by Chinese users) • Spam text messages asking people to click links, or forward messages to others for money etc.	• Provides the sense of everyday flow of content as background "noise" that is comforting, entertaining, "time pass" etc. • Serves as the raw material with which users construct online sociality (forwarding entertaining content to friends, religious content to family, motivational content to colleagues etc.) • Creates a sense of fatigue and overload that either leads users away from using the application, or bulk deleting messages, or having to "manage" memory of phone and SD card etc. • Encourages users to indulge in uncritical forwarding of messages without checking the content.

Table 1: A typology of disinformation or misinformation shared on WhatsApp.

Figure 2: WhatsApp forwarded message comparing current prime minister Modi with ex-prime minister Manmohan Singh.

It should be noted that this is not an exhaustive typology. Much of the messaging is responsive to daily political and social events. Many of the messages are focused on significant events such as elections or recent interreligious or caste unrest – such messages do not appear regularly. The above typology describes a small sample of the diverse varieties of misinformation and disinformation that we analysed during approximately six months of data collection. Different states have different genres of messages in vernacular languages.

Some messages such as those against Muslims or alleged child-kidnappers have similar themes but adapt to the specific state and language (text/voiceover). Save for a few exceptions (in the miscellaneous and overwhelming categories), much of the disinformation is *systematic* – in terms of the consistency of delivery (the number of messages received daily, and over a period of time) as well as in the consistency of ideological propaganda (familiar stereotypes, anxieties, fearmongering against Muslims and "anti-nationals" or "secular" citizens).

Figure 3: WhatsApp forwarded message on current and ex-prime minister's relationship with Obama.

Figure 4: WhatsApp forwarded message comparing Nehru and current prime minister Modi.

The systematic aspect suggests that the production and distribution of much disinformation and misinformation in India has become *institutionalised*. Major political parties, and in particular the governing party, have a very sophisticated and well-established social infrastructure[32] where messages can be centralised and disseminated at high speed, but which also allows for a) plausible deniability with regard to culpability for resulting violence; and b) a high level of customised local content flourishing in accordance with local languages and interests. The institutionalisation suggests that far right ethno-religious groups with links to political parties, and political parties with an allegiance to the Hindutva agenda are using WhatsApp (and Facebook and multiple other social media channels) to disseminate propaganda without necessarily listing this dissemination infrastructure as a campaign or electoral expense[33].

Figure 5: WhatsApp forwarded message comparing ex-prime minister of BJP, A.B. Vajpayee and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

[32] "Real or Fake, We Can Make Any Message Go Viral: Amit Shah to BJP Social Media Volunteers," *The Wire*, last modified 2018, accessed March 24, 2019, **thewire.in/politics/amit-shah-bjp-fake-social-media-messages**

[33] Amrita Madhukalya, "56-Hour Lag in Congress's Reach on WhatsApp Gives BJP the Edge," *Hindustan Times*, last modified 2019, accessed June 29, 2019, **hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/who-s-creating-whatsapp-buzz-this-election-season/story-NAewnMqSCqZlxtGlaelDhO.html**

WhatsApp in India

WhatsApp started as a messaging start-up company in 2009, and was soon picking up large numbers of users in many low and middle income countries including India. In 2016 using the Signal protocol designed by Open Whisper Systems, WhatsApp initiated end-to-end encryption. As of 2019, WhatsApp confirms that there are more than 400 million people in India using WhatsApp on a monthly basis.

WhatsApp has played a significant role in the actions of those initiating and instigating mob violence, vigilantism and attempting to influence elections. This kind of usage stands in contrast to the stated intention of its creators as a messaging service between "friends" (those already in your phone contact list) rather than as a bulk messaging service. Bearing in mind the ways in which WhatsApp is currently being used and the consequences for democracy and citizens' rights, WhatsApp has responded in two major areas – product design and literacy – in an attempt to curb what it construes as misuse of the App.

WhatsApp has used a machine-based learning system that is intended to identify and thereafter ban accounts that engage in the bulk sharing of messages. Globally, (between December 2018 and February 2019) this system is responsible for banning 2 million accounts per month. Our observations of users in India suggest that the efficacy of such bans is undermined by the ease with which users can obtain a new SIM card (often Jio SIM cards which are chosen for low-cost data) and then resume bulk-sharing on WhatsApp. In terms of product design, WhatsApp has introduced changes that they hope will disincentivise impersonal usage – for example, the bulk sharing of messages. These changes include the explicit labeling of messages as forwards, the limiting of forwards to five at one time, and the labeling of frequently forwarded messages. WhatsApp users can now choose not to be added to groups without their permission although this is not the default option. In the latest version of the app, administrators of groups can set permissions regarding which users can share messages and there will also be restrictions on users being added to groups repeatedly after they have left a group. Users will also have control over whether an unknown person (ie, a number not in their phone contact list) can add them to a group without their permission.

In terms of literacy, WhatsApp has partnered with some civil society organisations such as Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) and with industry associations such as the

National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) to design and implement media literacy programmes in up to ten states. These programmes are intended to provide functional skills that have the potential to curb the sharing of disinformation – for example teaching about ways to check the veracity of an image by doing a reverse image search on a smartphone. These programmes also include focused literacy efforts during elections. WhatsApp also partnered with Swaniti[34] Initiative to train 2600 workers from nine political parties in nine states on using WhatsApp "responsibly". In addition to these targeted literacy efforts, WhatsApp has used mainstream media and digital media distributors (including telecom service providers) to disseminate messages about media literacy in 11 different Indian languages. The key slogan for this campaign is "Share Joy, Not Rumours". Finally, during the recent general elections in India, WhatsApp introduced a "tip-line" developed in partnership with Indian start-up companies, where users could forward a message on WhatsApp to be fact-checked. The content and scale of such literacy efforts are distinct from considerations of how effective they are at changing the social, political and cultural ideas and values that we have found to be fundamental to the sharing of misinformation, disinformation and related hate-speech in India.

As many of these are rather recent initiatives, and are responding to some of the same events that prompted our research, we did not set out to measure the success or failure of these efforts by the company in India, but rather to gauge the ways in which such efforts become integrated into the wider social, civic and political communications system amongst average users across different states. To the best of our knowledge, there is also no specific information on the overall changes in patterns of use in India. After product changes with respect to the forwarding of messages, WhatsApp estimates that there has been a 25 per cent decrease in bulk messaging globally. Further, statistics from WhatsApp suggest that it remains predominantly a messaging service between individuals, with nine out of ten messages moving between individuals and WhatsApp groups tending to be on average below ten members. Even though this in itself is interesting, we note that given the scale of WhatsApp usage in India (400 million and growing), specifically in the case of mob violence, deliberate and targeted abuse of the application even by a minority of users has life-threatening consequences for vulnerable groups.

34 **swaniti.com**

Affordances, Platforms and Infrastructures

Rural areas in India are still largely served by 2G infrastructure, and this is even sometimes the case in small towns with populations of over 300,000 people as these quotes illustrate:

> …We have totally no network zones in rural area, some parts of rural are exceptional, somewhere they have range (network coverage)

> …We use ShareIt, we share movies to each other, boys download movies when they come into the city and give it to others.

> …We go where we can get range, we go to the roof of people's house where we get range.

Focus group discussion with middle-aged male WhatsApp users in Chandrapur, Maharashtra

In addition to its other affordances, WhatsApp also enables groups to form and to communicate without fear of their information being tracked. Following changes made by WhatsApp, each group can have up to a maximum of 256 members. There is no limit on the number of groups that any given person can belong to. Adding users to a group is also relatively easy for the group administrator. The only metadata required in order to add a user to a group is their mobile number[35].

When a subscriber registers for a SIM card, it is issued after the provision of a subscriber's Unique biometric identification information or Aadhaar number. Several investigations[36] have revealed that the database of subscribers can easily be purchased on the black market and circulates to a wide range of clients – from commercial advertisers interested in specific markets (for example, rural college-going students) to political parties (for example, subscribers from a specific ward or constituency). Further, many users themselves have enthusiastically adopted practices of group communication. This reflects pre-existing dynamics where informal and formal social groups have simply extended their presence onto WhatsApp. Neighbourhood associations, caste associations, political parties, charities, health interests, friendship groups, religious affiliations, professional associations or ties, and pro-government groups all existed before WhatsApp entered India, and now continue on WhatsApp as well, albeit with further features associated with online communities, such as the ability to dip in and dip out of many more groups than would be possible in face-to-face circumstances.

> **HH:** I am part of every political party WhatsApp group. BJP, Congress, RPI. In my mobile I am member of around 300 to 350 WhatsApp groups. I am part of reporters, newspapers, state political groups, groups of people we meet for work, health related, doctor's group.

Focus group discussion with male and female middle-aged users in Chandrapur, Maharashtra

❝

I am part of every political party WhatsApp group. BJP, Congress, RPI. In my mobile I am member of around 300 to 350 WhatsApp groups. I am part of reporters, newspapers, state political groups, groups of people we meet for work, health related, doctor's group. ❞

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[35] Since April 2019, WhatsApp has introduced options where if chosen users cannot be added to groups without their permission. See PTI, "Now You Can Choose If You Want to Be Added to a WhatsApp Group," *The New Indian Express*, last modified 2019, accessed May 28, 2019, **newindianexpress. com/lifestyle/tech/2019/apr/03/now-you-can-choose-if-you-want-to-be-added-to-a-whatsapp-group-1959784.html**

[36] Rachna Khaira, "Rs 500, 10 Minutes, and You Have Access to Billion Aadhaar Details," *The Tribune*, January 4, 2018, accessed July 26, 2019, **tribuneindia.com/news/nation/rs-500-10-minutes-and-you-have-access-to-billion-aadhaar-details/523361.html**; Tech2 News Staff, "Aadhaar Security Breaches: Here Are the Major Untoward Incidents That Have Happened with Aadhaar and What Was Actually Affected," *Firstpost*, last modified 2018, accessed July 26, 2019, **firstpost.com/tech/news-analysis/aadhaar-security-breaches-here-are-the-major-untoward-incidents-that-have-happened-with-aadhaar-and-what-was-actually-affected-4300349.html**

BB: I am part of a work group, school group, best friends' group, college group, master's group, work friends' group, family group. There are so many groups, I don't even remember them all. I would be a member of about 18-25 groups on WhatsApp. I started a friends' group. I am not admin on any other group. I get diverse content on groups. Memes, general information, election-political things, news, fake news, jokes, poems, good morning, good night messages.

In-depth interview with 28-year-old female user in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

CB: Known people add you to the group. For example, the other day I went to BJP office here for some work. When I went there they said, *arre bhaiya* [hey, brother] please give your WhatsApp number, so I gave it. And within five to seven minutes he immediately added me to a party group.

Focus group discussion with middle-aged male users in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

ED: …Sometimes if we go to some event, they tell you that they are planning similar event someplace else, that is why they need to add you to a group. Someone might give my number to someone else if they need me to work with them on some project or campaign. Sometimes you also give out phone numbers if you're registering for some event or program and then you get added to WhatsApp groups.

Focus group discussion with middle-aged male users in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

The encryption of information, the peer-to-peer nature of the network, and the group architecture that the cross-platform messaging service enables are crucial aspects of WhatsApp: these are affordances that play an important role in the spread of disinformation.

RR: As an app, through its design, it has enabled closed communication and mass communication. By mass I mean that you are reaching hundreds and thousands of people; if a group has 250 people, you can have 10 groups in your region and you have more than thousand people right then and there with one message and no one is ever going to know who started that chain of messages or who is the one who actually posted that. So, it has enabled that kind of communication where there is no accountability to the content posted and there is zero transparency on where the messages are emanating from. The trust factor that WhatsApp inherently carried because it was meant to be an end-to-end communication app has then been used in different contexts to actually spread a lot of misinformation and disinformation.

Expert Interview with journalist in Mumbai, Maharashtra

WhatsApp has introduced several technical changes to the application that seek to curb the sharing of misinformation and disinformation. The underlying logic of these changes is to introduce friction that reduces the rapid sharing of mis- and disinformation. These include: adding options where users cannot be added to groups without permission, introducing limits to the number of members in a given group, introducing limits to mass forwarding and so on. However, we discovered that by and large younger users use a range of unauthorised versions of WhatsApp that can be downloaded and used on the Android operating system in India, such as WhatsApp plus or WhatsApp GB and so on. Users who want these unauthorised versions are easily able to find explanatory videos on YouTube about how to download, install and use such unauthorised versions which allow them the functionality of older versions of WhatsApp such as mass forwarding and adding people to groups without permission.

PF: We mostly use WhatsApp GB because it has more features.

Focus group discussion with young men, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

AG: I had used this app. It was like a blue WhatsApp. It would send notifications when anyone comes online and we could download people's statuses also through that. I used it only 2 months and then I stopped using it. A friend of mine had put a status about this and I liked it so she had shared it with me. I was attracted to the colours and it was also a nice feature that I could download the videos and photos that people put as their status.

Focus group discussion with young men and women, Dharwad, Karnataka

Nor is this use of unauthorised versions (to work-around WhatsApp misinformation fixes) a problem confined to individual users. Unauthorised versions can be downloaded along with various other mass-distribution software and mass-distribution websites that enable political parties to weaponise WhatsApp against the political opposition and against vulnerable minority groups and dissenters. As we mentioned at the end of the previous section, such unauthorised software can be plugged into large scale social infrastructures

for the production and distribution of propaganda[37]. In order to address the institutionalised bulk sharing of messages, WhatsApp has introduced a machine-based learning system in early 2019. It has been widely reported that this system bans approximately 2 million accounts a month globally, although real time data for India is not available[38]. While an automated system to ban abusive behaviour might be necessary given the volume and scale of bulk messaging, it is not clear whether such efforts have been successful in preventing various forms of bulk messaging – including mis and disinformation by the government, and political parties[39]. The authors of this report encountered individuals who were directly involved in bulk-messaging during the 2019 Indian elections. Although outside the scope of this report, this aspect of persistent WhatsApp misuse warrants ongoing in-depth research.

A complex configuration of infrastructures that include platforms, cross-platform apps and their affordances, and also relatively affordable access to data and a fall in the cost of smartphones are all factors in the increasingly rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation in India. This can be said without attributing causality to any infrastructures or affordances. However, a statement such as this does raise questions of liability, responsibility and regulation. We will turn to these issues later in the report.

[37] Sankalp Phartiyal and Aditya Kalra, "Despite Being Exposed, Fake News Thrives on Social Media Ahead of India Polls," *Reuters*, last modified 2019, accessed May 18, 2019, **reuters.com/article/india-election-socialmedia-fakenews/despite-being-exposed-fake-news-thrives-on-social-media-ahead-of-india-polls-idUSKCN1RE08Z**

[38] Stopping Abuse: How WhatsApp Fights Bulk Messaging and Automated Behavior, previously available at: **whatsapp.com/safety/WA_StoppingAbuse_Whitepaper_020418_Update.pdf**. Link taken down.

[39] Vidya Narayanan et al., *News and Information over Facebook and WhatsApp during the Indian Election Campaign* (Oxford, 2019), accessed September 9, 2019, **comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/India-memo.pdf**; Sreenivasan Jain and Manas Pratap Singh, "Exclusive: The 'Silver Touch' Behind BJP's Online Dominance?," *NDTV*, last modified 2017, accessed September 9, 2019, **ndtv.com/india-news/exclusive-silver-touch-behind-bjps-online-dominance-1766114**; Ualan Campbell-Smith and Samantha Bradshaw, *Global Cyber Troops Country Profile: India* (Oxford, 2019), accessed September 9, 2019, **comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/05/India-Profile.pdf**

Transmediality and Intertextuality

In this section, we deal with two terms – transmediality which can be defined as non-media specific stories or phenomena "that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" [40] and intertextuality which refers to the ways in which "each text is an intersection with other texts where at least one other text can be read… "[41]. Our analysis of the data suggests that both are important components in the spread of false or misleading information, partial information, misinformation and disinformation that have led to mobs and lynchings in India.

In terms of transmediality, there are several parallel stereotypes and narratives that originate, for instance, in speeches from leading politicians of the BJP. These are to do with defending the day-to-day activities of the government and/or with attacking dissenters, and are usually articulated either by politicians or by party spokespersons who appear in mainstream media outlets. These narratives are then immediately supported by televised "debates" that take place at primetime on all the top English and Hindi news channels. These clips usually attack any opposition to the current government and simultaneously defend or support the government. These so-called debates are accompanied by suggestive hashtags. These hashtags are borrowed from social media activity and sometimes social media borrows from television.

On social media sites, there are thousands of social media accounts that use a template-driven or cookie-cutter attacks on any politically critical or dissenting social media user. The post, or tweet, uses exactly the same language and set of hashtags. The aim is to influence the algorithms of social media, ie, to suggest that a topic has "genuinely" sparked conversation. In addition, there are well known celebrities who then post tweets using these hashtags, and as a result, within a few hours these hashtags start trending – thereby achieving viral status[42]. This viral status further provides impetus for the topic to be viewed as newsworthy, and one around which polls and debates can be conducted. Significant events, such as India's air strikes against Pakistan following the Pulwama attack or events in Kashmir can be linked to all of the above-mentioned ultra-nationalist narratives and transmedia practices.

Figure 6: WhatsApp forwarded message of a tweet demanding arrest of Shehla Rashid.

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[40] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 95–96.

[41] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

[42] Johanna Deeksha, "#ArrestShehlaRashid Trends on Twitter after Army Slams Her Allegations of Harassment in Kashmir," *Edex Live*, last modified 2019, accessed August 29, 2019, **edexlive.com/news/2019/aug/19/arrestshehlarashid-trends-on-twitter-after-army-slams-her-allegations-of-harassment-in-kashmir-7521.html**
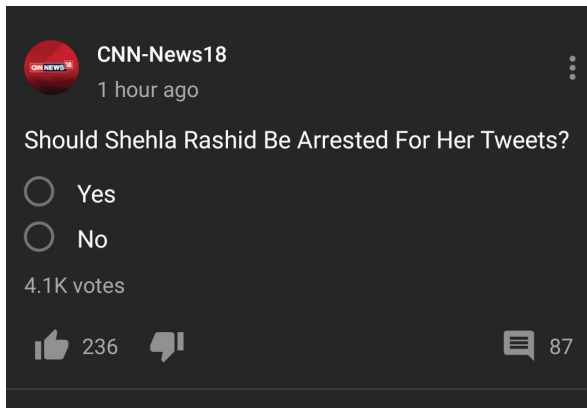
Figure 7: WhatsApp forwarded message of a television channel poll on arresting Shehla Rashid.

For example, during the recent abrogation of Article 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution providing autonomy for the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a prominent young activist from Kashmir, Shehla Rashid sent out several tweets on the 18th of August, 2019. In these tweets, she reported events transpiring in Kashmir based on conversations with local residents[43]. Rashid described a breakdown in delivery of public services and infrastructure, and instances of violence, torture and harassment within a camp set up by the Indian army. Within two days, a hashtag started by government supporters was trending on Twitter - #ArrestShehlaRashid (see Figure 1), and a lawyer practicing in the Supreme Court had filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) alleging that Rashid had deliberately spread disinformation to incite disaffection against the Indian army and government[44]. At the time of writing this report, prominent television channels such as CNN-News 18 ran a poll (see Figure 2) asking viewers/users to weigh in on whether Rashid should be arrested[45] while another television channel Republic TV ran programmes with a hashtag #TwitterQuitIndia alleging that the social media company is biased against India and because it was not willing to delete Shehla Rashid's tweets about Kashmir[46].

At the time of our data collection, the 2019 Balakot airstrikes (see *Timeline of the Pulawama and Balakot Attacks* on page 48) had only recently taken place, and were fresh in the minds of WhatsApp users with whom we interacted.

I: Did you get any video on Pulwama?

P: Yes, I got four videos during that time and three of them were fake. I saw on YouTube. One video was even Chinese.

Q: There were also a lot of speculations on how many terrorists had died [in the Balakot revenge airstrikes]. I had heard 300 to 350 had died.

P: Amit Shah had said it was 352.

V: We all had put WhatsApp statuses/ WhatsApp story that day.

I: Did you question any of the information you were provided during that time?

P: No at that time, we mostly believed everything we were told because it was a matter of patriotism.

I: And now?

P: I still believe that most of it was true.

Focus group discussion with young and middle-aged men in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

Even though there are many unanswered questions, for example about the intelligence failure that lead to the suicide explosions that killed Indian army personnel in Kashmir, the government along with mainstream media support diverted all public discussion towards questions about how many terrorists could be or were killed in the retaliation attack, and more broadly, to view the whole Pulwama terrorism incident through the lens of unquestioning nationalism. As the above quote shows, WhatsApp users have internalised definitions of patriotism as uncritical and accepting of government actions and narratives, and proceed to operationalise these understandings into practice via their WhatsApp

[43] See **twitter.com/Shehla_Rashid/status/1162974916250988545**. Last accessed on 21st August, 2019. Note also that very similar footage and reports had already been aired by the BBC and other international news organisations.

[44] "Criminal Complaint against Shehla Rashid under Sedition Charges, Lawyer Seeks Arrest," *The News Minute*, last modified 2019, accessed August 20, 2019, **thenewsminute.com/article/criminal-complaint-against-shehla-rashid-under-sedition-charges-lawyer-seeks-arrest-107456**

[45] Vijayta Lalwani, "'The Government Is a Bully': Shehla Rashid on Why She Tweeted Information She Could Not Verify," *Scroll*, last modified 2019, accessed August 20, 2019, **scroll.in/article/934536/the-government-is-a-bully-shehla-rashid-on-why-she-tweeted-information-she-could-not-verify**

[46] **twitter.com/republic/status/1163488208694337538**. Last accessed on August 20, 2019.

statuses, WhatsApp stories and so on. These practices in effect, constitute transmediality where the narrative of patriotism-in-times-of-crisis is conveyed via different texts across different media, making a distinctive contribution to historical and social understandings of events.

We also found that WhatsApp messages, especially disinformation, circulates *intertextually*. For example, the current Indian government led by Prime Minister Modi has prided itself on its emphasis on the speed and scale of performance on a series of infrastructure related developments. The Prime Minister himself has emphasised statistics and numbers that appear to provide the objective truth about the efficiency,

transparency and honesty of his government. These speeches are then simultaneously translated into neat infographic-style posters that are circulated on social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. They can be and are easily downloaded and shared on WhatsApp. In each of these posters, apart from the information itself, the texts reveal the use of falsified or contested quantitative (statistics-based) (dis)information that is assumed to have a higher truth status than just writing or images. As the figure below illustrates, the presentation of statistics as objective truth is aimed at an urban middle class audience, presumed to be ethical tax-paying citizens who can expect efficient "customer service" from the government.
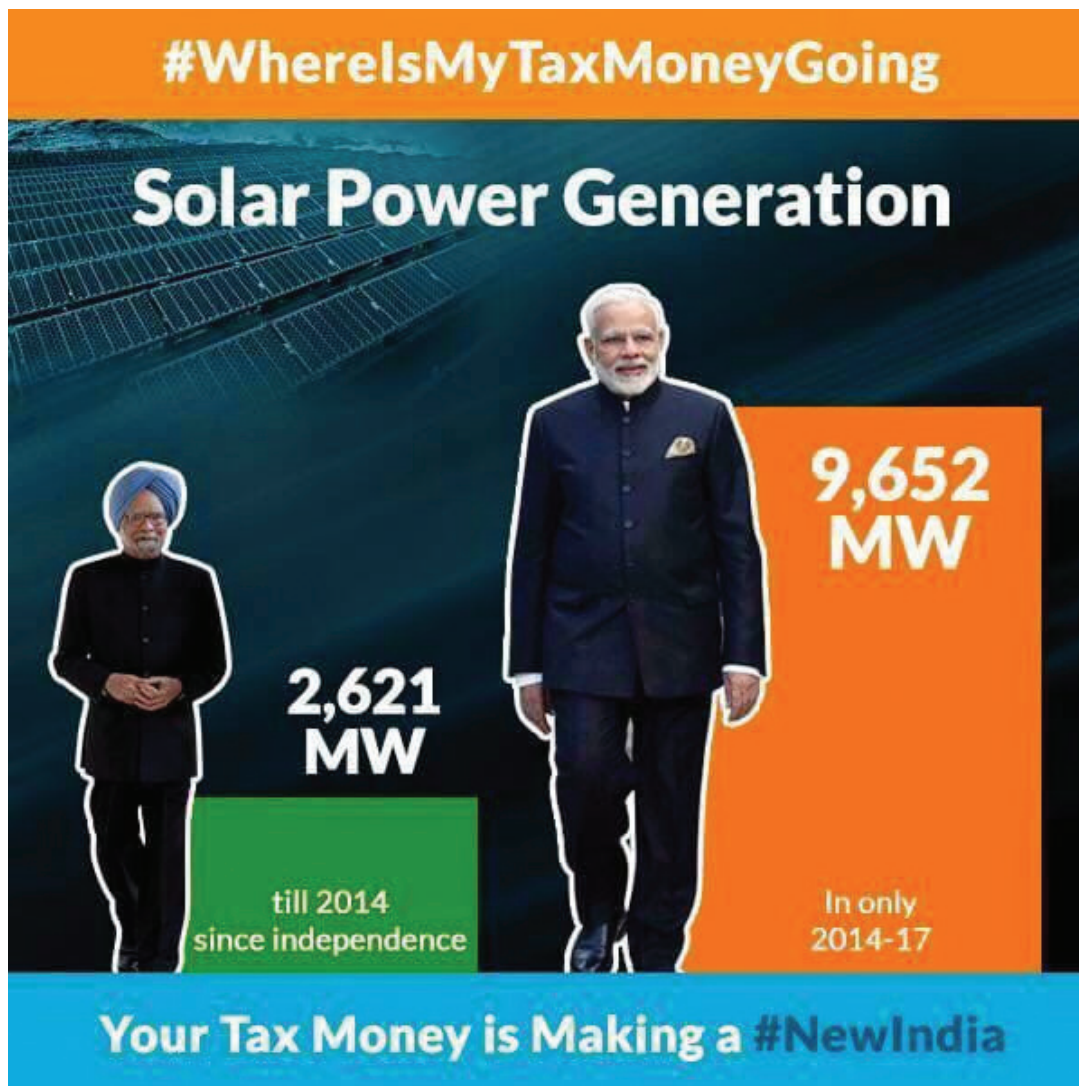

Figure 8: WhatsApp forwarded message using the genre of statistics-based truth-claims.

Media Literacy

The notion of media literacy has been around since at least the 1930s. Initially, literacy was used in a protectionist sense as most media users were seen to be passive victims. Over time, literacy has expanded to position itself as a vital requirement for participatory democracy, especially given the rapid rise and influence of networked communication technologies in many aspects of life. In the expanded notion of media literacy belong two broad distinctions – **functional media literacy** and **critical media literacy**. Functional media literacy emphasises the individual media user's skills and capacity to use various media – including the technical properties and affordances of information and communication technologies such as smart-phones and apps. Critical media literacy emphasises the intersection of skills and capacities with understandings of ideology, political economy and other forms of power as well as the notion of an active audience that participates in the struggle to make meaning of any given text [47]. Following narratives about the seemingly *unpredictable* and *uncontrollable* instances of violence linked to use of platforms and cross-platform Apps like WhatsApp, Facebook and TikTok, civil society institutions and groups have focused on a functional approach to media literacy.

F: We tell them immediately when you receive an information you should verify. Google is the easiest way by which you can verify an information and you should always verify it from multiple sources not just from one source. And then there's this image reverse search. So, we tell them about that. If there is a photograph which is questionable and you can always verify the authenticity of the photography by doing the image reverse search. And then we tell them about these Alt News and Boom Live fact checking organisations. So nowadays deep fakes are there are videos which can be doctored and they are doctored so well that you cannot tell the authenticity of the video just by looking at it. The words are being artificially put in the mouths of well-known people and it's done so well that you cannot tell just by looking at the video, it's very difficult to tell that it's doctored. So, if that is the case and it's not possible to verify it through Google and through other means then it's always good to get in touch with Alt News and Boom Live[48] who have a skilled team who will be able to verify that video for you and share it with you.

Interview with senior staff from civil society organisation in Delhi

Our interviewee worked for a civil society organisation that had devised two strategies as part of its media literacy work. One was a training module on behavioural patterns while the other module attempted to promote a culture of verification amongst users. The above extract from the interview refers to the latter module. Put together, these modules fall somewhere between functional and critical media literacy. We believe that functional media literacy is useful and should be continued.

GT: There's a huge difference [between a WhatsApp story and a message]. That day I was just leaving my house, when I saw the news [referring to the Pulwama suicide attack] so I had very little time. I clicked a photo when I saw it and put a story. Before that very few people had put a story about this incident. People can view stories very quickly. I feel that people only put stories when they feel that it is something very important and they put their own thoughts into it. [However] if you're forwarding messages, you can hide your feelings. People can question and debate on your stories with you personally. But if you are forwarding messages, especially if it's an opinion or a rumour, it spreads very quickly. People can interpret things in different ways. Sometimes they don't even read the entire message and just forward it. This way, wrong things spread very quickly. I don't usually send anything to people easily. WhatsApp even has an ad now, "share joy, not rumours".

HP: Now WhatsApp has done a good thing; a message that has been forwarded will say that it has been forwarded. Most messages people get these days are forwarded. Very few are typed by the senders. One of the biggest demerits in my opinion is that people forward messages without a second thought.

Focus group discussion with male and female social work students, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

[47] C Luke, "Media Literacy and Cultural Studies," in *Constructing Critical Literacies: Teaching and Learning Textual Practice*, ed. S Muspratt, A Luke, and P Freebody (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1997), 19–49; R Hobbs, "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement," *Journal of Communication* 48, no. 1 (1998): 16–32; B Ferguson, "Media Education and the Development of Critical Solidarity," *Media Education Journal* 30 (2001): 37–43; Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, "Critical Media Literacy Is Not an Option," *Learning Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (April 2007): 59–69; David Buckingham et al., *The Media Literacy of Children and Young People A Review of the Research Literature on Behalf of Ofcom* (London, 2005).

[48] AltNews and Boom Live are two of the most well-know and widely respected fact-checking organisations in India. Both of them have their own websites, dedicated helpline, and regularly dispel disinformation on various social media websites. Recently, AltNews has released a mobile app on the Android operating system.

> ❝
> People can question and debate on your stories with you personally. But if you are forwarding messages, especially if it's an opinion or a rumour, it spreads very quickly. People can interpret things in different ways. Sometimes they don't even read the entire message and just forward it. ❞

Even though functional literacy is useful and necessary it is *not sufficient*. As the quote from the civil society representative suggests, there are a handful of fact checking organisations who manage to publish fact-checking reports on a daily basis. However, the fact-checking industry has limited options for raising funds and recruitment, especially during significant periods such as the recently concluded general elections in May 2019. Further, functional literacy efforts are necessarily limited by the technical affordances provided by platforms such as WhatsApp and those provided by the device (usually smart phones) on which the user is accessing information or disinformation.

I: Is there anything that you would not pass on?

(Several at once) Most of it. don't have time. It's just for information. Just words and greetings.

VP: Anything that shows accidents, rape, I don't think we should show that. It is creating a bad impression.

DS: There's one person in one of the groups who is always trying to stir troubles. I don't share his posts.

I: For example?

DS: He posted that Why was Modiji not stopping Pulwama? Why was govt. allowing that attack? We threatened him. Stop that talk or get out.

I: Do you mean that the person who started the group told him off for stating his opinion?

DS: For making up lies. All of us group members. Even if that is his "opinion", still shut up, don't make a fight when you have no fact to show. Just keep quiet or just go to Pakistan and live there. Government is working hard. The country was attacked. We have to attack them (Pakistan, terrorist) in return.

I to VP: You we're worried about a bad impression?

VP: Yes, in the mind. I delete posts that is disturbing to thoughts. We should all do that. I would not forward such things. Especially on women.

BL: I don't forward. I save a screenshot if something is really very bad and I discuss with my husband that what should we do?

I: Like? For example?

BL: I am in a WhatsApp group of the kids (teenage) my daughters. Sometimes there is these posts on challenges, like do this (thing to make you sexy) and then you will get guys, pass it on if you agree, etc. But mostly I know they already have this kind of thing in Instagram. I am very careful. I check their phones every morning before they get up.

Mumbai, Maharashtra, Hindu and Jain housewives focus group discussion

This extended excerpt clearly shows that these educated urban women, whose primary concern seems to be their families, children and communities, are functionally very media literate. They can check their children's Instagram accounts and make screenshots; they are all in multiple groups, and they curate the flow of messages coming from these based on how the messages make them feel or relate to their values and beliefs.

So, functional media literacy suggests that users engage in sharing disinformation only because they do not know the facts or because of a lack the literacy required to verify the information. However, as our research demonstrates, users share disinformation, act to suppress discussion that could lead to the identification of disinformation, and forward misinformation out of diverse motivations including pre-existing prejudice against specific communities, a

Help stop the spread of **rumours** and **fake news** on WhatsApp.

1. Spot news that might be fake
Check for signs that help you decide if the information is fake. For example, forwarded messages with no source, no evidence, or messages that make you angry are signs that a story might not be true. Photos, videos and even voice recordings can be edited to mislead you.

2. Verify with other sources
Search online for facts and check trusted news sites to see where the story came from. If you still have doubts, ask fact-checkers, people you trust, and community leaders for more information.

3. Help stop the spread
If you see something that's fake, tell people and ask them to verify information before they share it. Don't share a message just because someone tells you to. Even if they're your friends.

Share joy, not rumours.

Figure 9: WhatsApp campaign to curb spread of misinformation.

belief in a particular (nationalist, religious) ideology, and pre-existing loyalty to political parties and government ministers. In such cases, functional literacy is of little help in preventing the spread of misinformation since even technically savvy users are willing to share disinformation and misinformation as long as it aligns with their values, beliefs and ideological convictions.

Our findings suggest that younger and middle-aged users have various informal self-learned or socially learned notions of digital literacy that straddle the line between functional and critical literacy. As a direct result of the overt and overwhelming bias in favour of the BJP shown across electronic media in India but paradoxically also influenced by information and misinformation about the lack of trustworthiness of opposition politicians, some younger users we

interviewed mention decreased trust in television as a source of authentic and accurate information, while turning instead to online applications and platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook etc.

L: ...Media is only business! Awareness is not their [Television journalists'] motive (for news). They want to increase their Television Rating Points (TRP) only. Media is tied with any party; they are not working for society. They show only news which political party want to bombard. Their work is to be neutral and show truth. They are not doing it.

Focus group discussion with college students in Pune, Maharashtra

G: I also received a lot of fake videos and news when the Pulwama attack happened. More of our soldiers had died than we were told.

I: How do you know this?

G: Different news channels (Aaj Tak, Zee News) were quoting different numbers. Newspapers were showing different numbers. Most people think that the news on TV is always true but it is not so.

Focus group discussion with young women in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

Despite this avowed distrust of televised broadcast news, we found clear connections between news channels on television and news clips or footage consumed on WhatsApp and other social media. Many of the television news debates borrow from the top trending topics on social media, and on many occasions, users come across information on social media or platforms like WhatsApp and then watch television to cross-verify it.

RO: I saw it first on Facebook. I also have Jio TV so I checked the news and even that was showing coverage of Pulwama. If someone receives news of an important event on Facebook or WhatsApp, they will definitely check the news on TV or read the newspaper to verify it.

Focus group discussion with male and female students in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Figure 10: WhatsApp campaign, Share Joy not Rumours.

For messages that contain no overt ideological content or are ambiguous, some users tend to display a sense of scepticism and have a set of techniques to verify whether a received message might be false

NO: I recently got a picture of a woman who was begging on the road. She had a small child on her lap. The woman was wearing old tattered clothing but the child on her lap was well dressed and seemed to be from a rich family. Everyone instantly thought it was a case of kidnapping. But if you zoomed in on the photo, you'll find that the child was edited into the photo.

Focus group discussion with middle aged men's group in Bhopal

KL: When Abhinandan [the Indian air force pilot who crash-landed across the border in Pakistan, was captured and later released by Pakistan] came back, at that time Pakistan shared a video of him. People had differing opinions on that as well. I don't want to say much about it as it is contentious. I believed the video for what it was when I first saw it. But later when I saw it on the news, it had 20 or 21 cuts. Something like that can change your point of view within a day. If a video has that many cuts, it can't be original.

Focus group discussion with college students, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Moving away, momentarily, from messages that lead to violence, several of the younger users we interviewed recognised specific messages that by their very genre indicated that the message was not from a reliable source. For instance, spam messages soliciting money:

SB: ...sometimes fake companies like to attract students, they get our numbers from somewhere like sometimes from our friends they get number; they send messages like "give 15000, 20000 [rupees], make more money" and all. And everyone is doing all things for earning bread only. When I came here I got messages like this "Earn maximum amount of money in very less time"; they got our numbers from our friends. They do this to attract people.

Focus group discussion with male students in Pune University, Maharashtra

On the other hand, other users struggle to reconcile the spread of disinformation with the sociability upon which WhatsApp draws. Many users expressed to us that they struggle to see how something can be fake or fraudulent if a trusted friend of many years has forwarded it to them.

❝

Users share disinformation, act to suppress discussion that could lead to identification of disinformation, and forward misinformation out of diverse motivations including pre-existing prejudice against specific communities, a belief in a particular (nationalist, religious) ideology, and pre-existing loyalty to individuals, political parties and government ministers. ❞

Younger users showed awareness of the possibilities that exist for manipulating still and moving-image footage and, by corollary, the claims attached to these types of manipulated footage. The reason for their awareness according to them is that many of them receive messages on a daily basis containing news or assertions that they recognise as misinformation based on their own life experiences.

GT: When the photos are edited, you can make out easily that it is fake. I will tell you about a funny incident that happened with my friend. So, a friend of mine put a photo of another friend saying "rest in peace". They had planned it and the person whose photo was put up purposely didn't receive anyone's calls for a whole day. I knew about this and people would call me also asking about this, so I did not know what to say in that situation. If such a post is put up by a government account, we tend to believe it.

Focus group discussion with young male students in Dharwad, Karnataka

We were also given examples of the recognition of misinformation such as news received on WhatsApp about riots or incidents purporting to be in their own region, circulated with stills or moving images from other regions. However, scepticism about one message does not necessarily extend to a more systematic scepticism about the validity of other messages circulating on WhatsApp. **Functional digital literacy about some features does not necessarily equate with or convert into broader critical digital literacy**.

Disinformation is produced to increasingly high standards, and circulated in complex formats that play with modality and genre.

TT: Many a times you get lynching videos with text written with it. Just by watching the video one doesn't get to know who is beating who for what reason. It is the text sent along with the video that gives you context. Many a time I have seen the same video being sent in different contexts. For example, the two men who were lynched in north-east [for alleged child-kidnapping], [Those who circulate] will use the same video again later with some other context like [those men] were disrespecting Bharat Mata [Mother India] or something.

Interview with female NGO worker in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

Our analysis of the data gathered for this research consistently suggests **users' motivations and ideological biases can come into conflict with their functional digital literacy**. Social contexts of dislike, envy, contempt and hatred against Dalits, Muslims and other minority groups, overwhelm the potential of many forms of media and digital literacy to prevent the spread of disinformation. Indeed, digital skills and functional media literacy allied to strong ideological prejudices and hatred against the other can assist the spread of disinformation, and sometimes be the trigger for misinformation.

Gendered Usage of WhatsApp

As discussed in the previous section, media literacy and digital skills are no prophylactic against misinformation, sometimes quite the contrary as they can be used in the service of broader systems of power and inequality. An acute example of this is gendered access to smartphones and their usage by women.

A: We have three mobile phones at home but only one of them is smart phone. I rarely use the smart phone, mostly children use it, I hardly use the phone. Our children watch cartoon shows, songs on the phone. I don't know how to put all this on phone.

B: I don't have a phone with me, my husband keeps the phone all the time.

C: I only have the basic phone at home, nobody has smart phone in our house. My son taught me how to use this basic phone. We never had any phone in our house before.

D: For me somebody usually makes the call and hands me the phone, so I don't know to how to make a call or receive a call. I just talk on it.

E: If I ever have my own phone, I will first learn how to use WhatsApp. How to send photos and videos.

F: We have three smartphones and two basic phones at home. I only use to make or receive calls, I don't touch it otherwise. I can play a video on the phone, can open a game, can see a photo, can see what has come on WhatsApp but don't know how to send anything.

G: I know that one can see videos on WhatsApp. Our brothers usually have smartphones, so we don't see or use it much, only when the phone is at home, we use it at times. People send videos of some functions or cartoons on WhatsApp. People send photos for wishing good morning or festivals. These are the ones I also forward to others.

Focus group discussion with middle aged women in Nindanpur, Uttar Pradesh

R: Initially, it was very difficult. Then my brother taught me how to send photos. But I don't know how to type in English.

S: It was tough to know how to save numbers. Before, I never knew if it was my mother or brother or anyone else who was calling. Now I know because of caller ID.

Focus group discussion with women in Daliganj, Uttar Pradesh

Y: I was using simple phone, we got this phone from organisation, so viju bhau taught me that how to use it. Calling someone and picking someone's call was easy but I learnt typing messages.

Z: My son taught me how to use it.

Focus group discussion with men and women in Chandrapur, Maharashtra

Our analysis of focus group data suggests that women, particularly in small towns and rural areas, frequently do not have any or unfettered access to smartphones. If they do have access, it is either monitored by a male member of their family or curtailed by their limited functional digital literacy. As the above quotes show, in some cases, male users in their families or networks help women access and use smartphones. However, we also heard that men's digital literacy has adverse consequences when allied to misogynist practices.

OO: Some boy from my college had taken my photo from WhatsApp. I don't know how he got my number and then he put my photo beside some other person's photo. My brother saw that and asked me who that was. I had no clue who that was and then we had to take a screenshot and got his account blocked. That's why I use my phone only to talk to my friends and only for 2 hours per day. I use only WhatsApp. And I am so scared that I don't put my photo anywhere.

TP: I got a video on WhatsApp where a girl had shared a video on TikTok but she hadn't worn underwear and without her knowledge, her private parts were showing. I told my friend to delete the video and I searched for the girl's ID on TikTok and informed her about this. But by that time, it had already reached a lot of people.

Focus group discussion with middle-aged women in Daliganj, Uttar Pradesh

> " Two years back, in Chappra village, an obscene video was made of the [rape of an accredited social health activist] worker and was circulated – she committed suicide after that or she was murdered, I don't know; but she died after that video became viral on WhatsApp. "

GA: Two years back, in Chappra village, an obscene video was made of the [rape of an accredited social health activist] worker and was circulated – she committed suicide after that or she was murdered, I don't know; but she died after that video became viral on WhatsApp.

Interview with employee in a mobile phone services shop, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh[49]

QP: [P]eople add you to groups without your permission sometimes. Once someone added me to a BJP WhatsApp group and someone sent a pornographic image on it recently. People called him out on it. I also commented on it, women and men both are part of the group, how can he send something like this on the group? I told everyone in the group to either remove me from the group or send only decent stuff on the group. If you want to send such stuff to someone then send it personally to them, why send it on a group?

Focus group discussion with men and women in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

As these experiences show, women often experience smartphone use as a domain carrying high risks. They have to negotiate between the patriarchal protection and surveillance of the men and older women in their immediate families, the attention of strangers who may seek to harm them through the appropriation and repurposing of content that they share unwarily about themselves, and the dangers of rape and shame culture. When assaulted physically and/or via sexualised images of them circulated amongst large numbers of users in short time spans, the women caught up in these events are overcome by feelings of shame and humiliation which are further fuelled by unsympathetic reactions from the wider community and the brazenness of perpetrators who feel that nothing will be done and that they have a right to women's bodies. We were told repeatedly of these feelings, experiences and of the fear or despair that ensued. Exacerbating this situation, men (and sometimes other women) in some families do not support the women, rather blaming them for endangering themselves or for breaching their own privacy, for being "fast", "casual", "loose", "unprincipled" or "slutty". We were told that there is a widespread view that if a woman chooses to use a smartphone and any apps therein she is immoral to begin with or is on the way to becoming immoral through the practice of using technologies. Like the health activist whose tragic story is shared above, women who are already struggling under the burden and fear of public sexualisation and humiliation appear to see no alternative other than suicide[50].

In India's caste-driven society, since caste is operationalised and sustained through endogamous relationships within sub-castes (called *jati)* that place

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[49] The details of this tragic case have been widely discussed in the media, pointing to the ubiquity of rape culture in India; the implication of WhatsApp to circulate viral rape videos made by perpetrators; and the patriarchal ways in which women bear the brunt of the social stigma attached to rape: **thequint.com/news/india/muzaffarnagar-asha-worker-commits-suicide-after-rape-clip-shared**

[50] Japleen Pasricha, *"Violence" Online In India: Cybercrimes against Women and Minorities on Social Media* (Delhi, 2016), accessed June 10, 2019, **feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FII_cyberbullying_report_website.pdf**; Anita Gurumurthy and Amrita Vasudevan, "Hidden Figures: A Look at Technology-Mediated Violence against Women in India," *IT for Change*, last modified 2019, accessed February 12, 2019, **itforchange.net/ hidden-figures-a-look-at-technology-mediated-violence-against-women-india**; Asad Ashraf, "A Dark Trade: Rape Videos for Sale in India," *Al-Jazeera*, last modified October 2016, **aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/10/dark-trade-rape-videos-sale-india-161023124250022.html**

Figure 11: WhatsApp forwarded message of a young man and woman hanging from tree. There was no context provided whether this was a case of caste-based murder, lynching, or suicide.

the burden of purity on women, it is women who become key foci of community anxiety[51]. Modern technologies such as smartphones are perceived as a threat to the endogamous order that has been built through systematic and vicious restrictions on women's mobility and via the caste-based, ghettoised spatial ordering of urban and rural neighbourhoods. Through WhatsApp and platforms such as TikTok, You Tube, Facebook and Instagram, the role of the woman as the carrier of caste purity comes under further strain. In this scenario, given that smartphones are not going to disappear, it is primarily girls and women who face the violent misogynist backlash from patriarchal and caste society's angst about technological incursions.

All-male WhatsApp groups have become fertile ground for the circulation of sexualised images of women and girls as well as for a wide range of pornographic material. Peer-to-peer encryption makes it possible for men to view and share material that they would struggle to share on more "public" platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and You Tube.

> **JJ:** I also get porn every day, say I get about 2GB porn every day on WhatsApp. Even if you leave such groups, they will add you again and also call you and shout, why did you leave the group, that is how friends are.
>
> *Focus group discussion with young and middle-aged men in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh*

> **KK:** We get all kinds of messages. If it is a group with old friends, we sometimes even get vulgar messages (laughs)
>
> *Focus group discussion with college students, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh*

It should be noted that working class women from Dalit backgrounds and from so-called "backward castes[52]" experience both symbolic and physical violence more frequently than women from middle and upper castes. In our interactions with women across all four states,

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[51] Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi; and Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development* (Jullundur City: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1968).

[52] The Indian subcontinent has sustained a caste-based hierarchy in its society for more than two thousand years. The hierarchy is based on a broad four-tiered varna (type): brahmins (priest), kshatriya (warrior), vaishya (trade) and shudra (labour). The fifth and lowest type is outside varna, hence sometimes called as "avarna" or more commonly as "Dalit". The actual operationalization and durability of the caste system stems from an exclusive endogamous system of association- called *jati* to form sub-castes that are closely tied to profession, surname, group identity and so on. There are thousands of *jatis* in India. See Gail Omvedt, *Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States*, 1. ed. (Delhi: Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, 1982); Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994); Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste with a Reply to Mahatma Gandhi; and Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development*.

> Digital skills and functional media literacy allied to strong ideological prejudices and hatred against the other can assist the spread of disinformation, and sometimes be the trigger for misinformation.

a large number of Dalit and OBC women said that they received messages that brought sexual violence to the fore. These include:

- Messages from unknown people, most likely men, saying "I like you" or "I love you"

- Pornographic content

- Moving image footage of women being beaten up by men

- Moving image footage of women being raped by men

- Moving image footage of the murders of women

- A woman being burnt alive

- Couples getting beaten up.

While the material circulated is not *caused by* WhatsApp, the barrage of such material received by users is predicated on the intersection of available technologies with existing values, ideologies and practices – particularly casteism, misogyny and patriarchy. All of these values, ideologies and practices have been able to find a widened sphere for expression in India and elsewhere (particularly in the UK and the USA amongst diasporic groups) on cross-platform apps such as WhatsApp.

YL: I've noticed how [on] these WhatsApp groups run by political parties I often see there are messages, images, and videos which are either morphed or very obviously mischievously edited to basically either make it look very sexual but in a derogatory way towards women. I remember that there was this [porno]graphic photo that was doing the rounds on these political WhatsApp groups and it was just after the air strikes that India conducted and the scene was rather graphic, it showed a woman who had the Pakistani colours on her being raped by a man who had Indian colours on him. It was being shared with

much joy on these groups. The idea here was that India is the man and India is the one [that] conducted air strikes [and what] becomes a thing of masculinity and misogyny here is that Pakistan is [represented as] a woman and can't do anything. That she is helpless. So, the semantics of that message are very common. I find in my observations that this kind of misogyny flows very freely, especially on political WhatsApp groups. The other thing that you see is because it's a closed medium, a lot of the members who are not necessarily members who know each other, they are very open about expressing their defamatory, derogatory references toward women leaders. Be it any major political leader who is a woman, I would always find some derogatory references about her.

Interview with journalist in Mumbai, Maharashtra

The quote above captures the intersectional nature of online misogyny. The muscular and patriarchal nature of nationalism promoted by the BJP and allied parties is closely tied to military aggression against Pakistan and to territorial security and expansion. Every time there is a cross-border conflict, the misogynistic aspect of nationalism is heightened. In this quote, Pakistan becomes feminised, enabling Hindutva supporting men to create a triple fantasy – a violent and easy domination of India over Pakistan, of Hindus over Muslims, and of men over women. The other notable issue pertaining to misogyny in WhatsApp groups and on other platforms such as TikTok and ShareChat is the form of expression enabled by a feeling of male conviviality. Sometimes WhatsApp groups with only male members feel emboldened to express misogynistic views that they perhaps feel they cannot air during interpersonal encounters with mixed gender groups or in the offline public sphere. The "closed off" nature of the group opens up a flow of existing misogyny[53].

[53] The recent chilling publication of misogynist language and rape threats in a Facebook chat by a group of male university students in the UK about their female peers, and the subsequent legal and social furore confirms that this phenomenon is not confined to India. See Dulcie Lee and Larissa Kennelly, "Inside the Warwick University Rape Chat Scandal," *BBC*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **bbc.com/news/uk-48366835**

The contexts of WhatsApp Usage in India

Drawing from broad socio-cultural perspectives on communication technologies, we argue that the tendency to spread misinformation and disinformation which has risen sharply in India and other countries does not stem directly from WhatsApp. Rather, the circulation of a high volume of dangerous and damaging misinformation and disinformation results from a combination of existing socio-political circumstances, popular attitudes and values, political power relations, and the availability of a technological tool that makes the circulation of content so easy and risk-free for the producers and forwarders of misinformation. A socio-cultural understanding provides a corrective to policy advocates and government officials who at times appear eager simply to *clamp down on or censor technological platforms*. There is undoubtedly a need to regulate platforms and apps stringently. However, in the cases we have been examining in India, there is no guarantee that such regulation, if left to state actors alone or even to a combination of private and state actors, would prevent the spread of disinformation and/ or the violence to which it leads. Such regulation, if undertaken in the same way that the electronic broadcast media has been regulated, would seem highly unlikely to solve the structural aspects of the crisis of violence that is engulfing various parts of the world, and India in particular.

The rise of authoritarian right-wing populist regimes has been marked by increasing violence against social and ethnic minorities carried out with little fear of reprisal by ascendant and aggressive majority groups. **In India, as elsewhere, simply regulating or tinkering with the affordances of various platforms is akin to putting a Band-Aid on a gaping wound.** We have observed that the central government has resorted to shutting down the internet every time an instance of mass mobilisation is predicted. However, it has become clear that the shut downs of the internet in these circumstances are not necessarily in the public interest, and in fact tend to further a particular anti-dissent agenda. Textile traders in Surat (in the state of Gujarat) protesting against Goods and Services Tax (GST) legislation, caste-based protests demanding reservations and various other such protests

that occur on a regular basis have been the target of state governments putting pressure on internet service providers to shut down the internet[54]. Such shut-downs have wide-ranging consequences.

A case in point is the recent shutdown of the internet and all telecommunications services in Kashmir even before the abrogation of Kashmir's autonomous status[55]. According to their announcements, the government uses internet shutdowns as a pre-emptive measure to mitigate street protests. However, the shutdown in Kashmir has caused panic given the impossibility of direct or mediated communication with family, friends and colleagues. In India rumours have been spreading about what is actually going on. On platforms such as Twitter, hashtags such as #KashmirwithModi were trending even while Kashmiris themselves did not have access to the internet. Overall, this tactic of shutting down all means of communication has become one of the main ways in which the government of India has denied people in Kashmir their universal right to freedom of speech and expression. In 2019 Jammu and Kashmir faced its 53rd internet shutdown; 47 per cent of all internet shutdowns in India have taken place in Jammu and Kashmir[56]. Shutting down the internet and mobile communications is, unsurprisingly, not an effective way to prevent disaffection or unrest amongst groups, or to prevent the spread of hateful content.

> It is difficult to control a video after it gets viral. Internet can be shut down only for some time but it is not a stable solution because as soon as the internet is restored, the videos are forwarded again. Sometimes people are warned not to send such communal videos but it not an effective measure. After a while such videos can be seen in circulation again.
>
> *Interview with police official in Muzaffarnagar,Uttar Pradesh*

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[54] Rajat Kathuria et al., *The Anatomy of an Internet Blackout: Measuring the Economic Impact of Internet Shutdowns in India*, 2018, accessed September 19, 2019, **icrier.org/pdf/Anatomy_of_an_Internet_Blackout.pdf**

[55] Sameer Hashmi, "'Don't Beat Us, Just Shoot Us': Kashmiris Allege Violent Army Crackdown," *BBC*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49481180**; Vindu Goel, Karan Deep Singh, and Sameer Yasir, "India Shut Down Kashmir's Internet Access. Now, 'We Cannot Do Anything,'" *The New York Times*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **nytimes.com/2019/08/14/technology/india-kashmir-internet.html**

[56] Data compiled by Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) tracker **internetshutdowns.in/**. Last accessed 11th August, 2019.

The Ideology of Hindutva

In 2019, in India, the broad socio-cultural context that drives disinformation is that of Hindutva, an ideology stemming from the mass-based organisation the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) founded in 1925 and its various allied wings. Drawing inspiration from fascist movements in Italy and Germany in the early years of the 20th century[57], the ideologues of the RSS carved out a vision of a nation state founded on ethno-religious affiliation rather than secular or democratic principles. This ideology which has come to be called Hindutva, has since the 1950s been operationalised in the formal political system through the Jan Sangh that since 1980 renamed itself as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Along with a host of other organisations, this ideology materialises through the Sangh Parivar (the family of organisations affiliated to Hindutva)[58].

The Hindutva project of reconfiguring India as a Hindu-dominated nation, while always powerful, has steadily gained purchase within branches of the state as well as holding a hegemonic position vis-a-vis symbolic aspects of everyday social life in India. Historically, much of the growth of Hindutva can be attributed to the interests not of all Hindus or all Indians but of the powerful dominant castes and their allies, especially the Brahmins and business-castes whose wealth and power were threatened by the full implications of secular and socialist thoughts for dismantling caste-based society and providing a social security net for the poor. However, all the dominant castes put together do not represent more than a quarter of the 1.37 billion strong population. Therefore, dominant caste interests have to be maintained through the consent of the majority, or the Bahujan communities comprising Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Dalits and Adivasis.

Precisely in order to provide the cohesive glue for a conflict driven caste system and in order to maintain the dominance of a small minority over a vast majority, the ideology of Hindutva presents itself as a solution for winning consent. However, in order to maintain internal cohesion, the boundary line needs to be drawn and the figure of the outsider needs to be posited. Hindutva ideologues present Muslims as the enemy of the nation. Over time, Muslims in India have found themselves consistently accused of being traitors, allies of foreign states and interlopers who belong in the nation state of Pakistan with whom the Indian state has fought several wars and continues to engage in low-key conflict on a more or less continuous basis. In the face of global capitalism and its various consequences, the project of Hindutva too has accelerated the broad tendencies which became visible in the 1920s.

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[57] Sumit Sarkar, "The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 5 (1993): 163–167; G Aloysius, "Trajectory of Hindutva," *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, no. 24 (1994): 1450–1452.

[58] Jairus Banaji, *Fascism: Essays on Europe and India* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Three Essays Collective, 2016); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Since the late 1980s, the parliamentary strength of the BJP has increased steadily. Dominant castes have come together and have now cornered most of the Parliamentary seats[59]. The modest increase in OBC representation in the lower house of the Indian Parliament has been reversed in the 2019 elections, while in political and entertainment discourse all Indian Muslims are even more ubiquitously represented by BJP and allied politicians as the enemies of Hindus and Hinduism.

WhatsApp as a technological cross-platform app appears in India in this abovementioned specific conjuncture. Although he seems to underplay the problem by making it appear to be something that might equally affect all communities depending on which locality one is in, a journalist in Mumbai demonstrates some alertness to the way in which this dominant narrative about Muslims is easily exacerbated through visual misinformation:

> **V:** …Videos are being sent *with purpose* these days. For example, in the video where a boy was tied to a tree and there were men beating him, one can just edit the video and add a skull cap to a man who is beating the boy. *That's it, now it has become Hindu vs Muslim.* But in reality, he may be Hindu [doing the beating] but it is made to look like he is Muslim and this creates misunderstandings. Once these videos get forwarded and people watch these videos, it gets ingrained in our minds and we start picking fights with people of other religions. [Whichever religion] is in majority [of the local population] in whichever area, will start reacting. [After that] even

[if] a goat [belonging to] a Muslim enters my field, and I have already watched this video and am thinking that a Muslim man was beating a Hindu boy, I will get angry and make an issue of [my neighbour's] goat entering my field. This is how [WhatsApp based incitement to violence] works.

Interview with journalist in Mumbai, Maharashtra

> **Z:** After the 2013 incident there is an increased understanding among people, but there is a fear of it being repeated again. Things are still sensitive. In future the same can happen again. During riots the video which went viral was not of our country. This was revealed later. People can be provoked through fake news even today. Riots can be provoked using that kind of video.

Interview with police official, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh

> **WW:** I received a message recently about a boy from Hubli who was a gau-rakshak [cow-protector] who committed suicide. People are using this situation to spread communalism. They are conspiring that it is a murder and using it to instigate people. Even a prominent BJP leader tweeted saying it is a murder. Many people forwarded this tweet even though she deleted that tweet later [as it was an unsubstantiated rumour].

Interview with electronics engineer in Dharwad, Karnataka

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I received a message recently about a boy from Hubli who was a gau-rakshak [cow-protector] who committed suicide. People are using this situation to spread communalism. They are conspiring that it is a murder and using it to instigate people. Even a prominent BJP leader tweeted saying it is a murder. Many people forwarded this tweet even though she deleted that tweet later [as it was an unsubstantiated rumour]. 99

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[59] Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, "Explained: In Hindi Heartland, Upper Castes Dominate New Lok Sabha," *The Indian Express* (Delhi, May 27, 2019), accessed July 21, 2019, **indianexpress.com/article/explained/in-hindi-heartland-upper-castes-dominate-new-house-5747511/**

Figure 12: WhatsApp forwarded message of popular yoga practitioner, businessman and champion of Hindutva, Baba Ramdev with calf.

TT: I belong to Gujarat, and there we had horrific incidents happening because of fake news. For example, 2-3 years back, a news spread that during Navratri [festival] one Muslim man is standing with his feet on one of the goddesses, or something stupid like that. In Gujarat people have a tendency for people to get influenced by riot-like things, everybody wants to contribute to it. It is very normal there; they will [set] light [to] an empty bus, burn public property. So that video also created a tense environment during Navratri between Hindu-Muslim in the area. They had put an empty bus on fire. WhatsApp was also shut off for 3-4 days, I think the internet was working but only WhatsApp was banned on those days. Ten years back you would never think that a small message could lead to things like this.

TT: I think there is more fear in using WhatsApp today. Just today I was discussing with my friend about this new app which has encrypted chats, we should start using it instead of WhatsApp. I am always sceptical to talk about things that are not easy to talk about these days on WhatsApp. We were talking about, how I was buying buff for my dog, I was talking to a friend on WhatsApp how I

am going to go and buy buff [buffalo meat] for my dog and as soon as I sent it, I was like shit, I should delete it, what if someone is actually reading this chat and I end up being lynched or something. So, one gets scared. Even if we are laughing about it now but there is a certain fear around.

Interview with NGO worker in Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

As the last quote reveals, there is a tangible sense of fear, especially among the younger active but secular users of WhatsApp who feel that they will face violent consequences from political vigilante groups given the political and cultural contexts in which they live. Other users shared examples when they faced ostracization and humiliation when they chose to question a dominant government or Hindutva narrative, even amongst friends.
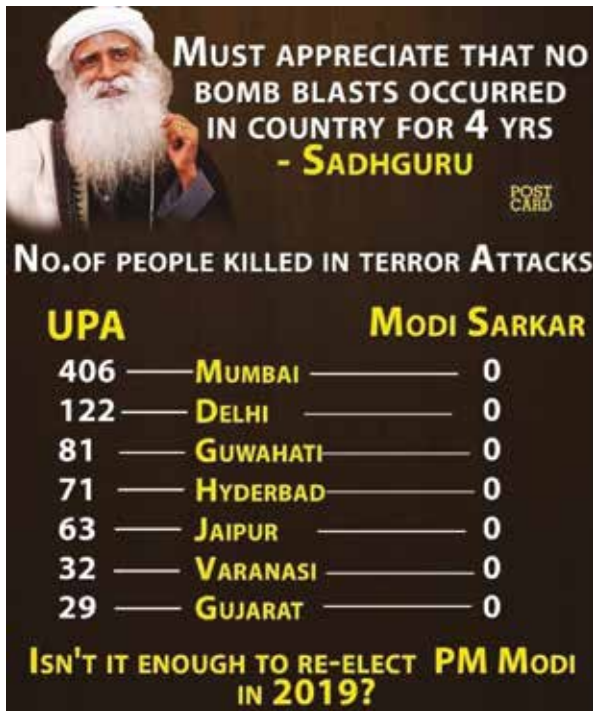
Figure 13: WhatsApp forwarded message of popular spiritual leader and champion of Hindutva, Jaggi Vasudev comparing casualties of terror attacks between BJP and Congress governments.

TT: I got a message related to religion about whether temple or mosque should be built in Ayodhya[60]. I wrote back on the group saying that no temple or mosque should be built there, but we should build a school there for education. As a consequence, ***I was made to exit the group***. Even I didn't ask why did they remove me from the group. They were all my old long-time friends. I speak to them otherwise on phone. I never asked them about what happened on that WhatsApp group because all of us know what happened, so what is there to ask?

Interview with NGO worker,
Dewas, Madhya Pradesh
[Emphasis added]

Technology is not outside of or immune to the political and social circumstances of the locations in which it is used. In India and more widely the various WhatsApp groups which incorporate users, are not groups created in a vacuum. These groups borrow from existing forms of sociality in their places of origin. Thus, caste-based networks that go back centuries have now had superimposed upon them networks of spatiality (Brahmin-only apartments, or Dalits forced to settle outside a village) and professionality (upper level administrators in public and private sectors dominated by dominant castes) and more recently, online sociality. Incitement works by creating the conditions of hatred, contempt and disgust that spark into violence.

> **EE:** ...a few Hindu villagers actually found some animal remains in a plastic bag. It was some body parts, but it was unclear which animal it was. But someone posted a message saying that a cow has been slaughtered in this particular area and this person has done this because he had his son's wedding last night (and the animal remains were found very close to his house). That message was started on WhatsApp and someone clicked a photo of that and wrote a note below that and spread it. Within minutes there were mobs and mobs of people, over a few thousands according to what the cops told me, who descended on that village and were standing outside the said man's house. They were a Muslim family and his son had just gotten married so he had had a feast at his house. The [mobs] descended there and assaulted him only because most of them saw that WhatsApp message.

Interview with journalist in Mumbai, Maharashtra

The assault described here took place at that moment *only* because most of the members of that vigilante mob saw that particular piece of misinformation on WhatsApp. However, in our view, such daily practices of creating and sharing information and misinformation are inextricably linked to existing ideological suspicions and hatreds as this quote above shows. The technical affordances (smartphone including camera, the facility of group-based messaging and text caption for images in WhatsApp, telecommunication network/spectrum) are operationalised and immediately become a mob of a "few thousands" since in such cases, there are some Hindus who are already waiting to attack the Muslim family.

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[60] In 1992, supporters of Hindutva illegally demolished the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a city in Uttar Pradesh, long believed by Hindutva supporters to be the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram.

User Motivations

" During the election I got messages from different political parties. I also get Hindu-Muslim conflict videos but don't usually watch these. What happens normally is that you start watching a video and after a few seconds you stop and just forward it your friends. One does not [need to] watch the complete video to understand what is being said in the video. Only later you realise what you have sent to whom. **"**

While we certainly encountered much reflexive thinking on other issues – especially linked to gender, in focus groups with women – a key feature of much of the talk we encountered around **motivations for passing on messages in WhatsApp groups** was a notable lack of reflexivity involved in receiving, decoding and forwarding information and misinformation. Some groups of users tend to forward messages they receive just based on the subject line, without even opening the messages to check what the information is about. They claim that the preview is sufficient to give them a sense of the value of the message and its importance. The contextual understanding in terms of dynamics of group, or the obvious affiliation of a group with a particular agenda, suffices to give the user a sense of whether a message is worth sharing or not.

O: [male] I don't check forwarded content always, not only that sometimes I forward posts without reading in detail. Maybe it's wrong but I forward posts without checking that is also truth.

K: [female] We don't know how many times we have forwarded content without checking that it is truth or not.

Focus group discussion with men and women in Satara, Maharashtra

Q: I read two lines of post then we get sense of that post then I take decision about forwarding or not. When new person is using WhatsApp, his curiosity is different than regular user so new person will check every message. Old user can understand by reading 2 lines.

Focus group discussion with male students in Pune, Maharashtra

P: I usually get "good morning", "good night" messages or "forward this message to five people otherwise something bad will happen to you". I get religious messages like photos of goddesses. During the election I got messages from different political parties. I also get Hindu-Muslim conflict videos but don't usually watch these. What happens normally is that you start watching a video and after a few seconds you stop and just forward it your friends. One does not [need to] watch the complete video to understand what is being said in the video. Only later you realise what you have sent to whom.

Interview with young male college graduate, Dewas, Madhya Pradesh

R: We also add only those people who we know. But without checking people can forward any post or video so I think we should double check before forwarding. Maybe sometime I also forget this thing.

S: If a person is writing his own thoughts, or sharing any news and I know he is a good person maybe then I can forward that post.

T: I don't check content always [before forwarding]. [I know that] we cannot believe just anyone's forwarded messages but still I don't check [before forwarding].

Focus group discussion with middle-aged men and women, Chandrapur, Maharashtra

None of the users in our focus groups admitted to spreading disinformation and misinformation deliberately. Most, however, revealed entrenched practices of sharing misinformation and disinformation, sometimes based on their trust in the sender or originator of the message, whilst also claiming that disinformation is always spread by "others". They attributed this spread

to people either being duped into believing pieces of misinformation or to those others' lack of moral turpitude as an individual or group member, or to supposed rural backwardness and illiteracy:

> **U:** There was a video of Rahul Gandhi talking about making potatoes into gold. I'm sure he didn't actually say that. You can watch news on TV also to distinguish what's fake and what's not. I don't send these videos. I just delete them. ***Mostly people in villages send fake messages because they don't know how to read and write***. Educated people also send [fake] messages actually but its less. If people become more aware [and literate] this will stop.

> *Interview with male student, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh* [Emphasis added]

A few minutes later in the same interview when asked about his usage during the Pulwama attacks, this student said "I mostly received very patriotic messages. But that was a very charged time. ***Even the fake news seemed true to me* .** I received four videos about the attack. It later turned out that only one was real and the rest were fake" [Emphasis added]. Thinking the patriotic videos were real, this urban, educated student had already shared them by the time he discovered his mistake.

Particularly amongst well-educated users who are aware of the need for a politically correct stance on disinformation, we found a tendency to position themselves as alert, ethical, responsible and savvy media users. However, as the above example shows, even very educated and media literate users are often not aware of the contradictions in their beliefs and behaviours. Following their views further, they appear to think that some types of disinformation and misinformation are exempt from blame if they are shared in the heat of the moment, at a "charged time" when nationalist passions are running high. On the surface, this may seem almost as a "non-motivation". We argue that on the contrary, in the cases we have observed it is the deep-seated ideology of Indian nationalism, national security, and hostility or hatred towards Kashmiris, Muslims, and others that appears to be the subtle moral motivation to overlook one's own practice of sharing disinformation during supposedly politically tense times.

As noted before, a key aspect of belonging to a WhatsApp group is the sociality involved in creating and being in a group.

> **W:** I have a WhatsApp group, it has 255 members, now cannot add any more people, I have reached the maximum limit on the group. It is called *[person name] mitra mandli [friend group]*. I am the only admin on the group. I have done the setting the group that no one can change the icon or name of the group, only I can. I had made other people admin before but they started adding random people to the group, I didn't even know those people. I have been running this group for three years now. I just made it, for no specific reason. We were only 20-30 people initially in the group. It gradually grew big. All people here [referring to focus group participants] are also part of this group. I had opened the group for time-pass. At that time, I didn't even know much about a WhatsApp group, what is it, what does it do, I just created one. We also chat on that group.

> *Focus group discussion with male students, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh*

All participants in the quote above came from a Dalit community and were part of several other WhatsApp groups that asserted their rights *as* Dalits, groups named after Dr Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule (both well-known anti-caste campaigners and public intellectuals). In such cases, WhatsApp has enabled a mode of sociality where young users who have access to smartphones, media literacy, and access to affordable data can create networks for young Dalits whose interests are represented neither in mainstream media, nor in the offline public sphere and discourse due to caste bias. We have heard it suggested in discussion, that end-to-end encryption of WhatsApp messages enables those suffering various forms of oppression and who might not otherwise have a voice in the mainstream media to circulate information germane to their cause, and to communicate safely with each other. This view, which suggests the important role of encrypted communications apps such as WhatsApp for enabling resistance and strengthening aspects of democracy in India, is one that must to be considered seriously alongside the other findings of our research.

Most users we interviewed are members of multiple groups – often with contradictory claims and affiliations, ranging from health-related groups to groups of political parties (see quotes from users in the section

on Affordances, Platforms and Infrastructures on pages 21-23). Many users claimed a level of exhaustion with the constant flow of information, a relentless stream of messages that would be impossible to go through with attentive thoroughness in a single day.

FF: I'm not on any third-party groups; friends' group and company group and family group. I was on a political group but I exited because I was getting tired of the repeated messages and my phone memory was also becoming full. So, I left it.

GG: Mainly religious and political. Too many messages and too many lies. It's just Chatting, chatting, chatting. There is no use. Just because of the provision of groups, there are 200/300/400 messages coming daily and I don't think that's right.

Interviews with mobile phone shop employee and a chartered accountant 25-30 years, males, Dharwad, Karnataka

It is important not to dismiss this aspect of WhatsApp group membership. The cognitive, physical and emotional labour that would be required to process, and decide whether to respond, amend, delete, forward-to-many or forward-to-some the bulk of messages received on any given day is significant – and in some cases would (and does) comprise a full-time, paid job. In the face of such relentless flows of sayings, greetings, prayers, comments, information, misinformation and disinformation, ordinary users who are not paid to administer social media spaces demonstrate two key tendencies associated with the need for speed – bulk deletion and/or bulk forwarding of messages. Both actions are based on specific motivations.

Some users bulk delete messages at a specified time of day, usually the end of each day; it could also be the bulk deletion of messages only for specific groups where unread messages have accumulated. This is a tactic for negotiating challenges at both the practical and the affective levels. Bulk deletion of messages enables users to feel that they are successfully avoiding drowning in an overload of messages on their phones and thus ease the sense of pressure that we were repeatedly told accompanies belonging to a lot of very active WhatsApp groups, while retaining the feeling of connectedness and/or community that being in those groups brings. There are also practical challenges associated with a build-up of unread messages. If too many messages accumulate, the storage capacity of a user's phone risks filling up, or going through many messages might drain the batteries of the phone. In other cases, the signal of the network is hard to find so users are selective about what content they engage with. Almost every person who has been using WhatsApp spoke unfailingly, and disparagingly, about having to delete multiple messages wishing them good morning, good night, hello etc with accompanying images/GIFs/videos on a daily basis.

Our findings reveal two further motivations. One is a fear of missing out and of being excluded thereafter. Users believe that the forwarding of a message is a valid form of participation in a group, and counts as a group activity or participation in the eyes of other group members. We heard the fear expressed on several occasions that if a WhatsApp group member stops participating overtly, then the group dynamics will slowly start excluding them and will cohere around only those members who drive the activity of that group by regular postings, stories, forwards and message responses. The other motivation for forwarding is the establishment of a user's own credibility and importance with regard to the subject matter of the

"

None of the users in our focus groups admitted to spreading disinformation and misinformation deliberately. Most, however, revealed entrenched practices of sharing misinformation and disinformation. "

Figure 14: WhatsApp forwarded message of forest fires in California shared as an image of forest fires in Karnataka.

group. Sometimes local events such as accidents or riots, or other breaches of the peace do not make it onto the television news (especially given that television programming is largely urban-centric). Both of these motivations were discussed primarily by men. Several male users also mentioned this lack of attention from mainstream broadcast media towards local issues and events as an opportunity to establish their own importance and credibility as people who are the first to be in the know about important local events.

We interpreted their comments as being an expression of the wish to be perceived by their communities as **nodes of information**. Possessing information that others do not yet possess was often discussed in our focus groups as an important form of symbolic capital. In order to rush to ensure their rank as the first passer of information, many users hasten to put together a

pastiche of hurriedly assembled content to pass on as fast as they can. If there is news of an accident and still or moving images are unavailable, then images from previous such incidents are used unhesitatingly along with captions or voiceovers that connect the information to an event believed to have taken place in their region. Such swift action requires a certain degree of skill and functional media literacy to achieve which also carries kudos. Moreover, such an action is not perceived by most users as a contribution to misinformation or disinformation, but rather is perceived as analogous to the way in which mainstream media frequently deploy "stock images" from news agencies such as Reuters and AFP while reporting a developing story. Positioning themselves as amateur reporters in the context of their own communities, the users who want to "post first" or "forward first" are less concerned with reliability or the potential to start dangerous rumours than with immediacy and impact. Our analysis was also confirmed by other users who commented on those in their groups who always "post first" or from whom many forwards emanate, suggesting that the proportion of inaccurate or false information might be larger from these people but that they still had a reputation as very knowledgeable and informed.

Our analysis of the data suggests that for many amateur "WhatsApp reporters", the internet appears to be a vast repository of stock messages. Given the limited time in which to gain first mover advantage, they take what they can get.

All of this connects to the strong affective element at play in the use of WhatsApp for the circulation of content that is apparently informational. Amidst the flow of hundreds of messages, the ones which stand out are those that convey a sense of immediacy, and those that can shock.

Overwhelming Information, Spectacular Violence

Many images that users forwarded to us pertained to the overwhelming. These were video clips of massive waterfalls, or natural disasters (hurricanes, tornados), accidents, mishaps, and of course connected to violence. Many users spoke about messages that *disturbed* them, as if these messages made it impossible to re-enter the real world by separating and distancing what they had seen on the screen of their phone screens. In the case of the violence connected to rumours about child kidnapping and kidney theft by strangers, the affective element in WhatsApp usage is noteworthy. These messages frequently display an image (for instance, one repeatedly shared that we believe to have been borrowed from a conflict situation in the Middle East) of what appears to be children's corpses – each of their bodies partially covered by a sheet. The effect on some viewers is immediate and visceral.

This visual message is accompanied by voiceover saying that these children lie dead because their organs were harvested by unknown persons and that all should be vigilant in catching and preventing or punishing the culprits and protecting their own children. The many small and apparently dead bodies in the image convey that what is at stake is a serious problem, not a stray incident. The partial sheet covering the bodies connotes a concealment of the horrors of illegal kidney and organ harvesting; at the very same time, they excite the imagination with regard to the damage which the illegal organ harvesting has done to the tiny bodies beneath the sheets. The voiceover usually narrates the same script with minor variations. And where there is written text, it is usually the same content translated into various regional languages. Text (in both voiceover and description) anchors the image announcing a tangible, clear and present danger. In each case, the (fake) crime is explained, it is alleged that the image is from some other Indian state, and that the perpetrator is a single individual or a group of criminals from a particular state and that they have been observed recently in nearby regions. The message goes on to say that it is crucial to share the message widely in order to "keep our children safe" and "apprehend the perpetrators".

In such messages, the obvious meaning is a request to users to assume civic duty for the sake of the most vulnerable – defenceless children. The sense of civic duty is amplified due to its informal nature. The image acts as "proof" that the forces of law and order have failed to prevent such an atrocity, therefore the implied burden to save the children now rests solely on the public, who become the vigilant guardians in each society – the recipients of the message and other WhatsApp users.

At another level, the message can stir a deep anxiety and anger in the recipients, who are themselves often from poor and marginal communities. It calls into being a feeling of great injustice, that it is not enough that they have to work all day to barely survive, and even after this struggle, and in spite of this struggle, there is a threat to their children. The feelings of horror evoked by the image appear to impel some users to *forward* these messages. At this moment, the movement of discourse is temporarily frozen and affect drives the circulation of misinformation.

In as many as 11 states across India, nearly 50 entirely innocent Indian citizens going about their daily business have been caught and beaten to death, suspected to be kidney snatchers. In contrast to the lynchings around rumours of beef eating or cow slaughter which clearly target Dalits and Muslims, the kidney-snatching WhatsApp rumours have, till the middle of 2019 at least, not appeared to target a particular religion or caste grouping but rather to focus on the idea of the "stranger" who is not to be trusted. Victims of these lynch mobs hail from all communities, are male and female, and come from several social classes. In several cases, perpetrators continued beating the victims even after the police had arrived on the scene. Triggered by the rumours circulating on WhatsApp and by word of mouth thereafter, extreme violence has been unleashed.

In the case of the instigation of sectarian violence, messages were either used to humiliate and point suspicion at Muslims directly or to intensify pride about Hindutva without mentioning Muslims but with a connotation that was derogatory towards Muslims.

For example, in July 2019, a 400-year old idol of the Hindu god Shiva in Maharashtra was partially damaged by lightning. Some users started a rumour that the idol had been vandalised by Muslim groups[61]. In another rumour, a Brazilian prison riot video had been shared as a warning that thousands of Rohingya Muslims are on the prowl looking to kidnap children[62].

In turn the affective power of this content translates into a range of emotions that form the immediate backdrop for spread of disinformation and subsequent violence. These emotions are anger, pride, disgust, humiliation, suspicion and hatred. Incidents alleged to have happened at a local, regional or national level are deliberately twisted to deepen anti-Muslim prejudice and hatred, to provoke pride in an imagined Hindu community and to legitimise any subsequent violence against Muslims.

> **FT:** …mostly just photos and videos praising the [Hindu] community. Also, some information about things happening in the area like if an accident happens, someone will send a photo of that along with the location. Once I got a video of a man [apparently] killing a cow along with a message full of abuses for him. It also said that only true Hindus would share this.
>
> **I:** So, did you forward this?
>
> **FT:** …sometimes you have to share it because what they [the Muslims] are doing is wrong

Focus group discussion with young
men in Nagda, Madhya Pradesh

While those belonging to dominant castes have make increasingly public assertions about what is right and wrong with regard to their version of religion (which takes precedence over whether information is accurate or not), this conflict has deeply adverse implications for the everyday lives and security of Muslims across India

> …my friend's father used to run a group called *[redacted]* group. A rally was being taken out in Ujjain, and there was permission for only 200 people to attend it. But when the rally happened, the crowd started to gather and it became really big. Hindus objected to it and complained to the police. My friend's father was not there in the rally but they all had discussed about the rally on the WhatsApp group. Police did some investigation and arrested my friend's father because he was the admin of that group. They said that he instigated Muslims to take out a rally. He was in jail for three months.

Focus group discussion with Muslim
men in Tarana, Madhya Pradesh

During the air strikes (see *Timeline of the Pulawama and Balakot Attacks* on page 48) in Balakot (on the border of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir), an Indian Air Force pilot was captured and was in Pakistani custody, an event that was widely reported by mainstream television and press news across India. He was kept as a prisoner of war for about a week before the Pakistani government made the decision to send him back to India as a gesture of goodwill and as a concrete measure to de-escalate the impending conflict. Within a week, hundreds of thousands of images of the captured pilot, some gleaned from social media and

> " …mostly just photos and videos praising the [Hindu] community. Also, some information about things happening in the area like if an accident happens, someone will send a photo of that along with the location. Once I got a video of a man [apparently] killing a cow along with a message full of abuses for him. It also said that only true Hindus would share this. "

[61] Pooja Chaudhuri, "Shiva Idol in Maharashtra Vandalised by Muslims? Initial Probe Says Damage by Lightning Strike," *Alt News*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **altnews.in/shiva-idol-in-maharashtra-vandalised-by-muslims-initial-probe-says-damage-by-lightning-strike/**

[62] Pooja Chaudhuri, "Video of 2017 Brazil Prison Riot Shared as Rohingya Muslim Kidnapping Gangs on Prowl," *Alt News*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **altnews.in/video-of-2017-brazil-prison-riot-shared-as-rohingya-muslim-kidnapping-gangs-on-prowl/**

Figure 15: Screenshot of WhatsApp forwarded message about kidney snatching.

Figure 16: A reverse image search reveals hundreds of originators of the photograph on ShareChat and other applications, in different languages.

others from mainstream news media, were circulating on WhatsApp and across many other platforms including Facebook and ShareChat. Most of the images were not accompanied by any commentary, voiceover or text. These were images of the pilot with some bleeding on the face, or video clips of some unknown people capturing the pilot before a Pakistani army man appears to enter the frame and come to usher the pilot to safety from a mob (or, by implication, to further torture). Other versions included doctored content and manipulation of the same content, so the image of the pilot was, variously, surrounded by the Indian flag, or inserted into a patriotic song with a slideshow of the images of the pilot, or inserted into posters connoting that the pilot is a popular film star, or images of the pilot with his family or his peers from the army. All of these images served to concentrate several disparate ideological threads into a single narrative.

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...sometimes you have to share it because what they [the Muslims] are doing is wrong. 〞

Timeline of the Pulwama and Balakot attacks

On the 14th of February 2019, forty Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel were killed when two buses (as part of a larger convoy) became the target of a suicide bombing in Pulwama, a district in South Kashmir. After the suicide bombing, Adil Ahmad Dar, a young Kashmiri from Pulwama released a video claiming responsibility for the attack and associating himself with Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM). Dar had, apparently, been radicalised after being attacked by pellet guns fired by Indian army personnel in 2016 to quell the subsequent outpouring of public sympathy following the killing of popular militant Burhan Wani. Over the next twelve days mainstream media (especially television channels) as well as social media witnessed heated debates about nationalism and national security. Although there was no evidence that the Pulwama suicide bomber had anything to do with Pakistan, much of the Indian domestic media coverage was aggressively in favour of military aggression against Pakistan. Further, thousands of Kashmiris were targeted across the country in instances of discrimination, individual and mob violence. On the 26th of February, 12 jet planes of the Indian Air Force dropped five 1000 kilogram bombs in Balakot, Pakistan. The Indian government maintained that this air strike caused major damage to a JeM camp in Balakot and that terrorists of JeM had been killed (although the exact number of casualties varied in different reports). Foreign press such as Al-Jazeera, the BBC, Reuters have suggested that analysis of satellite imagery suggests no casualties or major damage to JeM camp in Balakot. On the 27th of February, Pakistani jet planes entered Indian air space, allegedly with the intention of targeting Indian military establishments. In the ensuing aerial confrontation, one Indian and one Pakistani plane were shot down. Pakistan captured Air Force pilot Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman and detained him as a prisoner of war. On the 1st of March, Pakistan released Varthaman as a gesture of peace. Subsequently tensions eased between the two countries, although the online rhetoric remained high. Prominent BJP politicians including Prime Minister Modi and president of the BJP, Amit Shah referred to the Pulwama and the Balakot attacks repeatedly during the last stages of their election campaign. As a result, this episode was heavily discussed by mainstream media journalists and social media users till the conclusion of the general election in India on the 19th of May.

> Someone else said that a WhatsApp group wasn't an appropriate place for this discussion and after that it kind of fizzled out. But then sometime later I realised that screenshots from that conversation were circulating all around the campus. And then those were posted on Twitter by a student from this college who also very proudly claims to be an office bearer of the ABVP [student wing of the BJP]. He later pulled down those posts. He blurred everyone's numbers but mine. This post was getting shared by a BJP MLA and another BJP spokesperson. It was flooding all over Twitter.

First, the captured pilot (who crashed while on a mission and landed over the border inside Pakistan) was circulated as proof that *India was under attack from an enemy country* and *at war*. The implications of those images were that at times such as these, all "petty party politics" should be cast aside and that every true Indian needs to come together in the national interest to join against Pakistan and against anyone who supports Pakistani terrorists. The captured and released pilot became the symbol of national pride – a young man who had not revealed a word about Indian secrets in spite of being captured by the enemy. All need to come together to pray for his speedy and safe return. On another level, the pilot and the video of unknown (presumably Muslim) Pakistanis capturing the pilot became a confirmation of *the Muslim as an enemy*. Moreover, the reportage on this episode by mainstream media along with the political context in which it has been framed – namely one of wounded masculine national pride, led to violent consequences for anyone who dared to question the Indian nationalist narrative and the version of events purveyed by the government.

X: So, someone once sent this one post about Pulwama that said that we should all come together and celebrate our martyrs. So, I wrote "LOL". People started getting very furious. They asked how I could make fun of deaths. I said that I wasn't making fun of death but I would certainly make fun of this celebration of martyrdom. This started a whole discussion. I also talked about how army is masculinist and assists in state sponsored crimes. These are words that we use in academia very frequently. Someone else said that a WhatsApp group wasn't an appropriate place for this discussion and after that it kind of fizzled out. But then sometime later I realised that screenshots from that conversation were circulating all around the campus. And then those were posted on Twitter by a student from this college who also very proudly claims to be an office bearer of the ABVP [student wing of the BJP]. He later pulled down those posts. He blurred everyone's numbers but mine. This post was getting shared by a BJP MLA and another BJP spokesperson. It was flooding all over Twitter. And then someone sent me a message saying this was happening. Then I started getting calls that I didn't answer. Later I started getting [threatening] messages on Facebook so I deactivated Facebook. But before that someone had got a photo of me and my mother and circulated that on Twitter. My number and my email ID, my Facebook, Twitter account was made public.

Interview with female student, Mumbai, Maharashtra

तुम्हारी मां की कसम सेंड करो हिंदुस्तान जिंदाबाद

Figure 17: WhatsApp forwarded message combining nationalism and sexual violence. Widely circulated after Pulwama incident. The caption translates as "An oath on your mother, send this. Victory to Hindustan".

This episode of doxing that we were told about was only one amongst dozens reported by other ordinary citizens and public figures who commented in a similar vein or sounded a note of caution about the circumstances of ordinary Kashmiris, or about the dangers of Indian nationalist rhetoric[63].

In 2013 Muzaffarnagar district in the state of Uttar Pradesh witnessed severe riots targeting Muslims. Politically motivated riots in 2013 have not dimmed the prospects of ongoing and future violence based on religious discrimination.

> **VV:** At the time when Pulwama attack happened, it was seen as a Hindu-Muslim issue. In many WhatsApp groups, people of both the religions were verbally abusing each other. So, in one group, the argument became big, [*redacted*]one shopkeeper had posted something on the group and people went and ransacked his shop. Scenes is created at Police stations, just last week, someone had posted something against the Gita [Hindu religious text], they went to the [*redacted*] police station and created a scene. In another case, the local education officer had made a personal group of the department. During Pulwama attack everybody was sharing their personal views on the group. So, someone commented saying that this attack has not happened on its own but it has

been orchestrated. This led to lot of argument and criticism, he was also suspended from the department.

Focus group discussion with middle-aged male Hindu and Muslims in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh

As this comment and previous comments in the Mumbai housewives group demonstrate, the online quickly bleeds into the offline world if a WhatsApp group member happens to dissent from the ruling ideology of the group. It is not as if one could allege a conspiracy where the BJP top leadership or even the leadership at state level are directly involved in censorship of individual comments in groups. The ideology of authoritarian hyper-nationalism in the context of a discourse of national security and being "anti-national" is enough to galvanise individuals into mobs who delete accounts, exclude recalcitrant members, dox and shame dissenting posters, destroy property, exert "pressure" to get a person suspended from their job, file a complaint with the police, or urge the police to act against victims for apparently disturbing the peace. It should be noted that in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister has a personal track record of making hate speeches and threatening violence against Muslims[64]. In such a context, it is not necessary for an explicit message to be sent from top

[63] Press Trust of India, "Kolkata Girl Gets Rape Threats for Facebook Post on Kashmir," *India Today*, last modified 2019, accessed September 9, 2019, **indiatoday.in/india/story/pulwama-news-kolkata-girl-gets-rape-threats-for-facebook-post-on-kashmir-1460631-2019-02-20**

[64] See **indiatoday.in/india/story/love-jihad-row-yogi-adityanath-provocative-speech-205846-2014-08-27**. Last accessed 14th August, 2019.

Figure 18: WhatsApp forwarded message comparing Indian pilot Abhinandan with a popular South Indian movie star.

politicians directing particular incidents of violence. On the contrary, the above-mentioned instances of harassment become ways of lowly cadres being noticed and rewarded by the local political leadership and even the national leadership. Thus, there will be a number of people who are always on the lookout for those who can be attacked without repercussions and gain quick political mileage with little risk of punishment.

Both in relation to kidney snatching and to the warmongering nationalist images following the Indian army airstrikes on Balakot, the messages that act as a trigger are produced and disseminated in a systematic manner; they fall into clear genres; and are targeted to produce affective states in recipients that make entire communities more prone to agree to, participate in, or view violence against particular targets as legitimate.

Conclusion: Questions of Policy and Regulation

At the beginning of the project, we found ourselves examining and categorising the various different types of image, moving image and audio footage that constitutes misinformation, disinformation and fake news in order to tease out and clarify their patterns. This led us to gather data to address the Research Questions "To what extent do the everyday users of WhatsApp think that they themselves, their fellow users, the different technological and social structures, and their intermediaries in government and corporate sectors, bear the blame for and therefore should take responsibility for increasing public violence and lynchings across India in the past five years? How do they conceive of solutions to these problems?" The foregoing sections have identified some of the answers to these questions:

• greater functional media literacy;

• greater political education and critical media literacy;

• better means for reporting misinformation;

• better means for identifying and reporting hate-speech and other suspicious content;

• more speed, transparency and responsiveness when suspected misinformation is reported;

• More awareness of the use of WhatsApp by political parties and in particular by ruling political parties

• More awareness given by the platform with regard to the role of the Indian police in preventing and prosecuting cyber-crimes against women and girls

• the labelling of messages as forwards;

• the enumeration of the number of times something has been forwarded.

During the analysis of our data, we ourselves came to see an emerging typology amongst users who forward misinformation, which, while changing based on multiple factors, indicates a need for caution in accusing illiterate or rural users of being the primary spreaders and dupes of WhatsApp based misinformation.

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It is not as if one could allege a conspiracy where the BJP top leadership or even the leadership at state level are directly involved in censorship of individual comments in groups. The ideology of authoritarian hyper-nationalism in the context of a discourse of national security and being "anti-national" is enough to galvanise individuals into mobs. "

Table 2: A typology of users

Likelihood of spreading WhatsApp misinformation/ disinformation and hate-speech *which contributes to and legitimises mob violence and/or lynching*	WhatsApp presence	Motivations and characteristics	Major demographic features
VERY HIGH	Initiators and administrators of multiple different types and levels of WhatsApp groups in which Hindu nationalist, party-political and ethno-religious misinformation circulates, including party-political student groups or frequent "first posters" and very heavy WhatsApp users who forward regularly and post stories.	• Strong ideological commitment to ethno-religious and nationalist ideology • Often university educated • High or very high functional digital literacy – aware of all new ways of passing on information; high spec phones; multiple social media accounts; able to make and doctor moving image footage; understands the affordances of different platforms for political-ideological work • Regular consumers of mainstream media • Ideologically inflected media consumption • Politically savvy • Political party loyalties to the government/ruling party and associated politicians • Often involved in Hindutva politics offline • Often involved in multiple social media networks and groups with political and ethno-religious affiliations (Student, work-place, family, local neighbourhood, caste association, temple association, interest-based, friends, political) • Posts in English and Hindi wishing to appeal to national and transnational audience • High level of commenting on and/or policing of others' posts – particularly those which question nationalist misinformation • Frequent trolling and doxing of opposing views • View themselves as (the only) true patriots • Often involved in anti-reservation discussions • Very critical of Congress and other regional opposition parties • Often posts fake infographics and statistics praising the current regime in India for economy, law and order, and other achievements • Sometimes run alt-news outlets or fact-checker sites that selectively call out news critical of policies of Modi and the BJP and that seem to "confirm" pro-BJP political misinformation.	*Mainly:* urban or small town, aged 22-50, Upper or Middle Caste, working or middle-middle class, Hindus (and Jains). Mostly male but include: some middle, upper-middle- and upper class Hindu (and Jain) women aged 20-50.

Likelihood of spreading WhatsApp misinformation/ disinformation and hate-speech *which contributes to and legitimises mob violence and/or lynching*	WhatsApp presence	Motivations and characteristics	Major demographic features
HIGH	Initiators and administrators of WhatsApp groups or very active members of WhatsApp in which local neighbourhood watch-style content circulates, also misogynist content / stereotypes/ nationalist misinformation circulates.	• Ideological commitment to nationalism • Ideological commitment to Hindutva • Literate and employed • Medium to high functional digital literacy • Cross-platform presence • Trolling of opposing ideological views • Posts in Hindi or vernacular to appeal to local audience • View themselves as protectors of the nation, patriots • Posts against Congress and opposition parties, and people allied to them as useless/ corrupt but also circulators of anti-national misinformation.	Mainly: small town and rural Hindu upper or middle caste, some OBCs, working and middle class, men. Includes a small numbers of middle class urban women.
HIGH	Frequent posters in family WhatsApp groups and local WhatsApp groups in which neighbourhood watch-style content circulates about cross-caste relationships, petty theft, also primarily responsible for forwarding content about alleged "Child kidnappers and organ thieves".	• Medium to high functional digital literacy • Posts in Hindi or vernacular • Attends regular word-of-mouth gatherings where news is discussed • View themselves as protectors of family, faith, locality and values • View themselves as well-informed and community node • Passes on ethno-nationalist "facts" which have not been fact checked at times of high political tension.	Small town and rural, Hindu high, middle and lower castes, OBCs, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Others; mainly men aged 30 and above.

Likelihood of spreading WhatsApp misinformation/ disinformation and hate-speech *which contributes to and legitimises mob violence and/or lynching*	WhatsApp presence	Motivations and characteristics	Major demographic features
MEDIUM	Semi-active members in several family, friends, student, local, workplace or interest-based WhatsApp groups and local WhatsApp groups.	• Medium functional digital literacy • In the absence of data, downloads and passes on messages • Likes to feel part of a community online, worried about being excluded or viewed as part of an outgroup • Posts in English, Hindi and/or vernacular • Questions misinformation of certain types (particularly random misinformation) at times of peace • Sometimes fact checks (and so view themselves as possessing critical media literacy • Often forwards messages that contain misinformation, without reading fully • Can never read all the information coming in and so often bulk-deletes or bulk-forwards from certain groups • May post or forward nationalist messages, random still and moving images of accidents/ deaths, sometimes with a question • May post or forward information put out by groups allied to opposition parties • May post accurate information put out by NGOs • May post misinformation put out by opposition groups or NGOs • May post or forward health misinformation • May question or stop forwarding health misinformation.	*Mainly:* urban, small town and rural, Hindu high, middle and lower castes, OBCs young and middle-aged men. *But also sometimes*: urban and small town Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Adivasis; mainly men aged 18-65; *but also includes*: small number of Hindu women (35-50).

Likelihood of spreading WhatsApp misinformation/ disinformation and hate-speech *which contributes to and legitimises mob violence and/or lynching*	WhatsApp presence	Motivations and characteristics	Major demographic features
LOW	Inactive or silent members in several family, friends, student, local, workplace or interest-based WhatsApp groups and local WhatsApp groups.	• May have low levels of functional digital literacy • May have medium levels of critical political literacy • Engaged with local communities in face-to-face civic activities • Very low-spec phones • Can afford very little data • Little personal time and privacy • Never posts information or misinformation • Never forwards misinformation.	*Mainly:* Urban working class, small town and rural, Dalit, Adivasi, OBC, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Other: *Mainly:* girls and women; but also some older men.
LOW	Members of WhatsApp groups that are critical or dissenting towards authoritarian nationalist policies and Hindutva politics.	• High functional digital media literacy • High critical digital media literacy • High political literacy, multiple political affiliations, usually critical of BJP • Reads posts from multiple sources in national and international news • Calls out propaganda, fake news, hate-speech, misinformation and disinformation in multiple sources from mainstream and social media • Aware of and uses languages of Human Rights as opposed to nationalism • Secular, non-religious • Regularly reports and questions misinformation and disinformation of all types and from all sources • Has initiated fact-checking or posts information from fact-checkers • Regularly attacked by online by trolls from the first two groups • Sometimes the victims of fake news and disinformation • Often under surveillance by state.	*Mainly:* urban, might belong to any religion or caste, men and women, older and younger; mainly middle class and upper middle-class but also some working class/students.

Likelihood of spreading WhatsApp misinformation/ disinformation and hate-speech *which contributes to and legitimises mob violence and/or lynching*	WhatsApp presence	Motivations and characteristics	Major demographic features
NONE	Not on WhatsApp or any social media.	• Not on WhatsApp or any social media • Not allied to any political camp • Afraid of being labelled a trouble-maker • Critical of government and politicians' actions which negatively affect their lives • Uninterested in being drawn into Hindutva agenda • Solidarity with local community shown through sharing of resources • May possess a non-smart phone or family doesn't own a phone at all • Negligible functional digital literacy • Often caring for others fulltime and/or working long hours • Might verbally pass on health-related misinformation or other misinformation received from someone with a smartphone but no chance of this leading to lynch-mobs of the type discussed in this report.	*Mainly:* poor or very poor; generally, women, in rural areas and remote areas of all religions; *also mainly* Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim; *occasionally* – very poor rural or urban Hindus, men and women.

It can be seen – from the foregoing typology of users who spread disinformation and/or misinformation – that assuming most misinformation spreads through rural and/or illiterate users and targeting functional digital and information literacy interventions primarily at these groups would be both inaccurate and ineffective. While not all the listed characteristics and motivations-to-forward or not-to-forward misinformation and disinformation apply to all users in that category, motivations often come tied together with particular positions within the current Indian social hierarchy.

Our findings raise several troubling ethical and practical issues for WhatsApp (and other tech companies) and for any citizens or state functionaries interested in reducing the vigilante violence in India as well as the online hate-speech and misinformation that triggers it. These issues all centre around the tension between a genuine commitment to human rights and the commitments of the various parties to their different forms of power – to staying in government and promoting a particular form of intolerant ethno-nationalism, to being the biggest messaging service and financial transaction hub in the country.

While our analysis of the data undermines the view that the blame for all the horrifying violence that has come to be called "WhatsApp lynchings" rests solely with WhatsApp as a company or with poorly educated, digitally illiterate rural users, neither the company nor its users are absolved of blame. Both are implicated by the very accounts of the users we interviewed. So, given a situation in which Indian government and state functionaries have been shown themselves to engage in hate-speech, misinformation, to spread rumours and to countenance the murder of innocent citizens;

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The messages that act as a trigger are produced and disseminated in a systematic manner; they fall into clear genres; and are targeted to produce affective states in recipients that make entire communities more prone to agree to, participate in, or view violence against particular targets as legitimate. "

and in which some members of the police force and Indian justice system not only tolerate casteism[65] and violent misogyny[66] but have themselves participated in rape and molestation, all recommendations have to be understood as conditional on the context.

To our knowledge, four petitions have been filed in the Madras, Bombay and Madhya Pradesh high courts across India demanding that users' Aadhaar numbers and other official ID be linked to people's social media accounts. Facebook has asked that all four be heard together by the Supreme Court. Along with these, a professor from IIT Madras, Dr V Kamakoti has made some recommendations about tagging the phone numbers of users who produce and share messages[67]. The Attorney General of the government has himself now argued for the linking of Aadhar to individuals' social media, a move that our report suggests would be both anti-democratic and fruitless in preventing the most prevalent types of disinformation. In parallel, three states, Manipur, Rajasthan and West Bengal have passed state-level anti-lynching laws. These laws cover valuable ground in holding the state accountable in terms of identifying and punishing perpetrators as well as safeguarding and rehabilitating victims of lynching[68]. However, it is unclear to what extent these laws can curb the spread of disinformation on WhatsApp and other similar applications.

The idea behind these demands and suggestions is supposedly for the Indian state to have the ability to track and trace the originators of a message that have violated Indian laws. Apart from the obvious deeply problematic implications around privacy of crucial identifying data being available to foreign-owned companies such as Facebook, there are equally worrying implications for data misuse and harassment by state forces, Indian corporates and third parties. Evidence suggests that such moves would set precedents for governments to demand user data for censorship of all types of dissent or worse[69].

The current existence and circulation of hate speech against minorities and of misogynist and pornographic content on openly available, non-encrypted platforms and apps (TikTok, ShareChat) has not been prosecuted systematically by the various legal means available across all Indian states to date. In fact, despite the existence of video and other evidence about unlawful killings, perpetrators have been walking free in recent months[70]. Calling for further surveillance of WhatsApp users on the pretext that this would put an end to life-threatening rumours without using the current evidence from non-encrypted platforms and apps and without using laws to punish hate-speech, cyber-crimes and lynchings, and thus send a message to those planning further communal unrest and violence is mistaken and further endangers the human rights of Indian citizens.

On public social media platforms, moderators are employed to take down content that is violent or abusive, that has been flagged as propagating hate, promoting terrorism and constitutes libel. Evidence suggests that while this goes some way to combatting the violent and hate-filled content that reaches most users' screens and news feeds, there are two ways in which much hateful misinformation and violent misogynist and/or racist content continues to circulate: first, companies

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[65] A Ramaiah, "Growing Crimes against Dalits in India despite Special Laws: Relevance of Ambedkar's Demand for 'Separate Settlement'", *Journal of Law and Conflict Resolution* 3, no. 9 (2011): 151–168; A Ramaiah, "Growing Crimes against Dalits in India despite Special Laws," *LSE South Asia* , last modified 2013, accessed June 9, 2017, **blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2013/05/28/growing-crimes-against-dalits-in-india-despite-special-laws/**; Rahul Singh, *Criminal Justice in the Shadow of Caste: Study on Discrimination against Dalit and Adivasi Prisoners and Victims of Police Excesses* (Delhi, 2019), accessed September 9, 2019, **annihilatecaste.in/uploads/downloads/data_190118030229_21000.pdf**

[66] Naureen Shah and Meenakshi Ganguly, *Broken System: Dysfunction, Abuse, and Impunity in the Indian Police*, 2009, accessed September 9, 2019, **hrw.org/report/2009/08/04/broken-system/dysfunction-abuse-and-impunity-indian-police**

[67] Anand Venkatanarayanan, "Dr Kamakoti's Solution for WhatsApp Traceability Is Erroneous, Not Feasible," *Medianama*, last modified 2019, accessed August 29, 2019, **medianama.com/2019/08/223-kamakoti-solution-for-traceability-whatsapp-encryption-madras-anand-venkatanarayanan/**

[68] Harsh Mander, "Showing the Way: On Manipur's New Anti-Lynching Law," *The Hindu*, last modified 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, **thehindu.com/opinion/lead/manipur-shows-the-way/article26007016.ece**; Kishor Govinda, "West Bengal Passes Anti Lynching Bill, BJP Opposes It!," *Gauri Lankesh News*, last modified 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, **gaurilankeshnews.com/bengal-anti-lynching-bill/**

[69] On the recent shutdown of communications in Kashmir, the central government has increased its request for takedown of Twitter accounts, wherein some twitter accounts are accused of being sponsored or associated with terrorism without sufficient evidence. See Anuj Srivas, "Kashmir: Modi Govt's Blocking Orders to Twitter Raise Questions Over Transparency," *The Wire*, last modified 2019, accessed September 12, 2019, **thewire.in/tech/kashmir-twitter-modi-government-takedown-orders-transparency**

[70] See **aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/pehlu-khan-lynching-indian-state-appeal-acquittal-accused-190815091140287.html**

and moderators themselves operate with political and religious biases; second the amount of such hate-speech that is generated far outstrips the ability of moderators to cope. Worse, on cross-platform apps such as WhatsApp, such content may flow freely without any technological possibility of moderating the content due to encryption. Therefore, measures are needed urgently to identify and block the phone numbers of WhatsApp users who are responsible for posting or forwarding even one instance of hate-speech on a non-encrypted platform or app (the majority of which is against Dalits, women and religious minorities), and to take down their posts, however far these have travelled.

The key challenge here is to retain end-to-end encryption so users' privacy in general, and those fighting for secular values and human rights in particular are protected, while at the same time, to hold the circulation of messages with hate speech, misogyny, abuse, incitement to violence and other forms of misinformation and disinformation accountable. Keeping this challenge in mind, we recommend that WhatsApp must act to curb the bulk sharing of messages, by restricting the sharing of messages to only one group at a time. Ideally, we recommend that this be the default setting for WhatsApp users in India, and if not as default, then it should be strongly considered during occasions where it is known that violence tends to transpire – such as in the run up to elections or when rumours of child-kidnapping are circulating in a given town/city.

In order to prevent users' being added to groups without their permission, especially by members of political parties and (quasi) religious groups, we recommend that the default setting should be that an individual user cannot be added to a group without his/her permission.

Instances of disinformation that lead to vigilante violence are extremely time-sensitive. Rumours of cattle-killing, possession of beef, child-kidnapping etc. can lead to mobs murdering already vulnerable individuals in a matter of minutes. Given this situation, we recommend that WhatsApp introduce a "beacon" feature where a warning/advisory can be broadcast from WhatsApp to users in specific locations about specific issues.

Finally, we also recommend that WhatsApp introduce a mechanism whereby users, especially women and sexual minorities are able to report hate speech, misogyny, sexual violence etc. on a separate fast-tracked route in partnership with local or state-level law enforcement[71].

In response to intense criticism by the Government of India and in the Indian media as well as threats to limit its scope in India, WhatsApp has made several changes to its technical features in order to curb the spread of disinformation and misinformation (see *WhatsApp usage in India* on page 20). While the long-term effectiveness of these remains to be seen, given that they have primarily been implemented since the middle of 2019, our findings so far indicate that these are simply not enough to stem the tide of misinformation: murders are still occurring based on rumours spread on WhatsApp. Further, we have learnt that to circumvent the restrictions on how many forwards at a time, and how many members are allowed in groups, many users are downloading and using outdated and/or unauthorised versions of the app (such as WhatsApp GB and WhatsApp Plus) which are available on Android operating systems which enable them to bypass some of the recent changes in the application.

Action is obviously urgently needed to stamp out the spread of illegal clone apps and to discourage the use of outdated versions which breach users' updated terms of service. However, to begin to tackle the non-stop dissemination of hate-speech, violent misogyny and religious bigotry on both outdated and legitimate versions of the App, and to deal with and prevent the violent consequences which have claimed and devastated so many lives in India, we strongly recommend that WhatsApp employs a politically literate, well-informed, human-rights aware, trained team to work with a range of non-governmental human rights, women's rights, journalism and technology rights organisations on the ground in India to lay out a range of aims and solutions.

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[71] For example, after the horrific rape of a young woman in Delhi in 2012 (known as the Nirbhaya case), the Indian government has introduced a special helpline (dial 112) for reporting sexual violence. Taking this helpline as a template, it could be made easier for WhatsApp users to connect directly to this or to similar helplines from within the application.

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