



**Keeping tabs** BJP has announced plans to recruit a 2,00,000-strong "cyber army" in the largest and electorally most crucial State of Uttar Pradesh, in time for the general elections in 2019. A 2015 image of a BJP war room in Delhi MEETA AHLAWAT

STATES OF MATTER

# Click and bait politics

A "social media communications hub" could well be a euphemism for greater surveillance and a covert political operation



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Donald Trump was carried to his unlikely victory in 2016 by a blizzard of social media falsehood. All the misinformation had a human origin, but once set in motion, was carried forward by automated processes: So-called "netbots" that combined the social networks' potential for exponential spread, with a robot's mechanical persistence.

Though disturbing, these findings conveyed a sliver of comfort. If a technical process was responsible for spreading fake news, there was a possible remedy to be found in that realm. Algorithms that multiplied falsehood could as well be used to restrain them and establish standards of truth. Even if their profits rode on incentives that drove the spreading of fake news, social media giants such as Facebook and Twitter could be persuaded that civic responsibility should have precedence over profit.

Later research uncovered less promising realities. A study of very wide expanse, involving 126,000 news stories shared over Twitter by three million users between 2006 and 2017, found that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information". The effects were "more pronounced for false political news" than other categories. And contrary to the comforting thought that responsibility lay mainly within the machine realm, the study found that "robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate".

Exactly five years back, Edward Snowden blew the whistle on how the National Security Agency (NSA) in the US was collecting "metadata" from telephone conversations and online transactions, as part of the "global war on terror". In principle, the NSA process was not significantly different from that employed by internet giants such as Google and Facebook for optimising ad placements: Trawling through huge volumes of online transactions to pick up the keywords indicating a target user's range of interests. Recent

revelations about Cambridge Analytica targeting political ads after assessing individual susceptibility through social media profiles show that the internet giants remain complicit in the dubious practices.

Though perhaps a little slow moving in relation to private entrepreneurs, political establishments have been on the learning curve. In the Indian political milieu, the BJP has been particularly savvy, continuing from the cutting-edge propaganda techniques it deployed through the 2014 campaign to promote the image of its standard bearer, Narendra Modi, now India's Prime Minister.

A recent RTI filing found that the Modi government has, since May 2014, spent ₹4,300 crore on publicity. The ministry of information and broadcasting (MIB) also announced that it intended to carry out a survey of the impact of these advertisements on popular perception, with the intent of leveraging these insights into electoral advantage.

Meanwhile, the BJP has announced plans to recruit a 200,000-strong "cyber army" in the largest and electorally crucial State of Uttar Pradesh, in time for the next general election. Every polling booth, according to plans announced by a top official of the party's State unit, would have a "cyber yodha" or warrior, who would approach "every citizen with a new strategy, while ensuring that information pertaining to various schemes, policies and achievements ... reach the voters."

In December 2015, the MIB, working through a fully-controlled corporate body, invited technical and financial bids from qualified vendors to set up and maintain a "social media communications hub". The stated purpose was to ensure regular citizen had access to information about important governmental programmes.

There was also a plainly stated propagandist intent in the brief to prospective vendors,

to enhance the "reach of content on internet and social media sites", and find ways of "making the uploaded content viral". A surveillance intent was also manifest, though relatively understated in the first iteration of this call for proposals: To monitor "individual social media users and accounts", and evaluate "social media sentiments".

Little more was heard in the public domain about that particular venture, till renewed intent was signalled in April 2018, with the MIB inviting a fresh round of applications. The "scope of work" specified here involves harvesting relevant information posted both on news portals and social media platforms, to assess the overall drift of public opinion, as also its more granular details. The hub, as the tender specifies, should "support easy management of conversational logs with each individual, with capabilities to merge it across channels to ... facilitate ... a 360-degree view of the people who are creating buzz across various topics".

The proposal would allow room for "influencers" of opinion who could initiate these conversations in all the country's districts. The purposes could be many and among those specifically mentioned, is the cultivation of "nationalistic" feelings.

The internet is being cast here not as a domain of vast possibilities with the potential to deepen democracy through the richness of user-generated content, but as a new mode of propaganda. A petition by a member of the West Bengal State legislature is before the Supreme Court, seeking the quashing of the scheme. As in the US, civil society in India remains starry-eyed, but without a determined pushback, the possibilities of the new social media are at risk of subversion by a political operation intent on using it for very narrow purposes.

As in the US, civil society in India remains starry-eyed

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