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India's tangled web of misinformation lies

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Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, arrives in Argentina for the G20 summit. : Hernan Nersesian, G20

A mysterious app, a viral hoax and political rivals engaging in misinformation mudslinging – India is in the grips of a fake news epidemic.

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India faces an epidemic of fake news and two of the biggest offenders are the country's [two main political parties](#), the ruling BJP and Congress. This unregulated “wild west” is causing alarm with predictions that unchecked India is headed for aggravated civic unrest.

A two-year long investigation by Delhi-based news portal [The Wire](#) explored propaganda techniques in use by India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The BJP's success in recruiting volunteers and generating fake news [was well known](#), but the investigation suggested the party had added a potent recruit to its ranks: Tek Fog, a multi-function app with tremendous power to produce and proliferate misinformation.

The creation of two private sector IT firms, Tek Fog [can reportedly influence](#) social media trends by controlling multiple accounts. It could [take over WhatsApp accounts](#) that have fallen into disuse and deploy them to spread political messaging.

Tek Fog could also discretely doctor URLs, linking to an authentic news story and then seamlessly transporting a user to a propaganda site. It could spew out [torrents of abuse](#) against journalists and public figures, especially those deemed threats to the BJP.

The Wire investigation found Tek Fog could probably override one-time password security sent through cellphones to verify social media accounts. It could also circumvent the Captcha code test, which is put in place to screen out automated bot-like apps.

Details of who owns and controls Tek Fog are unclear. Its purported ability to evade the account security procedures of major social media platforms, has not been plausibly demonstrated.

The Wire investigation [has been questioned on other grounds](#): could the app actually just open and close all of these

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accounts, removing all residual traces? Is it plausible that a party would invest in an app to manipulate social media trends when it has long accomplished similar results through active human intervention?

These questions aside, the revelations suggest a sophisticated tech-enabled arm to the BJP's electoral strategy.

It is just over two months since India's Supreme Court ordered an independent investigation into an electronic snooping and entrapment operation involving Pegasus, spyware of Israeli origin only made available to official security and intelligence agencies. Opposition figures have made a case for bringing Tek Fog within the same investigative ambit.

The BJP's carefully structured influence tactics, ranging from national misinformation campaigns to polling booth-level strategies, have long been in place.

But the problem runs deeper than just the BJP. Oxford University's Internet Institute says the BJP and their main opposition, the Congress, were equal offenders in matters of fake news in the months prior to India's last general election.

Facebook took down a number of pages for what it termed "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" but not before they had reached millions of followers. Various regulatory responses and technological fixes failed, despite energetic advocacy by the autonomous Election Commission of India.

Some have suggested the fake news epidemic be treated as a public health problem, which calls for both a technocratic response as well as a mass education program. But who will educate the educators?

The epidemic of fake news could be the result of a determined effort at ensuring strength in numbers and capturing the width of the "gate" through which diverse viewpoints claim a space in the news universe.

Social media has led to some journalists seeing themselves as disseminators, rather than interpreters of news. And when the likelihood of earning audience clicks influences gatekeeping,

traditional media may be drawn towards emulating cyber-world trends.

[‘Algorithmic amplification’](#) is how social media operates. It is a game played on the terrain of the attention economy by maximising clicks on any piece of news. The contest has shifted in favour of fake news over the last decade or so, but the logic of algorithms suggests the numbers game could be driven towards a restoration of truth as a news value with sufficient effort.

Government agencies are unlikely to participate in good faith efforts to check India’s epidemic of fake news, given the partisan stakes involved. Investigative agencies are not permitted to operate with any manner of autonomy, and government media outlets are yet to shake off their culture of compliance.

It is still feasible for older, non-government media and public authorities to forge a partnership against misinformation, though it would require careful planning and implementation to retain a measure of independence and autonomy.

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