

3. Hate in the Air: Social media fuelling hate crimes against minorities

August 2019

1. Background

The rapid growth of digital technology and social media in India⁶² have had a side effect - the emergence of new forms of hate and violence that have had horrific consequences around the world. Despite efforts by social media platforms and governments, the use of online spaces as a medium to spread hate continues almost unabated. This often spills over to the real world, resulting in violence and in the undermining of the overall democratic process.

This paper will analyse, with the help of selected illustrative examples from an Indian context, the phenomenon of online hate and its violent real-life spillovers. It will look at how efforts by social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter have mostly failed to tackle the problem, and how the Indian state and its present functionaries have demonstrated a history of using the internet and social media to not only crush dissent, but also to twist the general social discourse as per their requirements, often resulting in the normalisation of hate against religious minorities and other marginalised communities.

2. The continued proliferation of hate and disinformation online

Whatsapp and Facebook, with over 400 million and 294 million active users respectively, are now widely used in India by the younger and older generations alike. While Twitter has released no India-specific usage metrics, it too has emerged as a popular platform to express opinions and to conduct real-time journalism. The infiltration of each of these platforms by miscreants has resulted in a situation where the average Indian user of social media is subject to a barrage of carefully constructed hateful and untrue content, on a daily basis. This has resulted in the normalisation of various kinds of hate, the deepening of delicate social fissures, and at least partly contributed to a steady and continuous increase of hate crimes in the country.⁶³ Observers report, political actors, particularly those close to the ruling BJP, carefully and deliberately stoke the flames in a bid to further polarise society and thus consolidate their hold over power (see Box 1).

62 According to market research agency Kantar IMRB, India is expected to have 627 million internet users by the end of 2019. Of these, 493 million will be regular users, and around 40% of the regular users will be from rural areas. For more: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/internet-users-in-india-to-reach-627-million-in-2019-report/articleshow/68288868.cms?from=A>

63 <https://amnesty.org.in/news-update/hate-crime-reports-on-an-alarming-rise-reveals-amnesty-international-indias-halt-the-hate/>

Box 1: The BJP and its online troll army

Social media is believed to have played a substantial role in the BJP's 2014 and 2019 election campaigns.

"We saw a trend, we read this trend, where the youth of the country were embracing social media as their first tool when they started using the internet, and we made sure our presence was there," said Arvind Gupta, who as head of BJP's IT division led the party's 2014 social media campaign. Gupta claimed that social media affected 30-40% of the overall seats it won. Apart from using platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and WhatsApp to push its message and frame the public discourse, the BJP also leveraged social media to "crowdsource" its election manifesto. Since it came to power, however, the BJP has been accused of using its massive online influence network to spread hate and disinformation, and also to target its political opponents. Swati Chaturvedi, in her book *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret Digital Army of the BJP*, has detailed how PM Modi and other top BJP leaders contribute to the normalisation of hate by following online troll accounts that send out rape threats and death threats to critics, and also indulge in blatant communal incitement.⁶⁴

In 2015, Modi hosted and posed for photographs with a group of 150 "social media influencers" at his official prime ministerial residence. Many of them were later revealed to have been directly involved in spreading hate and disinformation.⁶⁵

A few, selected hate-mongering Twitter accounts followed by PM Modi and other top BJP functionaries⁶⁶:

- @GovindHindu56, who tweeted extensively using the #___ (Complete Boycott of Muslims) hashtag, is followed by Narendra Modi (Prime Minister), Piyush Goyal (Minister of Railways & Commerce), Bajajant

64 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/27/india-bjp-party-ordering-online-abuse-opponents-actors-modi-claims-book>

65 <https://www.thequint.com/tech-and-auto/tech-news/twitter-trolls-among-super150-invited-by-pm-modi>

66 <https://www.altnews.in/hall-shame-serial-abusers-sexist-bigots-rumour-mongers-followed-pm-modi-twitter/>

Jay Panda (National Vice-President, BJP), Kapil Mishra (former Aam Aadmi Party MLA who defected to BJP)

- @ExSecular, who tweeted a fake picture of actress Swara Bhaskar asking for Muslims to be hanged in the aftermath of the killing of radical Hindu leader Kamlesh Tiwari, is followed by Modi, Goyal and Mishra.
- @NikhilDadhich, who tweeted "*Ek kuttiya kutte ki maut kya mari, saare pille ek sur mein bilbila rahe hain* (It took a bitch to die a dog's death, for all pups to howl in the same tune)" following the murder of activist-journalist Gauri Lankesh, is followed by Modi.
- @AmiteshSinghBJP, a self-described member of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJP's youth wing) who tweeted false rumours about communal tensions in Godhra and goaded his followers to "kill at least 3000 Muslims tomorrow", was followed by Modi before his account was suspended.
- @HDLIndiaOrg (Hindu Defence League), the account that started the false rumours about communal tensions in Godhra, was also followed by Modi.

BOX 1: The BJP and its online troll army

A recent example of this deliberate online polarisation was in the aftermath of the terror attack in February 2019 in Pulwama in the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir, when 40 Indian paramilitary personnel were killed by a suicide bomber. Immediately following the attack, as the Indian government struggled to put together a coherent response, online miscreants went into overdrive, flooding social media with memes and doctored images and videos. Conspiracy theories were propounded, some of them going as far as alleging that India's opposition leaders were directly involved in the attack. Pictures and videos of Kashmiris supposedly celebrating the attack were spread widely, and Tathagatha Roy - a former senior BJP leader and the serving Governor of Meghalaya state - used his Twitter account to openly call for a boycott of "everything Kashmiri".⁶⁷ This toxic environment resulted in hundreds of Kashmiri students across the country being forced, due to threats, to abandon their education and return to their home state,

⁶⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/governor-tathagatha-roy-tweets-boycott-kashmiri-draws-flak/articleshow/68062588.cms?from=mdr>

with some of them even facing violent attacks.⁶⁸

Some other recent examples of similar, open attempts at polarisation and incitement include: the publishing of a list of interfaith couples on Facebook, exhorting "Hindu lions" to "hunt" them down;⁶⁹ an argument over a parking spot in Delhi being mischaracterised as a terror attack on a temple, with over 80,000 tweets including from BJP legislator Kapil Mishra;⁷⁰ the circulation of celebratory videos from Pakistan following its victory over India in the 2017 Champions Trophy final, claiming the people in the videos were Indian Muslims;⁷¹ the video of the murder of a Bangladeshi political leader being passed off as the lynching of a Hindu by Muslims in Bihar, with the message "Share this video so much that it reaches Narendra Modi. If you are a true Hindu, then forward it";⁷² and the open call on Twitter in October 2019 for a boycott of all Muslims, a trend that stayed online for almost an entire day before being taken down.⁷³

In Assam, where the National Register of Citizens (NRC) exercise is underway, a recent study of 800 Facebook posts by Avaaz found a preponderance of hate speech against Bengali immigrants, who are openly referred to as "criminals", "rapists", "terrorists", "pigs" and other dehumanising terms. These posts were shared almost 100,000 times, adding up to around 5.4 million views for violent hate speech. Another similar, India-wide study of hate content⁷⁴ on Facebook conducted by Equality Labs provided a breakdown of hate content on the platform: 37% of the hateful posts were Islamophobic (including anti-Rohingya material, posts pertaining to 'love jihad', glorification of earlier instances of violence against Muslims, and Islamophobic profanities), 16% fake news, 13% targeting gender or sexuality, 13% targeting caste minorities (40% of these posts targeted caste-based reservations, while the rest consisted of caste-slurs, anti-Ambedkar messages, posts decrying inter-caste personal relationships, etc), and 9% targeting other religious minorities.

68 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1464491>

69 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/muslim-hindu-couples-love-jihad-hit-list-facebook-interfaith-relationships-extremism-violence-a8325106.html>

70 https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/bjp-rw-twitter-trolls-temple-terror-attack_in_5d1b1c65e4b07f6ca5830164

71 <https://www.altnews.in/multiple-fake-videos-circulated-social-media-claiming-indian-muslims-celebrated-pakistans-victory/>

72 <https://www.indiatoday.in/fact-check/story/old-video-bangladesh-communal-spin-1559211-2019-06-30>

73 https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/twitter-sleeping-through-rabid-anti-muslim-hate-is-frankly-infuriating_in_5daf06b1e4b0422422cbf4e2

74 Facebook defines hate speech as: "...a direct attack on people based on what we call protected characteristics — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, caste, sex, gender, gender identity, and serious disease or disability." It defines 'attack' as "violent or dehumanizing speech, statements of inferiority, or calls for exclusion or segregation." For more: https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/hate_speech

It is clear that much of this content is clearly designed to deepen polarisation and run afoul of both India's laws as well as platform-specific rules and regulations. And yet, there has been very little action against such content. The Equality Labs study noted that 93% of the 1000+ posts it reported to Facebook were not removed at all. Of the content that was removed, half were eventually restored. Of the 213 (of 800) posts reported by Avaaz, only 96 (45%) were removed. By allowing the continued proliferation of such content, social media platforms like Facebook are complicit in the marginalisation of some of the world's most vulnerable communities.

3. When online hate spills over into real-world violence

Hate speech is often a precursor to mass violence. A striking example of this has been in Myanmar, when social media platforms like Facebook were used to fuel ethnic violence against the Rohingya people. A systematic online campaign involving at least 700 Myanmar military personnel, it was revealed later, flooded Facebook with hateful, incendiary and dehumanising posts targeting the Rohingya minority. These posts, which were timed for peak viewership among the Myanmar public, played a "determining role" in perpetuating the crisis, according to the United Nations.⁷⁵

Similarly, online hate has contributed to mass violence in India as well. In Muzaffarnagar in 2013, when coordinated attacks against Muslims resulted in over 60 deaths, one of the initial sparks for the violence came in the form of a fake video that circulated across the region via WhatsApp and Facebook. The video, which purported to show two Hindu brothers (who had allegedly murdered a Muslim man earlier) being lynched by a Muslim mob in Kawal village, was actually of an incident that had taken place in Pakistan two years earlier. "We had blocked it on the internet. However, it was passed on from phone to phone through WhatsApp and within a few days, thousands of people had viewed it. This only served to inflame sentiments," said PK Vishwakarma, a senior police officer who investigated the incident. Copies of the video were discovered on the phones of several of the arrested rioters. "They all believed that this was indeed the incident at Kawaal," added another officer.⁷⁶

75 <https://time.com/5197039/un-facebook-myanmar-rohingya-violence/>

76 <https://www.financialexpress.com/archive/muzaffarnagar-rioters-used-whatsapp-to-fan-violence-find-police/1168215/>

Online hate and disinformation is also alleged to have played a role in 2015 in Dadri, when 52-year old Mohammed Akhlaq was lynched to death by a mob over rumours that he had slaughtered a calf and stored beef in his refrigerator. Rakhi, a 39-year-old woman quoted in a HuffPost India report from the area following the incident, cited "young blood" as the reason for the high level of intolerance in the area. "There were no old people in the mob. They were all young and angry. There is something about the food we eat, the air we breathe today, and all these mobile phones, which makes the young men so frustrated and violent," she said. The report noted that many villagers firmly believe that Akhlaq's family did kill a cow, and that he did deserve his fate. Their proof? Three unverified photos of meat and bones that were circulated widely in the region via WhatsApp.⁷⁷

The circulation of disinformation on WhatsApp has, in fact, resulted in a phenomenon referred to by many as "WhatsApp lynchings". A BBC analysis of similar lynching cases found that at least 31 people were killed following fake rumours on WhatsApp⁷⁸. A notable example is from Bangalore, when a viral video clip showed a man on a motorbike appearing to kidnap a child from a public street, warning people to be on the lookout for "potential child-lifters". In the mob frenzy that followed, vigilantes killed at least 10 people whom they suspected of being child abductors. The video was later revealed to be part of a safety video produced by a child welfare group in Pakistan, with this clarification being edited out of the viral video.⁷⁹ Similarly in Rainpada, Maharashtra, five travelling nomads were beaten to death by an angry mob that had watched WhatsApp videos warning of outsiders kidnapping local children. "Our clients' position is that they genuinely thought that the five people were child kidnappers because they had been seeing this kind of information on WhatsApp for months," said one of the lawyers for the accused.⁸⁰

While the anger resulting in such incidents may be spontaneous, it is clear that the stories that fuel such violence are not. "Clearly, people with money and skills take part in creating the fake videos. In many cases, the footage used is sourced from all over the world. It is edited, manipulated and then spliced together to suggest that it is of recent local origin," said Vir Sanghvi, a journalist.⁸¹ Sanghvi's assertion was confirmed by Shivam Shankar Singh, a data analyst who worked

77 https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/10/01/how-centuries-of-peace-in_n_8224590.html

78 At least 10 more similar deaths are reported to have occurred since the conclusion of the BBC study.

79 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-e5043092-f7f0-42e9-9848-5274ac896e6d>

80 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/pranavdixit/whatsapp-destroyed-village-lynchings-rainpada-india>

81 <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2154436/indias-lynching-app-who-using-whatsapp-murder-weapon>

as a political consultant with the BJP in the past. "Those who make them, those who design the graphics know that they are fake. These messages are then sent to 500 WhatsApp groups, the people in those groups think these are real... and they spread them as they want to spread the message, not because they want to spread fake news," revealed Singh.⁸²

Although almost all political parties now have dedicated social media wings, the BJP's 'IT Cell' is considered to be far more sophisticated and well-funded than the others. A 2018 BBC research confirmed "right-wing groups are much more organised than on the left, pushing nationalistic fake stories further. There was also an overlap of fake news sources on Twitter and support networks of PM Narendra Modi."⁸³

4. Why is online hate so prevalent?

The prevalence of online hate, particularly on social media platforms, is now a common phenomenon across the world. The problem of its preponderance in developing countries like India has been described by some as a problem of digital literacy or a lack of education. The Equality Labs study had identified the lack of data and awareness among Facebook's Indian users about the platform, their rights on the platform as users and citizens as crucial reasons for the persistence of the problem. The London School of Economics (LSE), in a study funded by WhatsApp⁸⁴, however disputes the centrality of digital illiteracy in the perpetuation of online hate. It found that mob lynchings due to fake news happen out of "reasons of prejudice and ideology", rather than "ignorance or digital literacy". In fact, it found that more media literacy can "strengthen the power of some groups to spread ideological disinformation." If a WhatsApp user is "male, urban or rural, young or middle-aged, technologically literate, Hindu, upper or middle class", the study found, they are more likely to share fake news or hate speech. The sensationalism of mainstream media adds to the problem, noted the study.

The view that prejudice, and not digital literacy, is the primary reason is echoed

82 <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/how-is-the-fake-news-factory-structured/300965>

83 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-46146877>

84 In response to widespread criticism over the role of its platform in hate speech and disinformation, WhatsApp funded 20 academic studies to research the phenomenon, around the world. For more: <https://www.whatsapp.com/research/awards/announcement/>

by the Observer Research Foundation's Sunjay Joshi: "The specific social media platform or messaging board no longer matters, simply because the problem resides not with the platforms, but elsewhere. The problem is in the milieu in which hate speech proliferates and acts of terror are staged."⁸⁵

5. Social media platforms and online hate

While it is true that online miscreants take advantage of pre-existing social tensions, and cognitive biases are difficult to dislodge, it is imperative that social media companies are held accountable for the poisonous content that is allowed to spread on their platforms. Partly in an effort to avoid this, they have unveiled a number of measures to check the spread of hate and disinformation.

Following the rise in reporting of the "WhatsApp lynchings" phenomenon in India, WhatsApp rolled out a number of changes to its platform, such as limiting the number of people messages can be forwarded to, putting restrictions on group membership, etc. These measures are easily circumvented by miscreants, according to the LSE study. WhatsApp has also invested in some local education and advertising campaigns, and announced partnerships with local civil society organisations to work on digital literacy. However, hate speech and disinformation continues to be widely disseminated via WhatsApp and other social media platforms.

A key reason for the failure of these technology companies' efforts is a lack of cultural understanding about the problems faced by marginalised groups in India, according to the Equality Labs study. The study found that Facebook's hate speech guidelines are not translated into many local Indian languages, thus perpetuating the ignorance among its Indian users about their rights and responsibilities as contributors to the platform. The ignorance of global technology companies about local realities in India was further exemplified late last year, when Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey met with Indian civil society organisations and was reported to have been "largely oblivious" to caste-based abuses taking place on the platform.⁸⁶

The continued reliance on artificial intelligence technology - a process Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has admitted will take "5 to 10 years" to perfect⁸⁷ - as

85 <https://www.orfonline.org/research/why-regulating-social-media-will-not-solve-online-hate-speech-54490/>

86 <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/pranavdixit/in-secret-meeting-top-twitter-execs-blindsided-by-reports>

87 <https://qz.com/1249273/facebook-ceo-mark-zuckerberg-says-ai-will-detect-hate-speech-in-5-10-years/>

opposed to increased engagement of human content moderators, has not helped matters. Academic studies have unanimously recommended that enlisting more content reviewers, and developing India-specific community standards, are imperative to fight online hate and disinformation. Facebook, however, almost seemed blind about the problem when responding to queries from Avaaz: "We have invested in dedicated content reviewers, who have local language expertise and an understanding of the India's long-standing historical and social tensions."⁸⁸ Facebook has around 15,000 dedicated content reviewers around the world. When compared with around 2.2 billion users posting content day in and day out on the platform, that comes to around one human content moderator for every 146,000 users.

Equality Labs has suggested that the first step in holding social media platforms like Facebook accountable is to order them to conduct basic human rights assessments of their operations, as required by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.⁸⁹ "We cannot even begin to address the harm unless there is an audit of this harm," said Thenmozhi Soundararajan, one of the authors of the report.⁹⁰

6. The role of the state

Social media companies have avoided regulation in the past by claiming that they are merely platforms where content is shared, and not creators of content themselves, and by unveiling a number of piecemeal, platform-specific changes. However, efforts have been gathering pace internationally to bring them under the ambit of the law. (see Box 2)

88 <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-50247540>

89 Endorsed by the UNHRC in 2011, the UNGPBHR is the first global standard for preventing and addressing the risk of adverse impacts on human rights linked to business activity. Multinational corporations are required to conduct human rights due diligence and identify the impact of business operations on vulnerable groups.

90 https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/facebook-profiting-normalisation-violent-hate-speech_n_5d010442e4b07551039afc7c

Box 2: Global efforts to fight online hate and disinformation

- In 2017, Germany passed the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG)ⁱ, which forced social media companies to set up procedures to review complaints about content and remove illegal content within 24 hours. Failure to comply with these requirements may result in fines of up to €5m (individuals) or €50m (companies).
- Germany's Network Enforcement Act is said to have inspired at least 13 countries - in addition to the European Union - to adopt or propose similar legislations.ⁱⁱ These countries include Australia, Belarus, France, India, Malaysia, Kenya, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Venezuela and Vietnam.
- The European Union is considering a clampdown on extremist content online, with reports claiming that it plans that it plans to introduce fines for social media platforms if they do not delete extremist content within an hour.ⁱⁱⁱ
- In April 2019, following the Christchurch mosque attacks that were streamed live by the shooter on Facebook, Australia passed the Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act, which introduces criminal penalties for social media companies, jail sentences (of up to 3 years) for their top executives, and fines of up to 10% of their total global turnover.^{iv}
- In June 2019, the United Nations officially put hate speech "on notice", unveiling the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (UNSPAHS).^v The UNSPAHS looks to target "root causes" like marginalisation, discrimination, poverty, weak state institutions, etc., and also looks to respond to the impact of hate speech on societies.

i Tough new German law puts tech firms and free speech in spotlight: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/05/tough-new-german-law-puts-tech-firms-and-free-speech-in-spotlight>

ii Germany's Online Crackdowns Inspire the World's Dictators <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/06/germany-online-crackdowns-inspired-the-worlds-dictators-russia-venezuela-india/>

iii Social media faces EU fine if terror lingers for an hour <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-45247169>

iv Australian government pushes through expansive new legislation targeting abhorrent violent material online <https://www.ashurst.com/en/news-and-insights/legal-updates/media-update-new-legislation-targeting-abhorrent-violent-material-online/>

v Hate speech 'on notice' as UN chief launches new plan to 'identify, prevent and confront' growing scourge <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040731>

Similarly, the effort to eliminate online hate and disinformation in India has to be led by the state. Presently, India lacks a specific law to tackle the problem. Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) prohibits provocation with the intent to cause riots, and Section 295A prohibits intentional insults to the religious feelings of any class. But these laws have rarely been invoked in legitimate instances of scurrilous online behaviour. Section 66A of the Information Technology (IT) Act, which had outlawed "offensive", "menacing", "false" or "misleading" online messages, was repealed by India's Supreme Court in 2015 on the grounds that it violated the freedom of speech.

Apar Gupta, the Executive Director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, laments the absence of a sustainable institutional framework to fix accountability for the menace of online hate and disinformation. The tendency to fix the blame on social media platforms, he says, is leading to "public officials and police departments escaping accountability, as they continue to place the onus of governance on a private corporation for maintaining an ordered and democratic society."

The Indian government has ostensibly been trying to take social media companies to task, warning WhatsApp recently that it "cannot evade accountability and responsibility".⁹¹ In March 2019, the Parliamentary Panel on Information Technology asked Facebook to ensure that its platforms (which include WhatsApp and Instagram) were not misused to create divisions or incite violence.⁹² In October 2019, the Indian government declared in a filing before the Supreme Court (SC) that the process of finalising new laws regulating social media would be completed by mid-January, 2020. Noting that the internet had emerged as a "potent tool to cause unimaginable disruption to the democratic polity", the government says that the new laws will address "ever growing threats to individual rights and the nation's integrity, sovereignty and security."⁹³

Civil society organisations, however, are sceptical of the government's intentions. They point to the government's less-than-stellar record in controlling and suppressing free speech online. According to a study by UK-based Comparitech, the Indian government sends the most number of content takedown requests to social media platforms, more than Russia and Turkey.⁹⁴ Equality Labs noted that

91 <https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/it-ministry-says-whatsapp-can-t-evade-responsibility-for-messages-its-users-send-1277865-2018-07-05>

92 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/parliamentary-panel-confronts-facebook-over-inability-to-check-misuse-of-platform-during-polls/articleshow/68290681.cms?from=mdr>

93 <https://techcrunch.com/2019/10/21/india-intermediary-internet-social-regulation/>

94 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/india-sent-most-takedown-requests-to-social-media-cos->

Facebook has been made to disable the personal accounts of more than a dozen leading journalists. A Mint study in December 2018 found that at least 50 people were arrested for social media posts in 2017 and 2018, with some of the arrested spending as much as half a year behind bars. More than half were Muslims, and almost all were very poor. The Internet Democracy Project's Nayantara Ranganathan noted, "In cases where arrests are made, it is mostly people criticising say the Prime Minister, or the ruling party, with notable exceptions. In a lot of these cases, the reasons are really frivolous."⁹⁵

A recent report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) on the use of opaque legal processes by the Indian state to stifle dissent in Kashmir observed that nearly 1 million tweets have been removed since 2017⁹⁶. More Twitter accounts were withheld in India in the second half of 2018 than in the rest of the world combined. "Dissent is being criminalised and space is stifled. This way, Twitter is automatically siding with the oppression and not with the expression. This is a violation of the right to freedom of speech," said Khurram Parvez, Kashmiri human rights activist.⁹⁷ An anonymous government source quoted in an Al Jazeera report detailed how the process takes place: "After identifying the Twitter handles, a request is made through a magistrate for their blocking. After getting a proper court order same is sent to Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), an expert agency that handles computer security incidents". CERT, in liaison with social media platforms, checks the "merit of the accounts that are requested to be blocked". "It's mostly accounts with anti-national content and sometimes blasphemous handles also," the anonymous source added.

7. Conclusion

Historically, hate speech and disinformation have been precursors to mass violence. In India, as in many places around the world where ethnic or religious majorities are rallying together on the basis of identity, social media has acted as a platform for opportunistic extremists to take advantage of pre-existing social tensions in order to widen and consolidate their support base, propound polarising narratives, and thus mobilise the wider public around their narrow political agenda. As Disney CEO Bob Iger remarked recently, "Hitler would have loved social media. It's the most powerful marketing tool an extremist could ever

[research/articleshow/71402073.cms?from=mdr](https://www.research/articleshow/71402073.cms?from=mdr)

95 <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/sWTITq8jScRZpKwSPN25UN/Prisoners-of-memes-social-media-victims.html>

96 <https://cpj.org/blog/2019/10/india-opaque-legal-process-suppress-kashmir-twitter.php>

97 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/twitter-accused-censoring-free-speech-kashmir-191030140205682.html>

hope for because by design social media reflects a narrow world view filtering out anything that challenges our beliefs while constantly validating our convictions and amplifying our deepest fears."⁹⁸

Social media companies must be held responsible for allowing their platforms to be misused, but the onus on taking the lead to tackle the wider problem of societal degradation as a result of online hate and disinformation must fall on the state. The Indian state has, over the years, proved itself to be adept at leveraging the internet and social media to promote its interests. The Indian government, particularly since the BJP assumed power, has also proved itself adept at working in consonance with social media companies to muzzle voices that it finds unsavory. The continued festering of hate and disinformation in online spaces, and its spillover into the real world as mob violence, therefore, can at least partly be understood as a problem of failure of intent on the part of the functionaries of the Indian state. As Hannah Arendt noted in her study of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, some of the most monstrous crimes are committed not by perverted and sadistic monsters but by "terribly and terrifyingly normal" people who merely do what they see as expected of them by those in power.⁹⁹

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