

TECH

The Future of Fake News in India: 1,000 WhatsApp Messages a Day

In election season, campaigners are using the messaging service more to target voters, but its opaque nature makes it hard to hunt down sources of false content



A BJP supporter covered in colored powder watches exit poll results on his mobile at a BJP office in Lucknow, India, last year.
PHOTO: PRABHAT KUMAR VERMA/ZUMA PRESS

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For Gurupad Kolli, a 40-year-old lawyer who lives in a remote Indian village, the torrent of WhatsApp messages surging to his phone a few weeks ago meant one thing: election day was near.

They're at turns strident, angry, buoyant, informative, misleading, gripping and confusing, he says. Some days he received as many as 1,000 of them through the popular messaging service. Pleased to no longer "depend on the mass media like newspapers," the resident of Ramapur village in the southern state of Karnataka nonetheless also conceded "there's so much false and fake news going around."

He isn't alone in his bewilderment. The rapidly falling cost of smartphones and mobile data in the world's second-most-populous nation has turbocharged the spread of WhatsApp, where it is growing far faster than other social media and messaging platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

India is home to more WhatsApp users than any other country, accounting for more than 200 million of the 1.5 billion monthly active global users. That rivals the popularity in India of Facebook Inc., which owns WhatsApp. Tens of millions of Indians of all ages have made the messaging service, which is simple to join and use, their entry point to the world of digital communication, especially in poor, remote areas where users are flocking to the internet for the first time.

Neha Dharia, a Bangalore-based analyst with research firm Warp Speed Reads, estimates some 13.7 billion WhatsApp messages are sent every day in India, up about 50% from last year. This year began with Indians sending more than 20 billion New Years messages to each other on WhatsApp, a record, and more than any other country, according to the company.

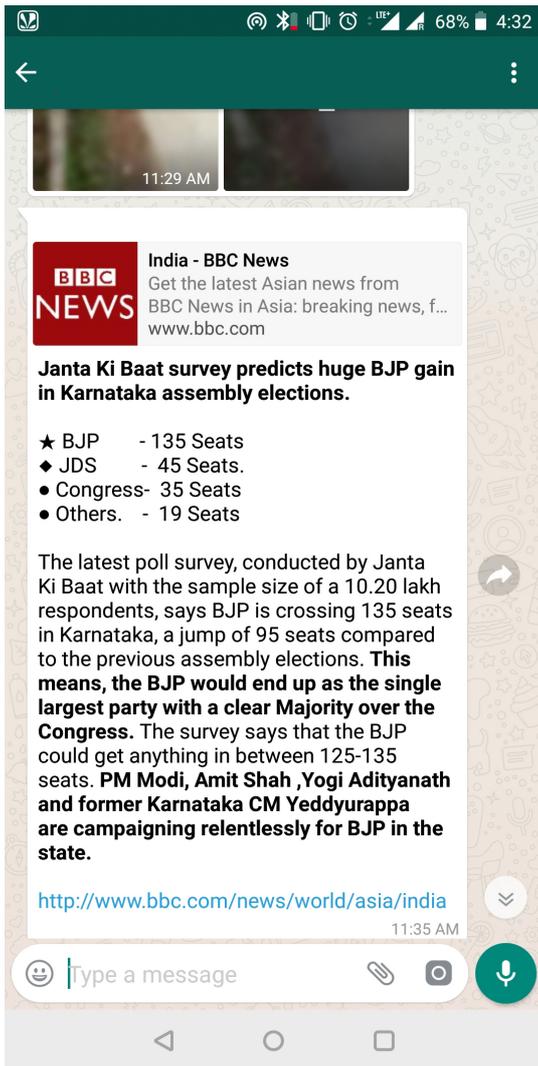
Other big emerging economies such as Indonesia and Brazil have seen a similar pattern where new internet users sign up for WhatsApp first and use it often. In India, the messaging service is at the forefront of a wave of connectivity that is beginning to change how these communities do everything from entertain themselves to how they buy and sell things.

And how they vote, if India's hyperactive political parties have their way. Always keen for the attention of the masses, India's politicians have been among the first globally to systematically exploit WhatsApp—including ways that even the service itself is unable to keep up with or

control—to get out their policy message, counter with a retort, or fend off an accusation of “fake news” to voters.

During state elections such as last week’s in Karnataka, a tsunami of political messages coursed through an opaque network of tens of millions of WhatsApp users that parties say they use to target specific groups of voters.

The intermittent state polls—which in the world’s largest democracy are often on a scale larger than national elections in many countries—have become a laboratory for experiments with social media in a democracy where the internet is still spreading and evolving rapidly. Indian political operatives say WhatsApp has gone from being one more arrow in their social media quiver to a messaging bazooka that they’re now figuring out how to aim and deploy in a critical national election next year.



A screenshot of a WhatsApp message on a mobile phone, showing fake poll results alongside the logo of the BBC, a British broadcaster.

“The reach, user base and response is just amazing,” said Balaji Srinivas, who heads the social media efforts of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Karnataka.

Mr. Srinivas helms one of the social media “war rooms” run by the three major parties competing in the elections here in Karnataka, where the largest city is India’s technology hub of Bangalore. One is in a hotel ballroom, another in an office lobby and the last is, in the case of Mr. Srinivas’ BJP, a location kept secret from the press and public. They are filled with young volunteers, nearly all of them men, intensely monitoring banks of computers and television screens.

From the Congress party’s social media enclave, state social media head Srivatsa Y.B. says he can funnel a given WhatsApp message within a few hours to 1.5 million field volunteers and from there have it forwarded over and over into a universe of what he says are 30 million WhatsApp users among the state’s total population of 61 million people.

WhatsApp is particularly effective at reaching India’s youth in rural areas, he believes.

“Every youth is on WhatsApp, and they spend more time on it than on Facebook and Twitter,” he said in between glances at his phone and interruptions from harried team members in the Congress social media headquarters.

WhatsApp, based in Menlo Park, California, doesn’t have Twitter’s ability to blast out a message publicly to tens of millions in one go. It doesn’t host content itself like Facebook or promise a Facebook advertisement’s ability to target audiences based on their own expressed preferences and profiles. Messages are relayed from person to person, or from an individual to a relatively small group of no more than 256 members. WhatsApp makes only limited information about a user available to contacts, such as their phone number and profile photo.

Yet India’s campaign operatives say they use computers to automatically send messages to tens of thousands of groups that are carefully managed and monitored by campaign staff and volunteers. Those recipients forward them to other groups also managed by campaign workers and from there onward to reach either a narrow list of recipients with shared traits—such as location, gender and language—or a swath of tens of millions of voters.

How do they get personal information about WhatsApp users to organize the groups? Mostly the old-fashioned way, offline through campaign volunteers gathering it in person or by hiring companies that do the legwork, according to campaign workers.

“Political parties in India have been using WhatsApp to organize for some time,” said Carl Woog, a WhatsApp spokesman. “This has all been done without help from WhatsApp.” He said the company was working on “education efforts” ahead of next year’s elections, focusing on issues such as “how to spot fake news and hoaxes.”

Campaigners say they also maintain thousands of accounts simply to monitor how effectively their messages are getting through to the targeted audience and to monitor for false and misleading messages that need countering.

They say they use WhatsApp to distribute policy statements, publicize campaign events and distribute videos that are short and low-resolution enough to consume little data and save easily on inexpensive smartphones with small storage capacity. Most say they send five to eight messages a day through their WhatsApp networks.

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RUPAK DE CHOWDHURI/REUTERS

Congress and BJP say they train workers and volunteers to recognize and avoid sending or forwarding false news or messages. Yet all also say their war rooms spend much of their time countering inaccuracies, misleading information and outright fake reports. Because WhatsApp is such a closed channel, with all messages encrypted between senders, determining the source of false and misleading missives is nearly impossible, campaign

workers say.

Fact-checking groups in India say the spread of false news in India is increasingly happening on WhatsApp rather than Facebook or Twitter.

“More than 90% of the stuff we are debunking is on WhatsApp,” said Govindraj Ethiraj, a journalist and founder of one such group, Boom.

Just days before voting, WhatsApp groups were circulating fake poll results alongside the logo of the BBC, a British broadcaster. Some of the false messages showed the BJP leading, others that Congress was ahead. The BBC subsequently put out a statement on Twitter saying it conducted no such polls and the reports in the messages were “fake.”

Social media heads of both parties deny their workers were involved in sending or spreading the fake reports, and both said they circulated the BBC Twitter statement through their WhatsApp networks. Both say they train supporters to distinguish false reports and tell them never to distribute these.

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