

Disinformation Is Everywhere in India | The Hindu

By Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

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With the Lok Sabha elections coming up, it is critically important that Indians have access to credible and trustworthy information before they vote. The problem is that many do not feel they do. In a brand new survey of English-language Internet users in India conducted by the University of Oxford, we have found that a majority of the respondents are concerned with whether the news they come across online is real or fake.

Who can blame them? After the [Pulwama attack](#), social media and messaging apps were flooded with false and misleading content as people tried to make sense of the horrible violence. As Trushar Barot, a former BBC journalist who leads Facebook's integrity initiatives in India, tweeted, "I've never seen anything like this before — the scale of fake content circulating on one story."

Some of this was ordinary people sharing misinformation in good faith, but much of it was not. As the Central Reserve Police Force noted a few days after losing 40 men in the attack, "It has been noticed that on social media some miscreants are trying to circulate fake pictures of body parts of our Martyrs to invoke hatred while we stand united. Please DO NOT circulate/share/like such photographs or posts." Even as some news media made the occasional misstep and amplified some of this disinformation, other journalists and fact-checkers were working overtime to identify and debunk some of the worst examples shared online, including fake or manipulated material trying to link Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Congress general secretary in-charge of eastern Uttar Pradesh, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, to the attack.

Social media and messaging apps are thus at the heart of the disinformation problems that India faces. Of our survey respondents, 52% say they get news via Facebook, and the same percentage say they get news via WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook. With an estimated quarter billion Indians having come online

since the last general election, companies like Facebook, Google and Twitter have become central parts of the Indian media environment, including the disinformation problems that it faces.

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