Click and bait politics

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

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 had once set in motion, was carried forward by robots’ 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, there was a possible remedy to be found in that realm.

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 faster, 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 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.

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

STATES OF MATTER