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FEATURES

Social Media Hub or a Tool of Mass Surveillance?

Prasanth R

A recent tender document inviting bidders to set up a Social Media Communication Hub for the ministry of information and broadcasting is the latest assault by the NDA government on the rights of the people of India. While the tender talks about the creation of a platform that will “power a real-time New Media Command Room” and help facilitate “creating a 360 degree view of the people who are creating buzz across various topics,” its real intention seems to be identifying and targeting dissenting social media space.

The stated aim of the project is to enable the ministry to understand the impact of campaigns on various schemes and improve the reach of said campaigns. However, behind all the fancy terminology, the project primarily comprises two aspects: One is a massive surveillance apparatus that aims at collecting and analysing huge volumes of data, and profiling people based on that. The second is the utilising of this data to

predict the mood of people online and issue responses, including those targeted at individuals or groups. This is in addition to ‘activating’ influencers – those who have a lot of followers online – to push the agenda of the government.

The tender, issued by the Broadcast Engineering Consultants India Limited, which has been tasked with executing this project, requires the following: 1) A social media analytical tool 2) Preparation of analytics reports 3) Pre-and post establishment support (staffing) 4) Predictive Analysis 5) A knowledge management system and 6) A private data centre.

The social media analytical tool is expected to ‘listen’ to conversations on all major digital channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Tumblr, as well as blogs and news channels. More significantly, it is also to be able to monitor email, which clearly points to the fact that is no mere exercise in identifying the response to schemes. The first question that arises here is whether the government proposes to get this information from these global data giants. The National Security Agency of the United States, of course, was able to do this as part of the PRISM programme that saw the participation of

many of the companies and was exposed by Edward Snowden in 2013. However, even this mass extraction of data was under the legal framework of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. In India, there is no answer to the question regarding the legal framework under which such an operation will be undertaken.

It is important to note that the telecom firms in India are already involved in such agreements with the government whereby the latter can pull information from them at any point of time and inform them only after the incident. The possibility of information from digital channels being harvested on a large scale raises massive concerns about the privacy of users in the country.

India also does not have a data protection law yet. The Srikrishna Committee, which was charged with suggesting the same, noted in a white paper last year that existing laws in the area were hamstrung by the lack of an effective implementation mechanism. Over the past years, we have seen case after case of Aadhaar data being leaked or misused. The threat of something similar happening with the digital information of Indians remains a strong possibility. This is especially true because the tender calls for the setting up of a knowledge management centre and a

private data centre to store “Social Media Platform related Data/Content”.

The social media tool will also collect data across languages and comprise a Natural Language Processing Engine to identify sentiment and context from all of them, adding an additional layer of depth to the government’s surveillance.

It is very clear that this exercise is intended at targeting voices which are critical of the government. The tender in fact clearly defines “Monitoring individual social media user/account’ as one of the ‘features’ of the project. We already have a situation where hordes of angry trolls descend online on any voice critical of the government. In the recent past, journalists, academics and activists have all faced the wrath of these elements. The prime minister himself follows many of these purveyors of hate on Twitter. This new project that aims at a fine-tuned analysis of users and sentiments is very likely to turn into a tool to direct more virulence at those who criticise the policies and methods of the government. In that way, the project is likely to complement the digital armies mobilised by the BJP to spew hatred on those who would not toe its line.

The fact that the proposed platform will also have the capability to publish heightens this risk. This is to be seen alongside the deployment of predictive analysis to “mould public perception” in a “positive manner” for the country and inculcate nationalistic sentiments, as well as counter the “media blitzkrieg” of India’s adversaries. These requirements come amid a deluge of fake news and half-truths being produced in support of the establishment. From the prime minister onwards, the entire government set-up has been found complicit in the spreading of misleading and provocative information. An automated system that crunches vast amounts of data and uses its results to stage interventions online will inevitably lead to furthering this trend. With the election only a year away, and dissatisfaction rising, as indicated by a series of elections results and the mass mobilisations by the farmer and working class movements, this proposal seems a desperate attempt by the government to shape perception in its favour.

The preparation of reports and the staffing are key questions as nearly 800 employees will be deployed across the country, including one in each of the 716 districts. These contracted employees will wield considerable power, associated as they are with a system that is so intrusive. Edward Snowden, himself a contracted employee, also exposed how his colleagues misused US intelligence data, often for personal reasons. The political and social implications of this step can be very harmful, considering the speed at which internet penetration is rising in India and the outsized influence such personnel may have. It is instructive that the government no longer bothers to use the pretext of a threat to the country to initiate such a mass surveillance programme. Instead, it has the audacity to cite feedback to schemes as the reason to intrude into the lives of millions of Indians. It goes without saying that the online interactions of most people are in the domain of the personal. A system which explicitly sets out to identify the ‘interests’ of Indians online is inevitably likely to produce disastrous results.

At a global level, this move comes at a time when the European countries have put into place the General Data Protection Rules, among the strongest in the world so far. These give users considerable control over their data collected by private companies. Across the world, Facebook and other firms which collect user

information on a large scale are facing a backlash following the Cambridge Analytica scandal. At this point, India is clearly going against the general movement towards user sovereignty over their data. Ironically, such a system is being proposed shortly after the landmark Supreme Court decision declaring privacy a fundamental right. At the same time, it is not a surprise as the government did argue that it did not believe privacy was such a right.

Ultimately, it remains highly doubtful if the government can execute the project in its totality considering the technical challenges. But even so, the proposal points to an unashamed attempt at identifying and targeting dissenting voices, all under the banner of development and nationalism. In this, the tender is a textbook case of the tendency of the Modi government and the BJP to avoid any hard questions of the issues faced by the people of India.

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