Ensuring a cyber-just democracy

By Meenakshi Lekhi | Issue Date: April 08, 2018 | Updated: March 31, 2018 20:03 IST

I remember calling Internet the new-age God, because it offered space for expression and connectivity without discrimination. Now, I feel this tool has gone to the demons, who are using it for manipulation.

"One of the main cyber risks is to think they don't exist. The other is to try to treat all potential risks," said French cyber security expert Stephane Nappo.

There are things you know you possess; hence, you secure them. But, there are things you do not know you possess. Hence, in all likelihood, it will remain open to theft. Data is something that is consistently open to misappropriation and misuse.

The digital revolution has thrown open a world, where a digitally smart minority sets the rules for a digitally illiterate majority. This majority remains ignorant of the threats and challenges they are exposed to. Many of us hardly attach value to data, unless it is a password or bank account details. The comments we make on social media, the photographs we post, the places we describe after a visit, the merchandise we display with pride are hardly important to us beyond a point. But, such 'unimportant' data become wickedly useful assets for smart players in the digital world.

Illustration: Bhaskaran

Governments across the world were rattled by the news that Facebook had shared data of nearly 50 million users with a British political consulting firm—Cambridge Analytica. Combining data mining and data analysis techniques with strategic communication, the firm is said to have influenced the voting behavior in more than 200 elections around the world, including in India.

Cambridge Analytica invented analytical tools that attempt a "psychographic analysis" for a deeper understanding of the target audience. The firm claimed that through a strategy called "behavioural microtargetting" it can predict "needs" of individuals and also how these needs change over time. In October 2016, Cambridge Analytica chief executive Alexander Nix, talking to Sky News said, "Today in the United States we have somewhere close to four or five thousand data points on every individual… So, we model the personality of every adult across the US—some 230 million people."

Cambridge Analytica's involvement in the Indian elections is a matter of speculation. The wrongdoing is not restricted to unethical data mining practice and its pernicious use by the service provider in influencing voting behaviour of the electorate, but also in causing distortions. It is unethical, illegal and, besides being a serious breach of trust, it goes to undermine the very foundations of democracy. Now, with the public disclosure and subsequent apology by Facebook regarding the data breach, the unethical modus operandi of Cambridge Analytica is no longer a matter of speculation.

Hence, it was no surprise that the government cracked its whip on Cambridge Analytica by sending a notice to the firm asking for information about its list of clients in India, the source of data gathered by it and whether such data were gathered with the individual's consent. The IT ministry has also sternly warned Facebook against any attempt to influence electioneering in India. Google, Twitter and all other platforms can also be manipulated, and, therefore, need regulation. I propose that the handles be linked to government-verified documentation.

With 133 million young voters slated to vote in the parliamentary election in 2019, it is important to ensure that all digital campaigning are fair, authentic and balanced. While the Narendra Modi government is fully committed to ensuring complete freedom of expression for the citizens, it cannot allow India to become a playground for any organised cyber espionage that will endanger democracy.

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