

*Brief: Cybersecurity,
Meta and The Wire Fiasco*



Meta



THE
WIRE

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Background

In October 2022, a media outlet called the Wire, which presents itself as a critical dissenting voice and champion of free speech, published a three-story series alleging that Meta, the big tech and social media giant, had given unchecked authority to Amit Malviya, the head of the Indian ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Information Technology (IT) Cell. It claimed that by using Meta's XCheck Program, Malviya and his staff could censor content on Facebook and Instagram that they did not agree with. Meta rejected the dubious assertions made by the Wire.

As of October 31, 2022, The Wire has removed these stories from its publishing platform pending the conclusion of a claimed "internal review." Although the motive behind the Wire's smear campaign against Malviya and Meta is unknown, one analysis implies that it was done to damage the reputation of the ruling party, to give credence to allegations of content censorship, and to discredit Meta among social media users in India. Meta, possibly India's most effective internet platform, and it boasts;

- 550 million users on WhatsApp¹
- 410 million users on Facebook²
- 400 million users on Instagram³

Had The Wire's maligned campaign carried weight, it could have had a dramatic impact on BJP's and Amit Malviya's image, Meta's business in India, their popularity and trust. The Wire has been claiming that it fell prey to a 'trap', the veracity of its claims is based on

¹ Singh, M. (2022) *Brands are spamming WhatsApp users in India, Facebook's largest market*, TechCrunch. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2022/10/10/in-india-businesses-are-increasingly-spamming-users-on-whatsapp/> (Accessed: October 31, 2022).

² Tech in Asia - connecting Asia's startup ecosystem. Accessed October 31, 2022. <https://www.techinasia.com/facebook-410-million-monthly-active-users-asia-q2-2014>.

³ "100m Indian Users Jump on Instagram Bandwagon in Just Nine Months." HT Tech, August 16, 2022. <https://tech.hindustantimes.com/tech/news/100m-indian-users-jump-on-instagram-bandwagon-in-just-nine-months-71660664480054.html>.

incredulous claims. Apart from the allegations levelled against Malviya and Meta, The Wire also dragged Kanishk Karan, a Policy Manager at Twitter and Andy Stone, Communications Director at Meta for sharing emails with their journalists. Karan and Stone also dismissed these claims and called for action by relevant authorities.

In response to the false allegations against Malviya, he filed a criminal complaint with the Delhi Police against The Wire and its leadership, founder editor Siddharth Varadarajan, Sidharth Bhatia, MK Venu, and Jahanvi Sen⁴. Much before Malviya filed the police report, The Wire filed a complaint of fraud with an intention to mislead against its own researcher and reporter Devesh Kumar. The Wire fired him after an internal scrutiny and called him “highly disturbed mentally”.

While The Wire has offered an apology to Malviya (and to the ruling BJP), the fiasco has led to deepening distrust among people for independent journalism. Moreover, the back-and-forth between Meta and The Wire and the evidence provided by the latter has paved the way for a serious discourse on technology, social media, personal data, and cybersecurity. While the controversy will subside soon, the deeper cybersecurity issues need to be addressed more carefully.

⁴ https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1585956446339989506?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1585956446339989506%7Ctwgr%5E28eb45b095ace71a46c3f399099539e85d742dd2%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.opindia.com%2F2022%2F10%2Famit-malviya-files-complaint-against-the-wire-for-fake-meta-story%2F

Observations from the cybersecurity perspective

The fabrication of evidence by The Wire and its unscrupulous attack on the Meta raises many concerns from the cyber and tech policy perspective. These are:

- 1. Data privacy:** Both Stone and Karan have fallen prey to false personification by The Wire. Even if The Wire received these emails from an undisclosed source, personal data of both these individuals was compromised, their fake identities created, and false information spread in their name. This has the potential to malign their credibility and cause them professional damage.
- 2. Disinformation:** Through their reporting, The Wire spread misinformation and disinformation about the XCheck Program run by Meta. Later, the company's CISO clarified that the platform is not built for reporting posts (on Facebook and Instagram) but is rather built to prevent over-enforcement.
- 3. Content moderation/censorship/free speech:** Through its three articles, The Wire tried to portray Meta as a catalyst in BJP's censorship drive. Indirectly, it also tried to malign the Party's image as one which curtails freedom of speech and expression.
- 4. Cyber crime:** All through the fiasco it can be concluded that URL addresses, email accounts, emails, "leaked internal" documents, and watchlists, and references all are fake. There are discrepancies in timestamps. All of these account for gross cyber violations, leading to punitive cyber crimes.

Concluding remarks

The *telos* of The Wire behind running this smear campaign against Malivya, the BJP, and Meta is not ascertained yet. However, it is clear that The Wire engaged in cyber crime by propelling and disseminating information which was not properly backed. From the cybersecurity perspective, such controversies need special attention. In the case filed by Malviya against The Wire, it would be imperative for the courts of law to also look into the issue from the lens of data privacy, personal data protection, and cyber crime.