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Understanding Digital Media Manipulation in the Socio-Political Context of India: A Case Study of Youtube in the Country

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Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Science and technology have always played crucial roles in transforming human lives. The fast pace of globalisation and liberalisation have brought in revolutionary sweeping changes in the field of technology, so much so that we dwell in a “global village" now, with “connectivity” as the keyword. The massive technological revolution and the pervasive use of technology in each and every sphere of our life even for a ‘Nano' second have no doubt made our living and life, what can be called ‘digital'! Thanks to the smart phones and the apps-communication in all its forms, is being digitalised and reaching out to the masses. This innovative media popularly known as the ‘Digital media’ or ‘Social media’ took the world by a storm. With the emergence of digital devices, our thoughts, expressions, communication gained a new momentum. The wave of digitisation is reflected through the social media networking sites, affecting each and every sphere from society to economy to politics and culture and bearing an overwhelming influence upon the 18's to the 80's. However, this pervasive influence of digital media communication slowly began to manoeuvre and shape our thoughts and opinions. This invariably gave rise to a different form of strategy to dominate our expressions and communication in line, sometimes with that of the decision makers or simply a certain section, group, mass or a handful. Thus began an altogether new form of manipulation the digital media manipulation. This very plague of digitisation pervaded the Indian society like rest of the world as the Indians became wielded with digital media communication.

Keywords: Politics; Communication; Digital media; Social media; Political manipulation

INTRODUCTION

Digital media gained inroads in India from the late 2000's onwards. It took lesser than little time for the countrymen to get acquainted with the social media handles and within a few years, digital media established its strong foothold in the subcontinent. The accessibility of cheaper smartphones and the growing interest of the mass with the digital handles, specially the youth, made India one of the top countries to have the largest user base of the social networking sites. But the perils of digital media manipulation grew prominently in the country as more and more manipulative narratives in the digital sphere came to dominate our neurons, consciously or unconsciously. While media manipulation was nothing new for the country, yet the manipulative techniques brought forth by social and digital media have posed a threat to the democracy like never before. Adding to the woes, lies a somewhat detrimental role played by YouTube and its channels, for which India constitutes the largest user base. Therefore, this research is aimed at an understanding of the impact of digital media manipulation in the Indian subcontinent at a deeper level, how the former is affecting the society and the polity, what are the consequences of such a manipulation as well as the active and passive role played by YouTube in the country [1].

This study is to be explored by following some major key areas-a comparative study of YouTube in India and other subcontinent countries with regard to media impact and base, spread of political misinformation and propaganda in the country by the YouTube channels, if any and to what extent and the impact of YouTube upon the mass in building the democracy of India, the political process *vis-a-vis* the election season [2].

Background of the study and research objective

Mass media is always regarded as the fourth pillar of Indian democracy. The ushering of digital or social media as a form of mass media brought a metamorphosis in the entire communication system. India's digital media revolution thus is a tale of exponential growth, coupled with widespread accessibility of data, affordable smartphones and internet penetration onto each nook and corners of the country. Almost 32.2 percent of the Indian population are social media users now. India's flagship program Digital India and other initiatives of the government have aided in increasing of digital literacy among the mass, making digital media communication a household name now. Among all the social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube hold the largest popularity with India being the largest user base for both these digital media handles. One of the reasons behind the popularity of digital media platforms in India lies in the fact that accessibility to these don't require much literacy and technical knowledge and hence almost all age groups of both urban and rural areas can handle them with ease and communicate whatsoever [3].

Thus, we live and breathe in a digital age now. The boon of information technology has not only altered the traditional means of communication, but also has disrupted the Indian societal structure like never before. But digitization unfortunately is not an unalloyed blessing. In course of time, the digital media space has taken a toll in our way of communication, as the former is bring weaponized to manipulate us. Thus began a 'digital-techno' politics to dominate the beliefs and thoughts. Interestingly this 'Digital authoritarianism' is often a powerful tool for the Indian political authorities to maximize their own gains [4]. However, on a deeper level, the question which hints us is extent of the impact that digital media manipulation has with the society and the youth. Further, with the growing number of political, politico-religious content and fake malicious videos disseminating misinformation in the YouTube channels, it is necessary to understand the particular role played by YouTube in India. Therefore, research objective can be summed up as:

- To trace the evolution of digital media authoritarianism and manipulation in India
- To understand and analyze the impact of digital media manipulation in the socio-political context of the country, with special reference to the role played by YouTube in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of literary works have been dedicated to throw light on the digital media or social media manipulation in India. Ihsan Yilmaz's edited book "Digital authoritarianism and its religious legitimization", probes into the impact of digital media manipulation upon the democratic politics, with special reference to the concept of 'Hindu Nationalism in India'. His narrative focuses upon how the state in varying degrees use digital technology to manoeuvre public opinion, demonize ethnic and religious minorities, opposition parties and political dissidents [5].

Digital authoritarianism entails the use of information technology to subvert the mindset of the citizens. A study of the same leads us to find that there has been a shift or transformation in the usage of internet and digital media in India from a liberal, open space to a restricted one. A survey of India's digital landscape finds that the rise and

growth of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his rule have led to an upsurge in digital surveillance and has nurtured an environment of online harassment for those either who are critical of the ruling party's policies or not in line with their ideology [6].

Maurice Jakesch and others' research article "Trends alert: A cross-platform organization manipulated Twitter trends in the Indian general election", provides insights onto the role played by various WhatsApp groups in manipulating tweets through various mobilization campaigns, thus controlling social media narratives during the 2019 general elections.

A well-documented work on how social media manipulates and has spread misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic is put forward by Emilio Ferrara in the article "Misinformation, manipulation and abuse on social media in the era of COVID-19". The article deals with the AI-manipulated multimedia and AI-powered automated accounts as part of digital media manipulation that has rendered a malicious effect since the pandemic [7].

Politics of propaganda was never a novice concept for Indian democracy. However, the advent of social media orchestrated it to a newer dimension altogether. Digital campaigns by political parties ahead of the elections have undoubtedly facilitated civic engagement, but have brought in subtle maneuvering and moulding of thoughts and ideas of the mass. Mahapatra and Plagemann in their article, "Polarization and politicization: The social media strategies of Indian political parties" mentions that digital political campaigns are often misused for cheap propaganda and disinformation which provided grist for political polarization in Indian heterogeneous society [8].

Political bots have been a newer addition to digital propaganda and manipulation. Online public opinion has been manipulated by a handful of computational sources that are driven by algorithms, mentions Neyazi in his work "Digital propaganda, political bots and polarized politics in India".

The rapid spread of internet had led to a sudden boost of accessing online news and information in India. But the question which confronts us is the quality of such online news, it's credibility. There is widespread concern regarding the falsification of political news and distortions. An assessment of this is provided by Rajgarhia, Sanjana in her article based on media manipulation in Indian context. She portrays how digital manipulation is mediated through the spread of fake ideologies in the online platforms, challenging the viability of societal institutions. Media manipulation is the main driving force behind the distortion of political information. Those involved in manipulation or manipulators deploy a variety of techniques from doctored images to forged documents, provocative slogans and so on to attain their objectives [9].

Subversive political propaganda by the political parties through digital channels rose during COVID-19 pandemic. Like elsewhere in India too this had a toll on the mental set and 'mental autonomy' of the population. Sharma, Padmakshi in her article "Digital disinformation in India: An attack on mental autonomy" (2022), emphatically mentions the intentional efforts to influence or manipulate public discourses through the help of bots or particular videos is an infringement on the mental autonomy of the citizens. However though in her article she mentions of particular WhatsApp and Facebook groups in facilitating such misinformation and manipulation, she fails to explain the role of YouTube channels for digital content creation and the effects they have upon the mass.

Internet journalism is very popular in India nowadays and with internet journalism comes the role of YouTube in particular. Sharma, Yashraj in his article "How A Shadowy Meta, YouTube Black Market Clouds India Election Integrity", points out how hosts of YouTube content and ads before the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections spread provocative political content, hate speech, violence and incitement.

In the age of digital communication, election season in India saw rapid spread of deep fake warfare and information manipulation. The rise of deepfakes and AI generated media pose a great threat to online political discourse and electoral integrity. 2024 Lok Sabha elections saw deepfake technology to spread false narratives, incite social unrest and thereby discredit political opponents.

Social media channels have developed as breeding grounds for manipulative practices to shape public ideologies and discourses. Srinivasan, V's article throws light on how propaganda manipulates public opinion *via* digital media. According to him there is a specific design intricately woven to instill propaganda narrative in India. It includes a method known as "astrorurfing", a technique used to create the illusion of grassroots support by orchestrating the narrative.

When on one hand digitization is disrupting Indian democracy like never before, the other side of image is also getting unleashed. Digital tools that have and are changing the way we communicate, are increasingly being used to manipulate people's behaviour, disrupt fair electoral processes, compromise judicial independence, and infringe upon freedom of expression and opinion. What's worse is that sometimes these digital strategies are adopted by the government that erode the public trust in democratic systems, Bose points put in his article "SubscriberWrites:

Beyond Digital Authoritarianism: Democracy 2.0".

With the expanse in digital connectivity, the propaganda of misinformation had and has been affecting many developments. Social media has been manipulated to change the political narratives in a lot of countries and unfortunately India too is a part of them, as mentioned by a survey by the University of Oxford in the year 2020.

Definition, scope of study, limitations and research problem

Broadly defined, digital media manipulation refers to the systematic techniques and measures exploited by internet-based based to manipulate the public by misleading them. It can be both qualitative and quantitative depending upon the methods and tactics used. Meaning of certain key terms need to be delineated in this respect. Digital authoritarianism refers a systematic way of government or the state to use information technology in controlling the population or more specifically manipulating their mindset or ideology. The scope of the study hence is vast and pervades to all areas of digital media manipulation, the nuances and tactics of how this manipulation has spread its wings in the country and whether there is any connection with digital authoritarianism or not and if any then what's the future of the democracy.

The scope of this study brings us to the question of research problem and the gaps prevalent in the existing literary works. A research problem generally introduces the reader to the importance of the topic being studied.

It's necessary to understand the context of the research problem as well as exploring the nature of such, in order to delineate the statement of concern. Digital manipulation is on the rise in India, but the tactics, motive behind such manipulation as well as to what extent it is impacting the Indian society and polity is missing in the existing literary works. A large part of digital manipulation rests on 'image manipulation', for which artificial intelligence is a potent tool. Hence this facet requires special attention. Further, what are the specific roles played by the digital media platforms for fostering digital manipulation need to be studied in detail to understand the effect of manipulative practices in India. Also, a thematic study of the existing literature propels the question of a connection between digital manipulation and authoritarianism in the Indian subcontinent. Another gap that stems from the existing works is to what extent the subversion of population's political discourses is shaping the political institutions and processes of the country. Next so far digital manipulation is concerned, it's necessary to understand the particular medium or media which is fostering manipulative techniques in the best possible way.

Research questions

The gaps in the existing works quell for further research on this topic. Therefore, dwelling on the research objective and research problem, the possible research questions to address the gaps can be delineated as:

What are the ways and tactics of digital media manipulation?

Tentative hypothesis: Digital media manipulation around the world looms large with provocative content, image morphing, use of artificial Intelligence and other technical resources.

How digital manipulation has shaped Indian politics?

Tentative hypothesis: Digital manipulation, another name for digital authoritarianism in the context of Indian politics, an easy way to dominate the minds of average Indians for spreading of political propaganda in favour of the ruled.

What is the impact of digital media manipulation in the Indian society, especially with the youth?

Tentative hypothesis: Youth in the country are more hooked to digital media than others. Easy access of internet and smart phones have made it possible to access social media anywhere and everywhere thereby increasing the chances of getting lured by digital content. Influence of digital content often leads to development of violence and provocations.

What is the role of YouTube in fostering digital media manipulation in India?

Tentative hypothesis: India has the largest base of YouTube in the world. Very few digital media channels are as overwhelming as YouTube when it comes to content creation and usage. This has both positive and negative effects with YouTube often alleged for being pivotal in digital media manipulation.

DISCUSSION

Future of the work-chapterisation

Based on the research questions and research problem, the probable chapters can hover around the following issues:

Understanding digital authoritarianism and manipulation: Ways and tactics

The major components of this chapter would include a detailed discussion on the meaning, description of the term "digital authoritarianism", relation between "digital authoritarianism" and "digital Manipulation". Further the methods and strategies relating to such are also to be covered in the chapter with suitable examples from in and around the world. This chapter on the whole is going to be generic and subjective in nature.

Political propaganda and manipulation in India through social media

Major points to be included in this chapter would hover around the ideas of political propaganda and political manipulation in India with the help of social media-the role of social media in spreading of political messages and whether the same are manipulative or not spread of political communication by political parties/politicians to attract the voters manipulative or authoritative in nature.

Impact of digital media manipulation in India: Consequences upon the youth

The major components to be covered in this chapter would include an assessment of digital media manipulation upon the country's youth with regard to the democracy and political process of India-effect on election season influence on voters, poll counts if any-concept of digital media influencers and their role in influencing/subverting public opinion

Fostering digital media manipulation: An assessment of YouTube channels in India

This chapter to focus on the role of YouTube in India in details- A case study of YouTube channels with regard to its political content, communication, misinformation YouTube channels of various political parties and individual handles of politicians role and nature of content of some specific YouTube channels dealing with political news, information, role of YouTube influencers-influence upon the mass manipulative or authoritative role of YouTube during the pandemic scenario and aftermath future of country's democracy.

Research methodology/plan of work

The following work would be dealt in these methods:

- Historical and analytical method to be used-content analysis would be one of the vital aspects of this research, since the manipulative narratives from the particular handles need to be analysed. A comparative study of the digital media platforms needs to be chalked out for understanding sentiment analysis of the target audience. YouTube content to be analysed separately (specific categories) and in details as well as their sources.
- Data needs to be collected from YouTube videos quantitative method to understand viewers engagement from particular YouTube channels (Number of subscribers, likes, comments if any). Images and videos to be collected from authentic and eminent sources, political parties' social media handles to capture the tactics of digital manipulation. Nature of content of some specific channels need to be focused upon those dealing with political news specifically.
- Since the focus of the work is upon the youth, a survey would be carried out, targeting 18-35 years of age group. Survey to be done using Google Forms, physical interviews, emailers. Focus would be more on the tech-savvy youth or those who spend more time with the social media and internet. Survey also to be done with those involved/working in digital marketing, Photoshop, designing, AI to understand details behind image morphing-a very important feature of digital media manipulation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study would help in understanding the scope, extent of the role of YouTube in fostering digital manipulation as well as its limitations. It would open up the space for further study, research and investigation onto the arena with the gradual evolution of digital media in the course of time.

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