

Forum: Special Political

Issue: The Question of the Influence of Social Media in Elections

Officer: Sam Richardson

Position: Head Chair

Introduction

Social media has gone from a mere social media platform to a medium that has become integral to global politics. In elections, the use of social media has become a necessity for elections in many nations. The use of social media itself has exponentiated in recent years. By 2023, the total amount of users on Instagram is projected to be 1.185 billion, while Twitter is expected to have over 315 million users. This growth of social media is especially expected to be driven by developing markets, as access to smartphones and computers also continue to grow in these markets. As more individuals gain access to the internet, politicians have been increasingly forced to utilize social media in their campaigns. Between 2016 and 2020, political Twitter and Instagram accounts have grown their average likes and favorites by 586% and shares and retweets by 268%. With users growing at an exponential rate, politicians have been forced to adapt to the new landscape. Today, organized political social media campaigns exist in 48 countries, and that number will continue to grow yearly.

This shift toward social media has caused a myriad of new problems for electoral integrity throughout the world. Through foreign influence campaigns, domestically spread misinformation, and other factors, the internet has become a new method through which elections results can be skewed. This tainting of results has manifested itself in the use of deep fakes, mass disinformation campaigns, and other falsities. Politicians can now post inaccurate

attacks against their opponents, and unlike in the past, these claims can then be falsely justified through the use of deep fakes, out-of-context snippets, and incorrect data perpetuated by an “echo chamber.” These negatives can be further exacerbated by social media companies who sell their data so that politicians can analyze it in order to find the most effective strategies. The fusion of social media and politics in recent years has established a new norm, where politicians lessen truth in favor of gaining popularity.

Voter Fraud Is Not New, But Social Media Presents New Problems

Voter fraud and election tampering are not new phenomena. From the days of Roman consular elections, electoral systems have been influenced by physical force, fraud, or a refusal to honor election results. Incumbent presidents would often see that power was slipping away, and refuse to abdicate from power, thus sparking a violent struggle for power.

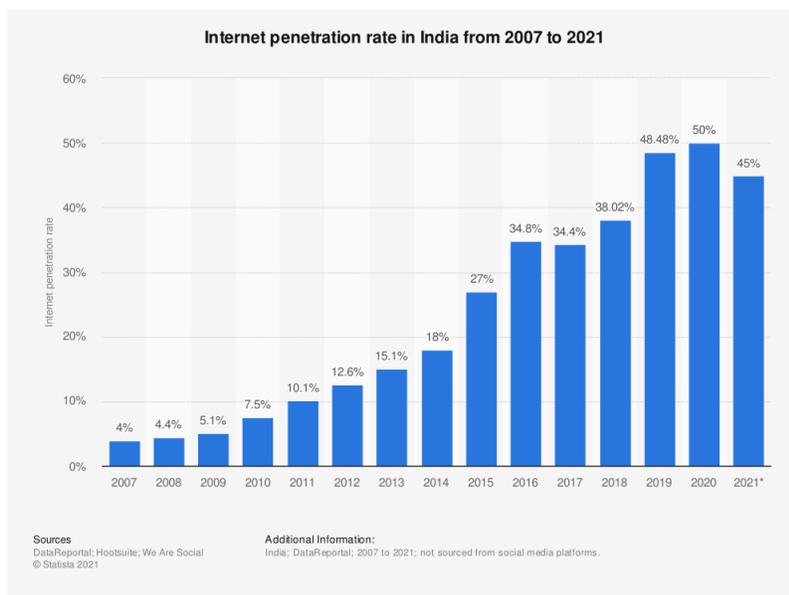
However, the issue of social media’s influence in elections is not the same. Its fraudulence is not clear-cut. While before, the constituent’s vote would be tampered with, social media fundamentally changes the psyche of the voter in an intangible manner. In addition, measures were taken against social media in elections often run the risk of limiting free speech, which can then create a slippery slope leading to human rights violations. Often, in their efforts to curb the problem of election tampering, governments actually end up limiting the freedoms of the people. This slippery slope is echoed by UN Policy Counselor Wafa Ben-Hassine, who says, “Governments in Asia are similarly advancing laws that serve to restrict the freedom of expression.” Governments interested in increasing their power could limit the freedom of their citizens through policies passed under the guise of protecting against misinformation.

At the same time, citizens do not have the tools to analyze sources properly. The average citizen can not discern falsifications, rhetorical strategies, and a lack of alternative perspectives.

Instead, they often fall victim to the same strategies used by speakers for decades, such as negative integration and nationalism, which can often cause significant damage to minority groups. Since the UN is tasked with upholding fundamental human rights, such as privacy and freedom, combating misinformation is a difficult task.

India: Case Study 1

Before 2009, only one Indian politician had a Twitter account. Between 2009 and 2014 though, the number of Facebook users grew by seven times, and the number of internet-using citizens has grown significantly during that time as well.



(Via Statista)

Politicians took advantage of this growth in the 2014 elections, which has been described as India’s first social media election. The historically right-wing, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) “developed an effective IT wing linked to disinformation and propaganda, both of which it employs to stoke communal divisions to reap electoral benefits” (Jose). The BJP utilized Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to spread their message to all voting citizens with access to the internet, which as noted previously had grown exponentially in recent years. In fact, the BJP was operating between 200,000 and 300,000 WhatsApp groups and 18,000 Twitter handles

during the election. The sheer number of accounts under BJP control allowed them to manipulate the social media market in whatever direction they wanted.

In their social media campaigns, the BJP used both negative and positive integration. First, they spread positive rhetoric regarding the BJP, thus drowning out criticism and also filling social media feeds' with laudatory information about the BJP. This praise centered around the praise of otherwise controversial policies, such as airstrikes in Balakot and the increased prevalence of the army. At the same time, the BJP deliberately avoided negatives, thus restricting alternative perspectives available to potential voters. Issues such as unemployment were largely ignored, and the constituents were not heavily exposed to the negatives of the BJP. Their social media campaign was not just limited to spreading positive information about themselves though, and the BJP worked tirelessly to tarnish the image of their "enemies," such as the Indian National Congress and Aam Aadmi Party. In fact, many of the social media accounts created by the BJP focused on spreading disinformation about the BJP's "enemies." According to former Party volunteer Sadhavi Kosla, the BJP sexually and religiously trolled opposing leaders, especially if they were women. In 2020, the BJP even posted a fake video of violent Indian protestors supporting Pakistan, which only fueled hatred among BJP members. These actions created further divisions between Hindus and Muslims, and this increased animosity created the risk of further hate crimes among the two groups. Today, the BJP has focused more on limiting what voters can see on their social media accounts. By flooding social media with positive messages and attacking other parties, the BJP can restrict the information available to voters while simultaneously instilling pro-Hindu, anti-Islam views in voters.

The BJP has been especially successful because it appeals to the pre-existing beliefs of potential Hindu voters. Small prejudices and Indian nationalism can be manipulated through

disinformation campaigns into fervid support for the BJP and hatred of the “others.” When farmers began to protest the anti-small farm bills passed in September 2020, the BJP labeled these groups as violent Muslim rioters, thus using the Muslim-Hindu divide in India to their advantage. The BJP also posted videos that defended police brutality against farmers, which were later taken down by Twitter due to misinformation.

In response to the BJP, other political parties adopted the same strategies. After the BJP began calling Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi “Pappu,” a derogatory name for an immature boy, the Indian National Congress increased its social media presence. After 2014, their spending on social media increased by a factor of ten. Other Indian parties have also taken to social media, and in 2022, social media has become an integral piece of Indian elections.

In the UN report on Human Rights in India for the year 2020, social media abuse was cited as the main factor in the increasing Hindu discrimination against Muslims. As a result of these social media campaigns, Hindus attacked Muslims for false claims, such as the claim that Muslims deliberately spread COVID-19 to Hindu communities in a “CoronaJihad” effort. While the UN recognizes these issues in India, it is difficult to make an effort in India against the BJP while also respecting national sovereignty. Since India is a growing economic power, nations like China do not want to take any risks. And since these social media issues take place on a national level, they are hard to mitigate through UN action.

United States: Case Study 2

In the United States, social media has played a massive role in the last two presidential elections, as well as numerous Congressional and local elections that have taken place over the past decade. As a nation where nearly all citizens have access to the internet and social media, the United States is susceptible to mass social media use by politicians. Both major parties, the

Democrats and Republicans, have used social media for their benefit, and appealing to constituents has been the main aspect of social media use. The goal is not necessarily to flip voters, but rather to further entrench the party's constituents so there is little movement between parties.

In the 2016 and 2020 election cycles, both Democrats and Republicans used key vocabulary to specifically appeal to their voting blocks. Democrats used words like "COVID-19," "equality," and "healthcare," while the Republicans have used words like "fake news," "liberals," and "defund." By using specific vocabulary, political parties can appeal to their voters specifically, and create a unified party stance. If each party sticks to a smaller vocabulary, the perspectives of voters will be heavily polarized and simplified by this language use. This use of partisan terms also increased the engagement of posts among the audience. When popular terms were used, those posts would get increased feedback, such as likes and comments, from the audience. In addition, the polarized audience of these posts often creates an "echo chamber," further diminishing alternative perspectives. The use of keywords is especially prevalent on Twitter, where they can cause a post to be featured in categories accessible from the Twitter home page and trending page.

Malicious content also ran rampant during the 2020 elections. Lawmakers, in addition to posting positive content about themselves, posted negative posts about opponents. Among Democrats, for example, the term "Trump" was the most commonly used term during the 2020 election, despite the Democratic Party's animosity toward the former president. Lawmakers, especially right-wing politicians, also began misinformation campaigns. These included claims against election results and opponents, and like in India would often contain misogynistic tones. These claims would often be shared thousands or millions of times, and bots were utilized to

further increase their reach across social media platforms. These bots were not limited to American bots, and Russian meddling in the American election through social media has been well-documented. Through boosting the popularity of anti-Hillary Clinton content, Russia was able to influence the election, and Russia is reported to have used a similar strategy in influencing the Brexit vote. When posts containing misinformation were taken down by fact-checkers, it would often take place after the damage was done. Even after Donald Trump was banned from Twitter after spreading misinformation regarding the 2020 election results, the damage was already done. There was a common thread of vocabulary among Republicans regarding “voter fraud,” and on January 6, 2021, the US Capitol was raided by right-wing Americans who believed the 2020 election results were falsified so that Donald Trump would not become president. In addition, the massive following of accounts spreading information added legitimacy to falsified claims, according to the University of Maryland Division of Research.

The propagation of falsified information can weaken a democracy, which relies on well-informed voters to make decisions in their own best interest. If voters are spread false information, they will not be able to make informed decisions. Thus, the strength of the democracy will suffer, as leaders will have increased sway over the minds of voters. According to the research group Economist Intelligence Unit, the US has been flawed democracy for five years in a row due to the misinformation spread during those years, much of which can be attributed to social media.

In response, social media companies began to ban content that was deemed to be misinformation. This policy creates a slippery slope though, as the removal of private content can turn into a limitation of free speech further down the road.

Despite social media's negative effects on the United States' elections, it also fueled an increase in voter participation. In the 2020 election, first-time voters under 30 are double the number of first-time voters under 30 in the 2016 election. Voter turnout campaigns from both parties flooded the internet before elections, and the results were evident in the statistics of voter registration.

Possible Action

While the UN has not made direct action against the issue, they have continued to reinforce that human rights must remain at the forefront of any response to social media in elections. Protecting elections can not be used as an excuse to violate the privacy and freedoms of voters, and this idea must remain at the forefront of any actions. However, this does not mean that governments should adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to social media. Social media misuse can distort democracy and limit technological freedom, and thus needs to be dealt with.

UNESCO advocates for a four-step approach to limiting misinformation and its effects. The first step is promoting internet literacy. If voters understand the drawbacks of the internet, the ways in which misinformation can be spotted, and the methods by which one can evaluate sources, they can more successfully navigate the internet. In developing countries and among the elderly populations, this is especially important, as they have not been around the internet for a long time. Therefore, education for these groups is especially important, as they can be easily swayed by misinformation.

The second step of the UNESCO approach is the identification and monitoring of information. This includes fact-checking, flagging, and blacklisting content. When a user sees that a post is flagged for misinformation, they will be less likely to trust that source as real news. This flagging is often done by fact-checkers, who often work for private companies, such as

Instagram, Facebook, and even various NGOs. Posts can also be blacklisted, which can limit their audience. This strategy, although being more extreme than flagging, can further limit the effects of misinformation on voters. Identification of misinformation has been growing throughout the world, both in developed and developing countries, and companies and initiatives are sprouting up throughout the world to help quell the effects of misinformation.

The third step of UNESCO's plan is containment and corrective measures. This includes the contextualization of news and the propagation of alternative sources. The goal of contextualization is to provide additional information so that voters can understand the surroundings of a particular snippet or piece of information. A main strategy that can be used in contextualization is to provide an article explaining the complete issue, or at least the other side of an issue so that voters are not swayed by incomplete information. Containing also involves the limitation of fake accounts which are used to artificially spread misinformation. For example, social media companies can ban bot accounts so that they can not be used in this manner. Some companies have also begun to assign authenticity scores to pieces of information, which can help to contain the perceived validity of a false source.

The final component of UNESCO's plan is the implementation of regulatory measures. These measures, according to the UN Special Rapporteur's Report, must be done "to promote a free, independent and diverse communications environment, including media diversity, which is a key means of addressing disinformation and propaganda." Some suggested courses of action include the implementation of subsidies or lower taxes for media companies who actively seek to dissuade misinformation. This can be done through private-public journalism partnerships or the ability for media outlets to register as non-profits and receive government funding. The European Commission has even come up with a five-step process in regards to this step that includes:

- Disrupting advertising revenues of certain accounts and websites that spread disinformation.
- Making political advertising and issue-based advertising more transparent.
- Addressing the issue of fake accounts and online bots.
- Empowering consumers to report disinformation and access different news sources, while improving the visibility and findability of authoritative content.
- Empowering the research community to monitor online disinformation through privacy-compliant access to the platforms' data.”

While it is tricky to both contain misinformation and promote freedom of expression, policies must be put in place that achieves this goal. As social media continues to grow, it must be regulated more so that consumers can interact with media that is comprehensive, accurate, and relatively unbiased.

Bibliography

- Ben-Hassine, Wafa. "Government Policy for the Internet Must Be Rights-Based and User-Centred." United Nations, United Nations,
<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/government-policy-internet-must-be-rights-based-and-user-centred>.
- "Charting Congress on Social Media in the 2016 and 2020 Elections." Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy, Pew Research Center, 20 Oct. 2021,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/09/30/charting-congress-on-social-media-in-the-2016-and-2020-elections/>.
- Howard, Philip. "Use of Social Media to Manipulate Public Opinion Now a Global Problem, Says New Report." Oxford Internet Institute Use of Social Media to Manipulate Public Opinion Now a Global Problem Says New Report Comments, 26 Sept. 2019,
<https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/news/use-of-social-media-to-manipulate-public-opinion-now-a-global-problem-says-new-report/>.
- "How Social Media Is Shaping Political Campaigns." Knowledge@Wharton. The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 17 August, 2020. Web. 13 March, 2022
<https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/how-social-media-is-shaping-political-campaigns>
- Jose, Jelvin. "The Politicization of Social Media in India." South Asian Voices, 7 Jan. 2022,
<https://southasianvoices.org/the-politicization-of-social-media-in-india/>.
- Martin-Rozumiłowicz, Beata. "Social Media, Disinformation and Electoral Integrity." IFES, Aug. 2019.

- Moore, Hayleigh, and Mia Hinckle. "Social Media's Impact on the 2020 Presidential Election: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." UMD Division of Research, University of Maryland, 3 Nov. 2020,
<https://research.umd.edu/articles/social-medias-impact-2020-presidential-election-good-bad-and-ugly?id=13541>.
- Poushter, Jacob, et al. "Social Media Use Continues to Rise in Developing Countries." Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, Pew Research Center, 14 Aug. 2020,
<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/06/19/social-media-use-continues-to-rise-in-developing-countries-but-plateaus-across-developed-ones/>.
- UNESCO. *Elections and Media in Digital Times*. UNESCO, 2019.
- "World Report 2021: Rights Trends in India." Human Rights Watch, 13 Jan. 2021,
<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/india#>.