

Social Media and Critical Digital Literacy in India's General Elections

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Summary

With the Indian general elections two weeks away, critical digital literacy, particularly at the digital fringes, is a key tool to fight fake news and uphold election integrity in a social media-saturated environment.

Introduction

India's general elections are around the corner, and, as expected, the role of social media and technology companies in influencing electoral outcomes has come under the spotlight. Recent initiatives, such as the social media guidelines for campaigning issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI), and the voluntary adoption of a code of ethics for online campaigning by internet companies, could not have come sooner.

With over 400 million internet users, and vernacular content gaining in popularity across the country, monitoring internet spaces would be a complex and highly demanding task. Nonetheless, these initiatives are steps in the right direction. They provide some mechanisms to hold political actors and technology companies – long complicit in the misuse of social media for narrow political and commercial gains – accountable for their (in) actions.

Social Media and Political Engagement

Social media has increasingly influenced public opinion and discourse in India since the landmark 2014 general elections, which saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Narendra Modi rise to power through the skilful leveraging of new media. Since then, social media has been used by political parties and actors as a regular tool of political communication, not just during, but between, elections as well.

The advent of social media has significantly impacted the nature and type of political communication and democratic engagement in India. The democratisation of (political) communication has also placed citizens at the receiving end of high levels of propaganda, misinformation, and fake news – resulting in increased political polarization, toxic public discourse, and violence.

Within this context, the ECI directives and internet companies' monitoring of social media content would make cyberspace a more viable space for democratic engagement. However, these efforts need to be supplemented by citizens and civil society efforts as watchdogs, both online and offline.

For example, the ECI's cVIGIL app provides citizens a means to report model code violations and electoral malpractices in real time, with a fast-track complaint reception and redressal system. Similarly, as technology companies have now realised, the limitations of artificial intelligence (AI) to weed out problematic and dangerous content make the involvement of humans a necessary condition.

The Digital Fringes

In both cases, the role of informed and active citizens is critical for efforts to clean up social media spaces and uphold election integrity. Where this gets tricky in the Indian context is that the success of such initiatives requires *critical digital literacy*, a crucial ingredient that is sorely lacking among netizens. Whereas media/digital literacy focuses on the effective use of information technology (IT) devices and services, critical digital literacy goes beyond this to instil critical thinking skills about the authenticity of content, and how it is consumed and shared.

Unfortunately, despite – or perhaps because of – the dizzying speed of mobile phone and internet penetration in India, the state (and even the private sector) has lagged behind in implementing critical digital literacy programmes and public awareness campaigns about the dangers of social media. Populations on the digital fringes viz., those with little or no access to new technologies and/or limited skills to use them effectively, are particularly susceptible to falsehoods peddled online.

The location at the digital fringes is not just a matter of technology, but the result of a series of disempowerments—class, caste, gender, age, geography, etc. Those on the digital fringes include the poor, rural populations, women, the disabled, migrants and internally displaced populations, and the elderly. The combination of rapid digital connectivity with little-to-no critical digital literacy is a time bomb, as evidenced in a string of social media-fuelled mob violence and lynchings in 2018.

Critical Digital Literacy and Election Integrity

Spurred into action by these horrific acts and government pressure, internet companies have initiated measures to detect and remove malicious content and tackle inappropriate behaviour and abuse ahead of the upcoming elections. They have also launched critical digital literacy programmes in partnership with government, private institutions, and civil society organisations.

These, and other digital literacy and cyber awareness programmes initiated by Indian corporate and not-for-profit organisations, are critical first lines of defence in tackling fake news and other problematic content. Such initiatives also play an important role by supplementing the efforts of the national digital literacy schemes launched by the government. Although an ambitious and significant step toward increasing rural digital literacy, the programme has suffered from several limitations, and does not include critical digital literacy in its curriculum.

Already there are a handful of fact-checking websites run by committed individuals, such as Alt News, Social Media Hoax Slayer, Check4Spam and Boom that are fighting fake news on a

daily basis. To make a real dent, however, their commendable efforts must be supported by higher journalism standards in the mainstream media, as well as through critical digital literacy programmes implemented on a national scale.

Conclusion

With the general elections just two weeks away, the thrust on critical digital literacy, particularly for those on the digital fringes, acquires greater urgency. Developing human capabilities and smarter citizens is crucial in light of the inability of AI and technological solutions to detect and weed out fake news, hate speech, and propaganda on their own. The need for collaborative actions – between academia, governments, technology companies, civil society and citizens – to instil critical digital literacy skills goes beyond upholding election integrity to defending the core principles of democracy itself.

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