Vernacular Social Media and the 2019 General Elections

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Summary

The use of social media by all political parties in the 2019 Indian general elections has had a transformative effect on political campaigning in India. However, much of the focus has been on English social media platforms. This paper traces the use of regional language social media networks by political parties and the circulation of fake news during the elections.

Introduction

In end-2018 a prominent Indian newspaper, The Hindustan Times, reported that fake news and hate speech thrive on regional language social networks.[1] Their investigation followed a month after Quartz India published a story on how politicians were "flocking" to non-English social networks ahead of the state elections in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in 2018.[2] The Hindustan Times investigation provided compelling examples of how Indian language platforms, Sharechat and Helo, operating in as many as 14 different languages (Hindi, Tamil and Telugu chief among them), became hotbeds of misinformation, hate speech and propaganda. The article argued that while social media giants like Facebook were undergoing close scrutiny for fake news, Indian language platforms were flying under the radar.

Sharechat and Helo

Helo and Sharechat's design is similar to that of Facebook. On Helo, at the top of the screen, one can select from pages like 'Popular' and browse through a feed of user-generated content, including graphic interchange formats, photographs, news and videos as well as post directly to the messaging platform, WhatsApp. During the 2019 elections, on Sharechat's *Lokpriya* (Popular) page, hot content – an interview between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bollywood actor Akshay Kumar, or an update on the latest hit song or trending political hashtag campaign – #*phir ek baar modi sarkaar* (one more time Modi's government) or #*bhajpa hatao desh bacha* (remove BJP; save the country) – would greet the user.

Both Helo and Sharechat target the next 100 to 150 million mobile internet users in rural India and Tier 2 and 3 cities, populated by Indian language speakers who are possibly less

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[1] Samarth Bansal and Snigdha Poonam, "Fake news and hate speech thrive on regional language social media", *Hindustan Times*, 14 Nov 2018. https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-regional-social-media-platforms-spew-fake-news-and-get-away-with-it/story-s8Kc2s4TKfne0ZRlXNuLuM.html

[2] Aria Thaker, "Indian politicians are now flocking to an unlikely 'no English' social network", *Quartz India*, 5 October 2018. https://qz.com/india/1414241/sorry-facebook-indias-bjp-and-congress-flock-to-sharechat/

comfortable with global social media platforms like Facebook than local home-grown language social networks.

The appeal of Sharechat and Helo, has not been lost on major political parties. During the election season, the Congress Party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) IT and Social Media Cell officials posted videos and photos, such as Modi standing in line to vote, on Sharechat as well as other content, sometimes blurred with the ominous warning: "This Post may contain fake news." When interviewed, Congress members have said that these platforms have become an effective means for politicians to promote their messages and connect with voters in swathes of rural India where the reach of mainstream social media platforms is more limited.[3]

This has affected the quality of political content voters consume. Many new rural mobile internet users often cannot identify fake news before they spread it.[4] Perhaps for this reason, Helo and Sharechat were portrayed in early news reports as incubation grounds for disinformation, where trends originated before going viral on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter.

Election Campaign

On 19 March 2019, the Election Commission of India (ECI) called the heads of Sharechat and Bytedance (the parent company of Helo) to a meeting along with major tech companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. A Voluntary Code of Ethics was agreed upon to tackle problematic content and bring transparency to political advertising before the elections.[5]

Helo and Sharechat acted quickly to protect their brands and public image. As early as November 2018, Sharechat's head of public policy, Berges Malu, explained that the platform had content moderators for multiple languages, and would work with a local fact-checking partner, NewsCheck. In December 2018, Helo partnered with another fact-checking agency, ALT News.

In accordance with the Voluntary Code, media companies thereafter adopted various tools and strategies to combat fake news, including training grievance nodal officers in New Delhi

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[3] S Bansal and S Poonam, "Fake news and hate speech thrive on regional language social media", op. cit. Also see Mithun MK, "WhatsApp armies and Like farms: Internet is ground zero for BJP, Cong to take on TRS", *The News Minute*, 13 November 2018. https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/whatsapp-armies-and-farms-internet-ground-zero-bjp-cong-take-trs-91436

[4] Murali Krishnan, "How fake news is widening social rifts in India", *DW Global Media Forum*, 9 October 2017. https://www.dw.com/en/how-fake-news-is-widening-social-rifts-in-india/a-40875997

[5] "Voluntary Code of Ethics by the Social Media Platforms for the General Election 2019", *Election Commission of India*. https://eci.gov.in/files/file/9468-voluntary-code-of-ethics-by-the-social-media-platforms-for-the-general-election-2019/
Also see "State-level nodal officers to help Election Commission take on fake news, hate speech on social media", *Business Today*, 3 April 2019. https://www.businesstoday.in/current/economy-politics/statelevel-nodal-officers-to-help-election-commission-take-on-fake-news-hate-speech-on-social-media/story/333535.html

to report abuses as well as using artificial intelligence, machine-learning algorithms, user-reports, and content labels and disclosures to flag or remove injurious content.

Still, on 21 April 2019, two weeks into the election, BOOM, Facebook's Mumbai based fact-checking team (which moderates content in as many as 10 Indian languages), described the task of trying to stop the deluge of misinformation by new smartphone users as Sisyphean.[6] This was in accordance with surveys. A Microsoft study shows 64 per cent of Indians encounter fake news online, while BBC research shows 72 per cent of Indians struggle to distinguish information that is real from fake.[7][8]

The Size of the Problem

India's digital landscape had transformed after the 2014 election. According to reports by the Internet and Mobile Association of India in April 2015, social media usage had exploded in rural areas. The launch of Reliance Jio in December 2015 made data in India cheaper than anywhere else in the world ($0.26 per giga byte), and brought millions of new users online.[9]

In 2014, Indian citizens had only 100 million smartphones between them; this number jumped to approximately 300 million in 2017, and is expected to pass 440 million by 2022.[10]

Signs that political discourse will shift to the Indian languages online is becoming increasingly apparent. Rural internet users already surpass their urban counterparts in the amount of time they spend on news, chat apps, social media and online entertainment – 328 minutes for rural users versus 308 minutes weekly for urban users.[11] The user-base for vernacular content is also expected to grow three fold in the next five years.[12]

To provide an example of this market's growth potential, Sharechat, which launched its platform in October 2015, has accrued over 40 million active monthly users. Before Helo

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6   Saritha Rai, "How 11 People Are Trying to Stop Fake News in the World's Largest Election", *Bloomberg*, 22 April 2019. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-04-21/facebook-has-assembled-a-small-army-of-fact-checkers-too-small

7   "Microsoft releases digital civility index on Safer Internet Day", *Microsoft News Center India*, 5 February 2019. https://news.microsoft.com/en-in/microsoft-digital-civility-index-safer-internet-day-2019/

8   "Fake news is a concern for 83% of Indian media consumers, reveals BBC Study", *Scroll.in*, 12 June 2019. https://scroll.in/latest/838693/fake-news-is-a-concern-for-83-of-indian-media-consumers-reveals-bbc-study

9   "India has cheapest mobile data in the world: Study", *The Hindu*, 6 March 2019. https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/info-tech/india-has-cheapest-mobile-data-in-world-study/article26445922.ece

10   Pankaj Mishra, "The Real Revolution in India", *Bloomberg*, 21 April 2019. https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-04-21/the-smartphone-threatens-india-s-democracy Also see "How Online vernacular market is becoming the next big battle ground for tech cos", *The Economic Times*, 11 March 2018. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/how-online-vernacular-market-is-becoming-the-big-battle-ground-for-tech-cos/articleshow/63248994.cms?from=mdr

11   G Seetharaman, "Indian Languages—Defining India's Internet: A Study by KPMG in India and Google", April 2017", https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2017/04/Indian-languages-Defining-Indias-Internet.pdf

12   Aastha Singal, "Is Indian Startup Ecosystem Ready to Meet the Massive Demand for Vernacular Content?" *Entrepreneur India*, 19 September 2018. https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/320316

launched in June 2018, Sharechat was growing 20 per cent monthly, and claims to have multiplied its user-base twenty-fold between October 2015 and October 2018.[13]

Helo, by comparison, a copycat platform launched by the Chinese company Bytedance, attracted 25 million active monthly users in under 10 months, and aims for 300 per cent growth in 2019.[14] Helo holds the spot of India's second most popular Indian language social network. A commonly cited 2017 KPMG and Google report reveals that the number of Indian language Internet users at 234 million has already surpassed English users. It estimates that by 2021, this number will grow to 536 million, overtaking by a long margin the 199 million English users.[15]

Political Cyberwar

Such vernacularisation will have a profound effect on the quality of democratic public discourse. The lowering of language barriers and bridging of rural-urban divides has made it easier for parties to push their agendas across new areas and demographics. Voters from small towns and villages constitute many parties' key constituencies.

Approximately 69 per cent of India's population lives in rural India. It is notable that the BJP secured some of its biggest gains among rural voters, increasing its vote share by 7.3 per cent.[16] Young voters, amongst social media's biggest users, were also a much sought-after prize: like in 2014, the youth came out in strong numbers for the BJP, especially first-time voters. The BJP's vote share was 40-41 per cent for voters between 18-27 years of age.[17]

Correlation does not prove causation. The BJP's strategic and effective use of digital media bolstered what was already a strong offline campaign. Still, multiple news reports and research suggest that if on the surface political parties vowed to abide by the rules of the ECI, showcasing chaste social media handles, then behind the scenes well-funded IT cells, cyber soldiers, biased content providers and paid vendors waged proxy wars across cell phone screens.[18]

Fighting Fake News

Social media cannot solely be blamed for the outbreak in fake news. In many ways, it only amplifies pre-existing problems. Citizens have been finding it increasingly difficult to

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[13] Varsha Bansal, "Bytedance eats into Sharechat's market as daily active users dip", *Livemint*, 28 January 2019. https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/bytedance-eats-into-sharechat-s-market-as-daily-active-users-dip-1548649417145.html
Also see A Thaker, "Indian politicians are now flocking to an unlikely 'no English' social network", op. cit.

[14] Ibid.

[15] "Indian Languages—Defining India's Internet: A Study by KPMG in India and Google", April 2017. https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2017/04/Indian-languages-Defining-Indias-Internet.pdf

[16] Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta, "Where did the BJP get its votes from in 2019?" *livemint*, 3 June 2019. https://www.livemint.com/

[17] Jyoti Mishra and Amrit Negi, "Post-poll survey: BJP, the most preferred party of young India", *The Hindu*, 29 May 2019. https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/the-most-preferred-party-of-young-india/article27277454.ece

[18] Snigda Poonam and Samarth Bansal, "Misinformation Is Endangering India's Election", *The Atlantic*, 1 April 2019. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/india-misinformation-election-fake-news/586123/

distinguish between news, entertainment and propaganda, which points to a broader malaise in India's media environment.

So long as profits are driven by eyeballs, digital advertisements, and sensationalism, it is unlikely media organizations will deviate from their standard models of business.[19] Many experts agree that critical digital literacy is the way forward. It has also been argued that political parties should pick up the fight, as they are at the heart of the problem. Strong government regulation has been viewed suspiciously, for fear of government surveillance and infringement of freedom of speech.

The fight against fake news must indeed be multipronged. However, digital literacy might face hurdles in a society where the bulk of the population lives in rural areas and levels of education are low. The ability and will of political parties to regulate their own behavior is also uncertain, when guidelines created for social media are easily circumvented and the guidelines themselves have little legal teeth. The alignment between the spurts of disinformation on social media following the Balakot air strike in February 2019, IT cells working overtime during this period and the BJP's campaign on national security raises serious questions.[20]

So long as one party weaponises social media, others are incentivised to do so also. India may be a political democracy, in that it has a parliamentary system and free elections, but not a social democracy, given deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities.[21] One of the interesting things about the 2019 election was that the BJP succeeded in consolidating the Hindu vote bank across social groups, which included a spike in support from Hindu Other Backward Classed (OBCs), Dalits or the former untouchables and the Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes.[22] The BJP's success in stitching together a broad coalition of social groups was helped by social media.

Self-Regulation

In the Indian media, politics, sensationalism, and entertainment mix to a dangerous degree, largely due to intense competition and a scarcity of funds. Much like the incentives driving media houses, which peddle Bollywood celebrity and cricket updates, Helo and Sharechat are also marked for their marriage of the popular and political. The logic of many regional

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[19] "Press Release – Experts: Media and Digital Literacy Must to Fight Fake News", *Sflc.in*, 1 January 2019. https://sflc.in/press-release-experts-media-and-digital-literacy-must-fight-fake-news

[20] Ravik Bhattacharya, "In Cooch Behar, BJP's social media boss is 36-year-old-shop owner who juggles 1,114 WhatsApp groups", *The Indian Express*, 12 April 2019. https://indianexpress.com/elections/in-cooch-behar-bjps-social-media-boss-is-36-yr-old-shop-owner-who-juggles-1114-whatsapp-groups-5669638/

[21] Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Columbia University Press 2003): p. 3.

[22] Shreyas Sardesai and Vibha Attri, "Post-poll survey: the 2019 verdict is a manifestation of the deepening religious divide in India", *The Hindu*, 30 May 2019. https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/the-verdict-is-a-manifestation-of-the-deepening-religious-divide-in-india/article27297239.ece

content apps is to hook the masses on entertainment, and to use entertainment as a gateway to political news.[23]

Between February and April 2019, Sharechat removed 54,400 accounts and 487,000 pieces of content for violating their community guidelines and terms of use. Notably, 13,195 pieces came from the politics and news section.[24] In a rapidly expanding market hungry for vernacular content, clickable content is unlikely to be responsible, well-researched journalism.

The digital media industry does appear capable of self-regulation though. When global giants like Facebook came under governmental pressure and started to develop in-house strategies to rein in fake news, Helo and Sharechat followed suit, after pressure from government and critical news coverage.

Another bright spot was the action taken by regional content application Daily Hunt in partnering with Hindi publications such as *Dainik Jagran*, *Punjab Kesari* and BBC Hindi to build credibility and to distinguish the publications from peddlers of harmful or misleading content.[25] This move is perhaps galvanising platforms like Helo to shore up credibility by joining hands with more reliable partners.[26] Digital literacy is certainly important. But equally important are legislative policy changes and market regulations. Though it is commendable that new digital technologies are democratising politics, it is also critical for the government to enact laws that protect fair and balanced free speech.

The 2019 general elections were possibly an indication of a backlash by India's Hindi and regional language-speaking population against the secular, English-speaking westernised elite. This is likely why the BJP's anti-elite rhetoric and cultural politics paid electoral dividends.[27] In this changed political discourse, regional language social media is going to play a critical role.

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23 Shadma Shaik, "Dailyhunt, regional digital rivals catch the news bug ahead of 2019 elections", *Factor Daily*, 29 January 2019. https://factordaily.com/dailyhunt-regional-digital-rivals-catch-the-news-bug-ahead-of-2019-elections/

24 Megha Mandavia, "Sharechat takes down half a million pieces of content, 54K accounts removed", *The Economic Times*, 17 April 2019. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/sharechat-pulls-down-4-8-lakh-posts-54k-accounts-for-violating-community-guidelines/articleshow/68925554.cms

25 Shadma Shaik, "Dailyhunt, regional digital rivals catch the news bug ahead of 2019 elections", *Factor Daily*, 29 January 2019. https://factordaily.com/dailyhunt-regional-digital-rivals-catch-the-news-bug-ahead-of-2019-elections/

26 Deepu Sebastion Edmond, "India Politicians accuse China-made app Helo of election interference and call for Tiktok to be banned", *South China Morning Post*, 16 April 2019. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3006458/indian-politicians-call-china-made-app-tiktok-be-banned-amid

27 Devesh Kapur, "Modi's India is aspirational, assertive—and anti-elite", *The Washington Post*, 29 May 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/29/modis-india-is-aspirational-assertive-anti-elite/?utm_term=.d520dbda5c82