

EFFECTS OF NEWS DISSEMINATION ON VOTER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

News refers to critical information about local, national or international events that is broadcasted through various media channels, including radio, television, smartphones, newspapers, and magazines. The transmission of any sort of news can vary widely: some stories might gain rapid attention and go viral, while others might remain largely unnoticed. The likelihood of a news story going viral depends on several factors, including timing, location, the platform used for dissemination, the sensitivity of the information, and the surrounding discourse.

All of these factors suggest that news dissemination should be handled with absolute care and responsibility, but this is often not the case. In the digital age of social media, news channels specifically might not be the sole source of information that people encounter. With the increasing penetration of the internet and the use of social media, anyone can act as a news reporter, regardless of whether the person has valid credentials and accurate information to share. This phenomenon, termed as citizen journalism or armchair activism, can have unintended and even harmful consequences.

In a democracy, a voter is seen as a rational citizen with the power and responsibility to choose their representative. However, this rationale and decision making is often driven by several factors, not limited to the actions of the political parties. Here is where the news dissemination, via popular social media channels, like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, and WhatsApp, comes into the picture. X is one of the primary mediums for political discussion and dissemination.

The focus of this paper is to explore how a voter's perception can be affected and influenced by the usage of these media platforms.

Keywords: News, News Dissemination, Voter, Social Media, Perception

Introduction

Voter perception is closely tied to media consumption, a key element of news dissemination. This process involves the spread of both authentic and fake news, with no guarantee that the information comes from credible sources. The credibility of a source of information being disseminated on various social media channels is not something tangible that can be weighed

in. The 2014 Lok Sabha elections were often called the “media elections,” with the Bharatiya Janata Party’s victory attributed to the convergence of corporate media ownership and the party's corporate backers. While many claims were made, the truth behind these assertions remains unproven.

In the last decade, Indian voters have increasingly relied on digital media rather than traditional sources of news, like television, radio, and newspapers. This can further be substantiated by the 2024 Digital News Report (Statista, n.d.) which states that over 50% of Indians now get their news from social media. Voters frequently read news on mobile apps, watch political event reels, and follow politicians on social media, which increases their exposure to particular types of media and makes them more susceptible to influence. The young voter base in the country is said to be more technologically savvy, equipped, and interested in learning about politics and government online.

This paper aims to dive into how news about current issues, politicians and politics, in general, impacts the decision of a voter in the longer run. Delhi, with an internet penetration rate of around 68%, followed by Kerala has seen significant growth in digital news consumption, with 70% of Indians accessing news online, primarily through YouTube. The research will focus on how voters in Delhi form impressions based on media consumption from platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X. It will also examine the factors that determine whether these choices are perceived as correct or incorrect and how these influences manifest during election season.

Review of Literature

News dissemination plays out in various trajectories and a cycle of flow of information. In times of the rapid rise of social media and other digital platforms along with the growth of tech-savvy demography, information from a particular source spreads so quickly that it becomes next to impossible to find its origin, leading to an unavailability to verify the ‘credibility’ of the news amongst the layman. The information plays out in the following manner, i.e.

- i. Access
- ii. Input
- iii. Output

After news is disseminated and spread, it influences attitudinal changes in voters. Voters often come with pre-existing social and political biases, stereotypes, and judgments, which influence how they interpret information. These diverse perspectives help individuals form their own version of the truth. The factors that contribute to attitudinal differences become evident in the decision-making process when voters decide whom to support. Media exposure, whether partisan or nonpartisan, provides voters with various viewpoints and selective content, which can impact their choices. News consumed through newspapers, television, and social media acts as a powerful influence, preparing individuals to make decisions on voting day.

Election outcomes are heavily influenced by the channels through which news is spread. Fake news, a growing issue, adds another layer of complexity to this process. The

sensationalization of stories or the spread of misinformation can reinforce existing prejudices and stereotypes, leading to more polarized and negative thinking. Fake news infiltrates multiple forms of media, contributing to a “post-truth” environment, as described by Higgins (2016). Overall, news media has greatly transformed the political landscape and its effects on society.

Methodology

This research will take a qualitative approach, analysing secondary data and research published by political analysts, political scientists, and media experts in India. The content will be reviewed descriptively, with a focus on analysis and summarization. Relevant literature was examined based on specific keywords, and publications by notable authors were selected to form an initial understanding of the topic. Research papers from Google Scholar were consulted to gather content and datasets. During this phase, key sections of the texts were highlighted and used to summarize the findings. The main keywords for this review included “media,” “politics,” “voter perception,” “social media,” and “election news.”

Objective

This study aims to determine the general effects of using social and traditional media platforms by an average Indian voter in Delhi. The paper's scope is to explore how these media platforms can be beneficial for the voter or act as an element that is detrimental to the formation of a perception. The subjectivity of seeking truth in news disseminated through these mediums is also a significant aspect of the study.

Finding and Analysis Strategy

The widespread availability of news has made it easy for information to be transferred seamlessly from one device or person to another. This smooth exchange highlights the close relationship between communication and mass media. Both media and communication rely on each other to transmit news effectively. Social media has emerged as a key platform for sharing news, not just among friends, families, and organizations, but also across various social networking sites. The speed, efficiency, and shareability of news on these platforms define how information is disseminated. Social media has become a powerful tool for news distribution, allowing individuals to act as content distributors. It is necessary to understand why and when people choose to disseminate news in this digital environment. As scholars from the Pew Research Center note, “If searching for news was the most important development of the last decade, sharing news may be among the most important of the next” (Olmstead, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2011, p. 10).

In the contemporary media framework, news operates in a continuous flow. The first step here is publishing the content. Any “individual” on the internet can publish media, which can stand as both a boon and a bane. However, imposing restrictions on this practice would put it in murky territory regarding freedom of speech and expression. As a result, when individuals post content—particularly news—they often do so without professional affiliation or journalistic backing. Since information can be interpreted in various ways, news invariably circulates through a cycle where it moves from one platform to another. Choi

(2016) describes this as “externalising content by endorsing or recontextualising news content through “like” or favourite” button”.

Julian Wallace (2018) outlines three stages in the dissemination of media. The first is "access," where users often struggle to distinguish between reliable and unreliable content. Here, non-journalistic actors and credible sources coexist, and distinguishing between them requires careful scrutiny. The second stage is "selection criteria," where both journalists and non-journalists curate content based on their own criteria, often shaped by pre-existing attitudes. Institutional or organizational forces may influence journalistic standards, whereas amateurs are not bound by such principles and may skip fact-checking. The final stage is "output," where journalistic actors typically rely on academic or institutional tools to publish their content, while non-journalistic actors often use social media platforms (such as X, Reddit, Facebook) due to their accessibility and ease of readability.

As elaborated by Steven Kates (1998), political advertising has recently been examined from an ethical standpoint. Key issues in political advertising include the truthfulness of the ad, its manipulative nature, and any deceptive technical elements. A common thread in the existing literature is the assumption that voters are rational and make informed decisions. However, this traditional perspective can be challenged by a postmodern approach, which questions the assumption that voters can verify the truthfulness of claims. Michel Foucault explores how individuals are often caught in political discourse, limiting their ability to fully participate due to the constraints of prevailing ideologies.

Academics and popular press note a significant sense of “cynicism and disenchantment” of voters from the political process and government. According to Kates (1998), they demonstrate high anger, distrust and frustration towards politicians, the government and the electoral process. They view political advertising as a “tactic in a game” used by politicians to increase their number of voters and that they would go to great lengths to win. Thus, voters view the news suspiciously and see any elaborate sponsorship as a scheme enabling politicians to win. Predominantly, an opposing political campaign alienates voters, making them averse.

Voter Choice and Political Attitudes

As discussed throughout this paper, an average voter today has access to various gadgets and platforms. Many studies have highlighted the impact of mass communication on elections, with recent reports suggesting that it can significantly influence election outcomes. Nearly 49% of people now rely on social media for news. Voting is a crucial political act that upholds the spirit of democracy. Election results are not just determined by who won, but by why one candidate or party received more votes than another. This raises the important question: why did voters make the choices they did, and what influenced their decisions?

An election season only determines how the media builds attitudes in people. Political and social factors affect voter decisions. Some of the political factors include ideological orientation, evaluation of the qualities of a leader, general performance of the government in the past, loyalty to a party, and affinity towards policies put forward by that party. Issues related to partisanship are more stable but affinity towards a particular government because of its policymaking is a changeable opinion. The social factors that come into play are views

shared by family and friends, selective media consumption because of partisan views, and environment in social settings like workplace, educational institutions, and home.

There is also a set of sociological factors motivated by one's belief and opinion on caste, class, religion, race and gender. For a policy issue to affect the voter's decision, they must have an already existing opinion on it and then further form a stronger opinion on it through consumption of media in the form of posts. In praise of the said policy, Facebook posts in favour of the benefits it creates or an Instagram carousel posts stating the pros of the policy in the process of becoming a law. Individual voting behaviour is thus a characterisation of electoral dynamics in the cohort of electoral motives set by politicians and parties in the form of campaigns, whether physical or online.

When drawing out an analogy to the sociological approaches of the Columbia school, the Ann Arbor group presented a political and psychological approach to this issue. The psychological approach recognises the role of social characteristics like socioeconomic status, religion and family influence. However, it argues, that "the distribution of social characteristics in a population varies but slowly over some time". An individual's political attitudes are built based on the news, which is spread and 'found easily.' The type of news found easily is the news that is believed and followed. The same news then travels and forms perceptions in the masses. A study on fake news that impacted voters for populist parties in Italy during the 2018 elections showed how falsification and rumoured news positively affected the votes for populist candidates in the 2018 Italian election and that prior political beliefs cannot explain this effect.

When individuals consume political news from various sources on social media or other media platforms, they often selectively believe the content they encounter. This selective consumption is influenced by the voter's attitudes, which are shaped by the political and social factors discussed earlier. A key issue here is how media flows, which is determined by the type of content an individual chooses to engage with. For example, if someone is interested in the 2024 Presidential Elections, they are likely to seek out content related to that topic, reflecting their selective bias.

In an ideal world without media bias, collective decision-making in large groups would be more effective, leading to better decisions. When news is shared selectively within a large group, the information is typically accurate enough to help individuals distinguish what is true and what is not, shaping voter perception. This network minimizes partisanship by offering diverse content, rather than fostering polarization. However, media bias weakens the quality of news, and social media becomes less effective in polarized environments. While filtering news doesn't necessarily reduce competence, the lack of diverse, high-quality information shared on social media limits voters' exposure to accurate or better-quality content. The greater danger lies in being exposed to biased, low-quality news, which creates a bubble where individuals only encounter the information they want to consume.

Scholars have noted a sharp rise in misinformation within global media in recent years. Higgins (2016) describes this era as a "post-truth" world, where not only is there an increase in the volume of news, but also a decline in users' expectations of truth. While political actors have always exaggerated, deceived, or lied, the frequency and significance of such tactics appear to have increased in recent years. The rise of social media has enabled politicians to communicate

misinformation directly to the public, bypassing the media's traditional role as gatekeepers and editors. This shift, coupled with a weakening of what Graves and Wells (2019) call "factual accountability," has allowed misinformation to spread more easily.

A fundamental and evident characteristic of fake news is that it is next to impossible to trace the source. The phoney news spreaders mask their true identity by pretending to post under the pretext of being from a legitimate source. For example, an analysis of X activity in the context of the 2016 U.S. election shows that 80% of fake news stories were consumed by merely 1% of the population. Similar results were found in a study that monitored 300 French and Italian websites, and independent fact-checkers determined that they were disseminators of incorrect information. The role of traditional news media pioneered to be a credible and factual source of news is a mistaken impression. The journalistic community's response to the spread of misinformation appears to be a renewed emphasis on truth and facts, with several media brands worldwide being more cautious with facts than ever.

Thus, the voting patterns of an individual are regarded as a result of news, fake news, cognitive, social, cultural, and political biases and thinking that give way to the decision-making on the day of the voting process.

Effects of News Dissemination on Voter Perspective

News is an integral part of most people's lives. Whether through television, social media, news apps on smartphones, YouTube videos, or tweets, people are constantly exposed to media. The impact of the news they encounter can be positive, negative, or indifferent. When individuals come across news that aligns with their existing beliefs, they are more likely to accept it without questioning, as it reinforces their worldview. This positive reception to information, without fact-checking, happens because the news fits a voter's perspective and way of thinking. Fake news, in particular, often spreads within ideological echo chambers or "cyber-ghettos."

A second response is a negative one, where voters find the news upsetting or offensive because it conflicts with their beliefs, hurts their religious sentiments, or fuels communal tensions. In such cases, they may ignore the information, as it does not validate their views. Alternatively, some voters may see the news as a mirror, offering a different perspective that prompts them to reflect on their own stance on the issue.

A third and final way of reacting is that of indifference. Here, a voter might not be relying on all forms of news to gauge their opinion and thus might not consider a piece of information they read and see online. Another aspect of indifference is doom-scrolling, where users consume only mindless content and do not pay significant heed to anything they see, including news. This might explain the high level of impression but the low number of likes on posts, tweets and newsletters online. It shows us how consuming information using their smart devices is not their primary goal for most people.

Conclusion

To summarize the points discussed, voters are rational individuals who play a vital role in a democracy by choosing the candidates or parties they believe will bring about the desired changes. Media has a profound influence on political engagement and electoral outcomes. The impact of news dissemination on voter perception is an important area of study. The narratives

shaped by media perspectives influence voters and affect electoral dynamics. Misinformation, biased reporting, and sensationalism are significant challenges to maintaining a well-informed electorate. Moving forward, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. First, increasing media literacy among the public is crucial for encouraging critical engagement with news content. Voters must be equipped with the tools to assess the credibility of sources and recognize biases, reducing the impact of misleading information. Second, policymakers and regulators should create strong frameworks to ensure transparency in media ownership, funding, and political affiliations.

Such frameworks can help curb the spread of misinformation while ensuring accountability among news organisations. Moreover, the role of academia in this context cannot be overstated. Continued interdisciplinary research into the dynamics of news consumption, voter behaviour, and media ecosystems is essential for developing evidence-based interventions. Academic institutions should also collaborate with media organisations to promote responsible journalism practices, encourage diverse and independent news sources, and foster innovations in fact-checking technologies. In conclusion, addressing the effects of news dissemination on voter perception requires an integrative strategy that combines educational initiatives, regulatory oversight, and ongoing research. By adopting these measures, the integrity of democratic processes can be safeguarded, ensuring that voters are equipped with accurate, unbiased information upon which to base their electoral decisions.

Voters are rational individuals who play a crucial role in a democratic system by voting for an individual or a party that brings about the changes they desire. The impact of news dissemination on voter perception is a critical area of study, given the media's significant influence on political engagement and electoral outcomes. This research has highlighted the substantial role that various media forms, traditional or digital, play in shaping public opinion, often in ways that can distort or amplify specific narratives. Misinformation, biased reporting, and sensationalism are significant challenges in ensuring a well-informed electorate.

The way forward, therefore, requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach. First, it's essential to emphasise the empowering role of media literacy among the populace to foster critical engagement with news content. Voters must be equipped with the tools to discern credible sources and identify biases, thereby reducing the impact of misleading information. Second, policymakers and regulators must devise robust frameworks that promote transparency in media ownership, funding, and political affiliations. This transparency is crucial as it can help curb the spread of misinformation while ensuring accountability among news organisations, thereby fostering trust in the news.

Moreover, the role of academia in this context must be balanced. Continued and urgent interdisciplinary research into the dynamics of news consumption, voter behaviour, and media ecosystems is essential for developing evidence-based interventions. Academic institutions should also collaborate with media organisations to promote responsible journalism practices, encourage diverse and independent news sources, and foster innovations in fact-checking technologies. In conclusion, addressing the effects of news dissemination on voter perception requires an integrative strategy that combines educational

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