Social Media, Disinformation, and Democracy in Asia: Country Cases
October 2020
In 2019, Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN) selected social media and disinformation as the common challenge that continue to plague and hinder democracy in Asia.

Against this background, ADRN published this special report to evaluate the current state of social media and the spread of disinformation in the region by studying the phenomenon and its impact within different countries in Asia, as well as their responses.

The report investigates pressing, contemporary questions such as:
Who are the major disinformation disseminators?
What are the primary issue areas and who are the main targets?
What are the effects of disinformation?
What current legal and political efforts have been placed by governments, lawmakers, media and CSOs to combat against disinformation?
What are the methods of disinformation applied towards different linguistic communities?
How do public figures use their personal social media accounts to engage with the public?

Drawing on a rich array of resources and data,
This report offers country-specific analyses, highlights areas of improvement, and suggests policy recommendations for ensuring the protection of social media and online platforms from the spread of disinformation.

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Introduction

The idea of democracy stemmed from the ideal of holding people in power accountable and expecting “rule by the people” in the form of a commitment to serve the citizens. Historically, the idea of direct participatory democracy developed in ancient Greece, characterized by a system in which major decisions were made by citizens constituting the assembly. Citizen-centric participation was considered the ideal form of democracy, as in effect, this meant people rule themselves (Srinivasan, 2008). Although the model of participatory democracy was considered ideal, growing populations rendered such a model irrational, and in its stead the representative model of democracy was adopted throughout the world. Political theorists such as Rousseau & May (2002) remarked that representative democracies where the government is chosen through popular elections do not give freedom to individuals to participate actively, directly, and continuously. In India, direct democracy has been associated with the Gram Sabha level, but at the macro level, representatives provide the means to participate by establishing a link between the government and the citizens. However, for proponents of representative democracy, social media has become a possible solution that is first used as a medium by candidates to engage directly with the electorate and which secondly works as an alternative solution to attract more deliberation with two-way engagement. Trevor Smith (2017) terms this “web-enabled democracy” where a range of platforms have given the represented and the representatives a way to connect with each other. Similarly, Macpherson (1977) put forth that the real potential of placing politics online is, in a way, reviving the council system of participation. Specifically, the nature of participation on social media not only provides an ease of time and space, but more uniquely reduces the emotional strain of political participation (Smith, 2017).

An ideal democratic discourse would revolve around dynamic citizen participation in the form of

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2 Research Consultant, Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
3 Director, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)
4 Gram Sabha (Village Assembly) is a participatory forum in the villages as mandated by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment or Part IX of the Indian Constitution. The development plans prepared by the Gram Panchayats (local governance institutions) are discussed, approved, and monitored in the Gram Sabha. All of the electorates in a Gram Panchayat are members of the Gram Sabha.
discussing issues, directly participating in areas that allow direct decision making, and even voting in elections. The imagination behind a healthy democracy therefore subsists on citizens as active participants and not as just mere recipients of information. Political communication on social media is one such practice that is responsible for generating and disseminating information. Political communication operates downwards from the state to the citizens, horizontally in linkages between political actors, and upwards from citizens to the governing institutions (Norris, 2001).

Social media as the new media for political communication has been studied by various scholars (Hill & Hughes, 1998; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Norris, 2001). Walter Lippman’s (1922) fundamental work on *Public Opinion* centered around the belief that propaganda-based public discourse could control public opinion. He further argued that given the complexity of the issues faced by citizens in a modern democratic society, it was unreasonable to expect an individual to meaningfully inform themselves and contribute as an aware citizen. A quantitative study done by Paul Lazarsfeld (1940) seemed most relevant to evaluate the effectiveness of media (created by propaganda) on voting behavior (public opinion). This was further explored by Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (2009) two-way communication theory, where opinion leaders first receive messages from mass media, and then these opinion leaders interpret and pass this information on to the public. Therefore, the link between social media and elections revolves around the field of political communication and the resultant political discourse created by opinion leaders.

**Figure 1. Indicating Information Production and Consumption on Social Media**


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5 New media, differentiated from old media (newspapers, magazines, television), refers to an interactive form of digital media that entails two-way communication. Communication taking place on social media is also considered utilization of new media as it includes active production of content and information. It further is associated with social networks and virtual communities among others.
In India, political debates revolve around the puzzle of “politics of recognition” (Ruparelia, 2008). Demonstrating identities based on caste, language, and religion thus forms a dominant part of the political discourse and discusses the ways in which the state can accommodate various minority groups and identities. In this drive, in an increasing digitally networked democratic society, the traditional forms of social and political mobilization and recognition of social and minority groups are now gradually shifting towards online mobilization. One example of this is a study by Arvind Kumar Thakur (2019) describing online mobilization among Dalits as a part of the counternarrative from the physical to the digital space.

India being a multi-party system debates on equality, justice, and secularism among other tenets entrenched in Indian politics. These form the basis of exchange for arguments which are addressed by the elected representatives as a response to this homegrown public discourse. Political communication within this cultural and socio-political context has experienced a paradigmatic shift in the last decade. The recent 2019 general election in India was termed to be contested within a paradigm defined by digital consumption. Researchers observed that approximately half the voting population had access to digital technologies, and one-third had access to social media (Mehta, 2019). In the past decade, India had the “second highest smartphone penetration in the world” (Canalys, 2019). The availability of cheap internet data led to a widespread adoption of digital technologies, but also altered political communication between the political leaders and the citizens. Rao (2019) opines that the 2014 general elections made political actors realize that social media was a game changer. Further, Rao (2019) states that with political parties jumping to hop on the social media bandwagon, political communication in India has never been this fragmented, energetic, chaotic, inclusive, and polarizing. Social media strategies used for campaigns online to maximize electoral gains, gain feedback on policy discussions, or for the promotion of major legislative reform not only inform the netizens online but also have an effect in the offline world through the circulation of news between new and old media.

Objectives and Research Questions

Scholars have assessed the ways in which social media is used by politicians and political parties for electoral gains and governance. The other major contribution to the study of understanding the role of social media in democracy is the extensive research conducted after the incidents of the Iranian elections in 2009, the Arab Spring in 2011, and the Occupy Wall Street movement, all of which represented dissent. However, most of the studies have been conducted in the context of “highly wired and economically developed” societies and there is a need to explore the established “difficult democracies” (Ahmed, Jaidka & Cho, 2016). There exists a dearth of research on the role of social media in political campaigns and elections in developing countries characterized by uneven internet access yet having a

6 The scheduled caste known as Dalits means the oppressed caste.
7 The multi-party system in India includes national and regional parties. According to the latest figures, the total number of parties registered with the Election Commission of India is 2,599 with eight national parties (INC, BJP, BSP, CPI, CPI-M, NCP, AITC, NPP). This includes 53 state-level parties and 2,538 unrecognized parties.
8 Active participant and user of the internet.
“high-tech urban hub of educated and employed internet users” (Ahmed et al., 2016). This propels our interest into mapping the response to social media campaigns and tools used to gather electoral support in India. Significantly, it also opens an opportunity to discuss the ways in which regulations, ethical codes, and policies can be designed to manage the downsides of social media by adopting a multi-stakeholder approach. The paper acknowledges the proxies regarding the influence of social media on political participation but also goes beyond to comprehend certain challenges posed to policy makers and social media companies in steering political communication. Broadly, the attempt is to inquire further into the following research questions.

**Primary Research Question**

What is the role of social media in the electoral processes as used by various political parties and political leadership?

**Secondary Research Questions**

How do political figures (incumbent and opposition) use social media platforms to engage with the public? How is social media shaping the face of the democratic discourse in India? What policies and regulatory practices are required to tackle the downside of misinformation and fake news on social media?

**Methodology**

There is an ongoing attempt to deploy an appropriate method and a holistic approach to measure democracy. Internationally, the World Value Survey conducted in 1981 was the fundamental research project which employed the survey method to monitor public opinion and its effects on democracy. Following the survey method, other democracy-related projects and democracy barometers have been developed to measure the quality of democracy in the past such as the Afro Barometer, the New Russia Barometer, and the Latino Barometer among others. India has been included in the Asian Barometer Survey which covers topics ranging from economic conditions to political participation. India has also been included in the Democracy Index, where it is currently ranked 51st and categorized as a “flawed democracy,” which has free and fair elections but also faces issues such as infringement on media freedom. India has also been included within the Variety of Democracy project (V-Dem), which is based on five high-level principles of democracy: electoral, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, and liberal.

While the traditional method of collecting data through sample surveys remains fundamental to obtain

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9 These are instruments to measure the quality of established democracies based on indicators such as freedom, control, and equality. They do not define whether a country is a democracy or not, but compare the quality of different established democracies.

10 Comparative barometer survey comprising 18 states and territories.

11 The Democracy Index is compiled by a UK-based company, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), for 167 countries. It is based on major indicators, measuring pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture.
standardized information, it can also suffer from certain biases and may not be promising enough to provide objective measurement to understand broad attitudes. Lutz and Toit (2014) opine that social media provides an important source where one can analyze “opinion-rich” data. Short messages, tweets, likes, images, blogs, and others need not replace the traditional research methods, but could complement the data collected by surveys. For instance, data collected by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) under the program Lokniti includes various India-related surveys based on democratic politics and elections, and is often cited with other qualitative methods to compliment the analysis.

This study involves content analysis of primary data gathered by taking screen grabs of political communication by political figures and parties online. It uses tweets collected through “Twitonomy,” a data collection and analytics tool. Twitter was specifically chosen as the platform for analysis as Twitter emerged as the first battleground for the parliamentary elections fought online in India. Ahmed et al. (2016) opine that Twitter’s usage as a campaign tool was the “country’s first experiment” in social media campaigning. It provides a unique interactional space with prompt dialogue, and unlike other platforms, Twitter is specifically known for providing a space for political discussion. Through “trending news” or a tweet from a political personality, Twitter is a source for journalists to decide what specific stories have to be run on television. Daniyal (2019) states that despite the Twitter numbers being small in India as compared with other platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, Twitter has managed to gain an inordinate political focus and is uniquely influential. While digital impact is not the sole factor influencing elections in India, Twitter Inc. worked closely with politicians in the 2014 general elections and observed how media firms and mobile companies partnered to distribute tweets offline (Kalra, 2014). The majority of political research is based on data gathered from Twitter, as the planning and execution of any political campaign has become a “norm” on this platform (Ahmed et al., 2016). While the 2014 general elections marked the start of India earning a name in the international milieu through the success of the Bhartiya Jana Party (hereafter, BJP) and its social media presence, this research will focus on a descriptive analysis of this “space” from the period between 2015 and 2019.

This urge to make one’s presence visible through trending features also encourages Twitter users to grapple with different forms of speech making as part of political communication on social media. Keeping Twitter as the main source of data, this paper will attempt to map the growing influence of all political parties and representatives on the platform and will provide a glimpse of features such as the “hashtags” which are seriously monitored by the IT cell of each political party. In addition, this article will descriptively discuss the changing nature and theorization of old and new media used for political communication in India. Lastly, the paper also contributes to an understanding of the ethical lows of fake news and misinformation. While many studies contribute to this issue, the present research will discuss the newer challenges and policy actions taken to regulate content online.

Apart from primary screen grabs, this qualitative study will also majorly rely on secondary data

12 Visit- https://www.twitonomy.com/
13 Political parties make use of their IT cells to strategize and implement their social media propaganda. These cells often wage propaganda wars on social media platforms and focus particularly on creating and circulating content near elections. Overall, these cells manage a party’s social media posts and website.
sources such as government orders, think tank reports, academic articles, and newspaper editorial.

The Indian Internet Ecosystem

India is called the “next center frontier of the internet” (Iyengar, 2018). With 451 million active monthly users, India stands next to only China, occupying second place in terms of internet users per a report by the IAMAI (Mandavia, 2019). The overall internet penetration in India experienced a spike of 50 percent between 2007 and 2020. Further, the share of the population accessing social networks in India is expected to jump from 24 percent in 2018 to 31 percent by the year 2023 (Statista, 2020). Lokniti’s recent report on “Social Media and Political Behavior” (2019) indicated that a major part of social media exposure occurs through smartphones. Data shows that the share of social media users who access platforms via smartphones has increased from one fourth to one third in the last two years. The report also suggested that currently only one third of the electorate in the country is exposed to social media, while the remaining two thirds do not use any social media platforms. It also notes that unlike 2014, where only one national party dominated the social media front, other parties in the opposition have now made extensive use of social media to gain popularity and support (Lokniti, 2019). The report concludes that the social media space is no longer just an “innocent space” in which to connect with people—rather it is becoming influential in creating a space for political activity and polarized conversations (Lokniti, 2019).

The Indian internet ecosystem comprises a regulatory design situated within the legislative framework of the Information Technology Act of 2000. This statutory law stipulates fundamental rights like freedom

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14 The collaborative report between the Lokniti program of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung analyzes maps and the growth of apps and social networking sites in India. It was conducted to assess the role of digital media in shaping attitudes and preferences in the 2019 general election.
of speech and expression (mostly Article 19 in the context of regulating content), the right to equality, and others. The Department of Telecommunications (DOT) is the body that issues licenses to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) on behalf of the Central Government (The Indian Telegraph Act, 1885, Section 4). The Indian internet ecosystem faces a dilemma in that most content service providers fall outside the jurisdictional control of the Indian license regime and may not comply with Indian constitutional rights and principles. In such a scenario, the state relies on the expertise of non-state actors (the internet giants) to regulate content. Theorized by many scholars, such as Hancher & Moran (1998), such a phenomenon has been described as blurring the line between the regulator and the “regulatee.” As a result, in the Indian context, social media platforms have time and again been subjected to questions about the spread of fake news, the use of bots (automatically enabled accounts), and the dissemination of misinformation with an army of commentators. Certainly, this is having wider ramifications in terms of keeping intact the essence and fundamentals of Indian democracy at a time when every citizen and voter is “empowered” or “disempowered” by the power of social media.

**Assessing the Interface of Netizens on Social Media**

**Use of Social Media by Political Leaders and Political Parties in India**

In the West, following the 2004 US elections, scholars argued that the Obama and McCain campaigns provided a watershed moment for modern political communication on social media. To confront a decline in citizen participation and interest, political parties in western democracies took the route of connecting with voters on new media, such as Twitter, which has been used to “revive” their relationship with citizens (Coleman & Blumer, 2009).

In India, the need to create a support base on new media emerged from the realization that youths were actively engaged in the use of social media. One of the first Indian politicians to use social media, the current Prime Minister of India, understood the importance of garnering support from the youth in elections. He managed to gain the support he sought by reaching out to the youth through social media. Breaking away from the old patterns of traditional media, the Prime Minister announced his win via Twitter on the @narendramodi account for his more than 5 million followers. Grasping the technological bent of voters, he took the exercise further by using tweets as a tool with the hashtag #selfiewithmodi on Twitter. Jaffrelot (2015) argued that this phenomenon of crafting a strategy to become a technology-savvy leader and transforming India on the basis of information technology is “high-tech populism.” Since the elections, the Prime Minister’s social media strategy has included taking advantage of two-way communication on the platform by trying to involve citizens through direct dialogue. For instance, the figure below depicting the Prime Minister’s invite to the citizens of India to share their input for a momentous day is not only symptomatic of including the voices of citizens but also suggestive of a participatory form of democracy.

Narendra Modi’s deliberate Twitter strategy has been captured by Ralph Schroeder (2018) in his book *Social Theory after the Internet*. He dedicates a brief analysis of changing media systems by
Schroeder (2018) categorizes Modi as the “high tech icon” in his study. His analysis of Narendra Modi indicates a difference from other leaders. He opines that Modi, unlike others, has used Twitter to communicate and engage with ordinary members of his own BJP party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in addition to ordinary citizens. Studies have also shown that his social media team operated a media campaign outside the party that was run by the American advertising firm Ogilvy & Mather.

Even after the elections, Modi used Twitter and Facebook to engage in direct contact with people by maintaining a “near total lack of contact” with old media such as news channels (Chakravarty & Roy, 2015). However, as shown in the figure below, traditional news channels such as Republic and ABP News on Twitter retweeted Narendra Modi’s tweets to update news online.

Other political leaders have also attempted to utilize social media platforms to make their media activity noticeable. Research suggests that even though the BJP occupied most of the public’s attention in the first half of the decade, other political parties such as the Indian National Congress (hereafter, INC) have also gained attention from the wider public on social media, weakening the BJP presence online. The former INC president Rahul Gandhi, who was slow in joining the medium, sped up the implementation of his social media strategies to gain a significant number of followers after 2015 (Lokniti, 2019).
The above examples of national-level political leaders represent the faces of their respective parties. Leadership may have been dispersed throughout social networks, but it has at the same time been individualized by creating a public association of a party with one face during elections. A significant example of this can be understood through an analysis of the popularity of Mamata Banerjee on Twitter. Following BJP’s Narendra Modi and INC’s Rahul Gandhi, the All India Trinamool Congress (hereafter, AITC) founder and West Bengal’s Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has the third largest number of followers among the eight national party leaders.
During the Lok Sabha 2019 elections in India, both Rahul Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee claimed to be fighting against the right-wing BJP. Despite their defeat, the coalition was seen as momentous. In a news article titled “From Rahul Gandhi to Mamata Banerjee: Shaken opposition leaders rant on Twitter” (TeamMyNation, May 20, 2019), these leaders used Twitter to express their resentment towards the exit poll results and asked for the other opposition parties to raise their voice against the BJP leadership.

While the three most popular national leaders have managed to represent their parties in this space, Mayawati, President of the Bahujan Samaj Party (hereafter, BSP) is the fourth most popular national party leader with 1.1 million followers on Twitter. This party believes in uplifting the lower caste groups in India, referred to as the Bahujan Samaj. The party enjoys the support of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and other religious minorities. It has been observed that the BSP, despite being one of the main national political parties in India, does not have a verified account\textsuperscript{15} on Twitter unlike the other national parties. However, as the face of the party,

\textsuperscript{15} A verified account on Twitter shows that an account of public interest is authentic. This is not an endorsement, but allows users to distinguish between the real and fake accounts with the same name.
Mayawati not only enjoys popularity with a large number of followers but chooses to communicate with them in Hindi. \(^{16}\)

**Figure 8. Mayawati’s Twitter Account with her Posts in Hindi**

![Mayawati's Twitter Account](Source: Twitter (Accessed on November 24, 2019))

In India, the Dalit and other lower castes are constantly fighting on various fronts against substantial inequalities, such as the ascribed roles\(^{17}\) which contribute to their economic and educational backwardness. The BSP leader has chosen Hindi, a language more easily understood by the citizens in the north and central India, as her language of political communication to reach out to minorities on her Twitter page and to build a non-elite narrative. The Lokniti (2019) report proves that upper castes continue to dominate online social networks.

Significantly, national parties often occupy the social media space on various occasions apart from the charged environment nearing every election. However, the capture of the social media space by youth leaders has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Apart from student-led agitations and protests which are also read under activism, several young leaders have carved out spaces in mainstream politics and championed for the same ideal public discourse. With social media space still being “young” (Lokniti, 2019) as it is most regularly used by voters in the age group between 18 and 22, these leaders have enjoyed an unprecedented following on Twitter.

For instance, Hardik Patel, a member of the INC, led the historic Patidar reservation demonstration\(^{19}\) in July of 2015, demanding OBC status for the Patidar community. The movement faced strong opposition from OBC members in Gujarat, who rose in protest against granting status to the community. Hardik Patel continued to go on a “fast unto death” in 2018 and is known as the champion of the community. Active in organizing rallies in the state of Gujarat, as Hardik Patel built his agenda addressing severe unemployment, agrarian distress, and expensive education in the state, his massive rally support can also be seen in the number of followers he gained within such a short span of time.

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16 Hindi, which has around 551 million speakers, is the most widely spoken language in India.

17 Ascribed role is a role that is given by society based on caste, gender, age, and community.

18 Patidar is an Indian caste founded in Gujarat, India.

19 The OBC status to the Patidar community would have given them official recognition in the social and educational domains.
Another notable young leader is Kanhaiya Kumar, a member of the Communist Party of India (hereafter, CPI) who apart from making his mark in mainstream national politics was also hailed as “Social Media’s New Hero” (Hebbar, 2016). With a whopping 2.2 million followers on Twitter, his fiery speech championing freedom of speech and expression in India has drawn renewed attention to the civil liberties and freedom guaranteed under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. Hebbar (2016) stated in her article that as the speech resonated with young netizens, Twitter as well as Facebook were flooded with slogans related to #azadi (meaning “freedom” in Hindi).

These young candidates in the Indian political realm have not only stood as competitive candidates in elections, but more crucially have championed for India’s political discourse. While their presence in mainstream politics has posed challenges to veteran leaders, their co-optation within the mainstream parties is deemed favorable due to their ability to garner the attention of citizens, particularly the youth who can relate better to their political communication on social media platforms. A stark example of this was witnessed in Bangalore, where Tejasvi Surya, a 28-year old MP from the BJP, won the election in...
the Bangalore South Lok Sabha constituency. Aligning with the mainstream party ideology, Tejasvi Surya is also known for his social media presence and controversial remarks made in the recent past. He joined Twitter using the name Chowkidar in his handle, which is a reference to the adoption of the name by the face of the party Narendra Modi in response to charges of corruption against the BJP. With this name, Tejasvi Surya unapologetically declared his affiliation and took a stand (Figure 12).

**Figure 10. Social Media’s New Hero**

![Image Source: Huffington Post, 2016 (Accessed March 4, 2020)](image1)

**Figure 11. A Rhetorical Tweet by Kanhaiya Kumar, Reaching Out to his Followers Using Hindi**

![Image Source: Twitter (Accessed March 4, 2020)](image2)

Addressed as the “young disruptors bringing an alternative brand of politics” (Chaudhary, 2019), these leaders shape their political communication by bringing it in line with their respective party ideology. They simultaneously reiterate the ideal political discourse revolving around the issues of education, employment, and values of social and economic equality which are entrenched in the constitutional imagination of India.
While the reach of a leader is driven by both personality and party ideology, the influence of social media as a platform available for political communication has been unevenly grasped in the regions of India. The number of followers of different political parties varies in different regions. As the Lokniti report (2019, p. 16) reveals, the Eastern part of the country (which includes Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, and rest of the Northeast) lags in social media usage as compared to the Southern, Northern, and Western parts of India. The survey shows that the other parts of the country have higher exposure to social media as compared to the Northeastern part of the country.

Another trend is the differentiation of regional and national political party presence online. A closer look at the presence of the regional political parties of Assam on Twitter illustrates this trend. For instance, while Assam has three major regional parties, two of them are an ally of the BJP, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People’s Front (BPF). The third major regional party, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), is a party in opposition to the other two. BPF recently joined Twitter in February 2020 (as shown in the screengrab below), while AGP was founded in 1985 and joined Twitter in August 2019. The principal opposition party AIUDF, founded in 2005, joined Twitter in November 2019.
The disconnect of the regional parties of Assam who joined Twitter later than others indicates that they joined the space to follow the trend rather than due to a need to mark their visibility on social media. Trends also show a relatively stronger presence of other regional parties of the Southern and the Western part of India on Twitter. The Lokniti report (2019, p. 17) suggests that South India, per the national-level survey conducted, registered the highest percentage of social media users. South India was followed closely by the North and the Western region constituting Gujarat, Goa, and Maharashtra, all of which showed a high usage of social media platforms.

In this present research, data shows that Shiv Sena, a regional party in Maharashtra, has the highest number of followers. All India Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK), a major regional party in Tamil Nadu, has the second highest number, followed by Akali Dal, a prominent regional political party in Punjab.

**Figure 14.** Twitter Accounts of Regional Parties from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab, which Have a Much Higher Number of Followers as Compared to Parties from Northeast India
In relation to the data above, factors such as differing literacy rates and regional internet penetration are vital in contributing to the increased number of followers, but cannot be seen in isolation. In addition to these factors, the offline political campaigns aligned with online political efforts by political parties and leaders in the Western and Southern regions clearly demonstrate that these regional parties enjoy a greater number of followers on the platform. While the number of followers depict the popularity of a political leader or party, certain interactive features such as likes, dislikes, hashtags, and retweets enable easy participation and propel discussion by allowing users to register agreement and disagreement with personal or collective causes. More can be gathered from an analysis of the tools used on social media, such as the hashtag on Twitter, which is discussed in the following section.

Polarizing Participation through Hashtag Activism

Hashtags (#) are seen as speedy and unstructured, yet they have a coordinating power on Twitter. As such, the hashtag has attracted considerable attention from practitioners, journalists, and researchers. Giglietto and Lee (2017) analyze the use of hashtags on Twitter and observe that hashtags were initially seen to facilitate aggregation of related information circulating on the platform. The use of the hashtag served not just as a “marker of the shared conversation,” but also led users to include them in their posts on Twitter if they wished to join an established discussion running on the platform (Bruns, 2011). Interestingly, as hashtags vary between being spontaneously organized to being well planned by content creators, hashtags are referred to as “ad hoc publics” that can depict concrete political results in an ongoing and inconclusive debate (Bruns and Burgess, 2015).

The use of hashtags on Twitter has gained special attention when it was done by political rivals occupying center stage. One example of this is #Chowkidaarchorhai, coined by Rahul Gandhi in response to BJP’s #Main bhi chowkidaar, which led to a hashtag battle online. Data revealed that during the campaign, the hashtag battle heated up, and the hashtag Main bhi Chowkidar was tweeted 3.2 million times on March 18, 2019, almost three times as often as Congress’s Chowkidar chor hai was used on Twitter (Sharma, 2019). Media in India reported the usage of hashtags such as Modi hai toh munkin hai, modi he aayega, and others, stating that the huge “traction underscored public approval for a second term for the PM” (ibid). Hashtag activism has been used as an area of inquiry for researchers seeking to understand the sentiment and trends among social media users. In addition to being used to determine electoral support, such analysis is also used to sort opinions on issues affecting the political discourse.

Recently, the Indian government imposed a 170-day internet shutdown in the State of Jammu and Kashmir starting from August 4, 2019 as a “preventive measure” in the background of the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution (revoking special status to the State). This blanket internet shutdown in Kashmir would naturally lead one to expect a low online presence of people’s participation and representation on this decision in this region while enabling wider participation for rest of India. As shown in the figure below, Twitter data revealed that the hashtag #Article370 and all of the related hashtags depict a form of increased political participation in mainstream India which is characterized by an increased consciousness felt in contradiction to the dominant political party’s support to abrogation of Article 370 in erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir province, and consequent internet shut down in that region.
This issue sparked debate amidst the imposition of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC), which curtailed movement and gatherings in the region. Social media platforms experienced different narratives which were backed by the ideological battles that were fought over the issue. Hashtags such as #Kashmirbleeds depicted the protest against the government’s decision, while hashtags such as #Kashmirmeintiranga and #modihaitohmumkinhai incited long-standing debates around the narrative of nationalism. #Pakistan, #Jaihind, and #indianarmy were also used in historical contestations on the issue. In addition, fake news incidents that fueled military retaliation between India and Pakistan and contributed to hostilities around the issue have maintained an online presence. (Bagri, 2019).

Therefore, the dominant narrative flowing from the tweets for #Article370 also channeled a discussion on related issues through tweets such as #Pakistan and #India in addition to others online. It also demonstrates the visibility of a subdued political expression which is otherwise guaranteed by basic freedoms such as freedom of speech and expression in the real social and political landscape in the country.

Another recent issue related to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC)\(^{20}\) has sparked raging reactions all over India and even among Indian diaspora accusing the government of discriminating against Muslims in India. Amidst the decision to conduct a phased implementation of the nationwide NRC and CAA, there was a downplay of the government’s narratives

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\(^{20}\) The CAA amends Indian citizenship to include illegal migrants who are Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who entered India before 2014 following religious persecution. The bill does not mention Muslims and other communities who fled from the same or other neighboring countries. The amendment has been widely criticized as discriminating on the basis of religion, particularly for excluding Muslims.
on the NRC after the protests spread (Vishwanath & Sheriff, 2019). A sentiment analysis of #CAANRC and other related hashtags is illustrated in the figure below. Sentiment analysis (or the emotion AI) is a tool widely used to analyze customer feedback on products and reviews and has been used to tap voter sentiments by political strategists (Chatterjee, 2019).

**Figure 16. Sentiment Analysis for #CAANRC**

The related keywords are placed on a scale depicting mood, which varies from pleasant to unpleasant, and assessing intensity, which varies from subdued to active. For instance, the hashtags such as #targeted, #died, or #evil exhibit stronger (active) comments that have a more unpleasant tone on the issue, whereas hashtags such #anticaa, #protests, #parliament, and #free are clearly segregated into the category of stronger (active) pleasant tone. Citizen responses on social media can be analyzed through tools used by technology developers, after which they can be used and adopted by different political parties and corporations. Such tools in turn categorize responses in addition to consolidating reactions (in terms of tweets or likes) to further understand the reason why some hashtags are more heavily retweeted.

In a 2014 interview between social media heads, the BJP national technology head, Arvind Gupta admitted to “analyzing the online sentiment using social media analytics” (PR Week, 2014). The Information Technology cell of the BJP works round the clock to analyze a particular hashtag or a tag. The subsequent active and prompt response by the government (BJP) on various issues showcases the use of sentiment analysis as a crucial tool. For instance, in the context of the CAANRC debate, the government restrategized the campaign by mapping the online sentiments of protestors and countered it by campaigning in support of the hashtag #IndiaSupportsCAA (Tewari, 2019). It is crucial to acknowledge the power of hashtags which are used by state to communicate to the citizen (top to bottom) via the communication of the citizens to the state (bottom up approach). Hashtags have facilitated a two-way dialogue on the internet where feedback can be instantly measured and acknowledged by political leaders, parties, and institutions. This has led to a more participatory type of communication between the state and the citizen which resembles a participatory mode of democracy in a representative democracy.

Economic legislative actions have received similar attention in the virtual world as compared to the
real world. Demonetization was an exercise that the government took with the main objective of curbing black money, increasing the tax base, and expanding the number of taxpayers. Their intention was to accomplish this through the digitization and integration of the formal and informal economies (Deodhar, 2017). However, the impacts on citizens were significant as revealed by long queues to withdraw cash, inefficient ATMs, and greater inconvenience for workers and the elderly (Ganapatye, 2016). As tweets followed, hashtags related to the issue flooded Twitter, drawing attention to the specific concerns and problems that stemmed from the inconvenience it caused the citizenry. After three years of implementation of the reform, users on Twitter continued to denounce the progress of demonetization. Newer hashtags potentiated participation, with hashtags such as #DemonitisationDisaster, #BlackDay, and #3yearsofdemodisaster trending under the top 10 hashtags in India. Deccan Hearld (November 8, 2019) published a news article with the headline, “Twitter goes crazy on 3rd anniversary of Demonetisation.” Twitter witnessed arguments between the party in power, which defended the reform, and the parties in opposition and common citizens, which took a critical stand on the reform (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Screengrabs of Varied Opinions on the Issue of Demonetization

A similar sentiment analysis of #demonetisation found that the mixed reactions to the reform were reflected in the use of the hashtag on Twitter. The active-pleasant portion of the scale was dominated by hashtags such as #coalgate, #scams, and #demonetisation, whereas hashtags such as #exposed, #censorship, #gst, and #steal were used to express active unpleasant sentiment with respect to the issue (Figure 18). The negative impact of the demonetization reform was also reflected in the voting patterns regarding the BJP in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections. The median voter in India is both rural and poor, and the negative impact of the reform affected the livelihoods of those in the agricultural sector. Sen’s (2019) analysis found that a 100 percent decrease in the sales of the mandi (market) closest to the constituency resulted in a one percent fall in the BJP mean vote share in that particular constituency. His
assessment also found that the negative economic impact of the exercise was short-lived and could be of “less salience to the voters in the run up to the 2019 general election” (Sen, 2019). Therefore, the reform did not have a visible effect on voting behavior in the general elections.

Figure 18. Sentiment Analysis for #Demonetisation

Source: Twitter (Accessed January 20, 2020)

The growth of the internet as a new political communication technology is thus facilitated by convenient features such as likes, retweets, and hashtags, which has altered the speed of movement coordination and solicited public opinions on critical issues. Virtual opinions display sentiments that cross language barriers through such features in addition to being efficient enough to attract prompt support for a cause. Both real world and virtual coordination on issues of national importance underpin further inquiry on the effect on citizens in the real world. The next section tries to assess this realization by evaluating the online-offline world divide through the synthesis of old and new media. This research demands an understanding on the issue, as the literature (Lokniti, 2019) shows that old media formats such as the radio, newspapers, and prominently television continue to play a major role in molding public opinion during elections.

News through Old and New Media

Old or traditional media formats, which comprise newspapers in the form of print, television, radio, and billboards among others, target mass audiences and rely on a one-way, slow dialogue channel from the receiver. The traditional form of media, although still impactful, is often the first “visible” presence of political ideas, dialogues, and partisan representation in the real world. New forms of media such as social media, websites, and podcasts surpass the limitations of a passive “mass audience” to reach an active “mass and an interpersonal audience.” This form of media moves beyond disseminating information from just one focal source of information with its ability to circulate user-generated content available from many focal points to a mass audience. Additionally, the feasibility of prompt exchange of information has also shaped the ways in which new forms of media contribute to old forms of media by
informing people about activities centered around national debates and leadership. As participation forms the basic difference between old and new media, Chadwick (2013) terms this synthesis “hybrid media.” This also opens an area of research to map the ways in which hybrid media is steering political communication and participation in India.

Theoretically, the idea of “influencing the influencers” as proposed by Andrew Chadwick (2013) fits well as substantiated by the response of old media channels sharing news with netizens by tweeting. The old media has revamped its platform by sharing tweets, and newspapers often quote tweets for offline readers. For instance, news channels used #odd_even on Twitter after the implementation of the Odd Even scheme in Delhi (Figure 19). Off social media, Business Standard published an article titled “Hashtag odd-even plan gets a thumbs up on social media” (Business Standard, 2016). The Hindustan Times newspaper also shared the headline “Follow it for your kids, tweets Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal on Odd-even rule” (“Follow it for your kids,” 2019).

Figure 19. List of News Channels Taking the Lead in Tweeting #odd_even

Source: Twitter (Accessed September 13, 2019)

Odd-even is a scheme introduced by the Delhi Government in 2016 as a car rationing system allowing the movement of vehicles based on the number plate. Number plates ending with even numbers (0, 2, 4, 6, 8) were allowed to drive on one day and those ending with odd numbers (1, 3, 5, 7, 9) could be driven on the alternate day. This scheme was introduced to keep the pollution generated by transport in check.
This strategy is also discussed by scholars such as Pande (2015), who examines the concept of “performative power” proposed by Daniel Kreiss (2014). He espouses a strategy which aims at reaching out to the maximum audience by making use of hybrid media, despite the challenge of uneven internet penetration. The reliance of old media on new media may seem to facilitate a holistic coverage of content for the public. However, the hybridity of this form of media also has its own perils of being overly reliant on news. This can be summarized by the “information cocoon” theory propounded by Cass Sunstein (2018). The information cocoon symbolizes the problem of personalization of information which effects the manner in which we make decisions regarding any political news on social media. The content available through the cocoon is based on netizens’ social media search history and conforms algorithmically to provide social media users with similar news in the future. The citizen is thus exposed to a tailored form of news on the internet based on his or her search history.

Amber Sinha (2019) also shows in his work how research analysts have determined that Twitter’s trending topics and graphs privilege “breaking news” stories over other kinds of stories. However, breaking news stories are dependent on the velocity of tweets or comments. This information exposure on new media will also have a significant impact on the real-world situation when broadcast by old media. More gravely, these concerns can have an impact on the nature of information by deepening ideological locks and prejudices instead of giving a fair variety of content to media users. Targeted attacks on Northeastern people in different parts of India in 2012 and the riots in Muzaffarnagar in 2013 were incidents attributed to the spread of misinformation on social media platforms (Sinha, 2019). These cases of incitement to violence create a push for social media to fact check the information being floated on different platforms, which has a high likelihood of being acknowledged simultaneously by old media formats.

The Changing Credibility of the Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is an autonomous body constitutionally authorized under Article 324 of the Constitution of India. It exercises administrative oversight over state and Union elections in India. The autonomous status of the ECI not only allows this institution to enjoy supremacy over the incumbent government and opposition, it also plays the vital role of guarding elections through directives such as issuing the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) for contesting candidates and political parties. Indian research scholars such as Anupama Roy and Ujjwal Singh (2018) opine that the “legal doctrine of electoral exceptionalism” manifests into the MCC, ensuring electoral integrity and electoral management to ensure democratic outcomes. This institution has in the recent past dealt with issues concerning multiple stakeholders in the real and the virtual world. Recently, BJP MP Meenakshi Lekhi filed a

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22 Hybrid media is the strategic and tactful way of using old and new media to communicate the message to a large audience in a more effective way.

23 The Model Code of Conduct is announced by the ECI prior to election campaigning. The MCC contains guidance for political parties and candidates distributed in guidelines for categories such as General Conduct, Meetings, Procession, Polling Day, Polling Booths, Observers, Party in Power, and Guideline on Election Manifesto.
complaint with the ECI against a news channel accusing it of violating the MCC by telecasting the “would be results” of the Delhi elections (DD News, January 7, 2020). The MP also tweeted a copy of the complaint, bringing it to public notice. The ECI is seen as the custodian of furthering the MCC, and has moved beyond the mere role of managing controversies to a role of preserving the essence of representative democracy by dealing with issues such as booth capturing, low voter turnout, and problematic behavior by politicians and political parties.

The ECI on its social media platforms thus makes an attempt to inform and disseminate decisions made during elections. For instance, the ECI barred Anurag Thakur and Parvesh Verma from campaigning in the Delhi Assembly Elections 2020 for a period of 72 hours and 96 hours respectively on January 30, 2020 (Election Commission of India, 2020). The impugned statement by the politicians violated Part 1 of the Model Code of Conduct as it led to the promotion of “hatred between different classes of the citizens of India on grounds of religion, race, caste, community, or language” (ECI, 2020). Similarly, the ECI ended up putting curbs on four senior politicians: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, BSP Chief Mayawati, Union Minister Maneka Gandhi, and Samajwadi Party candidate Azam Khan for violating the MCC. These curbs restrained them from giving interviews or making any comments on print, electronic, or even social media in connection with the Lok Sabha elections at the time (The Hindu, June 9, 2020). The Commission issued the notices and uploaded the order on its official account via social media platforms.

As discussed before, the ECI also marks its presence on social media sites with the help of a flagship program known as the Systematic Voters’ Education and Electoral Participation program (SVEEP). The ECI’s official accounts include Twitter with the handle “Election Commission of India, #SVEEP AS @ECISVEEP,” Facebook with the “Election Commission of India” page, and Instagram with the account “Election Commission of India (SVEEP).” The ECI uploads all important notices on all three platforms. The vibrant visibility and the increased interaction rate on social media platforms are what first led to a need for a virtual presence of the institution online. Wider dissemination and dialogue on social media also led to the adoption of the Voluntary Code of Ethics in the Lok Sabha elections for all State polls. This voluntary code was mandated to social media companies including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Share-chat, Google, and TikTok. The IAMAI acted as the channel between the ECI and the social media companies to ensure that the Code of Ethics—ensuring free, fair, and ethical usage of social media platforms—remains consistent in upholding electoral integrity in the consequent elections.

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24 Anurag Thakur is a member of Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Parliament) and Parvesh Verma is the Member of Parliament from the West Delhi Lok Sabha. Both are members of the BJP.
While the ECI is the custodian of preserving trust in electoral processes through routine checks and balances, the institution’s credibility has been questioned by many analysts and research scholars in the time of digital politics. Nalin Mehta (2019) opined in his article that the 2019 general election “shifted paradigms in Indian politics” as this was the first election where social media companies decisively came up with self-regulated rules. However, the problem of regulating content in the midst of free-floating information and dynamic actors online renders absolute self-regulation ineffective. Press Trust of India (2019) stated that Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube among others were asked to take down over 900 posts during the “silence period.”

Twitter took down 49 posts and WhatsApp and Google took three and two posts down respectively. Out of the 628 total posts taken down, 477 of these featured political content during the silence period (Dhingra, 2019). This also garnered attention towards the issue of political advertising under the check of the MCC, which implied that political parties were now required to disclose expenditures incurred on social media advertisements. Advertisers were now allowed to register with the ECI and the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC).

Amber Sinha (2019) draws attention to the gap in defining political advertising, which is neither defined by the ECI nor by the Representation of People’s Act. He further argues that this lack of a clear definition led to internet platforms individually determining their course of action in governing political advertisements. Thus, the regulatory void created by multiple actors in the internet realm challenges the credibility of public institutions such as the ECI, which is now catching up and making its presence visible on social media.

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25 A period which starts 48 hours before the hour set for the conclusion of polling in a particular phase.
26 The Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC) at the state and the district level work to examine the pre-certification of all advertisements promoted by political parties and political leaders in India.
Co-regulation to Tackle Disinformation on Social Media

Following the 2019 elections, debates regarding the ethical dilution of political communication have dominated the discussion around the usage of social media. The election concluded by noting that ethical standards in political communication worsen when unethical practices are used to circulate misleading information to a majority of a digitally illiterate\(^\text{27}\) population. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting planned to set up a “Find, Assess, Create, Target” (FACT) checking module to prevent the spread of fake news. This was followed by the Press Information Bureau under the same program, which set up a FACT checking unit to validate the news (Press Trust of India, 2019). This initiative by the government has been recently revamped to identify fake news in different regional languages (Dutta, 2020). Apart from the institutional measures taken by the government, an onus to self-regulate content falls on the social media companies as well. Such an expectation has led to a growth in fact-checking websites and activities. Fact-checking websites such as Alt News, SMHoaxSlayer, and BOOM have partnered with social media companies like Facebook. Media houses like India Today Group and Times of India have their own fact-checking websites.

Think tanks and many NGOs have also emerged as important stakeholders in assessing democratic and transparent functioning through lawful regulation of content online. For instance, Freedom House’s report on the Freedom on the Net 2019 places India under the category of “Partly Free” from digital election interference. The report by Freedom House also indicates critical issues behind this ranking including taking technical measures in the form of blocking access to content and taking legal measures such as punitive actions against dissent, thereby weakening democratic ethos. In order to understand the co-regulatory technique closely, it is vital to first delve in the governance structure regulating online content in India.

\[\text{Figure 21. PIB Fact-Check Handle}\]

![PIB Fact-Check Handle](Source: Twitter (Accessed on September 13, 2019))

\(^{27}\) Digital illiteracy refers to the inability of an individual to find, evaluate, and compare clear information through media on various digital platforms. It requires both cognitive and technical skills.
Regulating Online Speech in India: Governance of Internet Intermediaries

The debates around governance of internet intermediaries have occupied center stage in parliament discussions. A social media platform cannot “evade their responsibility and larger commitment to ensure that its platform is not misused on a large scale to spread incorrect facts projected as news and designed to instigate people to commit crime,” IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad stated in the Parliament on July 26, 2018. He further stated that the law of abetment 28 also applies to social media platforms if they fail to take adequate and prompt action (Pahwa, 2018). In 2019, UK-based technology research firm Comparitech collated transparency reports from top internet giants and concluded that India, followed by Russia and Turkey, sent the most takedown requests to social media companies (Mandavia, 2019). The report created regulatory dilemmas at a time when the Indian government was trying to hold social media companies accountable for the content posted and shared. Privacy analysts and free speech activists found this move to be a pretext upon which the citizens could be subjected to surveillance and in turn attempts to harness big data online. However, the major challenge emanates from this balance between ensuring security by combating fake news while ensuring the constitutionally protected rights of free speech, expression, and other civil liberties.

To strike a balance, it is crucial to understand how platforms govern speech in the form of “content” and how these social media platforms are themselves governed. As briefly discussed before, the internet ecosystem in India is circumscribed within the statutory framework of the Information Technology Act of 2000. This legal framework, termed intermediary liability, provides safe harbor to internet intermediaries (social media companies) under Section 79 as long as they do not have “actual knowledge” 29 of the infringing content on their platforms. These liability protections allow the platforms to function without compromising on the content posted and shared by billions of users online. Experts explain that “it is impossible for platforms to have actual knowledge of each piece of content when there are billions of pieces of content uploaded each minute” (Pahwa, 2018). Therefore, under intermediary liability, removal of unlawful content was only operational after receiving a judicial order or a receipt from the government. However, the scale and speed at which varied types of content are uploaded, posted, and shared online also makes this system redundant as waiting for an authorized order and acting upon it can render the internet governance agenda ineffective. The Supreme Court of India ordered that content related to issues such as rape, gang rape videos, and pre-natal sex determination 30 on social media be “auto blocked” by internet intermediaries, subverting the earlier established rule of bringing down content on the issuance of an order by the said authorities. As internet intermediaries have been coaxed to make data more accessible to governments, the platforms themselves have also created policies to which they...

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28 Offenses relating to abetment under Section 107 of the Indian Penal Code basically mean the action of instigating, encouraging, or promoting a person into committing an offense or can also mean aiding the offender while he is committing a crime.

29 The term “actual knowledge” has been debated before in the case of Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India, wherein the Court read down Section 79(3)(b) under the IT Act, 2000, stating that the term constitutes a situation wherein the intermediary “upon receiving actual knowledge from a court order or on being notified by the appropriate government agency that unlawful acts relatable to Article 19(2) are going to be committed then fails to expeditiously remove or disable access to such material.”

30 Prajwala vs. Union of India (2015)
commit internally. For example, Facebook has “community standards” and Twitter has “The Twitter Rules,” which have attempted to clarify established categories of lawful and unlawful content to its users. These in-house content moderation functions have to be revised for effective regulation and have adopted a middle path to balance content regulation with technology assisted by human moderation.

The need for such interventions follows from cases that show failures despite the necessary liability compliance, safe harbor rules, and self-regulation of social media companies with the conformity to jurisdiction specific constitutional standards. Content regulation on the internet has emerged as tricky in nature to the Indian government and has again challenged the technical expertise within the government. For instance, many internet research scholars have differentiated between content aggregators and content creators and how liability should differ for each. Therefore, news websites such as Print, Wire, Scroll would be considered to play an active role in creating content as opposed to Daily News or Google News, which are news aggregators of content posted on other websites. Sinha (2019) argues that similarly, Twitter allows users to express themselves using words, images, GIFs, tweets, and retweets but does not have a role in deciding what content is produced. The debate therefore treads along a thin line of appropriate regulation, over-regulation, and lack of effective regulation in tackling misinformation.

More importantly, to study electoral cycles and beyond, the debate has significant consequences on the public discourse, as social media has definitely assumed the function of a public forum if not a complete public sphere.

A co-regulatory approach to combatting the issues of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news is required to sustain ethical political communication. The need of the hour is to encourage a multi-stakeholder approach to creating a public policy oriented towards encouraging dissent, installing constructive fact checkers, preserving free speech and expression, and enacting strict penalty measures for spreading fake news and profile targeting.

**Ways Forward**

As social media facilitates easy voicing of opinions and participation, it also facilitates “clickvatism” and “slacktivism.” These rise with the intention of participating through impulsive online engagement and may become problematic by not promoting quality contributions to the building of content for societal consumption on social media. As political communication becomes routinized on social media, netizens need to be alert enough to differentiate between fact and delusion. Issues such as information cocoons and uneven internet penetration as discussed in this article further steer our attention towards the danger of consuming unchecked digital content and communication on social media platforms. There is a need to ensure a multi-stakeholder approach to policy formulation with regard to content regulation on social media. It demands engagement of policy makers, political representatives, civil society, the private

31 The use of social media and other online methods to promote a cause.

32 The practice of supporting a political or social cause by means such as social media or online petitions, characterized as involving very little effort or commitment.
sector, and most importantly the citizenry. Their voices need to be channeled through effective collaborations and consultations which will further enable an informed policy dialogue on issues such as managing fake news, cybersecurity, and guarding against unlawful surveillance and targeted political advertisements on social media.

Within the larger approach of addressing policy issues from a multi-stakeholder approach, the second recommendation is to ensure inter-ministerial coordination within the government and coordination between the private sector and civil society. For the government, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, IAMAI, and the Election Commission of India must coordinate and work together on issues such as tackling electoral content online. With shifting innovation and new features available online, newer technological possibilities must also remain within the limits of lawful electoral promotion and campaigning. For this, inter-sectoral coordination between social media intermediaries, independent fact checking units, and the civil society feedback need to be maintained to ensure that social media platforms work towards a technical framework contributing to functional safeguards online in addition to following the due diligence criteria mentioned in the IT Act of 2000.

As coordination and a multi-stakeholder approach to policy formulation form the basic pillars in uplifting ethical standards in political communication, it is essential that even the act of endorsing free speech as discussed in this paper be checked in a balanced way within this approach.

**Conclusion**

The data provided above demonstrate the ease with which netizens can engage in political dialogue. It is also clearly up for debate whether the usage of social media is reflective of the ground election results. However, the data is justifiable in explaining the popularity of certain political parties and political leaders compared to others. This gap also exists with respect to the support a few mainstream political parties enjoy compared to other national and regional parties that have failed to create a support base on social media platforms. The democratic discourse encompassing pluralistic views on social media platforms remains a concern in a country like India, characterized by the slow growth of internet penetration and a lower relative degree of digital literacy. Nevertheless, it is vital to remember that electoral processes online are a subset within the larger democratic discourse of the real world. Therefore, as ways of political communication on social media advance together with increasing interaction, the dangers emanating from delusional content and misleading facts on social media loom for both political leaders as well as citizens in the real and the virtual world. Addressing such a problem in the longer run may result in curbing social media usage. Moreover, any over blocking or uneven attempts to regulate content will in time compromise the ethics of democracy and the participatory nature of this platform. In such a scenario, in a conversation on the subject of social media and democracy, Dr. Amir Ullah Khan33 rightly opines that “social media needs careful nurturing not strict regulation.”

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33 Personal Communication with Dr. Amir Ullah Khan, Professor of Economics, Maulana Azad National Urdu University.
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