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Social Media, Fake News, and Political Polarization: Challenges for Indian Democracy

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Abstract:

Indian democracy increasingly confronts the intertwined pressures of ubiquitous social media, the industrialization of fake news, and deepening political polarization. This study synthesizes recent Indian and comparative evidence to map causal pathways linking platform design, incentive structures, and user psychology to downstream civic outcomes. We highlight how algorithmic curation, homophily, and attention economies generate selective exposure, amplify affective polarization, and reward emotionally charged misinformation at scale. Drawing on election periods and everyday discourse, we situate India's experience within a global landscape while foregrounding distinctive features: multilingual information ecologies, the dominance of mobile-first private messaging, uneven digital literacy, and heterogeneous regulatory capacity. We then evaluate the effectiveness and trade-offs of current responses, including fact-check partnerships, platform moderation, India's IT Rules, and court-driven remedies, alongside media-literacy initiatives. Finally, we outline a research and policy agenda that prioritizes transparency mandates for recommender systems, interoperable provenance standards, rapid response protocols during high-salience events, and curriculum-embedded critical digital literacy. The paper argues that mitigating polarization without suppressing pluralism requires a layered approach that aligns platform incentives with public interest, strengthens independent institutions, and equips citizens to navigate high-velocity information environments. By integrating insights across communication studies, political science, behavioral science, and technology policy, the study clarifies mechanisms, evaluates evidence, and proposes pragmatic, democratic safeguards suited to India's scale and diversity. We propose measurement strategies combining audits, trace data, surveys, and field experiments across diverse states.

Keywords: Social media; Fake news; Political polarization; India; Algorithmic curation; Media literacy; Regulation.

Introduction

Indian democracy confronts significant challenges arising from the intersection of social media, fake news, and political polarization. This multifaceted situation necessitates an

examination of the relationship between these phenomena and their collective implications. Social media, conceived as digital platforms facilitating multisided exchange of user-generated content, has experienced continued expansion. Globally, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn have witnessed substantial growth in users and activity; similarly, India hosts an estimated 745 million online social media users distributed across various platforms. The resultant escalation in political activities correlates directly with social media's penetration and widespread adoption.

The Role of Social Media in Modern Politics

Social media platforms have radically altered political communication worldwide. Indian political parties have adopted these platforms extensively; most major parties maintain profiles on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2014 electoral success, politicians increased their social media engagement and media outreach, prompted by the need to connect with young voters. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections—featuring a record number of first-time voters—confirmed social media's role and Twitter's primacy. Social media provide unprecedented access to information that shapes opinions and discussions. However, Indian users also encounter filter bubbles and echo chambers that isolate them within like-minded groups, producing ideological polarization that undermines democratic discourse by eroding exposure to diverse viewpoints. To avoid misinformation and bias, users need to seek out varied content and engage beyond their comfort zones. The spread of disinformation globally spawned a complex set of regulatory responses. Less investigated has been the interplay of social media, fake news, and political polarization in India's political arena.

Initially a medium for sharing text and photos, social media have transitioned to integrated platforms for people-centric, multimedia communication. They allow individuals to post content, view others' posts, and interact through likes, comments, and shares. The 2023 digital landscape reveals 692 million Indian internet users, nearly half of the population. Smartphone penetration is well over 50%, and two-thirds of internet users access platforms daily; some users actively contribute content. Among India's 300 million social media accounts, WhatsApp leads with 487 million users, roughly 35% of the population. YouTube (467 million) and Facebook (410 million) follow closely. Platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter sustain sizable demographics. These trends indicate that India is poised to become the largest social media user base globally.

Evolution of Social Media Platforms: The first social media platform was Six Degrees, created in 1997. It allowed users to create profiles and friend other users. Friendster launched in 2002, built around the concept of friending. LinkedIn started as a networking site for professionals. Facebook launched in 2004 and rapidly expanded its functionality and reach. Social media use in India has increased from 4.7 million internet users in 2007 to 560 million in 2019, with over 168 million using social media in 2019. The top five platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram.

Social Media Usage in India: Social media is now widely used throughout Indian society and politics, often fostering a strongly polarized environment within echo-chambers. Personalization and fragmentation of media consumption has increased over the past decade, making people less integrated into one cohesive society. Sources of news, information, and views are mostly singular and self-referential. Addiction to the mobile phone, in the absence of longer-term systemic social supports, can lead to isolation and depression. Misinformation, half-truths, and fake news are rife, eroding trust in political actors and institutions, while spreading conflicting and incompatible worldviews and suspicion that prevent the formation of any policy consensus. Social media's capacity for many-to-many communication makes the web a key multi-directional platform for the circulation of news, knowledge, and divergent views. The rapid emergence of more open Web 2.0 platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, transformed contemporary life by enabling people to participate more fully in social, cultural,

political, and economic activities. Extensive government digitization has been accompanied by the rapid expansion of digital media platforms. With over 900 million active Internet users, growing at approximately 5 million new users every month, India is the second largest internet market in the world after China. 72% of the internet-using population accesses the internet via mobile-devices. Digital media cultures flourish through multiple platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. Despite these rapid gains, internet usage remains low: only 26% of India's population is connected to the Internet. India has a third of the world's unconnected population, more than a billion people still live without access to these new digital communication modes. Facebook has the largest number of subscribers in India. WhatsApp follows Facebook with close to 200 million users in the country.

Understanding Fake News

Fake news can be conceptualized as intentionally fabricated misinformation designed to mislead consumers. Social media platforms are increasingly exploited to propagate such deceptive content that resembles genuine reporting, yet lacks veracity. Individuals are exposed to fake news through algorithmically curated feeds, targeted advertisements, and information posted by their network contacts. This content is crafted to elicit emotional reactions from recipients to increase engagement, which in turn escalates exposure. Nevertheless, the impact of fake news is uneven across communities; certain groups continue to question the validity of scientific consensus and democratically derived electoral outcomes. Fake news, therefore, constitutes a significant challenge to public debates in liberal democracies, including India.

Definition and Types of Fake News: The term "fake news" surged globally during the 2016 US presidential election and was designated Word of the Year by Collins Dictionary in 2017. The spread of technologies like Web 2.0 and the expansion of social media have altered the dissemination speeds and reach of fake news. Lazer et al. (M. J. Lazer et al, 2023) argue that fake news—defined as fabricated information that mimics news content in form but not in organizational process or intent—reflects the erosion of media's editorial standards and disrupts the credibility of traditional editorial outlets. Instances of fake news have precipitated social disturbances in India, as demonstrated by empirical studies. Fake news manifests as falsehoods or deceptive content created and spread to misrepresent real facts. Societal exposition to such unfiltered and unverified news fosters confusion, misunderstanding, fear, and perception biases.

Mechanisms of Dissemination: Different groups of people consume fake news through different means, and fake-news conceivability varies depending on the political stance taken and the cultural values espoused by the individual or group. Americans and Indians exhibit significantly different propensities to believe fake news, which requires further investigation.

Facebook, which operates as a single social meta-chasm that exists within and overlays relationships between individuals and society, enables societal change and mobilization of social capital. Fake news abuses this system, impacting individual beliefs and, consequently, the societal structure it helps to sustain. Users respond by seeking better news sources and filtering the information they consume.

Impact of Fake News on Society

Social media has become the dominant conduit for news and information consumption worldwide. This volume examines the impact of fake news and social media on the development of political polarization in India, alongside the related challenges for Indian democracy. Political polarization—the division of society into opposing groups unified by contrasting ideas—is not new in India, but it is increasingly apparent and often reflected in current discourse. Various scholars and media outlets have analysed the historical causes and contemporary consequences of this growing divide. To date, the interplay between social media and political polarization has been documented mainly in the West. The present chapter therefore assesses the Indian situation by reviewing relevant academic and non-governmental

organisation (NGO) research, government statements and newspaper articles. It proposes that social media's coverage and prioritisation of polarizing political content underlies its ongoing amplification, and highlights the concomitant problems for both the country and its democratic institutions.

Within the digital democracy of the Internet, social media platforms have emerged as leading agents of information dissemination, news generation and public participation. Social media—online platforms via which users create, share and interact around content—have facilitated a marked transformation in the politics of both established and emerging nations. In India, the world's largest democracy, social media usage has expanded rapidly, the country now ranking among the top nations alongside China, the United States and Indonesia by number of active users. The proliferation of social-media platforms has radically altered the political landscape, positioning digital media as an important site for electoral politics, making election-related news and information more accessible, and allowing voters greater engagement with their candidates and elected representatives. At the same time, social media have facilitated new styles of political participation across the globe. The Internet provides citizens in established democracies with multiple opportunities for new modes of political participation, extending and deepening existing channels of engagement. For citizens in emerging democracies, unlocked from restrictions on public assembly and surveillance, digital media offers alternative access to political debate and discussion with the potential to facilitate an informed and enduring political culture. Although the relationship between social-media use and participation may not be causal or direct, a consistent aggregate association between the two exists across democratic and non-democratic nations alike. Fake news is not a new concept but the rapid spread of fake news through technology has emerged as an epidemic that is difficult to control and has created heavy consequences all over the world. Fake news is misinformation, disinformation, propaganda, persuasive communication, satire, or parody.

Public Perception and Misinformation: Social media discourse shapes perceptions about social occurrences. When users engage with a subject, additional information on the topic continues to surface in their feeds. This contributes to the construction of a shallow understanding of public issues, amplifying the effect of false news. Even when presented with incontrovertible facts, individuals tend to maintain their preexisting beliefs, which may be reinforced when contrary evidence is perceived as an attack on personal identity. The reality construction of a social group becomes prioritized over relationships with factual truth. Accusations that fake news denies reality do not resonate with those holding such views. Such rifts lead to suspicion toward increasingly complex subjects, fostering a political climate in which the truth is trivialized; opinions are viewed as equally valid despite disparities in evidential support.

Federal Indian elections provide evidence of rapid spread of socially divisive content. Fake news categorized as hate speech further compounds existing ethnic and caste tensions, with various groups propagating divergent narratives. Early detection, however, remains a challenge. The deepening impact of social media discourse raises concerns about the future of democratic activities. The ensuing transformation in the nature of social media content, encompassing fake news and polarization, reflects fundamental disruptions in societal communication and information exchange that appear to accelerate with technological advancement.

Political Polarization in India

Political polarization in India can be traced back to the country's colonial period, featuring centralist versus anti-centralist divisions and reactions to authoritarian colonial regimes. These historic roots have matured into a political cleavage defined by identities and personalities, which determine contemporary political allegiances and possibilities for compromise among the country's multiple parties. The recent surge in social media use has profoundly influenced the dynamics of polarization. Research indicates that social media accelerates the growth

and evolution of polarization by fostering echo chambers—where individuals are primarily exposed to like-minded opinions—and by reactivating chronic polarization through heightened political interest, despite reducing direct political disagreement. Yet, a study of Twitter conversations ahead of the 2019 general election reveals a more nuanced picture, uncovering both inclusive and exclusionary rhetoric in Hindi and English that underscores the complexity and layered structure of contemporary political discourse between parties and actors.

Historical Context of Polarization: Political polarization defined as an increase in ideological distance, the consistency of issue positions along ideological dimensions, and the extent to which disagreement is expressed in a divided manner is a crucial challenge for democracies worldwide, affecting social cohesion and healthy democratic functioning across countries such as India, the United States, Brazil, Russia, Austria, and the United Kingdom. India exhibits marked ethno-religious and ideological as well as partisan polarization; electoral competition is mainly between the two major parties, Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Polarization in the Republic of India is deeply rooted in the country's pre-independence history when the Indian National Congress began mobilizing against colonial forces. Bipan subsequently emerged, claiming that a major portion of the Hindu–Muslim conflict could be ascribed to the policy of advance polarization by the colonial government—nationalists wished to overshadow their economic and political demands by a religious combination in order to cement the Hindu vote against the All-India Muslim League. Nationalist parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh were focused on the Hindu religion and culture alone, alienating the Muslim community from the Hindu-dominated nationalist movement. In the post-independence period, the terms Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism became popular and analytical tools, and there were demands by some members of the Hindu nationalist movement to reorganize the country based on the principles of Hindu Culture. Contemporary political discourse is characterized by hostility, vindictiveness, and a lack of mutual respect and discussion. Expanding on this, the National Election Study (NES) 2004 found that on key aspects of polarization, both within and across parties, the parties that are ideologically the furthest apart also maintain the highest level of political polarization. Media coverage on polarization points to escalating tensions between groups clamouring for protected membership and Indian government efforts aimed at fostering social cohesion and political consensus in the midst of such cleavages. The social and cultural fabric of Indian society is characterized by an overlapping of divisions of caste, religious affiliation, and geographical origins, creating potential pressure points upon which social and political mobilization can take place for one camp or another. Polarization remains a real and important part of Indian politics, and there is considerable ambiguity about what form polarization actually takes in this context. Political opinion in India is generally thought to be more antipathy-based, with animosity and negative sentiment being the strongest drivers of polarization. Yet, there is some evidence supporting an ideology-based interpretation: the dominant cleavages within India between supporters of Congress and BJP seem to be based on considerations related to Hindu Identity and Socialism, suggesting that core attitudes drive the pattern of political polarization in the country.

Current Trends in Political Discourse: Government-run media, parties, and politicians have historically dominated the flow of political information in India. The 2000s saw the rapid growth of political discourse on social media. Individuals began moving away from traditional information sources such as newspapers, television, and radio, increasingly relying on social media, blogs, and online news portals.

Political parties embraced popular social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube for election campaigning and communication with citizens. Former Prime Minister Narendra Modi's electoral campaigns exemplified the successful use of social media for political mobilization and engagement. Parties across the political spectrum

increased their investment in party IT cells and social media campaigns, extensively using digital technologies to reach voters. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections witnessed thousands of political rallies, with social media and digital technologies contributing to the highest voter turn-out since the first general election in 1951–1952.

Significant internet growth permits many to attend to politics, including youth, who have become increasingly politicized on social media platforms. Political and social debates are pervasive on digital platforms, where political actors also engage in organized disruption campaigns in an attempt to undermine oppositional voices. Driven by the Internet and growing smartphone user base, a significant portion of the population now gathers news and information through social media platforms.

Interconnection Between Social Media and Political Polarization

Political polarization and social media are intricately connected. Social media fosters frequent engagement with politically homogeneous content within personalized information environments. Repeated exposure to such content engenders psychological mechanisms that contribute to affective polarization, as explored in “The Role of Social Media in Modern Politics” and “Understanding Fake News.” Ultimately, social media users become exposed to extreme and inaccurate political information when they do not interact with a mix of information sources.

Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: Social media platforms serve as important spaces for individuals to organize their opinions and make purchasing decisions. However, the architecture of these platforms also contributes to the emergence of echo chambers and filter bubbles. The basic properties of social media—low cost, easy access, and rapid dissemination of information—have encouraged large numbers to consume news online. These characteristics facilitate the wide propagation of both high-quality and low-quality content, often limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and thus fostering echo chambers. The propagation of narratives similar to users’ existing views is further amplified by recommender algorithms, which reinforce this tendency and contribute to the formation of filter bubbles. The principal driver of these dynamics is technology, particularly the influence of social media algorithms. Nevertheless, psychological factors such as confirmation bias and social network configurations like homophily play significant roles in maintaining and intensifying echo chambers via feedback loops. Within such chambers, users encounter one-sided content and shared stances, while dissenting opinions are excluded and outside sources are discredited. In India, social media users do not form a monolith but instead engage with a diverse range of platforms. For instance, politicians may be more active on Twitter, while Facebook dominates among the general public. Platforms known for fake content have experienced notable surges in political activity during elections.

Role of Algorithms in Shaping Opinions: Social media platforms act as powerful “gates” between users and information, influencing the information users receive and how they interact with it. Search, news feed, and recommendation algorithms select, prioritize, and filter content according to their proprietary logic and objectives, and thus can amplify selective exposure and contribute to opinion polarization. Content moderation algorithms and automated fact-checking also play a key role in filtering information and correcting misinformation. Algorithms primarily reinforce selective exposure by promoting content that is similar to what users have already engaged with or expressed interest in e.g., users who have engaged with conservative Facebook pages are more likely to be recommended other conservative pages or groups. Algorithms further reinforce selective exposure, leading to stronger opinion polarization, by predicting and recommending the content users would be most likely to engage with right-wing users who engage relatively more with extreme content are more likely to be recommended such content, and this appears to increase their

toxicity.

Regulatory Framework and Challenges: India boasts one of the world's largest social media user bases, making it a major target for misinformation campaigns. The recent proliferation of fake news amplified political polarization and fuelled communal violence in the country. Although Indian laws forbid sharing false information that disturbs communal harmony, enforcement of existing regulations during news cycles fails to prevent the spread of such content. India's destructive political polarization, exacerbated by misinformation and fake news, threatens the country's democratic future.

Social media aggressively employs attention-seeking strategies to polarize users, who inhabit echo chambers and propagate divisive discourse detrimental to societal cohesion. While media-consumption fragmentation is not novel, the personalization and detachment induced by contemporary technology are unprecedented. Addiction to mobile devices can evoke isolation and depression. Fake news and disinformation undermine trust in institutions and fragment global perspectives, hindering consensus on public policies. The surge of fake content, concerns about data-privacy breaches, and the monetization of user information intensify the debate over regulation. Social-media platforms encounter escalating demands to moderate misleading material and curb radicalization. Vigilant enforcement of existing provisions constitutes the most pragmatic approach. In public discourse, particularly within Indian communities, derogatory expressions targeting specific groups have become common. Scrutinizing the political favoritism shaping communication through misinformation, biased reporting, selective concealment, and outright censorship remains a significant challenge.

India possesses one of the largest and most diversified traditional media industries, encompassing substantial print, television, and radio segments. The right to media freedom receives constitutional protection, with certain limitations designed to avert harm to public order, decency, morality, and to secure state interests. Efforts to combat, detect, and eradicate misinformation confront substantial obstacles, amid debates over political-partisanship and jurisdictional complexities attached to freedom-of-expression laws.

Current Laws Governing Social Media: Social media platforms enable rapid dissemination of information and have altered the dynamics of political, economic, and societal landscapes. While numerous digital platforms have emerged worldwide, their reach and societal impact differ considerably across nations. The Indian subcontinent, in particular, has witnessed a remarkable surge of affordable smartphones equipped with decent cameras, data plans available at less than \$3 per GB, and an estimated population of 750 million potential internet users, although only 564 million were online before the outbreak of a global pandemic that compelled many offline individuals to turn to connectivity. According to a report released in January 2020, 99% of urban Indian homes possessed a mobile phone, with the national average expected to climb to 85.3% during the aforementioned pandemic, reflecting a fundamental behavioral shift that has increased the demand for mobile phones. The Government of India embarked on an ambitious programme aimed at creating \$5 billion worth of national infrastructure projects for data connectivity across all the country's 660 000 villages; within the next five to ten years, the nation is projected to boast 100–700 million connected users with a large percentage of these users invariably becoming social media participants. Facebook continues to dominate among the Indo-Asian digital giants, but other applications such as LinkedIn and Pinterest have increasingly penetrated the country's market. The number of active Twitter users in India during 2020 was 20 million, representing the second-largest market after the US. Given the above and the fact that communication between Indian politicians and their constituents is most frequently conducted via social media, it is essential therefore to analyse this country's social media landscape in order to understand the way that Indian citizens receive political information, and how this information influences voters' behaviour and political mobilisation on the subcontinent.

Challenges in Enforcement: Social media platforms accommodate a vast spectrum of

content, including misinformation, hate speech, and fake news. Since Indian social media is open to all citizens, controlling each post is nearly impossible; this leaves enforcement agencies striving to balance national security and citizens' constitutional freedom of speech. Although blocking content is relatively simple, filtering it is a major challenge. Artificial intelligence, blockchain, and machine learning technologies can help identify fake content; however, it still remains difficult to prevent users from participating in, sharing, and creating this content. Consequently, enforcement agencies find themselves addressing viral misinformation, hate speech, and polarizing content on social media altogether.

Public Awareness and Education

The burgeoning popularity of social media in India has led to a proliferation of fake news, posing significant threats to Indian democracy by blurring the lines between truth and deception and fomenting political polarization. The widespread use of social media platforms among Indian youth has enabled extremist groups to exploit these channels and become major purveyors of fake news, thereby threatening national security. The country's existing legislative and policy frameworks are insufficient, as social media companies refrain from self-regulation, anticipate government intervention, and fail to differentiate between regular comments and fake information. Media-education initiatives and civil-society actions thus remain the most viable means of combating this menace. As the influence of fake news intensifies in India and globally, efforts focused on media literacy and effective public information become increasingly crucial. A laissez-faire approach to fake news and political polarization on social media may appear liberal on the surface but ultimately undermines the democratic foundation of the world's largest democracy.

Social media literacy programs, campaigns, and initiatives play a pivotal role in addressing the challenge of fake news and political polarization. These efforts must run parallel with regulatory frameworks to prepare the public adequately, especially vulnerable segments such as youths, scholars, and non-technical individuals, for the digital age. Digital literacy and media-awareness programs are indispensable in equipping citizens to discern fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, safeguarding the democratic polity. Professional entities—such as academicians, media personnel, social workers, and members of the executive, judiciary, and legislative branches—have significant roles in facilitating impartial, unbiased, and accessible media-education initiatives. Empowered through these programs, citizens also hold the responsibility to survey public spaces and intervene promptly to suppress the spread of fake information and propaganda. Targeted awareness-generation initiatives should focus on youth, the principal users of social media, to impart a sense of responsibility and to counterbalance the influence of fake news.

Media Literacy Initiatives: As per Madan (2022), social media marketing employs various attention techniques through existing consumer technologies in order to generate a polarized society filled with echo chambers, divisive rhetoric, and harmful ideologies. This larger-than-life glorification of personal choice results in a higher degree of personalization and fragmentation of content, which may harm social cohesion. Similarly, misinformation and "fake news" degrade trust in institutions and fragment worldviews, complicating the very ability for a society to arrive at consensus on public policy matters. With many-to-many communication, social media is regarded as one of the major avenues for news and views. The proliferation of fake news together with continued concerns about privacy and the commercialisation of personal data have led to calls for greater regulatory oversight, while at the same time, the platforms themselves have come under pressure to moderate false content and redress issues of radicalisation.

Role of Educational Institutions: Educational institutions are facilitators that can equip individuals with skills and resources to be more discerning towards fake news. Indian universities and colleges should ensure students receive media literacy as part of the curriculum. Instead of merely providing information, pedagogy needs to foster critical thinking

so that students can evaluate the reliability of messages. To decrease the likelihood of students dispensing inaccurate information, classes should include group activities in which members critically evaluate news or social media posts. Varied formats of misinformation from the banal to the harmful can be used as a foundation for discussion. It is crucial for instructors to provide unbiased facts and cultivate a safe environment.

The curriculum should examine platforms that disseminate fake news in the Indian context, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. While Twitter is known as a site of lies in geopolitics, the private, image-centric nature of Facebook is used by individuals to forge relationships. Viral disinformation on Instagram can propagate toxicity in the form of memes, manipulated photographs, and deepfake videos. Scholarly inquiry can also shed light on political and religious tensions in particular towns and cities, highlighting how social media exacerbates conflict and elevates underlying animosity to the national stage. To provide a comprehensive treatment, students should monitor a controversial claim for several weeks, documenting its evolution, the spread of responses, and the subsequent developments. Datasets enable mathematical modeling of online behavior and reveal the reach of different types of falsehoods.

International Perspectives on Fake News and Polarization

Fake news and political polarization threaten democracies worldwide. Several nations have tried varying regulatory responses, some producing effective results. Malaysia's Communications and Multimedia Commission established CyberSAFE to promote safe online behavior, exclude extremist and hate speech, and mandate social media platforms' cooperation. Fake news tripled the number of police reports of misinformation, and the government requested social-media platforms to help erase it. The Independent High Authority for Audiovisual and Digital Communication in France prompted social-media platforms to remove fake accounts surrounding the 2017 presidential elections and issued preventive rules for the 2019 European parliamentary elections. It later produced a series of experts' reports and, in 2020, asked social-media platforms to bring their fake-news policies into line with the country's public-health strategy, especially as COVID-19 vaccines became available. Georgia outlawed false or misleading statements concerning COVID-19 and fixed imprisonment of up to 4 years for those persuading people to steer clear of vaccination. Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act prohibits the communication of misleading or false statements that might adversely affect public interest, public health, safety and security, election conduct, or the economy. The United Kingdom's Online Safety Bill focuses on illegal content and content that is "legal but harmful" to users. The UK's Defamation Act also establishes thresholds for harm before libel action is permissible against fake news. Germany's NetzDG requires social-media platforms to remove "manifestly unlawful" content relating to fake news within 24 h of being flagged. Italy adopted a new Code of Digital Administration and Digital Services and Goods, addressing the use of ICT within the public sector and mandating administrative transparency to counter online deception.

An examination of international experiences reveals a repertoire of strategies that democracies have employed in response to fake news, political polarization, and social media. A survey of corresponding literature suggests three interrelated approaches: regulation, awareness, and civil society. Each contributes to the capacity of democracies to manage and mitigate the negative externalities of digital media. By the end of 2017, over seventy countries were either considering or actively implementing regulations targeting fake news. These range from legislative bans and criminal sanctions to codes of conduct. India itself criminalizes the willful publication or circulation of false information with intent to cause public mischief. Controversies linked to the application of these rules highlight the boundary between repression and regulation. However, regulation remains an indispensable element in the development of democratic safeguards—the "democratic armoury."

Complementing regulatory considerations are public awareness campaigns. These efforts

span open letters and advertisements warning about unreliable sources, media literacy initiatives designed to arm citizens, fact-checking programs, and nudges incorporated into social media platforms. Awareness serves both the allocation of political responsibility and the mitigation of potential harms.

Future Directions for Indian Democracy

To address the sociopolitical challenges posed by social media, fake news, and political polarization in India, the prior discussions suggest a range of promising future directions. Foremost, India's regulatory bodies are encouraged to engage constructively with major digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, ShareChat, and the homegrown NaMo App, to implement transparent and effective content moderation mechanisms. Meanwhile, social media companies face increasing pressure to constrain the proliferation of fake news through algorithmic interventions, chiefly by reducing the prominence of ambiguous and unverified content. Alongside such policy efforts, the promotion of extensive media literacy education programmes remains indispensable; despite their long-term nature, these initiatives constitute a fundamental remedy to the effects of misinformation and manipulation. While the gradual extension of internet connectivity towards the Indian population—currently approximately 26%—raises concerns that the most vulnerable segments might continue to fall prey to viral deceptions and divisive messaging, it ultimately strengthens democracy's capacity for resilience.

The widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter has had a profound effect on the fabric of Indian democracy. These platforms are not only used to connect with friends and family, but also to share images, opinions, world events, and political news. A sharp rise in their usage during the last Lok Sabha polls is alone evidence of the huge impact they exert on political opinion. Along with the advantages of instant dissemination of trustworthy information, the faster transmission of fake news and hate content and the increase in political polarisation are the side effects of social networking and microblogging sites. Altogether, these four elements have become a serious and vital threat for Indian democracy. The demands for action and control over social media – such as through the IT rules of 2021 – reveal how grave the threat is. Through an examination of the evolution of social media, fake news and political polarisation, along with the associated regulations and control measures, this chapter shows that an interplay among all the above-mentioned phenomena has the potential to shape, shake or make the Indian democracy, but also to rupture it completely.

Conclusion

The interplay between social media, fake news, and political polarization represents a significant challenge for Indian democracy. As social media platforms expand their influence and usage, their political significance becomes increasingly apparent. While fake news is not a new phenomenon, its creation, dissemination, and consumption have been dramatically facilitated by the advent of social media, making the issue far more intractable than before. Fake news plays an influential role in shaping public perception on various social, political, and cultural issues. Consequently, a critical examination of the connection between social media and political polarization is both timely and necessary, especially since these factors combine to pose a complex problem for India's political system.

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