Political Polarization of First-Time Voters: The Role of Disinformation in Strengthening Bias of Indian Youth in the 2019 General Elections

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To study the build-up of ‘bias in action’ of first-time voters

- Largest democracy: 84.3 million first-time voters including 15 million aged 18-19 (Election Commission of India, 2019)

- Largest digitalized democracy: 61% of owners of smartphones among voters, highest exposure to social media at 31%, highest users of Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (CSDS-Lokniti, 2019)

- First-gen of social media elections: Aggressively targeted by BJP and INC by SNS and SMS

- Further segmentation: First-time voters and information agents

Source: Election Commission of India poster targeting first-time voters.
First-time voters: N=61, SEC, High SMS and SNS Users from Kolkata and Bangalore
Time of study: Election (March- May 2019) and Post-Election (November-December, 2019) phases
Composite identity: Focus on polarization rather than tribalism
Biases: Information verification bias, pre-existing bias, and new/mutated bias
Stakes: Individual, collective, national prestige, economic, political
Salience: Parameters for a heuristics-based analytical engine model/blockchain approach on dependencies of disinformation

Narrative Capture: Disinformation to “truth”
## Discursive Strategies: Hyperbole vs. Humor

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Leadership/party</td>
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<td>Issue (soft-power like economy)</td>
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<td>Issue (hard-power like national security)</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘Us’ versus ‘Them’</td>
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<td>Amplification, binary opposition, whataboutery</td>
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Key Findings: Information Bias

• Diversity of sources, not of content: 41% access information from social media + memes
• Preferred news format and common disinformation formats are the same: Videos, memes, text
• Prefer reading headlines and news-shorts
• Social media considered less biased than traditional media but without much variance
• Both perceived to be titled towards Right-Wing/Conservative, though high percentage of those who cannot identify any particular bias
• Social media considered a major source of disinformation compared to traditional media, though not much variance, biased media considered ‘major security threat’
• Fact-checking sites, media accountability, citizen awareness to fight disinformation
• 58/61 never fact-checked
Belief in Traditional Media

- Unbiased: 33%
- Biased: 67%

Perception of Bias in Social Media

- Unbiased: 51%
- Biased: 49%

Perception of Bias in Traditional Media

- Biased - Unsure of Leaning: 39%
- Left Wing+ Liberal: 22%
- Right Wing+ Conservative: 39%

Perception of Bias in Social Media

- Conservative+ Right Wing: 40%
- Any Other: 56%
- Liberal+ Left Wing: 14%
Percentage of Social Media Readers identifying Security Threat from different sources

- Biased Media: 23%
- Pakistan: 16%
- Terrorists: 27%
- Separatists: 13%
- Immigrants: 8%
- China: 13%

Percentage of Newspaper Readers identifying Security Threat from different sources

- Biased Media: 19%
- Pakistan: 24%
- Terrorists: 29%
- Separatists: 12%
- Immigrants: 2%
- China: 14%
Key Findings: Pre-existing Bias

- **Partisanship:** Different issue priorities, only six partisan supporters (BJP), moderate supporters (19 of BJP and INC) and 36 swing voters. Among moderates and non-partisan voters, no use of discursive terminologies tropes or topoi of disinformation
- **Composite identity:** Different ideological, issue, and interest positions. No clear political bias (55/61)
- **Socializers:** Voting along family lines, peer groups, selfie citizens

**Issue and information source and format preferences rather than bias**

Source: Youth Ki Awaaz (Voice of the Youth), 2019

Source: The Hindu, 2019
Key Findings: Post-disinformation exposure (disinformation on economy)

• Increase in belief of both traditional and social media consumers of news on disinformation on economic growth, employment, success of government schemes, and foreign investment

• Moderately partisan and non-partisan respondents were less informed on economy

• Moderately partisan and non-partisan respondents believed disinformation by pro-BJP pages than pro-INC pages
Key Findings: Post-disinformation exposure (disinformation on national security)

- Moderately and non-partisan respondents believed disinformation on national security; more for newspapers consumers (1st preference) than social media news consumers but with small variance
- Moderately and non-partisan respondents believed pro-BJP pages rather than pro-INP pages
- National security as a bridge issue: National prestige (civic nationalism rather than ethnic nationalism) or collective stake
Key Findings: Post-disinformation exposure (disinformation on leadership/party)

- More moderately and non-partisan respondents believed pro-BJP pages compared to pro-INC pages on Narendra Modi and BJP-led government to be stronger and more capable than Rahul Gandhi and INC-led UPA.

- More moderately and non-partisan respondents also believed pro-INC pages of BJP being more corrupt and less tolerant to freedom of speech and expression.
Summary of initial findings

**Bias:** More cognitive (framing, anchoring, confirmation, herd) than motivational bias (partisan to affective). No invited manipulation. **Bellwether of bias:** Start using discursive tropes and topoi after exposure to disinformation

**Heuristics:** Credibility, liking, and consensus

**Stakes:** National prestige as a collective stake. No individual personal, political or profit stake for 55/61 respondents. Personal, social, and economic stakes for 6/61. Actively targeted by BJP and participation incentivized

**Media:** Is biased. Fact-checkers are biased. Acknowledge partisanship. Build credibility

**Information sources:** Multiple sources of same content, amplification of content. Preference to read abridged news, more prone to disinformation. Few inclined to fact-check

**Voting preference:** More issue-based priorities than guided by ethical, ideological or identity-based considerations. ‘Bandwagon voting’ guided by consensus heuristics

Identify common disinformation’s discursive devices, target cognitive than motivational biases