

Manufactured Realities: The Digital Politics of Truth in India's 2024 Election

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Abstract : The 2024 Indian General Election unfolded not merely as a contest for political power, but as a struggle for control over the public sphere itself. In a digital landscape governed by social algorithms and shaped by echo chambers, the conditions for rational public debate, what Habermas envisioned as communicative reason; were deeply challenged. Social media platforms, designed to maximise engagement rather than understanding, reconstituted the public sphere into a fragmented network of curated realities. Within these spaces, misinformation, deepfakes, and AI-driven propaganda circulated with viral precision, collapsing the boundaries between truth and narrative, authenticity and manipulation.

This qualitative, document-based study examines how the architecture of social algorithms and the psychology of digital participation transformed India's 2024 election discourse. Drawing from government reports, verified fact-checks, and academic analyses, it explores how algorithmic amplification and partisan echo chambers reshaped democratic deliberation. The paper argues that the election exposed a deeper crisis in communicative rationality: where citizens no longer deliberate with one another but within algorithmically tailored silos. In such an environment, truth becomes contingent, and democracy risks devolving into digital populism.

Yet, the study also finds that democratic integrity can be renewed through civic literacy, transparent regulation, and the revival of a participatory public sphere grounded in ethical communication. Reimagining democracy in the algorithmic age, it contends, means defending not just the ballot box but the very ecology of shared understanding upon which free societies depend.

Keywords: misinformation, deepfakes, echo chambers, social algorithms, Habermas, public sphere, India 2024 election, political propaganda.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Indian General Election was not only one of the largest democratic exercises in the world but also one of the most digitally mediated. While political leaders addressed vast crowds across the country, the real battle for perception and persuasion unfolded in the unseen world of screens and algorithms. Social media platforms became political battlegrounds where fake news, manipulated images, and emotionally charged narratives shaped public consciousness. For millions of voters, political understanding came not from manifestos or television debates but through forwarded messages, edited videos, and viral memes crafted to provoke instant reaction. The digital sphere redefined the relationship between citizens and truth, as social algorithms quietly determined what people saw, believed, and ignored. This transformation has unsettled the classical idea of the public sphere that Jürgen Habermas described—a space where rational dialogue and shared facts enable consensus. Instead, the Indian public sphere has fragmented into echo chambers



that reward outrage over understanding. Cass Sunstein warned that such informational isolation weakens democratic discourse by making citizens comfortable within ideological bubbles. During the 2024 election, these algorithmic spaces became fertile ground for misinformation, amplified by artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies that blurred the line between authenticity and simulation. Hannah Arendt's concept of a "crisis of factuality," where truth loses its moral authority, became a visible reality as viral falsehoods travelled faster than corrections. In this climate, information ceased to be a neutral record of events and became a weapon of persuasion, engineered through repetition, emotion, and algorithmic precision.

The 2024 election revealed how political power increasingly flows through communication networks rather than through traditional institutions, echoing Manuel Castells' notion of the network society. In this environment, visibility determines influence, and that visibility is largely decided by the logic of algorithms. Shoshana Zuboff's idea of surveillance capitalism helps explain how this digital economy transforms citizens into data profiles whose behaviours, fears, and desires can be monitored and predicted. Political strategists no longer rely only on speeches or rallies but on micro-targeted messages that speak directly to individual anxieties and identities. As Noam Chomsky observed decades ago, modern propaganda operates by manufacturing consent—yet in the digital era, this manufacturing occurs invisibly within social platforms that masquerade as neutral. During the Indian election, algorithmic visibility often replaced genuine deliberation, and the manipulation of perception became a form of governance. This paper examines how these forces—fake news, digital propaganda, and social algorithms—reshaped India's 2024 democratic experience. It argues that democracy now faces not just the problem of misinformation but a deeper crisis of shared reality. When citizens inhabit separate worlds of truth, the foundation of deliberative democracy weakens. Yet, the same digital tools that distort reality also carry the potential for renewal. Transparency in algorithmic design, digital literacy, ethical governance, and civic courage can help rebuild a common understanding. The 2024 election thus stands as both a warning and a lesson: in an age when reality can be manufactured, the defence of democracy depends on protecting the integrity of truth itself.

2. Context and Literature Review

The relationship between democracy and information has long been central to political and communication theory. Jürgen Habermas (1989) conceptualised the public sphere as a space where citizens engage in rational and equal debate guided by reason and mutual understanding. In the digital era, however, this ideal has fractured under the influence of social algorithms that determine visibility and engagement. Scholars such as Cass Sunstein (2018) and Eli Pariser (2011) have described how these algorithms foster echo chambers and filter bubbles, isolating users within self-reinforcing information networks. This algorithmic design transforms public dialogue into polarised communication loops where emotion outweighs reason and complexity is sacrificed for virality. Hannah Arendt (1971) foresaw the danger of such distortion in her notion of a "crisis of factuality," where factual truth loses its moral and civic value. The rise of synthetic media, deepfakes, and AI-generated misinformation has deepened this crisis. Chesney and Citron (2019) identify deepfakes as catalysts of a "reality crisis," enabling manipulation that is almost indistinguishable from truth. In India's digital landscape, these theoretical anxieties have found immediate expression. With over 880 million internet users and 500 million active WhatsApp accounts (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India [TRAI], 2024), the scale of information exchange is vast and unregulated. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY, 2024) issued more than 1,200 takedown orders during the election period to counter the spread of false content, illustrating the enormity of the challenge. Empirical studies by Garimella et al. (2024) and Phadke and Mitra (2024) revealed that political misinformation on WhatsApp and Twitter during the 2024 general election often favoured dominant parties, recycled older falsehoods, and strategically altered wording—a process termed "lexical mutation"—to evade detection. These findings align with Lazer et al. (2018), who showed that false news travels faster and deeper than truth because of its emotional charge. Such patterns demonstrate what Tufekci (2018) calls the "automation of persuasion," where engagement-driven algorithms amplify sensationalism and anger to sustain attention.

Civil society and journalistic investigations during the 2024 Indian election further illustrate how misinformation, political propaganda, and digital infrastructures intertwine. Reuters (2024) documented deepfake videos of Bollywood actors Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh criticising the ruling party, while Al Jazeera (2024) reported on Instagram's algorithm boosting AI-generated images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi framed as mythic heroes. The Guardian (2024) revealed that Meta approved 14 political ads containing AI-generated hate speech and disinformation,



underscoring weaknesses in platform accountability. Fact-checkers such as Alt News, Boom Live, and PIB Fact Check countered hundreds of false claims daily, yet their corrections often failed to penetrate closed messaging networks, echoing Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral's (2018) observation that falsehoods thrive on novelty and speed. Scholars including Manuel Castells (2009) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) provide frameworks for interpreting these developments. Castells's concept of the "network society" explains how political power now flows through information networks rather than formal institutions, while Zuboff's theory of "surveillance capitalism" exposes how platforms monetise attention by predicting and shaping behaviour. These mechanisms were evident in the micro-targeting and psychographic profiling used by political campaigns during the election. As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) noted, modern propaganda manufactures consent through control over communication channels; in 2024, that control was algorithmic, embedded within platform design rather than state censorship. Regulatory responses in India remain ambivalent. The Press Information Bureau (2024) issued advisories warning parties against AI manipulation, while the Supreme Court's suspension of a proposed government fact-checking unit (Reuters, 2024) reflected the tension between combating misinformation and protecting free speech. The Koan Advisory Report (2024) found that over 70 percent of Indian voters relied primarily on social media for political information, highlighting how fragile factual discourse has become. The literature therefore converges on a critical insight: misinformation in India is not merely a problem of falsehood but a symptom of structural transformation in the communication order. Deepfakes, social algorithms, and echo chambers together redefine how citizens perceive truth, authority, and participation. As Habermas warned, democracy cannot function without a shared commitment to communicative reason. The 2024 Indian election shows that rebuilding this foundation will require transparency in algorithmic governance, civic digital literacy, and renewed ethical responsibility in both media and politics.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based approach to examine how misinformation, fake news, and political propaganda shaped democratic discourse during India's 2024 General Election. The analysis focuses on how digital platforms, social algorithms, and echo chambers influenced public opinion and communicative rationality. Data were drawn from verified and credible sources, including official reports from the Election Commission of India and the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, fact-checking archives such as PIB Fact Check and Alt News, policy papers from the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Koan Advisory, academic works by Garimella et al. (2024) and Phadke and Mitra (2024), and investigative reports from Reuters, The Guardian, and Al Jazeera. The study employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in misinformation, mechanisms of propagation, institutional responses, and democratic implications. Triangulation of sources ensured reliability and reduced bias. The approach does not measure behavioural impacts but interprets how digital misinformation systems operate within India's political communication network. This method offers an ethical, verifiable, and contextually grounded understanding of how technology and media ecosystems collectively shape public reasoning in a democracy increasingly influenced by algorithmic design and manufactured realities.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that India's 2024 General Election became a defining moment in the evolution of digital propaganda and algorithmic influence on democracy. The most visible trend was the increasing use of AI-generated content and manipulated media that blurred the line between fact and fabrication. Deepfake videos of Bollywood actors Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh criticizing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and endorsing the opposition parties went viral, gaining hundreds of thousands of views before both actors publicly denied their authenticity and the police initiated an investigation (Reuters, 2024).

Similarly, manipulated campaign posters depicting Modi in front of Singapore's metro line circulated widely, creating a narrative of infrastructural achievement that was visually persuasive yet factually incorrect (Time via Alt News, 2024). Studies such as *Deciphering Viral Trends in WhatsApp* (Garimella et al., 2024) confirmed that misinformation in rural communication networks overwhelmingly supported the ruling party and recycled already debunked content, showing how falsehoods persist through repetition. Phadke and Mitra

(2024) identified "lexical mutation" as a common tactic, where the same misinformation was subtly reworded to bypass content filters. Collectively, these patterns suggest that misinformation during the 2024 election was not an occasional



anomaly but an integral feature of campaign communication, operating within a sophisticated architecture of digital manipulation. The technological infrastructure of misinformation proved equally significant. Social media algorithms, designed to maximize engagement, inadvertently amplified polarizing narratives by prioritizing emotional content over factual accuracy. Cass Sunstein's (2018) concept of echo chambers finds vivid expression in this context, as Indian voters increasingly engaged with information that confirmed their existing beliefs. The consequence was the fragmentation of the public sphere, which Jürgen Habermas once described as a space for rational deliberation. Instead, this space has been reengineered by social algorithms into polarized, self-reinforcing information loops. Cross-platform pipelines further intensified this process: false or manipulated content frequently began circulating in private messaging platforms such as WhatsApp before appearing on public networks like X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. A Reuters report (2024) documented that election monitoring cells attempted to flag and remove deepfakes but found themselves reacting too late, as misinformation spread rapidly through private groups before surfacing publicly. This aligns with the 2019 "Trend Alert" study by Jakesch et al. (2021), which demonstrated how coordinated WhatsApp networks can engineer trends on Twitter through synchronized posting. Liu, Rahimian, and Garimella (2025) further found that politically charged multimedia messages—videos, memes, and images—achieved greater reach than text-based content, underscoring how visual formats fuel virality in closed networks. These intertwined mechanisms—algorithmic boosting, emotional targeting, and cross-platform seeding—constitute what Tufekci (2018) terms the "automation of persuasion."

Institutional and corporate responses, while visible, proved inconsistent. Meta revised its misinformation and deepfake policies before the election, yet a Guardian investigation found that 14 AI-generated political ads containing hate speech and disinformation were approved on

Facebook during the campaign period, despite the company's stated prohibitions (The Guardian, 2024). These ads were targeted at specific communities and violated Meta's election integrity policies, revealing persistent enforcement gaps between corporate policy and practice. Similarly, while the Election Commission of India issued advisories warning political parties against the use of deepfakes (Reuters, 2024), regulatory frameworks lacked the agility to counter the scale of digital manipulation. The Supreme Court's decision in March 2024 to suspend the creation of a government-run fact-checking unit under the IT Rules highlighted the legal tension between free expression and content regulation (Reuters, 2024). At the same time, the Press Information Bureau (PIB, 2024) and fact-checking organizations such as Alt News and Boom Live continued to debunk viral claims, though their reach remained limited in vernacular and rural audiences. As Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) note, falsehoods spread faster than corrections because they evoke stronger emotions—an observation that resonates deeply with India's electoral environment. Garimella et al. (2024) showed that even when misinformation was debunked, the same messages resurfaced in WhatsApp groups, highlighting how fact-checking struggles to penetrate private networks. These findings illustrate the asymmetry between the viral dynamics of misinformation and the slower mechanisms of institutional correction. The persistence of such misinformation within private groups also points to the emergence of what Arendt (1971) called a "crisis of factuality," where the distinction between truth and falsehood loses its practical relevance in public life. Within this fragmented communication ecosystem, democracy risks devolving into a contest over narrative dominance rather than informed debate. Manuel Castells's (2009) theory of the network society helps to explain this shift: political power now flows through communication networks rather than formal institutions. Visibility, not persuasion, becomes the source of influence. Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) concept of surveillance capitalism further clarifies how this visibility is commodified—citizens are no longer just participants in democracy but data points whose behaviours, emotions, and preferences are continuously monitored and exploited. The 2024 Indian election confirmed this reality through the widespread use of micro-targeted advertisements and psychographic profiling by campaign strategists. What Noam Chomsky and Herman (1988) once described as the "manufacture of consent" has, in the algorithmic age, evolved into the manufacture of perception itself.

The broader democratic implications of these developments are profound. The fragmentation of the epistemic community—the collective space of shared knowledge—undermines the deliberative foundations of democracy. When voters inhabit separate realities curated by social algorithms, the conditions for mutual understanding erode. The 2024 election revealed how algorithmic design has transformed political communication from a forum of deliberation into a marketplace of emotion. Trust, the moral foundation of democratic legitimacy, becomes vulnerable when citizens cannot distinguish authentic communication from manufactured spectacle. This erosion of trust extends to institutions: platforms are perceived as biased, regulators as ineffective, and journalism as powerless against viral deception. Yet,



even within this bleak landscape, there are glimmers of resilience. Reports by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2025) and Koan Advisory Group (2024) note growing awareness among voters and civil society organizations about the need for digital literacy and ethical AI regulation. Community-based moderation efforts, including WhatsApp group admins who voluntarily monitor content, represent small but meaningful steps toward grassroots accountability. However, these remain fragmented responses in the absence of systemic reform. The findings of this study thus underscore that the battle against misinformation is not solely technical—it is moral, institutional, and cultural. Defending democratic integrity requires a renewed commitment to transparency in algorithmic design, the institutionalization of civic media education, and stronger collaboration between regulators, platforms, and the public. In essence, the 2024 Indian General Election demonstrates that misinformation and digital propaganda are not peripheral disruptions but central forces reshaping democracy itself. Deepfakes, false ads, and algorithmic bias do not simply distort electoral outcomes; they redefine how citizens experience truth, authority, and participation. The challenge ahead is not merely to police falsehoods but to rebuild the social conditions under which truth can once again command respect. As Habermas reminds us, democracy depends on the possibility of reasoned understanding. To preserve that possibility in an age of manufactured realities will require not just technological vigilance but the cultivation of civic courage and ethical imagination.

5. Conclusion

The 2024 Indian General Election stands as a landmark in the intersection of technology, politics, and democracy. It revealed that the most powerful forces shaping public opinion no longer arise solely from speeches, manifestos, or rallies, but from the unseen operations of social algorithms and digital infrastructures that now govern visibility and attention. The findings of this study show that misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmically amplified propaganda have transformed the nature of political communication, turning the public sphere into a contested terrain of manufactured realities. What began as a tool for democratizing participation has, paradoxically, become a mechanism through which manipulation can be automated and emotion can be commodified.

At its core, this transformation challenges the moral and epistemic foundation upon which democratic societies rest—the shared belief that truth is a public good. Habermas’s vision of a public sphere governed by communicative rationality presupposed that citizens would engage in debate through reason and evidence. Yet, as this study demonstrates, digital technologies increasingly distort that process. The architecture of engagement-driven platforms rewards outrage, simplicity, and speed, all of which stand in tension with deliberation and understanding. Social algorithms, optimized to capture attention, elevate content that provokes rather than informs. Within these systems, truth competes not with lies but with virality, and as Arendt warned, when factual truth becomes indistinguishable from narrative, the line between persuasion and deception collapses.

The election’s digital ecosystem revealed how these dynamics operate in real time. The deepfake videos featuring Aamir Khan and Ranveer Singh, the circulation of manipulated imagery portraying Modi in mythic form, and the spread of recycled misinformation through WhatsApp groups are not isolated incidents but manifestations of a structural condition. They mark a new phase in political communication where the boundaries between authenticity and performance are deliberately blurred. The institutions responsible for safeguarding democratic integrity—media organizations, regulators, and platforms—found themselves in a race they could not win. Fact-checkers worked tirelessly but could not match the velocity of misinformation; platforms updated their policies yet still approved inflammatory content; and government agencies issued advisories but struggled to enforce them uniformly. This disjunction between intent and capacity illustrates a deeper truth: democracy’s traditional guardians are ill-equipped to manage a public sphere that operates at algorithmic speed.

The social consequences of this transformation extend beyond the immediate electoral cycle. The fragmentation of India’s information ecosystem has produced a new kind of political polarization—one not merely of ideology but of perception itself. Citizens increasingly inhabit separate realities curated by algorithms that prioritize personal relevance over collective understanding. The erosion of this shared epistemic foundation weakens the bonds of civic trust. When voters cannot agree on basic facts, democratic dialogue loses coherence, and collective decision-making risks degenerating into parallel monologues. This aligns with Sunstein’s observation that echo chambers do not just isolate citizens; they reshape the very conditions of citizenship by replacing public reasoning with identity-driven affirmation.



Yet, the story is not solely one of decline. The Indian democratic experience also demonstrates resilience. Despite manipulation, voter participation remained remarkably high, suggesting that citizens still value engagement, even amid confusion. The growing work of independent factchecking organizations and civil society groups shows that democratic culture continues to adapt. Reports by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2025) and Koan Advisory (2024) highlight an encouraging shift toward digital literacy programs, community moderation, and collaborative verification networks that can serve as early warning systems against misinformation. These efforts are small in scale but symbolically significant—they mark the re-emergence of what Habermas would call “communicative resistance,” where truth is defended not by censorship but by collective deliberation.

The lessons from the 2024 election therefore point toward a necessary recalibration of democratic practice in the digital age. The defense of democracy must now include the defense of information integrity. This requires not just policy reform but cultural transformation. First, digital platforms must be held accountable for algorithmic design. Transparency in how content is ranked, recommended, and monetized is essential for rebuilding public trust. Algorithmic audits by independent institutions, publicly accessible data on political ad spending, and mandatory labeling of AI-generated content could limit the exploitation of visibility as a political weapon. Such measures should not be framed as censorship but as democratic safeguards ensuring that communication remains authentic and accountable.

Second, the state’s role must evolve from reactive regulation to proactive partnership. Rather than relying solely on punitive takedowns or content removal, the government could collaborate with universities, think tanks, and civic groups to create open-source digital observatories that monitor election-related information flows. These observatories would operate as transparent, non-partisan entities capable of identifying coordinated disinformation campaigns before they influence public perception. The Election Commission of India could also integrate digital ethics into its Model Code of Conduct, requiring all parties to disclose the use of AI-generated material or paid online influencers in campaign activities.

Third, journalism and education must play a renewed civic role. As misinformation erodes institutional credibility, media literacy must become as fundamental as literacy itself. Schools and universities can integrate media education into curricula, emphasizing critical thinking, verification skills, and ethical information sharing. Journalistic institutions, too, must invest in verification infrastructure and collaborative fact-checking models that engage citizens as participants in truth production rather than passive consumers. In a society where each citizen can publish, share, and amplify, the responsibility for truth cannot remain confined to traditional media gatekeepers—it must become a collective practice.

Finally, democratic renewal in the digital age demands a moral and philosophical awakening. Technology is not destiny; it is a reflection of human choices. The algorithms that now shape civic life are not inherently destructive, but they become so when governed by profit without purpose. To restore integrity to democratic communication, societies must reclaim the moral center of their technological development. Regulation can impose accountability, but only ethical reflection can inspire restraint. This study affirms that democracy survives not by suppressing complexity but by cultivating empathy and dialogue—the very qualities social algorithms often suppress.

India’s 2024 election, in all its digital turbulence, offers both a warning and a way forward. It shows how fragile democratic truth has become, yet also how adaptable democratic spirit remains. The path ahead lies not in rejecting technology but in rehumanizing it. Platforms, policymakers, educators, and citizens must share responsibility for ensuring that the tools of connection do not become instruments of division. When truth becomes a public duty rather than a private burden, democracy regains its moral compass. The defense of democratic integrity, then, begins not only in law or regulation but in conscience—in the daily choice to value accuracy over immediacy, understanding over reaction, and conversation over conflict. In an age when realities can be manufactured with a click, preserving democracy means preserving our capacity to believe, to doubt, and to discern together. Only by restoring this shared commitment to truth can the public sphere become, once again, the space of freedom that Habermas imagined and that democracy requires.



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