

FROM MASS MEDIA TO NETWORK POLITICS: CROSS-PLATFORMS CAMPAIGNING, YOUTH ENGAGEMENT, AND AI DYNAMICS IN INDIA'S ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of social media and artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed political communication in India, reshaping how citizens receive information, engage with political actors, and participate in democratic processes. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have evolved from communication tools into influential political spaces where campaigns are increasingly driven by data analytics, algorithmic amplification, influencer networks, and AI-enabled personalization. These developments have been particularly significant for young and first-time voters, who rely extensively on digital platforms for political information and engagement. This paper examines the changing nature of political communication in India's electoral democracy by reviewing contemporary scholarship on digital campaigning, youth political participation, data analytics, micro-targeting, political branding, algorithmic recommendation systems, echo chambers, misinformation, deepfakes, and generative artificial intelligence. Drawing upon the works of Manuel Castells, Henry Jenkins, Yochai Benkler, Andrew Chadwick, Brian McNair, Joyojeet Pal, Sarangi, Gaur, Singh et al., and other contemporary scholars, the paper synthesizes theoretical and empirical perspectives to explain how political communication has shifted from centralized, mass-mediated broadcasting to decentralized, participatory, and algorithmically mediated digital networks. Particular attention is given to the 2024 Lok Sabha Election, which marked a significant milestone in the institutionalization of AI-driven electoral communication through voice cloning, multilingual campaign messaging, generative propaganda, deepfakes, hyper-localized deployment, and precision political communication. The paper also examines the democratic implications of algorithmic personalization, shadow campaigning, misinformation, and the emergence of regulatory challenges such as the "Authenticity Trap," highlighting their impact on electoral integrity, voter autonomy, and democratic accountability.

KEY WORDS: Network Society, Digital Political Communication, Cross-Platform Electioneering,

INTRODUCTION

India's digital landscape has expanded rapidly in recent years. According to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI, 2026), the country had over 1.29 billion internet subscribers by the end of 2025, with internet penetration reaching 72.24%. The dominance of mobile internet, accounting for more than 94% of all internet connections, has made smartphones the primary medium for accessing social media platforms. This rapid digital expansion has transformed political communication by enabling citizens to consume, create, and disseminate political information in real time.

Against this backdrop, the implications of expanding internet penetration extend beyond digital access to the transformation of political participation, particularly among young citizens. The widespread adoption of smartphones and social media has created new avenues through which youth access political information, discuss public affairs, and engage

with democratic processes. This growing digital ecosystem is reflected in recent survey findings on youth political attitudes. According to the (Lokniti, CSDS Delhi, n.d.) 2024 survey, Indian youth aged 18–22 demonstrate a high level of political awareness and normative commitment to democratic participation. An overwhelming 91.9% believe that young people should take an active interest in national affairs rather than leaving politics to older generations.

The structural transformation underlying this shift can be understood through Manuel Castells' concept of the network society. (Castells, 2011) argues that the Internet has disrupted the Gutenberg legacy of centralized, one-way communication that characterized the era of print and broadcast media. Traditional mass media, with television as the cultural epicenter, concentrated editorial authority in the hands of a few gatekeepers who controlled the production and circulation of political information. In contrast, the Internet's uncontrollable

architecture, originally designed as a decentralized network, enables many-to-many communication and supports what Castells terms mass self-communication, where individuals simultaneously produce, distribute, and consume political content. This transition has weakened traditional editorial control and accelerated the spread of user-generated content, hashtags, memes, and online campaigns, allowing political messages and viral movements to emerge outside institutional media structures.

Consequently, political participation increasingly unfolds within networked digital spaces, where virtual communities transcend geographical boundaries and communication flows horizontally rather than through centralized channels. (Jenkins, 2006) argues that this convergence culture is shaped by a dynamic tension between top-down corporate power and bottom-up consumer participation. While media corporations seek to expand their intellectual property through cross-platform synergy and transmedia extensions, users simultaneously reinterpret, remix, and redistribute content, often challenging institutional control over meaning and ownership. The proliferation of user-generated content, participatory fandoms, and networked communities has therefore contributed to the democratization of the digital public square, where political, cultural, and social discourse increasingly emerges through horizontal interactions rather than centralized editorial authority.

The current networked environment has lowered these barriers, putting the means of production such as computation, communication, and storage into the hands of individuals globally (Benkler, 2006). In the Indian context, the Digital India initiative has contributed to the emergence of a more networked and participatory democratic ecosystem, where citizens are not merely recipients of political information but active contributors to the digital public sphere (Van Dijk, 2020). Within this evolving digital ecosystem, social media platforms have become important arenas for political participation, enabling citizens particularly young people to access political information, express opinions, engage in deliberative discussions, mobilize around public issues, and participate in electoral political action. As a result, social media has increasingly complemented conventional modes of political engagement by facilitating more interactive, networked, and participatory forms of democratic involvement.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Direct Communication between political leaders and citizens

Brian McNair's concept of disintermediation, developed within his theory of Cultural Chaos, explains how digital media have reduced the intermediary role traditionally

performed by journalists and editors, enabling political leaders to communicate directly with citizens through digital platforms (McNair, 2017). In the Indian context, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Mann Ki Baat exemplifies this shift towards direct political communication by reaching citizens through radio alongside digital platforms such as YouTube, social media, podcasts, and mobile applications. This allows political messages to bypass exclusive reliance on conventional media gatekeepers while fostering a more immediate and personalized connection with citizens through digital convergence and user-driven dissemination. Complementing this perspective, Andrew Chadwick's Hybrid Media System argues that digital communication does not replace legacy media but interacts strategically with it (Chadwick, 2013). Political leaders increasingly use social media to communicate directly with citizens, while traditional news organizations monitor these platforms and amplify significant messages through television, newspapers, and digital news portals. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's posts on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), which frequently become breaking news across mainstream media, illustrate this hybrid interaction, demonstrating how political communication today is shaped by the strategic interplay between direct digital communication and legacy media logics.

Low-cost campaigning

The proliferation of digital platforms has substantially reduced the cost of political campaigning by enabling parties to reach large and diverse electorates with minimal financial and logistical constraints. Sharma (2025) argues that this affordability has been accompanied by the professionalization of digital electioneering, where campaign consultants, data analysts, influencers, and organized online networks strategically produce and disseminate political content at scale through platforms such as WhatsApp and social media. Complementing this perspective, (Joyjeet Pal - *Social Media Influencers and Political Capture in India*, 2024) concept of shadow politics highlights the growing reliance on low-cost local influencers, hyper-local volunteer networks, and vernacular digital channels to circulate political messages within specific communities. Together, these developments demonstrate how contemporary election campaigns combine professional digital infrastructures with decentralized grassroots networks, allowing political actors to achieve targeted outreach, rapid message amplification, and large-scale voter mobilization at relatively low cost (Neyazi, 2018)

Political Branding and Youth Engagement

Political branding in the digital age increasingly relies on influencers, celebrities, slogans, and online content creators to connect with young audiences who consume political information primarily through social media. Rather than

depending solely on traditional media, political actors across the political spectrum use digital platforms to cultivate relatable public images, engage directly with voters, and amplify campaign narratives. For instance, the BJP's campaigns such as "Main Bhi Chowkidar" and "Modi Hai Toh Mumkin Hai" gained widespread traction through coordinated dissemination by political leaders, celebrities, influencers, and ordinary users across platforms like X, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Similarly, opposition campaigns including "Bharat Jodo Yatra", "Nafrat Chhodo, Bharat Jodo", and "Nyay" sought to mobilize public support by leveraging social media influencers, digital volunteers, and independent commentators to expand their reach among young voters.

Research by (Dash et al., 2022b) demonstrates that influencers including celebrities, journalists, platform-native creators, and hyperlocal digital personalities have become important intermediaries in shaping political discourse during elections and political crises. Such strategies are particularly effective among youth, who are more likely to engage with political content through familiar digital personalities than through conventional news sources. However, the algorithmic design of social media often rewards emotionally charged and highly partisan content with greater visibility and engagement, creating incentives for influencers to produce content that attracts attention and strengthens political narratives. As a result, political branding today extends beyond campaign advertising to include a networked ecosystem of influencers, digital volunteers, and online communities that play a significant role in shaping youth political engagement and electoral participation.

DATA ANALYTICS AND MICRO TARGETING

Evolution of Data-Driven Election Campaigning

(*View of Extreme Speech | Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Meta practice of Extreme Speech*, n.d.) The 2014 General Election marked a significant turning point in Indian political campaigning, demonstrating how digital technologies could be integrated with data-driven communication to reach voters at an unprecedented scale. Political campaigns increasingly relied on digital strategists, advertising professionals, social media teams, and analytics experts to design targeted messages for different demographic groups. Digital platforms enabled parties to communicate directly with citizens through social media, live streaming, WhatsApp groups, and innovative campaign techniques such as Narendra Modi's 3D hologram rallies, reducing dependence on traditional media gatekeepers and allowing leaders to cultivate a more direct relationship with voters.

The growing professionalization of election campaigns has also led to the emergence of digital political

consultancies, such as the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), and dedicated party-affiliated digital communication units that employ social listening, sentiment analysis, voter profiling, and real-time data analytics to inform campaign strategies. By analyzing online behavior, demographic characteristics, regional concerns, and issue pREFERENCES, these organizations assist political parties in developing tailored communication for different voter segments. Such data-driven approaches enable campaigns to monitor public sentiment, assess the effectiveness of political messaging, and adapt outreach strategies in real time. While these techniques have enhanced the efficiency and precision of electoral communication, they have also generated scholarly debates on issues of data privacy, surveillance, algorithmic influence, transparency, and the ethical implications of political micro-targeting.

Audience Segmentation and Digital Political Communication

Data analytics has become central to electoral strategy. Political parties continuously monitor engagement metrics including likes, shares, comments, retweets, watch time, and hashtag trends to evaluate public response and refine campaign messaging. Network analysis helps identify influential accounts, digital volunteers, and online communities capable of amplifying campaign narratives. These insights facilitate micro-targeting, whereby different voter groups receive customized political messages based on their interests, identities, language preferences, geographic location, and online behavior.

Digital campaigns also employ memes, slogans, hashtags, and short-form videos to increase engagement among younger voters. The BJP popularized campaigns such as #AbkiBaarModiSarkar, #MainBhiChowkidar, #ModiHaiTohMumkinHai, and #PhirEkBaarModiSarkar, while the Congress and the INDIA alliance promoted campaigns including #BharatJodoYatra, #NafratChhodoBharatJodo, #Nyay, #SaveConstitution, and #JudegaBharatJeetegaIndia. Election-related memes inspired by Bollywood dialogues, cricket reference, viral reaction GIFs, and humorous edits of political speeches have further transformed political communication into engaging and shareable digital content, particularly among first-time and young voters.

Participatory Digital Campaigns and Engagement Metrics

(Pal, 2023) argue that this digital ecosystem is sustained through a combination of professional campaign managers, official party social media teams, digital volunteers, and automated accounts that together contribute to what he describes as a "permanent campaign". Beyond paid advertisements, campaigns increasingly encourage supporters to participate in activities such as sharing campaign material, amplifying hashtags, creating memes, and circulating political

content across digital platforms. Engagement metrics including hashtag trends, shares, and retweets provide continuous feedback on audience response, enabling campaigns to optimize their communication strategies. Consequently, data analytics and micro-targeting have transformed electioneering from broad mass communication into an interactive, data-driven, and continuously evolving process of political communication and voter engagement.

YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Evolution of Social Media Use among Young Voters

The relationship between social media and youth political participation has undergone a profound transformation over the past decade. The CSDS–Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2016) Youth Survey revealed that social media penetration among Indian youth was still in its formative stage, with 50% of respondents reporting no exposure to social media platforms. Among youth aged 15–34 years, WhatsApp emerged as the most frequently used platform, with 30% reporting daily use, followed by Facebook (25%), YouTube (11%), and Twitter (7%). Daily Facebook usage increased significantly from 6% in 2014 to 25% in 2016, highlighting the rapid digitalization of political communication during and immediately after the 2014 General Election.

Digital Media and Electoral Participation

The survey also identified an important paradox. Young people who were the most digitally connected particularly students, graduates, and those aged 18–21 years were generally more exposed to online political information and campaign activities but were less likely to vote regularly than less digitally connected groups (Kumar et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the 2014 Lok Sabha election marked the first national election since 1999 in which youth voter turnout exceeded the overall national turnout, indicating that digital political communication had begun to reshape electoral participation among younger citizens.

By the 2024 General Election, however, India's digital ecosystem had changed dramatically. Affordable smartphones, inexpensive mobile internet, and widespread digital connectivity have transformed social media from a supplementary campaign tool into a primary arena of political communication. While Facebook and Twitter (now X) were prominent during the 2014 election cycle, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and short-form video platforms have emerged as the principal channels through which first-time voters encounter political information, campaign messages, and electoral narratives. WhatsApp facilitates the rapid circulation of campaign material through private groups and community networks, whereas Instagram's reels, stories, influencer

collaborations, memes, and visual storytelling have become particularly influential in engaging young audiences. Political parties, candidates, civil society organizations, and independent content creators increasingly use these platforms to communicate with first-time voters through localized, personalized, and visually engaging content.

First-Time Voters and Digital Political Engagement

Consequently, youth political participation in 2024 extends well beyond electoral turnout. First-time voters increasingly engage with politics by following political influencers, sharing campaign content, participating in online discussions, creating and remixing political memes, attending digitally mobilized events, fact-checking information, and expressing political opinions across social media platforms. This shift suggests that political participation among contemporary youth is increasingly networked, interactive, and digitally mediated. As the present study examines first-time voters in the 2024 General Election, understanding how these digital platforms influence political awareness, engagement, and electoral participation forms a central focus of the research.

DIGITAL THREATS AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

Algorithmic Amplification and Echo Chambers

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic systems has fundamentally transformed political communication in India. According to Sarangi (2025), digital election campaigns increasingly rely on algorithmic campaigning, where predictive analytics, recommender algorithms, behavioral profiling, and automated content curation shape how citizens encounter political information online. Rather than passively receiving information, users are exposed to personalized political content selected by platform algorithms based on their browsing behavior, interactions, preferences, and social networks. This process has contributed to the emergence of the "algorithmic voter" a citizen whose political preferences and electoral behavior are increasingly inferred, predicted, and influenced through opaque computational systems.

Algorithms determine the visibility and reach of political content by prioritizing posts that generate higher levels of engagement, including likes, comments, shares, and watch time. Consequently, emotionally charged content, sensational narratives, and highly personalized campaign messages often receive greater algorithmic amplification than balanced or deliberative political information. Political actors increasingly employ artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, behavioral micro-targeting, and recommendation systems to optimize campaign strategies and maximize voter engagement, particularly among digitally active youth. These developments

have also intensified concerns regarding algorithmic bias, filter bubbles, echo chambers, misinformation, deepfakes, and the transparency of digital political communication. Algorithms increasingly determine which political messages users encounter by prioritizing content that generates high levels of engagement. This personalization creates information environments in which users are repeatedly exposed to ideologically similar content, reinforcing political beliefs while reducing exposure to alternative viewpoints. During politically sensitive events such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests and the COVID-19 pandemic, social media networks rapidly amplified competing narratives through a relatively small number of influential accounts. These processes contribute to agenda-setting, political polarization, and the formation of digital echo chambers, particularly among young users who rely heavily on algorithmically curated information feeds (Pal et al., 2022; Garimella, 2018).

Sarangi (2025) further argues that India's evolving regulatory framework including the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDPA), the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the Election Commission of India's digital campaign guidelines has yet to fully address the democratic challenges posed by algorithmic campaigning. The study contends that safeguarding electoral integrity in the age of artificial intelligence requires greater transparency, accountability, and democratic oversight of algorithmic systems that increasingly shape political participation and voter decision-making. The rapid expansion of social media has transformed political participation by enabling citizens to access, produce, and disseminate political content with unprecedented ease. However, the same digital platforms increasingly rely on algorithms that personalize information based on users' previous interactions, interests, and engagement patterns. Such algorithmic curation often reinforces existing political preferences, creating echo chambers where individuals are repeatedly exposed to ideologically similar content while alternative viewpoints are filtered out. These algorithmically curated information environments shape political attitudes, intensify polarization, and influence electoral decision-making, particularly among digitally active youth (Sarangi, 2025).

Misinformation, Deepfakes and Electoral Integrity

The widespread use of social media has also facilitated the rapid circulation of misinformation, disinformation, and AI-generated deepfakes during election campaigns. Research on the 2019 General Election found that misinformation circulated by major political actors frequently centered on issues such as corruption, religion, nationalism, celebrities, gender, and electoral campaigns. The increasing use of deepfakes and manipulated audiovisual content further complicates voters' ability to distinguish authentic political

communication from fabricated material. These developments undermine electoral integrity by distorting public debate, influencing voter perceptions, and reinforcing echo chambers through the repeated circulation of misleading information. Independent fact-checking initiatives such as Alt News and BOOM Live, along with the Press Information Bureau (PIB) Fact Check, have attempted to counter misinformation, although regulatory challenges remain significant (Sarangi, 2025).

Influencers, Digital Campaigns and Networked Political Participation

Political participation increasingly extends beyond voting to include engagement with influencers, digital volunteers, and online communities. Political parties now collaborate with influencers on platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to disseminate hyperlocal and micro-targeted political messages that resonate with specific demographic groups. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsements, these influencers often integrate political narratives into everyday content, making campaign messages appear more authentic and relatable. Alongside organized campaign teams, loosely connected digital actors and ordinary users contribute to the creation and amplification of political narratives through memes, hashtags, videos, and short-form content, thereby expanding the reach of electoral campaigns (Pal et al., 2022; Sarangi, 2025).

Digital Campaign Regulation and Democratic Challenges

The growing influence of social media has prompted efforts to strengthen electoral regulation in the digital sphere. Ahead of the 2019 General Election, major technology companies adopted a voluntary code of ethics in consultation with the Election Commission of India (ECI), committing to improve transparency in political advertising, establish grievance redressal mechanisms, and respond more quickly to violations of the Model Code of Conduct. The ECI has also created a dedicated social media Cell to monitor online campaigning and address election-related misinformation. Nevertheless, scholars argue that existing regulatory frameworks remain inadequate to address algorithmic bias, proxy political advertising, undisclosed influencer partnerships, deepfakes, and coordinated digital campaigns. These challenges raise broader concerns regarding electoral integrity, freedom of expression, transparency, and democratic accountability in the digital age (Sarangi, 2025). Recent elections have witnessed the integration of artificial intelligence into campaign communication. AI-generated multilingual speeches, synthetic videos, personalized visual content, and automated message variations have expanded the scale and sophistication of political outreach. While these technologies enhance campaign

efficiency and facilitate communication across India's linguistic diversity, they also raise concerns regarding misinformation, deepfakes, transparency, electoral manipulation, and democratic accountability. Consequently, AI has emerged as one of the defining technologies shaping the future of political communication in India's electoral democracy (Pal et al., 2022).

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, DEEPFAKES AND ELECTORAL COMMUNICATION IN THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTION

The 2024 Lok Sabha Election represented a defining moment in India's experience with AI-driven political communication, demonstrating both the opportunities and democratic risks associated with generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in electoral campaigns (Gaur, n.d.). During the election cycle, political parties reportedly invested nearly US\$50 million in AI-backed communication strategies, signaling the institutionalization of AI within contemporary electioneering (Gaur, n.d.; Singh et al., 2024). These technologies expanded political communication beyond conventional campaigning through applications such as voice cloning, AI-generated multilingual speeches, personalized voter messaging, the digital "resurrection" of deceased political leaders, synthetic videos, and AI-generated satire. For example, AI-generated speeches of M. Karunanidhi were used to mobilize party workers, while voice-cloning technologies enabled candidates to deliver personalized messages that strengthened the emotional appeal of campaign communication. Simultaneously, manipulated media—including viral deepfakes of political leaders and fabricated campaign announcements—demonstrated how the same technologies could be deployed both for innovative voter outreach and for electoral misinformation and reputational attacks (Gaur, n.d.).

The integration of AI also transformed political communication from broad digital outreach into hyper-localized deployment, enabling campaign teams to deliver highly personalized messages across diverse linguistic, regional, caste-based, and demographic communities (Singh et al., 2024). Rather than relying solely on mass communication, AI-enabled campaigns increasingly employed precision political communication, tailoring political messages according to local identities, language preference, occupations, and community-specific concerns. This shift substantially enhanced voter engagement by making campaign communication appear more localized, culturally familiar, and emotionally resonant (Singh et al., 2024).

Hyper-Localized Deployment, Shadow Campaigning and Linguistic Customization

A defining characteristic of AI-enabled electioneering was the emergence of shadow campaigning, whereby political

communication increasingly occurred through decentralized and relatively unregulated digital networks (Singh et al., 2024). Campaign teams reportedly utilized WhatsApp "scratch groups" community-specific messaging groups organized according to demographic characteristics to distribute deepfake videos, synthetic audio, AI-generated images, and localized campaign narratives directly to targeted voter segments. These materials were frequently packaged by hyper-local content aggregators and circulated through encrypted or minimally moderated platforms, making real-time monitoring, fact-checking, and regulatory intervention considerably more difficult. Consequently, political persuasion shifted from centralized broadcasting towards highly targeted, community-based information flows (Singh et al., 2024).

Artificial intelligence also enabled unprecedented linguistic and cultural customization of political communication. Through real-time translation, voice cloning, and AI-assisted content adaptation, campaign teams were able to overcome India's linguistic diversity by producing localized political messages in multiple regional languages. Technologies such as the government's Bhashini platform facilitated translations of political speeches into Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Telugu, Odia, and Malayalam, thereby expanding campaign outreach across linguistically diverse electorates. AI-generated reels, multilingual speeches, and customized voice messages established stronger emotional and cultural connections with local audiences, transforming political communication into a more personalized and culturally embedded process (Singh et al., 2024).

The use of AI further extended to the digital resurrection of deceased political leaders whose symbolic authority continued to influence regional politics. AI-generated recreations of M. Karunanidhi, J. Jayalithaa, and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee illustrate how generative propaganda increasingly combines technological innovation with historical memory and emotional symbolism to reinforce contemporary electoral narratives (Singh et al., 2024).

Deepfakes, Electoral Integrity and the "Authenticity Trap"

While AI significantly expanded the possibilities of political communication, the 2024 General Election simultaneously exposed substantial weaknesses in the governance of AI-generated political content (Gaur, n.d.). Despite platform-level restrictions and the Election Commission of India's advisory directing political parties to remove identified deepfakes within three hours, enforcement remained fragmented and largely reactive. Civil society initiatives such as Project Shakti and the Misinformation Combat Alliance sought to identify and counter AI-generated misinformation, while technology companies introduced

temporary safeguards, including restrictions on election-related AI responses. Nevertheless, the proliferation of synthetic political content highlighted the limitations of existing authenticity checkpoints, particularly on encrypted messaging platforms and rapidly evolving digital ecosystems (Gaur, n.d.). A central contribution of Gaur's analysis is the concept of the "Authenticity Trap," which distinguishes between technical authenticity and legality. Whereas technical authenticity concerns whether political content has been generated or manipulated through artificial intelligence, legality concerns whether that content violates electoral law through defamation, impersonation, fraud, or electoral misinformation. Gaur argues that conflating these two dimensions creates over-inclusive regulatory frameworks that presume all synthetic political content to be unlawful irrespective of context, intent, or public value. Such an approach risks suppressing satire, parody, political experimentation, digital art, accessibility tools, and AI-assisted multilingual translations, all of which may strengthen rather than undermine democratic participation (Gaur, n.d.).

Beyond isolated incidents of misinformation, the Authenticity Trap has broader implications for electoral integrity, voter autonomy, and democratic governance. Deepfakes challenge the traditional marketplace of ideas by accelerating the circulation of misleading content at a scale and speed beyond the corrective capacity of fact-checking institutions. At the same time, vague regulatory standards may facilitate prior restraint, allowing authorities or digital platforms to suppress political expression based solely on the AI-generated nature of content rather than demonstrable electoral harm. Furthermore, problems of traceability, anonymous dissemination, and attribution complicate accountability for malicious actors operating across digital platforms (Gaur, n.d.).

Evolution of AI Campaigning and the Need for a Tiered Regulatory Response

Although the 2024 Lok Sabha Election witnessed the large-scale institutionalization of AI-enabled campaigning, its origins can be traced to the 2020 Delhi Assembly Election, widely regarded as the first documented use of generative AI in an Indian electoral campaign (Singh et al., 2024). During this campaign, AI technology manipulated existing videos of BJP leader Manoj Tiwari, enabling him to deliver campaign messages in English and Haryanvi. Released strategically one day before polling and disseminated through nearly 5,800 WhatsApp groups, the AI-generated videos reportedly reached approximately 15 million voters, demonstrating AI's unprecedented capacity to overcome linguistic barriers and scale personalized political communication through coordinated digital networks (Singh et al., 2024). Since then, AI-generated media has evolved into a standard instrument of hyper-localized

deployment, shadow campaigning, and precision political communication across electoral campaigns.

To address these emerging challenges, Gaur proposes a tiered regulatory response based on an Authenticity–Legality Spectrum rather than a blanket prohibition of synthetic political content. This framework distinguishes between "inauthentic but lawful" content including satire, educational simulations, accessibility tools, consensual AI recreations, and multilingual translations and "inauthentic and unlawful" content designed to deceive voters, impersonate political actors, incite violence, or disseminate electoral disinformation (Gaur, n.d.). Such a differentiated regulatory framework seeks to preserve electoral integrity while simultaneously protecting freedom of expression, technological innovation, and democratic accountability in an era where AI has fundamentally reshaped political communication (Gaur, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

The transformation of political communication in India reflects a fundamental shift from centralized, mass-mediated communication to a decentralized, networked, and digitally driven electoral ecosystem. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have redefined how political information is produced, shared, and consumed, enabling citizens—particularly young and first-time voters—to move beyond passive information consumption and become active participants in political discourse. Political engagement today increasingly extends beyond voting to include content creation, online deliberation, digital mobilization, and participation in networked communities. This review demonstrates that digital technologies have significantly enhanced political outreach through political branding, influencer engagement, data analytics, behavioural micro-targeting, and cross-platform campaigning. At the same time, these innovations have reshaped electoral strategies by enabling political actors to communicate with greater precision and personalization. The 2024 Lok Sabha Election further illustrated the growing institutionalization of artificial intelligence in electoral communication through voice cloning, multilingual campaign messaging, hyper-localized deployment, generative propaganda, and deepfakes. While these technologies have expanded opportunities for citizen engagement, they have also intensified concerns regarding misinformation, algorithmic manipulation, echo chambers, voter profiling, and electoral integrity.

The review further highlights that existing regulatory frameworks remain insufficient to address the rapidly evolving challenges posed by AI-driven political communication. The concept of the "Authenticity Trap" underscores the need for regulatory approaches that distinguish between technological

innovation and malicious deception while safeguarding freedom of expression, electoral fairness, and democratic accountability. Greater transparency in platform governance, stronger data protection mechanisms, and ethically informed AI regulation will be essential to preserving public trust in electoral processes. Ultimately, the future of India's electoral democracy will depend not only on technological innovation but also on its responsible governance. As political communication becomes increasingly networked, data-driven, and AI-mediated, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting digital literacy, and ensuring transparent regulation will be critical to fostering an informed, participatory, and resilient democratic society.

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