

Misinformation as Electoral Infrastructure: Digital Platforms and Vernacular Politics in Rajasthan Assembly Elections 2023

¹Priyanka Maheshwari,

Research Scholar, Department of Media, Communication and Fine Arts, Manipal University Jaipur. Email ID:

priyanka.23fa30smc00002@mu.j.manipal.edu

²Corresponding author: Dr Amit Verma,

Associate Professor, Journalism and Mass Communication, Centre for Distance and Online Education, Manipal

University, Jaipur, India. Email ID: Amit.verma@jaipur.manipal.edu Orchid id: 0000 0001-8690-0285

Abstract

False information propagated in elections has turned out to be a characteristic problem in the democratic leadership in digitally connected societies of Asia. If the state assembly elections are concerned, their political significance arises decisively, but their study is relatively less prevalent among scholars, whereas Indian national elections are long-standing concerns. The current paper analyses the ecology of misinformation in the 2023 Rajasthan Legislative Assembly Elections in terms of platform-related flows, vernacular political discourse, and its effects on electoral attitudes and democratic trust. Based on a mixed-methods research design, the study will utilize a content analysis of election-related misinformation, a voter survey of urban and rural Rajasthan, and interviews with journalists, fact-checkers, election officials, and political communicators.

According to the results, WhatsApp and YouTube were used as potent sources of election misinformation in 2023, and modern visual and emotive messages (especially videos) were more effective than text-based lies. Stories of misinformation were very local in nature and appealed to caste identities, welfare programs, communal feelings and credibility of the candidate. According to the results of the survey, misinformation exposure has not had a major direct influence on the voting choice but has been strongly correlated with the loss of confidence in the electoral institutions and growth of political cynicism. There is also qualitative evidence that misinformation was a driving force of mobilization and identity affirmation as opposed to being a persuasive force. This study enhances the field of Asian media studies by preempting a sub-national electoral setting by showing that global digital platforms engage with local political cultures in creating misinformation processes. Findings revealed that some policy-relevant lessons to the governance of elections, platforms accountable, and media literacy interventions context-specific, and the lessons can be applied in other electoral democracies in South and Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Misinformation; fake news; WhatsApp; political communication; Electoral politics.

Introduction

The 2023 Rajasthan Legislative Assembly Elections were characterized by a media space that was more digitally saturated than ever before, the establishment of social media as the main source of political information, and an increased concern among people about misinformation and fake news. Electoral politics in India is increasingly moving to platform-based communications, with short video, memes, message sharing and partisan commentaries being shared at rates too high to be checked by the institutional apparatus of verification and correction. Misinformation here has not only become a technological issue but also an organizational characteristic of modern electoral contests. There is a particularly educative case to observe such dynamics in Rajasthan. Being one of the largest states in India, Rajasthan is typified by acute rural-urban inequalities, intricate caste formations, periodic communal eruptions and a political culture in which welfare provision, agrarian agendas, and leadership reputation are the decisive factors in election results. The 2023 election campaign was characterized by strong online movements instead of relying on traditional media efforts, the political parties, sympathetic influencers, and grassroots supporters who used platform-native tactics in influencing people's perception. Some of the most common misinformation was visual, namely edited videos, deceptive clips of speeches, and fake information regarding welfare schemes, which ended up being shared widely, especially via WhatsApp and YouTube.

State assembly elections, unlike national elections, may tend to enjoy minimal periodical attention from national media and regulators, providing relatively free spaces of localized misinformation. However, elections become the center of the Indian federal democracy, which influences the results of governance, political leadership, and approaches by national political parties. The 2023 Rajasthan Assembly Elections therefore offer a crucial chance to analyze the functioning of misinformation in sub-national elections and how these experiences vary with those of the national ones. In this paper, the conceptual framework of election misinformation is presented within a larger misinformation ecology, which includes platform infrastructures, political actors, media institutions, or audience practices. Instead of considering misinformation as specific false statements, the research examines the determination of how misleading narratives are created, disseminated, and understood in the context of a particular socio-political and media situation in Rajasthan. The paper contributes to the Asian media scholarship as it is explicitly oriented towards the 2023 election and provides an empirically grounded, regionally based analysis of digital misinformation and the implications to democracy.

Literature Review

The academic definition of misinformation has become less concerned with false information to a more expansive information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and misinformation (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). In the political domain, such types of classifications are often mixed, where political participants utilize ambiguity, emotionality, and identity-based discourses to further partisan agendas (Bora & Behera, 2018). Studies on the Asian democracies indicate that misinformation is hardly taken in as neutral information. Rather, it is built in affective and cultural frames, which inform citizen interpretation and action in the response to political messages (Banaji & Bhat, 2020). This is more so in India where political discourse is highly entangled in caste, religion and regionalism.

Indian Electoral politics and Digital Platforms

There is a significant scholarly literature that WhatsApp is the most powerful platform in Indian electoral communication, particularly one in rural, semi-urban regions (Arun, 2019; Udupa et al., 2022). Its coded structure, use of peer networks as well as high degree of inter-personal trust result in it being an efficient medium through which misinformation is propagated. YouTube has become an additional field, where politically oriented channels are hosted, integrating news, commentary, and propaganda (Neyazi et al., 2024). These processes are inflated by state elections, which promote hyper-localized messages. Fact-checking agencies that were monitoring the 2023 assembly elections reported on instances of misleading information about welfare programs, voting processes, communal events, and statements of the candidates (BOOM, 2023). Their distribution was common in Hindi and local slang and undermined mainstream fact-checking operations.

Misinformation Electoral Effects

It is disputed whether there is a relationship between exposure to misinformation and voting. Though the initial research focused on small direct persuasion impacts (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), current literature indicates that misinformation is one of the factors that undermine institutional trust, polarization, and democratic exhaustion (Guess et al., 2020). Misinformation will not necessarily change the vote choice in the Indian context but might help transform the overall situation of voting (Neyazi et al., 2024).

Theoretical Framework: Misinformation Ecology

This paper employs the paradigm of misinformation ecology which considers misinformation as a component of interlinked socio-technical systems instead of a disjointed lie. The infrastructural affordances and privilege speed, virality, and emotional reactions; political actors offer strategically positioned stories; and audiences read and share content on their social networks (Udupa et al., 2022). This ecology has been created by three overlapping dimensions in the 2023 Rajasthan elections:

- (1) platform structures (encryption, algorithmic amplification, visual affordances),
- (2) local political discourses (caste, welfare, communal identity, leadership), and
- (3) audience agency (interpretation, trust, sharing based on peers).

Research Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-method design involving content analysis, survey research, and qualitative interviews to investigate the sources of misinformation and impacts in the 2023 Rajasthan Assembly Elections. In October 2023, a list of 1,250 items of misinformation was assembled between October and December 2023, consisting of fact-checking organizations (BOOM, Factly) and freely available posts on social media. The target and platform, format, theme and language of items were coded.

Table 1. Coding Framework for Misinformation Content

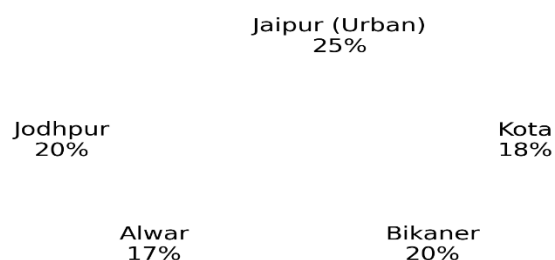
Category	Description
Platform	WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, X
Format	Text, Image, Video, Audio
Theme	Communal, Welfare, Leadership, Electoral Process
Language	Hindi, Rajasthani dialects
Target	Party, Candidate, Community

Intercoder reliability yielded a Cohen's kappa of 0.78.

The survey was done in 5 districts as examples of urban and rural Rajasthan (n = 1,200). The survey had scales of media use, exposure to misinformation, institutional trust and voting behavior.

Figure 1. Distribution of Survey Sample District-wise (Rajasthan, 2023)

Figure 1. District-wise Distribution of Survey Sample (Rajasthan, 2023)



To provide the context to quantitative results, twenty-two semi-structured interviews were held with journalists, fact-checkers, election officials, party communicators, and voters.

Data analysis and Interpretation

Flows and Forms of Platform: WhatsApp transmitted 46 percent of misinformation, with YouTube (31). Misinformation in the form of video became dominant, especially those clips that are emotion evoking based on caste and communal identity.

Table 2. Distribution of Misinformation (2023) Platform-wise

Platform	Percentage
WhatsApp	46%
YouTube	31%
Facebook	15%
X	8%

Regression analysis showed that there was a significant negative influence between high misinformation exposure and trust in Election Commission and mainstream media. Influences on the voting choice were indirect and through partisan identity. Interviewees also noted that misinformation tends to recreate beliefs more than convincing the undecided voters, which serves as a mobilizing story in identity politics. The results of the present research highlight the need to go beyond event-focused or technologically deterministic descriptions of the role of election misinformation. As it has been shown by the 2023 Rajasthan Assembly Elections, misinformation should be considered as a structural and cultural phenomenon embedded in the architectures of platforms, local political discourses, and practices of audiences that, together, determine the flow and responsiveness of political information. Misinformation in this electoral cycle was deployed as a discursive infrastructure, which reorganized the production, distribution and contestation of political meaning, rather than acting as isolated and linearly persuasive false claims.

One of the key insights based on the analysis is the platform differentiation of the flows of misinformation. WhatsApp and YouTube are not neutral channels that happened to be used by them; they organized political communication differently. The encrypted and interpersonal nature of WhatsApp contributed to creating the atmosphere where misinformation gained its legitimacy due to social closeness as opposed to the credibility of evidence. The flow of messages was not checked, but it was incorporated into reliable social relations. This observation is not new to the previous literature on the use of WhatsApp to organize political communication in India (Arun, 2019; Udupa et al., 2022) but the case of the state of Rajasthan shows that the process becomes even more acute during elections, when the political rhetoric is highly local and interpersonal.

YouTube on the other hand served as a semi-public collection of partisan interpretation. False videos were usually presented as an analysis, ground reports or expos, and it was difficult to distinguish between writing and propaganda. Such content can be algorithmically visible on the 2023 election and indicates that platform logics are becoming increasingly attracted to the affective intensity and ideological certainty, and less to the factual rigor. Critically, this paper concludes that misinformation was distributed in a hybridized fashion: WhatsApp was frequently used as the main channel to disseminate the content, whereas YouTube was used as the source of audiovisual materials that could be cut, shared, and recontextualized endlessly. Such inter-platform circulation makes regulation and fact-checking activities more difficult than remaining confined in singular platforms. The other important aspect of the misinformation ecology of Rajasthan 2023 is the vernacular and narrative specificity of this case study. The misinformation that was reported in this study was highly local as compared to national elections where misinformation usually concerns matters of macro-level like national security or charisma of leadership. This was characterized by claims to come to caste-based reservation, eligibility to welfare, local communal events, and political rivalries at the constituency level that dominated the misinformation environment. Such stories did not exist in a vacuum, but they were well coordinated with the socio-political fault lines and historical grievances of Rajasthan. This observation complicates misinformation models that are universal, believing that content has the same features in all electoral situations and instead endorses the need to do regionally oriented media studies in Asia (Banaji and Bhat, 2020).

More importantly, the survey results of the study make it difficult to assume that misinformation has the same effect on the election. Although instances of misinformation were high in the 2023 Rajasthan elections, the possibility of its direct impact on the vote choice was low. Rather, misinformation had its effect on more covert and long-term processes, especially by eroding the credibility of electoral institutions and mainstream media. Those respondents who were more exposed to these levels had a higher level of skepticism towards the Election Commission of India and believed that indeed, elections are

corrupt or tainted. These perceptions are consequential in terms of democracy although they may not change voting patterns at that time. Such a trend goes in line with international research indicating that the most significant effects of misinformation are systemic, but not transactional (Guess et al., 2020). Misinformation in the context of Rajasthan was not as an instrument of changing minds of the undecided voters, but rather a device to more strongly cultivate cynicism, normalize suspicion and post-truth political thinking. In the long run this can render electoral democracy hollow, distrustful and performance-based by norms instead of deliberation, participation instead of performance-based allegiance.

The qualitative interviews also shed more light on the way misinformation is perceived by the voters themselves. A great number of respondents did not contextualize the misleading content as fake news but as a possibility, something that is emotionally true, or worthy to contemplate. Such interpretation flexibility highlights an important shortcoming of fact-checking-based answers to misinformation. Factual corrections are not sufficient when political communication is considered in terms of affective and identity-based approaches. The misinformation in the 2023 elections in Rajasthan also tended to support the political identities that people (especially women) had, and it was an expressive resource of belonging and not information. In a more global Asian media studies, the case of Rajasthan demonstrates the intersection of platformed politics and the local culture of democracy. These trends can be noted in the Southeast Asian elections, where digital misinformation spread through vernacular networks and strengthens a system of political identity based on patronage. The Rajasthan Assembly Elections therefore help in making comparative readings of the misinformation in Asia that demand that digital media should not be theorized as a homogenizing factor but rather as an infrastructure that enhances the political rationale of the localities.

Conclusion

The 2023 Rajasthan Assembly Elections is a crucial empirical peek into the changing nature of the digital media, electoral politics, and democratic legitimacy in India and the rest of Asia. As this paper will show, misinformation over the election was not a one-time interference and was not caused by the reckless nature of digital behavior. Rather, it was part of the modern-day electoral communication landscape, which was informed by the feature of the platforms, political motivations, and social discourse that was embedded within the platforms. Amongst the most notable findings of this study, there is the concept that misinformation should be perceived as a democratic stressor and not as an isolated menace. Misinformation did not always influence voters and decisively change the electoral results in the 2023 elections in Rajasthan. It was more pernicious, working by the slow erosion of institutional trust, by the naturalization of suspicion, and by the pathos of polarization of political speech. These are long term cumulative effects that are difficult to solve in one election.

The research also identifies weaknesses of current responses to governance. Although the Election Commission of India actively monitored the elections and the fact-checking organizations became more visible in 2023, most of the vernacular misinformation circulated in closed digital networks remained largely unaddressed. This discrepancy indicates an inherent imbalance between the tempo, volume, and closeness of the platform-based misinformation and the slowness, centrality, and tendencies to be urban-based of the institutional interventions. Unless this structural mismatch is resolved, the regulatory endeavors will appear nominal, as opposed to transformative. The Rajasthan case suggests the urgency of switching to an ecosystem-based approach to election integrity, in terms of policy. To counter misinformation, it is necessary to use combined efforts on all levels, politics, media, and civil society. The mechanisms of platform accountability should not be built on voluntary self-regulation but must contain elements of transparency requirements during periods of election, and especially with regards to algorithmic amplification and monetization of political content. Simultaneously, the election governance frameworks should acknowledge the unique state-level contest dynamics and distribute these resources instead of using national tactics. The reconsideration of media literacy as a democratic protocol instead of technical skill regime is also of critical importance. The results indicate that voters cannot be called passive receivers of all the misinformation because they interpret political material on emotional, cultural, and identity-based levels. Interventions in media literacy need to address these aspects, therefore, promoting critical thinking as a citizen instead of just learning verification tricks. In this process, the community media, local educators and regional journalists must play a significant role, especially in the linguistically and culturally diversified setting like Rajasthan.

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