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Scrutinising the Aftermath of the Cascading Effect of Social Networking on World Elections 2024

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In an era where digital footprints dictate the public's perception, the phenomenon of 'cascading'—where one online trigger initiates an array of cascades leading to widely propagated actions has taken centre stage in the concurrent geopolitical scenario, particularly in shaping socio-political narratives. This research piece looks at how social media is becoming progressively pertinent in world political campaigning as political parties and their PR teams carefully & significantly harness the voters' sentiments while putting social media in charge. Political entities are aggressively trying to enter people's subconscious via social networking sites as the 'Global Election Year' approaches, about half of the world's population will exercise their democratic right to vote. Today, political campaigns are increasingly leaning on the architecture of popular culture either to create enticing illustrations of their politicians or to decimate their adversaries. Recent examples include(s): Indonesia's presidential candidate using Tik-Tok trends to appeal to the younger voter population, and the Indian Prime Minister's media displaying tailored information to reinforce an influential, unopposed public persona. Similarly, political narratives in Pakistan have been constructed to manipulate public mood using trial-room recordings and subtle international analogies.

Such tactics raise significant challenges regarding the manipulation of voters' psychological autonomy, i.e., voters having second thoughts and dilution of their constitutional right to choose the representative of their own choice. The free-wheeling expansion of propaganda machinery — agencies and companies that create favourable political messages takes place in a largely unregulated

legal landscape. The infamous 2014 Cambridge Analytica scandal serves as a cautionary tale, with sophisticated data analytics and deep-pocketed interests purportedly playing a critical role in influencing the electoral outcome of the World's superpower. This paper unfolds two principal objectives: firstly, to critically evaluate the extent to which propaganda mechanisms influence the subconscious decision-making of voters; and second, to assess their tangible impact on electoral outcomes and explore the legal gaps that allow such manipulations to go largely unchallenged. By examining global instances and identifying loopholes in existing regulations, the authors also seek to offer pragmatic insights for future governance & censorship of political content over social platforms.

Keywords: *elections, social networking, propaganda machines, democracy, social media influencing.*

INTRODUCTION

As the internet becomes increasingly ubiquitous, it's not surprising that it is being employed to spread misinformation in an array of forms, one of which is deepfakes, to establish itself as a dominant force by causing large-scale disruptions like hampering the electoral processes of a democracy and many more.

The term 'Cascading' is often used to determine a set of acts being triggered by a single action, which one could often see happening over social media, wherein a series of actions are triggered by the fall of a single domino. The most recent example of it would be the 'Porsche Car Incident'¹, where the justice was only served due to this effect. However, our world is built on the phenomenon of 'Yin & Yang' wherein there is good, there exists evil too and the same has been affirmed here as well as one could be observant about people using this very thing to gain popularity or stay trending to be in the minds of the people of an ecosystem. Simultaneously with the outset of the 'Global Election Year'² wherein almost 'half of the world's population' would be casting their votes, being on the very mobile screens of the people is a *'box that most of the*

¹ Sunil Kumar Singh, '17-Year-Old Crashed Speeding Porsche Into Bike In Pune, 2 Killed: Cops' *NDTV* (Pune, 20 May 2024) <<https://www.ndtv.com/pune-news/17-year-old-crashes-speeding-porsche-into-bike-in-pune-2-killed-cops-5697027>> accessed 07 April 2025

² Richard Wike et al., 'Global Elections in 2024: What We Learned in a Year of Political Disruption' (*Pew Research Center*, 11 December 2024) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/12/11/global-elections-in-2024-what-we-learned-in-a-year-of-political-disruption/>> accessed 07 April 2025

political parties would like to tick upon’ to get into the subconscious brains of the citizens of a democratic state.

The task of ‘Social Media Influencing’ is often carried on by the PR teams of these political parties through the creation of attractive & catchy videos, posts etc. which they put to use through the use of latest trending audios or trendy sketches over various social networking sites to attract views & to get into the subconscious minds of the voters to cast a win or gain the support of the indigenous voters through representing their views. In recent times, there have been two such examples,

Firstly, during the Indonesian Presidential Elections³, one of the 70-year old presidential candidate was seen using the viral ‘*Tit-Tok*’ music & dance moves, to gain attention from the youth & the usage of such ‘trends’ by his Indian counterpart is no new to us, as we can see our PM or his Social Media team constantly sharing videos of the Hon’ble PM in almost every trending reels over the *Instagram* showcasing a ‘rock-solid’ image of the PM whilst, making mockery of the opposition.

Secondly, the other way of using it is by negativizing the image of all the close ally’s or situations in the country & then showcasing their ‘political candidate’ working to resolve those issues likewise, the same is being witnessed in the Pakistan’s Elections wherein the incumbent PM was seen making videos while being under trial about the so called ‘true situations of his country & countrymen’ whilst also praising the Indian PM & subsequently negating the image of the current PM & his political party.

All these tactics are being used to influence the choice of voters & hampering the ‘Right to choose our representative’, a right enshrined under the ‘Right to Vote’ which serves as a *sine qua non* for a healthy democracy. And all of this could be possible through using the propaganda creating mechanism working on the other side of the screens of our mobile phones by crafting the perfect propaganda for the parties & creating the perfect image of the political leaders & these propaganda machines are often available for the highest bidder, as the same was seen in the 2014 ‘Cambridge Analytica Scam’, wherein the deep pockets of Mr. Donald Trump had won him the

³ Najwa Shafira Mulia et al., ‘The Impact of Social Media on Voters' Perceptions in the 2024 Election’ (2024) 1(1) Al-Musthalah: Jurnal Riset dan Penelitian Multidisiplin
<<https://journal.syamilahpublishing.com/index.php/musthalah/article/view/22>> accessed 07 April 2025

Presidential seat of the 'World's most powerful state' then, how can a mere swing state like ours could be armored against this contagious disease of 'Political Influencing' over the social networks in the AI driven world. The authors herein intend to shed some light on the aforementioned ways through reviewing contemporary instances whereby political parties have achieved more favourable results by leveraging their social media, whilst simultaneously recommending an envisioned legislative structure for tackling such a legal lacuna.

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INDIAN ELECTIONS?

In the contemporaneous scenario, as per the people's perceptions in the ongoing situation often leverage upon the social media, making it a double-edged sword while contemplating it both-ways, i.e., to say the digital footprints does delve into the promotions of democratization but, by far it is believed that social media's nuances leads to an authoritarian regime.⁴ An example of the same could be analyzed in the Indian regime wherein the opposition leader Mr. Rahul Gandhi [during the 2019 elections] accused the dominant party of 'hacking, tapping & putting under surveillance' his & his party mates cellphones, using the Israeli developed 'Pegasus spyware' thus leading to the formation of an authoritarian regime.

Whilst the 2014 Indian Elections saw an early adoption of the Social Media campaigns to gain a wider outreach, and a good dose of gimmickry, the 2019 as well as the concurrent 2024 elections saw the use of social media as an organisational frontline over as well as above the traditional print & televised media.⁵

LEGAL JURISPRUDENCE IN INDIA

There exists a dynamically intersecting interplay between the two pillars of democracy, namely, the Legislature & the Judiciary, when it comes to the regulatory aspects of the incumbent 'cyber-sphere', i.e., social networking sites. The Indian Judiciary has in its judgement given under the K.S.Puttaswamy case (2016-17)⁶ declared the 'Right to privacy' as a fundamental right of the

⁴ Turgay Yerlikaya and Seca Toker Aslan, 'Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era' (2020) 22(2) *Insight Turkey* 177 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26918129>> accessed 07 April 2025

⁵ Joyojeet Pal, 'Social Media in Elections: Modi and After' in Sumit Ganguly, Dinsha Mistree and Larry Diamond (eds), *The Troubling State of India's Democracy* (University of Michigan Press 2024)

⁶ *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) and Anr v Union of India and Ors* AIR 2017 SC 4161

beings in India, similarly the apex court has also duly acknowledged the ‘Right to be forgotten’ in its judgement given under Jorawar Singh’s case⁷ which now stands as the ‘law of the land’.

Whilst the contribution of the ‘Legislature’ too can’t be left unheard as the legislature has time and again enacted the set of laws about the need of the time starting up from the initial ‘IT Act, 2000’, to the IT Intermediary Rules, 2021 to the DPDP Act, 2023 as well as the DPDP Rules 2025⁸, wherein there have been gigantic upsurge in the cases relating to cyber-criminality namely; forgery, misrepresentations (political & public). Also, the legislature has duly recognised the Right to be forgotten u/s 8(7) of the DPDP Act, 2023, indicating a smooth as well as stringent application of the ‘separation of power doctrine’, showcasing a meticulous implementation of the checks & balances mechanism.

WHAT ARE DEEPPFAKES?

From aeon, mankind has been told not to fully believe what we perceive with our eyes. This phrase can be realized today to the fullest of its extent for mankind has created a weapon of mass distraction in form of ‘Deepfakes’ a word coined by an anonymous Reddit user for ‘morphed videos’ & the videos showcasing sexually explicit images of two established Hollywood actors had triggered the domino effect wherein, many famous personalities were shown in nude through super imposing them over the adult actresses including our own ‘Bulli Bai’ controversy⁹.

These works of human agony are often performed through the neural networks, i.e., a layer of algorithm having the ability to map the facial know-how(s) of an individual and applying it to the target with a need for human touch to attain perfection. However, the concept of machine learning is making that need even scarier.

The terminology ‘Deepfakes’ can be subdivided into audio, video & images. The political usage of Deepfakes can be traced back to the 2012 Campaigns of the US President Barack Obama, wherein he utilized the tech, game to fulfil the media appearances, then he did physically with videos & speeches, some he said, while the others were part of ‘audio-fakes’ which he never said. While the first negative action of this technology having a humungous political impact can be

⁷ *Jorawar Singh Munday v Union of India & Ors* WP (C) 3918/2021 & CM Appl 11767/2021

⁸ Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025.

⁹ ‘Bulli Bai: India App That Put Muslim Women up for Sale Is Shut’ *BBC News* (03 January 2022)

<<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59856619>> accessed 07 April 2025

said to be the fake rape video utilized by the legal-council of President of Philippines as a weapon for sexual harassment, with the advent of time we can also see them being utilized even by people for 'brand endorsements' by the people at the peak of the chair of politicians as done by lyre-bird along with this we have also witnessed certain defamatory images popping out in our day to day lives.

The aforesaid cases form a part of the time wherein we saw a little or some influence of the social-networking platforms; however, in the post-COVID-19 era, one cannot expect to see a public or a political figure without having some influence over the cyber plane.

This Election year is full of examples of political influencing deepfakes with the first instance gaining an exorbitant media coverage being the New Hampshire incident wherein, the people witnessed a deepfake of President Biden endorsing Mr. Trump through a 'voice record' asking them to support Trump being cascaded all over the Cyberspace, after this we also witnessed a deepfake video of the Pakistan's former PM Imran Khan, wherein the incumbent PM was seen making videos from the prison while being under trial about the so called 'true situations of his country & countrymen' whilst also praising the Indian PM & subsequently negativizing the image of the current PM & his political party.

In the Indian scenario, we have seen some 'audio-visual' deepfakes here & there over the WhatsApp-university and influencing the political choices of the people who aren't duly informed. The best example of this could be PM Modi's plan to remove reservation being snowballed all over the university groups to encompass a negative image of our PM & to ultimately disrupt, hinder the India's election results also shows its impact being the loss in the UP seats which one may decipher were mostly populated by people reaping the beneficiaries of reservation system.

Along with this we can't wait for yet another deepfake of our key political figures spreading over social platforms like whatsapp right before the General Assembly Elections spreading like a wildfire in the forest consuming their chances like animals caught in it with us having no plan to contempt it due to the lack of control in our legal structure alongside that fact that especially in India we tend to believe in almost everything without double-checking as seen during the times of fake news snowballed during the Covid-19 epidemic.

INFORMATION CASCADES

The mankind has always lived in groups wherein most of us would imitate our leaders in almost every aspect & this phenomenon has been ever present since men has laid his foot on earth, one can see this in the influence of people for aeon hence being great man of that generation & this phenomenon has worked in its truest of sense in the Fashion industry wherein, we call in information cascades and in the present times we can also see its presence over the cyber realm wherein we often see people sharing, following & acting like men they want to imitate the most common example could be people sharing clips of their favorite scenes from a movie or various other things like reels or retweeting some words of wisdom said by their favorite individuals be it politicians, movie stars or sportsmen.

This process looks harmless to us at the initial sight but persists far reaching consequences as through these actions of ours we tend to give social media sites a knowledge about our know-hows like, what kind of content we often prefer, which is then utilized by them to crack a perfect filter for us and then try to suggest stuff which they tend us to watch, we have seen this a lot of times on social media wherein after we go through the posts, reels or stories of our preferred individuals showing up front, rather than the people we don't like or talk less often about. This information can also help them to determine our views starting from what kind of food we like to the people we love or hate and things we used to love and various other things all of this can be achieved through the utilization of Meta Data Analysis by these companies & the next step taken down by them is 'Profiling'. Profiling the big data sets via indulging it through the sophisticated data processing tools and finding out, 'What's the best for you!' taking it a layer deeper into the 'Specific targeting' mechanism.

With all this the algorithms & neural networks could show us the pool of datasets which a strata of individuals would prefer based upon a set demographics which they can change by a little to keep them interested while keeping them closer to the core idea while serving their presence there example, could be utilized for a presence of a casual user who only uses the sites for a little amount of time.

In addition to this we also have people who could be labeled as the 'heavy users' of the social networking platforms wherein they give hours at a stretch of surfing trying to make contact with people so that they could make a living as today we don't need cameras or other expensive

equipment(s) to be famous all we need is already present in our pockets which when applied in a viral trend & shared by the people to their peer groups could make them an overnight sensation such is the power of information cascades.

With these two groups, we see the formation of herds following certain creators over social media while constantly sharing, liking and promoting their work & those actions of theirs form a basic premise of a cascade having certain characteristics, and these herds can then be manipulated according to the whims & fancies of their creators. The best example could be various products like; Prime Energy, Feastables, Layer and various other brands co- created by the herd leaders and simultaneously bought & promoted impulsively by the blindfolded followers a similar approach can be seen in the context of World Elections this year wherein, we can see a lot of social media creators & pages engaged in setting promotional as well as propaganda-based tones for our political candidates. The best example could be the backing of former President Trump by the World's richest person (Elon Musk), the Founder & CEO of Tesla, SpaceX & various other skyline ventures, through conducting a Seminar & also livestreaming it under the auspices of Tesla's YouTube channel.¹⁰ Elon had urged the American audience to vote in unison for Donald Trump as he's the person that dedicates his interest & workings of his office to 'Make America Great Again'¹¹ in terms of sturdy support from mining of Cryptocurrencies (Bitcoin), to promising to have an AI based Research oriented support system dedicated to tackle with the forthcoming AI- related disruptions & fostering a healthy image in terms of preparedness of the Global Power.

Moreover we also saw the rise of release of various memes directly purporting to support a side in the elections in trend whether it was from the leading party of our nation or the opposition, this tremendous upsurge duly signals us of the creation of groups on each side spreading such posts over a great speed over the boundary-less internet.

One can also see such members giving their all to win in this combat of their leaders which could also result in some extreme steps being taken like spreading of Deepfakes (wrongfully), hacking,

¹⁰ 'LIVE: Elon Musk Joins Trump in Fiery Debate with Kamala Harris' (YouTube, 26 October 2024) <<https://www.youtube.com/live/5ozLapDdJ8s?si=r2WiBKlEwEvEeO9J>> accessed 07 April 2025

¹¹ Alan M. Kraut, "Make America Great Again"...Again? (Center for Migration Studies of New York Report, January 2016) <<https://cmsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Make-America-Great-Again...-Again.docx-2pdf.com-edit-metadata.pdf>> accessed 07 April 2025

defamation or spreading up of fake news or other problems which could sully the image of an individual over the web of one another, through any means necessary and wrongful Cascades are the basic threats which these people are trying to target through the creation of a set of rules to govern them & Social media sites deleting such posts before they start of snowballing over the web. This part focuses on the basic knowledge of the cascades & the harms they could bring upon us, whilst the next part talks about the real-world instances of the cascades trying to win over the other side of individuals.

REAL LIFE SCENARIOS

The aforesaid only talks about the theoretical aspects wherein ‘cascades’ could disrupt the world elections, but below are some examples taken from ‘real-life’ attacks or manipulating tactics hiding in plain sight. Below are only small amount of democratic mishaps taking place over the internet through Cyber cascades, moreover authors would also like to mention other nations struck with the similar force like the constant influx of Chinese Deepfakes Attacks trying to have a cascading effect over Taiwan in the General Elections or the hate speech used by the Maldives President to sweep in the victory another example would also be taken from the Baltic state of Slovakia where the internet was used to influence the democratic right of elections which in today’s day n time is motivated by funny memes or falsified videos unlike the ‘heart-felt’ speeches and truthful anecdotes utilized by the past global leaders below are several major attacks which the author’s think are consequential to be studied along with our research to understand it’s worth & why is it the need of the hour in the contemporaneous scenario.

Cambridge Analytica: This is one of the most complete attacks over the elections, as herein we saw the company executives accepting their influence over 2016 electoral campaigns over President Trump wherein they put to use more than 89 million profiles data to create the facebook campaign to algorithm for psychological profiling of the users from their data consumption over the web (facebook) & then showing these people tailored ads personally made as per their needs, to gain their attention & votes simultaneously. The completeness of this analysis comes from the action taken against both Cambridge and Facebook for their involvement in this case.

Brexit Dilemma: Brexit is yet another scenario wherein we saw the British people take back control from the EU, with the help of Facebook & various right-wing people talking about the

immigrants working there. And today we can see its after effects wherein most of the campaigning took place on Facebook, showcasing posts to people persuadable with their fair channelised to cast the vote for Britain opting out of the EU, committing the biggest fraud in British elections for the last century. These attacks are also backed by Cambridge Analytica, the same company responsible for disruptions in the US Elections 2016, wherein we saw them channelise people's fair & 'Make America Great Again' under President Trump.

New Hampshire Deepfake Controversy amid the US Presidential Elections 2024:¹²

This attack was one of the first noticed attacks on the forthcoming US Presidential Elections 2024, wherein President Biden's voice was cloned to deviate the voters' perceptions & to ask them to vote against them. This is one of the most textbook examples of such attacks happening wherein a candidate requests people to vote against him through the usage of an incumbent voice-cloning software available online, a day before the elections in the region. This attack was the first major attack to happen at the start of the 2024 election year.

Pakistan Electoral Attacks: On Feb 7 a day before the Pakistan's General Assembly Elections we witnessed an AI generated deepfake of the former PM Imran Khan from a PTI's top brass & Khan's attorney stating that they boycott the present elections & simultaneously asking people to abstain from voting & the most shocking facts about this deepfake is that this is not a first one to be used in the incumbent Pakistan's elections as Imran Khan has utilized this technology by giving his speeches to his legal team which were then AI morphed & stitched with his old videos to generate speeches like he was out of the bars & campaigning for his party, this can be seen as an insightful use of the technology while campaigning for elections but the Feb 7 incident was a criminal act as it lacked the consent of people concerned in the video along with the fact that people are more likely to believe in such things when we put it in the same pedestal as Imran Khan's AI campaigning.¹³

¹² Rehan Mirza, 'How AI Deepfakes Threaten the 2024 Elections' *The Journalist's Resource* (16 February 2024) <<https://journalistsresource.org/home/how-ai-deepfakes-threaten-the-2024-elections/>> accessed 07 April 2025

¹³ Siladitya Ray, 'Imran Khan—Pakistan's Jailed Ex-Leader—Uses AI Deepfake To Address Online Election Rally' *Forbes* (18 December 2023) <<https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/innovation/artificial-intelligence-machine-learning/imran-khanpakistans-jailed-ex-leaderuses-ai-deepfake-to-address-online-election-rally>> accessed 07 April 2025

Indonesian Elections: Prabowo Subianto was one of the candidates for the Indonesian Presidential Elections, known for his fiery temper all over Indonesia, for his past military exploits & dangers associated with human rights of the individuals and disappearance of children. This image of his was transfigured into a ‘grand-fatherly figure’ for the Indonesian youth through very aggressive rebranding over the social media wherein he was found dancing joyfully over the stages on K-Pop songs, giving away the tickets to such concerts, while his social media feed was carefully curated with the viral dance moves & posts relating to cats transforming his image into a stage wherein the Guardian has reported people saying all these actions were done through carefully crafted ad campaigns by the Vice-Presidential candidate Gibran Rakabuming Raka, while yielding the advantages of such cascades via branding him as an ‘Grand-father’ like figure & proclaiming that “Indonesia will be more secure and will be better with someone who has a strong personality like Prabowo”.¹⁴

Mygov.in (Indian Context): This page on Instagram is defined as the citizen engagement platform of the GOI; however it can also be seen as the promotional page to the BJP vis-à-vis the Modi govt wherein there are posts which showcases/ highlights the great works of the BJP Govt. strides only with 24 carat images of PM Modi for instance a post made on it on 19th Sept, 2024 showcasing him as an ‘all-rounder’ stating the things like “How can a leader be: Kids ultimate superhero! Yuva’s part of their crew! The world’s boss-level leader! Parivarjans Pradhan Sevak! Guardian of the Nation.” Are these the posts a government should post about its government? Citizenry interaction page other than these we also see a video talking about our PM’s best qualities there are a lot more of these posts showcased in this profile the best example of it influencing the elections could be a meme post showcasing “Raju’s mom inspired by movie 3 idiots” reaping benefits from the PM’s schemes. Are these citizen engagement or a personal PR page of the PM? The authors would like to question its legitimacy & purpose of usage.

Misc Acts: In addition to these abovementioned social media instances one can’t stop talking about the acts proliferated by various pages, operated by individuals having only one motto i.e., to ‘ditch-the-competition’ via blindly various other channels of thought wherein we could see partiality done by them today we can also see such things being done by the AI speakers which we often buy such an act was done by the Amazon’s Alexa wherein when asked ‘Why to vote for

¹⁴ Mulia (n 3)

Donald Trump?’¹⁵ we got no answer but when asked the same question w.r.t. Kamala Harris we saw it provide a long & vivid explanation on reasons to vote for her along-with various other ad campaigning(s) by social media people form a layer wherein the people giving opinions are hiding in veil of anonymity. But their opinions are changing our ability to think bit by bit.

Indian Jurisprudence: The constitution of India is the pro-generator of all laws working within the territory of India wherein it provides power for law creation and areas wherein such power is to be vested Part-XV of the Constitution deals with the election related laws wherein the control of elections is to be vested under Election Commission headed by a Chief Election Commissioner & a body of Commissioners having the power of supretendence, conduct and control over the elections u/r Art 224¹⁶ while Art 327¹⁷ talks about the role of parliament w.r.t elections as the legislators providing them with the power to make laws relating to all matters concerning elections to either houses with these powers parliament has created a certain number of rules, regulations & acts. The authors would specifically emphasise these acts controlling the cyber-sphere through actions like taking down the social media posts, to nip the snowballing of defamatory or misleading posts in the bud. Below are some acts dealing with such a dilemma:

IT ACT, 2000:¹⁸ This act was the first cyber-regulation of India dealing with all matters of cyber plane, one of which is the ‘Intermediary liabilities’ highlighted in the case of ‘Baazi.com’¹⁹ wherein we saw inception of ‘principle of safe harbor’²⁰ provided u/s - 79 of the Act 2000 wherein, if the intermediary follows the legal paradigm given by the CG they may escape the liability arising from such actions however, we don’t find any set of rules to take down these posts in the core sections of the act but, the rules i.e., the IT Intermediary Rules, 2021 talks about a comprehensive legal regime containing rules for Grievance Redressal of people who want these posts to be taken down along with some past actions taken u/r Rules like, Information Technology Rules 2009.²¹

¹⁵ ‘Why to Vote for Trump or Harris: Political Bias in Alexa Response?’ *Times of India* (04 September 2024) <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/why-to-vote-for-trump-or-harris-political-bias-in-alexa-response/articleshow/113047812.cms>> accessed 07 April 2025

¹⁶ Constitution of India 1950, art 224

¹⁷ Constitution of India 1950, art 327

¹⁸ Information Technology Act 2000

¹⁹ *Avnish Bajaj v State of (N.C.T) of Delhi* (2008) 105 DRJ 721

²⁰ Information Technology Act 2000, s 79

²¹ Information Technology (Procedure & Safeguards for Blocking of Access of Informations of Public) Rules 2009

The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines & Digital Media Rules, 2021):²² The rules provide for a more stringent set of laws in which we talk about removal of undesirable content from social media within a stipulated course of time when asked by Government of India, or its subsidiaries in addition to identifying the objectionable dilemma within 72 hours, Moreover the rules also talk about appointment of a Chief Compliance Officer for the companies not headquartered in India while the officer needs to be predominantly based in India & should be working 24/7 for compliance of government conditions laid down for the social media governance, and such an officer would also act as a bridge between the Indian Government & the Significant Social Media Intermediary per se²³ and a similar approach is also shown in the MeITY Guidelines.

Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023:²⁴ Our legislature finally published a Personal Data Protection Law which can be said to be a far cry from the great Data privacy laws like the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)²⁵ under which the 2018 draft²⁶ of the Act was modeled after herein we put up a lot of responsibility on the heads of Data Fiduciaries & Significant Data Fiduciaries defined u/s - 2(i)²⁷ & 2(z)²⁸ simultaneously i.e., the companies wherein such data is collected & processed along with categorization of data into ‘Personal’²⁹ & ‘Sensitive Personal’³⁰ data for an added layer of protection. The usage of this act under this cascade regime is for the prevention & profiling of the ‘Data principal’ which can be utilised by the perpetrators as done in the case of Cambridge Analytica or for the analysis & finding vis-à-vis targeting the core groups. The act also deals with a plethora of other factors like, Identification of the illicit posts within the course of 72 hrs & taking them down within a standard time namely 24-36 hrs whose violation could attracts certain judicial actions in the form of monetary compensations or judicial outrage as seen during the pleading of RG Kar’s case wherein an order was made by the Bench consisting of then Chief Justice of India (Dr. D.Y. Chandrachud) for taking down of the certain Wikipedia images, videos but was non-complied & was duly rejected by Wikipedia which showcases the toothlessness of this act due to the absence

²² The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines & Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021

²³ The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines & Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021, s 4

²⁴ The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023

²⁵ General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679

²⁶ The Personal Data Protection Act 2018

²⁷ The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, s 2(i)

²⁸ The Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023, s 2(z)

²⁹ The Personal Data Protection Act 2018, s 3(29)

³⁰ The Personal Data Protection Act 2018, s 3(35)

of stringency of deterrence over the incumbent Data fiduciaries.³¹ Along with this we can also see a mention of ‘Right to be forgotten’ a judiciary created right in Indian context in the case of *Jorawar Singh*³², wherein it was ordered by the judicial body to erase up all the falsified & misappropriated data showcasing a ‘criminal record’ of Jorawar Singh, which could happen through the deletion of such misleading deepfakes while the S- 10³³ also talks about ‘Application of data protection for representing the fiduciary in matters relating to Grievance Redressal Officer for the realm of public order, electoral democracy etc.’ while giving periodic data impact assessment & periodic audits to the government of India. The govt. has also made compliance with these guidelines a compulsory step, which, if not done properly, the fiduciaries can’t function under the territorial boundaries of India.

CONCLUSION

In the final part of this research article, the authors duly acknowledge that the advent of social media has indeed revolutionised global electoral processes, transforming the way political narratives are constructed, perceived, and consumed. As we all know overuse of everything could be detrimental but, the controlled use of anything how bad it may be provides us with certain positives, as it wouldn’t be wrong to reckon that social media is today’s ‘Chaubara’ wherein people meet & share their day-to-day life happenings & views be it political, social or of any other sort. Furthermore, in the contemporary political landscape, platforms like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook and TikTok are not mere tools of communication but powerful instruments of persuasion, manipulation and polarisation. As the ‘Global Election Year’ emerges, impacting nearly half of the world’s population, the horrors of digitally engineered voters’ behaviour, rising deepfakes and unregulated influence of operations loom larger than ever before.

At the heart of this transformation lies the cascading effect—a phenomenon whereby a single viral post or digital event triggers a domino chain of reactions, perceptions, and impulsive decisions. While this effect has enabled social justice movements and amplified public concerns,

³¹ ‘What went down during the last hearing of the Supreme Court on the RG Kar medical college case’ *YouTube BrutIndia* (22 September 2024) <<https://youtube.com/shorts/6YdDIwk6zLo?si=1d5pNaxRGollmpwL>> accessed 07 April 2025

³² *Jorawar Singh Munday v Union of India & Ors* WP (C) 3918/2021 & CM Appl 11767/2021

³³ The Personal Data Protection Act 2023, s 10

as seen in cases like the concurrent Porsche Car Incident in India, it has now been actively appropriated by political actors to serve more manipulative purposes. Political campaigns now rely heavily on an orchestrated online narrative to shape voter sentiment, often bypassing rational debate in favour of emotional appeal. This subtle intrusion into the subconscious of voters threatens to erode one of the cornerstones of democracy: the free and informed right to choose.

What was formerly achieved through various ground (physical) campaigns and manifestos is currently being deliberately engineered via reels, memes, trending audio, deepfakes and AI-generated propaganda machineries, merely with a single click. Political figures today are no longer just speaking to the people; they are performing for the algorithm. Be it a 70-year-old Indonesian presidential candidate dancing to TikTok trends to win the youth vote in the forthcoming elections or its Indian counterpart's social media machinery portraying an unassailable public image while subverting its opponents' strategies like these, reveal how digital prevalence is being equated at par with democratic legitimacy.

Further compounding the issue is the emergence of polarising political ecosystems. The speed and virality of social media have wholly fragmented public discourse into echo chambers, often driven by algorithmic preferences rather than diverse opinion. Moreover, the borderlessness of the internet has enabled extra-territorial actors to meddle in the domestic electoral affairs, influencing constituencies they have no stake in and skewing democratic choices, as was seen in the case of Bangladesh's General Assembly Elections.

One surely cannot ignore the historical warnings that have emerged from events like the 2016 Cambridge Analytica scandal or the Brexit referendum, where data mining, specified-targeting and manipulative content played a key role in influencing electoral outcomes. These episodes demonstrate the perils of leaving digital political spaces unregulated & uncensored. In both cases, a combination of unregulated tech platforms and deep-pocketed political interests created conditions where voter autonomy was compromised in favour of carefully engineered consent.

The situation is further complicated by the proliferation of deepfakes and AI-generated content. No longer confined to satire or entertainment, deepfakes are now used to falsify political narratives and speeches, misleading the electorate with fabricated realities. When used

irresponsibly or maliciously, these technologies have the potential to blur the distinction between truth and manipulation, making voters more susceptible to disinformation campaigns. While some political candidates in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia have used deepfakes to enhance their outreach, the long-term implications of unregulated usage are deeply concerning.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for a collaborative, deterrent-based, and forward-looking response. Additionally, it is also imperative to regulate the role of private entities and capitalist influencers in electoral discourse. When business tycoons or tech magnates like Elon Musk express political preferences and offer incentives accordingly, it disrupts the democratic balance and often serves the elite interests at the cost of electoral fairness, which indeed works in persuading, brainwashing & overturning the voter's perception. Public awareness is also a powerful tool. Citizens must evolve into digital human firewalls, developing the ability to critically assess online content. Media literacy programs must be mainstreamed into education and civic initiatives to ensure voters can detect manipulation, question viral trends, and verify sources before forming opinions.

Lastly, deepfakes must not be outright banned but regulated with transparency. If political deepfakes are to be used for campaigning, they must be watermarked or tagged clearly to avoid misleading the public. Until a clear legal framework is enacted, a moratorium on their use in political advertising is advisable. In sum, the digital revolution, while offering unparalleled access and outreach, has also opened new frontiers for subversion, manipulation and democratic decay. If left unchecked, these trends could reduce elections to algorithmic theatre where the illusion of choice prevails, but the very soul of democracy is lost in deep waters.

The time to act is now. Drawing lessons from the past and being mindful of present threats, policymakers, citizens, and platforms must come together to safeguard democracy from its newest nemesis, i.e., weaponised information. The future of democratic choice, public reasoning and electoral integrity depends not just on ballots cast in booths, but on the information cascades that precede them.

SUGGESTIONS

The following are some of the suggestions quoted by the authors to formulate an arsenal of laws/regulations/rules which serve the objective of being reality-oriented, deterrent yet collaborative & functional in the contemporary era:

Blanket Ban: Under the first suggestion the authors would like to recommend the steps similar to the one's taken by the State of California wherein we witnessed the Mayor demanding a blanket ban on the political memes '60 days' before the elections a similar approach can also be adopted in India's context wherein a filtering mechanism could be introduced to filter out such election related content with fines or such stringent actions on candidates, if such acts were affiliated to them and actions on such pages & people sharing such politically influencing materials.

Need for Modernisation of laws (The Need of the Hour): The next suggestion talks about the creation of a stringent & deterrent set of laws having a wise grip on such perpetrators instead of a toothless set of laws like ours, wherein we are dependent on the government. To create certain cells for taking actions which we all know would take time until then we are a damsel in distress while being vulnerable as stated in the aforementioned RG Kar's case³⁴ wherein the hon'ble SC could only give orders for such objectionable materials to be taken down with no harsh step to follow it due to the lack of penal provisions u/r the realm of our laws.

Private Players trying to get Unjust Gains: The influence of the capitalists in the democratic matters is not a new thing we all know about the presence of private entities backing the politicians whether it is the grass root level or the top-level political representative but the speeches of influential people openly supporting such people could hurt the political scenarios the latest example of it could be Elon Musk providing over certain benefits for people, aligning to his political guidance & voting for Donald Trump in the forthcoming US Presidential Elections could cause more harm than good.

Extra-Territorial Actors: The next problem often seen in such scenarios is the borderlessness of the internet, wherein people from any part of the world could act in the space of individuals,

³⁴ R Sai Spandana, 'R.G. Kar Medical College Rape and Murder Case: Updates from the Supreme Court' (*Supreme Court Observer*, 24 September 2024) <<https://www.scobserver.in/journal/r-g-kar-medical-college-rape-and-murder-case-updates-from-the-supreme-court/>> accessed 07 April 2025

wherein the elections are taking place. In past, we have seen political candidates interacting with people who do not even form a part of their core voter list. Such people can also be held liable for the vast disruptions in that constituency. Hence, we need to create some kind of barriers to stop people from bleeding into other constituencies.

Social Media Censorship Regulations: As mentioned above, in India, we need stringent social media regulations to tackle all these issues & to deter the perpetrators. The best route to take in this scenario is to readily find these sites to deter them from entertaining such people without banning them wholly like in Europe & USA wherein these sites could be seen being fined heavily daily for their omissions leading to cyber-security threats, and according to authors the theory of deterrence is the only way forward.

Human Firewall: Just like the laws, the individuals also need to be self-aware of these internet related mishaps by acting prudently as we do in our real lives by double-checking everything and taking every fact with a grain of salt and re-confirming it with others instead of anything & everything which appears on the internet as gospel. One should work on it as the work of an ordinary individual full of mistakes or trickery. Instead of sharing everything from the WhatsApp-university, we need to break the chain of such falsified information spreading in the form of cascades & trying to influence one person after the other.

Regulating Deepfakes: In the last part of suggestive discussions, the authors would also like to shed some light upon the positive side of deepfakes which can be seen in the Pakistan & Indonesia's case studies wherein the candidates used it to aid themselves in their campaigns, such actions can be taken as campaigning over internet if regulated in the *right manner* instead of going haywire & then being utilized by the perpetrators for wrongful gains. Hence, there should be a bar on such actions until and unless one can find a strict set of rules to govern the widespread use of deepfakes all over the vicious web circle.