



Prime mover The Columbia Journalism Review deemed the 2019 Lok Sabha polls 'India's WhatsApp election' BY ANDY WONG

STATES OF MATTER

Chinese whispers

Mutant definitions of news have led to conflicting accounts of social media's impact on the recent elections



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The day before counting began in India's recent general election, *The Columbia Journalism Review* referred to the massive polling exercise as "India's WhatsApp election". For all the profound issues at stake, it said, the most riveting aspect of the campaign had been the "rampant proliferation of disinformation and hate speech online".

Given these worries about active electoral subversion, a study released on June 11 by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) would have brought relief, if nothing else, for its anticlimactic findings. The large-scale survey, available on the website of the CSDS affiliate Lokniti, indicated some perceptible links between social media use and voting behaviour, but not of sufficient scale to override other determinants of political choice.

From a sample of over 24,000 voters broadly mirroring India's population in caste and gender terms, social media users were identified and classed by the frequency of their visits to five specific sites: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube and Instagram. Since most respondents would typically use more than one platform, the study isolated the impact of overlapping usage patterns, and worked out a "composite index" which classed respondents four ways: From high social media use, to moderate, low and finally zero.

What was striking in this exercise was the relative ubiquity of WhatsApp. Yet for all the early warnings, the numbers turned in by the survey were modest. Over 63 per cent of the respondents fell within the category of "zero access" to social media. Among those with access, 47 per cent said they never read political news on social media. To an open-ended question about news sources, 49 per cent named television, 11 per cent named "other people around them", and 10 per cent mentioned newspapers. A very modest 3 per cent

named social media as a news source.

There was a pronounced advantage for the BJP among voters with high social media exposure: 43 per cent of respondents within this category reported an inclination towards the party, against 21 per cent for the Congress. But with the "high exposure" category being a mere 10 per cent of total sample – and by implication, the population – winning its favour would have been of negligible benefit without similar advantages in other categories. Sure enough, the BJP had advantages across all categories, of roughly the same magnitude by which it bested the Congress in the national popular vote share.

The Lokniti study will be closely parsed in the months ahead. Yet certain inconsistencies with other research findings need to be highlighted for a broader understanding.

Just a month before the vote count, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ) published its own survey-based findings on the digital news domain. Very different in coverage (being confined to only the English language audience) and methodology (being based on online surveys), the RISJ arrived at conclusions at sharp variance with Lokniti's. Even more than other markets with high mobile phone penetration, it found, India was emerging as a mobile-first market, where the "distributed discovery" of news was the norm. Primary news sources were of less importance than the social media platform from which news was accessed. And increasingly, video was the format in which news was being consumed.

Lokniti's finding that the intensity of social media use – estimated on the basis of respondents' recall – does not square with figures on data traffic over the mobile network. The *Ericsson Mobility Report* (EMR) is the in-

dustry standard here, and successive editions record the rapid global growth of smartphones, in which India was quick to catch up despite a late start.

The EMR clubs India along with Nepal and Bhutan as a market, but the numbers could safely be assumed to pertain mostly to India. In its most recent edition, the EMR speaks of an average data traffic of 9.8 gigabytes (GB) per month over each smart-phone in the India region in the last quarter of 2018. This was sharply up over the earlier year's figure of 6 GB per month. Going back to 2015, the data traffic on each smart-phone was a mere 1.5 GB per month.

Factoring in the rapid growth in smart-phone numbers, the total data traffic over the mobile network increased from 0.3 Exabytes per month in 2015 (each Exabyte is a billion Gigabytes) to 4.6 in 2018.

These figures are obviously very difficult to reconcile with the Lokniti finding that news access over social media is a rarity. The problem may lie in mutual intelligibility between Lokniti's surveyor and the respondent in what was meant by "news". It is a definition in constant flux. The older understanding of news as something the media industry produces is yielding to a new construct. News is now a collective outpouring of angst at the betrayal of all the promises that liberal democracy functions on.

The right-wing has understood that reality to create a corrosive populism that actively pursues the disenfranchisement of those at the margins. Media practitioners committed to values of liberalism are yet to discover an antidote for this growing malaise.

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