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Fake News And Electoral Democracy: A Content Analysis Of Whatsapp Usage In South India

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1. Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, is witnessing a paradigm shift in the way political information is disseminated, largely due to the exponential growth of mobile internet and social media platforms. Among these, WhatsApp holds a unique position. As of 2023, India has over 487 million WhatsApp users (Statista, 2023), making it the largest user base globally. Its features—end-to-end encryption, multimedia sharing, and group messaging—offer unparalleled outreach, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where traditional media penetration is limited.

While WhatsApp provides an inclusive platform for information exchange, it has simultaneously become a breeding ground for political misinformation. The platform's private and encrypted nature allows false or misleading content to spread rapidly, often without verification or accountability. Political operatives exploit this opacity, especially during elections, to influence voter perceptions and polarize communities. This is particularly concerning in South India, where regional identities, linguistic pride, and diverse political ideologies create fertile ground for tailored misinformation campaigns.

This study seeks to understand how political misinformation circulates on WhatsApp during Indian elections, focusing on South India where vernacular languages and regional identities are deeply entwined with political expression. It addresses three core questions: What are the dominant themes and narratives of political fake news? How are these messages linguistically and culturally adapted for regional audiences? What role does WhatsApp play in shaping the political consciousness of rural voters?

2. Literature Review

The relationship between social media and political discourse has been a focal point of academic inquiry in recent years. Globally, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been studied for their role in political mobilization, misinformation, and public discourse transformation (Tucker et al., 2018). In the Indian context, however, WhatsApp has emerged as a particularly powerful tool due to its widespread usage and penetration into rural and semi-urban areas (Banaji et al., 2019).

Unlike public platforms, WhatsApp functions as a closed communication system, often among trusted contacts, making it less susceptible to scrutiny and external regulation. This structure creates echo chambers that reinforce biases and facilitate the unchecked spread of misinformation. Narayanan et al. (2019) highlight how WhatsApp groups were used during elections to disseminate politically motivated fake news that played on communal fears and nationalistic fervor.

Badrinathan (2021) found that in India, especially in rural areas, the trust placed in messages received via WhatsApp is disproportionately high. This trust often stems from the perception that messages from friends and family are credible, which reduces the likelihood of cross-verification. The emotional and moral framing of such messages further discourages critical analysis.

Udupa (2020) provides a cultural perspective, arguing that fake news in India often mimics vernacular storytelling traditions, including hyperbole, satire, and spiritual symbolism, to gain credibility. The role of language in these narratives is crucial. In South India, regional languages like Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada are not just modes of communication but carriers of cultural identity. Political messages that align with linguistic pride or invoke regional grievances are more likely to be accepted.

Furthermore, Chakravarty & Roy (2020) assert that political parties in India have institutionalized the use of digital communication teams—often referred to as IT cells—that are tasked with creating and disseminating strategic misinformation. These teams are especially active during election cycles, when the stakes are high and digital narratives can sway public opinion.

However, there is a significant gap in empirical studies focusing specifically on the southern states, which differ markedly in their political culture, literacy levels, and social hierarchies. This paper attempts to fill that gap through a focused case study approach.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis framework, complemented by semi-structured interviews, to explore the nature of political misinformation disseminated via WhatsApp. The focus is on two major election events: the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the 2023 Karnataka Assembly elections.

3.2 Data Collection

We compiled a dataset of 250 WhatsApp messages that were flagged as political misinformation by reputed fact-checking organizations such as Alt News, Boom Live, and Factly. The messages were collected from public groups (with participant consent), user submissions, and field contacts in three states: Telangana (Adilabad and Warangal), Karnataka (Bengaluru Rural and Mysore), and Tamil Nadu (Salem and Villupuram). The timeframe for data collection was from January 2019 to May 2023.

3.3 Coding Scheme

Each message was coded across four dimensions:

- **Format:** Text, Image, Video, Audio
- **Language:** Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Hinglish
- **Theme:** Communal, Nationalist, Anti-Opposition, Pro-Government, Conspiracy
- **Intent:** Emotional Manipulation, Voter Mobilization, Discrediting Opponents

To assess the impact on voters, we also conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with rural voters from the same districts. The interviews were aimed at understanding user perception, trust in forwarded messages, and political behavior influenced by WhatsApp content.

4. Findings

4.1 Format and Structure of Misinformation

Out of the 250 messages:

- **Videos:** 103 (41%)
- **Images/Memes:** 68 (27%)
- **Text Forwards:** 53 (21%)
- **Audio Clips:** 26 (11%)

Videos were the most effective in engaging users, often combining sensationalist visuals with dramatic music and captions. These videos were edited with local film references or mimicked TV news broadcasts to appear authentic. Audio clips often impersonated journalists, priests, or influencers and were commonly shared in more rural or semi-literate communities.

4.2 Language and Cultural Localization

Localization was not merely linguistic but also symbolic. Telugu messages frequently invoked Hindu religious icons and tied current political events to mythological themes. Kannada messages emphasized regional pride and anti-North sentiments. Tamil messages often leveraged the legacy of Dravidian politics, anti-Brahmin narratives, and language-based identity politics.

Approximately 72% of the content featured colloquial expressions, regional idioms, or cultural references that made the messages relatable and believable. For example, a widely circulated Tamil video during the 2019 elections falsely claimed that Hindi would be imposed nationwide if a particular party won—resonating with deep-rooted linguistic anxieties in Tamil Nadu.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

- **Communal Narratives** (34%): These messages portrayed minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, as threats to national security or cultural identity. Common tropes included forced conversions, cow slaughter, and Islamic invasions.
- **Nationalist Messaging** (22%): These glorified the military, space achievements, and the 'Make in India' campaign, often using doctored statistics or images.
- **Anti-Opposition Content** (19%): These included doctored videos showing opposition leaders disrespecting national symbols, engaging in corruption, or making anti-national remarks.
- **Fake Poll Results and Surveys** (13%): Bogus opinion polls were circulated claiming victory for specific parties, creating a bandwagon effect.
- **Conspiracy Theories** (12%): These ranged from foreign conspiracies to internal sabotage by 'urban naxals,' NGOs, or student activists.

4.4 Psychological and Emotional Manipulation

The strategic use of emotion was evident. Messages designed to invoke fear (e.g., demographic threats), anger (e.g., corruption), or pride (e.g., India's global standing) were more widely shared. Many memes and jokes ridiculing opposition leaders used humor to mask propaganda. Interviewees revealed they were more likely to believe messages that "felt right" emotionally, even if they lacked factual basis.

5. Discussion

Our analysis demonstrates that misinformation on WhatsApp is not haphazard but strategically curated. Political campaigners appear to be deliberately crafting messages tailored to specific linguistic and cultural contexts to maximize impact. These messages use colloquial language, cultural symbols, and emotional appeals to bypass rational scrutiny.

The dominance of visual content suggests a shift toward more immersive misinformation formats, which are harder to debunk and more likely to elicit strong reactions. Videos that mimic credible formats, such as news reports or religious discourses, lend authenticity to false claims.

In rural South India, where literacy rates vary and access to reliable information is limited, WhatsApp often becomes the primary news source. The trust placed in closed WhatsApp groups—formed around kinship, caste, or community—reinforces belief in misinformation. Users are reluctant to challenge the consensus within these groups, fearing social alienation.

Moreover, the platform's architecture discourages fact-checking. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, where public counters and third-party labels exist, WhatsApp forwards carry no warnings. The lack of traceability of message origin also makes accountability nearly impossible.

6. Conclusion

The findings underscore the dangerous implications of WhatsApp-driven political misinformation in South India. The use of emotionally charged, regionally customized content not only influences voting behavior but also deepens existing societal divisions. In democracies like India, where informed voter choice is critical, such manipulation can derail electoral integrity.

This study recommends:

- **Localized media literacy programs** in schools, community centers, and adult education modules, tailored to linguistic and cultural contexts.
- **Collaboration between government, fact-checkers, and tech companies** to develop early detection and counter strategies.
- **Mandating transparency in political messaging**, especially during election cycles, with mechanisms to track digital campaign funding.

Future research should explore how misinformation affects long-term political beliefs and whether exposure leads to radicalization or merely short-term influence. Comparative studies between different regions and platforms could further illuminate these dynamics.

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