India’s Political Infodemic

Mains syllabus: GS II Important aspects of governance; GS III - Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life.

Why in the News?

Across various Indian States, digital tactics have been used and exhibit distinct regional adaptations while retaining overarching strategies.

How are digital technologies are being adopted in political campaigning ?

- **Digital campaigns** - With internet penetration in India now reaching about 88 crore users and WhatsApp itself boasting over 59 crore active accounts, digital strategies have become indispensable campaign tools.
- **Digital volunteers** – Political parties uses volunteers, party people to manage social media accounts, create digital content, or participate in virtual events to mobilize voters and emphasise voter concerns.
- **WhatsApp groups** - Local political party persons or these digital volunteers frequently compile voter lists, adding unsuspecting citizens into WhatsApp groups cleverly disguised as community forums, Resident Welfare Associations, or hobbyist groups.
- **AI contents** - AI-generated memes and viral content, with each party rapidly disseminating targeted narratives to specific demographic segments.
- **Use of applications** – Mobile applications are used by parties to assign tasks, track volunteer performance, and maintain competitive leaderboards, enhancing volunteer engagement through gamification.

What is the WhatsApp Pramukh Model?

- **WhatsApp Pramukh** - These Pramukhs manage digital communications at local levels, systematically categorising voters based on caste, religion, economic status, and other demographics.
- **Targeted campaigns** - They then distribute carefully crafted content—memes, videos, and doctored images—aligned with party agendas.
- **Monitoring effectiveness** - Local booth workers, often acting as WhatsApp Pramukhs, monitor content effectiveness meticulously, tracking engagement through forwards and responses.
- **Amplification** - Messages that resonate well are swiftly amplified across multiple groups, creating a powerful ripple effect.

- Political leaders leverage these strategies deliberately, ensuring that their talking points penetrate deeply into community dialogues.

How do these trends create political infodemic?

Political Infodemic is the deluge of misleading information, continual onslaught of propaganda, half-truths, and outright falsehoods in political communication.

- **Infiltrating community spaces** - Central to the political infodemic is the covert infiltration of private WhatsApp groups, which were initially formed for community or casual interactions.
- These spaces have become prime targets for propaganda and places targeted propaganda directly into users' hands and everyday conversations.
- **Pointed propaganda** - These groups gradually disseminate politically charged messages, embedding subtle propaganda into everyday interactions.
- **Spread to mainstream media** - Once they permeate small groups, mainstream media often pick up these trends, amplifying their reach and lending them credibility.
- **Shaping large scale public opinion** - The result is a rapid transition from localised misinformation to national headlines, significantly altering public perception.
- **Data-driven micro targeting and profiling** - Hyperlocal influence hinges significantly on sophisticated voter profiling.
- Parties purchase or obtain voter data, analysing it to identify community affiliations, regional issues, and ideological leanings.

What are the democratic implications of these trends?

- **Manipulative political communication** - Digital platforms have merged irrevocably with traditional electoral campaigning.
- This fusion erodes distinctions between overt advertising and covert propaganda, creating fertile ground for manipulative political communication.
- **Polarization of communities** - Old protest images repurposed against political rivals are circulated and proliferated in WhatsApp groups and effectively polarising local communities.
- **Influencing public perception and electoral outcomes** – Use of digital technologies is shaping public opinion and discourse in unexpected ways, and thereby offering a modern means to electoral victory.
- **Bypassing regulations** - Manipulated images and misleading messages infiltrate local networks rapidly, outpacing fact-checking efforts.
- **Compromises electoral integrity** - When misinformation saturates personal conversations, it skews voter perceptions and potentially compromises electoral integrity, making informed democratic choices challenging.

What lies ahead?

- India's infodemic symbolises a broader global trend where digital micro-targeting increasingly shapes electoral outcomes subtly yet decisively.

- Effective countermeasures depend significantly on civil society vigilance, independent journalism, and informed citizen activism to expose and counter manipulative strategies.
- Heightened vigilance and proactive intervention are necessary to safeguard electoral integrity.
- Preserving genuine democratic engagement hinges on collective responsibility—by alert citizens, proactive media, and responsive civil society—in mitigating the corrosive effects of unchecked digital propaganda.
- Without widespread watchfulness, the infodemic will continue to flourish, subtly nudging millions of citizens in directions they might never have chosen through genuine, open discourse.

Reference

[The Hindu | India’s political infodemic]

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