

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LEGAL RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS



Open Access, Refereed Journal Multi-Disciplinary
Peer Reviewed

www.ijlra.com

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ISSN

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MEDIA'S IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY: ANALYZING THE ROLE OF INFORMATION, MANIPULATION, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION.

AUTHORED BY - DIVYASHREE KARANTH BR
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ABSTRACT

Media plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining democratic societies, serving as a primary source of information, influencing public perception, and facilitating political discourse. The media has developed as a powerful tool for political participation and expression. The whole focus of this paper is how social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter might influence voters' voting choices, particularly during election season, by spreading manipulative material and fake news. Initially, the rise of the media was intended to benefit democratic processes; however, it is today regarded as one of the greatest threats to democracy. Examples from 2021 statistics show fake news propagation offenses across India and how religious identities and communities are linked with politics to gain an edge over other parties in elections. We discuss how news channels play a pivotal role in democracy, being the official or primary source of information to the public, but are now biased toward one party and cannot be reliable. In India, media bias prevails throughout the country's prominent newspapers, and political pressures drive this prejudice. Many media platforms have a mutually beneficial relationship with the government, earning attention, financing, and status in exchange. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook uses algorithms to curate users' content feeds. These algorithms can inadvertently promote certain types of content or prioritize sensational information, affecting the overall quality of political speech. It also faced scrutiny for data exploitation and using such data for political targeting—the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how user data can be exploited for political purposes. Due to such instances, there have been more skeptical and critical arguments that state and non-state actors use social media to manipulate political life, which is a reason to become a threat to society. Hence, this research paper aims to illuminate media bias and information manipulation related to democracy to inform the public about how their perceptions have been influenced without their knowledge and how window dressing is prevalent in all social media platforms.

Keywords: Media bias, Democracy, Social media manipulation, Fake news, Religious polarization, Algorithmic influence, Public awareness, Media literacy, Democratic reforms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between media, democracy, and information abuse, focusing on India post-2014, the digitalization era. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have been used to spread information awareness fraudulently and falsely, endangering the democratic process. Traditional media outlets have also had credibility issues due to political bias. Instances of fake news propagation put together with religious and political identity directly threaten the democratic process. The relationship between media outlets and governments has raised concerns about undue influence. Algorithms in social media, such as Facebook's curating users' content feeds, can fuel sensational stories and influence politics. This paper aims to highlight widespread media bias, inform the public about the subtle ways their perceptions are developed without their knowledge and abuse of information that threatens democracy, and highlight the importance of understanding media and democratic development as such, defending democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Political Conditionality of Mass Media Influence:

When Do Parties Follow Mass Media Attention?

BY CHRISTOFFER GREEN-PEDERSEN and RUNE STUBAGER

This article argues that mass media's influence on political parties' policies influences their interests, and Media's opinions shape people's perceptions when the issue is politicized. It supports this with a time-series study of mass media influence on opposition parties' agendas in Denmark over twenty years. The study explores mass media influence on opposition party agendas during regular times, revealing an apparent effect on party attention, except for foreign policy issues, on issues owned by the opposition party.

Social Media and Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: The Manipulation of Politics in The Election Process

BY TURGAY YERLİKAYA and SECA TOKER ASLAN

This article examines the impact of virtual social networks on social and political life,

especially during elections. It highlights how platforms like Facebook and Twitter can manipulate voter preferences by spreading fake news and disinformation. Initially considered to impact democracy positively, this article uses examples from the 2016 U.S. elections. Presidential elections in France, Brexit, Germany, the U.K., and Turkey illustrate the threat social networks pose to democracy. The article explores election manipulation, highlighting the use of new media tools and the role of social media in democratization. It presents positive and negative examples of social media's potential to create a democratic public space.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

- To what extent does media bias exist in Indian newspapers and news channels, and what are the underlying factors contributing to media bias?
- How do social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter affect voter behavior and choices during elections?
- How are religious identities and communities linked with politics in India, and how do political parties use these affiliations to gain an advantage in elections?
- To what extent is the general public aware of media bias, information manipulation, and algorithmic influences on their perceptions, and how does this awareness affect their trust in the media and the democratic process?
- How can the media be reformed to serve its democratic function better and minimize its potential negative impact on public perception and the electoral process?

HYPOTHESIS

- Democracies are heavily influenced by media distribution, manipulation, and public opinion. Biased reporting, manipulative tactics, and fake news influence voter choice and election results.
- The evolving role of the media from an unbiased reporter to a discriminating factor influences public trust and civic engagement, ensuring an informed society is involved.

METHODOLOGY

This research combines both doctrinal and non-doctrinal methods.

- Doctrinal research involves an extensive review of scholarly journals and academic

literature to gather established theories and concepts.

- Non-doctrinal research involves informal interviews with social media users from family and neighborhood, providing real-world perspectives on media's impact on democracy and ensuring a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

DATA ANALYSIS

MEDIA BIAS

Media bias refers to the partiality or favoritism in how news organizations present information, often influenced by political, ideological, or economic factors, which usually results in the unequal or twisted portrayal of events, affecting public perception and trust in the media. In India, media bias prevails throughout the country's leading newspapers, and political parties determine this prejudice. In India, the potential for media bias to influence political support may contribute considerably to the regression of democracy by damaging the media, impeding free expression as per Article 19 of the Indian Constitution and government accountability, and influencing voters.

According to reports, Twitter deleted 52 messages criticizing the Indian government's handling of the epidemic at the order of the Indian government. Meanwhile, pro-government media stations blamed the farmers' protests for a lack of oxygen supplies for COVID-19 patients, despite the fact that supplies were already scarce owing to a lack of public health facilities.

Underlying sources of media bias include government funding, which is critical to the operations and budgets of many newspapers, and the ruling parties' unwillingness to advertise with journals that do not support their views. As a result of this pressure, the media supports government policies, resulting in unequal reporting that can affect political behavior in favor of the parties in power.

A survey of 30 Indian newspapers and 41 Indian TV stations with the highest audience rates in the country from 2017 to 2018 proves that the majority of media bias. Media bias influences voting behavior by changing voter decisions and views. In India's 2014 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) spent more on advertising than the Congress Party, leading to more votes for the party, likely by those with more exposure in the media with the party. Media bias uses provoking messages, selective information, and appeasement to influence voters, changing or

twisting their beliefs about politicians' voting effectiveness and personal benefits. Identifying and handling media bias is necessary for a more informed and impartial democracy.

Analyzing the case of Twitter removing 52 critical tweets reveals a concerning pattern of direct government intervention in public discourse. This censorship demonstrates how digital platforms, despite their global reach, remain susceptible to local political pressures. The relationship between the government and media in India appears to be one of control by the government, rather than independence, as evidenced by the selective silencing of critical voices during a national health crisis.

The financial dependency of media outlets on government advertising creates a systemic vulnerability that compromises the very art of journalistic integrity. This economic leverage translates into editorial influence, as newspapers and TV channels cannot risk losing crucial revenue by publishing content unfavorable to ruling parties. The consequences of this bias extend beyond simple favoritism—it fundamentally alters the information landscape available to citizens, preventing them from making fully informed democratic choices.

The BJP's advertising strategy in the 2014 elections exemplifies how media saturation can translate into electoral advantage. By outspending their competitors, they effectively dominated the information environment, creating a perception of inevitability and momentum that influenced voter behavior. This case study illustrates how media bias operates not just through explicit propaganda but through subtle message repetition and visibility imbalances.

Identifying and handling media bias is necessary for a more informed and impartial democracy.

SOCIAL MEDIA, A BOON OR A BANE FOR DEMOCRACY?

Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter significantly impact Indian elections by facilitating the sharing of politics and information. But they can also be breeding grounds for fake news, manipulation, and echo chambers, which can sway voters. Social media also heightens political divisions and allows parties to tailor messages to suit specific demographics of voters, which influences decision-making.

A study reveals that fake news and conspiracy theories on Facebook emerged in the public

three months before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, effectively targeting the Democratic Party candidates. The targeted country's values and immigrants, reaching millions on Facebook, aimed to weaken Obama and the Democratic Party. Fake news about the Pope's support for Trump's candidacy was shared 961,000 times after the Obama news. This highlights the immense influence of social network manipulations.

When it became evident that Facebook was being manipulated, an inquiry was launched, and it was discovered that Facebook had disclosed data on up to 87 million Facebook users to a researcher at Cambridge Analytica, which worked for the Trump campaign. The scandal came to be known as the Cambridge Analytica Scandal. This raises a significant question about how much users can rely on Facebook for their data.

A recent study from Statista shows the fake news propagation in India during 2021-2022 as shown below:

Number of fake news propagation offences reported across India in 2021, by leading state

Fake news propagation offences reported in India 2021, by leading state

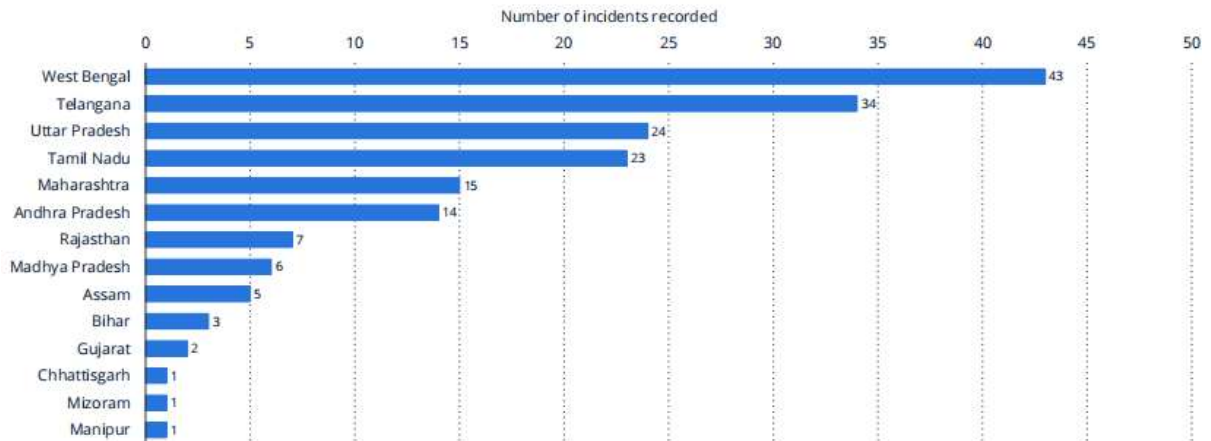


Figure 1

Twitter has admitted that it amplifies tweets from rightwing politicians and news outlets more than left-leaning content, according to a study in six out of seven countries, except Germany. Right-leaning news organizations were also more amplified, and an algorithmic timeline amplified politicians' tweets.

The statistics presented in Figure 1 reveal a troubling pattern of fake news propagation across

India, with politics consistently being the most targeted subject (72.1%). This is not coincidental but reflects a very carefully sought deliberate strategy to influence the democratic process. The second highest category—crime and accident news (38.5%)—suggests that sensationalism drives engagement, while religious news (28.9%) indicates the exploitation of sensitive identity-based issues to provoke emotional responses from voters.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal represents a watershed moment in understanding social media's threat to democracy. This case demonstrates that social media platforms aren't merely passive channel for information but can be weaponized through sophisticated data analytics to target voters with unprecedented precision. The scandal revealed how psychographic profiles created from Facebook data enabled political campaigns to deliver highly personalized messaging designed to exploit specific psychological vulnerabilities of different voter segments.

Twitter's algorithmic bias toward right-wing content across multiple countries indicates a systemic issue rather than isolated incidents. This built-in amplification creates an uneven playing field in political discourse, giving certain ideological perspectives disproportionate visibility and influence. The fact that this bias exists in the platform's architecture itself, rather than through human editorial decisions, makes it particularly concerning, as it operates invisibly and at scale.

These findings demonstrate that social media's role in democracy has evolved from its initial promise as a democratizing force to become, in many ways, a sophisticated system for information manipulation that can undermine the very principles of informed citizenry upon which democracy depends.

In conclusion, social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, wield substantial influence over voter behavior and election choices, making them unreliable as a source of information.

RELIGION, A TOOL OF POLITICS?

In India, religious identity is closely linked to community and politics, and political parties exploit these links to gain electoral advantage. They formally meet with religious leaders, institutions, and symbols to rally voters, appeal to specific religious sentiments, and promote

policies that address religious priorities. Religion and caste systems are being increasingly used day by day in our democratic country.

One of the main reasons is illiteracy. The country's significant population is literate but is still influenced by the promises made by the parties based on religion. When it comes to illiterate people, it is easiest for politicians to manipulate them based on their racial ethnicity or caste. Using such circumstances, political parties use religion as a weapon to manipulate or emotionally connect people to parties. One such example in India is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) using Hinduism as their front to gain the unfair advantage of gaining all the votes of the majority religion of India, the Hindus. They bring up Hinduism or Hindutva in every campaign to bag the attention and votes of all those in that religion.

A recent study from Statista shows how the news channels often bring up religion relating it to politics to influence the public. The statistics are as follows:

Share of TV debates on Hindi news channels in India from 2021 to 2022, by topic

Hindi news channel coverage India 2021-2022, by topic

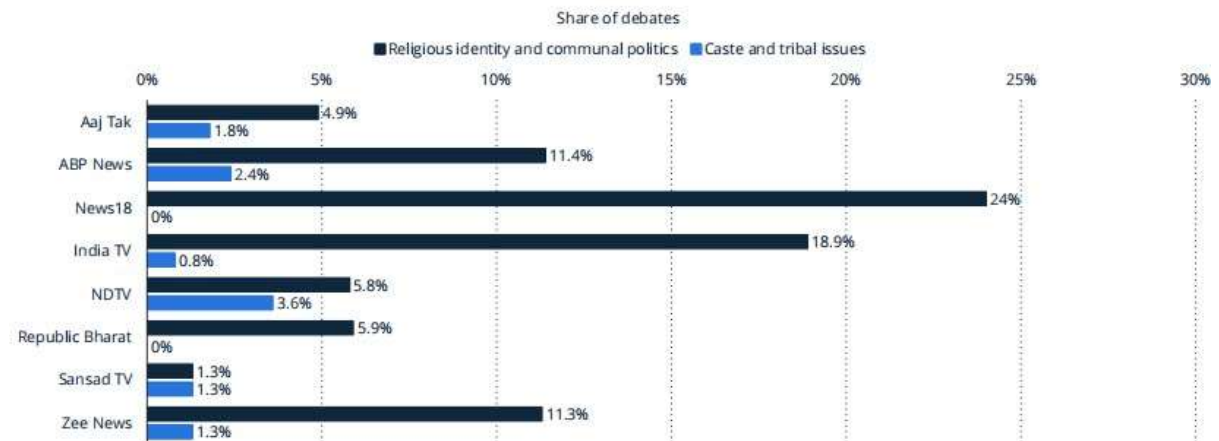


Figure 2

Figure 2 provides compelling evidence of how media coverage intertwines religion with politics, creating a powerful narrative tool for political manipulation. The data shows that Hindu-related news (75.3%) dominates religious coverage in Indian media, significantly outpacing coverage of Muslim (55.3%), Christian (15.7%), and other religious communities. This disproportionate coverage creates a media landscape where Hindu identity is centralized in political discourse, reinforcing its use as a political rallying point.

The BJP's strategic use of Hindutva represents a sophisticated political adaptation of religious identity. By positioning themselves as defenders of Hindu interests, they've effectively transformed religious identity into political capital. This strategy exploits deep-seated cultural identities and emotional connections that transcend rational policy evaluation, making it particularly effective in a diverse democracy like India.

The correlation between illiteracy rates and susceptibility to religious political appeals reveals a troubling vulnerability in India's democratic structure. Less educated voters may lack the critical thinking skills or alternative information sources needed to evaluate religiously-framed political messages. This creates a two-tier democracy where education levels determine susceptibility to manipulation, undermining the principle of equal political participation.

This politicization of religion has profound implications for India's constitutional commitment to secularism. When political success becomes increasingly tied to religious mobilization, parties have diminishing incentives to maintain secular governance. The long-term consequence could be a gradual erosion of the institutional separation between religion and state that has been fundamental to India's democratic foundation.

These strategies can secure significant votes, but they also risk deepening divisions and undermining the secular principles of Indian democracy. The interplay between religion and politics in India remains a complex and controversial aspect of its democracy.

AWARENESS AMONGST THE PUBLIC

Public awareness of media bias, information processing, and algorithmic influence varies. Some are aware, but many are not. This lack of knowledge affects trust in the media and the democratic process, increasing suspicion and misinformation. Bridging this awareness gap through media literacy is critical to creating more informed citizens in the digital age.

The general public of India is unaware of media bias, information processing, and algorithmic influences. Few literate people are knowledgeable enough to check every piece of news to confirm whether they are fake or algorithmic. In contrast, the rest of the citizens often believe whatever comes up on their feed is true. According to the statistics taken from Statista, Opinion on bias in news media coverage in India 2022 looks like this:

Public perception of partisanship in news media coverage in India in 2022

Opinion on bias in news media coverage India 2022

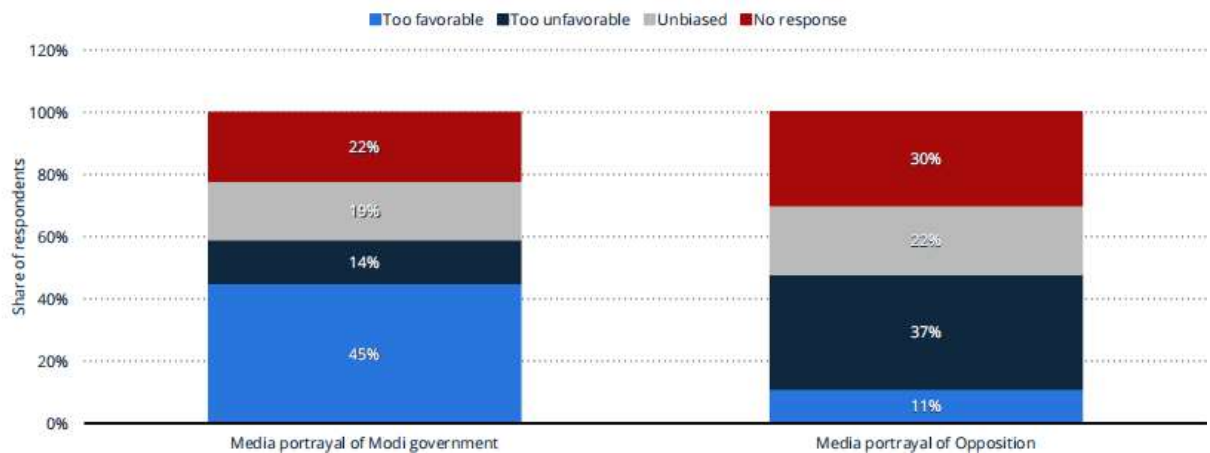


Figure 3

Figure 3 provides a revealing snapshot of how Indians perceive media bias, with striking implications for democratic discourse. The overwhelming perception (42%) that news media favors the political right while only 25% perceive a balanced approach indicates a significant credibility crisis in Indian media. This perception gap doesn't merely reflect subjective opinions but represents a fundamental breakdown in the media's role as an impartial information source.

The data reveals an important asymmetry: while many recognize right-wing favoritism, far fewer (10%) perceive bias against the right. This suggests that media bias in India may operate more through positive portrayal of certain political entities rather than negative coverage of others. Such positive bias can be more difficult for average citizens to detect, as it doesn't trigger the same critical evaluation that overtly negative coverage might.

The significant percentage (23%) who are uncertain about media bias points to a critical knowledge gap. This uncertainty represents a vulnerable segment of the population who, lacking the tools to identify bias, may be most susceptible to manipulation. Their political opinions and voting decisions are thus formed in an information environment they cannot effectively navigate or evaluate.

This awareness deficit creates a democratic vulnerability where media literacy directly impacts civic participation quality. Without the skills to recognize bias, citizens cannot fulfill their democratic responsibility to make informed decisions. The data suggests that media literacy

in India isn't merely an educational concern but a fundamental democratic safeguard that requires urgent attention.

As you can see, news media coverage covers favoring the right wing more than anything related to the left wing being unfavored. Such biased news creates public perceptions instead of giving information which is what media is meant to do. Most of the public are unaware of such instances and hence get sucked into these political strategies and end up voting for parties that are shown to be good on media whilst not even looking at the party's manifesto. The public has to be made aware of these strategies and educated on how to be more aware of the misinformation and influential media. They should be taught on how to use media in order to make it in our favour than for it to be a bane to our country and the world as a whole.

MEDIA, A DEMOCRATIC FUNCTION

Media reform is critical to enhancing democratic activity and reducing negative impacts on public opinion and elections. Transparency, accountability, and unbiased reporting are essential. Media literacy, diverse newsroom representation, independent fact-checking, sound journalistic values, and a limited number of media owners are essential. Social media platforms should be regulated to curb misinformation and hate speech and provide a healthy democracy with informed public engagement prioritized over media interests. Media is a platform that is supposed to inform, not influence. It has to be reformed and controlled by an independent authority that the government or any influential parties do not monitor. Media is a vital aspect of democracy, and if used in its best interest, it could do wonders for this country and the world.

The need for media reform in India is not merely a matter of improving journalistic quality but is fundamental to preserving democratic integrity itself. The evidence presented throughout this paper points to systematic failures in the media ecosystem that require structural solutions rather than superficial adjustments.

Media literacy represents perhaps the most urgent reform priority. As digital platforms become primary information sources, citizens require sophisticated skills to navigate complex information landscapes. Effective media literacy programs must go beyond simple fact-checking to develop critical analytical frameworks that allow citizens to evaluate source credibility, recognize emotional manipulation techniques, and understand how algorithmic curation shapes their information exposure.

The concentration of media ownership in India has created dangerous power dynamics where a few entities can shape national discourse. This oligopolistic structure facilitates the political capture of information channels and undermines the diversity of perspectives essential to democratic deliberation. Regulatory frameworks that limit cross-media ownership and promote independent media voices are essential counterbalances to this concentration of communicative power.

Social media regulation presents unique challenges that traditional media policies cannot address. The transnational nature of these platforms, their algorithmic opacity, and their unprecedented scale require innovative regulatory approaches. Potential solutions include algorithmic transparency requirements, stronger data protection laws, platform liability for demonstrably false content, and public interest obligations similar to those traditionally imposed on broadcast media.

These reforms must balance competing values—preserving free expression while combating harmful misinformation, maintaining platform innovation while ensuring accountability, and respecting user autonomy while protecting democratic processes. The complexity of these trade-offs requires thoughtful policy development with input from diverse stakeholders including civil society, technologists, legal experts, and media practitioners.

Media is a platform that is supposed to inform, not influence. It has to be reformed and controlled by an independent authority that the government or any influential parties do not monitor. Media is a vital aspect of democracy, and if used in its best interest, it could do wonders for this country and the world.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines the role of the media in democratic societies, focusing on information dissemination, exchange, and public opinion. From its source as a tool to promote democracy to its present-day status as a potential threat, such social media platforms as Facebook and Twitter are primarily concerned with the impact of social media on voter choice, especially during elections. Fake news, often associated with religious identity and community, is used for political gain. Traditional news channels, driven by political pressures and associations, are undermined by bias and dubious credibility. Relations between news outlets and governments have also been highlighted. The Cambridge Analytica scandal has demonstrated the impact of

algorithmic content curation on social media, data use, and political goals. The paper highlights the need for media reform and transparency in Indian democracy, promotion of media literacy, encouragement of ethical journalism, and regulation of social media channels.

The analysis conducted throughout this paper has answered the central research questions with concerning clarity. Media bias in Indian newspapers and news channels is extensive and primarily driven by economic dependencies on government advertising, political pressure, and ownership concentration. Social media platforms influence voter behavior through algorithmic amplification of divisive content, targeted messaging based on personal data, and the rapid spread of misinformation that exploits confirmation bias. Religious identities are systematically weaponized in Indian politics, with media playing a crucial role in amplifying religious narratives that serve political ends, particularly through disproportionate coverage that favors majority religious sentiments.

Public awareness of these manipulative forces remains dangerously low, with significant portions of the population unable to identify media bias or understand algorithmic influences on their information exposure. This awareness gap creates a democratic vulnerability where citizens' political decisions are shaped by forces they neither recognize nor understand. Media reform must therefore prioritize transparency, ownership diversity, algorithmic accountability, and robust media literacy programs that empower citizens to navigate increasingly complex information landscapes.

The paper highlights the need for media reform and transparency in Indian democracy, promotion of media literacy, encouragement of ethical journalism, and regulation of social media channels. The evidence presented demonstrates that media's role in democracy has evolved from information provider to opinion shaper, creating an urgent need to recalibrate this relationship to preserve democratic integrity in the digital age.

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