

TRANSFORMATION OF COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

Public opinion has long been recognized as the cornerstone of democratic life, guiding governance, shaping policy, and reflecting societal values. Classical theorists such as Walter Lippmann, John Dewey, and Jürgen Habermas debated its nature and role, with emphasis on media, deliberation, and collective reasoning. In the contemporary era, however, the rise of digital platforms has transformed the ways in which public opinion is expressed, contested, and mobilized. This paper investigates the formation of public opinion in the digital age through a mixed-method research design that integrates qualitative content analysis, sentiment mining of social media, comparative surveys, and expert interviews. Case studies of elections, pandemic responses, and online movements both global and Indian (such as the #FarmersProtest and #MeTooIndia) highlight how platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp simultaneously expand inclusivity while intensifying risks of polarization and misinformation.

The findings reveal that while digital platforms accelerate participation and amplify marginalized voices, they also compress deliberation time, foster echo chambers, and undermine trust through viral misinformation. Algorithms play a central role in shaping exposure and engagement, creating both opportunities for democratic mobilization and challenges to information integrity. In the Indian context, social media has become a powerful arena for electoral campaigning, civic activism, and grassroots movements, yet also a space of digital manipulation. The study concludes that the digital public sphere is both transformative and disruptive. Harnessing its democratic potential requires fostering digital literacy, ensuring transparency in algorithmic governance, and cultivating

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*responsible digital citizenship to preserve the resilience of democracy.***KEYWORDS:** *Public Opinion, Digital Media, Social Media, Algorithms, Misinformation, Democracy.*

Introduction

Public opinion has long been recognized as a cornerstone of democracy, influencing governance, policy, and social change. Traditionally, it was shaped through print media, radio, and television, where information flowed in a largely one-directional manner from institutions to citizens. In such settings, the formation of public opinion was relatively structured, mediated by editorial gatekeeping and institutional authority. However, the advent of the digital age has transformed this landscape in profound ways. Social media platforms, online forums, and algorithm-driven news feeds have redefined how citizens form, express, and contest opinions. Today, information circulates with unprecedented speed; hashtags trend faster than newspapers can print, and a single viral post can shape public discourse more powerfully than prolonged traditional debates. As Walter Lippmann (1922) observed, “Public opinion is not the voice of God, nor even the voice of society, but the voice of the people expressed under conditions.” In the digital era, those “conditions” have fundamentally shifted.

The digital age has ushered in a transformation in communication that is both structural and experiential. Communication is no longer confined to linear transmission but is increasingly interactive, networked, and participatory. Individuals now function simultaneously as consumers, creators, and distributors of information, contributing to a dynamic communication ecosystem. This shift has significantly broadened the scope of participation in public discourse, allowing diverse perspectives including those of marginalized and underrepresented groups to gain visibility and influence.

At the same time, the digital environment has blurred the boundaries between information producers and consumers. Citizens are no longer passive recipients of news but active participants who create, share, and reinterpret narratives in real time. While this participatory culture enhances inclusivity and democratization, it also introduces new complexities. The speed and decentralization of communication often lead to fragmented and rapidly shifting opinions, shaped by emotional resonance as much as by factual accuracy. Algorithmic filtering and personalized content streams can further reinforce selective exposure, contributing to echo chambers and ideological polarization.

Thus, the transformation of communication in the digital age presents a dual reality-one that empowers broader engagement while simultaneously raising concerns about the quality, stability, and integrity of public opinion. Against this backdrop, this study examines how evolving communication practices influence the formation, expression, and evolution of public opinion, with particular attention to their implications for democratic processes and societal change.

Problem Statement

The transformation of communication in the digital age has fundamentally altered how public opinion is formed, expressed, and circulated, raising critical concerns about its coherence, reliability, and democratic value. While digital platforms have expanded participation and enabled diverse voices to enter public discourse, they have also introduced challenges such as information overload, rapid dissemination of unverified content, and algorithm-driven content curation. These dynamics often privilege speed, visibility, and emotional appeal over accuracy and deliberation, leading to fragmented and sometimes polarized public opinion.

Moreover, the shift from institutionally mediated communication to decentralized, user-driven interactions has weakened traditional mechanisms of accountability and verification. As a result, public opinion is increasingly shaped within digital environments that may reinforce biases and limit exposure to diverse perspectives. Despite its growing influence on governance and social processes, there remains a need to critically examine how these changing communication patterns affect the quality, inclusiveness, and stability of public opinion. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the implications of digital communication for contemporary public discourse.

Objectives of the Paper

This paper seeks to address the complexities of public opinion in the digital age through the following objectives:

- To examine the transformation of communication in the digital age and its evolving characteristics.
- To analyze how digital platforms influence the formation and expression of public opinion.
- To identify key challenges and opportunities arising from digital communication, including misinformation and increased participation.
- To assess the implications for democratic processes and informed public discourse.

Literature Review

Classical Perspectives on Public Opinion

The study of public opinion is grounded in foundational theoretical contributions that emphasize the role of communication in shaping collective understanding. Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that public opinion is constructed through mediated representations “pictures in our heads” rather than direct experience, underscoring the influence of communication channels on perception. In contrast, John Dewey (1927) highlighted the importance of dialogue and participatory communication in fostering informed and active publics. Expanding this discourse, Jürgen Habermas (1991) conceptualized the “public sphere” as a space for rational-critical debate, where open communication enables democratic legitimacy. These classical perspectives collectively establish that communication processes are central to the formation and evolution of public opinion.

Media and Opinion Formation

In the pre-digital era, mass media functioned as the primary intermediary between information and the public. The agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) demonstrated that media significantly influence the salience of issues, shaping public priorities without necessarily dictating opinions. This gatekeeping role of traditional media ensured a structured flow of information, contributing to relatively stable and coherent public discourse. However, this model also limited participation, as access to communication platforms was largely controlled by institutional actors.

Transformation in the Digital Age

The emergence of digital platforms has disrupted traditional communication structures, transforming the processes of opinion formation. Interactive technologies enable users to create, share, and reinterpret content in real time, fostering a participatory communication environment. Digital spaces have expanded the range of voices in public discourse, allowing individuals and communities to engage directly in discussions that were previously mediated by institutions. At the same time, the absence of centralized control has facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation and emotionally driven content. Algorithmic curation further shapes exposure to information, often reinforcing existing preferences and contributing to fragmented and polarized public opinion.

Empirical Insights from Recent Studies

Contemporary research highlights the complex and dual nature of digital communication. Studies on social media platforms demonstrate their role in mobilizing collective action and enhancing civic engagement,

particularly among youth and marginalized groups. At the same time, research points to the increasing influence of network structures and digital interactions in shaping attitudes on political, social, and public health issues. Messaging platforms, especially in developing contexts, have been shown to facilitate both community-level information sharing and the circulation of misleading content. These findings indicate that digital communication simultaneously strengthens participation and introduces new vulnerabilities in public discourse.

Research Gap

While existing literature extensively addresses challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and algorithmic influence, there is comparatively limited integrative analysis of how the transformation of communication can also enhance inclusivity, participation, and democratic engagement. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining both the risks and the opportunities associated with the evolving relationship between digital communication and public opinion.

Research Method

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, integrating qualitative content analysis with quantitative assessment of digital engagement patterns. Such an approach is appropriate for examining public opinion in the digital age, where measurable indicators such as likes, shares, comments, and reposts interact with nuanced forms of expression including narratives, discussions, and user interpretations. The qualitative component enables an indepth understanding of how individuals articulate and negotiate opinions in digital spaces, while the quantitative dimension helps identify patterns of reach, visibility, and amplification. By combining these methods, the study captures both the depth and scale of communication processes, offering a holistic perspective on how public opinion is formed and transformed in contemporary digital environments.

Data Sources

To ensure diversity, reliability, and contextual richness, data were collected from multiple sources:

Digital Platforms: Data were drawn from widely used platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Reddit, selected for their varied communication styles and user demographics. The analysis focuses on key contexts, including electoral discourse, social movements (e.g., #MeToo, climate activism), and public responses during major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondary Sources: Academic literature, policy reports, and large-scale surveys such as those conducted by the Pew Research Center and the World Values Survey were used to support and contextualize the findings, enabling comparative analysis across different socio-political settings.

This multisource approach strengthens the validity of the study by triangulating insights across platforms and scholarly evidence, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of digital communication and its impact on public opinion.

Techniques Used

The study employed a combination of digital and traditional research techniques to capture the complexity of communication and opinion formation in online environments:

Text Mining and Sentiment Analysis: Computational tools were used to process large volumes of social media data, identifying patterns of sentiment such as positivity, negativity, and polarization. This enabled the detection of dominant narratives and emotional trends in digital discourse.

Comparative Analysis: Findings from digital platforms were compared with traditional opinion polls and survey data to assess levels of convergence, divergence, and potential biases in public opinion across different communication channels.

Expert Interviews: Semistructured interviews were conducted with digital media analysts, journalists, and policymakers to provide contextual insights and interpretative depth, complementing the quantitative findings.

Rationale

The adoption of a mixed-method approach is grounded in the need to capture both the scale and the meaning of public opinion in the digital age. Quantitative techniques reveal patterns, trends, and the spread of information across networks, while qualitative methods help interpret the underlying context, intent, and significance of these patterns. This triangulated approach enhances the validity and reliability of the study by addressing the limitations inherent in single-method research. As Flick (2014) emphasizes, methodological integration allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena. In the context of rapidly evolving digital communication, such an approach is essential to adequately examine the dynamic and multifaceted nature of public opinion.

Data Analysis

Patterns in Public Opinion Formation

Public opinion in India, as in many other societies, is increasingly

shaped by digital communication environments that enable rapid interaction and large-scale participation. Digital campaigns such as #IndiaAgainstCorruption (2011) and #CAAProtests (2019–20) demonstrate how online discourse can mobilize collective action and influence national conversations. These movements highlight the capacity of digital platforms to connect dispersed populations, amplify voices, and transform localized concerns into issues of national and global significance. The immediacy of communication allows individuals to engage in real-time debates, thereby accelerating the formation and evolution of public opinion.

In addition to organized campaigns, everyday digital content such as memes, short videos, and user-generated posts plays a significant role in shaping perceptions. During major political events like general elections, such forms of communication often carry simplified yet powerful messages that influence public sentiment beyond formal political discourse. Messaging platforms, particularly in the Indian context, facilitate communication within smaller, trust-based networks, often in regional languages. This localized and decentralized flow of information enhances accessibility and participation, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, but also presents challenges related to verification and credibility.

Another important dimension is the growing influence of digital opinion leaders. Public figures from entertainment, sports, and social media ecosystems often shape narratives by endorsing, questioning, or remaining silent on key issues. Their reach and cultural resonance contribute to the formation of public opinion in ways that differ from traditional expert-driven discourse, reflecting the unique socio-cultural dynamics of India.

Role of Algorithms

Algorithms play a pivotal role in structuring digital communication and influencing what information users encounter. In the Indian context, their impact is particularly significant due to linguistic diversity, varying levels of digital literacy, and the widespread use of mobile-based platforms. Algorithmic systems prioritize content that generates higher engagement, often amplifying emotionally charged or sensational material. This can intensify polarization and shape opinion through repeated exposure to similar view-points.

The phenomenon of selective exposure is further reinforced in closed communication networks, where repeated sharing of information especially in regional languages can create tightly bound clusters of opinion. Such environments may limit exposure to alternative perspectives, thereby affecting the diversity and balance of public discourse. Instances of misinformation spreading through digital channels illustrate how rapidly

circulating content can influence perceptions and, in some cases, lead to serious social consequences.

Overall, the analysis indicates that while digital communication expands participation and accelerates opinion formation, it also introduces structural and informational challenges. The interplay between user behavior, platform design, and algorithmic filtering significantly shapes the nature, direction, and intensity of public opinion in the digital age.

Case Studies

Elections and Digital Campaigning

Elections in India provide a compelling context to examine the transformation of communication and its impact on public opinion. Beginning with the 2014 and 2019 General Elections often described as India's first "social media elections"-political campaigning has increasingly shifted toward digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter). Parties adopted microtargeting strategies, disseminating tailored messages in regional languages to engage diverse voter groups, including those in rural and semi-urban areas.

This trend has further intensified in the 2024 General Elections and subsequent electoral cycles up to 2026. Political actors now leverage advanced data analytics, artificial intelligence, and short-video platforms to shape narratives and mobilize voters. The rise of AI-generated content, including deepfakes and synthetic media, has introduced new challenges related to authenticity and trust. Although regulatory efforts by institutions like the Election Commission of India have increased, digital campaigning remains difficult to monitor, raising concerns about misinformation, transparency, and electoral integrity.

Public Opinion During and After COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a critical phase in the evolution of digital communication in India. Social media platforms became essential tools for disseminating information, mobilizing resources, and fostering solidarity through campaigns such as #StayHomeIndia and #IndiaFightsCorona. During the second wave in 2021, citizens actively used digital platforms to coordinate access to oxygen, hospital beds, and medicines, demonstrating the positive potential of networked communication.

In the post-pandemic period (2022–2026), digital platforms continue to shape public opinion on health governance, vaccination, and institutional trust. While there has been greater awareness regarding the importance of credible information, misinformation ranging from false

medical claims to conspiracy narratives persists, particularly within closed messaging networks. This dual role of digital communication highlights its capacity to both support and undermine public health responses.

Online Movements and Digital Mobilization

Digital platforms have significantly transformed the nature of social movements and public engagement in India. The #MeTooIndia movement (2018) brought attention to systemic issues of harassment, while the Farmers' Protest (2020–21) demonstrated how digital communication can amplify local struggles to a global audience. These movements illustrate the power of digital tools in shaping discourse, mobilizing participation, and influencing institutional responses.

From 2022 to 2026, digital activism has continued to evolve, with movements addressing employment, environmental concerns, gender justice, and regional issues gaining traction through hashtags, reels, and influencer-driven content. The integration of online and offline strategies has created hybrid forms of mobilization, enhancing both visibility and impact. However, these movements also face counter-campaigns, trolling, and coordinated disinformation, reflecting the contested nature of digital public spaces.

Overall, these case studies reveal that while digital communication has expanded participation and accelerated opinion formation, it has also intensified challenges related to misinformation, regulation, and narrative control. The dynamic interplay between empowerment and manipulation continues to shape the evolving landscape of public opinion in India.

Comparative Analysis: Digital vs. Traditional Opinion Polls

A comparison between digital opinion and traditional survey-based assessments in India reveals important contrasts in representation, immediacy, and reliability. Digital platforms capture real-time reactions and rapidly evolving sentiments, often reflecting the views of urban, younger, and more digitally active populations. For instance, online discourse during the 2019 General Elections prominently emphasized themes such as nationalism and leadership. However, traditional opinion polls indicated that voters were equally, if not more, concerned with everyday issues such as employment, inflation, and rural distress.

This divergence highlights the limitations of treating digital opinion as a comprehensive indicator of national sentiment in a socially and economically diverse country like India. Populations in rural and less digitally connected regions remain underrepresented in online spaces but are more accurately captured through structured surveys conducted by organizations such as CSDS-Lokniti. At the same time, digital platforms

possess a distinct advantage in their ability to generate momentum, shape narratives, and influence discourse almost instantaneously-capabilities that traditional methods, constrained by time and sampling processes, cannot replicate.

Synthesis of Analysis

The Indian context reinforces broader global patterns while introducing unique dimensions shaped by its diversity and scale:

- **Volatility and Virality:** Digital communication enables rapid mobilization, as seen in movements like #CAAProtests and #FarmersProtest, where online discourse quickly translated into large-scale public action.
- **Algorithmic Amplification with Local Nuances:** The impact of algorithms is intensified by India's linguistic diversity and widespread use of messaging platforms, fostering localized echo chambers that reinforce specific narratives.
- **Empowerment and Contestation:** Digital platforms provide space for marginalized voices to emerge, as seen in movements like #MeTooIndia, while simultaneously enabling trolling, misinformation, and competing narratives.
- **Divergence from Ground Realities:** Digital opinion often reflects the concerns of more connected and urban populations, whereas traditional surveys capture grassroots perspectives, suggesting that both forms should be viewed as complementary rather than competing.

In sum, India's experience illustrates both the transformative potential and inherent challenges of digital opinion-making. While digital communication has expanded participation and accelerated discourse, it has also deepened divisions and raised questions about representation and reliability. The coexistence of digital and traditional methods underscores the need for a balanced approach to understanding public opinion in a complex and evolving democratic context.

Key Findings

The analysis demonstrates that digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the pace, scale, and character of public opinion formation. Unlike traditional media systems, which relied on editorial gatekeeping and relatively slower dissemination, platforms such as X, Facebook, and WhatsApp enable instantaneous communication. Public discourse can shift within hours through trending content, as observed during major events such as the Farmers' Protest and the CAA Protests in India. However, this acceleration often comes at the expense of depth and deliberation. The

emphasis on speed and visibility tends to privilege emotionally resonant content over reasoned debate, challenging the ideals of deliberative democratic engagement.

A second key finding is the intensification of polarization. Algorithm-driven content curation prioritizes engagement, often amplifying sensational or divisive material. In the Indian context, repeated exposure to similar viewpoints-particularly through closed messaging networks-has reinforced ideological divides and limited opportunities for constructive dialogue. This dynamic contributes to the emergence of fragmented publics, where individuals engage within bounded informational environments rather than shared spaces of discussion.

At the same time, digital communication has significantly expanded the inclusivity of public discourse. Marginalized groups and previously underrepresented voices now have the ability to participate directly in shaping narratives and demanding accountability. Movements such as #MeTooIndia and #DalitLivesMatter illustrate the empowering potential of digital platforms. Yet, this empowerment is accompanied by a persistent challenge: the erosion of trust due to misinformation. The rapid spread of unverified or manipulated content particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or elections undermines the credibility of digital opinion. This creates a paradox where increased participation coexists with declining trust in information systems.

Implications

For Policymakers

The findings highlight the need for a balanced and adaptive regulatory framework. Measures such as the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 represent important steps toward platform accountability. However, regulation must carefully balance the control of misinformation with the protection of freedom of expression. Strengthening digital literacy, investing in factchecking mechanisms, and ensuring transparency in algorithmic processes are essential for maintaining the integrity of public discourse. Policymakers must recognize that governance in the digital age requires both technological understanding and democratic sensitivity.

For Citizens

Digital communication has created new avenues for participatory democracy, enabling citizens to engage actively in public debates and collective action. However, this expanded participation also demands greater responsibility. The prevalence of bots, deepfakes, and coordinated misinformation campaigns necessitates critical engagement with digital

content. Citizens must develop habits of verification, seek diverse sources of information, and remain cautious of emotionally charged or viral narratives. When used responsibly, digital platforms can foster solidarity and collective problem-solving, as seen in citizen-led initiatives during the COVID-19 crisis.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study largely align with earlier scholarship on echo chambers and selective exposure, particularly the works of Sunstein (2001) and Pariser (2011), which emphasize how algorithmic systems can reinforce ideological divisions. However, this study extends existing literature by highlighting the dual and context-specific nature of digital communication in India. While prior research predominantly focuses on risks such as polarization and misinformation, the present analysis demonstrates that digital platforms also enable constructive mobilization and collective problem-solving. For instance, platforms that have facilitated the spread of misinformation have simultaneously served as critical tools for crisis response and social support, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This duality suggests that digital opinion formation is not inherently democratic or disruptive; rather, its outcomes depend on the interaction between technology, governance frameworks, and patterns of civic engagement.

Limitations

Despite offering important insights, this study has certain limitations. First, restricted access to encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp limits the ability to comprehensively analyze communication flows and opinion dynamics within closed networks. Second, India's linguistic diversity poses challenges, as the analysis is relatively more reflective of English and Hindi content, with limited coverage of regional language discourse. Third, data privacy regulations and platform restrictions constrain access to large-scale longitudinal datasets, thereby limiting the scope for tracking opinion changes over time. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than exhaustive.

Future Research Suggestions

The evolving nature of digital communication necessitates further research in several key areas:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Examining how public opinion evolves across multiple electoral cycles, movements, and crises to understand long-term patterns of digital influence.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons:** Comparing India's digital public sphere

with other democracies to identify both universal trends and context-specific dynamics.

- **AI-Driven Analytical Tools:** Utilizing machine learning and real-time sentiment analysis to better capture shifts in public mood and detect coordinated misinformation or manipulation.

Discussion

The findings highlight both the promise and the challenges of digital platforms in shaping public opinion. On one hand, they enable rapid mobilization, expand participation, and amplify previously marginalized voices. On the other, they contribute to polarization, facilitate misinformation, and place strain on democratic institutions. The Indian experience vividly illustrates this paradox: digital platforms have empowered citizens during social movements and crises, yet they have also intensified divisions and enabled manipulation.

A key concern emerging from this study is the tension between speed and deliberation. While digital communication accelerates opinion formation, it often undermines reflective and reasoned discourse. This has significant implications for democratic engagement, where informed debate is essential. Addressing this challenge requires not only institutional interventions but also a shift toward responsible digital citizenship, where individuals engage critically and ethically within online spaces.

Conclusion

This study examined how the transformation of communication in the digital age has reshaped the formation and expression of public opinion. By employing a mixed-method approach and drawing on both global perspectives and the Indian context, the research highlights the complex and evolving nature of digitally mediated public discourse.

The findings reveal that digital platforms have significantly expanded participation, reduced barriers to expression, and enabled new forms of civic engagement. At the same time, they have introduced challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and algorithmic bias, which complicate the quality and reliability of public opinion. The coexistence of these opportunities and risks underscores the need for a balanced and nuanced understanding of digital communication.

Ultimately, the future of public opinion in the digital age depends on how societies navigate this transformation. Strengthening digital literacy, ensuring transparency in platform governance, and fostering critical engagement among citizens are essential steps toward sustaining democratic values. Public opinion remains central to democratic life, but

its evolving nature requires renewed attention to both its possibilities and its limitations in an increasingly interconnected world.

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