

MEDIA'S ROLE IN DETERMINING ELECTION RESULTS: A CASE STUDY OF OLD AND NEW MEDIA IN THE 2024 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections in India were not only the world's largest democratic franchise exercise, but also a turning point in the engagement between old and new media. The paper explores how television, print and radio (traditional media) and social media, messaging apps, influencers, and algorithmic advertising (new media) influenced narratives, voters' perceptions, turnout behaviour and, ultimately, election outcomes. Employing a mixed-methods approach—triangulating co-temporal reporting, influential think-tank research, CSDS/Lokniti in-field reports, platform transparency reports and secondary research studies—the study identifies four primary mechanisms whereby media influenced the 2024 race: agenda-setting and framing by mass broadcasters; micro-targeting and amplification on platforms; the spread of misinformation and deepfakes; and platform responses and regulatory actions. Results indicate that legacy television exercised disproportionate agenda-setting power in urban and peri-urban news consumption, while new media reinforced targeted messaging, constructed filter bubbles among demographic and linguistic segments, and facilitated both rapid mobilization and the dissemination of disinformation. The convergence of these media spaces—television events re-edited for short-form video, political advertisements re-edited for messaging apps, and influencers connecting old and new audiences—produced hybridized streams of information that benefited campaigns with sophisticated media plans and deep pockets. Policy suggestions include strengthening disclosure norms of political advertisements, multi-language fact-checking infrastructure, platform accountability that addresses India's linguistic diversity, and long-lasting media-literacy interventions targeting first-time and rural voters. The piece concludes that media doesn't single-handedly determine elections, but in 2024 did successfully determine the context of voter decision-making: what was on their agenda, how the candidates were framed, and what

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was “trusted” news—thereby influencing preferences, mobilization and democratic contestation meaning in India.

Keywords

Media effects, disinformation, agenda-setting, social media, TV, Lok Sabha 2024.

Introduction

The Lok Sabha polls of 2024—which happened over multiple rounds on the nation’s geographically diverse landscapes and linguistic plurality—presented a complex media ecosystem where traditional channels (TV networks, newspapers, radio) and new media (social media, messaging apps, influencers, online targeted advertisements) interacted to shape public discourse. With nearly a billion potential voters and an electoral calendar stretching for weeks, the contest was fought out through mainstream primetime debates, thousands of local newspaper columns, millions of WhatsApp groups, and algorithmically-sorted feeds on platforms such as X, Facebook/Instagram, YouTube and new short-form video platforms. It was this diversity and range that created the election as a natural laboratory for studying the media’s influence on political behaviour and electoral outcomes.

Media research has traditionally emphasized agenda-setting and framing as means through which information environments shape issue salience and evaluative standards for citizens (what to think) and framing (how to think). In India’s 2024 election, these traditional mechanisms were layered over new ones: (1) micro-targeted communication made possible by platform advertising and data analysis; (2) amplification through influencer networks and platform virality; and (3) high-velocity disinformation, such as AI-powered deepfakes and denuded context content spreading on end-to-end encrypted messaging platforms. The result was a hybrid media ecology in which broadcast headlines could be chopped into bite-sized clips to seed WhatsApp chains, as well as hyper-targeted commercials which tried to lock down attitudinal priors in thin demographic slices.

And so, comprehension of the role of media in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is both empirically urgent and normatively charged. Empirically, researchers and policymakers have to be able to assess how news flows shape vote choice, turnout and intergroup attitudes. Normatively, stakes are high for democracy: media cultures prioritizing speed over fact-checking or sensationalism over substance can manipulate deliberation and close down the space for well-informed consent. Some research questions for this paper are: (a) How did old media and new media respectively construct electoral narratives in 2024? (b) How did the two sectors interact to generate or contain disinformation? (c) Which institutional and technological levers were most determinative of outcomes—and how could reform contain harms without snuffing out civic debate?

Methodologically, this analysis draws on contemporaneous reporting by leading news organizations, think-tank briefings, CSDS/Lokniti studies, platform transparency reports and select academic scholarship on media influence and disinformation in India. The ambition is not to offer a complete empirical causal model—rarely an alternative except in behemoth, first-order datasets—but to map mechanisms and make evidence-informed policy recommendations based on observed patterns in the 2024 electoral cycle. The remainder of the paper then proceeds with a short literature review, three content-analytical sections (traditional media dynamics; new media, micro-targeting and disinformation; and institutional responses and policy framework), and concludes with a synthesis and policy implications.

Literature Review

The media and elections scholarship integrates traditional communication theory with newer research on digital platforms.

Conventional agenda-setting and framing research confirms that the media establish issue salience and frames of interpretation for voter priorities; these models have been used in the Indian context by researchers, who have pointed to television’s particular contribution to national-level agenda-setting. Findings of recent comparison research by the Reuters Institute and scholar communities show a global trend: while mainstream media remain reliable sources for the majority, digital media redescribe reach and attention economies—tending to privilege engagement-oriented content over deliberative journalism. Growing data set tracks disinformation system in India, tracing how end-to-end encrypted messaging apps (specifically WhatsApp), local language systems and influencer chains transmit unsubstantiated information and artificial media rapidly. Research and investigations by mainstream media and nongovernmental researchers in 2024 highlighted examples of AI-generated deepfakes and politically charged advertising that had slipped through the cracks of moderation; the study highlights gaps in platform enforcement and the challenges of moderating content in hundreds of Indian languages.

Think-tank analyses (Carnegie, ORF, CSDS/Lokniti) and academic briefings concur on two aspects: one, media influence is conditional—dependent upon media consciousness, local social networks and institutional trust; two, hybridisation of media suggests interventions that are multi-faceted, with a mix of regulatory openness, platform cooperation, fact-checking in local languages and investments in public information campaigns. This literature provides analytical inputs into the 2024 case study below.

Television remained the leading medium of news consumption in 2024, especially in urban and semi-urban India. Its presence and visual influence influenced elections through rallies, interviews, and live debates. Agenda-setting and framing determined what issues entered public attention and how they were understood. Television, though, frequently centered on spectacle rather than policy. Ownership trends and advertiser power determined coverage, with some networks taking partisan stances. Print and radio provided supporting acts, providing depth and local veracity but not television's spontaneity. Significantly, television content also supplied digital outlets, where excerpts were repurposed for viral transmission. Legacy media therefore both established agendas and provided content for digital boosting.

Digital platforms revolutionized campaigning by making targeted persuasion possible. Ads, brief videos, and influencers conveyed messages targeted to linguistic, demographic, and regional groups. WhatsApp was a unique space as a reliable but transparent channel where disinformation propagated with speed. Disinformation showed up in various guises—miscontextualized videos, AI deepfakes, and selectively edited footage—disproportionately impacting communities with poorer moderation. Influencers obfuscated boundaries between entertainment and persuasion and tended to amplify party messages in subtle but robust ways. Algorithms maximized emotional content, while transparent targeting hampered accountability. Parallely, digital media facilitated fact-checking and mobilization, though corrective actions usually trailed behind misinformation.

The Election Commission of India released advisories and voter education campaigns, yet enforcement lagged behind digital strategy. Platforms declared election integrity efforts and transparency processes, but enforcement loopholes persisted, particularly in languages.

Civil society organizations tracked disinformation and pushed platforms for change, though a lack of resources limited their impact. Legal arguments persist on ad disclosures, data transparency, and regulation, with potential overreach if free speech is restricted. Asymmetries in resources conferred an advantage on those with advanced digital operations, and issues of fairness were raised.

The 2024 elections showcased the integration of old and new media. Television remained at the heart of national agenda-setting, while digital media excelled at micro-targeting and virality. Together they developed a hybrid media ecology that determined what voters were exposed to, how they evaluated credibility, and how they organized. Media power was strong but not deterministic, subject to literacy, trust, and availability. For enhancing democratic resilience, India needs increased transparency in political adverts, increased multilingual moderation,

support for independent media, and sustained investment in media literacy. The media does not determine outcomes, but it sets the context in which democratic decisions are taken.

Conclusion

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections show that traditional and digital media ecosystems do not work in separative ways; they are constitutively interlinked.

Television still dictated national agendas through compelling storytelling and prime-time penetration. New media offered precision instruments for micro-targeting, speed mobilisation and viral storytelling. End-to-end encrypted messaging multiplied the speed and intimacy of information flows, and influencer economies dissolved boundaries between entertainment and persuasion. Cumulatively, these forces reshaped the informational environment in ways that made a material difference in voters' comprehension of issues, assessment of candidates and organization of political action. Yet media power is contingent not deterministic.

The success of media tactics is contingent on audience media literacy, local social trust networks, socio-economic technology access, and institutional credibility. In 2024, victors in the media environment were those actors and campaigns who were able to marry broadcast visibility with specialist digital engagement and possess the means to produce multilingual content that could move on a local level. Meanwhile, disinformation and misinformation targeted loopholes in platform regulation, language coverage and public awareness—giving a structural edge to stories that operated on grounds of affect and simplicity over detailed policy debate. Policy remedies need therefore to be multi-pronged.

In total, the 2024 Lok Sabha polls were influenced by a mixed media environment in which old and new media supported each other's strengths and weaknesses.

The media did not mechanically decide the result, yet it significantly shaped the interpretive context in which political decisions were undertaken. To guarantee coming elections are won by deliberation rather than deception, India—and democratic societies at large—need to commit resources to transparency, multilingual enforcement, media literacy and institutional innovations that align platform incentives with the public interest. Only by correcting these systemic features will the media be able to continue to inform rather than distort democratic decision-making

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