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Original Article

Media & Politics in the Post-COVID Era: The Transformation of Communication, Public Opinion and Governance

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed societies in all parts of the world, not only in terms of altering political landscapes, but in also changing the role of media in shaping public opinion, political discourse and governance. In this paper, the focus is on the ways in which the media adapted during the pandemic, the use of media by political actors to stay in power and influence, and the fact that the pandemic exacerbates the already present challenges of misinformation and media concentration. The paper ends with reflections on the long-term impact for democratic processes, public participation and the integrity of the media in the post-COVID world.

Introduction:

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020 has affected the world in so many ways, including on the health and economic level as well as the way in which societies communicate and address political matters. All campaigns, news distribution and public discourse moved almost entirely online, thanks to physical distancing.Political campaigns, news dissemination, and public discourse were done almost exclusively online, with the implementation of physical distancing. Social media, digital news and online political activism have become increasingly important during the pandemic, driving considerable shifts in media–politics interactions (1).

This paper looks into the relationship between media and politics in the post-COVID world. It emphasizes the changing nature of digital media, the emergence of misinformation, and the ways in which political players have responded to these trends in order to claim and wield public opinion (2). Lastly, it covers the implications for democracy and governance in the wake of the global crisis.

Digital Media Surge in the Post-COVID Era:

This is because the pandemic has pushed the migration from traditional media toward social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok as the key sources of political information. Real time communication became essential as a result of social distancing and lockdowns, with politicians and governments disseminating information and influencing public opinion through social media. It was also the pandemic that enabled political actors to sidestep traditional media, which has enhanced online campaigns in organising, fundraising, and voter engagement.

The increasing prevalence of Misinformation and Disinformation:

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an unprecedented level of misinformation and disinformation spread, especially about the virus itself, vaccines, and government measures (3). Social media flooded with fake information, spreading conspiracy theories and politically driven information. The algorithms that pushed sensational content further fueled mistrust in public health and elections.Algorithms that spread sensational content further reinforced mistrust in public health and elections. Misinformation about voting systems and mail-in ballots, for instance, had a significant effect on the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. Although attempts have been made to reduce the proliferation of misinformation, platforms still faced a large amount of harmful content (4).

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The Media's Part in Polarization of Society:

Political polarization has risen in the post-Covid period and the media has multiplied and reinforced divisions.The polarization has increased in the post-Covid period, as has the media that caters to fragmented audiences. Social media algorithms designed to maximize engagement have fostered echo chambers, and deepen existing beliefs (5). This has been particularly noticeable during the pandemic with polarized issues around mask mandates and vaccinations. Political actors exploited digital media to mobilise, polarising. Traditional news media also became more polarized, with biased reporting which put citizens in the middle between competing perspectives.

Digital Activism and Political Mobilization:

Digital activism also increased, due to the use of social media during lockdowns for political movements in the post-COVID period (6). Farmers' unions in India mobilized global support during the protests in 2020-2021 through the use of digital platforms, for example, and Black Lives Matter amplified its message online (7), social media emerged as a unique medium for political conversation, protest and social justice campaigns, particularly among younger people who are more inclined to organize via online platforms than in-person (8).

Theoretical Framework:

Agenda-Setting Theory:

This theory posits that media does not determine thoughts, rather, it focuses the attention of the public on certain problems, which cause them to think about it. Post-COVID, digital platforms dominated the public agenda with health measures, vaccines, and political responses dominating the agenda, whereas social media and news media were gatekeepers to attention. Studying the role of news media coverage in the pandemic to draw in the public's attention to important political issues and to guide political discussion about COVID-19, public health and elections.

Spiral of Silence Theory:

This theory proposes that individuals will not voice opinions if they believe that their opinions are minority opinions, thus reducing their perspectives in the public discourse. In the age of COVID-19, political polarization on social media platforms have created a dominant perspective, where other minority voices such as anti-lockdown or anti-vaccine perspectives were unable to be represented due to backlash. Exploring the role of digital platforms during the pandemic in the expression of political opinions of minorities in a polarized society.

Two-Step Flow Theory

Media influences on public opinion is indirect by means of opinion leaders that are persons or groups that consume the media and have an influence to the people in their surroundings. social media influencers, such as activists, celebrities, and politicians, have been instrumental in shaping public opinion on the pandemic by interpreting, sharing, and influencing the public health perspectives, political actions, and votes during the pandemic. Examining how digital opinion leaders affect political discourse, public health knowledge, and the call to action in relation to vaccines, lockdowns and elections during the pandemic.

Review Of Literature:

Chadwick, A. & Dennis, J. (2021). Social media, polarization and the COVID-19 pandemic. Journal of Political Communication.

In this study, the authors examine the role that the Covid-19 pandemic played in exacerbating political polarization via social media. It shows how political parties and groups leveraged social media to try to sell their message, sometimes amplifying existing polarisation over government responses to the pandemic. The authors explore how social media has contributed to polarization of discourse and how the digital medium has come to be increasingly central for political participation in the midst of the health crisis.The authors consider the contribution of social media to polarizing discourse and the growing importance of the digital medium for political engagement in the midst of the health crisis.

Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., & Pennycook, G. (2020). The science of fabrications. Science.

Lazer et al. explore the issue of misinformation and disinformation during COVID-19 and how it spread over social media platforms. The paper states that misinformation during the pandemic went well beyond being a public health problem, as both political camps exploited false information to sway public opinion and political results.

Tufekci, Z. (2021). The COVID-19 infodemic and the issue of misinformation. Nature Medicine.

Tufekci speaks about the dangers of misinformation in the pandemic, especially the way that social media platforms were used to spread false health information. The paper highlights the need to consider algorithmic amplification as an agent of misinformation and its impact on the trust of the population in health authorities and government policies, and consequently, in politics.

Graham, T., & Shaw, D. (2020). Polarization in the digital age: Social media during COVID-19. You can download the full text of the article from the European Journal of Communication.

Graham and Shaw look at how social media helped to further polarize the political during Covid. They claim the echo chambers created by digital platforms played a role in spreading divisive political messages, particularly related to health measures and vaccine distribution. The article offers a comprehensive overview of the role of social media in exacerbating political polarisation in the world during the crisis.

Klein, M., & Mayer, A. (2021). Digital activism during the COVID-19 pandemic: The example of the Black Lives Matter movement. Journal of Digital Activism.

This paper examines how social media has played a role in the Black Lives Matter movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Klein and Mayer emphasize the role of digital platforms in becoming all-important tools for grassroots political action that will facilitate activism even during periods of distancing. The authors claim that the pandemic has ushered in a transformation of political engagement, moving towards digital spaces for social justice

movements.The authors state that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought a turning point in political engagement in the direction of digital spaces for social justice movements.

Boulianne, S. (2020). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of the present study. Information, Communication & Society.

Boulianne does a meta-analysis of the relationship between social media use and political participation, and concludes that social media was a key driver of political discourse during the pandemic. The paper proposes that digital media provided new ways of engagement, especially for younger generations, who were less likely to engage in traditional politics. This shift is put in context of the pandemic's impact on political activity.

Fraser, N. (2021). Public Sphere: Reinventing Democracy in the Post COVID-19 Era. Journal of Social Philosophy Digital Age.

Fraser speaks about the changing nature of the public sphere in the digital age, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic. She feels that during the pandemic, she has seen the traditional media's shortcomings in supporting the democratic discourse and there's a new way of public engagement to the digital media. This change will have implications for democratic processes in the post-pandemic world, the paper explores.

Wells, G. (2020). Political Communication and Media influence in the era of COVID-19. Political Communication Review.

Wells delves into the changing dynamics of political communication and media in the pandemic era. He points to the importance of digital media in the political campaign, news reporting and public health communication. Wells shares his thoughts on the implications for media independence, specifically that media consolidation could have negatively impacted political diversity and the government's response to the pandemic.

Hindman, M. (2021). The internet and the crisis of democracy: Political polarization and media fragmentation in the digital age. Journal of Democracy.

Hindman examines the larger implications of digital media's impact on democracy, contending that the COVID-19 pandemic and hyper-fracturing/polarization of media platforms have helped to create a crisis of democracy. The study analyzes the strategies adopted by political actors to counteract these developments, and how they have leveraged digital spaces to empower themselves and, at the same time, created political polarization.

Objectives:

1. To analyze the impact of the digital media on political communication during the covid-19 pandemic and post-covid-19 era.
2. To explore misinformation and disinformation, how it has proliferated and how it affects people.
3. To gauge the impact of media on polarization of political parties.
4. To investigate the effect of digital activism and the rise of it in political mobilization.
5. To study the long-term consequences for democratic process and governance

Methodology:

Case Studies

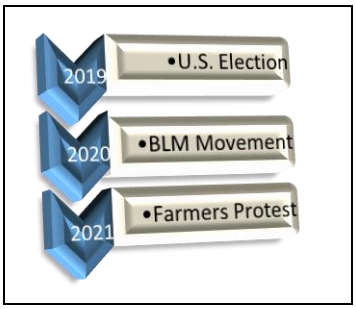
The paper will contain case studies of political events and movements which digital media played a significant role in during and after the pandemic. This includes:

The U.S. 2020 presidential election: a digital media analysis of how public opinion has been influenced, how misinformation has been disseminated about the election process, and how disinformation has spread following the election.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement: Through a social media lens, understanding how the BLM movement used social media to organize protests, mobilize people across the globe and impact public policy throughout the pandemic.

In India, Farmers Protests: Investigating how the digital platforms enabled political mobilization and the dissemination of alternative narratives on the protests and government response.

Analysis of the Case Studies:



(Case Studies Flowchart or Timeline)

The U.S. 2020 Presidential Election is the subject of Case Study 1.Case Study 1: The U.S. 2020 Presidential Election.

With COVID-19 forcing campaigns to turn to digital platforms for political engagement, the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election saw a significant increase in digital media. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube were pivotal, becoming the hubs of social media during the election as both major parties and grassroots groups leveraged these platforms to make an impact on the public and reach voters. Digital media enabled messages to be targeted to demographics, especially with the use of data analytics, and

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campaigns were constructed around highly-charged messaging to energize supporters.

This dependence on digital media, however, also helped to spread misinformation and disinformation. Those rumors of mail-in ballots and voting integrity were quickly shared on social media. Leaders and celebrities, including President Trump, spread false claims that the election had been "stolen," further sowing doubts about the integrity of democratic systems. The Capitol Rioters are a small group of individuals, who are failing to realize that their actions were driven by a combination of digital media, misinformation, and political violence.These disinformation campaigns led to the January 6th Capitol riot, and the digital platforms and misinformation were unable to prevent its spread despite efforts to do so.

This is a case study on Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement.

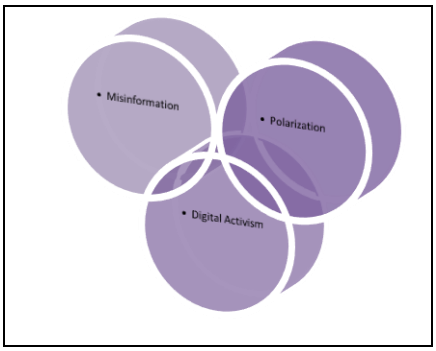
Digital media has been a critical tool in the building of the Black Lives Matter movement and its mobilization around the world. With public gathering restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement needed to shift to online platforms to keep going. After experiencing police brutality and systemic racism, social media platforms became a must-have tool to share information, mobilize protesters, and promote policy change.

This BLM movement really became global in 2020 when George Floyd was killed, and his video went viral on sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The platforms facilitated international organization of protests and resonance of the message of racial justice. The hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter, helped to spark solidarity actions in other countries including the U.K. and France, while digital tools helped activists circumvent traditional media, organize events, and raise funds. Influencing public opinion and policy discussions about police reform and racial justice, BLM's digital presence has been a major factor despite challenges such as misinformation and counter-narratives.

Case study 3: Farmer's protest in India

The Farmers' Protests in India, which began in the final months of 2020, is a clear example of the power of digital media in generating political mobilisation. The protests quickly expanded when new agricultural laws were promulgated that farmers were concerned would negatively affect their lives. Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube played a vital role in organizing the protests, countering the biased news coverage by traditional media and disseminating alternative narratives to a greater audience.

Additionally, social media played a key role in putting the farmers' cause on the global map, with the hashtag #FarmersProtest gaining popularity internationally and influential figures such as celebrities and politicians lending their voice to the plight of the farmers. WhatsApp has been used to organize protests and update news, despite government regulations. The use of social media was instrumental in keeping the movement alive, even in the face of efforts to prevent digital platforms from being used, and finally secured the repeal of the obstructive legislation, demonstrating the strength of digital activism.

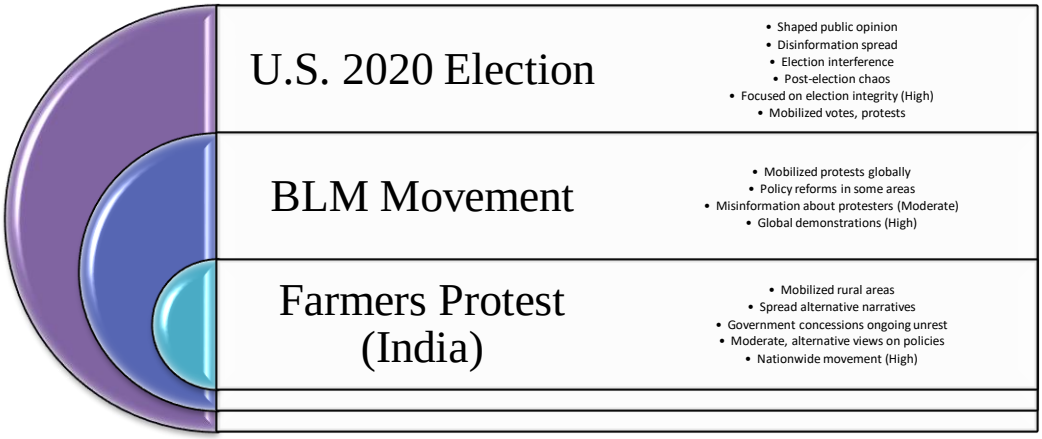


(Relationship Between Misinformation, Polarization, Digital Activism)

	Short-Term Impact	Medium-Term Impact	Long-Term Implications
Impact on Public Opinion	☺		
Influence on Policy			
Electoral Integrity		☺	
Political Mobilization	☺		
Democratic Backsliding		☺	

(Framework for Assessing Digital Media's Influence on Democratic Processes)

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(Comparative Analysis Diagram Case Studies)

Findings:

The use of social media was a major element to polarize public opinion with targeted campaigns targeting certain voters.

Misinformation relating to voting processes and election integrity rapidly proliferated online.

Social media algorithms prioritize sensational content, encouraging emotional interactions and polarization.

Digital platforms played an important role in organizing protests and movements, including the Capitol riot and BLM protests.

The COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the transition to digital activism, with online platforms playing a vital role in organizing and advocacy.

The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and #FarmersProtest were able to increase movements and garner worldwide support.

Suggestions:

To gain the trust of voters in future campaigns, it is important to focus on ethical application of data and transparency in targeting.

Platforms need to do more to combat misinformation, and better to moderate and fact-check content.

Platforms must engage with experts and authorities to stop harmful mobilisation and ensure freedom of expression.

Activists need to use social media to build solidarity, but they need to be aware of hashtag hijacking and misinformation.

Ultimately, the actions should result in more decentralized networks that enable communication and outreach even when platforms are closed.

Conclusion:

Media-Politics relationship has been drastically changed in the post-COVID world. The pandemic has further underscored the importance of digital media in informing, providing opportunities for connection and engagement for citizens, while also demonstrating how easily it can be used or manipulated for misinformation and political polarisation. Media platforms offered political actors a direct avenue to reach citizens, but also posed new challenges in the form of misinformation, echo chambers, and media concentration.

In a post-pandemic world, it is important to acknowledge the impact of the pandemic on political communication. Balancing the free flow of information, ensuring information's accuracy, and engaging in civil discussion in a polarized media environment are key issues in the future of democracy that need to be addressed in balancing the free flow of information. In the current context of the pandemic, it has become more important than ever to have media literacy, transparency and accountability in political communication as a way to ensure a clean political process.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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