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Indian online news environment not fragmented along partisan lines during election; digital-born and regional, vernacular-language media top Twitter and Facebook election engagement, respectively

- Regional news outlets dominate the provision of political information on Facebook, with non-English, vernacular-language outlets by far the most active on the platform. National broadcasters come a distant second.
- On Twitter, digital-born outlets and national daily newspapers were the most active during the elections, though national broadcasters were close behind.
- Audience mapping suggests there is little fragmentation along partisan lines as exists in the wider political sphere.

In the wake of the Indian general election, new research finds that political polarisation in the online media environment during the campaign was not as high as has been suggested, and that digital news outlets competed with national daily newspapers to become the dominant voice in news on Twitter.

These are some of the findings in new research from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, [‘Online Audience Engagement with Legacy and Digital-Born News Media in the 2019 Indian Elections’](#). The fact sheet examines 101 of the most important news outlets including national and regional media, legacy and digital-born, and print and broadcast media, weighted by their reach and social media engagement.

The researchers mapped Twitter users’ engagement with media outlets’ feeds to gauge whether they interact with a variety of sources or remain in “echo chambers”. The exercise revealed that levels of polarisation in online news consumption are not as high as one may think, with Indian news audiences consuming a substantially diverse array of news sources, in contrast, perhaps to the growing political polarisation in the country. The report’s authors write:

“Our analysis thus provides a reminder that while the existence of active, visible, and vocal partisan minorities engaged in often highly polarised debates (sometimes in orchestrated ways driven by particular political agendas) can create the impression that the overall online environment in India is fragmented along partisan lines, our findings suggests that is not the case overall.”

Further key findings include:

- Both digital-born and legacy national outlets prioritised the use of Twitter over Facebook, reflective of the platform’s use in urban areas and the English-speaking core audiences for such outlets.
- Digital-born news outlets across India show a higher proportional level of audience engagement across social media compared to the legacy media.
- Video narratives have the highest engagement levels on Facebook (similar to what has been observed in other countries).

Sílvia Majó-Vázquez, lead author of the fact sheet, said: “India has recently seen a sharp growth of new media entrants which have been able to draw increasing audience attention on social media and the web. Yet, until now, we lacked evidence to know how Indian news audiences were distributed in this new scenario. As shown, far from being clustered within a small number of news outlets, Indian audiences broadly have an omnivorous media diet which does not mirror patterns of audience polarisation.”

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, co-author of the fact sheet, said: “This is a very important contribution to understand how people consumed news online during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and the increasing competition between legacy media and digital-born media to draw voters’ attention. Given the dearth of empirical studies on the topic in India, this could be a benchmark for future researchers to compare how online space are being used for political mobilization.”

Selected figures

Figure 2. Volume of Facebook posts over time by media type

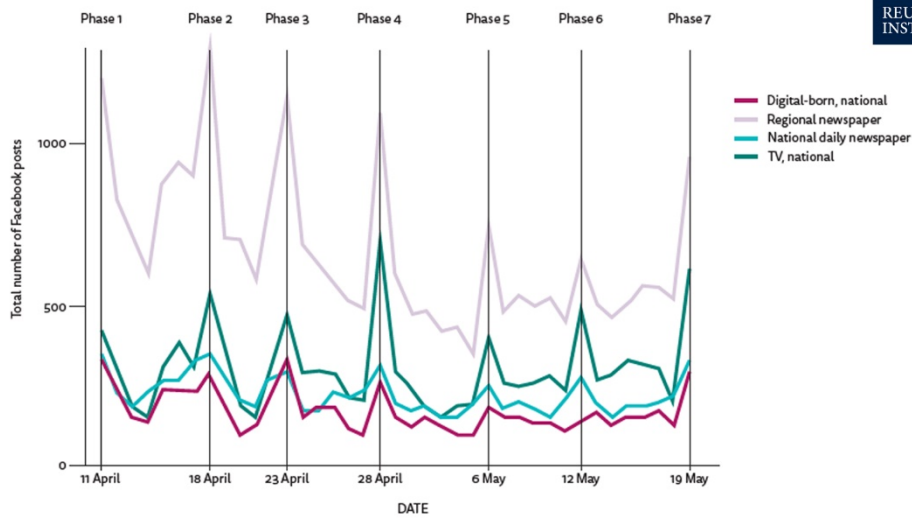
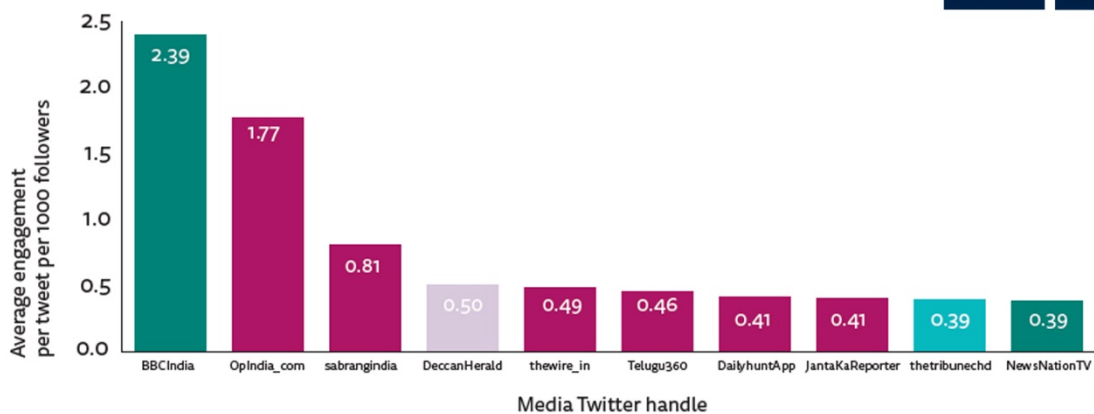


Figure 5. Engagement on Twitter by media outlet



METHODOLOGY

The researchers analysed the online activity of 101 news outlets across the country combining audience reach, measured by Comscore, and those with a high visibility on social media. They monitored 66,000 Facebook posts and over 63 million tweets from 78 and 73 outlets, respectively, across the country. For the structural analysis, they applied a 'community detection walktrap algorithm' to an audience map to identify the numbers of fragmented communities across the network of news organisations. Analysis took place during the seven phases of the election period which began on 11 April and ended 19 May 2019.

ENDS

For further information please contact Matthew Leake, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, +44 (0)1865 611099, matthew.leake@politics.ox.ac.uk. The link to the report will go live once the embargo is lifted.

About the authors

Sílvia Majó-Vázquez is a communication researcher and Post-doctoral Research Fellow at Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Her research areas include news audience behavior, digital news structure and the role of new and legacy media in the online news domain.

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Rasmus Kleis Nielsen is Director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and Professor of Political Communication at the University of Oxford. His work focuses on changes in the news media, on political communication, and the role of digital technologies in both. He has done extensive research on journalism, news media, campaign communication, and various forms of activism across the world.

About the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

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