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Digital Spaces and Political Mobilisation

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century has ushered in an unprecedented era of digital transformation, fundamentally altering how society organizes, communicates, and engages in political discourse. This paper examines how digital spaces have reshaped political mobilization, particularly in the Indian context, where traditional hierarchical frameworks are being challenged by new forms of digital engagement. Through an analysis of the 2024 Indian General Elections, the study explores how political parties have adapted their mobilization strategies to leverage digital infrastructure within a competitive electoral framework. The paper demonstrates how digital spaces witness and further a kind of 'stalagmite mobilization', contrary to Nettl's (1967) traditional conception for developing countries, as digitalization enables mainstream political participation beyond physical boundaries. Drawing on Habermas's (1991) conceptualization of the public sphere and Chadwick's (2017) hybrid media systems, an attempt is made to examine how digital platforms facilitate the transformation of constructed narratives into perceived reality through algorithmic amplification and affective resonance. While digital spaces create new opportunities for political engagement and innovative approaches to e-governance, they simultaneously present challenges through misinformation, surveillance, and digital divides which necessitates the reconceptualization of political mobilization even more.

Keywords: *Digital Spaces, Political Mobilization, Platform Governance, Algorithmic Mediation, Digital Public Sphere, Digital Transformation, Political Communication, Digital Legitimation, E-panopticon, Digital Governmentality*

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in an unprecedented era of digital transformation, fundamentally altering how society organises, communicates, and engages in political discourse. The technology-driven 'Information Age' saw a proliferation of computers and information devices and was enabled by a network of satellites and broadband fibre optic cables, paving the way for 'the rise of the network society' (Castells, 2011). Technology is society made durable (Latour, 1991) with agency digitised. The Internet creates a virtual landscape with new technology, a space which becomes personal, political and ideological. It blurs the traditional "organically social" notion and emerges as a non-place (Auge, 2009) of concealed identities and anonymity. Building on the foundation of technological advancement and network society, political organisations and movements adopt strategies to leverage digital infrastructure in a competitive electoral framework guided, sustained and influenced by digital spaces (Neudert & Marchal, 2019). Digital spaces may be defined as 'mathematized' spaces structured by algorithms, networks, and data flows. It is devoid of embodied spatial experience of "being together" in terms of bodily proximity (Hardesty & Sheredos, 2019). It concerns digital technologies and how people interact with them and through them (Benyon, 2014). Digital spaces enable virtual interactions mediated by technology, forming communities based on algorithmic connections and shared digital experiences, fundamentally transforming how bonds are formed and maintained.

Political participation is the cornerstone and essence of democracy. Different voices and opinions influence the voting behaviour and ultimately the policies of the government. Political participation of people does not only refer to their voting in elections, but is also expressed through public debates, campaigning, gatherings, newspaper articles, protests, joining political organizations, advocating for specific policies or issues etc. The digital spaces today re-vitalize civic engagement in politics in an unprecedented way. With the rising popularity of social media platforms, people engage in political discourse, disseminate information and mobilize support and connect for various political causes. The digital spaces present a unique paradox as the traditional dichotomy between the 'real' and 'fake' becomes obsolete in this context, as the virtual may not be tangible but cannot be disregarded as a mere simulation. The transformation of political mobilisation in digital spaces represents not a departure from reality but rather an expansion of what constitutes political reality in the contemporary era. Political mobilisation refers to the act of "organising groups, social networks, crowds, and social units for political goals" to garner and manage

the support of people on an issue or multiple issues (Oberschall, 2011). Nettl defines political mobilization as the 'collective and structured expression of commitment and support within society' (Nettl, 1967). Political mobilisation in the digiscape witnesses the coordination of virtual communities, online campaigns, and digital activism within algorithmically mediated platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, etc. in contrast to traditional forms of crowd management and crowd sourcing. A platform ecosystem is a collection of networked platforms that are governed by a specific set of mechanisms which influence daily activities, in turn altering social order and the fundamental organisation of societies (Keskin, 2018). Emerging deterritorialized culture represents a fundamental reimagining of political reality and not just a tactical shift. The "technological acceleration, acceleration of social change, and acceleration of the pace of life" for the sustenance and maintenance of "socioeconomic and institutional status quo" (Rosa, 2017) is manifested in the creation of a hybrid political landscape where digital spaces serve as legitimate and powerful arenas for political discourse and organisation.

Mass mobilisation, as traditionally practiced by political parties in India, operates through a hierarchical, top-down framework where parties exercise significant control over political action, henceforth, mass mobilisation cannot be equated with mass participation. Political mobilisation in developing countries is from the top of the institutional ladder towards downwards exhibiting top-down mobilisation (stalactite mobilisation) instead of upward towards authority from the bottom (stalagmite mobilisation). But the current regime in a developing country like India's goes beyond Nettl's idea of mobilisation and the stalagmite and stalactite conceptualisation. Digital spaces witness and furthers a kind of stalagmite mobilisation, contrary to what Nettl envisaged for developing countries, as through digitalisation, mobilisation does not remain peripheral or physical. It is out there and becomes the digitally induced mainstream political mobilisation which is more towards mass participation. This kind of political mobilisation in the digital space becomes a stronger transmitting source of transformation in modern societies, whether through messaging applications like WhatsApp or through other social media platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, YouTube, etc. Political parties have adapted to platform-specific features such as Instagram reels for youth engagement, YouTube Live for interactive sessions, Twitter Spaces for political debates, WhatsApp Communities for grassroots organisation, etc. They act as a tool that helps organise, influence, and manage political mobilisation because of their accessibility, instantaneous flow of information, and reach, allowing mass participation.

Information achieves viral status rapidly, demonstrating what Jenkins, Ford & Green (2013) call 'spreadable media'. Digital platforms hence become political tools and political arenas which influence political processes and shape government policies and strategies. The role of platforms in political mobilisation extends beyond mere communication channels. Political participation through digital spaces takes a different form in obtaining support and mobilising funds, projecting the reach of the digital logic of power. As Van Dijk et al. (2018) argue, platforms have become infrastructural to political communication, creating "platform governance" through rules, algorithms, and policies that shape political discourse and mobilisation patterns. The collection and analysis of user data represents a new form of power- knowledge in the Foucauldian sense where political behaviour is simultaneously monitored and shaped. Platform algorithms create e-panopticons where users' political expressions are constantly monitored and regulated. In India, this digital governmentality manifests in state- sanctioned platform surveillance through *Information Technology [Intermediaries Guidelines (Amendment) Rules] 2018*, content regulation through *Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023* (DPDPA), and algorithmic control of political narratives. Political discourse also becomes subject to platform-specific disciplinary mechanisms with the due consent of the state, from content moderation to algorithmic amplification. This creates new forms of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 2007) where political behaviour is shaped through digital architectures rather than direct control.

Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph's seminal work, *The Modernity of Tradition* (1967) offers an extensive analysis of political mobilisation categorised into three types: vertical, horizontal, and differential mobilisation. Each of these forms continues to develop in the modern digital environment while preserving its essential attributes. Vertical mobilisation, defined by conventional authority frameworks, functions via established hierarchies in which traditional notables attain political backing. This kind of mobilisation is fundamentally dependent on hierarchical organisation and interdependent connections. In the contemporary platform society, while digital platforms have altered the methods of vertical mobilisation, the fundamental notion of hierarchical control persists in many political organisations in the form of party-controlled social media channels, official digital communications, verified political accounts and centralised digital campaigns. Horizontal mobilisation offers a more equitable framework, whereby class or community leaders and their specialised organisations facilitate political support. Such a classification disrupts hierarchies, resulting in the creation of newer patterns of

socio-political division. The introduction of digital platforms has substantially facilitated horizontal mobilisation, encouraging the establishment of peer-to-peer networks, social media movements, digital grassroots organising, hashtag activism, etc. Differential mobilisation, possibly the most sophisticated of the three, comprises political parties and integrative frameworks engaging distinct groups via numerous pathways. This method combines ideology, emotion, and curiosity to elicit both direct and indirect support. In the digital age, differentiated mobilisation has emerged via cross-platform engagement, algorithmic targeting, data-driven campaign strategies and customised political messaging across several platforms.

The Indian General Elections, 2024 witnessed the emergence of social media platforms as key combat zones for parties as these platforms enable the quick dissemination of messages, news and political commentary to enable communication, engagement and debate in real time. It served as the mega stage for a showdown between *#PhirEkBaarModiSarkar* and *#HathBadlegaHalaat*. The Bharatiya Janata Party maintained a dominant position in terms of social media presence and reach with a staggering 23.54 percent, exceeding the reach of major opposition parties including Congress, AAP, and Trinamool Congress combined as of April, 2024 (Paliwal, 2024). The consistent updates and streaming of Congress's *Bharat Jodo Yatra* and *Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra* were orchestrated to weed out Rahul Gandhi's image of a *shehzada* (prince) and assert him as a compassionate leader catering to the grassroots of the country's centre to the peripheries. On the other hand, the now ruling party, BJP, engaged in the live streaming of every political rally, event and roadshow attended by the Prime Minister to showcase him as a dedicated, relentless, and determined *karmath* (hardworking). Additionally, social media campaigns like *#MainBhiChowkidar* or *#BharatJodoYatra* pivoted an immersive experience for citizens and non-residents (Indian diaspora) to transform from being passive content viewer and content consumer to a content creator who feels connected to the ongoing movements occurring in real time. Such a shift is indicative of how the voting population engaged with the political processes at play henceforth propelling a dynamic and an interactive democratic discourse. Moreover, such campaigns are particularly effective in capturing the attention of undecided and swing voters.

Digital spaces emerged as the site for neo-social movements in the 21st century based on its potentiality to strengthen collective political mobilisation and transform how individuals share information or organise movements and protests particularly through targeted messaging that can reach specific

demographic groups through carefully crafted language, rhetoric, and emotional appeals. The modern political landscape in India demonstrates Chadwick's concept of hybrid media systems where both traditional media and new media not only coexist but actively shape and influence each other in facilitating political communication. This is evident in how various political parties in India like Congress, BJP, AAP, etc. have adapted their communication strategies. A radio programme, *Mann Ki Baat*, where the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi addresses the country on matters concerning national interest in its episodes, is also available in various channels and platforms like government websites, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), etc. Inputs and suggestions of the citizens are taken for the address through the Narendra Modi App, MyGov Open Forum and a toll-free number making individual personalised engagement and experience possible. This is testimony to the hybrid logic of operation as it combines both traditional and new media forms for its dissemination and circulation. Similarly, Congress party's *Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra*, a physical political rally aimed at seeking justice for social, economic and political issues and atrocities that plague the country witnessed widespread digital engagement and circulation because of its strong cross platform digital presence. The social media depiction of Rahul Gandhi projected the opposition leader as a people's leader walking hand in hand with the masses across the Indian subcontinent as he capitalised on the speak on camera format. Both Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi maintained traditional political messaging while adapting to the digital platforms. One can observe that such a hybrid approach fundamentally reshapes how political parties manage and curate their mobilization strategies, blending physical presence with digital engagement allowing the movement to resonate both on the ground and in virtual spaces. It also impacts how political mobilization has evolved from traditional patterns.

The BJP showcases a bottom-up approach (stalagmite mobilisation) and the Congress party, a top-down structure (stalactite mobilisation), with respect to political mobilisation. Such techniques supplemented and influenced by technology helps tailor a digital narrative in a political discourse. The BJP with the help of *NaMo* App built on a digital feedback loop has propounded an assessment mechanism that seeks feedback about the proficiencies and competencies of local MP's (The Economic Times, 2023). BJP's emphasis on community- based networking and grassroots organisation is indicative of a traditional stalagmite mobilisation. Their approach has leveraged WhatsApp groups and social media networks like Facebook and Twitter (X) to amplify their traditional strength in ground-level organisation and extend its scope to

expand their digital reach, impact and influence. BJP's IT cell manages over 50 lakh WhatsApp groups that allows for the rapid dissemination of party narratives and mobilization directives from the top-bottom or bottom-top ladder. The party page has 21.6 million followers on Twitter (X) and 7.5 million on Instagram as of 7th April 2024 (Paliwal, 2024).

The Indian National Congress, on the contrary, is a hierarchically structured party (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024) that follows the top-down approach with a central leadership at its topmost rung. It has manoeuvred its mobilisation technique and political strategy given the prospects and challenges so presented by digitisation. The Congress party spent 70 percent of its campaign funds on social media advertisements during the 2024 elections, marking a 10 percent increase from 2019 (Teks Academy, 2024). The increase in investment is visible through targeted social media campaigns across platforms, multimedia content production, and enhanced digital infrastructure for volunteer coordination. It not only used data analytics to identify and amplify Gandhi's key messages, but it also deployed a well-equipped team to generate viral-worthy content suiting the party's narrative and strategy. While PM Modi took frequent jibes at Rahul Gandhi as '*pappu', 'fuse tube light' or 'shehzada'* to reinforce prevalent beliefs of Rahul Gandhi being an incompetent and naive political leader; the Congress fought the rhetoric by projecting Gandhi has a fierce force to be reckoned with to rebuild the party's and its leader's image. The manufactured "*Pappu*" image was fought with relentless direct engagement of Gandhi with the masses, and it adopted an aggressive media strategy by focusing on key issues that concerned the citizens like inflation, unemployment, etc., consequently making a shift from making personal attacks to addressing governance issues to fight the alleged perception of disconnection, alienation, and disassociation between grassroots and the leadership of Congress.

It is imperative to note that historically, political rallies functioned as a tangible display of political presence and public engagement; however, digital spaces, in today's informational society, become crucial arenas for contested political narratives where traditional power structures and hierarchies are simultaneously challenged and reinforced through novel forms of political communication and mobilisation. The hyper-visiblisation of *Bharat Nyay Yatra* on social media rather than traditional mainstream media reflects a thoughtful endeavour to confront the prevailing digital narrative of elitism and isolation. The Congress implemented a multifaceted approach to amass social media reach and increase engagement with Rahul Gandhi interacting with the public through a 'speak to the camera' format on a range of sociopolitical issues,

demonstrating the party's recognition of the transformative potential of digital spaces' in democratic participation and its ability to overcome traditional barriers— economic, educational, and geographical—that historically limited political engagement, creates more accessible and participatory channels for democratic discourse. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of affective publics explains digital platforms' role in emotional political engagement. Modi's *chaiwala* narrative and nationalist messaging create emotional resonance through digital storytelling, while Rahul Gandhi's direct digital interactions generate emotional connections transcending traditional communication.

Digital spaces represent a new form of a deterritorialized networked public sphere marking a shift from Habermas's (1991) conceptualisation of a traditional bourgeois public sphere (coffee houses, salons, etc.) to virtual platforms leading to the creation of a technologically mediated lifeworld. Discourse here is not shaped by human actors alone but by technological infrastructure as well. It is marked by spatial and temporal compression with influx of information in a nonlinear sense. Such compression of time and space creates the need for instant responses and constant engagement for increased reach and its maintenance. This correspondingly alters fundamental political decision-making that may bypass traditional and calculated deliberative processes. Real time reactions and comments become binding regardless of the transient nature of viral movements that emerge and dissipate quickly. The digital news cycle and social media reactions create a perpetual presence where political narratives must be constantly managed.

The digital public sphere represents both a fulfilment and shift of Habermas's vision. The digital transformation of the Habermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere presents a fundamental shift from rational-critical debate, particularly in terms of how public opinion is formed, made to sustain and circulated. Many times, public opinions so created are not premised on facts. Fact refers to a statement that can be proved to be true or false while opinion involves expression of feelings that cannot be proven as facts as they may be based on lies or emotions intended to deliberately mislead and set narratives. Digital spaces thus become a medium wherein political opinions are constructed and lies or deceptions become truth or reality through digital legitimation. Publicity in digital spaces can be critical to encourage rational debate or manipulative to further mass manipulation in the Habermasian sense. This process manifests distinctly in Indian political discourse. For instance, the construction and circulation of Rahul Gandhi's *pappu* image for supposedly being naive or dumb or Modi's *chaiwala* narrative indicates how digital spaces

facilitate the transformation of constructed narratives into perceived reality through:

- Algorithmic amplification as the repeated sharing and engagement with these narratives creates platform-specific visibility where certain characterizations gain prominence through technical infrastructure rather than merit and its factuality.

- Affective resonance as the *chaiwala* narrative, for instance, connects individual identity to larger mass; and

- Digital legitimation as the *Modi ka parivar* response by BJP leaders to Lalu Prasad Yadav's *no family* criticism for Modi, illustrates how digital spaces enable rapid narrative construction and counter-narrative deployment operate in the hybrid system.

- Creation of echochambers (through generative Artificial Intelligence, i.e., AI) to reinforce uncritical acceptance, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

- Primacy to viral content over verified facts by digital architecture.

- Rapid spread of misinformation, disinformation and deepfakes through spreadable media like WhatsApp.

Such narratives may be premised on facts, fabrications or rhetoric, yet what might be perceived as truth may not be true at all and still be considered as legitimate based on digital circulation and emotional engagement rather than actual fact-checking. Digital spaces during elections, therefore, act as a tool and a weapon which both attacks and facilitates the core foundation of democracy and democratic processes. Falsified news has continued to grow in the digital era as the sources cannot be authenticated without necessary fact checks and have become politicised as they seem more real than the truth. Digital manipulation is concerning as misinformation and disinformation undermine the democratic process. Misinformation (false and inaccurate information) and disinformation (intentional spreading of false information to influence and manipulate other people's perception and the understanding of reality) pose a threat and emerge as new forms of distortion and colonisation that is detrimental for rational critical debate. Elections today, witness widespread use of AI which may emerge as a potential threat to democracy and electoral integrity. Creation of deepfakes to further manipulative publicity and its circulation as authentic shakes the basic tenet of fair elections. Indian elections witnessed deepfake videos being circulated of numerous leaders like Narendra Modi (BJP), Shivraj Singh Chauhan (BJP), Kailash Vijayvargia (BJP), Kamal Nath (Congress), etc

(Sharma, 2024). A deep fake video intended to deceive the masses also emerged of BRS leader KT Rama Rao asking his party supporters to vote in favour of Congress over his own party meaningfully (Biswas, 2024). With the advent of more sophisticated technology, the usage of AI to gain political mileage and traction will only get magnified. While the 2014 elections monetised on the hologram of Narendra Modi (Nelson, 2014) allowing his virtual presence across multiple locations simultaneously, 2024 elections saw more advanced usage of AI by various political parties to mark their presence and pervasiveness with the click of their phones, evading spatial boundaries making AI-generated content harder to distinguish from authentic communications.

Platform governance represents a new form of system colonisation of the lifeworld, where algorithmic logic and commercial imperatives potentially distort genuine democratic discourse and have deep-seated psychological impact on political behaviour and decision-making. The digital landscape as it exists today presents a mammoth challenge in terms of political content consumption and processing, creating a digital fatigue. Users are thrusted with an unrelenting stream of political messages, updates, and discussions across multiple platforms simultaneously, leading to diminished emotional response and numbness to political stimuli. It also leads to a reduced ability to distinguish between significant and trivial political information. Unlike traditional media's periodic news cycles, digital platforms create an environment of constant political communication and information overload that affects attention spans, information comprehension and retention, and decision-making capacity. Digital spaces amplify cognitive biases while creating new ones based on digital interactions. The confirmation bias becomes more pronounced as users increasingly seek information that conforms with the existing political beliefs. Furthermore, the digital transformation of political mobilisation while expanding opportunities for participation, simultaneously creates new forms of exclusion through digital divide.

Participation gap in digital political spaces caused by variations in device ownership, internet connectivity quality, and the ability to engage with sophisticated political content directly creates a hierarchical order of political engagement. The chasm further widens with the rural- urban digital divide as rural areas continue to face bandwidth constraints that restrict participation in live political events and limit access to multimedia political content. However, digital spaces simultaneously enable what Fraser (1990) terms 'subaltern counterpublics' - alternative spaces for marginalised groups to formulate oppositional discourses and interpretations of their identities

and interests. These spaces facilitate new forms of lifeworld resistance through grassroots mobilisation, counter-public formation and resistance that Habermas saw as crucial for democracy, while potentially overcoming traditional barriers to political participation through technological mediation. The fundamental transformation in the base structure through technological infrastructure and platform ecosystems necessarily alters the superstructure of political communication and mobilisation in specific and polity in general. This dialectical relationship between base and superstructure in digital spaces creates a digital historical bloc where technological infrastructure, political practices, and social relations are mutually constitutive. The emergence of platform governance and algorithmic mediation represents not just a technical change but a structural transformation that reconfigures power relations and modes of political legitimation. This leads to a blurred distinction between facts and opinions in digital truth regimes which subsequently gets legitimation by means of its integration into broader political discourse. This structural transformation potentially facilitates what Pareto (1935) describes as the 'circulation of elites' in novel ways. Digital spaces enable new pathways to political influence through viral content creation, social media following, and digital organising capabilities. Traditional elite structures based on institutional authority or economic capital are challenged by emergent digital elites who derive their influence from mastery of platform dynamics and ability to shape online narratives. However, rather than a simple circulation, we witness what might be termed a hybrid elite formation, where traditional and digital forms of capital intersect and combine. Moreover, this transformation potentially leads to a paradigm shift of political mobilisation and public discourse in the Kuhnian (1962) sense.

CONCLUSION

Digital spaces remodel and reshape existing power relations and introduce newer forms of political capital based on digital influence and platform mastery. Temporally, time lag is reduced and the concept of time changes from a traditional polity to a digital polity because of the immediacy of digital interactions and intervention. Spatially, the traditional geographical and institutional boundaries bound by political power, action and influence are overpowered and manipulated by the deterritorialized digital spaces, creating new forms of political community and action. The influence of such a transition from the physical to the digital is not limited to bringing about changes to the conduits of political communication; rather, it also affects the way political reality is produced, experienced, and challenged. It alters how political

knowledge is produced and validated, marking a shift from institutional verification processes to networked legitimation. Political communications can now shape the outcome of elections. It shapes where messages are likely to make difference in the outcomes and accordingly filter bubbles are created by trained algorithms. This transformation of political mobilization in digital spaces represents a fundamental shift in how democratic discourse and political action operate in contemporary society. Virtual platforms serve as the kernel for an unprecedented momentum in political movements and participation, where messages and campaigns may spread rapidly across diverse audiences transcending physical boundaries. The power of digital mobilization lies in its ability to reach grassroots communities while simultaneously offering anonymous spaces for marginalized voices to participate in political discourse, effectively challenging Nettl's traditional conception of stalactite mobilization in developing countries. Social media hashtag movements, from farmer protests to other social justice campaigns, demonstrate how digital activism can quickly crystallize into powerful forces of change shaped by algorithmic mediation and platform governance. While this has created new opportunities for political engagement and innovative approaches to e-governance, it also presents significant challenges like the spread of misinformation, surveillance concerns, and the manipulation of digital narratives which pose a grave threat to an authentic political discourse thereby necessitating the need for public policies in this regard.

The convergence of structural and psychological transformations in digital political spaces creates a complex ecosystem where traditional theories of political mobilization must be reconceptualized. The interplay between platform governance, psychological effects, and political behaviour, generates new forms of political reality that transcend the conventional understanding of political participation and engagement that enables democratization of information. It has created new avenues for political communication, mobilization and collective action; but the concern for misinformation, disinformation, polarization, surveillance and digital divide looms large.

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