

Social Media, Misinformation and Fear-Speech: Digital Networks and Political Polarisation in East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract: *Social media has emerged as a central arena for political communication in India, reshaping how citizens access information, express opinions, and participate in democratic processes. While digital platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of political information, they have also enabled the large-scale spread of misinformation and fear-based political speech, contributing to growing political polarisation. This study examines the role of social media-based digital networks in spreading political misinformation and fear-speech and analyses their influence on political polarisation in East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh. Adopting a descriptive research design, the study is based on primary data collected from 258 active social media users through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistical tools, specifically Mean and Standard Deviation, were used for data analysis. The findings reveal that social media is a major source of political information and a key channel for the rapid diffusion of misinformation in multiple forms, including fake news, manipulated images and videos, and political rumours. The study further indicates that fear-based political speech intensifies social divisions, increases hostility toward specific groups, and reduces trust in democratic institutions. Digital network dynamics such as echo chambers and algorithmic content reinforcement were also found to amplify political polarisation by limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. The study highlights strong public support for digital literacy, fact-checking practices, platform regulation, and awareness programmes as measures to reduce political polarisation. Overall, the study underscores the need for comprehensive interventions combining media literacy, platform accountability, and public awareness to strengthen democratic discourse in the digital age.*

Keywords: Social media, political misinformation, fear-speech, digital networks, political polarisation, East Godavari, Andhra Pradesh