

Reducing Social Media Usage During Elections: Evidence from a WhatsApp Multi-Country Deactivation Experiment

Rajeshwari Majumdar

Tiago Ventura

Shelley Liu

Carolina Torreblanca

Joshua A. Tucker

MPSA Annual Conference
April 3, 2025

Motivation

Disinformation Spreads on WhatsApp Ahead of Brazilian Election

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Zimbabwe election disinformation spreads on WhatsApp



Tendai DUBE

Thu, August 3, 2023 at 2:41 AM EDT · 4 min read



Research on Social Media and Misinformation

- Existing research: focused primarily on feed-based platforms that are popular in advanced democracies (Twitter, Facebook)
- But in the Global South
 - the types of social media platforms that are predominantly used are fundamentally different (message-based; WhatsApp)
 - the harmful offline consequences of misinformation exposure may be more pronounced

Our Goal

Identify the causal effects of WhatsApp usage on exposure to misinformation and downstream effects on users' political attitudes

Approach

WhatsApp “deactivation” experiment in India and South Africa during the month leading up to their most recent general elections

Classical Deactivation Studies

The Welfare Effects of Social Media[†]

By HUNT ALLCOTT, LUCA BRAGHIERI, SARAH EICHMEYER,
AND MATTHEW GENTZKOW*

The rise of social media has provoked both optimism about potential societal benefits and concern about harms such as addiction, depression, and political polarization. In a randomized experiment, we find that deactivating Facebook for the four weeks before the 2018 US midterm election (i) reduced online activity, while increasing offline activities such as watching TV alone and socializing with family and friends; (ii) reduced both factual news knowledge and political polarization; (iii) increased subjective well-being; and (iv) caused a large persistent reduction in post-experiment Facebook use. Deactivation reduced post-experiment valuations of Facebook, suggesting that traditional metrics may overstate consumer surplus. (JEL D12, D72, D90, I31, L82, L86, Z13)

Testing the effects of Facebook usage in an ethnically polarized setting

Nejla Asimovic^{a,b,1}, Jonathan Nagler^{a,b}, Richard Bonneau^{b,c,d}, and Joshua A. Tucker^{a,b,e} 

^aDepartment of Politics, New York University, New York, NY 10012; ^bCenter for Social Media and Politics, New York University, New York, NY 10012;

^cDepartment of Biology, New York University, New York, NY 10012; ^dCourant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, New York University, New York, NY 10012;

^eDepartment of Russian and Slavic Studies, New York University, New York, NY 10012

Edited by Christopher Andrew Ball, Duke University, Durham, NC, and accepted by Editorial Board Member Mark Granovetter May 10, 2021 (received for review November 3, 2020)

It has been suggested that social media is altering intergroup dynamics—bringing people closer or further apart from them from one another—the impact of social media on interethnic attitudes has yet to be rigorously evaluated, especially within areas with tenuous interethnic relations. We report results from a randomized controlled trial in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), exploring the effects of deactivating social media during the period of ethnic violence resurgence in July 2019 on a set of interethnic attitudes of Facebook users. We find evidence that, counter to preregistered expectations, people who deactivated their Facebook profiles report lower regard for ethnic outgroups than those who remained active. Moreover, we present additional evidence suggesting that this effect is little conditioned on the level of ethnic homogeneity of respondents' residence. We also extend the analysis to include measures of subjective well-being and knowledge of news. Hence, we find that Facebook deactivation leads to suggestive improvements in subjective well-being and a decrease in knowledge of news. These findings are relevant to recent research in the United States in a very different context, thus increasing our confidence in the generalizability of these effects.

spaces can help or hinder the goal of transforming relations. From this perspective, social media should be considered and studied as one of the forces influencing the direction of countries' postconflict paths.

Importantly, both ethnicity and partisanship are potential markers of one's identity. Given that partisanship is acquired through socialization, it is therefore a measure of one's worldviews than group membership based on more immutable characteristics such as ethnicity or race (10). As such, some propose that people may assign larger blame and responsibility to others for their partisanship than for their inborn group affiliation (11). The difference between partisanship and ethnicity, however, has rarely been discussed as a potential explanation why intergroup contact, which tends to be associated with prejudice reduction (12–14), may be less effective at mitigating outgroup hostility in the context of partisanship (15). This, however, remains an open question requiring studies that go beyond partisan affiliation, in particular discussing attitudes toward ethnic outgroups and especially in an online context.

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- 3 Test whether reduced exposure leads to changes in political attitudes

Experimental Design

Experimental Conditions

Types of partial deactivation

- Time: Limit daily WhatsApp usage to 10 minutes
- Media: Do not consume multimedia content received via WhatsApp

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→ **2 × 2 design**

Time Treatment	Time Control
Media Treatment	Media Control

Treatment 1: Time Reduction

Task for treated users

For 4 weeks, limit daily usage to 10 minutes per day; set a daily app timer of 10 minutes

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- Conducted endline surveys just before election results announced

Results

Exposure to and Belief in News Headlines

- Participants are shown 8 news headlines; asked (a) whether they have seen this news before & (b) whether they think the news is true

Exposure to and Belief in News Headlines

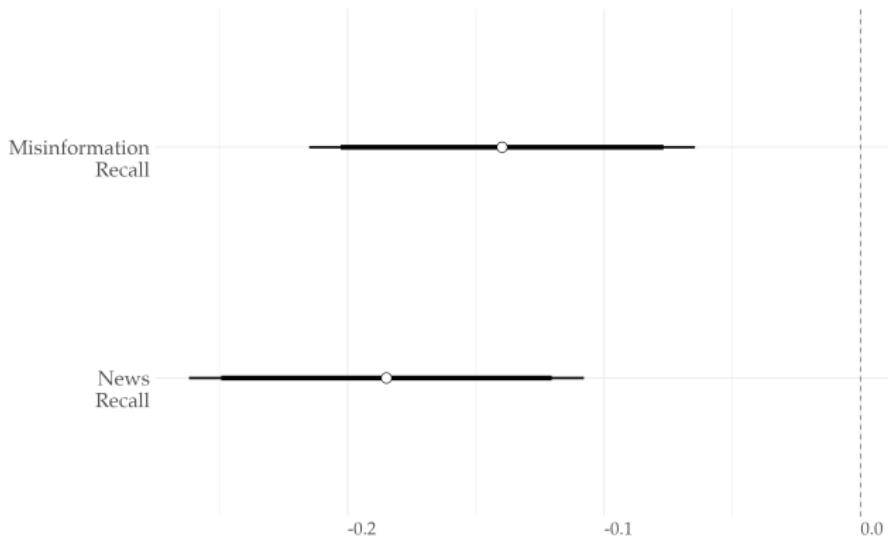
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- Participants are shown 8 news headlines; asked (a) whether they have seen this news before & (b) whether they think the news is true
- Four headlines are true news; four are misinformation stories
- Count how many (a) recalled & (b) accurately identified as T/F

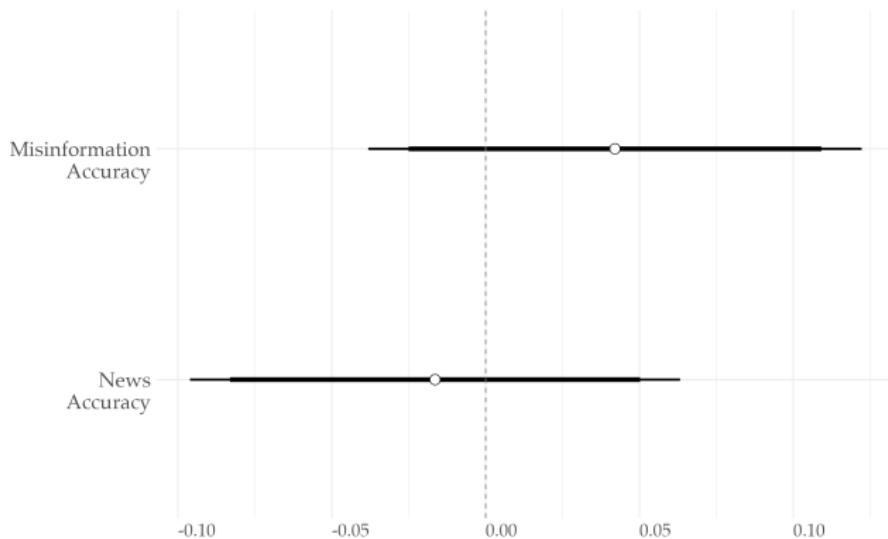
Exposure

Limiting WhatsApp usage reduces exposure to misinformation & news



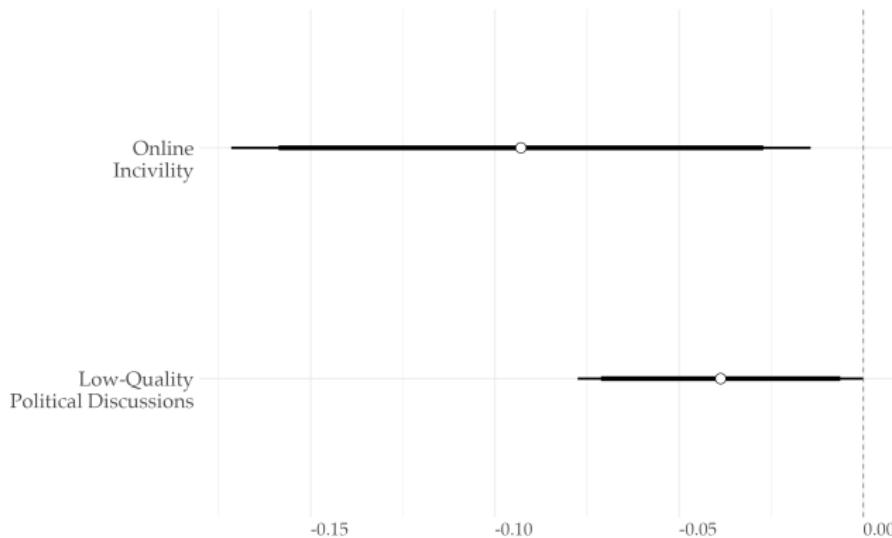
Belief

A short-term reduction in exposure does not translate to changes in accuracy judgments



Unpleasant content more broadly

Using several different items, we find that limiting WhatsApp usage also reduces exposure to online civility and low-quality political discourse



Downstream consequences on political polarization

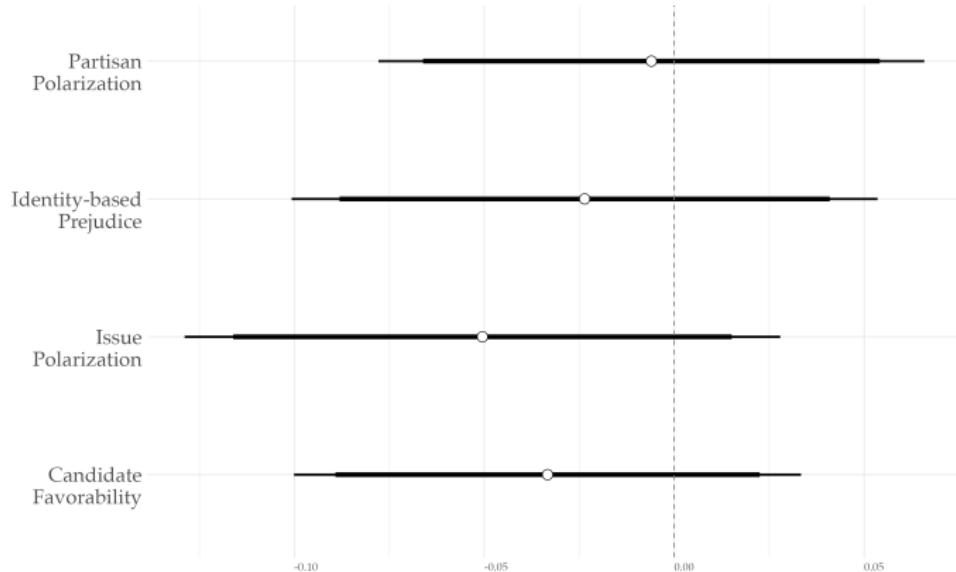
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Downstream consequences on political polarization

Can this short-term reduction in exposure to political misinformation and toxic political content change political attitudes and reduce polarization?

Not quite.

Downstream consequences on political polarization



Conclusion

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- Limiting WhatsApp usage *also* reduces exposure to toxic content and improves overall well-being

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 - Reduced exposure to such information does not mechanically affect accuracy perceptions
 - ...nor does it meaningfully change political attitudes (at least not within a short electoral period)
 - Limiting WhatsApp usage *also* reduces exposure to toxic content and improves overall well-being
- Push forward the conversation about the trade-offs of social media usage
- + Methodological contributions to studying social media in the Global South

