



The Effects of WhatsApp on Politics: A Multi-Country Deactivation Experiment

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Motivation

Social Media: From a liberation to Turmoil (Tucker et. al., 2019)

Three insights form the scholarly literature on social media and politics:

- Exposure to Misinformation follows a power law (Grinberg et al., 2019)
- The downstream effects of exposure to misinformation on political attitudes are **difficult to measure, often small in size, and context dependent**. (See Meta Election Studies + Facebook Deactivation Studies)
- Most of the scholarly evidence come from a **advanced democracies** and from a **feed-based platforms** (mostly Twitter, and to some extent Facebook)

Critical Gap: Global South + Messaging Apps.

Disinformation Spreads on WhatsApp Ahead of Brazilian Election

 Give this article  



Fake News Is Poisoning Brazilian Politics. WhatsApp Can Stop It.

Oct. 17, 2018



WhatsApp Multimedia Deactivation Experiment - Brazil 2022

➡ **Research Problem:** What are the causal effect of WhatsApp usage on beliefs for misinformation and its downstream effects, particularly political polarization?

➡ **Design:** Multimedia-Constrained Deactivation Experiment on WhatsApp:

- Incentivized participants to spent three weeks without accessing any multimedia (images, videos and audio) on WhatsApp.

➡ **Context:** Weeks before the 2022 Presidential Election in Brazil

➡ **Results:**

- Substantive reduction in **exposure to popular misinformation rumors**.
- Unable to detect small to moderate effects on **attitudes (belief accuracy and polarization)**
- Null-Effects on subjective well-being

Limitations

- Scope conditions: focus on direct effects of exposure to misinformation on WhatsApp.
- Effects might be context-dependent
 - Previous deactivation studies found different results in United States (x2), France and Bosnia
- Election context: highly polarization

Tech & Public Policy Proposal

Multi-Country WhatsApp Deactivation

➡ **Research Problem:** What are the causal effect of WhatsApp usage on beliefs for misinformation and its downstream effects, particularly political polarization?

➡ **Design:** Multi-Country Deactivation in three major Global South Democracies with Presidential Elections:

- Country Selection: Mexico, South Africa, India
- High WhatsApp usage + Ethnic and Political Polarization + Misinformation traveling primarily through WhatsApp

➡ **Design:** Interventions:

- Multimedia Deactivation - Focus on reducing exposure to Misinformation
- Reduction on WhatsApp usage - Full deactivation, >10min per day.
- Four week period.

Extensions

- Effects of group-based conversations on political polarization (Fall 2024)
- Online Data Donation Tool for Content from WhatsApp Groups (Fall 2024)
 - Focus on immigrant communities in the US
 - Conditional on time also used in the multi-country deactivation

Progress

- Our first big effort was on building a team of experts and select the countries to run the experiment:
 - [Joshua Tucker](#): Director of NYU' Center for Social Media and Politics (CSMaP)
 - [Shelley Liu](#): Assistant professor at Duke University, Sanford School of Public Policy
 - [Rajeshwari Majumdar](#): PhD Candidate, NYU Politics
 - [Carolina Torreblanco](#): PhD Candidate, NYU Politics

Progress

- IRB Review: November and December
- Recruitment: Starting in January
- Deactivation: Early April to May.

Impact

Causal Effects of WhatsApp on Politics

- **Claims about WhatsApp:**
 - Downstream effects on episodes offline violence
 - Affects voting choices in Global South elections
 - Facilitates spread of misinformation -> beliefs
- **Our work provides the first comparative evidence for the effects of WhatsApp on political outcomes.**
 - Separates general usage vs direct exposure to misinformation
 - Contextual variation

Causal Effects of WhatsApp on Politics

- **No causal evidence -> poor policy choices.**
 - Policymakers and technologists risk proposing solutions grounded in conventional wisdom, folk theory, or research from heterogeneous contexts.

The role of multimodal content on spread of misinformation

Our work also focuses on multimodal content:

- Most academic work has focuses on textual misinformation
- In contexts of low literacy, multimodal content have dominated the misinformation market
 - travel fasters
 - easier to understand
- Most social media companies have guard-rails focused on text/sources.

Dissemination Plan

- Main academic conferences in the next year calendar: APSA, IC2S2 & ICA
- Summer 2024: Social Media and Politics Conference at Georgetown (together with John Ladd)
- Open discussions about industry-academic collaborations with Meta/WhatsApp

Thank you