
The Vernacular Influencer: Case Study of an Indic Challenger to Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to examine the rise of the frugal tech innovator as vernacular influencer in the still new, still evolving idea of the ‘Indic’ internet. I use the term ‘influence’ in this paper to mean something more potent than merely follower count or the reach of an individual handle via its content streams. I explore, using the example of Koo, how a new breed of Indian entrepreneurs building digital products for Bhārat (a formulation often, though erroneously, employed for India hailing from small towns) is introducing novel elements into the country’s sociotechnical infrastructures. In that process, these innovators are ‘influencing’ the online behavior and conversations of millions of new entrants to social network sites that are unabashedly vernacular in their cultural mooring. Using a combination of digital ethnography and systematic textual analysis, this study hopes to contribute to knowledge in the field of India’s digital media by focusing on the algorithmic dimensions of innovation in local language media industries. I close by making the case that India’s growing talent pool in artificial intelligence is redefining how new social networks are emerging and operating in the world’s largest democracy.

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KEYWORDS

India; influencer; social network sites; Twitter; Koo; sociotechnical systems; algorithmic ranking; vernacular; South Asia; regulation; mobile phone; telecom; 4G; cheap data; platforms; social media; new media; innovation



Figure 1: A Twitter post from the @kooindia handle showing a data visualization based on the brand's growth across Indian geographies. Source: Screenshot from Twitter.

KEY THEMES

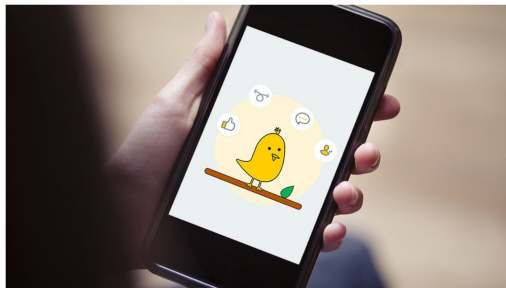
Homegrown

In early 2020, at around the same time the Covid-19 pandemic exploded, two young Indian entrepreneurs - Aprameya Radhakrishna and Mayank Bidawatka - launched Koo as India's homegrown alternative to microblogging platform Twitter. Two years on, the duo's decisions on platform design and (internal) regulation are informing the way millions of users communicate on Koo's digital street. While a clutch of made-in-India apps have surfaced in recent years - Sharechat and TikTok clones like MxTakaTak, Moj, Josh and Public, I focus on Koo because of its explicit adjacency to Twitter's user interface and its widely discussed launch at a particularly fraught moment in India's geopolitics and its shifting relationship with big tech platforms. In about 24 months since launch, Koo is reporting 20 million downloads and offers a choice of 10 languages. In early 2020, India began pushing back aggressively against the so-called Big Tech platforms which enjoy an outsize user base in the Global South. America-style free speech principles were colliding with Indian politics, a sudden escalation in Chinese aggression led to the worst violence since 1967 between the forces of the world's two most populous nations. Within days, India banned nearly 60 made-in-China apps, including the wildly popular TikTok, and tightened scrutiny of Chinese investment inflows. The tide was high, the moment was ripe. Koo, which takes its brand name from the Indic vernacular for birdsong, took its perch. Entire government departments and A-listers have co-opted Koo for their routine communications while they continue to utilize legacy platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

Koo: India's Twitter alternative with global ambitions

By Nikhil Iyengar
BBC Business Correspondent

4 February



Koo was founded in early 2020

Can Indian microblogging app Koo beat Twitter?

That's certainly the goal, according to co-founder Mayank Bidawatka, who says Koo expects to surpass Twitter's 25 million-strong user base in India this year.

Figure 2: Screenshot of a BBC news feature on Koo vs Twitter, 4 February 2022.

Vernacular

Much of the recent commentary on Koo, especially in academic circles, has focused on the brand's implicit political leaning or woven it into themes around polarization. To be clear, I am focusing here on Koo's design features as technological and cultural artifacts and making connections to the conference theme of social media influencers' impacts in the region. Recent news reports have teased out the possibility that Koo could outpace Twitter's user base this year. Koo's founders are betting that their vernacular focus – riding on the Hindi language market – will do the trick. Although Twitter offers users the functionality to post in their language of choice, the baseline has always been English. In contrast, when Koo kicked off in early 2020, it was in Kannada, the official language of Karnataka, a south Indian state which is home to India's Silicon Valley. Koo, in its skinny avatar, offered only two features at the time: text and image posts that could be seen and shared by followers, with zero algorithmic ranking. Two years in, Koo is now available in 10 languages in India and the company's developers are working on delivering eight more. In contrast to Twitter, Koo's interface remains largely timeline driven and chronological. Content shows up based on the feeds users already follow, suggestions are also based on existing follows and there's a very baseline level of prediction on what users may like. Based on a close reading of Koo's publicly available soundbites and multimedia posts on tactical and strategic aspects of its business, it is clear that the brand's low-key algorithmic mediation is an intentional departure from the engagement-based ranking that has come to define online platforms from the stable of public listed companies. In parallel, however, Radhakrishna's team is going all in on non-algorithmic bells and whistles. While Twitter got busy in politico-legal issues with the Indian state, Koo began rolling out voice to text in all its language offerings, a share button for WhatsApp, auto translation and post visibility in multiple languages, audio and video record options. Many features mimic Twitter's; some language specific ones don't – a fairly straightforward case of cultural strategy as an entry point for new market innovation.



Figure 3: Koo hashtag features prominently on the chyron of a Hindi television news channel. This screenshot from the channel's 10 March 2022 coverage of election results in India's heartland.

Local

Although the minimalist approach to algorithmic ranking is also a function of Koo's new-ness, it is equally a reflection of how Indian entrepreneurs are calibrating technological innovation to match the Indian state's more combative stance towards new media regulation. While big technology firms and their products have seeped into the daily rhythms of society across geographies, their ethos has been fundamentally western and driven by quarterly monetization metrics, as seen in scandals old and new. Governments and users are pushing back; Indian entrepreneurs such as Radhakrishna et al are embracing the opportunity to put local laws and cultural practices first as a tool for business growth, continuity and even valuation. Beyond the Koo case study, my broader argument is that the algorithmic turn in India's vernacular social media landscape is carving out a whole new sphere of influence on India's digital street. The twin engines of vernacular cultures and micro innovation drive are driven by Indians' deepening access to digital infrastructure. India's total 4G subscriber base surpassed 700 million in 2020. Most subscribers have access to mobile data plans at 9 cents per GB. Cheap data and the mobile phone as cultural technology in India are reconfiguring the country's public sphere. So too is India's ambitious digital infrastructure 'India Stack' at population scale. As an audience, India's local language internet users are challenging Anglo-centric understanding of digital cultures. In the case of local language social networks, algorithms are nudging users towards an entirely distinct list of preferences (trending topics) based on their language. These are novel phenomena in a country which accounts for one fifth of the world's population and 22 official languages.

CONCLUSION

The launch and evolution of local language social network sites in India's media landscape mixes into the confluence of standout technological and political trends in India's networked publics. India is making big moves on the global talent map for artificial intelligence. Bengaluru, where Koo is headquartered, has recently been ranked as the 5th most diverse artificial intelligence (AI) talent hotspot in the world – by the Fletcher School at Tufts University. As India's AI muscle becomes more ubiquitous, Indian innovators cranking out algorithmic solutions in resistance to western or foreign tech domination are redefining the notion of influence and influencer from the singular to the platform itself.