

The role of social media in shaping perceptions of social norms in a post-truth context

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Abstract. This study addresses the urgent relevance of this topic, focusing on how political and digital factors contribute to the degradation of media freedom and the spread of post-truth in the context of global polarisation. This study aimed to reveal the main mechanisms that shape the new forms of truth awareness through digital platforms, political practices, and social discourses. For the purposes of this study, a comparative analysis of legislation, as well as the practice in the implementation of the legislation, a case study of the media, and discourse analysis of political and cultural narratives were used. The study concludes that in a post-truth era, social media becomes a tool for the construction of society and an institution for the creation and legitimisation of new social norms. It is found that post-truth is not just a side effect of human cognitive functioning, but an attribute of the digital space in which technology is constantly evolving, information is being digitised (algorithmisation of contents), and social divisions are growing. It is determined that algorithms play a key role in the creation and normalisation of new social reality, serving as “architects” of reality; they select the form of behaviour and interpretation that contributes to maximum user engagement. As a result of the comparative analysis of the national models, the following findings were obtained: in the United States of America, the process of normalisation of political confrontation took place; Brazil was characterised by the consolidation of populist discourse; in India, WhatsApp became the driver of the formation of new local social norms and violent practices. Specific case studies, the #MeToo movement in the United States of America, the fight against disinformation in Brazil, and mobilisation on WhatsApp in India, show the effectiveness of online discourse in achieving social changes. Based on the practical importance of the results, the possibility of using the conclusions of the study to form a strategy for effective regulation and a system of journalistic professional ethics is substantiated, as one of the components of strengthening information resilience

Keywords: disinformation; fact-checking; algorithmic systems; polarisation; fake news

INTRODUCTION

Rapid transformations of the media landscape in a post-truth context have led to digital platforms and social networks becoming not just channels of dissemination of information but active promoting agents of new social realities. The information environment of the 21st century is typified by an increasing prevalence of manipulation, the spread of disinformation, pressure from political and private interests on journalism and a profound shift in the principles governing trust in the media. These processes manifest clearly in these two aspects of globalisation and digitalisation of information flows, which do not seem to have definite boundaries and algorithmic mechanisms employed by technology corporations, whose result is societal polarisation by providing a distorted picture of what the

social norms are. In the post-truth era, when people tend to hold on and defend what they want to believe without regard to facts, media freedom, regulation of digital platforms, and ethical responsibility of communication become more critical.

The problem under consideration has been examined in scholarly research from multiple perspectives, encompassing political, social, cultural, and technological dimensions. In their research, E. Culloty & J. Suiter (2021) came to the conclusion that media freedom worldwide is eroding under the influence of political and private pressures that include financial manipulation and the adoption of restrictive policies and direct violence against journalists. The authors noted that the fragility of the media situation

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has increased as a result of the rapid proliferation of digital platforms and the rise of authoritarian trends, which are given new forms of manipulation. It was noted that structural changes in the digital ecosystem provided conducive grounds for the manipulation of public opinion and the capture of the media space by political and commercial forces. S.A. Matei *et al.* (2021) focused on the problem of imbalance between technological giants and the public interest, identifying the case as one of increasing asymmetry of influence between private corporations and democratic institutions. The need for the introduction of new transatlantic regulatory models was underscored, which considers the principles of freedom of expression, protection of privacy, and promotion of technological innovation. In the study by D.A. Barclay (2022), attention was drawn to media-ethical dimensions of post-truth and, more specifically, to communication strategies that are able to minimise the effects of manipulation and give rise to a critical approach to information. It was argued that a central task of media lies in creating conditions for restoring trust in journalism through the implementation of ethical standards, as well as the development of transparent communication practices. D.A. Barclay also demonstrated that post-truth not only reshapes the information environment but also the very structure of social relations as it takes down the popularly accepted conceptions of objectivity and trust.

D. Malcolm (2021), drawing on Elias's sociology of knowledge, interpreted post-truth as a consequence of the intertwining of emotional and rational communication techniques, which gradually displaced classical conceptions of public discourse. It was emphasised that the informalisation of social relations led to a diminished sense of shame associated with the dissemination of falsehoods and to the legitimisation of disinformation practices. According to this analysis, post-truth is not a deviation from truth but a new knowledge that changes the structure of thought, the nature of social interaction and the norms of public communication. In the study by Y. Godler (2020), journalistic approaches to truth in post-truth conditions were in focus. It was shown that journalists used not one truth theory, but a set of different approaches, such as correspondence, coherence, and pragmatist approaches. This led to the conception of an adaptive truth that could respond to the challenges brought by the digital age, as well as restore trust in journalism. The article by E.C. Tandoc (2020) considered that the responses to the disinformation were based on the individual interests and social connections of the users. The authors demonstrated that reactions to disinformation depended on users' individual interests and social connections. This means that social network structures and personal motivations underpin a level of disinformation output, questioning, or continuing disregard for false data.

In the study by E.S. Zappalà (2021), post-truth was conceptualised as an epochal phenomenon which became, after 2016, a defining trait in the evolutionary trajectory of culture, politics, and literature. The author emphasised that post-truth has ceased to be exclusively a political

phenomenon and has acquired the status of a cultural narrative, reflected in artistic practices, collective memory, and social representations. J. Farkas & J. Schou (2020) in their research focused on the political discourses on post-truth in Western democracies. It was shown that such discourses create a new hegemony, where truth is viewed as contested and conflictual. The authors argued that the interplay between academic and non-expert narratives creates a paradoxical arrangement in the contemporary democratic setting where the importance of truth to democratic order is acknowledged, and at the same time, various distortions and manipulations are allowed.

Despite these scholarly contributions, several issues remain insufficiently explored. In particular, mechanisms through which algorithmic systems of social platforms not only disseminate disinformation but also enact the selective institutionalisation of social norms have not been adequately examined. Comparative studies of the national media environments are also lacking to manifest different configurations of social media in a post-truth framework. This study aimed to determine how social media under post-truth conditions have evolved from channels of communication to institutional agents in the construction of social reality and which mechanisms govern the formation, legitimisation and transformation of social norms. The objectives of the research included the identification of the role of algorithmic systems of social platforms in the selective amplification of certain archetypes of behaviour; a comparison of the specifics of social media impact on public perception in the USA (United States of America), Brazil, and India; and empirical cases of such translations of online narratives into tangible social normative transformations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological foundation of the study was based on classical and contemporary theoretical approaches that help explain changes in the epistemological and normative foundations of society. The analysis of the formation of shared representations in the digital space was based on the social construction of reality perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 2023). The agenda-setting model (McCombs *et al.*, 2018) was applied to interpret processes of determining priority issues within the public discourse, while framing theory (D'Angelo, 2017) enabled the identification of the mechanisms through which the interpretation of informational events is made in the media space. For explaining the long-term impact of digital media, a cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) was used, which is extrapolated to the study of social networks in the 21st century. Analysis of regulatory and legal documents that establish limits on the operation of social networks in various regions was another important component of the methodological framework. In the USA, the provisions under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Brannon & Holmes, 2024) that determine platform liability for circulated content were reviewed. The European context was analysed through the Digital Services Act (European Commission, n.d.), which stipulates

algorithmic transparency and mechanisms for countering disinformation. Considered were the *The Information Technology...* (2021) in the Indian context, which offer stringent instruments for regulating the digital space. The documents' inclusion made it possible to integrate legal and institutional dimensions into one methodological framework.

Within the empirical component of the study, a case study analysis was performed, which enabled looking at the transformation of social norms in three national contexts. For the USA, the interaction between users and the platforms Twitter/X (n.d.), Reddit (n.d.), and NYT – The New York Times (n.d.) was analysed, enabling the identification of framing mechanisms, the rapid dissemination of memes, and the role of fact-checking in restoring trust. Case studies of Facebook (n.d.), WhatsApp (n.d.) and *Folha de S.Paulo* (2025) were analysed in Brazil, as well as an experiment with restrictions on sharing multimedia content, which showed the effect of technical interventions on reducing exposure to disinformation. Materials from the *Hindustan Times* (n.d.), WhatsApp (n.d.), and Twitter/X (n.d.) in the Indian context were used, as well as the London School of Economics (LSE) study *WhatsApp Vigilantes* (2025). These sources gave an illustrated mechanism on how rumours are transformed into practical action, including violence. The choice of countries and platforms was justified by the specific characteristics of their information ecosystems: the USA as a global centre of media innovation and a major social platforms' source (Twitter/X, Reddit, Facebook), combined with a strong role of mass traditional media (NYT); Brazil as an example of the Global South country where messaging applications (WhatsApp, Facebook) are the main tools of political mobilisation; and India is the country with the highest number of WhatsApp users and a specific cultural environment that allows the local norms to be transformed.

RESULTS

Theoretical foundations for the construction of social reality in a post-truth context

In the scholarly discourse of the 21st century, the concept of “post-truth” has become the cornerstone for analysing

information processes and social consciousness transformations. The term became more common following political developments in the USA and Europe in the mid-2010s and gained common usage as a description of a new era where objective facts no longer dominate the perception of the public (Ejue & Etim, 2024). Instead, the emotive colouring of information, together with appeals to individual beliefs and values, becomes decisive in determining the “truth” and “real” in a world. This phenomenon is not limited to the political realm but is present in virtually every kind of social relation, from culture, the economy, interpersonal communication, to the promulgation of social norms. A defining feature of post-truth is the shift in emphasis from verified knowledge to information that resonates with the audience's pre-existing biases. Therefore, the social networks are catalysts in this process by which truth becomes relative. Algorithmic mechanisms that make the delivery of personalised content possible reinforce the effect of so-called “information bubbles”, within which individuals are predominantly exposed to messages affirming their existing world views (Makhortykh & Wijermars, 2023). For example, according to a survey report (The Economic, 2019), more than 53% of Indians reported having encountered fake news via Facebook or WhatsApp in the 30 days preceding an election. This provides a fertile ground for circulating disinformation, manipulative narratives, and conspiracy theories that end up defining what is perceived as behavioural norms and social standards. In the scholarly literature, post-truth is described as a condition of society in which emotions and beliefs shape perceptions of reality more than rational analysis or empirical evidence (Brahms, 2022). This characteristic is directly related to the functioning of the contemporary media, as they produce information flows in which facts are intertwined with emotional imagery and accuracy is often subordinated to impact. Within a post-truth environment, journalism and propaganda are blurred, just as the dichotomy between fact and opinion, thus causing a trust crisis in the traditional media. Table 1 provides descriptions of post-truth in greater detail.

Table 1. Post-truth as a systemic characteristic of the communication environment

Category	Factors	Consequences/Manifestations
Technical factors	► mass digitalisation of information and communication technologies; ► global network connectivity (social networks, messaging applications); ► algorithmisation (filtering, personalisation, echo chambers)	► accelerated dissemination of content without adequate fact-checking; ► passive models of information consumption (preference for confirmation of existing beliefs); ► decline in the role of objective sources of truth and fact-checking
Sociocultural factors	► increasing prominence of subjectivity (emotionality, personal experience); ► individualisation (selection of communication partners and information sources); ► social fragmentation (diverse groups with differing norms and worldviews)	► erosion of a shared foundation of norms and facts; ► multiplicity of “realities” and contextualisation of truth; ► increased societal vulnerability to manipulation by elites and external actors

Source: P. Capilla (2021), L. Dorosh (2022), J. Friedman (2023)

Thus, post-truth is not an aberration or an isolated incident but a strategic variable in communication ecology, formed at the nexus of technological and sociocultural factors. This variable has changed the way people relate to information: critical analysis has given way to selective perception, with social media becoming a main outlet for the legitimisation of “truths” (where “truth” has become a constructed, contextual or subjective narrative). This transformation is not only limited to information behaviour but also has a direct impact on the basis of society – the system of social norms. In scholarly literature, social norms are conventionally defined as a system of collectively accepted expectations and rules of behaviour that ensure social integration and maintenance of social order (Andrighetto & Vriens, 2022). Social norms in classical approaches, especially the theory of T. Parsons (1990), serve a stabilising function and set the limits of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour within human relationships. However, in an era of digitalisation and globalisation of communication networks, social norms are increasingly formed within the communication environment instead of by traditional institutions of socialisation and regulation like family, education, state, or religion. In a social media context, “likes”, “shares”, and comments afford more symbolic approval or disapproval, thus making normative enforcement less significant in formulating norms compared to continuous interaction and feedback. This sets up a scenario whereby patterns of social behaviour emerge not from rational deliberation or even cultural traditions, but as a consequence of content virality and algorithmic amplification. Movements such as the United States’ #MeToo (Lee & Murdie, 2021) or campaigns against fake news in Brazil (Ozawa *et al.*, 2023) emerged in this digital space but quickly took up real roles in shifting social norms, impacting gender relations, journalistic standards, and legal practices.

The transformation of social norms within the media environment takes two interrelated forms. On the one hand, there is a redefinition of traditional understandings of morality, tolerance, legitimacy, and publicity. What is considered politically active in one culture may be judged as inactivity in another culture, depending on the representation and reception of those norms in the media environment. On the other hand, new norms appear that are specific to the digital environment – the norms of online communication, rules of conduct in networks, and perceptions about the privacy or publicity of one’s personal data. In this, algorithmic systems of social media have a decisive role. They not only organise information flows but also form a kind of selective mechanism, which determines which topics are given visibility and which are delegated to the periphery of attention. Content selection algorithms on social media platforms such as Twitter or Instagram are based on the principles of personalisation and engagement maximisation, thus creating informational environments where users are continuously exposed to content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs. Over 99% of smartphones had WhatsApp installed on them in Brazil during the

2022 elections, and the number of unique disinformation claims that were circulated via various factchecking service lines showed a sharp rise in tandem with user increases (Hale *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, not only are the individual beliefs reinforced, but certain practices also become normalised at the level of communities. This process seems even more significant in post-truth contexts, where truth loses its explanatory power and becomes the second choice after feelings. Algorithms act as an institution of selective institutionalisation of social norms, promoting those representations that are more conducive to high audience engagement and downgrading those that have a limited number of fans. In this sense, algorithmic systems may be seen as new socialisation agents, competing with the traditional institutions. Whereas in modern society norm formation was carried out by legal systems, educational institutions, and traditional media, in the 21st century, this process is increasingly governed by the “black boxes” of digital platforms, whose *modus operandi* remains incomprehensible to ordinary users (Laczi & Póser, 2025).

In academic discussion, the media-social norm nexus is observed through several theoretical approaches, with each approach focusing on specific mechanisms regarding the formation and change of normative orientations in society. No one approach would be able to account for all facets of this phenomenon excellently, but collectively, they can be used to draw a more coherent picture given the complexity of the media environment in the post-truth era. One of the most influential approaches is the theory of the social construction of reality, formulated by P. Berger & T. Luckmann (2023). In this view, media are institutionalised means that define and assign meaning to certain real events and phenomena, thus forming a framework of interpretation for the same. Meaning negotiation, public debate, circulation of memes, and epidemiological campaigns all work together to ensure that social media serve as a key platform for the construction of realities. Another theoretical strand is represented by the “agenda-setting” model, introduced by M.E. McCombs *et al.* (2018). This model emphasises that media do not so much determine what people think, but rather shape what they think about. As far as social norms are concerned, it means that issues/media that are regularly covered in the media gain the status of socially relevant topics, while those that are beyond the sphere of media attention are marginalised.

Framing theory logically followed from E. Goffman’s original concept and later advancement in media and communication fields, and it emphasised the presentation of information (D’Angelo, 2017). Frames create a schema of reality, based on what is included and what is excluded. This forms the basis for framing theory because it chooses which practices are acceptable within society, making it a direct impact on norm formation. In the case of India, the use of WhatsApp as a channel for the dissemination of ethno-religious messages is particularly illustrative, where frames were employed to construct the legitimacy of violent actions leading to a shift in the parameters of what is deemed

acceptable in the mass psyche (Amarasingam *et al.*, 2022). The study by K. Garimella & D. Eckles (2020) showed that 13% of the photos shared in political WhatsApp groups in the pre-election period in India are false. The theory of cultivation by G. Gerbner (1998) is also important. It reveals the role of media in forming perceptions of social reality. The study highlights the cumulative effect, which is the result of systematic long-term exposure to media content. If, in traditional media, the accumulation of the effect was the result of the long viewing of television broadcasts, in the digital environment, it is the result of the constant presence of people in social networks. This gives rise to a phenomenon of “culture of constant presence”, in which repeated images and messages reinforce and normalise certain practices. For instance, various studies show that exposure to politically polarised content on Twitter (X, n.d.) in the USA fuels the perception of social division and sets new norms in terms of “normal” political behaviour, where aggressive confrontation and radical speech are regarded as legitimate.

The regulatory and normative aspects are taken into account in the context of the theoretical and methodological analysis that defines the limits of social media activity and the norm-formation process in the post-truth era. If classical sociological theories mainly focus on the symbolic and communicative aspects of the phenomenon, contemporary society of the 21st century also requires attention to the legal and institutional, as well as ethical factors. National legal systems respond differently to disinformation and algorithmic selection problems. In the USA, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (Brannon & Holmes, 2024) ensures broad immunity from the platform and minimises liability for user-generated content, while in the European Union, the Digital Services Act (European Commission, n.d.) introduces regulations on algorithmic transparency and regulation of disinformation. In India, The Information Technology... (2021), adopted in 2021, introduce stricter procedures for blocking objectionable content, raising the issue of balancing security and freedom of speech. In addition to the legal level, the level of ethics is also relevant when platforms and journalistic communities create their own rules to prevent the dissemination of fake news, hate speech, and the manipulation of narratives. Socially, one of the most powerful instruments is user-driven self-regulation practices, including large-scale unfollowings and “cancel culture”, as well as coordinated actions through mass reporting, which work as a form of digital punishment and, at the same time, show the emergence of new norms established not by the state, but by communities.

One relevant approach is symbolic interactionism, within which social norms are viewed as the product of ongoing interpretation of meanings in interpersonal communication (Husin *et al.*, 2021). Social media greatly expands the field for such communication, where the person is simultaneously producer and consumer of content. In this sense, norms are not only inherently top-down but also enforced horizontally, through interactions between relatively equal participants. In this regard, there is the spreading

of hashtags as new forms of normative expression, where their extensive and common use denotes social recognition of a particular stance, which thus becomes a social standard. Critical media theory is also widely used in research (Fuchs, 2021). The media function as instruments for the reproduction of power relations and hegemony. For this reason, critical theory is applied in the post-truth era with a new approach when algorithmic systems are viewed as producing inequalities as much as reflecting them and determining which voices are heard and which are not within social networks. That is to say, media not only provide information but also regulate the normative aspects selectively in favour of the groups which have greater access to resources of influence.

The combination of these approaches makes it possible to recognise that the relationship between media and social norms is multidimensional. These include a symbolic interaction process between individuals, structural agenda-setting and framing, as well as systemic long-term effects and reproduction of power relations. This is especially significant given that these processes are situated in a digital context where algorithms serve as a highly impactful but supplementary mediator. It therefore creates a relativity and a dynamic and situational nature of the norms, making society more prone to change but also more manipulable.

Influence of social media on the USA, Brazil and India in a post-truth situation

The media environment in each of the countries has its own empirical profile, which defines how these platforms influence social norms and the extent of this impact. The USA has more public (open) platforms (a high share of social dialogue is in Twitter/X (n.d.) and Reddit (n.d.)), while traditional large media, for example, The New York Times (n.d.), are one of the important nodes for correcting false information and norms. It is thus the mix of expert information (professional media and research reports) and social mobilisation via digital networks (viral stories and memes) that has the biggest impact on how social norms are changing. In Brazil, one can observe an affinity for private messaging services and social networks and the influence they have on local mobilisation and political communication. At the same time, massive national newspapers like *Folha de S.Paulo* (2025) tend to function in tense interactions with digital platforms, accusing the latter of cultivating informational garbage. This creates an environment where norms with regard to political behaviour, trust in institutions, and information hygiene are re-established through the circulation of content within private networks and by selection by algorithms. In India, the role of closed communication channels (WhatsApp) coupled with the level of mobile penetration creates a higher-level vulnerability for the spread of rumours/disinformation that is accelerated to the point that it, in some cases, leads to violent practices and changes local social norms. Table 2 presents the key empirical indicators and mechanisms of influence for the selected media platforms in the respective countries.

Table 2. Key empirical indicators for the main platforms and the channels of their influence

Parameter/ Country and platforms	USA – The New York Times, Reddit, Twitter/X	Brazil – Folha de S.Paulo, Facebook, WhatsApp	India – Hindustan Times, WhatsApp, Twitter/X
Structural characteristics of the media environment	Hybrid System of Large-Scale Public Platforms and Influential Traditional Media; NYT represents a case of an elite media actor with the capacity for fact-checking and providing normative guidance; Reddit comprises thematic communities characterised by a high degree of self-organisation of norms; Twitter serves as a fast-paced discursive space with significant potential for the viral propagation of threads	A combination of mass social networks (Facebook/Instagram) and private messaging channels (WhatsApp); national newspapers (Folha) have much power over elites, but limited oversight capacities over private groups; algorithms on Facebook/Instagram are a major factor in the visibility of local stories	There is dominance of mobile messaging platforms (WhatsApp) in information exchange during everyday life; Hindustan Times functions as a traditional media actor with an online presence; Twitter is used mainly by political elites and activists, and there are frequent regional variations concerning language and content
Main mechanisms of norm transmission	Public framing by elite media (NYT) + rapid social propagation of memes and threads (Twitter) + normative oversight and moderation within the subreddits; fact-checking serves as a mechanism to restore normative order	Content circulation through targeting and private networks; multimedia “facts” on WhatsApp and Facebook spread easily in a viral manner; algorithmic selection amplifies local narratives and emotionally charged messages	Transmission of rumours and local narratives within encrypted WhatsApp groups; political discussion on Twitter is sometimes translated into local offline activity; linguistic diversity further exacerbates local recirculation of norms
Representative empirical cases/ events	The influence of Twitter/X narratives on public opinion regarding vaccination; studies indicate an effect of descriptive online norms on attitude change, including impacts on vaccine uptake	An experimental deactivation of the multimedia content on WhatsApp in Brazil (RCT – Randomised Controlled Trial) resulted in a reduced exposure to disinformation prior to elections; media press (Folha) and academic reviews had proved the role played by Facebook in the spread of disinformation during electoral campaigns	Research and analytical reports have repeatedly pointed to a link between the circulation of WhatsApp messages and local incidences of violence and mobilisation; the LSE study “WhatsApp Vigilantes” and various journalistic reports have documented the mechanisms at work in translating rumours into action
Nature of disinformation/ misinformation influencing norms	Politically oriented disinformation (elections, pandemic), manipulative visual content, and constructed narratives designed for emotional mobilisation; Reddit occasionally functions as a source of atypical norms emerging from subcultures	Mass circulation of fabricated images and videos, as well as manipulative messages within private groups; political polarisation increases users’ willingness to accept authoritative yet unreliable information	Locally adapted fake content (including multilingual versions of the content), fabricated announcements, and manipulated news screenshots, all of which affect norms relating to safety and behaviour-change response
Algorithmic features affecting norm formation	Personalisation of the “For You” feed and timelines, engagement-based optimisation, and relevance-based ranking work to reinforce homogenous clusters of belief and amplify normative patterns that produce user engagement	Facebook/Instagram algorithms amplify sensational local content; private groups and WhatsApp bypass public algorithmic filtering, creating autonomous informational micro-systems	For WhatsApp, there is no centralised feed-ranking system, but the forwarding mechanism enables exponential dissemination of information, given that sharing takes place on groups; for Twitter, there are different mechanisms that determine visibility, such as reposts and retweets
Measurement of impact on social norms	Changes in tonal framing and descriptive norms (text mining), levels of polarisation (network modularity), and attitude analysis based on representative surveys	Measured indicators include exposure to disinformation (RCT), frequency of content forwarding, and dynamics of political narratives on social networks	The LSE studies have identified mechanisms linking message circulation to local mobilisation
Political and institutional context and regulation	Active role of fact-checking and ongoing legal debates on platform moderation; legislative initiatives in the USA are more frequently focused on algorithmic transparency and platform accountability	Emerging moderation policies and legal proceedings involving platforms; political pressure on Facebook during electoral periods; weaker institutional capacity to regulate private communication channels	Attempts to regulate WhatsApp and other platforms, including court cases and policy initiatives aimed at combating disinformation; challenges persist due to end-to-end encryption and the scale of these platforms

Source: compiled by the author based on Facebook (n.d.), WhatsApp (n.d.), Reddit (n.d.), Twitter/X (n.d.), The New York Times (n.d.), Hindustan Times (n.d.), D. Phillips (2018), S. Gao *et al.* (2022), T. Ventura *et al.* (2023), Folha de S.Paulo (2025), WhatsApp Vigilantes (2025)

Current results suggest that while the drivers of social media's impact on social norms across the three countries have some overlapping elements, the result depends on the specific mix of social media consumption, the language(s) being used, the importance of the private networks, and how the different countries view traditional institutions. In each case, the algorithms and platforms themselves (via engagement maximisation and content distribution) provide the push for norm formation: by boosting the spread of messages that are more emotionally arousing, they increase the likelihood of certain norms becoming salient, and thus acceptable, to the population. Private and encrypted networks (WhatsApp in Brazil and India, in particular) shift norm diffusion away from institutional processes of norm correction (such as professional fact-checking and editorial oversight). Experiments and field interventions suggest that certain technical changes to platforms (disabling autoplay of video messages, limiting the spread of forwardable messages) can reduce people's exposure to misinformation, and may also slow down the social norm diffusion of socially nonnormative behaviours. A RCT in Brazil shows the real-life impact of interventions like these, and this has implications for regulatory policy (Ventura *et al.*, 2023).

The relationship between public discourse (high-trust mass media such as NYT or Folha) and networked discourse determines how quickly and how radically social norms can change. Where trust in the traditional press remains high, and fact-checking is well established, there is evidence of a more gradual and adaptive change in social norms. But where public discourse has declined, or is spread thinly over many conflicting sources of information, there are conditions ripe for rapid norm change and an associated possibility of norm radicalisation. This implies, in practical terms, elite media in the USA play a moderating role, which is, however, not always effective, whereas the private networks more often decide the "tempo" of change in Brazil and India. In terms of measurement, a number of operational dimensions should be distinguished: effects on descriptive norms (what people perceive as typical), effects on injunctive or prescriptive norms (what people perceive as acceptable), and behavioural changes (concrete actions such as participation in protests, content sharing, or violence). Effects on descriptive norms may be rapid and measurable in a matter of days or weeks (e.g. regarding information on vaccination). On the other hand, evidence from RCTs and field interventions shows that while technical measures may lead to a decline in exposure to misinformation, they do not always translate to a visibly improved long-term critical evaluation of the sources of information (Gao *et al.*, 2022).

The potential of information diffusion of digital networks is explained primarily with reference to the structure of connections and the properties of flows in the social graph. Network homophily (the tendency of individuals to associate with similar others), clustering and the disproportionate distribution of connectivity (hub nodes) present a structural precondition for widespread content. If a

message reaches a node with more people or stays within a severely connected group of like-minded individuals, there is a statistically advanced likelihood that the message will go viral rapidly. This network-based mechanism is not autonomous: it is superimposed by the affordances of platform interfaces, such as "repost" and "forward", functions of automatic media playback, and push notifications that drastically diminish the cognitive barriers to dissemination (one click is enough to repost or forward content to a group). As a result, this "low-friction" mechanism transforms any emotionally charged message into a potential driver of behavioural normalisation within a group: when content is repeatedly encountered within the same community, it begins to be perceived as a "typical" descriptive norm, and thus as politically or morally acceptable.

Three processes on this network and functional substrate jointly define the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns. The first is the emotional construction of messages, whereby content that appeals to fear, outrage, or pride shows demonstrably higher levels of engagement, as well as wide dissemination. Second, is the use of hybrid narratives (a mix of true and false): campaigns that use manipulative claims together with actual information gain more legitimacy, and therefore evade factchecking treatments. The third mechanism is instrumental organisation through coordinated networks (bots, networks of fake accounts, and "troll farms"), which amplify the initial signal by producing an illusion of mass support or wide approval of a given behaviour. Together, these processes make disinformation not only fixed but also potentially normative.

Empirical cases provide examples of the mechanisms in relation to political and socio-cultural contexts. In the USA, after the 2016 and 2022 elections, false news was circulated on social media, and its distribution was asymmetrical – the bulk of false news widely shared during that period was pro-Trump in orientation. At the same time, analyses indicate that though the overall exposure to "fake news" was significant, a very high level of persuasion effect would have been required to change the electoral outcome in a significant way (which is highly statistically unlikely). This is the empirical interpretation that disinformation in mass media serves to degrade the quality of public discourse, increase polarisation, and cause behavioural shifts only if exposure to disinformation reaches a significant mass, and is further enabled by legitimisation such as endorsement by elites. Platforms were also involved in cross-platform transmission of the "Stop the Steal" narrative and other associated messaging that helped mobilise those who stormed the Capitol on 6 January 2021. Cross-platform flows of disinformation are shown to have reinforced the mobilisation effect (Kennedy *et al.*, 2022).

In Brazil, mechanisms of private dissemination of disinformation through messaging services had a pronounced political impact during the 2018 presidential election and subsequent campaigns (Cavalini *et al.*, 2023). A distinctive feature of the Brazilian case is the large-scale use of WhatsApp as a channel for targeted chain dissemination

(forwarding) of political content, often in the form of memes, short videos, and audio messages that are difficult to subject to public moderation. Randomised field experiments and interventions (among them was the disabling of automatic media playback in the messaging application) demonstrated that technical modifications of the interface meta-reduce the exposure of an audience to certain types of disinformation, at the same time not reducing belief in such content and political polarisation in the long run. Such findings underscore that tools targeted at curtailing visibility and shreabiity are better suited to dampen informational “noise” and volumes of circulation as opposed to immediately correcting beliefs.

In India, information within encrypted messaging groups has proved localised in context, adapted linguistically, and translated rapidly into concrete action. This has been observed to have manifested in direct street mobilisation and incidents of intentional violence (Vijaywargiya, 2025). This combination of local vulnerability (access to high quality journalism being limited in some regions and marked social tensions), technological affordances (forwarding functions and large group chats), and political provocation creates conditions in which disinformation quickly shifts from being a “message” to becoming a “normative practice” – acts of violence start to be seen as legitimate responses to the purported “threat” constructed by the disinformation (Ardia *et al.*, 2020). In Brazil, during the 2018 presidential campaign, about 42% of information uttered in right-wing WhatsApp groups was adjudged to be false by fact-checkers, compared to less than 3% of similar left-wing posts (Avelar, 2019).

It is also important to emphasise differences between platforms in terms of their algorithmic design and social affordances, as these differences help explain why the same disinformation strategy produced different outcomes in the USA, Brazil, and India. Public feeds with open addressing (Twitter, Reddit) are conducive to the rapid formation of meme-based discourse and highly dependent on the visibility of influential nodes, with disinformation circulating publicly and rapidly exposed to fact-checking, but also associated with mobilisation. Platforms with algorithmic feed personalisation (Facebook, Instagram) allow for more fine-tuned targeting of the audience and, by virtue of personalisation, allow content to be normalised for a region or group. The messaging application (WhatsApp) is characterised by the lack of a public feed and by end-to-end encryption, which renders any centralised form of moderation impossible. At the same time, the forwarding options and group chats ensure localised multi-channel dissemination with messages likely to be turned into practical instructions. This classification of platforms matches empirical cases – public campaigns at large in the USA created a perception of mass support; in Brazil, political posts were verified in private WhatsApp groups; and in India, localised misinformation in messaging apps was often materialised into specific real actions.

The phenomenon of user responses to posted content in a post-truth reality is one of the core components in social norm transformation. It is the audience itself that, through discussion, polarisation and the overall acceptance/rejection of a particular interpretation, forms an environment in which established reference frameworks lose stability and new ones slowly gain social recognition. User responses are never passive but are actively modulated by the operation of algorithms that amplify particular kinds of conduct. This results in a dynamic system of mutually-reinforcing user practices and technical mechanisms that give rise to a new normativity. In the USA, this is most clearly seen in two interrelated processes – polarisation and the normalisation of radical discourses, with ideologically homogeneous communities being formed on platforms such as Reddit and Twitter, where discussion is less a matter of an exchange of arguments and more a form of identity affirmation. During electoral campaigns, even traditional media such as The New York Times were drawn into a constant cyclical response to the mass digital debates. Thus, a new norm is created, where confrontation is the norm, and the absence of compromise is not considered a flaw but evidence of principled conviction.

In Brazil, a defining characteristic is the combination of the mobilisation potential of social networks with a high level of emotional engagement among users. Facebook and Instagram amplify the circulation of videos and visual narratives that tap into collective emotions – from fear of corruption to pride in national identity. In such conditions, discussion is less oriented towards truth and more oriented towards the creation of emotionally charged “new norms”, such as “the honest citizen versus the corrupt elite”. A specific feature of the Brazilian media space is that even traditional media such as Folha de S.Paulo has to tailor its narratives according to the logic of social media, thus exacerbating the polarisation impact. In India, a critical factor is the role of mobile platforms, most notably WhatsApp, which has turned into the main avenue for information exchange. User sentiments are not only shaped in the public domain but also within closed groups where the flow of information acquires a rather intimate treatment. This is a reason for trusting messages when they arrive as well, even when they are disinformation. Thus, new norms evolve, which are specific local perceptions and ethno-religious polarisation. Twitter is used as an open forum where positions are articulated, and the bulk of narratives is spread on WhatsApp due to minimal control from algorithms. Table 3 below shows the difference in social media role on norm formation between the USA, Brazil and India. This table shows that the emergence of a social norm through social media in the post-truth era is a complex phenomenon that depends on national media system characteristics, cultural context, and the operation of algorithms. The result of this process in the USA is the consolidation of new norms of acceptable conflict in politics as a style of public behaviour. In Brazil, this process occurs through affective appeals and

forms norms of collective emotions as a foundation of political actions. In India, there is an overlap but marked distinction in the form of decentralised interpretation of “national norm” with multiple locational understandings

reinforcing social segmentation. Concluding the analysis to confirm that social media does not just relay but actively produces normativity, with the process taking varying shapes based on politico-cultural specifics.

Table 3. Comparative overview of the influence of social media on norm formation in the United States, Brazil, and India

Country	Key platforms	Role of algorithms	Nature of user response	Formation of “new norms”
USA	The New York Times, Reddit, Twitter	Reinforce polarisation; personalise political content	Discussions take the form of ideological validation; a high level of confrontation	Radicalisation of political discourse; normalisation of conflict
Brazil	Folha de S.Paulo, Facebook, Instagram	Amplify emotional content; focus on visual narratives	Mass emotional mobilisation; discussions aimed at reinforcing collective sentiments	Emergence of norms of “honesty versus corruption”; legitimisation of populism
India	Hindustan Times, WhatsApp, Twitter	Minimal algorithmic control on WhatsApp; selective amplification on Twitter	Responses within closed groups; high trust in information; reinforcement of ethno-religious divisions	Localised norms reinforcing social segmentation; legitimisation of exclusive identities

Source: compiled by the author based on Facebook (n.d.), WhatsApp (n.d.), Reddit (n.d.), Twitter/X (n.d.), The New York Times (n.d.), Hindustan Times (n.d.), E.R.L. Loureiro (2021), D. Kreiss & S.C. McGregor (2024), R. Vijaywargiya (2025), Folha de S.Paulo (2025)

To overcome the norm-producing spread of disinformation, it is necessary to use a combination of approaches. Network analysis makes it possible to identify critical nodes and pathways of dissemination; a content and sentiment analysis detects alignments of emotionality and framing; experimental interventions (RCTs, field experiments) assess the impact of technical interventions; and the political economy of platforms clarifies which structuralised incentives/platform policies aid or retard correction. For operational conclusions, combined metrics should be employed, including speed of dissemination (time-to-peak), forwarding rates, network modularity/assortativity, changes in descriptive norms in pre- and post-exposure surveys, and case-based realisations (transitions from information to concrete action). In practical terms, the findings suggest several specific policy directions. Technical restrictions on content sharing within messaging applications and user interface (UI) modifications (such as indicators of media provenance or throttling the forwarding functionality) may help reduce the chances of super-viral large-scale dissemination of disinformation. On the other hand, there is a need for broadening holistic media literacy programmes, more localised fact-checking initiatives with multilingual capacities, and transparent research mechanisms (including access to anonymised platform data) for timely detection of emerging disinformation manoeuvres. That moderation policies need to be context-sensitive – an intervention that would work in open-feed contexts in the USA would not be as effective in the context of large encrypted communication channels as in Brazil or India.

DISCUSSION

The findings showed that algorithmic systems functioned as architects of reality, lending social norms a dynamic, situational and relative character. The discussion of the research findings enabled a comparison of the conclusions drawn with existing approaches in the field. F. Fischer’s (2021)

analysis has shown that the phenomenon of post-truth has been interpreted not only as an epistemological crisis but also as a political one, where the struggle over the meaning and the interpretation of facts becomes a key mechanism. The study emphasised that cases such as climate change denial and COVID-19 denial showed a shift from striving for social truth to competing for the social significance of facts. In conducted research, this was observed in the USA, Brazil, and India as well, where norms were formed not by people trusting in facts, but through the constant repetition of some views and algorithms amplifying some emotional aspects of events. As such, these findings confirm the concept of post-truth as a multilayered and multi-faceted phenomenon, showing also the increasing role of digital tools in this process, as technical actors of the meaning-making process beyond F. Fischer’s conception.

According to the study conducted by R. Cazzamatta *et al.* (2024), even though fact-checking has become an institutional mechanism, it is still heterogeneous and subject to political and regional factors. The researchers found that the global network of 400+ organisations has created a divide between powerful media centres and local initiatives that makes combating disinformation very hard. In comparison with these findings, the present study indicates that fact-checking in the USA has a relatively stable institutional character, whereas in Brazil and India, a more localised and reactive form prevails, closely linked to the dynamics of social media and political campaigning. Notably, cases of disinformation spreading via WhatsApp in Brazil and India, where localised initiatives are insufficiently resourced to respond to large-scale waves of false information. Thus, the results not only confirm the conclusion made in relation to regional heterogeneity but also complement it with evidence regarding the role of algorithmic systems that frame dissemination trajectories following information pathways leading to relative inefficiency of fact-checking in media ecosystems. In the study by

L. Sihombing *et al.* (2024), post-truth was conceptualised as the contrast between the irrational essence of post-truth and the rational roots of the legal truth. The author highlighted the danger to democratic institutions and the need for identification of philosophical and legal bases that can help reinstate trust among societies. Comparing those propositions to the findings of the present study revealed that regulatory frameworks still play a significant role in maintaining informational order in the USA, Brazil, and India, but the success of legal mechanisms was largely dependent on the algorithmic environment and the context of user reactions. The results showed that legal regulation cannot always limit the process of the formation of “new norms” on social media, which are shaped in the context of mass discussions and social polarisation. In other words, thus, in the irrational post-truth and rational truth binary, the determining factor was not normative frameworks so much as technological and communicative mechanisms that dictated the pace and direction of social transformation.

In the research by L. Reyes-Galindo (2021), it was argued that the phenomenon of post-truth is not restricted to the Brexit crisis, the United States’ presidential elections or other similar events, but its origins are deeply embedded in the social and cultural history. This study showed that scientific controversies are often artificially constructed as a result of socio-cultural practices, and that neglect of knowledge is either the outcome of deliberate policy or the by-product of institutional processes. In the present study, this conclusion was both confirmed and further specified through the example of the Brazilian media environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the combination of algorithmic information selection and the emotional mobilisation of users facilitated the legitimisation of populist narratives and undermined trust in official sources. In comparison with L. Reyes-Galindo’s interpretation, the findings demonstrated that post-truth is not only a culturally conditioned process but also a technologically sustained environment in which algorithms act as a key factor determining the scale and speed of the construction of non-knowledge. In the study by A.Y. Lee (2022), the main emphasis was placed on media literacy as a critical condition for countering disinformation. The author defined media literacy as a key instrument that enables recognition of manipulation, critical evaluation of information and reduction of vulnerability to fake news. The results of this research supported this thesis, but also demonstrated that even a high level of personal media competence does not guarantee protection from algorithmic effects. Thus, in the USA, where media literacy is at a higher level because of the traditions of media education and the public discourse, algorithmic selection also affects the radicalisation of political debate and conflict escalation. This means that media literacy is necessary but not sufficient to combat post-truth in the absence of technological and social mechanisms of selective norm institutionalisation.

A.A. Sabancı (2022) proposed the notion of “post-truth journalism” as the identification of outlets that claim to be

traditional, while they disseminate disinformation. The example of Breitbart demonstrates how hybrid media erode confidence in factual reporting and use journalistic formats to legitimise the use of manipulative materials. In the current study, it was found that similar processes operate in the case of the USA, where traditional and digital media coexisted and were politically contested, with normalisation even in respectable outlets; Brazil, where private messaging allowed users to circulate disinformation without journalistic control; and India, where WhatsApp channels sent out news-like messages as a means of mass mobilisation and even in some instances violent actions. Comparing it with the conceptualisations of A.A. Sabancı, it should be noted that post-truth journalism is only a subset of the general process in which algorithms and user engagement determine the formation of new norms. K. Özcan (2023) centred on an analysis of mechanisms of disinformation spread and their effect on the political process. The author stressed the role of algorithms as a tool to organise the flow of information and to produce new forms of public opinion manipulation. In comparison with the findings of current study, the algorithmic structure determined the social interaction framework and the processes of selective norm institutionalisation. K. Özcan analysed the political process and its effect on public opinion in the political context of elections primarily. In presented research, the results demonstrated the wider scope, ranging from political radicalisation in the USA to social segregation in local contexts in India. Thus, the results showed that algorithms produced consequences not only in politics but also in the cultural and normative field. It implies an extension of political scope in the narrow sense.

G. Singh (2023) presented post-truth as a situation where the truth that appears true prevails, especially in relation to political statements and the most global events that occurred in 2016, such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. The author addressed post-truth as a factor affecting the sphere of international relations and security policy, based on realist and liberal approaches. Comparing it with the findings of this study, G. Singh analysed post-truth primarily as a political and international issue, while this study focused on the socio-cultural level of post-truth. The importance of algorithms was emphasised, which led to the establishment of new norms and increased social polarisation. G. Singh stressed the broadening of the concept of security under post-truth conditions, and the results of this study showed that platforms are instruments that directly strengthen new forms of normativity, not just security. A.S. Kuraishi (2022) considered post-truth as a political discourse, as such, that is, distinguished it from the classic concept of post-truth (dominance of feelings, fake news). According to the author, post-truth discourse is a factor in political polarisation, degradation of democratic institutions, and democratic deconsolidation. The theoretical construction proposed by the author made it possible to define post-truth as a purposeful tool of a political actor. A comparison with the present study indicates that the findings are complementary: while A.S. Kuraishi sustained

attention to the discursive dimension of post-truth and its impact on democratic institutions in developing countries, the present research identified concrete empirical mechanisms of such influence via algorithmisation of digital platforms to amplify polarisation in localisation of norms. In both cases, it was demonstrated that post-truth is not confined to the informational sphere but transforms the very structure of political and social relations.

To sum up, comparing the findings of this study with the previous ones shows variation in perception of the phenomenon and its effects. The conducted study brought these results together by showing that post-truth not only serves communication channels but has an impact on democratic processes; on the other hand, it also functions as an institutional agent involved in the formation of social norms. This leads to the conclusion that information space, in its post-truth configuration, constitutes a multidimensional environment wherein mechanisms of political nature, of social nature, and cultural nature converge, whose waves range from intensified polarisation to increased transformation of models of democratic governance.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on a conducted analysis, social media in the post-truth environment is transforming from a channel of communication to an institutional agent of the construction of social reality, directly affecting the processes of formation, legitimisation, and transformation of social norms. It was shown that the phenomenon of post-truth, marked by a return from objective facts to beliefs subscribed to in an emotionally consequential manner, is not simply an epistemological aberration, but a systemic attribute of the media space, brought about by the technological digitalisation, the algorithmisation of content, and the socio-cultural processes of individualisation and fragmentation of society. The study also identified a mechanism through which algorithmic systems of social platforms, as “non-corporate agents of socialisation”, implement selective institutionalisation of norms. They institutionalise and amplify certain behaviour and representations that produce maximum user engagement, thus making social norms more relativistic, situational and changeable. National media environments of the USA, Brazil, and India have been compared, revealing distinct configurations of such influence. In the USA, with dominant public platforms and more traditional media, there a normalisation of political conflict and

radicalisation of discourse. In Brazil, which is typified by hybrid private and mass social platforms, emotional mobilisation and legitimisation of populist narratives prevailed. In India, on the other hand, the preponderance of enclosed channels of mobile communication was found to have led to the development of highly localised norms which accentuate segregative social practices and, at times, engage in actual violence.

The theoretical and methodological analysis, which combined approaches from the social construction of reality, agenda-setting theory, framing theory, cultivation theory, and symbolic interactionism, confirmed a multi-dimensional relationship between media and norms. As such, the media/ norm relationship is one of symbolic interaction, as well as structural mechanisms of power reproduction. The analysis of individual case studies, such as the #MeToo movement in the USA, Brazilian anti-fake news, and the WhatsApp-driven mass mobilisation in India, has shown that social media translates digital discourse into actual changes in norms. Thus, it can be concluded that in post-truth environments, social media not only reflect, but also produce normativity. They make society more open to change, but also more vulnerable to manipulation and coercion, thus necessitating a broad range of countervailing responses, involving technical solutions, flexible regulatory systems tailored to particular social contexts, and campaigns to raise digital and media literacy. The study only analyses the media environments of three countries (the USA, Brazil, and India) and selected social platforms, which makes it difficult to fully generalise the conclusions to all media environments and regions. Further empirical research should focus on cross-country comparative studies using media environments with different political systems, as well as the development of more precise quantitative approaches to measuring the direct links between specific algorithms and changes in social media and corresponding changes in specific norms.

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