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From Likes to Trolling: Analysing The Impact of Context Collapse in Indian Social Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT: The context collapse phenomenon—where social media platforms converge traditionally distinct social spheres—has profound implications for public discourse and communicative practices. This study seeks to examine how a singular message, disseminated across various digital platforms, elicits polarized reactions ranging from positive engagement (likes) to hostile responses (trolling and accusations of racism, classism, or casteism). The research emphasizes the impact of context collapse on audience cognition and message interpretation, particularly how it alters the reception of seemingly neutral content.

A qualitative case discussion method will be employed, using a purposive sample of tweets and social media posts as primary case studies. This will enable an investigation into whether context collapse amplifies semantic distortion, leading to viral reactions, and will identify which types of traditional media (TV or print) better convey such messages in a more segmented audience context. The findings aim to provide a deeper understanding of the dysfunctions that arise when audience segmentation is not adequately considered in message dissemination. Additionally, suggests a model tracing the information flow pattern in a fragmented digital landscape to understand the cause of context collapse.

KEYWORDS: Context Collapse, Cross-Platform Analysis, Social Media Polarization, Viral Reactions, Comparative Media Studies

I. INTRODUCTION

India's rich history reflects a complex interplay of peaceful coexistence and conflict, shaped by vast religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity. This diversity influenced social and administrative structures, oscillating between harmony and discord. Intellectual leaders like Basavanna and Allama fostered the exchange of religious ideas through debates, which, while resolving doctrinal differences, sometimes led to social tensions and violence. Post-independence, the Indian Constitution institutionalized secularism, religious freedom, and equality before the law to address historical inequalities and conflicts. It created a legal framework to mediate disputes and protect diversity. However, legal mechanisms alone cannot resolve deep-rooted social divides. Communal and ideological conflicts persist, exposing the limitations of constitutional guarantees.

The social media revolution has further complicated India's sensitive social fabric. While empowering marginalized voices and movements like #MeToo and Dalit activism, social media also fuels trolling and hate speech, prompting calls for stronger regulations. Political parties have utilized platforms like Twitter and Facebook to connect with voters, spread propaganda, and influence public opinion (Pal et al., 2020). This use of digital platforms for *political communication* reflects a broader trend of the *digitalization of politics*, with online platforms becoming critical to modern-day political campaigns (Kaul & Deshmukh, 2021).

One of the defining features of social media in India is its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, facilitating communication across different strata of society. However, the rise of misinformation, fake news, and *echo chambers* presents significant challenges to this seemingly interconnected digital environment. One of the key challenges posed by social media is the phenomenon of "context collapse," where content created for a specific audience is encountered by a much wider and more diverse audience, leading to misinterpretations and conflicts (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In a country as diverse as India, where social, religious, and linguistic identities play a crucial role in shaping worldviews, context collapse can have serious consequences.

Context collapse refers to the convergence of multiple audiences into a single communicative context, resulting in the breakdown of audience-specific cues that previously guided the construction and interpretation of messages (Davidson & Poor, 2015). This disruption can cause significant communicative dysfunctions, as messages crafted with one audience in mind are often interpreted differently by others, leading to unintended consequences. For example, a meme or tweet intended as satire for one

community may be interpreted as an insult by another, leading to outrage and retaliation. This collapse of context is particularly dangerous in the Indian context, where historical grievances and communal tensions can be easily reignited by a misunderstood post.

The phenomenon of **semantic distortion**—where the intended meaning of a message becomes skewed or altered due to contextual misinterpretations—further complicates this dynamic (Vásquez & Creel, 2017). Social media amplifies this problem by blurring the lines between private and public discourse, forcing users to navigate multiple, often conflicting, social roles simultaneously. Research has demonstrated that in online spaces, particularly where context collapse occurs, individuals are prone to trolling, misinterpretation, and hostile reactions, even to neutral or innocuous messages (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2022).

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background is grounded in the concept of *context collapse* and its implications for public discourse in digital environments. Social media platforms have reshaped communication by collapsing traditionally distinct social spheres—such as friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances—into a single, undifferentiated audience (boyd, 2011). As a result, individuals are often forced to tailor their messages to this blended audience, leading to communicative dysfunctions such as *semantic distortion*. Marwick and boyd (2011) argue that this context collapse is exacerbated by the algorithmic nature of platforms, which further distorts how content is displayed, reshared, and commented upon by users. Research on digital virality emphasizes the role of *affective publics*—online collectives mobilized by emotion rather than ideology (Papacharissi, 2015). The emotional intensity of public discourse on social media is often magnified by context collapse, causing simple messages to spiral into viral controversies due to varied interpretations by fragmented audiences (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Polarization, therefore, becomes an unintended consequence of context collapse, as users from different social, cultural, or political backgrounds receive the same message and respond based on their own perspectives (Guess et al., 2018).

Boczkowski and Papacharissi (2018) explore how the *hybrid media system*—a combination of traditional and digital media—further complicates audience engagement. Traditional media, such as television and print, maintain clearer audience segmentation, unlike social media, where messages are subject to a broader and more heterogeneous reception. However, even traditional media is not immune to the distortions caused by digital virality, as stories picked up from social media platforms often adopt sensational tones to maximize audience engagement.

Several studies on online behaviour have examined the role of *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles* (Sunstein, 2018). These are phenomena where users engage primarily with content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, reducing exposure to diverse perspectives. However, context collapse disrupts this dynamic by exposing users to opinions they would otherwise avoid, often leading to hostile reactions, such as trolling or public shaming. Trolling is frequently seen as a byproduct of these collapsed contexts, where anonymity and lack of direct social accountability amplify aggressive behaviour online.

Several studies have analyzed how context collapse contributes to the viral nature of certain messages, often elevating polarization and public hostility (Guess et al., 2018). In particular, misinformation and disinformation thrive in such environments, as audience members may lack the necessary background to accurately interpret the content they encounter.

III. IMPACT OF CONTEXT COLLAPSE

Mitra and Goswami (2021) examined the political use of social media in the 2019 Indian elections, showing how context collapse fuelled online hostility among political factions. Sundaram and Rao (2020) highlighted caste dynamics on Twitter, revealing how posts about caste issues often provoke backlash and offline violence. Context collapse on social media leads to significant psychological impacts. Users often experience social anxiety when their posts, intended for specific audiences, reach diverse groups, prompting self-censorship (Vitak, 2012). This situation creates identity management stress as individuals navigate different self-presentations, causing cognitive overload (Marwick & boyd, 2011). The collapse of public and private boundaries fosters fear of judgment, which can lead to self-doubt and withdrawal. Additionally, unintended exposure increases vulnerability to trolling, resulting in frustration and decreased self-esteem while conflicting audience responses contribute to emotional exhaustion (Cross & Parker, 2014).

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the role of context collapse in shaping polarized audience reactions to viral posts across social and traditional media.
- To design a comprehensive context collapse model integrating digital and traditional media.
- To discuss the mitigating strategies to reduce the polarising impact of context collapse

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs case discussions to examine how messages perform across media environments. It analyzes four cases: two viral social media posts later amplified by TV and print, and two TV shows originally targeting niche audiences but made viral on social media. These cases sparked polarized reactions across traditional and digital media. The study also explores whether segmented media environments, like print or TV, could have provided better context-specific framing. An inductive method is used post-analysis to develop a context collapse model.

VI. CASE ANALYSIS

In today's digital age, social media posts can rapidly gain traction and evoke mixed reactions from a wide spectrum of users. Virality often leads to a phenomenon where content is interpreted differently by varied audiences due to context collapse, resulting in both support (likes) and backlash (dislikes or trolling). The intersection of traditional media and social media has created a complex landscape where context collapse frequently occurs. In the cases discussed below, statements made on television shows or in print media, which might have remained contained within those contexts, gain traction online, leading to widespread reactions and debates

Case 1: AIB Roast of Bollywood Actors

The AIB Roast of Bollywood Actors (2015) was a live comedy event featuring actors like Ranveer Singh and Arjun Kapoor, with Karan Johar as the host. The content, filled with adult hum or and expletives, was intended for a niche urban audience familiar with Westernstyle comedy. However, when clips of the roast were shared on YouTube and other social media platforms, it quickly reached a much broader, more conservative audience. This led to widespread backlash, with complaints lodged against the creators for promoting obscenity.

Mainstream media, including television news channels like Times Now and India Today, heavily criticized the roast, amplifying public outrage. Various political groups and religious organizations condemned the content, leading to multiple FIRs being filed against AIB and the participating celebrities under Sections 294 of the Indian Penal Code (obscene acts and songs), as well as under the IT Act for circulating offensive content (NDTV, 2018). As a result, AIB had to remove the video from YouTube, and its members faced significant legal pressure. The controversy also impacted AIB's brand, with sponsors pulling out and the team receiving both hate and threats. The long-term impact will be a chilling effect on Indian stand-up comedy, with creators becoming more cautious about pushing boundaries due to the fear of legal action and public backlash. The incident became a flashpoint in discussions about freedom of speech, cultural sensitivities, and the limits of comedy in India.

Case 2: Sudha Murthy's Comments on Food Consciousness

In 2021, in an episode of *Khaane Mein Kaun Hai*, Sudha Murthy commented on using separate spoons for vegetarian and nonvegetarian food. Her remark was intended to emphasize the cultural significance of vegetarianism in her household, but it sparked controversy due to its strict dietary implications.

The comment gained traction on social media after clips were shared across platforms like Twitter, where it rapidly spread among users (India Today, 2023, July 26). The nature of her comment led to widespread debates, with some supporting her views on vegetarianism, while others criticized it as exclusionary or elitist. The public response was polarized. Many praised her for upholding traditional values, while others viewed her statement as a sign of class privilege, sparking discussions on food choices and cultural identity in India. Media outlets amplified the controversy, leading to a broader societal debate. To avoid the backlash, a more nuanced explanation could have been offered, emphasizing personal choice and the diversity of dietary practices rather than potentially imposing one's cultural preferences on others.

Case 3: Harsha Goenka's Saving's Tips

Harsh Goenka, a prominent businessman and billionaire, recently suggested on social media that individuals should aim to save ₹600 per day, which totals about ₹2,19,000 annually. He framed this advice alongside recommendations for reading 20 pages daily and walking 10,000 steps, highlighting the importance of small, consistent habits for long-term success.

However, his advice faced significant backlash, with many critics pointing out the stark reality of income inequality in India (The Daily Guardian, 2024 September 19). Many users noted that a considerable portion of the population earns less than ₹600 per day, making it impractical for them to save that amount. This led to accusations that Goenka was out of touch with the financial struggles faced by everyday Indians, particularly those in lower-income brackets.

Goenka's response to the criticism, which included a dismissive remark about those who couldn't save such an amount, further fuelled the negative reaction. Many felt his comments reflected a lack of understanding regarding the economic challenges many

people face in India today. The incident highlights the growing divide between wealthy individuals and the average citizen, particularly in the context of financial advice that often overlooks the realities of income disparity.

Case 4: Zomato's Customer Response

In 2019, Zomato sparked widespread debate when it tweeted, "Food doesn't have a religion. It is a religion," in response to a customer requesting a change of delivery person based on religion. The tweet aimed to promote inclusivity but received mixed reactions, with some praising the stance while others deemed it insensitive to religious sentiments (Sharma, 2019). Mainstream media outlets, including The Times of India and NDTV, reported on the incident, highlighting its implications for corporate communication. An alternative approach could have involved a more neutral response without invoking religious themes, thereby minimizing potential backlash.

By critically analysing the information flow pattern in the above cases, a generalized model is developed to understand the phenomenon under investigation (Figure 1). When a message crafted for a specific audience is positioned in appropriate media, it minimizes context collapse. However, if the message is carelessly shared on a platform solely for amplification to reach a larger audience, context collapse increases. Similarly, when amplifying media repurpose content from its original context and share it widely, the risk of context collapse is further amplified.

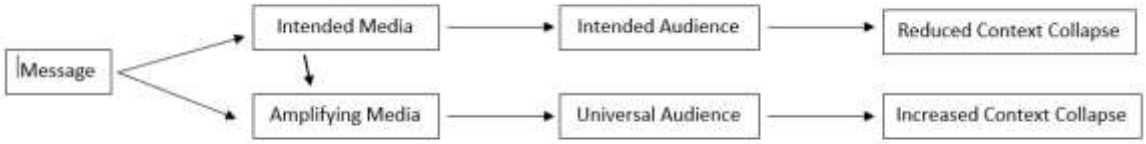


Figure 1 Context Collapse Model

VII. DISCUSSION

Mitigating context collapse on social media requires integrating digital media literacy into education to promote responsible online interactions and respect for diversity, aligning with constitutional values. Audience segmentation tools and enhanced privacy settings empower users to reclaim control over their digital identities. Raising awareness of self-censorship and implementing effective community moderation fosters inclusivity, reducing conflict and promoting democratic values (Vitak, 2012).

The trend of repurposing social media comments into traditional media discussions blurs audience boundaries, risking misinterpretation as original context is often lost. Amplifying content meant for niche audiences can lead to backlash, highlighting the need for digital media literacy that emphasizes audience awareness and contextual understanding.

Recognizing the relevance of audience segmentation in the digital age is crucial. Encouraging users to consider the broader implications of their statements before sharing reduces context collapse and its fallout. Responsible engagement and effective platform moderation promote constructive dialogues, safeguarding against miscommunication and conflict (Patel et al., 2021).

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, addressing context collapse on social media requires a multifaceted approach, including integrating digital media literacy into education. This not only cultivates critical online interaction skills but also reinforces constitutional values like equality, freedom of expression, and the right to privacy. Embedding these values in digital literacy curricula fosters an inclusive and respectful online environment, enhances civic engagement and critical thinking, and reflects democratic diversity.

Many Indian states now offer Digital Fluency as a skill enhancement subject, but enriching it with digital and democratic literacy is essential. Empowering individuals to appreciate diverse views and respond with dignity strengthens societal harmony. Media outlets and individuals can use audience segmentation tools and privacy settings to assert control over digital identities, while fostering awareness of self-censorship and implementing strong community moderation to promote inclusive discourse (Vitak, 2012).

By prioritizing digital media literacy, users are empowered to engage responsibly, uphold democratic principles, and contribute to a cohesive digital society.

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