

Interactive Computer Mediated Technology: Social Media and Indian Politics

Bapukan Saikia



Abstract: Nowadays social media become the battleground for political parties in India. It becomes an essential part of campaigning. The political parties form their own social media teams and they generate propagating content such as cartoons, memes etc. This field has also become a tool for common people to voice their concern. With the increasing usage of smartphones use of social media are also growing rapidly. Media plays the most important role in a Democracy and it keeps the Government active. With the advent of social media including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube etc. dramatically changed the way campaigns are run in Politics. Indians are rated as one of the most active social media users in the world. In India the 16th Lok Sabha election held in 2014 we saw the new trend in Indian politics. Social media played a proactive role in deciding which party wins the most seats. The Internet in India is offering opportunities for people to participate in interactive political social media campaigns and become political activists. Sometimes offensive online behavior on social media pages poses potential threats to its users. There are sometimes misunderstandings in comments. It will not be very effective using it as a mere campaign tool. But if used as a platform to share the latest decisions made by the Government and used effectively for active citizen engagement, social media will show positive results for future Indian elections. Social media have also become one of the important tools for nearly all of the world's political movements. It can be a potent weapon to spread one's ideology, or at least get it to reach more ears. Social media made democracy more inclusive from which nothing can be hidden.

Keywords : Campaign, Democracy, Media, Politics

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media provide opportunities to create and expand audiences, increase geographical reach, respond more quickly than ever before to news events and issues, and interact with news consumers in more immediate and direct ways.¹ In the process of globalization, development of Information and Communication Technologies has opened the path to interaction and participation of social actors. It is hard to conceive of a strong democracy without placing communication at the centre of things. The struggle for 'communication rights', its activism and attempts at curbing it, are not just indicative of the importance that free media acquire in contemporary existence, but are also a yardstick by which social scientists could measure the effectiveness of the

nation-state's commitment to democracy and its future.² Social networking sites have recently garnered academic attention for their role in fostering democracy and openness in both developed and developing regions. Unfortunately, in political science, this newfound interest has not yet translated into a greater interest in social media as a methodological tool for researchers conducting fieldwork.³ Aligning existing trust relationships with widely utilised social media platforms provides opportunities for news media to engage with their publics in a variety of ways. Facebook and Twitter are the dominant social media platforms in news communication, although others, such as Instagram, are also being utilised. Pew Research Center data from 2014 shows Facebook as by far the most popular social media platform, used by 71 per cent of online adults (Duggan et al. 2015).⁴ Nowadays Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. become the battleground for political parties in India. It becomes an essential part of campaigning. Viral videos, Cartoons, Memes related with politics are circulated through these new media known as social media. In India, the largest sections of social media users are youth voters. So, the political parties targeted these youth voters through these use of these media. The political parties form their own social media teams and they generate propagating content such as cartoons and memes. By this way the political parties are giving social media users many moments to laugh also. Launching digital campaigns, the political parties set up some election war rooms. This field has also become a tool for common people to voice their concern. Through the platforms of social media political parties can communicate directly with the voters. Now political parties are spending crores of rupees on social media campaigns and on war rooms. But they refused to give details about the expenses. With the increasing usage of smartphones use of social media are also growing rapidly.

II. METHODOLOGY

All the data and information used in this paper were collected from the secondary sources. The secondary sources were the books, journals, articles, internet, pamphlets and other such means.

III. USE OF INTERNET IN INDIA: THE OVERALL NUMBERS

As on December 2016, India had estimated 432 million Internet users. This however, doesn't take into account the impact of demonetisation. It was estimated that by 2017, Internet Users in India are most likely to be in a range of

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¹ Kathryn Bowd, (2016), "Social media and news media: Building new publics or fragmenting audiences?" University of Adelaide Press.

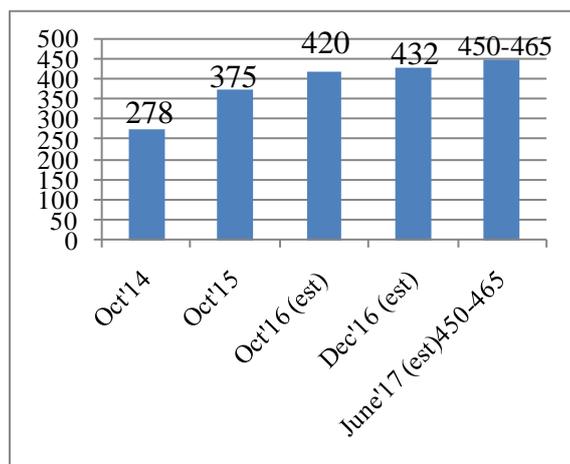
² Saima Saeed, (2009), "Negotiating Power: Community Media, Democracy and the Public Sphere", *Development in Practice*, Vol. 19, No. 4/5, pp. 466-478.

³ Isabelle Cote, (2013), "Fieldwork in the Age of Social Media: Opportunities and Challenges", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 615-619.

⁴ Kathryn Bowd, (2016), "Social media and news media: Building new publics or fragmenting audiences?" University of Adelaide Press.

450-465 million. The report finds that the overall internet penetration in India is around 31% presently.

Figure 1: Use of Internet in India (figures in millions)



Source: IMRB I-Cube, All India Estimates. December estimates does not account the impact of demonetisation

IV. ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DEMOCRACY

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, Democracy is a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.” Around the 1780s with the introduction of newspapers, media came into existence and since then it has matured by leaps and bounds. Media plays the most important role in a Democracy and it keeps the Government active. With the advent of social media including Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube etc. dramatically changed the way campaigns are run in Politics. The social media is seen as a place in which public opinion is formed and where interventions in public opinion are possible by an increasing array of institutions and individuals. In recent years the term ‘social media’ has become a popular way to describe a collection of online systems that allow for the production, storage and distribution of user-generated content. Social media allows for the creation of a virtual social space where groups of users can come together in synchronous and asynchronous interactions.⁵ Social media increased political participation of youth and women day by day. Social media is making the system more democratic. In a democratic country it also acts as a major pressure group. K. Sasikumar, senior media person from India, has said that the emergence of social media has brought more democracy to news coverage. He said that the new-generation web-based news services had the potential to cater to the vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, which were mostly ignored by the mainstream media. The people have already lost faith in the objectivity and credibility of the mainstream media as most of them are owned by corporate giants or political powers. The Fourth Estate is not constitutionally or institutionally accountable to anybody. Media have become power centers now. The social networking sites have a key role in the current context.⁶ The Digital News Report 2016 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 51% of their sample use social media as a source of news. According to the Global Web Index’s first-quarter report for

2017, 94% of digital consumers aged 16-64 say they have an account on at least one social media platform and 98% have visited/used one within the last month; one in every three minutes spent online is devoted to social networking and messaging, with digital consumers engaging for a daily average of over two hours. At least 78% of the Internet population aged 16-64 is now networking via a mobile.⁷ It has reshaped the process of contemporary political communication by influencing the way politicians interact with citizens and each other.

V. EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON INDIAN POLITICS

Indians are rated as one of the most active social media users in the world. The Internet’s socio-economic impact is becoming more and more visible in India. The Internet is helping people of India in almost all aspects of life such as education, socialisation, healthcare, communication, entertainment and development. Now, after transforming many facets of Indian life, the Internet has found new use and is emerging as a tool for political strategists and leaders of political parties.⁸ The political impact and use of new media technologies—the internet, social media and mobile communication—have been subject to specific attention. Over this time, the use of new media has moved from being a novelty for parties, candidates, civil society organisations and established media to becoming an important-if still secondary—aspect of political communication in the electoral process. This new significance is seen in the professionalization of channel management by political actors, heightened risk management by political organisations and increased use of international knowledge transfer and learning. These changes represent an example of the adaptation of wholly new communication technologies into the political environment and the interplay between technological possibilities and the structural context.⁹ In India the 16th Lok Sabha election held in 2014 we saw the new trend in Indian politics. Social media played a proactive role in deciding which party wins the most seats. Congress was defeated and whole and sole responsible person for it was ‘Mr. Narendra Modi’. He used all digital platforms as well as offline channels to reach his audience. For the first time in India social media was used so extensively during elections. A report published in April 2013 by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and the Mumbai-based IRIS Knowledge Foundation, Facebook users will have a tremendous impact over the results of the polls in 160 of India’s 543 constituencies and the reason for this is the youth of India. As per Indiaonlinepages site 2014, shows that the most popular parties and candidates were Aam Aadmi Party’s Arvind Kejriwal, from Bharatiya Janata Party’s Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi from Indian National Congress. Mr. Narendra Modi has reached 3.97 million followers growing his follower base by 28% percent since 1st January. Not to be outdone, where as Mr. Arvind Kejriwal has raced to 1.79 million, an amazing 79% growth from the

⁵ Peter John Chen, (2013), “Social media” ANU Press.

⁶ <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/lsquoSocial-media-brought-more-democracy-to-news-coverage/article15721879.ece>

⁷ <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/practising-journalism-in-the-age-of-social-media/article18378995.ece>

⁸ Amol Sheshrao Katkar, (2014), “Impact of Social Media on Indian Politics” A Business Research Management Proposal, Indian Institute of Management Kozhikkode

⁹ Peter John Chen, (2015), “New Media in the Electoral Context: The new normal” ANU Press.



start of the year.¹⁰ The Internet in India is offering opportunities for people to participate in interactive political social media campaigns and become political activists. It is also helping voters to better know and chose candidates. Metrics such as voter data and candidate details such as attendance in Parliament, criminal records, when available on social media, will change the way the voter sees towards a candidate (IRIS Knowledge Foundation & IAMAI, 2013). As per present circumstances, it can be easily seen that Internet use will shortly bring a paradigm shift to Indian politics. Presently, the Internet is providing new opportunities for political mobilization and participation in India. In fact, changing a lot of things for both leaders and voters. These, however, are still early days for the Internet in Indian politics and one cannot predict with certainty how much Internet will impact Indian elections which are usually designed around sentiments, public rallies and low voter turnouts, television, print or radio ads, popular welfare schemes.¹¹ It will not be very effective using it as a mere campaign tool. But if used as a platform to share the latest decisions made by the Government and used effectively for active citizen engagement, social media will show positive results for future Indian elections.

VI. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

On Facebook, BJP has the highest number of fans as compared to its competitors (4.45 million). INC is not far behind, they have 3.2 million fans with 3.6 lakhs talking about this. The party has second highest number of fans on Facebook leading ahead of AAP which has 2.1 million fans. While AAP lags behind in the race for number of fans, they have the highest engagement as % of fans as opposed to BJP and INC.

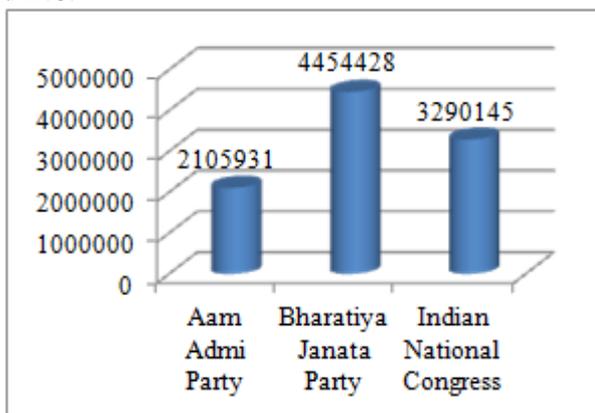


Figure 2: Comparison of three political parties on Facebook (AAP, BJP & INC)

Source: www.socialsamosa.com/2014/05

Thus, the role of the social media cannot be over looked as it has been used in positive and negative ways. The advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media are discussed below-

¹⁰Gayatri Wani, Nilesh Alone, (2014), "A Survey on Impact of Social Media on ElectionSystem" *International Journal of Computer Science and Information Technologies*, Vol. 5 (6), 7363-7366.

¹¹Amol Sheshrao Katkar, (2014), "Impact of Social Media on Indian Politics" A Business Research Management Proposal, Indian Institute of Management Kozhikkode.

Advantages:

- It gives a platform to speak its users.
- Through the means of social media, one can immediately publish information in near-real time.
- Citizens' political engagement can be increased by online political communication.
- Easy process of dialogue with sympathizers and potential voters.
- One can use this medium to raise voice against social and undemocratic actions causing political out-rest.

Disadvantages:

- It will be difficult to use lack of resources, expertise or need for control for political parties.
- Sometimes offensive online behavior on social media pages poses potential threats to its users. There are sometimes misunderstandings in comments.
- Social media fosters an inclination to speak without thinking things through.
- Social media decreases Face-to-Face Communication Skills.
- Social media can help create something which does not exist or may not be as good as it is presented.

VII. CONCLUSION

Social media has finally arrived as an essential element of the contemporary electoral practices of Indian political parties, with visible and significant impacts on the conduct of the 2014, 2019 Lok Sabha election and elections to come. No politicians can undermine the power of social media. It can be used or has been used so far by the political parties as a game-changer during the time of elections. Social media have also become one of the important tools for nearly all of the world's political movements. It can be a potent weapon to spread one's ideology, or at least get it to reach more ears. Citizen should be aware about the nature of information being shared or published through social media. Because the information shared through social media may not be correct at all time. Social media made democracy more inclusive from which nothing can be hidden. Accordingly, now-a-days social media is acting as a new form of voice for both the citizens as well as their representatives where by creating public profiles and public pages, the users are making people aware of their various agendas. Because of this, common people can debate; argue without any kind of hesitation.

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