

New Media and its impact on Political Communication

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Abstract- Indian politicians have taken to New Media, particularly Twitter, and see it as a powerful tool to listen to their voters and keep them engaged. But they are well aware of the limitations of the reach and political impact of the medium. Though the penetration of this medium is just above 9 percent in India, New Media is here to stay and change the dynamics of political discourse. With General Elections due in 2014, most of the major political parties have started investing considerably on their New Media campaigning tools. This paradigm shift has worked wonders in the communication aspect especially to reach out to the younger voting population of India which consists of more than half the population. The use of New Media was rampant in the many State Assembly Elections held recently. This paper will draw inferences about the New Media awareness levels among voters in four cities-Bangalore, Mysore, Pune and Mumbai. The survey will shed light on the online experiences of voters, the ability of this medium to initiate political dialogue and its relevance in our democracy. The paper will explore the possible arrival of New Media as a powerful campaigning tool.

Key Words: New Media, Political Communication, Campaigning tools, Social engagement

Introduction

The trend in political campaigning in India is the use of both traditional and New Media to reach out to the 1.2 billion voters. Political parties use these forms of communication to communicate, engage and enthuse young voters and continue to do so.

The use of media such as newspapers, radio, television and now internet, is creating and defining new ways for political parties to mobilise support, mould public opinion and encourage public participation, compelling voters to step out of their homes and come to the polling booths to exercise their franchise.

Social media in particular has redefined the communication strategy for political parties. It has garnered public activism in the form of online petitions, created discussion forums online, helped voters and political parties to share pictures, articles and videos and prompted citizens to get involved in the democratic

process.

Communicating through New Media may be considered elitist, in a country like India, where a mere 9 percent of the population logs in every day. However, this evolving campaigning tool is soon spreading to the grassroots too, with the government setting up broadband connections in all the village panchayats in India.

New Media has a multi-pronged usage for political parties. As seen in the recent Delhi Assembly Polls, the Aam Aadmi Party took to this medium not only to effectively communicate its party's ideologies, but also to raise funds and make the fund collection drive transparent and budgeted.

The US Presidential elections not only showed the world the effectiveness of New Media and the role it played in the victory of Obama, it has also helped to understand the dissemination of political news. Though the future of New Media

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in the process of political discourse is not clear, it certainly cannot be overlooked at the moment. It is a platform to harness and leverage to the maximum extent¹.

Political communication using New Media in India

New Media encompasses the internet and all the social networking sites such as blogs, You Tube, Facebook and Twitter.

A recent newspaper report noted that BJP's prime ministerial candidate for 2014 general elections Narendra Modi has edged out India's cricketing legend Sachin Tendulkar to become the most talked about person on Facebook in India. Facebook had 82 million MAUs (monthly active users) in India for the quarter ending June 30, 2013².

In the recent past, the popularity of the political personalities in India is being judged by their followers on Facebook. There have even been allegations of creating fake identities to take on the rivals. A recent sting operation by Cobrapost showed how for the right price, the online reputation of a politician or political organization could be made or marred³. If politicians felt slighted by an Election Commission decision to bring social media campaigns under a code of conduct, they had a reason⁴. But with the Cobrapost expose, the Election Commission now stands vindicated.

Ability to influence

A study by Burson-Marsteller illustrates how Twitter and social media in general have become part and parcel of any integrated government communications. It however has found that Barack Obama may have over 33 million followers on Twitter but he is not the most influential world leader on Twitter. Instead, this distinction belongs to Pope Francis, who tweets from the account @pontifex. Despite having just seven million followers, tweets made @pontifex are retweeted over 11,000 times on average. In comparison, tweets made from @barackobama account are retweeted 2,309 times on average⁵.

The study, based on an analysis of 505 government accounts in 153 countries in early July, found that more than three quarters (77.7%) of world leaders have a Twitter account that they use to reach out to people. Of these, 68% leaders have made mutual connection with their peers, either by following them or by conversing them, on Twitter.

Most of these Twitter accounts are handled by official staff that manages the affairs for these world leaders. These leaders rarely make personal tweets or connect with their followers in any meaningful way.

The twitter account of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh follows the same pattern. "The Twitter account run by the office of the Indian Prime Minister is quite active with an average of almost 5 tweets a day ... (but) it is clear that the main purpose of the account is to disseminate information. Engagement on the account is extremely limited. Only 1% of his tweets are replies and 5% retweets," notes the report.

In fact, the study found that the leaders who are more influential in the real world tend to follow fewer accounts on Twitter and refrain from replying to their followers. For example, "almost a third (148) of all world leaders and governments are following Barack Obama (but) he only mutually follows two other world leaders-Norway's Jens Stoltenberg and Russia's Dmitry Medvedev".

Purpose of the Study

The recent technological advances in mobile technology and India's growing clout as one of the top five countries which is socially engaged online, makes social media a phenomenon which is still largely untapped. It is perceived to be an important part of the elections in India, which is the world's largest democracy. Thus, analysing its role and the difference that it will make in the elections needs to be ascertained.

This study is purely primary and exploratory in nature. The purpose is to understand the significance of New Media in political campaigning and the awareness of the electorate

about this rapidly evolving medium.

Objectives of the Study

- * To study the awareness levels of voters about political campaigning using New Media
- * To study what attracts them to political discussions in the online forum
- * To study their participation levels in the New Media platform
- * To study the preference of voters with regard to personalities and networking sites

Methodology

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Data was collected first hand from 75 respondents in four cities-Bangalore, Mysore, Pune and Mumbai. A structured questionnaire (consisting of close-ended and open-ended questions) was administered to the respondents and personal interviews were conducted to draw conclusions.

Majority of the respondents (70 percent) were in the age group 21-40yrs. 65 percent of them belong to the student category (21-24yrs), while the rest of the respondents (15 percent) were working professionals(30-40yrs). 20 percent of them were from business and other categories.

A simple percentage analysis was carried out to draw inferences, since this is a very primary exploratory study. Hence results are indicative. It has to be supplemented by extensive exploratory and descriptive study on various aspects.

Data Processing and Analysis

The following tables indicate the profile of the respondents who participated in this study:

Respondents	
Maharashtra (Mumbai/Pune)	37
Karnataka (Bangalore/Mysore)	38
Total	75

Age	% of total
21-30	65%
31-40	27%
>40	8%

Education	% of Total
Under Grad	5%
Post Grad	60%
MBA	24%
PHD	8%
CA	3%

Income	% of Total
Unemployed/Students	46%
0-5L	16%
5-10L	16%
10-20L	16%
>20L	5%

Sex	% of Total
Male	54%
Female	46%

Awareness levels

The respondents have been selected from some of the most prominent metropolitan cities in south and western India. Hence, the participants were educated, IT-savvy and aware of political developments, though not all of them were interested in political systems and how they communicate. However, majority of them seemed to be aware of the definition of New Media and its usage in political campaigning, which is a fairly recent development in the Indian context.

Are you aware of political campaigning via New Media?	Yes	86%
	No	14%

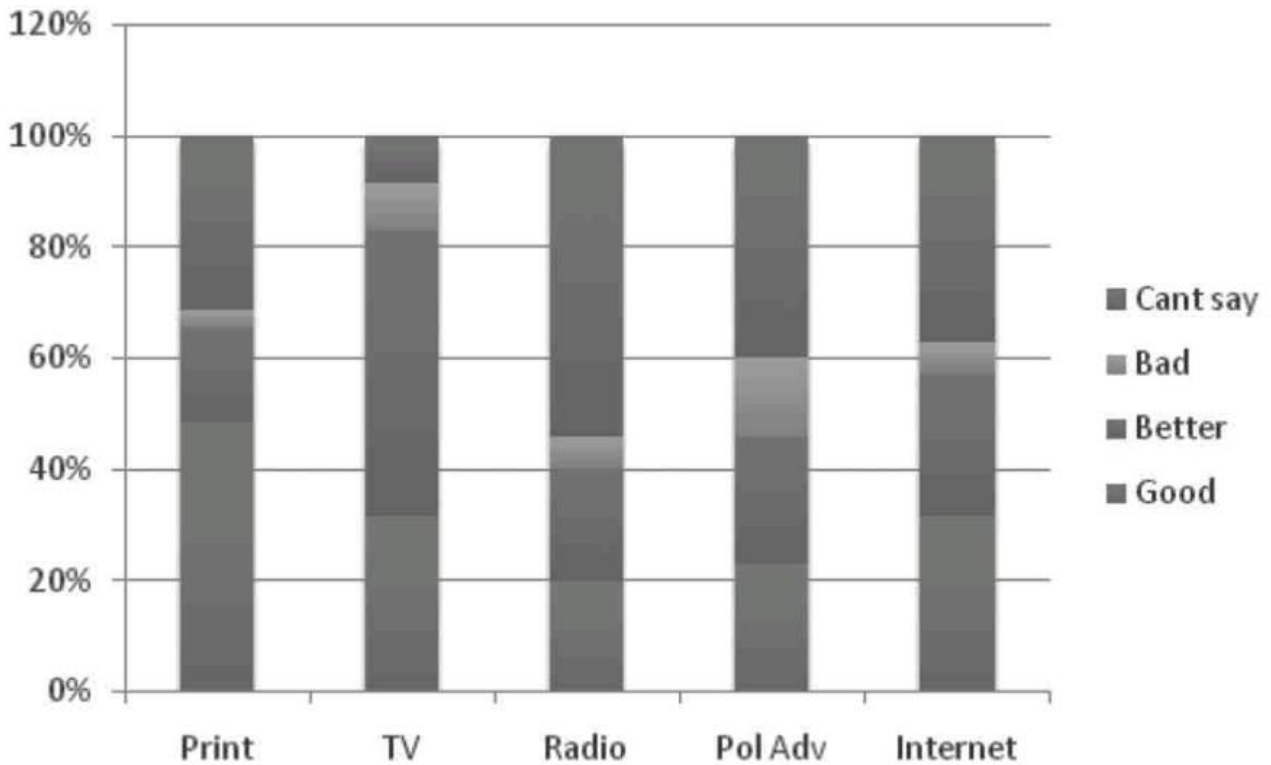
Influence

When it came to assessing the influence that New Media has on a voter, the respondents were fairly non-committal. They selected the 20-50 % range of influence level that was given and remained neutral. In a country like India, where more than half the population still live in villages, public speeches and door-to-door campaigning remain the two most preferred options for campaigning. But by 2040, there will be a shift in demographics and more than 60 percent of the population will be living in cities. This rapid urbanisation will lead to political parties opting for platforms like the media to campaign and reach out to their electorate.

What is the percentage of influence that New Media has on the voter?	10-20%	22%
	20-50%	36%
	50-70%	31%
	Above 70%	11%

The following graph indicates the respondents rating of influence of different media:-

- * Television has been rated as the most influential media in being able to communicate political campaigns as it has a wider reach and impact
- * Newspapers came second in their influence factor
- * Internet, which encompasses New Media (Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, You Tube) came a close third, showing that it is gaining prominence as an influential medium in a short span of time



Participation

A unique attribute of New Media in political campaigning is that it has been able to initiate dialogue and pave the way for meaningful interaction between stakeholders concerned-voters, administrators and leaders.

Today, the common man is able to directly reach out to a minister or bureaucrat, if he has a public profile on a social networking site. Hence, the respondents when asked if their participation on political debates in this forum mattered, were divided in their response (50%).

Do you think your participation in the New Media political debates matter?	Yes	50%
	No	50%

Do you think your opinion on the New Media platforms is paving way for more dialogue?	Yes	53%
	No	47%

Do the political personalities revert to your Tweets/Comments?	Yes	22%
	No	78%

Does a positive response create renewed interest in you to follow or like that political party/personality?	Yes	58%
	No	42%

Preference

When it came to preferences for selecting a New Media channel of their liking, many felt that it

was easier to 'like' a post of Facebook. With regard to preferences of candidates and display of content, the personality of a politician mattered most.

Majority of the respondents (78%) felt that New Media as a campaigning tool is a phenomenon that will have far reaching implications in the elections and political system of India.

What is the frequent activity given below that you endorse the most:	Tweeting	9%
	Posting pictures on Twitter/Facebook	29%
	Liking a Post	40%
	Sharing pictures, videos, posts on your profile page	8%
	Creating/Joining groups with similar political ideology	14%

What attracts you to a political page of a politician of your choice	Personality	36%
	Content	25%
	Design and Display	3%
	Frequency of updation	11%
	Interesting interaction/Dialogues	25%

Do you think campaigning through the New Media in India is a phenomenon that is here to stay?	Yes	78%
	No	22%

Summary of the findings

- 86% of the respondents are aware of the political campaigning in New Media
- 60% of them own atleast 2 accounts in social media such as Facebook and Twitter, followed by 25% of them who blog.
- Respondents felt that political speeches and rallies (53%), Door to door campaign (22%),

advertising through various media (18%) are still the best ways for election campaigning.

- Respondents (14%) like creating groups with similar ideology, followed by (40%) liking a post, (29%) of them like sharing pictures, videos, posts, (9%) of them like to tweet and start a debate or form opinion and 8% of them like to upload a news item related to the party.
- Almost all the respondents were aware of political campaigning in media.
- 85% of the respondents felt that media can play a deciding factor in influencing the voters during elections, while 15% say they don't agree
- 60% of the respondents endorse this method of campaigning and 40% of them feel it as an additional medium used by political parties

Conclusion

Political communication in the social media has been successful in bridging the gap between political parties and young voters. It has generated interest and activism among the youth, who earlier thought of politics in negative shades of muscle power, corruption and not fit for the common man. As seen in the recent record turnout in Delhi Assembly Elections, it has influenced voters to come out and vote. By engaging voters in the online forum, this medium has created wider scope for a participative approach to democracy. It has eliminated the gap between politicians and the common man.

Suggestions

What could make this the medium more effective for shaping public opinion and conveying the political ideology?

- **Regular updates**

Frequency of updates is crucial for any campaign to sustain on the New Media platform.

A minimum of 4 tweets in a week and 1 update on Facebook is a must

- **Healthy interaction and avoid personal vendetta**

The communication on this forum should go beyond personal grudges and the blame-game of politics. Politicians should avoid bragging about their achievements and maintain a balance between disseminating information about their work and getting their electorate to pitch in with ideas and useful dialogue

- **Accountable and genuine, with a purpose to reach out to the common man**

Since the idea is to communicate and reach out to the common man, the content should be genuine and the responses should be meaningful. The common man should be able to make the politicians accountable for what they write on these social media sites.

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