FACEBOOK AS A TOOL OF POLITICAL IMAGE BUILDING: A CASE STUDY ON PM MODI

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Abstract: Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of India. He is the Prime Ministerial candidate representing the Bharatiya Janata Party. He was the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2004. He is the MP of Varanasi. During the general elections of 2004, the use of social media campaigns started the Modi wave which made him the face of BJP nationwide. His speeches and his method of digitization and promotion of digital forums made him very popular among the youth and the general public as well. Modi is frequent on Twitter and Facebook along with his usual "Mann Ki Baat". Since Facebook is a forum which is more user-friendly, he is also the most followed political leader on Facebook and the third most followed political leader of twitter. Hence, The researcher will be looking at Facebook in his study. Modi also is known to manage both social media accounts. He uses his Facebook to show whatever he does on a daily or at least a weekly basis. The researcher is planning on an expert Interview of 2 people and a content analysis of his web page on Facebook to observe the reactions and comments of his followers. The study has reflected that the use of social media by the leader has been deemed effective and is a strong point of his campaign. It has been found that the leader does use Facebook as a tool for political image-building although the impacts have been a mixture of positive and negative reactions towards his posts on social media.

Key Words: Facebook, Image Building, Narendra Modi, Politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

This research aims to show how Prime Minister Narendra Modi uses Facebook to build a political image of himself and his party, BJP. The page has posted not only about himself but various party activities in and around India. It can be noticed that his followers on the page rise by approximately five hundred a day, approximately twelve thousand by the week and approximately one lakh thirty thousand a month. (Socialbakers). Although, Srivatsa YB, National Congress in charge mentioned that most of his social media followers are fake accounts generated by the social media wing of the party itself. The researcher aims to analyses the activities of PM Narendra Modi using Facebook as a tool to convince his voters that he can still be a good leader even after losing the three states Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan over a span of one month.

How political parties use Facebook as a tool for political image building

Politicians and the parties often criticize media when they are put in a bad light but when they get exposure from the same media which might be praising them, they have no issues with that whatsoever. Facebook pages have no other option to run posts about the front runners who lead the political parties and as viewers or followers, one has to stay vigilant and prepare to face propaganda or manipulation when they are avid followers of the party on the social media platform. Exclusive one on one interviews, staged rallies and press conferences are common and now, political parties have moved onto the forum of social media mainly including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Friendly media coverage is always welcomed and when these politicians take pictures with celebrities, the celebrity in turn posts this on his or her social media profile which helps the politician gain immense popularity and votes from the fan base. Today, a politician or a party can bypass the media filter by going online to social media as they claim that the traditional media does not give the entire story to the public. A Facebook page allows the political party to post whatever they deem is important for their potential voters to know. For instance, it was this social media strategy that helped ex-US President Mr. Barack Obama to win his 2008 presidential elections. Social media also allows the politician to get in touch with the voters in a very direct and personal level. Although Social Media does not reach everybody, it is an instantaneous method to reach followers. It is mainly to not go through the traditional media where the politician cannot make vague promises.

How the BJP uses Facebook as a tool for political image building

The BJP use PM Modi's facebook page for most of their news. Since PM Modi's page has about 45 million followers whereas the BJP page only has 15 million followers. This indicates that more people follow the Narendra Modi page and hence that page has more reach than the BJP page. Since the Narendra Modi page has many posts of his rallies in various states, posters, and advertisements of national schemes the BJP party has to offer and mainly, he posts pictures of his daily activities which are showered with likes and positive reactions. However, the comments speak a different story. The party uses the Narendra Modi page to influence the public and the main page is just to post news articles and other minor state level rallies. However, the BJP page has a picture of Narendra Modi as the cover picture.

How Narendra Modi initiated the use of Facebook for Political Image Building

Narendra Modi did a very good job as the CM of Gujarat. He needed social media possibly to appeal to the youth as he was up against Rahul Gandhi who was himself a youth. Narendra Modi was the Prime Ministerial Candidate for 2014 and also for 2019. He gained popularity through the backlash from the Godhra riots. He threads lightly due to the tricky position this got him regarding the communal stances. He developed the tech Savvy image to connect with the youth as discussed above. He is the most followed and liked political leader on Facebook and has a major prominence in the International forum compared to Macron, Trudeau etc. Although due to his relations with Jio (Mukesh Ambani), there is conflict whether Modi is for the Union or for Corporate i.e. if he stands for the people or for money. However, all these factors affect his political image and we will learn if Facebook has helped in forming or changing his political image amongst the audience to some degree.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before Social media became the primary weapon used by a politician or an individual to build an image, traditional media was used. For instance, MGR used his mainstream Tamil Cinema to voice his opinions and slowly transcended into politics.

In today's generation, public data is definitely an easy outlet for today's society. It is easily and readily available for reference especially in forums such as Facebook and Twitter. Once an Internet user types in a name, it is easy to get information, opinion and details about that person and in turn, it is easy for the person to give out information that the public freely takes. Social media platforms have profoundly changed how we behave on these platforms. The researcher has referred this article to learn how to analyze comments and reactions to posts put up by various public figures to infer to a result. Many political leaders use Facebook and other Social media platforms to influence, change and respond to people on the platform. Modi also needed more reach to interact with the people all around India and Facebook definitely helps in serving the purpose. In this research, the team observed social media profiles of about 187 federal German Politicians. Analysis of posts, comments and reactions were studied to understand public sentiment towards the politicians and to see if their posts affected the followers in any way. As this was just a social observatory experiment, there were no concrete findings from the research. (Simon Caton, 2015)

Social media like Facebook and Twitter help in the rise of an individual politician rather than the party itself. Since Narendra Modi is now the politician with the most number of followers on Facebook, it is very easy for the party to influence the voters. It assists the scope for personalized campaigning. As Modi is the face of BJP and is likely to be the 2019 Prime Ministerial candidate, the domain can be used by him for updates and for propaganda. "Politicians use social media as a tool for political communication. The findings show that politicians' report both marketing and dialogue with voters as motives for their social media use and their practices varied, too. Politicians' reported motive to use social media for marketing purposes was reflected in their actual use. The preferred social media platform for marketing purposes was Facebook." Twitter was apparently for to and fro communication.(Enli & Skogerbø, 2013)

President Trump and Former President of America Barack Obama used Facebook data to win votes. This can be used to understand this research topic as well since social media is a free and easy platform to influence voters. They used various means such as targeted advertisements by using user data to easily influence the voters subconsciously. The article also talks about how Obama made his followers download the "Obama facebook app" that stole their and their friend's data under their noses. If anything, it was Facebook that allows the world leaders to do so. This also allowed Obama to have data of the non-followers and attempted to gain their votes as well. Political leaders have it easy in today's time due to such advancement in technology to gain votes and followers. Obama harvested a lot of user data to his favors to know what his followers wanted and acted accordingly. This will help my research as it is about a politician using a social media platform to his advantage, thus giving me a deeper insight into the process. (Stock News and News analysis, 2018)

Many constituencies in Bihar and UP misused the Lotus logo or associated their own party with Modi to gain votes. To counter this movement, Modi used social media platforms to spread awareness and classically condition the people to associate himself and the BJP with the Lotus symbol. It can be noticed that the Lotus badge is worn by Modi often as well. This is from the book by Lance Price called The Modi Effect. (Price, n.d.)

As Narendra Modi is the most followed world leader on Facebook, Almost all his foreign visits are visible on Facebook. The speeches from New York are available in his Facebook profile as well. One of his recent posts shows a picture of him hugging a baby at Seoul at South Korea as he interacts with his admirers. The article also talks about how efficient his social media team is to keep up his image in posting pictures and videos to match with his status updates. He primarily used social media platforms during the 2014 elections as well for visibility. (The Indian Express, 2015)

Modi and the BJP used a different strategy this time. BJP as a party was successful only because they used Modi as the face. Instead of BJP vs Congress, it was Modi vs Congress. He used social media platforms as to appeal to the youth as he was going against Rahul Gandhi who himself was a young person. He used a new technique of communication and saturated the public space. Though the campaign did fall back on the "old RSS network", he made sure most his speeches and activities were reported on his Facebook and it is a known fact that he has an exceptional social media team (Jaffrelot, C. 2015).

Political expressions are made were made social media platforms specifically Facebook during the 2012 presidential debates in the US. It shows how people display individual opinions and express their political ideas on open platforms. Through this, the politicians can understand a pattern and act to favor their followers. The political debates that went "viral" were commented on by the followers and this data was later used by the politicians in their campaigns. (Edgerly, Thorson, Bighash, & Hannah, 2016). This allows the researcher to draw parallels on how a social media page can function to understand the mentality of the follower.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To find out the use of Facebook by Narendra Modi for building a political image.
- To understand the extent to which the leader uses Facebook.

IV. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Did PM Modi use Facebook as a tool for a positive public image for a longitudinal inductive benefit?

The researcher is going to attempt to prove or disprove this hypothesis by checking if the audience's mentality was influenced by Modi through his social media platforms. This would be to see if he developed this persona over a long period of time (Longitudinal) and if it was for the benefit of himself or the party or the union government or the cabinets image etc.

V. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Analysis Methods

- ### *Content Analysis*

Analyzing the Facebook posts of PM Narendra Modi for a one-month time period after the loss of three major states in the State Elections.

The researcher aims to analyze the posts for a span of one month after the loss of the three states Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The researcher also plans on understanding the comments section to see if the posts are actually changing the perspective that the people have of the leader over the span of the given time. The researcher would be performing sentiment analysis.

- ### *Conducting an expert interview*

Interviewing experts who support two other parties with other perspectives. Focusing on interviewing Srivatsa Y B, who was social media In-Charge and a member of Indian Youth Congress, Nikhil Joy who is a journalist previously working at Malayalam Manorama and now works at Red Fm Radio station.

This method can prove to be helpful as you get an expert's opinion to validate the content analysis performed. This can also help to find out to what degree they think that Facebook can be used for political image building. Since nobody actually knows the true persona of the politician, it is easy for them to give out a political image by using social media as a tool. The questions would hence aid clarity of the topic.

VI. ANALYSIS

The posts have been analyzed from December 11th to January 11th. The first post ever that was put up by PM Narendra Modi's Facebook page was our PM accepting the decision taken by the people and wishing the oppositions best of luck to govern the states. This is followed by him saying that the BJP worked hard and would still work hard for development and he also uploads a post in praise of all BJP "*karyakartas*" telling the followers that they worked hard to serve them and will continue to do same. The analysis would be broadly on the types of likes or reactions majorly seen, the comments under the posts and to see a change in attitude in the followers. The page although has a great first impression but it rarely does anything to interact with the users. The users are not allowed to post anything hence causing a hindrance in user engagement. On average, the page posts 2.2 posts every day and analysis suggests that there is room for improvement in the posting and organization of content. (Likealyzer.com, 2019) The page does not like or interact with any other pages thus showing it functions independently. Although Narendra Modi's page has a high follower count, Rahul Gandhi's page has more reach and interaction as his team takes time to reply to comments. This increases user interaction and in turn, increases the chance of changing according to your follower's demands.

Analysis based on the type of likes or reactions

The analysis began from the posts starting from Dec 11th to Jan 11th. This was a one-month duration after the BJP lost in the three states as mentioned above in the paper. The studied sample shows that the overall reaction to the posts tends to be inclined more to the negative aspects of sentiment analysis. Though it is hard to objectively declare that reactions on Facebook stand as a direct

portrayal of the responder's emotions or sentiments; a general feeling can be gained through a thorough reading. Responses like "ha-ha react", like or heart in the context of millennial Facebook responders can stand for signs of mockery towards or the encouragement for the post. But a text-based analysis of the comments brings forward a clear negative sentiment. That couples to these icon responses can indicate that users tend to enjoy these posts more as entertainment, defeating the cause of it being propaganda or prime ministerial candidate image building. Although he has a number of people praising him no matter what he does, many people have over time changed their blind faith in criticizing the leader. Moves like Demonetization, Fuel Hike, and even the surgical strike claim have constantly been questioned by his followers.

Positive Sentiments

Being the most followed leader on Facebook, The Narendra Modi page has about 43 Million followers and a lot of his followers are known to follow the leader with blind faith. As discussed, most of his posts have likes followed by either "Laugh reactions" or by "Love Reactions". The page started losing supporters after demonetization failed. People started to question the leader who had made false promises stating that "Give me 50 days, if I am not able to fulfill my promises, you can ask me to stand anywhere and I shall". Although his supporters justify his actions and still follow him. They see him as a brave and daring prime minister. A prime minister who has used nationalism as his weapon. His moves such as the surgical strike helped him gain all the patriotic people of the country who continue to follow him blindly. Comments like "Best Prime Minister of India till date" and "We are always in support of you Modiji". There are followers who react to criticism on his posts by insulting the person who has criticized their leader even though the criticism is factual and objective. Most of his posts have nothing to do with policies and have a lot to do with religious sentiments, including Modi visiting a temple, Modi taking a dip in a holy river etc which his religious "Hindu" followers love more than anything and is questioned by those who follow him for purely his political ideologies. A lot of them are tired waiting for the "Acche Din" that he had promised in the start as well. This leads to people developing a negative sentiment towards the leader.

Negative Sentiment

"Feku", "Chaiwala" and "Chor". These are either names called by his followers who lost faith in his abilities or are just internet trolls or congress supporters. Some followers feel that after the loss of the three states, more states are soon to not vote for Modi in the Lok Sabha elections. Modi, however, continues to post in the same manner but instead of policies, he is inclined to more nationalistic methods and to evoke a sense of patriotism in his followers. He does not interact with his followers in the comments but uploads recaps of his "Mann Ki Baat" or his speeches in various events. His followers accuse him of making empty promises and not doing anything about it to fulfill it with efforts. Although his campaigns and political ideologies have worked in the 2014 elections, the same method cannot work again to win him the post. The youth have many problems regarding employment and education. There are many who had a lot of expectations which the leader failed to meet. The "laugh reacts" signify that the followers know that the leader is making empty promises yet again as it shows that they are laughing at it signifying their lack of seriousness towards the post. To start off, Dec 11th there was a post about accepting that they lost the three states which got a lot of "Laugh reacts" and the last post the researcher analyzed on Jan 11th was a "Selfie" taken with Bollywood stars which majorly got "Heart Reacts". Although his followers had a problem with his methods as it was to gain more followers and seldom discussed the solutions to current issues. Although there were an upside and a downside, there are neutral parties as well who are passive and just like his posts including travel, temple visits, talks with other BJP Karyakartas etc without commenting nor reacting to them.

Therefore, the analysis shows that Modi does use Facebook in a subconscious manner and not a "To the face manner" as his posts work with subtle undertones to gain supporters. His change in strategy is not direct but slowly changes but the negative overpowering the positive in a big margin.

Expert Interview Analysis

The researcher had conducted expert interviews on Srivatsa Y B, who was social media In-Charge and a member of Indian Youth Congress and Nikhil Joy who is a journalist previously working at Malayalam Manorama and now works at Red FM Radio station. This was to get a different party perspective in a social media angle and a general journalistic angle.

It is found that even though Narendra Modi has the most number of followers on Facebook, his reach is still lower than that of Rahul Gandhi and the Congress Party. Congress Party does not post propaganda which the BJP highly relies on suggests Srivatsa Y B. BJP has the upper edge over other parties as they are richer and spend a lot of money on their ads and social media campaign. They also started on social media way before Congress could. The researcher has also discovered the use of Whatsapp by the BJP to create and send forwards as Nationalists do not think twice before sending the propaganda forward. On Facebook and Instagram, the BJP leader is promoted free of cost by Actors and celebrities. This gives more visibility for the BJP and the actors benefit from this as well. He also emphasizes that Modi's personality or his political image comes from the propaganda the social media displays whereas Rahul Gandhi makes mistakes as he does not prepare with proper "man-made environment". Also, most of his speeches that are trolled are edited and this is mostly done by internet trolls that are in abundant. There are many troll pages that are paid by BJP to spread their ideology or their propaganda.

This brings us to Nikhil Joy's take on the subject. He suggests that BJP especially Narendra Modi makes the best use of Social media in Indian politics. He says that he makes a post where he talks about one lie in ten different and convincing manners. He expects that if a lie is told more than enough times, it can be turned into the truth. Although the three southern states that are Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are the only three states that have never fallen for the BJP's words. In all the other states it has effected in some way or the other. Even in Kerala, it worked a little bit when it came to the Shabari Mala incident. Tamil Nadu is the only "Untouched" state. During the Shabari Mala incident, the BJP financed a lot of Facebook pages and online media to spread their ideologies. Even in Kerala, many troll pages such as "Outspoken" etc. They even have a social media hub in important cities. "All this started when Prasanth Kishore came in as their social media strategist" he adds. In 2014, that is when BJP realized that they can use social media as a powerful weapon. Nowadays, the Congress party has also started incorporating this slowly. The other party that comes close to the BJP's methods of using social media is the Telugu Desam Party by NTR

VII. CONCLUSION

What the researcher noticed is that both opinions reflect that the BJP's social media campaign is the best and is what Congress learns from and tries to beat. This method of using social media to build the political image was successful in the 2014 elections but in the one month on analysis, the BJP followed a similar pattern other than the first three days where they apologized and then got into their usual pattern of posting. Although the researcher discovered that whatever the page posts are shared and a large chunk of followers do blindly believe it. It can be confirmed that the Narendra Modi does use Social media for political image building in a very high degree, not only from his own page but from many troll pages as well. Facebook is a major tool in the political campaign.

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