



Social Media and Political Communication in India: Evolution, Key Media Forms and Trends

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Abstract: In recent years, India has witnessed a paradigmatic shift in its political landscape, driven in large part by the penetration of digital technologies and the rapid growth of social media. This paper examines the emergence of “digital populism” in Indian politics, a phenomenon wherein political actors employ digital platforms not only for communication but also for the consolidation of power, personalization of leadership, and strategic mobilization of emotions. While social media has democratized information flow and opened avenues for greater civic participation, it has simultaneously enabled disinformation, polarization, and algorithmic manipulation. Through a critical engagement with existing literature, empirical case studies, and theoretical frameworks, this research seeks to unravel how Indian political parties—particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—have weaponized social media to construct populist narratives that thrive on a direct, unmediated relationship between leaders and “the people.” The paper argues that Indian democracy is now navigating an era where digital populism is becoming a dominant mode of political engagement—one that challenges the norms of deliberative democracy and raises urgent questions about transparency, accountability, and the future of political discourse.

Keywords- Social media, Campaign, Politics, Party, Election

Introduction

Politics dates back to early civilization when human beings organized themselves to live in groups with common objectives of growth and prosperity against all odds. It is concerned with the administration and governance of a defined geographical boundary, the people within this boundary and all associated activities. As there are numerous actors in politics, political communication has been an indispensable and very important element in politics.

Definition: Political communication traces its origins to the earliest Greek philosophers like Aristotle and Plato. There are many varied definitions of political communication.

For **Lynda Lee Kaid (2004)**, the definition of political communication as suggested by Chaffe is most acceptable. Political communication was considered to play the role of communication in the political system. Communication is exchange of ideas, feelings or information. This is a transmission of information between groups or from one person to another. The definition of political communication depends a great deal on the time and era of the political philosopher who defined it.

Elements of Political Communication

Brian McNair (2017b) has given a more detailed description of the various elements;

- All types of communication used by politicians and other political actors to achieve specific goals,
- Communication used by non-politicians such as newspaper columnists and voters,
- Communication related to these actors and their actions as reported in the media, editorials and other forms of media analysis of politics.

Political communication also consists of presidential speeches, campaign debates, and public campaigns designed to influence attitudes on wide area of issues.

Jack McLeod (2009) stressed on political communication being a multi-level field (operating in a multi-lateral space). According to him, it links political actors; media organizations, political culture, and finally the roles played by journalists and differently involved citizens.

Role of Media in Political Communication

Different perspectives have emerged over the years on the role and the power of the media in this sphere.

In the modern age, for **Davis and Owen (2008)** political communication also constitutes news via highly diverse communication formats such as television, Internet, Facebook posts, YouTube videos and other media content which captures what people think and feel about politics. Media has evolved as a crucial element in political communication. The success of political

communication is being linked to its relationship with media, as it's a major channel for dissemination of political information, persuasion of the masses and even a propaganda machine.

Development of Political Communication

Research in the field of political communication, mass communication and communication are closely connected to each other. Study of political communication has modified and transformed over the years. The change has been primarily brought about by evolution in the communication technology.

Early researchers such as Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell and Paul S Lazarsfeld laid the foundations of communication research in the world. *Public Opinion* (1922) became the foundation of study in this field. Political communication research is a combination of many areas and this gives it an interdisciplinary character. This field draws from both practical and theoretical understanding of political science, psychology, sociology, communication and history. Political communication is an interdisciplinary area of study, which combines the fields of science and arts. The interest in this sphere arose early 20th century as newer forms of Government other than monarchy came into existence and communication too got a contemporary meaning. Political communication found acceptance and identification as an area of study during the time of early Greeks like Plato, Aristotle and Cicero.

Technology in Political Communication

The nature and essence of political communication is transforming as newer forms of media are emerging. Many theorists have highlighted the dramatic change in the manner politicians communicated in the era succeeding the wars after the advent of 'new' media. This didn't prove to be too fruitful as the electorate remained more loyal to the party and the influence of the media didn't permeate them.

Jay Blumler (2012) listed out the new features of modern day political communication. It is 24/7, there is a definite combination of traditional and modern methods of communication, and there is increased rivalry between various media organizations. Though media channels are diversified, the audience is highly fragmented but the recent trend points to an increase in interest for political news among the audience.

Political Communication in India

Communication is key in any type of Government and political atmosphere.

There is a relay of messages and information between its multiple performers. The performers are the politicians, political parties, citizens, media and the support groups.

Political communication in India is not simplistic and is in-fact, highly complex. The reasons are primarily due to geographical size and diverse, large population. One, it is a fairly large geographical area consisting of 29 states and 7 Union Territories. Secondly, India is home to more than a billion people who have highly diverse socio-economic and cultural differences. Due to differences in language and culture coupled with problems and issues that are unique to each of the states, a uniform political communication may not be viable. Indian elections have come a long way in the 70 years since Independence. Though there are still allegations of corruption or buying over voters, large scale rigging of the ballot or booth capturing, which was commonplace till the '80s, is a distant history now. The introduction of EVMs or Electronic Voting Machines has greatly reduced such malpractices enabling smooth and less violent elections. With India being a Federal system, there are elected governments at the state level and also at the Centre. Due to its diverse political base, political communication in India is often complex. Political parties and politicians use varied tools to communicate to this heterogeneous audience.

Tools of Political Communication in India

Public Meetings: Public meetings have been widely used by politicians across the country to primarily reach the rural or semi-rural electorate. Till 1980s, door to door campaigning, graffiti along with print ad were more popular than public meetings.

Electronic Media: The late Rajiv Gandhi first introduced technology in the 1989 elections when he used the state broadcaster Doordarshan to telecast political messages and also advertisements. This gave advent to the use of audio and videocassettes by other political parties to put forth their political message. This technology was used to relay political messages and also to play party songs. The election in 1989 witnessed use of television and audio-video cassettes as a tool of political communication.

Use of Celebrities: Late 1980s also saw film stars being roped in for political campaigns. This is still quite popular in many parts of India. Strangely, the biggest users of technology ended up on the losing side in the 1989 General Elections. They may not have lost due to technology but the use of technology certainly didn't help in the electoral victory.

In the following years, door to door campaigning, billboards, use of radio and television and public meetings continued to be used by all the political parties but nothing new was introduced in terms of technological use.

Change in Political Communication in the New Century in India

Political Communication changed dramatically in the year 2004 in India. With the liberalization of the economy and the consequent resonance in the media industry, dissemination of information happened at a much quicker rate.

It was Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee which launched the 'India Shining Campaign' and deployed never used technology to reach electoral goal. It was at this time that the Internet was born in the Indian political milieu. This was the first 360-degree political campaign in the country and utilized all the mediums for political communication. This included press, television, billboards, mobile phones and the Internet. Political parties utilized all possible tools to reach the electorate directly. This happened at a time when the Election Commission in India set out tough rules including penalty for the misuse of television, size of billboards and cut outs.

Use of Internet in Political Communication in India

India saw an increase of 684% in the Internet use between the years 2000-2004. In 2004, other than Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress even smaller political parties such as Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party had websites.

In spite of extensive use of the Internet in the 2004 elections, new media failed to connect with the masses. There are two primary reasons for the same, the penetration of Internet was just 3.6% of India's population in 2004 and there was a large disparity in the socio-economic and educational level in the population. From just 54 million computer literate Indians in 2004, it rose to 95 million in 2009. In 2009, L K Advani, the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP took to blog spot to communicate with the larger audience. Even in 2009, Internet or social media didn't have perceptible impact on the electoral outcome. Elections in 2014 saw social media usage rise to an unprecedented level and Financial Times termed Narendra Modi as the first 'social media' Prime Minister of India.

Social Media Qualitative study of emergence, Key Forms and Platforms, Usage

Of late, Web 2.0 and social media have become well known for highlighting various platforms such as blogs, micro blogging sites like Twitter, social networking tools or image/video/file sharing platforms like Facebook or wikis. All these platforms are collectively called social media. Social media enables users to interact virtually, participate in online discussions and create and disseminate information through various social media networks. These sites are used for interacting, information sharing or just to connect to friends and family through various posts or uploading of photos and videos.

Shirky (2008) has defined social media as a tool, which helps in the process of interacting, sharing, and co-operating with one another outside the ambit of traditional institutions and organizations.

Social media can be broadly categorized into six types:

A. Social networks: Social networks help people to make customized web pages and share content with their followers. Users can share video, information, news links, audio, or even photographs. Some of these social network platforms also have the chat option. Among the popular social networks are Facebook and MySpace.

B. Blogs: They are online logbooks where one can write on any topic of interest or issue. Blogs grew at a rapid pace in the 1990s as advanced web publishing mechanisms came into being and the knowledge of HTML was no longer necessary. Most of the blogs are an analysis on a particular topic or subject, including sports, politics, entertainment and movies. Blogs are also utilized to promote a particular individual, brand, or a company. Blogs can be an amalgamation of digital pages, web pages, and web pages along with text. There is a possibility to post comments on any blog making it an interactive medium.

C. Wikis: The most famous wiki is Wikipedia or the online encyclopedia where people are permitted to append the information or edit the content. It was created in 2001. Wikipedia currently has 5,477,002 articles on its site and is available in 293 languages.

D. Podcasts: Video or audio files are accessible by subscription similar to the Apple iTunes space. A series of digital media files are consequently downloaded by online syndication to a portable media player or to the user's personal gadget. This was invented by BBC journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004.

E. Forums: Online communities created to discuss specific issues and interests in the Internet space. Forums were a precursor to the term social media and were quite influential. They are still one of the most accepted forms of online groups.

F. Content Communities: Groups, which aggregate and share particular kinds of subject matter. The most successful content groups have been Flickr for photos, You Tube for videos and the bookmarked links (del.icio.us).

G. Micro-blogging: Twitter is the front-runner in the micro blogging arena. Twitter is bite- sized blogging platform in the socially networked sphere where a restricted amount of content can be posted. In other words short messages can be broadcast. Updates are delivered to desktop, or laptop as an instant message or as an SMS text message to a mobile service in real time.

H. Instant Messaging Service: WhatsApp is a free to use service to share documents, video, text messages, user location, audio files, images or GIF. All the information exchanged on this platform is end to end encrypted.

Applications of Social Media

There are 4 ways in which social media is commonly used today:

- Information sharing through website,
- Online activities in support of offline action,
- Online activities in the form of online petitions, virtual sit-ins, website haunting etc
- Organization of entire campaign online is known as e-movement. In this type of online activism, all elements of organizing happens without face-to-face interaction, social media sites, blogs, are common organizing pivots of protest.

Social media has become an inherent element of life, is a crucial source of information, education, entertainment and a tool for persuasion.

Social Media in Indian Political Sphere

Social media has grown as a crucial element in the sphere of politics too. It has emerged as a tool of communication for the wider

public and is not restricted only to politicians and political parties. Social media was used to propel public opinion and the voice of the common man as it was seen in the Anna Hazare Movement in New Delhi or the "Arab Spring" in West Asia and North Africa.

In India, political mobilization through social media happened for the first time in 2011-2012 by the civil action group called 'India Against Corruption' who demanded strong anti-graft legislation in the country to control rampant corruption. Call for support was sent through various social media networks, particularly Facebook, and people took to the streets to show their support.

Since then social media has become an indispensable element of Indian politics. Though it was adopted by many politicians including Narendra Modi and Shashi Tharoor in the first decade of this century, it became a prominent tool in the 2014 General Elections in India.

Usage of Social Media in India

The active Internet user base in India currently totals approx. 462 million, and it is growing at the rate of 90% per annum. This is far higher than the global average of just 19%. India currently has 153 million active social media users as compared to 2.53 billion users across the world. Social media usage in India is up 23% since 2015 while worldwide its growth has been marginally higher at 27%. Social media ranks next after e-mail in terms of usage.

Advantages of Social Media

Technological revolution has enabled social media applications to communicate to many people at the same time. Due to its unique characteristics; it can also be highly personal and one to one. Its many other features include instantaneity, accuracy and sometimes brevity (limit on the allowable number of words). Traditional communication rules are often ignored in the social media space. But the success of social media depends on the number of people to whom it is intended to, accessing the message at the right time. Social media manifests many different characteristics and is often defined as a group of new media. Social media favours participation leading to exchange of information and immediate response. The distinction between the audience and the media diminishes. The social media does not operate in a closed sphere and gives the chance of voting and feedback through various avenues. While the transference of information is uni-directional in traditional media i.e. message is transmitted to the audience by media, in social media the interaction is two-way.

Criticism of Social Media

Social media has been panned by critics on various counts. Some of the social media platforms have been criticized on account of being highly inconvenient to use, due to discrepancies in the content or information across various platforms, lack of accuracy of information or news on social media, lack of validity and also the anonymity of the content creator. Although information can be posted simultaneously across various social media tools, a few social media networks have attracted criticism for poor interoperability. Democratization of the Internet is one of the useful effects of digital media platforms. They also permit individuals to advertise themselves and form friendships instantly. Contrary to its name, social media has also been criticized for reducing sociability in the society and creating individuals isolated from their family and loved ones.

Analysis of social media communication Strategy-Indian national congress and Bharatiya Janata Party

This chapter consists a detailed study of social media plan, strategy and activities of the two national political parties namely Bharatiya Janata Party and the Indian National Congress. A personal interview was conducted with the social media team leader of the INC while BJP social media team replied to the questionnaire that was sent to them. The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions and the questions were both open ended and close ended.

Bharatiya Janata Party

BJP's IT team is a 25 members group, helped by over 150,000 volunteers to assist them online. The party has deployed a 360-degree campaign approach, and its outreach intends to reach voters both through offline and online means. Headed by Mr. Amit Malviya, the approach on the online media space looks the most coordinated, and well implemented among all parties. BJP's online strategy is divided into two action groups — one to educate on their policy and another to discredit others' work. BJP adopted IVR (Interactive Voice Response) based technology, holograms and recorded phone calls to improve their communication for the 2014 General Elections. In the Uttar Pradesh elections in 2017, BJP adopted WhatsApp groups to push their agenda and there were almost 5000 WhatsApp groups in action at that time in the state. As India's Internet population is third highest in the world, the potential in the social media space for political communication is huge. Among social media tools; BJP official Facebook page has 13, 412, 013[#] followers. BJP's official Twitter handle @BJP4India has 6,477, 636[#] followers. Narendra Modi, the tallest leader in BJP today and also India's Prime Minister has 3, 248, 984[#] followers on Google+ while the official BJP Google Hangout account has 14, 197[#] followers.

Indian National Congress

Among the major parties, INC took a long time to wake up to reality and adopt social media. Prime Ministerial aspirant Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi were not on any social networking site for a long time. Most of the social media management was outsourced to third parties. Facebook and twitter activity numbered less than 100 in the run up to the Delhi elections in 2014 and their social media activity remained highly ineffectual. Among social media platforms, Congress has 4,487,677[#] followers on Facebook and its Twitter handle @INC India has only 2,490,259[#] followers.

CONCLUSION**Electorate**

The social networking sites score higher and hence are more popular compared to the electronic media or the online news sites. Considering the popularity of the social media, this can be an effective tool to disseminate political news and information. Among the social media users for political news and information, a sizeable number is using it daily so this can be a useful medium to reach them. As smart phones are extremely popular among the populace, it would be a wise idea for the political parties and politicians to introduce phone based apps. Response of the electorate suggests, they perceive an active role of social media in the political communication in the country. It's not a case of initial interest for the novelty it offered but its actual usefulness for the social media users that has helped sustain interest. So the social media is here to stay. With majority of social media users having expressed their opinion on political issues on Facebook or Twitter, they are the most popular social media tools. In the perception of the general public, social media has been key to AAP's acceptance and success in the political space. Though political news and information is being exchanged between social media users, social media still may not be used aggressively to influence the followers politically if they hold divergent opinion on political issues. Social media has become a platform for exchange of political posts. Predominant majority is not inclined towards changing others' political idea or thought. People trying to change others' opinion still a small number. The study clearly shows only a few people are willing participants of political discussion on social media platforms while many others are not. They would like to avoid it if they could. Considering the birth and growth of social media as a means for political communication is quite recent, it has made tremendous progress to influence close to 50% of the respondents. Though social media platforms might attract or influence many people, political parties are unable to get people to volunteer or join them as members through social media. The analysis proves that though messages are being accessed, exchanged between users and even information from the political parties sought on social media platforms, it has not translated into votes. Social media campaign alone has not helped political parties get votes from social media users. We can conclusively prove that social media is an effective tool to communicate and win support for political purposes. Uses of social media for political discussions affects inter personal relations. There is also an engagement of people and political parties online.

Political Party

Social media has often been used only as a broadcast medium and not as a channel for two-way communication with the electorate. Between the political parties, BJP has a more comprehensive and integrated social media strategy compared to INC. Though, both the parties have increased social media spend, this is still a minuscule amount. This shows social media is a highly cost affective medium. With less than 100 people officially at work in respective social media teams of the both the political parties, human deployment too is minimal compared to the reach of this medium. Research on social media use has helped both the political parties to adopt latest tools in the space to stay connected and relevant.

The power and uniqueness of social media are still to be fully understood and utilized. Political leaders are within direct reach of voters for the first time. Parties and the politicians are realizing that they can now manufacture anything on the web. After the unprecedented use of social media platforms in 2014 General Elections, the popularity and usage of various social media tools has only grown in popularity. Politics all over the world and also in India has changed forever. Understanding the efficacy of this medium, social media has become an important element of political communication strategy of both the parties. INC has recently appointed a new head of its social media group to make it more visible in the social media space and to communicate more effectively with the masses.

Suggestions for further research

The Internet assists a global ecosystem of social communication. Life in this 21st century revolves around the network, news feeds, political propaganda, comments, 'likes', status updates and ratings. For the initial couple of decades, this online space was considered an idealized community which offered a forum for free expression of views and ideas, discussion between groups of divergent opinions and constructive convergence. Various Internet analysts and public have expressed their fear over the intent, tone and content of online discussions that threatens to affect their existence and also of the tool. Various events including the US Presidential Election 2016 highlight the future that awaits us. But with the emergence of fake news and increasing online harassment of users and the political polarization of social media users, this has become an issue of concern for many. There are many aspects of social media that can be of point of interest for researchers in the future. Considering the emergence of fake news especially on social media, one of the important issues is to analyze people's trust in various sources of information and to list the media sources which are most trusted by the masses. Another topic of interest could be to analyze if this highly polarized atmosphere had firmly divided the society in to two different media worlds? Further to this aspect is to study how deeply politics has pervaded the minds of the people due to increased social media use, if the prevailing highly partisan political climate in the country has affected personal interactions and political views are a reason for online harassment? And if social media users view online space as a more negative venue for political deliberations compared with face-to-face discussions. Social media was thought to have brought enlightenment, freedom and a better future for all mankind. And now with the right regulation and reawakening of the societal consciousness, social media can continue to be an enviable tool.

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