THE ‘SOCIAL’ IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: SOCIAL MEDIA ENABLED POLITICAL DISCOURSE, ENGAGEMENT AND MOBILIZATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The advent of digital media along with the recent boom of smartphones has changed the atlas of communication. The ubiquity of Social media has led to its increased use in all aspects of communication as against conventional media. Politics is not an exception. The role of social media in political discourses, engagement, and mobilization is widely realized and practiced and has become an important mode of political communication in India. In this paper, we explore the current academic corpus on political communication in the context of social media.

Methodology: The narrative literature review method proposed by Green, Johnson, and Adams (2006) was employed as the method for this article. Relevant peer-reviewed papers published during the period 2011-18 were considered for the narrative review. Appropriate papers were selected by a Google Scholar search using the keywords ‘Social media’, ‘India’ and ‘political communication’.

Main Findings: The broad aim of the present paper was to explore the current academic literature in the field of social media and political communication. The narrative literature review undertaken indicates scant work with limited focus on the broader issues. Social media influence on voting behavior and political engagement was the well-explored domain, but the determinants and uniqueness of such communication have not been explored.

Applications of this study: The indications from the review showcase that the magnitude and essence of political communication have changed through the years. The spectrum of political communication through social media has a great role in political and civic engagement. This study will be useful to the researchers in the field of mass communication, journalism, and political science.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The conventional mainstream media and social media are increasingly showing a pattern of convergence and mutual exclusiveness. One of the critical findings from the review is that the gender domains of social media and political communication in India have not been given much attention and empirical evidence is scanty. Future research in the field of social media in India should focus on the gendered spheres of political communication.

Keywords: Social Media, Politics, Political Communication, India, Narrative Literature Review.

INTRODUCTION

The intrinsic and perennial tendency of human beings to communicate with their fellows has given birth to various means of communication, from oral to written and to virtual. The internet from its time of existence has grown exponentially and has permeated all walks of life. Complex algorithms and language have enabled the technology to be more reachable and understandable to the common man. A large amount of user content, generated every second, is an open window to the social world around the globe.

Ever since its inception, social media witnessed wider changes in its structure, mode and the purpose of communication. The initial social media sites were largely centered on personal communications and chats. The later phases of the development of social media marked significant changes where enough scope has prevailed for both personal and mass communication. Politics is not an exception. Successful politicians inspire and motivate their followers and subjects through their messages and action, thus keeping their public relations on a new high. The selection of a social media platform of communication is now an integral part of political communication.

The last decade has witnessed the rise and fall of political parties, the surge of democracy and populism, and ‘cyberization’ of participation across the world. Social media has a position within the civil society as an alternative media, which produces different dimensions to the news reported around the world, unlike media serving the interests of state or commercial enterprises (Servaes, 1999). Different voices on issues are scattered around the globe and social media brings them together on a common platform to share their opinion. The borders between cyberspace and real-world were often diluted and the new politics of dissent was well-chronicled through the physical presence of protesters in the real world, brought together by the tweets and FB posts. (Gerbaudo, 2012).

Politicians use the social media platform to enhance their visibility and popularity. Kalnes (2016) calls it as social media logic. In the 2014 European Union election, the leading candidates used social media to their advantage. The points from their televised debates were further reinforced through their social media postings (Nulty, Theocharis., Popa., Parnet and...
The hybridization of the media system (the outcome of the interaction of traditional media systems with newer media systems) produces novel interaction, competition, co-evolvement and creation of fragmented media formats into original content. The underlying processes in this hybrid political communications are popularization, disintermediation, personalization, intimidation and of course populism (Bracciale R, Martella A, 2017). Within this environment, social media logic develops and is made use by the three actors namely politicians, media actors, and the citizen. These actors are restructured by networked technologies and the associated media dynamics, i.e., the actors are acclimatizing themselves to the limitations levied by the media (Asp, 2014). The new social media logic has altered the patterns of political communication creation or distribution. It is characterized by vigorous exchanges and multifaceted synergies at numerous planes (Strömbäck, Esser, 2009).

In India, social media has been widely used by political parties and political actors in the recent decade. The transition from mass media to social media use was characterized by guidance from the social media experts and campaigners. Since its popularization, social media is being used by politicians, but there is a potential change in the essence and purposes of communication. The present paper tries to explore the following questions - firstly, what are the recent trends in political communication through social media? Second, what are the major shifts in political communication since the popularization of social media? Last, what are the core essences of political communication through social media and how are they replacing the conventional modes of political communication.

**METHODOLOGY**

The narrative literature review method proposed by Green, Johnson, and Adams (2006) was employed as the method for this article. Relevant peer-reviewed papers published during the period 2011-19 were considered for the narrative review. Appropriate papers were selected by a Google Scholar search using the keywords ‘Social media’, ‘India’ and ‘political communication.’ The search resulted in a large volume of articles, research papers, commentaries, and web resources. Publications that were peer-reviewed and published during the above-mentioned period were taken into consideration. A total of 46 papers formed the sample unit for study. The selected papers were read and reread for understanding their essence to explore the possibility of answering the questions posed in the study. The experiential domains of researchers in the field of social media were also used to make inferences about the socio-political communication persistent in the current times.

**DISCUSSION**

This section is themed into different domains prominent in the available literature. The detailed and in-depth analysis of the papers allowed the researchers to fetch appropriate themes to answer the questions.

**I. Social Media drove Political Communication –the Indian Scene**

India is a typical example of a highly ‘social mediatized country for political communication. Personalization of political content is found to be a specific feature offered by social media, with politicians using it for self-disclosure about various political issues. The best example is the remarkable use of social media professionals by the current Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi’s for his election campaign. The respective profiles on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other platforms were subscribed and followed by a record-breaking number of social media users. As per the current records, Mr. Narendra Modi is followed by 34.6 million people on his personal Twitter account, yet another 18 million in his institutional account and has 34 million likes on Facebook (Burson-Marsteller, 2017). The Wall Street Journal (2016). His live discussions - ‘Chai Pe Charcha,’ ‘India272.com’ and ‘namonumber.com;’ and his Facebook page - ‘I support Narendra Modi’ were used for augmenting the voter base. The benefits of this planned action were that he could directly contact almost 12 crores of first-time voters, unite his party the BharatiyaJanathaPatty (BJP) workers, spread the party policies and agenda to the public, create an appealing concept of growth and continuously motivate people with a need for change (Digiperform, 2015).

With increasing internet penetration, higher participation in social media has enabled access to current political trends and active participation in social movements. The best example is Anna Hazare’s youth propelled pan-India movement against corruption. Contrary to the common belief that the new generation is apolitical or disinterested in political and social action, the movement has proved that youth were motivated through social media (Neyazi, 2013). Another classic example was the setting up of AamAadmi Party (AAP) and election to the provincial assembly of Delhi. Aravind Kejriwal of the AAP used his ‘common man’ persona against corruption by repeatedly re-blogging/ re-posting in social media so much so that it created his ‘muffler-man’ image against the ‘NAMO’ (Narendra Modi) tide. His technology-enabled political mobilization contributed to AAP’s victory.

**II. Election Campaigns**

Almost all political parties and politicians in India have Facebook and Twitter accounts. The use of social media became vibrant and took a new shape in India during the parliamentary election of 2014. Unlike the previous elections, the 2014 election has witnessed the strategic use of social media in the Indian election. Since then political communication in India has redesigned its future. Political campaigning through social media was mainly aimed at the youngsters and the middle class. The media and IT cells of the parties were tactically started to tap into the power of social media. Narasimhamurthy
(2014), Goval (2014), Kumar (2014) and Baishya (2015) indicate that the social media campaign made the 2014 election unique and the marketing strategies adopted were successful in reaching a large section of people, especially the youngsters and new voters. The communication trending around the hashtag #NaMo was influential in determining the voting behavior of the general public. Chadha & Guha (2016) considered the BJP's social media strategy in the 2014 election as rational driven and monitored at different levels. Mishra (2015) argues that result of Delhi Assembly Election of 2015 was largely influenced by internet usage, as more than 90% of the voters had internet access. Access to social media changed the monologue communication pattern and led to the debates and discourses. The implication of social media-driven political advertisement and vote share is underlined empirically in the Indian context by many researchers (Safiullah, Pathak., Singh., Anshul, 2016).

Anandan (2014) mentioned that campaign through the internet for the 2014 election would influence the urban followed by the rural. It was true that subsequent state assembly elections throughout India marked the optimum use of social media. The Gujrat election-2017, UP election-2017 and the election held in North-Eastern states in 2018 typically used social media as a prominent tool. Sharma (2017) in his empirical study showcases the influence of social media on the voting behavior of people in the Himachal Pradesh assembly election of 2017. Social media become an imperative tool for election and election campaigns in the current times mandated by its replacement of conventional media.

Mahapatra and Pagemann (2019) discuss the proliferation of Information Technology cells to expand and work on their political party's social media strategy (including looking after disseminating information through WhatsApp and manage the party’s Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts; and conduct research to understand the pulse of the public). The IT cells comprise of graphic designers, communication strategists and IT professionals (Banerjee and Haque, 2019). The authors refer to Ulekh and Shah 2018 as mentioning that parties such as the BJP have around 150 payrolled and more than a million volunteers working for them as part of their IT cell.

III. Mobilizing Public Opinion and Civic Participation

The role of social media in mobilizing public opinion is important. Social media has become a major source of information and communication for a large majority of the people especially the youths and middle class. Shares and tweets are potentially shaping their viewpoints and perspectives. Neyazi., Kumar, and Sometko (2016) studied the potential influence of digital media campaigns on the mobilization of voters. The study found that along with the traditional face to face campaigns, social media plays a crucial role in engaging the youngsters. Kakkar and Singh (2014) show that social media widely influence youth involvement in election campaigning - directly or indirectly. The indirect means include sharing the posts and tweets with their friend's circle and direct means include campaigning in their respective localities. Mishra (2016) describes the influence of social and digital media in the process of political mobilization and engagement at the University level election of Assam University.

Social media acts as a potential platform for discussing ideological and political driven communication to the target groups with the use of limited effort. The recent all India strike called by Dalit organizations in protest against the dilution of the Atrocities Act-1988 invited mass protest throughout the country, mostly fuelled by social media communication. The anti-corruption movement of 2013 and the crowd mobilization against the Delhi gang-rape are prominent examples of how social media acts as a medium for apolitical mobilization that changed the course of political and social discourse in the country. Chaudhuri & Fitzgerald (2015) also highlight the spontaneous mass movement and mobilization in response to the rape protest in India. The political discourse and mobilization were largely possible in the Delhi assembly election due to social media penetration (Pande, 2015). The author further shows that the tweets and re-tweets of political leaders have sparked the discourses in the mainstream media as well in social media.

IV. Forming Consensus and Dissent

Hassan (2014) explains how social media largely forecast the leadership of Modi and the same was constructed for wider acceptability and consensus from the mass. The ‘shares’ and tweets in the social media go ‘viral’ in minutes when it has something sensitive or when it has an essence that appeals to the social consensus driven by the values. In the era of hashtags, it has become easy, and at the same time complex, to construct consensus and dissent. Social media is persistently used by the government for sensitizing people and creating common consensus. The ‘Beti Bachao, BetiPadao’ campaign is a typical example. The government’s efforts for motivating people through social media (and the mainstream media) to quit subsidy of LPG cylinders is another example that yielded a positive result. George (2016) shows the importance of mobilizing consensus in social media for net neutrality. The consensus potentially impacted the policy measures for the same. The recent campaign and protest ‘#Justice for Asifa’ for the victim of Kathua rape case also made a societal consensus - instrumental for debates and discourses between political parties and the general public. Political patronage for the accused has also been widely criticized and a common dissent was constructed against such patronage.

‘Trolls’ are another vibrant social media communication tool for protest against unfavorable justification by political parties. The element of sarcasm and strong criticism are usually persistent in such trolls and capable enough of creating political engagement and mobilization. (Ross, A and Rivers, D, 2017)

Pal, Chandra, Chirumamilla, Kameswaran, Gonawela, Thawani, and Dasgupta (2017) critically analyze the use of irony and sarcasm by Modi in his social media handles that finds appeal among his followers. The authors portray it as the
'politics of self-representation'. Political sarcasm and irony are better strategies to communicate to the common people, than complex messages.

Bute (2014) analyses the positives and negatives of social media in the context of four major sensitive issues in India – the movement against -Corruption -2011, the Ethnic struggles in Assam-2012, campaigning against the Delhi Gang Rape-2012 and the Muzzafarpur Riots-2013. The analysis indicates that in the first two cases, social media has played a constructive role in rallying people and constructing a consensus, both politically and beyond the grounds of politics. In the latter two cases, social media acted negatively to create the situation more complex and the penetration of politics of polarization. The experiences in these incidents further made the government enforce restrictions on social media on such similar events to prevent the creation of negative consensus. Madhavan (2016) also indicates that the efforts of the social media in the campaigns for the Right to Information (RTI) -2005, anti-corruption -2011 and Net neutrality t-2015 have led to the wider democratic deliberations and consensus. Neyazi (2017) observes the trend of polarization caused by social media. Uncensored news and ‘hate’ content by the politicians/others reach people instantly and generate tension.

The common consensus in the social media compels the state authorities to take appropriate action (although they might not be in favor of it sometimes, ideologically and politically).

V. Beyond Election Campaigns

The avenues for social media do not limit it to the election campaign. Although social media was mainly used during election campaigns in its initial years, the recent trend underlines that along with publicizing the ideologies of parties at the central and state level, most of the leaders have developed their own strategic plan to communicate with their followers on mobilizing people and opinions. The framework of using it merely for election campaigns has almost disappeared among the politicians. Perennial and focused use of their pages and tweets are visible. The growing importance given to social media is evident from the recent call by Narendra Modi to reach at least 3 lakh genuine likes on Facebook for the MPs of BJP (Uttam, 2018).

The government and its department activities are also widely publicized through social media. This method is accepted as a prominent mode of reaching out to the people by political actors in power. The Clean India (Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) of the central government is a typical example (Rodrigues and Niemann, 2017). The campaign to a certain extent helped to create a positive image for the government as well as the personal charisma of Mr. Modi. Verma., Kumar, and Ilavarasan(2017) report the social media integration of the government departments in five populated states of India; UP, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh.

Sachdeva (2017) highlights the proactive use of personal social media accounts by ministers than their official ones. Ilavarasan (2017) indicates the higher use of social media by Narendra Modi than his government officials. Srivastava (2013) reports that social media though having a slower adoption rate by the Indian Government has had a high impact on the general public – an indication of a higher depth than width of adoption. The then Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh used to update his personal as well official website on a regular basis. The information shared was useful for the public as well as mainstream media. The recent scenario shows even the local self-government bodies explicitly using social media to communicate with the people and reaching out to them. All the Chief Ministers of Indian states have Facebook or Twitter pages or both. The same is being used for communicating the agenda of government as well the political parties they represent.

VI. Mainstream Media on the Social Media bandwagon

The current decade has witnessed massive changes in the outlook of conventional mass media. Challenges posed by social media to the mainstream media are innumerable. Mutual convergence of social and mainstream media is a reality, and is important for the Indian political scene, in order to engage with the maximum number of voters and the general public. Examples such as the Anna Hazare movement (started with traditional and moved to social media) and the Modi wave -the result of both social and traditional media use. (Neyazi, 2013) Both of them are mutually exclusive and imperative for each other. The media industry persistently looks for exclusives and breaking news from social media (Aneez, Chattopadhyay, Parthasarathi, and Nielsen., 2017). The conventional model of convening press meets for political communication is not necessary as the official pages have the same reach and the same would certainly become news in the mainstream media within minutes.

Recent trends indicate that traditional media have high coverage for posts/shares/tweets that have a political essence. The process goes reverse as well; mainstream media reports on political situations are shared and tweeted on social media too. Another interesting fact is that mainstream media also use social media to reach to the people. They share the exclusive news on their social media pages as well. The most important stakeholders of the media convergence are politicians and political parties. Darshan and Suresh (2017) explicate the issues posed by media convergence and the wider scope for the field of political communication in India.

VII. The Fake news phenomena

Aneez, Neyazi, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2019) points towards two types of news in the political context – general fake news i.e news prepared for political/marketable reasons and hyper-partisan news where reality is warped in order to drive a specific agenda. Banerjee and Haque (2018) discuss the utilization of popular platforms such as WhatsApp and
Facebook and Twitter by political parties in India for spreading fake news in order to manipulate the opinion of the public. According to the author, misinformation through multiple social media platforms was very common with the general public not spending the effort to check the veracity of the news. Fake news campaigns spread through trolls and ideologically and agenda led groups that incite violence or manipulate public sentiments towards or against politicians during elections. Twitter was deemed the most used platform for spreading fake news and this prompted the platform to purge many fake accounts which had a positive effect on bringing down instances of fake news (Banerjee and Haque, 2018).

VIII. Social media as a tool for ‘extreme speech’

According to Udupa (2019), extreme speech and abuse through memes, hashtags, labels, the use of syntax and video remixes have become a significant ethos of social media enabled politics reflecting new age political participation. Chopra (2019) highlights the dangerous trend of using WhatsApp and Facebook during elections for hate speech mongering and spreading disinformation, often inciting communal violence. Social media have also brought new jeopardies for women politicians across the globe in terms of cyberbullying/trolling (Patterson 2016). Indian Women journalists covering politics and women activists too are not spared. They are threatened with violence, gang rape and stripping on Twitter (Arya, 2013).

IX. Social media and Gendered Political Communication: The unexplored domain

One of the least explored areas in the field of political communication in India is the gendered political communication. The underrepresentation of this crucial area is high - attributed to the low levels of political participation of women in Indian politics. However, Kumar, Dhamija, and Dhamija (2016) proposed that the 2014 general elections were a path-breaking event that saw high women voter turnout.

The gender divide in digital and internet access along with with the socio-cultural scenario limits women’s exposure to social media to a great extent. Anderson (2015) critically studied the underrepresentation of women in Indian politics in the contexts of social media and found that women were potentially marginalized in the political process and political conversations in India. Subramanian (2017) indicates that the cultural barriers and imposition of restrictions limit internet access to women Mobile Association of India (2016) reports that social media use by women is limited to 35%. Gender notions prevalent in India delimit potential women internet users in many spheres. A few pieces of research focus on the social media usage of women, political leaders. Dutta and Bhatt (2016) quote Åström&Karlsson (2016) who point out major dissimilarities between impact and feedback dimensions of male and female politicians in their blog communication Female politicians use blogging more for developing stronger associations and engagement, through exchange of ideas related to policy. In spite of this, female politicians have a lesser way on the general voting public than their male counterparts.

It is ironic that gendered domains of social media use in the Indian political perspective do not find much space in academic literature. The use of social media by women political leaders for political communication shows a stagnating and unpromising trend. The widely cited face in the literature in connection with social media and political communication is Ms. Sushma Swaraj (Meti, Khandoba, and Guru, 2015; Sachdeva, 2017). It is a crucial question of why other women’s Indian leaders’ use of social media has not been given attention by researchers. Gendered aspects of political communication in this area have to be further explored. Though social media has a frail feminine voice, it has proved to be a potential means of addressing women’s rights and decision-making processes (Loiseau&Nowack, 2015). In India, it is widely used for highlighting women’s issues in particular.

CONCLUSION

The broad aim of the present paper was to explore the current knowledge base in the field of social media and political communication. The narrative literature review undertaken indicates scant literature with limited focus on the broader issues. Social media influence on voting behavior and political engagement was the well-explored domain. But its determinants and uniqueness of such communication have not been explored. Social media is setting new milestones in the sphere of political communication in India by replacing the dominance of traditional print and mass media. The magnitude of social media use for election campaigns has significantly increased since its popularization. While the use of political communication beyond the elections has become a routine thing in other countries, Indian political actors have recently joined the bandwagon of political engagement beyond elections (Kamat, 2015). Political mobilization and engagement were made easy due to the proliferation of social media and smartphones.

The organized efforts and structured use of social media have potentially influence to form the public opinion; both consensus and dissent. These lead to virtual democratic platforms where the government and authorities are being compelled to act and the political parties and politicians are more responsive to the public. The essence of political communication in social media includes proclaiming one’s political ideology and criticizing opponents with due observation and analysis. The government in power uses social media to reach its developmental agenda to the public while opposition parties try to find loopholes. Virtual world democracy is created in social media.
The conventional mainstream media and social media are increasingly showing a pattern of convergence and mutual exclusiveness. One of the critical findings from the review is that the gender domains of social media and political communication in India do not have much from researchers and empirical evidence is scanty. Future research in the field of social media in India should focus on the gendered spheres of political communication.

**Limitation and study Forward:** This study looks at political communication through the lens of narrative literature. More reflective and empirically fuelled research is essential to study the process used by political actors to steer change and transcend communication boundaries between what is political and non-political, public or private, mass or niche audiences. Also, further studies can look at literature that defines the influence of moderating or mediating factors that influence political communication through social media, such as communication competence, motives of use of political actors, and user expectations

**Practical Application of the Paper:** This study will be useful to the researchers and practitioners of not only mass communication, journalism, and political science, but also marketing and business, as implications of political communication as a marketing tool can also be noted.

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