Politics on the Social Media : A Recent Trend

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relation between social media and politics by investigating the power of the Internet and more specifically social media, in the political as well as social discourse. Over the last decade, many studies have been conducted on the pattern of the use of social media by different political groups. Many argue that social media stimulates online and offline political participation. The study investigates how online political activities impact political efficacy and real-life political participation among different political parties. Political efficacy is significantly based on online political participation. In addition to that, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc. provide platforms for netizens to participate in real-life political activities. The paper is based on the deep analysis of political activities done during the time of elections in 2012, and again the general elections held in 2014 and 2019. Social media, in particular, is now a serious factor in political campaigns and in the way people think about different issues related to them. . Social media allows politicians and political parties a method to connect directly with people across the country at a reduced cost and greater reach than traditional media. Indian politics has observed a whirl of change over a period of time. People on social media now feel more connected and they are experiencing a newly developed connections with their political parties. For instance, WhatsApp has 200 million users in India, twitter has 7.65 million users, Facebook has 300 million users and 41 million people watch YouTube on a monthly basis. Along with that about 40% of Indian population constitute youths, with their age between 18 to35. Such a huge participation of indian youths has paved the way for a deep and serious research in this field. In conclusion, the findings of the study suggest that online political activities strongly correlates to political awareness and political participation.

Keywords : Social Media, Political Participation, General Elections, Political Efficacy

INTRODUCTION

The media plays a vital role in a democracy; informing the public about political issues and acting as a watchdog against abuses of power. During election campaigns the media provides information and analysis about political party's programmes, policies, candidates and performance. Electronic communication seems to make politicians see more remote; there is still no connection between politics where power is brokered, and network society itself. In a similar way, social media has also transformed politics in India and globally. The political landscape has changed quite a bit in the last couple of decades. The internet has played important role in this transformation. Social media, in particular, is now a serious factor in political campaigns and in the way people think about issues. Candidates and their supporters constantly post their views on Facebook and Twitter. Each party has its own pages, from which it broadcasts propaganda and requests for donations. Its effect has impacted the way candidate campaign for their election. Social media allows politicians and political parties a method to connect directly with people across the country at a reduced cost and greater reach than traditional media. Indian politics has observed a whirl of change over a period of time and its dependency over social media to connect with people is experiencing the fellow democracies and its effects. It used social media like never before, the conventional ways of sending messages, recorded calls and public gathering were swept away under the rug.

Social media: a road to reach out to youth

While electronic media have played an important role in Indian elections for some decades, the advent of a variety of new technologies and platforms (Whatsapp, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and TikTok, etc; as well as number of web-based dissemination tools, collectively and loosely labelled social media in popular press) for public campaigning since 2014 elections has altered the character of such forms of communication.

In India the number of users for mass media platforms is within the top ten in the world. For instance, WhatsApp has 200 million users in India, twitter has 7.65 million users, Facebook has 300 million users and 41 million people watch YouTube on a monthly basis. Along with that about 40% of Indian population constitute youths, with their age between 18 to35. Research shows that audience spends 22% of their time on social networking sites, thus proving how popular social media platforms have become.

Social media use in politics

The use of social media by Indians was first highlighted during the 2008 Mumbai attack when information shared through twitter and flicker between Indians and outside. The second mass use of social media in India was the May 2009 election, when, for the first time, online voters registration and transparency campaign started. Again during the anti-corruption movement, 2012, social activist, Anna Hazare used social media to connect people in New Delhi. Social media has also credited with helping the Kejriwal, won a surprise victory in Delhi against major political parties. Since then, the relationship between politicians and public through social media has become stronger. Politicians promote their controlled speech and present their point of view without being interrupted by journalists or by media format. It has given privilege for politicians to post a presumptive political agenda. By means of it, political parties or politicians can

mobilize public and invites them to participate in discussion on some issues of public interest. By using media tools, politicians and political parties interacts apparently with more efficiently with their supporters and institutional and bureaucratic rigors. Again the general election of 2014 and that of 2019 was actually fought on social media.

One of the ways that social media has transformed politics is the sheer speed at which news, poll results and rumours are shared. Whereas in the pre-internet days, people had to wait for the next newspaper or TV news to get the latest information, online news is a 24/7 phenomenon. Social media has taken this step further. While we can access news on many websites at any hour, **most people spend more time on sites such as Facebook and Twitter** than they do on serious news or political websites. This means that we get all of the latest trending news stories and opinions shared by our friends whenever we log in.

Political campaigning through social media:

Politicians use social media to communicate with their audience and to call them either to vote or protest. So the use of web 2.0 technologies has made it incredible easy for a wide range political parties, social activists, individual leaders are getting attention towards social media. Observing the famous 2014 general election of India, social media was the battleground of various political campaigns and tremendous flow of varied political opinions.

While the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) led by current prime minister, Narendra Modi, was first party to concertedly deploy social media to campaign for its own programmes and ideology in the 2014 election, Narendra Modi's following was quickly gained and he was considered as famous and influential as Obama's elector campaign. This particular election saw the rise of leveraging much youth and their minds over social media for any political campaign and serious notice was found on both the occasion, in state and general elections. Since then many other political parties including the Indian National Congress (INC), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and many others have created IT cells to coordinate and aggressively campaign for their programme and vision for 2019 election. Late starters such as Mayawati of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have also jumped on the bandwagon. Lately many politicians have adopted to the norms and culture of social media, as per se, Arvind Kejriwal, Suresh Prabhu, Smriti Irani and our PM Narendra Modi. Their updates and feeds on various social media platforms about latest happenings and events keeps us informed. Our HRD minister Sushma Swaraj has also been quite active on twitter and made has presence felt by replying to the requests by replying to the requests by one's needing help or assistance. Vicious battles were being fought on social media by adherent of the two sides along with trolling and other activity. This has enabled the political actors to avoid engaging with their opponent in the electioneering. Unanchored social media campaigns had an important impact on 2019 election.

As per various surveys and reporters, after 2014 elections, 2.5% of budget is set for every election's political campaign on social media (which is roughly around 400-500 crore for major political parties). In the last 2019 general election, about 900 million Indians were eligible to vote in the election, which took place over about five weeks starting on April 11, and many more of them were online than during last election of 2014. In the general election of 2014, social media was used as a tool. This time it became a weapon for the contestants.

The impact of polls: targeting and advertising:

Political polls are an important part of every campaign. Many a time, they are confusing because we can often find multiple polls with contradictory results posted on the very same day.

As with other types of political news, the internet has greatly increased the number of poll results we see each day. Social media has accelerated this even more. Not only do social media sites report the results of polls, we can actually participated in Facebook polls. This is true even if they are flawed. A poll can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if people think one candidate is far ahead in the race, they might conclude there's no point in voting for the underdog. When people are posting the latest poll results on social media throughout the day, there are a great deal of pressure on candidates to put ahead of their opponents.

Targeting is used throughout the advertising industry to make sure that ads and messages reach the right audience. Politicians do this as well. They hire some companies which are good at performing such task of advertising and public relations. If a candidate wants to address the concerns of women, college students, retired people, or any group of voters, they can now tailor their messages. Just as advertisers on Facebook are able to use analytics and targeted advertising, so can candidates and politicians. Thus, if you notice that political messages seem to be talking to you personally, this is no accident.

The darker side: fake news, rumours and conspiracies

Apart from the positive part of the social media in politics especially in the last few years, we are seeing more negative part. The use of social media

to spread misinformation and fake news has been a huge concern in India. Doctored videos and information have been blamed for a spate of mob lynching's and even riots in India. Political parties have been frequently accused each other of intentionally spreading fake news intended to cause social unrest and given them political points. To tackle fake news, WhatsApp has taken a series of steps like slowing down the spread of fake news by reducing the number of forwards at a time o and by undertaking awareness campaigns through newspapers ads and workshops. But WhatsApp groups are still rife with political content of questionable origins and credibility.

"But the thing with social media is that there are so many layers of plausible deniability. There are thousands and thousands of accounts that are not 'officially' connected with political parties, but help carry their messages. All of this stuff will happen through them," he told the BBC.

With over 250 million users, WhatsApp by far has the biggest reach in India. And the platform is known to be a source of fake news and misinformation. But there's good reason to think the widespread popularity of WhatsApp in India could have damaging effect on the election. For one thing, the 2018 recent state-level election exposed how WhatsApp is being used to rapidly share messages intended to misinform voters for political gain.

India's 2019 election were widely anticipated to be the "WhatsApp election". Against a backdrop of rapidly improving internet connectivity and rising smartphone use, the number of people using private messaging service WhatsApp has soared since its India launch in mid-2010 to more than 200 million

users, more than in any democracy. And now the country's political parties are moving to capitalise on this mass communication channel. But given WhatsApp has already been used to misinform voters in other elections and spread damaging 'fake news' that has led to serious violence in India, there's a danger this could also pose a threat to the democratic process.Ultimately, the role of WhatsApp in Indian politics needs to be understood through the interaction of technology with wider social and cultural issues. WhatsApp is a tool that amplifies certain tendencies that already exist in Indian society. For example, incidents of lynching might have much more to do with incitement to violence in a divided society than with an app that potentially facilitates the spread of rumours. Similarly, messages that promote hatred on religious, caste, and gender lines rely on prevailing social cleavages. The Election Commission of India announced various measures to curb fake news and misinformation on social media platforms. However, for most of the users, it's a very big challenge to differentiate between what is fake and what is real.

The use of social media for political activities influences people's political efficacy, political knowledge, and political participation. Social media users may discover political activities in social media and by this way intensify their political knowledge, increase their political efficacy and improve their political participation. Moreover, the social media usage for political activities was influenced by frequency of general social media use. The more often they use social media for political activities.

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