

## ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*The Indian political system which was very traditional in approach and campaigned through mass meetings with their electorate has undergone a visible change. Political parties have realised the power of the New Media to reach out to a wider audience. The recent General Elections changed the tide in favour of technology and progress when 800 million voters sent back the ruling government which had held sway for 10 years to the opposition benches. This paper analyses the role of New Media in Political Communication. The social networking site Twitter in particular, has seen many politicians active, so much so that Twitter was looking to monetise elections by charging political parties for interacting with its million plus user base. The role of New Media in Political Communication is also being analysed all over the world. While there have been many movements that have been spearheaded through New Media, its reach and impact is yet to be truly ascertained. Research papers in the Indian context have been scanty and this can be seen through the paucity of literature in this field.*

### **Key Words:**

*New Media, Political Communication, Campaigning Tool, Elections*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the world's largest democracy, the freedom of speech and expression is a fundamental right guaranteed by the Indian constitution. Hence, the Press, or the Media as it is known today forms a very integral part of the four pillars of this democratic institution. The Media is the watchdog of the society. It is an opinion former as well as a critic for the 1.2 billion population. It holds up a mirror for the people, allowing them to judge, analyse, formulate ideas and make an action plan. In a country where such freedom of expression is ingrained and deeply entrenched in its very system, the Media plays a significant role.

The Indian political system has a history of thousands of years. The various rulers of this land have for over centuries established regimes and ruled over the people, however varied and diverse the land is- geographically and culturally. In the pre-Independence era, freedom fighters and revolutionaries garnered support for their causes and led massive uprisings against the British Raj. This was possible because they communicated their ideas and beliefs in a very effective manner.

How did they manage to reach such a large audience? How did they communicate to this audience? How did they understand the medium to retain power and influence people? These are some of the questions that this paper deals with.

### **POLITICIANS' AND MEDIA**

The political system is an essential thread that binds together our societal fabric. Governments in a democratic establishment use the Media to formulate, select and transmit messages to its citizens. The citizen would use this information to make his own reasoning of the political climate and make his own adjustments in the system whenever he encountered problems. This connective link connects the Government, Media and Society.<sup>1</sup> (Nimmo, 1964). He further states that this interaction can be explored and examined to concur with Herring, who states that "this relationship between the government and the public in actual practice is narrowed down to contacts between a small group of officials and a small group of newspaper correspondents."<sup>2</sup>

Today, it is no longer the prerogative of the ruler to be unattainable and unavailable to his citizens. Every politician wants to be connected with his electorate. The Prime Minister of India today tweets directly to his 5 plus million followers on Twitter. The President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, made the best use of New Media tools for his election campaigns and this can be seen in the number of research papers that have been published in this particular field in developed countries like USA, UK, Germany and Canada.

The tradition in India has been to fight elections with dignity. (Gujaral, 1999). Mass communication strategies for political and electoral battles may see a more diverse and imaginative application of campaigns to attract the voters in the future.<sup>3</sup>

An insightful observation indeed, coming from a former Prime Minister in 1999. Little did he

know that the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in 2014 would be played out across a convergence of media platforms—from mobile sets to television studios.

Since politicians have now come to understand the power and impact of Media, they are using it to fulfill their communication goals. However, the implications of promotion, propaganda and the use of public relations techniques connected with Political Communication are the most stressed by critics who oppose use of Media for Political Communication.

### **NEW MEDIA AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION**

The rise of New Media has introduced entirely new forms of behaviour, involving interactivity and searching. This is a new force of internationalisation which does not observe national boundaries, Mc Quail<sup>4</sup> observes. He also observes that Political Communication reflects a continuous process of news management along with a competition to define news events and issues.

McLuhan (*Understanding Media-The Extensions of Man*) said that New Media is a new form of communication with politicians.

New Media encompasses the internet and all the social networking sites such as blogs, You Tube, Facebook and Twitter as well as mobile apps such as Whatsapp. The recent technological advances in mobile technology and India's growing clout as one of the top five countries which is socially engaged online, makes Social Media a phenomenon which is still largely untapped. It has been perceived to be an important part of the elections in India, which is the world's largest democracy. Though the internet penetration is as low as 7-8 percent in India, according to the Internet World Statistics this translates to 302 million internet users in a demography which has a very young and rapidly rising profile in the age group 25-35.

The utilization and understanding of the new communication technologies for political and administrative purposes came during the reign of N Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh in 1999 (Murthy, 1999) when he gave importance to participatory communication through teleconferences, video conferences with district officials which led to e-governance.<sup>5</sup>

Videos were used on a large scale in the 8<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections in 1984 for political advertising and it was believed to be one of the major factors for the sweeping victory of the Congress party. By the 9<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections, the full impact of video was realised. (Ghosh, 1991). The advent of satellite television channels contributed to a major boon in Political Communication. It was during the 1998 elections that BJP's campaign first appeared on the internet and the party launched its website with much fanfare, and political communication in India evolved into a multimedia approach.<sup>6</sup>

### **RESEARCH ON POLITICIANS AND NEW MEDIA**

For most people, their interest in politics and the elections stem from the Media. This was evident in the study conducted by Trenaman and McQuail in 1959. Since that study which showed that television as a medium had increased people's interest in political issues and politicians considerably, it is now assumed that the broadcast medium is the most significant medium for communicating with the people.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent study of the Internet's place in politics, Davis (1999) has argued that: "... rather than acting as a revolutionary tool rearranging political power and instigating direct democracy, the Internet is destined to become dominated by the same actors in American politics who currently utilize other mediums. Undoubtedly, public expression will become more common and policy makers will be expected to respond hastily. But the mobilization of public expression will still largely be the creation of groups and individuals who currently dominate the political landscape. ... Today, the production of political news and information is the result of the interaction among official entities, interest group representatives, and the news media. Such interaction will also govern the Internet's presentation of news and information. ... the current forces dominating political news delivery, who dwarf the independent efforts, also will overshadow them on the Internet" (1999: 5)

As an example of the reinforcement model, let us consider Hagen (2001). Hagen describes with some acuity how "digital democracy" projects in the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany

have been shaped by the political cultures of each country, and especially the deficiencies that each political culture perceives in itself. He judges these projects as failures, however, essentially because the root problem in each case is citizen disillusionment resulting from globalization (2001: 65). He is skeptical, therefore, about the Internet's ability to "save" democracy, and he explains his skepticism using the word "amplify":

"ICT do not change political institutions and processes by virtue of their mere existence. Rather, their use may amplify existing social behaviours and trends. This can be [attributed] to the fact that the development of technological applications is controlled by specific dominant factors. With its instrumental character, ICT becomes a trend-amplifier in a given area of application" (Hagen 2001: 55)

### **ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION**

The role of New Media in Political Communication can have far reaching effects if tapped to its maximum potential. The access to a large database of electorate on the internet gives a political party a huge opportunity to analyse and evaluate this database.

Mass political communications retain their economies of scale, but they are increasingly integrated with political strategies on other levels. Political organizations become able to gather data on individual voters (Hunter 2002, McLean 1989: 61-76, Mintz and O'Harrow 2000, Wayne 2000b), and as more attributes of each voter are stored, it becomes possible to generate scripts tailored to each voter's interests, for example in get-out-the-vote campaigns (Stepanek 2000) or in day-to-day tactical campaigns of telephoning voters (Jameson, Glaze, and Teal 1999), according to (Philip, 2002).<sup>8</sup>

This has been proven in the case of the recent 2015 Delhi Assembly Election. The Aam Aadami Party (AAP) used algorithms and analytics to measure voter sentiment throughout their campaign on Twitter. India has over 100 million Facebook users and 33 million people on twitter, digital bulletin boards on which views and proclivities are freely and emphatically expressed, and that formed the engine of AAP's game plan. "Analysis of social media has played a major role in

how we have allocated funds in our manifesto," said senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia. "For instance, the majority of inputs on education and regarding free WiFi (a poll promise the party made in Delhi) came through social media. Sentiment analysis of social media particularly helped us understand the specific demands of women."

Preeti Sharma Menon, former Maharashtra state secretary of AAP, who played an important role in the social media campaign for the Delhi elections, said IIT-B volunteers performed a critical role in fashioning the party's response to voter sentiment in Delhi. "The feedback they provided framed vital turning points in the campaign," she said. "The importance of social media lies in introducing a new thought or perspective. While everything we spoke about became part of the poll agenda, the BJP, on the other hand, was unable to introduce a single new thought that would get echoed by opinion makers in the press," Menon was quoted in TOI.

A group of students from the prestigious IIT Bombay devised this algorithm which helped the party to understand the conversation on Twitter and formulate its election manifesto.<sup>9</sup> With data such as this available on the internet and advanced analytics available to understand this data, it will become easier for the political parties to understand the demographics, profile and aspirations of its 1.2 billion electorate.

Technology is a double-edged sword and the onus lies on the user to make a positive impact with its use. The NDA government at the centre, with a tech-savvy Prime Minister has ensured that all its Ministers have a Twitter account. Hence the priority of these elected representatives is to reach out to their preferred audiences. However, these politicians should ensure that their credibility is not at stake when sensitive and controversial topics are discussed in this platform.

### **SUMMARY**

The impact of New Media on Political Communication over traditional forms such as holding of mass rallies and door-to-door campaigning is an issue that can be debated especially in the Indian context, where more than half of the population lives in rural areas and lacks basic facilities like access to good education,

healthcare and infrastructure. In such a scenario, the idea of logging into the internet or smartphones and following political developments can seem far-fetched. However, it is not impossible. There is a slow and growing awareness towards this new medium of communication and it is empowering the people to participate in the process of democracy. This was not seen earlier, as television, radio and other forms of media were not interactive in nature. The interactivity of New Media and its reach and impact as well as its power to reach the powers-that-be directly, without any third party intervention is what makes this medium exciting.

The challenge for political parties and politicians' will be to engage this audience and gainfully keep this conversation going in the right direction to lead the country to development. A survey by an analytics firm (Simplify 360, 2014) says that 2.6 crore Indians read tweets related to elections. This presents a huge opportunity for the future of the Indian democracy.

Given India's young demographic profile which is logged in most of the time, New Media will be successful in bridging the gap between political parties and young voters. It will generate interest and activism among the youth, who earlier

perceived politics in negative shades.

By engaging voters in the online forum, this medium will create a wider scope for a participative approach to democracy. It will eliminate the gap between politicians and the common man.

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