

Role of Social Media In Driving Political Polarization And Reforms

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Abstract

Nearly four billion individuals across the globe are active on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. For many, these sites are their primary source for news and political updates. But social media may provide perverse incentives for controversial material by making it more likely to become "viral." We provide data showing that postings about political opponents have an out-group impact that is much greater than other proven predictors of social media sharing, such as emotive language. These results inform efforts to make social media spaces less toxic for users and add to ongoing academic discussions regarding the impact of social media on political polarisation. The Wall Street Journal reports that 2018 a Facebook research team warned the business that its "algorithms exploit the human brain's predisposition to discord." Executives at Facebook reportedly suppressed this study and rejected the team's recommendations for reducing polarisation on the site. The report backs up the theory that social media may encourage divisive material dissemination. The practice of "dunking" (i.e., insulting or disparaging one's adversaries) has gained popularity on Twitter, which has alarmed the company's CEO, Jack Dorsey. The recent assault of the United States Capitol brings these worries to the forefront. Social media rhetoric seems to have incited real-world violence. We want to look at the link between antipathy against the other group and popularity on Facebook and Twitter, two of the most widely used social media sites.

Keywords: *Social Media, Indian Elections, Political Polarisation, political parties*

Introduction

It is usual for political parties to engage in what is often understood to be political polarisation during election campaigns. This takes the shape of harsh and hostile speech on the campaign trail, which is often assumed to be worsened by social media. Some groups' divisiveness thrives even outside of election campaign times, and it's becoming more visible in everyday social media interaction. Internet and social media once held the promise of providing a platform for underrepresented voices and expanding democratic discourse, but this promise now appears to have given place to increasingly divisive disputes. The same is true for the political advantages and disadvantages that exist offline; data from the United States and Europe reveals that the players who were powerful in the mass media period remain the same in the digital media era. (Piskorski, 2014)

While mature western democracies have seen newspaper readership drop and business models continue to be challenged, India has experienced the expansion of both conventional media like newspapers and television and the emergence of the internet, which makes the country's position more nuanced and complicated. The established political actors in India, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have established their control on both conventional and internet media, despite the fact that these elements of the Indian media system provide the impression that the country's media landscape is lively. The prominence of BJP policy advocacy in mainstream media indicates the party's growing influence. There has been a similar rise in political discord since 2014 when the BJP initially acquired momentum. When there are only two ways to talk about crucial national and policy issues among politicians, politics is polarised. The function of the news media as a source of impartial information for individuals has been pushed to the background with the emergence of heated politics on television and social media. Political polarization in the United States has increased with the advent of prominent opinionated cable news channels like Fox and MSNBC, which promote conservative and liberal viewpoints, respectively. The development of commercial television in the 1980s and 1990s in Europe devalued public service programming, making news as 'infotainment' more popular. We see the American model of polarisation, the fall of public service broadcasting, and the development of entertainment in the news media, all of which are also present in India, as seen by the fast transition in the media-politics interaction outlined below. (Li & Bernoff, 2008)

Objective of Paper

1. Study About The Role Media In Election
2. Study About Political Polarisation In India

Using Social Media to Track Indian Elections, 2014-2019

The 16th Lok Sabha was elected after a record-breaking 554 million Indians went to the polls in the 2014 general election (Lower House of the Indian Parliament). The Indian National Congress-led UPA administration has faced widespread opposition due to charges of corruption and policy gridlock.(INC). Indian youth were eager for change since 65 percent of the population is under 35. Furthermore, the 2014 election was the first time political parties used innovative technologies and fresh ideas to engage voters through social media. Never before have so many important Indian organisations collaborated in favour of a single political party. This includes advertising, public relations, social media analytics and marketing, offline campaigning, citizen volunteer groups, non-resident Indians, and more. During Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement in 2011, social media proved to be a reliable barometer of public opinion. As an example

of the electoral success of political parties utilising SNS to respond to its members, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won an unprecedented 282 out of 545 seats in the current parliament.

Five short years ago, political parties in India hardly used social media. Now they depend on it significantly. Young people's participation in political discourse on social networking sites (SNS) has increased. With over 200 million users, India has more forwarded mails than any other nation. Times of India (2018). About a third of India's electorate might be reached via social media. According to an extrapolation of Census data from 2011, the vast majority of the expected 130 million first-time voters in the 2019 election are active on social media. Parties work hard to sway first-time voters in the hopes that they will become loyal supporters.(Lardi & Fuchs, 2013)

Social media usage has exploded recently, but it has yet to help improve India's political atmosphere. Since the conventional media is no longer operating as a gatekeeper, political parties are embracing social media to spread divisive religion and caste-based themes. An Oxford Internet Institute research found that India is among the top 10 nations where coordinated manipulation of social media is most common (Bradshaw and Howard 2018). Data collected by the Indian news site NDTV, which monitors controversial language by politicians, shows a 500% spike in the quantity of hate speech and "dog-whistling" material (coded signals catering to caste and religious prejudices) in the previous four years (Jaishwal, Jain, and Singh 2018). Online hate speech was tracked by the Observer Research Foundation, which found that Muslim communities were a particular target due to the prevalence of Islam in such groups (Mirchandani 2018). The BJP has been using religious polarisation as a distraction from the country's worsening economy, therefore, the INC has started its own campaign of fear and anger to counteract this. Therefore, there has been an upsurge in divisive information shared by major political parties in India on social media throughout the 2019 election campaign. This article analyses the influence of a rapidly changing media environment on elections in India by focusing on the strategies used by the country's two largest political parties on social media. By contrasting the BJP and the INC's social media initiatives, we show how the medium influences the message, leading to deeper societal separation. We also believe that social media's polarising impact will have long-term consequences for India's diplomacy. Keep an eye on the online discussions about Indian foreign policy, and expect a more polarised home debate.(Gentle, 2012)

The INC's 2019 Social Media Campaign

The INC has ramped up its online communications since it first started using social media for political purposes in May 2017. When discussing social and economic concerns, INC members often utilise virtue-signalling terms like "inclusive" and "unity in variation" to demonstrate the party's secular, centre-left ideology. This is intended to offset the BJP's image as a troublemaker. However, INC's recent social media posts have shown a political philosophy called "soft Hindutva." It is widely held that the INC is reverting to the right-leaning populism it employed in the 1980s to respond to the BJP's allegations that it is a pro-Muslim party. Media outlets in India have given Rahul Gandhi's identity as a Shiv Bhakt ("devotee of the Hindu God, Shiva") and invocations of Hindu deities prominent prominence since 2017 (Figure 4). This has all taken place in BJP-controlled states with large Hindu populations and elections in 2018. (Beshears, 2016)

Political Polarisation In India Is Toxic For Two Reasons.

First, the gulf between secular democracy and Hindutva nationalism, which emphasises a distinct identity and a feeling of cultural superiority, has widened. Furthermore, in the current political atmosphere, digital media have contributed to polarisation by providing a voice to regressive viewpoints that are using intimidation tactics to silence moderate voices. To attract readers, media sources may occasionally use the rhetorical strategies of polarisation, simplification, intensification, sensationalization, and personalisation. Politicians are always tailoring their language and delivery to the media's chosen norms. Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP came to power in 2014, their relationship with the media has shifted. Before 2014, Modi would often appeal to the media's sense of logic to get coverage. Modi's extensive use of social media to personally connect with his supporters was followed by meticulous curation of the messages to ensure they could be easily modified for usage across a wide variety of media platforms and delivered to audiences and journalists in near real-time. The administration led by Prime Minister Modi and the BJP has persevered in trying to influence the media openly and secretly since 2014.

Direct methods of control, such as the proliferation of channels like Zee TV and Republic TV that play only videos supporting the BJP, and the hiring of many news anchors who are known to be BJP supporters, are evident. Indirect methods of control, such as the use of state machinery to intimidate the media, have led to many outlets toeing the government line on many national and policy issues. Prannoy Roy, owner of NDTV, a supposedly anti-BJP broadcaster, had his home raided by the CBI on June 5 due to suspicions that he had defrauded financial

institutions. The participation of the CBI raised eyebrows since the transaction included just two private parties. The timing of the CBI search is also peculiar, coming only two days after NDTV host Nidhi Razdan ejected Sambit Patra, the national spokesperson for the BJP, from the show for indicating that the network supported the Congress party because of its "an agenda." The BJP has established its dominance in the digital media world, where it deploys armies of trolls to suppress opponents and counterpoints, thanks to its interest in and mastery of technology. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its followers have resorted to online harassment, fake news, and photoshop to silence its critics. With the lure of formal recognition and potential future funding from the government, the BJP's troll armies are strengthened. Since some of his Twitter followers have insulted women and urged for violence against the opposition, Prime Minister Modi invited 150 of them in July 2015. Despite widespread disapproval, the action demonstrates the emergence of a new kind of politics in which official patronage is used on purpose to gain people's support and build dedicated followers. (Aral, 2020)

Empowerment versus Populist Entrapment

The BJP won the 2014 election largely thanks to its superior digital marketing, a charismatic leader, and widespread anti-incumbency sentiment. Since then, the INC has invested in social media to boost support for its candidate; if they are able to capitalise on voters' dissatisfaction with the Modi government's performance, they may be able to win the next election. After five years in office, the BJP's hopeful narrative of "reform, performance, change" has become less appealing, so it is not surprising that the party has resorted to a more contentious campaign strategy. Hindu nationalists' intolerance of those of other faiths is therefore neither unprecedented nor the driving force behind the current effort to acquire power. Many of the methods of political manipulation and persuasion have mostly stayed the same over the years, but the proliferation of social media has greatly increased their impact, drawn more people to become involved, and sped up their spread. Since WhatsApp permits unprecedented levels of micro-targeting of voters, it has become the instrument of choice for political messages. WhatsApp is better for providing personalised messages based on the hyper-segmentation of voters, whereas Facebook and Twitter are better for conveying a campaign message with a national focus. The "ecosystem strategy," which limits message transmission to established connections, increases the system's credibility.

The use of WhatsApp illustrates both the benefits and the tremendous challenges brought about by the rise of digitisation in politics. At this time, WhatsApp is the only media outlet capable of reaching people in India's remotest regions. In the

December 2018 state elections in India, WhatsApp was utilised instead of political roadshows to reach voters in rural areas. As the digital divide between rural and urban regions narrows, more people will be able to use WhatsApp. Another consequence is that, in contrast to the 2014 election, more and more online battles around the 2019 election are being fought in vernacular languages. WhatsApp, along with ShareChat and Helo, two non-English-language platforms that have gained popularity, offers content in local languages since just 10% of the Indian population is proficient in English. (Agozzino, 2012)

These hyper-local messages might significantly enhance participation from under-represented groups in politics, but they could also deepen existing social divisions. With local, language-fluent fact-checkers, it has been easier, for example, to stem the tide of political propaganda and fake news spread through these platforms. 80% of individuals today acquire their information through social media, rendering traditional journalism more obsolete (Economic Times, 2017). The pervasive nature of social media makes it all the more crucial to monitor for false information and hate speech and to halt any anomalies in producing or disseminating material.

The employment of bots by political actors to influence online public opinion is another concerning trend. Bots are computer programs that carry out preprogrammed actions and engage in automated network communication with humans. Twitter bots may be either spam-spewing or beneficial, such as the mass distribution of automated news feeds. These automated accounts may first focus on high-profile persons and send forth messages rapidly. As part of their digital message strategies, it seems that all of the major parties, but most notably the BJP, are using automation and bots to boost the popularity of their party leaders on social media, troll their opponents on Twitter, and generate trending hashtags. It has been claimed that in only one day, Narendra Modi has amassed a staggering 280,000 new followers. ⁷ In other countries, political bots have been discovered to sway voters. ⁸ Efforts to influence public opinion via traditional media are often reported on in India's news. For instance, the practise of paid journalism among the country's main media outlets has received a great deal of scrutiny and legal action in recent years (Standing Committee on Information Technology, 2013). The BJP has been using bot armies and trolls to spread false information. Take the night of November 8th, 2016, for instance, when the Narendra Modi government stated that 86% of all currency in circulation will cease to be legal tender at midnight. Demonetization referred to this procedure. Officials claim the operation was launched to curb illicit money and terrorist funding, but it ended up killing more than 100 people and upsetting the local economy. In the midst of demonetization, however, the official storyline changed to emphasise expanding the cashless economy and the tax base.

In response to the 31 August 2017 announcement by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) that over 99 percent of old notes had been returned to the bank, the BJP mobilised online armies made up of both actual and bogus accounts. As a result, #demonetization success began trending on Twitter thanks to tweets from cabinet members including Suresh Prabhu and Kiren Rijiju, as well as Smriti Irani and Maneka Gandhi. 9 The effectiveness of demonetization in making India's economy less cash-driven was the subject of these tweets, but official data from the Central Bank shows that digital transactions have dropped even farther than they did before the policy was implemented. Many individuals in India are becoming concerned about the proliferation of "bots," or automated social media accounts. The Times of India, the country's most popular English-language newspaper, recently published an article discussing eleven ways bots might affect elections in India. The risks of allowing bots to have an impact on politics were not addressed. Despite the fact that India's next general election isn't until 2019, no major political party has proposed legislation to address the problem of hostile political bots. The BJP has started hiring seasoned political PR directors to handle strategic planning, issue identification, and media coverage, as is normal for democratic political organisations. (Downey & Neyazi, 2014)

When the BJP came into power, one of the first things they did was stop bringing reporters on overseas trips with the prime minister. Doordarshan is a government-funded TV network that often accompanies the country's leaders on international excursions. Like previous President Barack Obama did with social media sites like Facebook and YouTube, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been utilising Twitter to explain the government's stance on a wide range of issues. The administration is altering its methods of information dissemination in an attempt to sway public opinion.

To influence public opinion and win support for government programmes, the BJP employs a sophisticated public relations organisation. Despite seemingly incongruous scientific truths, the political player may benefit from skillful manipulation of public perception. There has been a decline in public spending on healthcare and education, an increase in unemployment, and great economic misery in the agricultural sector, but the BJP has continued to win elections. Despite demonetization's obvious shortcomings, its success has been celebrated.

The BJP has been spreading misinformation with the help of trolls and bot armies. As an example, the Narendra Modi government declared that 86% of all currency in circulation was invalid as of midnight on November 8, 2016. The term "demonetization" describes this action. The operation, which killed more than 100 people and shook both the underground economy and the farming community, was ostensibly launched to tackle black money and terrorist funding. However, midway through the process, the official storey of demonetization

changed to one that would encourage the expansion of the cashless economy and broaden the tax base.

The BJP started mobilising online armies of genuine and bogus accounts after the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) revealed numbers on demonetisation on 31 August 2017, showing that over 99 per cent of old notes had returned to the bank. This led to prominent politicians like as Suresh Prabhu, Kiren Rijiju, Smriti Irani, and Maneka Gandhi using the trending hashtag demonetisation success in their tweets. These tweets highlighted the effectiveness of demonetisation in making India's economy less cash-driven, yet, Central Bank figures show that digital transactions have dropped below pre-demonetization levels.

There is growing concern among the general public in India over the proliferation of "bots," or fake social media profiles. An article detailing eleven possible effects of bots on Indian politics was just published in The Times of India, the country's most widely read English daily. The risks of manipulating elections using bots were not addressed. Although India's next general election isn't until 2019, not a single major political party has proposed legislation to deal with the problem of hostile political bots.

The BJP, following the practise of other democratic political parties, has recently hired seasoned political public relations directors to manage strategy planning, issue identification, and media coverage decisions. As soon as they took power, the BJP banned media from accompanying the prime minister on foreign trips. Doordarshan is a government-funded TV network that often accompanies formal diplomatic trips. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been utilising Twitter, just way previous President Barack Obama used Facebook and YouTube, to explain the government's stance on a wide range of issues. To sway public opinion, the government is revamping its information dissemination strategies. (Howard & Hussain, 2013)

The BJP's PR machine is top-notch, and it's used to manipulate public opinion and win support for government programmes. Careful manipulation of public image might benefit the political player despite seemingly at odds scientific realities. Despite increased unemployment, deteriorating farm economies, and a decrease in public spending on health care and education, the BJP has been electorally successful. Demonetization has been celebrated despite being a disastrous failure.

The modest successes of the Modi administration have been blown out of proportion and presented as a radical departure from the norm. The lines between governing and campaigning have blurred in modern India's 24/7 political climate. Some have turned to "governance via publicity" in an attempt to regain people'

faith in the government. If the newsworthiness of an issue, policy, or programme were to take precedence above its actual execution or performance, it would be detrimental to democracy. (Davey, 2007)

It is important to see Prime Minister Modi's recent high-profile project launches (such as Make in India and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, or "clean India") through the lens of contemporary political PR methods. A good campaign may have an impact much beyond the next general election because of its malleability and the ability to be repackaged to match the needs of the moment (which, of course, one hopes it is). Modern campaigns must constantly bombard them with contradictory facts to persuade voters that something is changing, whether genuine or imagined.

Critics of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "New India" programme claim it is founded on the persecution and marginalisation of various groups. The general populace is more receptive to nationalist rhetoric now. When confronted with different viewpoints or the opinions of marginalised groups, nationalistic language is often employed as a weapon. Even in the wake of a national calamity, private news anchors are quick to assert the superiority of national identity. Consider Times Now's Navika Kumar, a news anchor. She once criticised a panellist live on television for veering off topic as he spoke about the horrific deaths of children at a hospital in Gorakhpur (patriotism in madrasas and the singing of Vande Mataram). Over 60 children died at a government hospital in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh, that may have been avoided when the BJP and Yogi Adityanath were in charge. However, all internet discussion was polarised along ideological lines, rather than showing compassion for the victims by acknowledging that other regimes besides the BJP had also suffered disasters.

In recent years, the country's ideological divide has become broader. Think of the brave journalist Gauri Lankesh, who was killed on her own home in Bengaluru on September 6, 2017, to get an idea of where fanning the flames of hatred may lead. Even more vicious were the Twitter users who celebrated Gauri Lankesh's murder with the BJP and threatened other political opponents with the same fate. Prime Minister Modi is a follower of four accounts that have made jokes about or provided justifications for #GauriLankesh's murder. (Jasper, 2008)

The rising demand for greater public online space gives us optimism that the present era of political conflict is reaching a tipping point and will soon collapse. Although established political actors, most notably the BJP, have made more effective use of the internet to spread their message, other political parties have begun to do the same. The BJP's newfound commitment to online discourse has drawn criticism. Several groups in the advocacy and civil society sectors are cooperating to dispel this sort of myth.

The relationship between the state and society has been altered by activists and protestors' widespread use of the internet and mobile phones "to recognise shared grievances and build transportable tools for organising against dictators"¹⁹. However, the potential for democratisation movements to confront authority through digital media is increasingly under siege. This risk is inherent to digital media since it inhibits dialogue between groups with very divergent worldviews. (Brants & Neijens, 1998)

Internet users may restrict the quantity of information that enters their "echo chamber" because of the ease with which they may choose content that supports their current worldview. A functioning democracy requires an open exchange of ideas, and in such a setting, voters are unlikely to be exposed to any. Although the benefit of inclusion is still available to underrepresented groups, barriers such as restricted access and the filter bubble may hinder them from successfully reaching out to diverse audiences in the digital world. This aspect of the internet is counterproductive to democracy in general since it reduces the amount of time people have to deliberate about issues. Evidence for the growing polarisation of Indian politics is mounting, even though there are still many Indians who hold moderate views. Is the country on the verge of entering a new era in which its storied demographic dividend becomes a destabilising factor? There has been an increase in the number of social media outlets where divisive views may be expressed, with the tacit sanction of the government. The BJP seems to be winning the public's impression battle thanks to its strategic use of traditional and new media, as well as the assistance of professional political PR specialists. This, however, should be consistent with the fact that the Congress and other political parties have hired professional public relations firms to convey their own message and counter that of the BJP. Competition among political actors for online mobilisation and control of public opinion is only likely to intensify as the number of internet users continues to rise (now at over 450 million) and as more and more vernacular content becomes accessible online. (Neyazi, 2018)

Conclusion

A newspaper has the right to pursue its own political line and comment on the actions of all stakeholders in a democracy, including the operations of the court; however, the newspaper needs to reflect on its behaviour if, in the course of doing so, it resorts to outright defamation of individuals or organisations. Editorials, views, and other articles produced by the media with a veneer of impartiality should be where the media's positions are conveyed rather than in the news reporting itself. It is a widely held belief that most journalists refrain from engaging in the practice of self-reflection. The problem arises when journalists or media firms begin seeing their jobs as responsible for bringing about positive social change and influencing public opinion in a more positive direction. That is

in no way part of their responsibilities. When faced with challenges of this kind, the boundary between journalism and activism often needs to be clarified. It is not the same thing to report the news as being an activist, and reporting the news is not the same as being an activist.

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