

Title – Social media in Politics – Simple aggregator or the emerging Ministry of truth?

Keywords - Social media, Hybridised New media, Political Marketing, Citizen initiated forum.

Introduction

Ravi and Vasundara (2015) posit that Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Twitter and Facebook have become great tools for the reluctant young Indians to actively engage in discussions concerning Political, Economic and Social issues. Within the last decade, authors have identified the competitive advantage SNS can offer in shaping Political discourse in a country as Simba (2009) highlights that beside Obama's ability of public speaking and inspiring people, his use of Social media and Internet to engage voters provided him with the support that most of other candidates never saw.

On the other hand, confronted by an increasingly cynical and distrustful electorate (Whiteley et al., 2016), political parties and candidates have now started to adopt digital communication tools as a means to engage with publics. Consistent with Whiteley's assertion, several international publications earmarked the 2014 Indian general elections as "India's first social media elections" (Pandey, 2015). Over 500 million voters turned up to exercise their right in the world's largest democracy which also recorded a record voter turnout of 66.38% beating the previous record on 1984 polls, results showed that the BJP won the biggest victory by any party for 30 years (BBCnews.com, 2014). Authors such as Sambandan (2014) and Ravi and Vasundara (2015) have explored and discussed the approach of Indian Prime Minister Modi and his party i.e. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the use of social media for communication, these studies highlight the communication initiated from the Political party/Government end. However, this paper explores the role of Citizen initiated discussion forum on Facebook and the role they play within the national Political dialogue. The paper hence presents literature that explains how the factors that have caused social media to emerge as a tool of choice in political dialogue between Government/Party and the citizens; but more importantly the paper explores the role of region-centric Facebook based discussion forum in the political dialogue in order to gain clarity over 'why' social media is emerging as an alternate medium of political dialogue to Mainstream Media (MSM), what is the rationale behind social media forums like Goa+ emerging? The paper conducts a netnographic study using Administrators and Moderators of Goa+, a Facebook based Political discussion forum originating in Goa, India and consisting of over 76, 680 members.

Social Media in Political communication

The use of social media in Indian digital democracy has been explored only recently by Ravi and Vasundara (2015) who leverage and cite the works of several authors including Simba (2009) who argues that the use of social media in political campaigns gained momentum in

the last decade with Obama's use of Internet to engage with voters and Murray's exploration (2005) of Howard Dean's use of social media in his Democratic campaign in 2004. Ravi and Vasundara's study (2015) cites Parceiro's argument (1999) which states that there is a need to create platforms for diverse mediums and credible voices for democracy to thrive; especially with political power of press, and the attempts of politicians and pundits to influence and control media becoming a concern (Ravi and Vasundara, 2015). There is emerging thought among authors like Ravi and Vasundara (2015) and Mandhana (2015) that the influence generated by the micro management of political discourse in India by the Mainstream Media (MSM) reaffirms Parceiro (1999) assertion to create further diverse platforms of communication that will allow democracy to thrive. Chadwick (2013) however highlights that the arrival of new media does not render older media obsolete, but rather facilitates the emergence of a 'hybridised' media system. This in turn makes it difficult to identify the creators and sponsors of news or events (Neyazi et al., 201) further cementing distrust between media and citizen (Whiteley et al., 2016) as Chakravarty and Roy (2015) posit media campaigns at times can be 'stage managed'.

As research within the alternate mediums of political dialogue gained momentum in the last decade in the West, Sambandan (2014) investigated the role of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in the 2014 Indian General elections using Hellriegel and Slocum (1981) model and identified that the presence of Prime Minister (PM) Modi on Facebook and Twitter summarised the transformative ability of Internet during elections. Sambandan (2014) cites Chopras' assertion (2014), which argues that the traditional political "high command control style" is not effective in social media – as social media is guided by those who use the same. Chopra hence asserts the importance of establishing a two way communication model. This position further highlights the need to explore the dynamics of Facebook based citizen initiated political discussion forums considering that there exists a gap within this area with regards to the functioning and purpose of such social media based forums.

The role of Social Networking sites (SNS) in the political scenario was initially explored by Boyd and Ellison (2008) who highlighted the ability of SNS by stating that SNS allows individuals to a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and c) view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Such virtual platforms are increasingly becoming a new reality in 'democratic debate' are emerging as alternatives to mainstream media for netizens to initiate, participate in or observe discussions concerning local Socio-economic and Political issues. The paper hence explores the role of Facebook Group from Goa, India (region-centric) Goa + as a citizen initiated communications forum and explores their functioning within the national Politics and citizen relationship.

BJP – PM Modi and the use of SNS in 2014 Indian General elections

The use of media and new social media by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and PM Modi in the 2014 Indian elections is well documented by authors such as Neyazi et al., (2016), Mandhana (2015); Pandey (2015); Pande (2014) – w.r.t. Social media and Ohm (2015) – w.r.t. Traditional media. They argue that 2016 marked a new era in political communication practice within India. These authors have presented various arguments as listed below that highlight how the novel use of SNS by BJP and PM Modi in the 2014 elections resulted in the 2014 elections being marked as India's first social media elections (Pandey, 2015).

The Youth Factor

The digital campaign gained importance wherein the young, first time voters in particular made up a large part of the Indian electorate and the traditional media in-turn began reporting on the ‘online debate’. The median age of Indian population is 27 and over 60 per cent of Indian citizens are under the age of 35 – which constituted the 150 million first time voters (Pande, 2014). India has more than 280 million Internet users – approximately the same number as online users in the U.S but it only accounts for a fourth of India’s population (Mandhana, 2015). Pande (2014) posits that coupling the use of Social media to engage youth within the political discourse of India provided BJP the edge in the 2014 Indian General elections.

The Symmetrical Solution

Martin Sorrell, the CEO of WPP group explains that using social and digital media to get a strategy across is a modern and sophisticated way forward and is better than presenting a muddled message which are otherwise characteristic of Indian election campaigns (rediff.com, 2015). Sorrell claims that in India, political campaigns are often too fragmented and social media offers a medium to develop an umbrella campaign (much like a corporate brand under which mini brands operate). Willis (2014) echoes the sentiment by explaining that its not just the 1.2 billion people of India, but it’s a deliberate strategy to use social media platforms to bypass traditional media outlets and reach supporters directly that provides the electoral backbone.

The Citizen – Media trust deficit

Pro-active and extensive use of Social Media in communication and public relations is triggering a change in the traditional modus operandi of the Indian press which was used to cozy relations with previous leaders (Mandhana, 2015). According to Mandhana, with almost no press briefings and fewer interviews, reporters are now pouring over a stream of government press releases and tweets. Mandhana quotes on of the political editor of major Indian news channel (who requested confidentiality) saying “*we don’t really know or understand the Prime minister’s thinking on this policy or that issue is, until he announces it himself*”.

The Online Army

According to Mandhana (2015), a couple senior members of the BJP Digital Operations team were reported saying they relied on a ‘massive database or army of online volunteers’ who re-tweet and comment to send Mr. Modi’s messages viral. Dr. James Chiriyankandath of the Institute of Commonwealth studies – University of London notes the importance of the grassroots efforts of the 45,000 nationwide branches of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – the ideological parent of the BJP) and its thousands of members which helped communicate the message to corners of the country (the guardian.com, 2014).

Although Mandhana (2015) relates the significance of social media in Indian Political debate to citizen-media trust deficit and the young Indian electorate; there exists a gap in literature that is yet to fully explore the functioning and purpose of Facebook based citizen initiated political forums and identify the role they play in informing the national political dialogue in

India. The authors of this paper acknowledge that these mechanisms need to be explored in full – although in the case of this paper, the same is being done specific to the role Goa+ played and continues to play during and post 2014 Indian general elections.

Methodology –

The research adopts a netnographic approach. Jones (1999) highlighted that the internet is creating new social constructs – communities based on Rheingold (1993) proponent of Virtual communities or social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling to form personal relationships in cyberspace. Kozinets (2000) further distinguished such communities into Boards, Rings, Lists, Dungeons and Chat rooms. Grossnickle and Raskin (2000) posit that marketing researchers have previously reported their experiences of online research – but Online ethnography or netnography has emerged over the past decade which provides an important tool to add to existing market research portfolio (Kozinets, 2000).

Within this research, an online field (S.M research – Facebook group) was set up by inviting the ‘moderators and admins (administrators)’ of the Facebook group Goa + - which allowed the researchers to interpret online communications (Maclaran and Catterall, 2002). The research field gathered informed consent by firstly connecting with the admins and moderators via PM (private messaging) on Facebook to explain the nature of this research. The moderators and admins then provide their consent to participation by accepting the invite to the ‘field’ addressing the informed consent debate in private versus public online communications (Waskul and Douglas, 1996). Research questions are then posed within the field which then generates ‘Archival data’ (Kozinets, 2002) – which is collected from Facebook but is also archived on the internet providing evidence of data – this archive date is also subject to increase. The data is then analysed via manual coding (Kozinets, 2010). The names of the participants are kept confidential and only initials are used as per the request of the participants.

Findings and Discussion

The themes emerging from the literature that explores BJP and Modi’s use of SNS centres around the Multi-faceted use of various SNS to create a symmetrical mode of communication

between the Government-Party and the citizens. SNS applications did not limit themselves to the 2014 Indian general elections campaign, but their leverage continued post elections with SNS being employed by the Indian BJP Government as a public accountability tool (Union Power ministry), governance tool (Union Railway ministry) and even a soft diplomatic tool (Prime Minister's office and External Affairs ministry). This paper emerges with another perspective that contributes to the continual use of SNS – i.e. the role of region-centric citizen initiated Facebook groups that continue the debate on political discourse in India – while providing critical commentary on the political state of affairs within India. The following are the themes emerging from a netnographic exploration into Goa+ - a Facebook group providing platforms for wider citizens to engage in discussion and debate over Politics in India. The themes are purely emergent and contextually specific to the above-mentioned region.

Hear ‘my’ voice and what ‘I’ think

RG – “Social media gives us the opportunity to discuss and expose mainstream media. The tool involved here is logic. I feel bad for the rural parts of the country who don't have Internet access and who accept whatever the mainstream media says as Gospel truth...”

SV – “Many people on my TL tell me that they first take a look at my wall and then decide to consult MSM. The trust deficit between the common people and MSM is largely the MSM's own doing though. Nowadays, no MSM deals with news, even on the front page. All they have are views”

Goa + A&M's believe that social media is providing peoples with an opportunity to ‘expose’ mainstream media (MSM), which further asserts Ravi and Vasundara (2015) and Mandhana (2015) claim of the mainstream media increasingly manipulating what is seen and heard by citizens. The admins and moderators of Goa+ argue that MSM is predominantly involved in filling their newspapers with their own ‘views’ rather than news – which is increasingly being viewed questionably. The rising ‘trust deficit’ between the triad of media, government and the citizens is further cementing the place of SNS as an alternate medium for people to hear their own voices and speak their own minds – develop a unique opinion. However, internet connectivity (especially in rural India) is a barrier to receive holistic participation into the debate.

Non-biased Citizen initiated discussion – not campaign

Admins and Moderators (A&M) of Goa + argue that forums like theirs attempt to provide a ‘politically neutral’ and independent platform for netizens to initiate, participate and observe discussions concerning contemporary topics of Political, Social or Economic importance.

VM – “Goa+ was created to provide an independent platform for different views, after it was observed in 2013 that most of the Facebook groups existing prior to that period were showing biased colors and used to abuse those who used to counter their views / lies. Some of us were admins of the earlier groups too! Goa+ would continue its role of providing an unbiased platform for its readers / members in future”.

RG – “Goa+ is just a discussion forum where people debate on various issues. Many lies get countered and many facts get placed too. It's just an extension of the conversations we have in our day to day life”

The A&M of Goa+ believe that such ‘independent’ platforms help in bringing together people with differing views and help contribute a moderated debate which is devoid of any affiliation or influence of Political organizations. The key characteristics of this group as per the A&M’s is that they are not driven by a single political ideology and they are devoid of any associations with Political organizations. This presents the group with an opportunity to counter what they term as ‘lies’ without being abused, which they assert happens in case of groups being politically motivated. The A&Ms also believe that such platforms serve as ‘truth seekers’ by extending everyday conversations on SNS and allowing the filter process of what can be termed as lie by presentation of a counter fact. The focus seems to remain on presentation of the ‘truth’ or most accurate information that can counter misinformation.

Is SNS un-biased? Really?

PG – “Main stream media "houses" are no more depicting the public mood n voice...”

RG – “The mainstream media is like one-way traffic. Social media is like extending conversations to a larger platform, getting various inputs and reading reactions from various groups. See, social media can never replace mainstream media since the news coming from mainstream media is the very fuel that social media functions on. The Base for any debate is created from reports from mainstream media”

CB – “mainstream media and social media are both businesses driven directly or indirectly by profit so to expect a completely unbiased factual report of anything of consequence is too much to expect”

Some A&M’s of Goa+ reserve a realistic view on the role of mainstream media (MSM) within SNS as they observe that both are profit driven businesses and expecting 100 per cent factual information is a tall ask. On the other hand, some A&M’s believe that the MSM houses do not represent the thoughts, feelings or emotions of the publics – while acting like a one way traffic. The lack of symmetrical communication opportunity (to wider publics) provided by MSM further enhances the role of Facebook groups such as Goa + within the democratic debate. The A&Ms also feel that despite the criticisms of MSM, it is irreplaceable by social media as the mainstream platform as many of the discussions that happen on Facebook groups like Goa + are initiated on or by mainstream media channels.

SNS – Political marketing tool? Or awareness building platform?

RG – “Social media can never be used for political marketeering in the exact sense of blatant advertising. It can create awareness and give rise to debate which help people (both active and the Silent readers) build an opinion”

CB – “if it is used by any political party people tend to disregard it but same propaganda repeatedly shared by friends and family slowly starts being treated as facts especially after all it is repeated ad nausea”

MS – “There are groups specifically created as the elections approach & post elections they become dormant. We at Goa+ want to make a difference by creating a long term impact on improving the quality of life of people here”

The A&Ms reserve faith for the Facebook group based platforms by identifying that some groups are sans political affiliation or political advertising and are more characteristic of ‘debate centres’ that act as intellectual fodder source for both the active and silent participants on SNS and allow them to build their own unique opinion on the national political discourse. They believe that members of the group are clear in identifying a debate or a discussion against a blatant, manufactured political propaganda which is often repeatedly shred by friends and family of political candidates causing ‘repeated ad nauseum’. They claim that although certain groups are created specifically for election campaigning purposes (and last as long as the campaign), platforms like Goa+ argue they have a vision of creating ‘long term impact’ on the quality of people’s lives (through political implications), which perhaps explains the groups’ contunuity and sustainaiblity of ongoing discussions before and even after the 2014 elections. The A&Ms also remain vigilant of the ill use of SNS that influence democratic processes within countries.

True lies

CB – “I think social media is going to be more and more disruptive as it can be used to disseminate patently bogus information. I casually follow US elections and the amount of bizarre lies that are spread is alarming. Only saving grace is that gives everyone a fair chance”

VM – “I feel Facebook posts can be used to spread lies than the truth more effectively. It is a fact that lies spread faster than the truth. Currently FB is used to spread negativity more than the positive things. However FB can be used and is used as a tool to spread political agenda”

The A&Ms argue that although social media presents itself as a platform for citizens to initiate political debates and actively participate or passively observe them, such platforms can be used to propagate or manufacture propaganda/consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and spread negativity – they even site the ‘lies’ spread during the course of US elections using SNS. They caution that SNS allow lies to be spread faster thereby creating a disruptive effect within national debate. However, the A&Ms feel that the decision of whether to influence or to be influenced remains in the hands of not only the A&Ms of Facebook groups but also the members and the general publics.

Truth seekers

CB – “I think social media is powerful because it is free, no one sided version can survive on the internet. Over time two sides of the story emerge. Now for someone who is genuinely interested in going into the truth it could be a starting point and one can than do more research. But for vast majority they dont have the time nor the desire to do that”.

RG – “It's just the plain simple truth about Modi and the need to defend him selflessly especially when he was unfairly targeted for riots and things like that stirred up passion in a majority of people. When a lie is repeated once too often, it often turns into the truth. People nipped the growth of this lie by merely asking questions and discovering their answers”.

SV – “Social Media is an effective tool. But at the end of the day, it is only a tool, and its effectiveness depends upon the person using it”

The A&Ms assert that platforms like Goa+ are the initial point of reference for the observer/reader. They highlight that the ‘truth seekers’ will use a post on such groups as the starting point of their own research on the topic and lead a process to create their own opinion – as they claim “*social medias’ effectiveness depends upon the person using it*”. The group A&Ms believe that the symmetrical platform of SNS allow both sides of an argument to emerge, thereby allowing the dormant observer to construct a unique opinion, and ask questions in order to uncover answers – something that is not possible for every common citizen to do using MSM. The A&Ms however feel that operating such a group is only one half of the equation, it is the extent of participation and depth of research by participating members that can help achieve the true purpose of such forum.

RG – “Social media will be actually considered mature if politicians start taking cognizance of the citizens' woes and address the many specific issues which are pointed out. The only hurdle is the constant whiners who will only criticise no matter what, and will do little constructive to achieve results”.

The Admins and moderators believe that the impact of social media on people’s lives can only be fulfilled once political parties take cognizance of the citizens’ grievances and suggestions on politically neutral Facebook groups. They assert that such groups are often ‘hurdled’ by the frequency of critiques and lack of constructive discussions. They expect the political machinery to use SNS as a fodder source to get qualitative and citizen driven data that can drive policies that may have a positive influence on people’s lives in the spirit of true democracy

Summary

This paper has attempted to seek new and unique insight into the ways in which SNS have played a role in shaping and driving national political debate. It is evident that SNS hosts politically manipulated as well as politically neutral groups, both driven with their own agenda. The exploratory study identifies that Goa+ (claiming to be politically neutral) has allowed citizens to participate in national political debate, both actively and passively and allowed them to forge their own unique opinion by observing posts and discussions within the group. The group resonates the position of ‘online social-aggregators’ similar to the Rheingold (1993) conceptualization of social-aggregators, who pull news reports from MSM, posts it on the online forum and then pulls diverse perspectives on the same from the group members. Besides addressing the citizen-media trust deficit, Goa+ has allowed truth seekers to go beyond the MSM rhetoric and reporting by providing them a tool or platform to seek reality or truth by countering or exposing the ‘lies’ with logically derived factual information. However, it is evidenced that the credibility of both, MSM and SNS is not fully comprehensible as participants asserted that a fully honest report is rare as MSM and SNS are profit driven businesses – hybridised (Neyazi et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The paper contributes to knowledge by exploring a previously un-explored aspect of the role citizen initiated Facebook forums play within Indian political debate. The findings remain emergent and not generic. The paper while providing clarity over the role of Facebook forums and their nature, develops further questions for further research and highlight wider implications for theory development as the authors observe the power of citizen forums on SNS. The operational purpose of Goa+ tends to lean away from citizen initiated campaign (CIC) criteria as posited by (Gibson, 2015) considering the Goa+ activities based on evidence do not include for example income generation or membership drives on party behalf, Goa+ rather positions itself as politically un-biased and simply a discussion forum filling in for the rising citizen-media trust deficit. Although, the use of new social media and internet to generate citizen-self driven political dialogue has commonalities with similar frameworks recently proposed by several authors (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Lilleker et al., 2015; Lee, 2015 and Copeland and Rommele, 2014), it is important to note that Lee's and Copeland and Rommeles' studies were contextually specific to Hong Kong and Germany, similar to the contextual fit of this study within Goa, India. However, following the analysis of the generated data and placing this into context, we as authors we are left with some nagging doubts about how social media has been used, is being used and whether the goal of democratising democracy through social media has become purposefully or inadvertently manipulated, a broader study is hence proposed in future.

Much has been written of and about 'fake news' (BBC News, 2016) and 'PostTruth', however it is social media that has enabled the spread of such concepts through the further development of what BuzzFeed (2016) have coined as 'hyperpartisan Face Book posts'. Whilst political History tells us that personalised influence in electioneering is not new (for example see: Deacon 2013), it is the speed and reach of digital social media that is potentially destabilising to the democratic process, especially when it is combined with a 24/7 news media, which has also become partisan and in some cases has placed greater emphasis on partisan support rather than journalistic accuracy.

The obvious danger is that the electorate will be more predisposed to fictional stories favouring, or agreeing with their personal view – and share them, before the facts are checked and a redaction is made. As Jenkins et al., (2013) suggests the power of social media and indeed all digital platforms are that they are highly personalised and that they allow for transmedia exposure of messages – thus appealing to differing parts of an audience through differing media, yet enabling the audience to offer further comment and edit before sharing with peer groups.

We are therefore drawn, not forwards into a political digital utopia, but backwards into a dystopian 'futureworld' as created by George Orwell (1949), where the establishment of a 'Ministry of Truth' was created to enable facts to be deleted in favour of falsehoods, propagated and shared by a populous unaware of the true dangers of democratic choice. What interest us as researchers are the clear similarities that can be drawn between the rise of the 'popular' political movements and the work of Herman and Chomsky – especially the Manufacture of Consent (1988) and how Fromm's work on freedom (1941) may be at play in contemporary political communication. Thus we have presented here a short illustrated perspective on the use of social media in political marketing, but we recognise that this also represents a departure point for further research, which should not become seduced by the use of social media in this context, but rather question if the hidden hand of propaganda has found a new and disturbing mechanism.

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