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Use of social media in India and Political Communication

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Abstract

Early 1980's dominated the Indian television scenario and news became a part and parcel of prime time viewing in almost all the households. It broadcasted important speeches and talks with political personality and people in power position. The newscaster also became programme hosts and sound byte was substantiated with feature news or chat show were journalist could question key personalities on screen. This phenomenon continued even after LPG, in fact it became even more assertive with MNC coming and newer news channels becoming part of the media business. The relation between mass media and politics became all about what the nation wants to know and who advocates the devil. There has been a paradigm shift in the way the relationship between politicians and media has evolved. The television-politics relationship though continues to be strong in terms of ownership pattern and appointment of key positions in media houses, digital media is giving a tough competition to this model of political communication. India has seen a new wave of communication in 'Modi Era'. The prime minister of India as well as the cabinet ministers have tried to bridge the gap between people and leaders using social media so much so that it appears that the current opposition party leaders are in a race to challenge one of the most followed personality on social media.

This paper shall try to look at two of the Indian politicians Narendra Modi and Shashi Tharoor, who are actively followed on the social networking site and see how digital media becomes crucial for political communication keeping in mind the framework given by Michael Gurevitch et al. This paper shall also try to address some of the key suggestions given by Michael Gurevitch and see if the same could be applied to Indian political communication and social media scenario.

Keywords: *Social media, Twitter, Political communication, India, Narendra Modi, Shashi Tharoor, Michael Gurevitch.*

Political Communication: Political communication deals actively with the confluence of political actions and the media. This relationship between the two elements is highly important due to the dependency of politicians to establish their reputation with the public

through mass media. Early 1980's dominated Indian television scenario and news became a part and parcel of prime time viewing in almost all the households. It broadcasted speeches of important people and talks with political personality or people in powerful position. This phenomenon continued till LPG (Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation) in fact it became even more assertive with MNC (Multi-National Corporations) coming and newer news channels becoming part of the media business. The newscaster's role shifted from just reading news and they became programme producers who would design the content of the news features. Sound bites from news bulletin were used to substantiate these news features and chat shows became like a wrestling ring where journalist could question and drill these key personalities on screen unabashedly.

In the midst of this change came the internet boom and social media provided the much needed direct connection between mass and individual. This interlink helped bridge gap in political communication and this media link between politics and social media became highly important in transforming the sphere of political communication.

Political communication and India: Political scenario in India underwent a paradigm shift in last few years especially after growth of social media. Politicians use mass media to such an extent that it has often been a point of contention whether it is possible for media to remain fair and do its duty as 'fourth estate'. The current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is an apt example of how the line between personal and political can appear to be erasing and how an influential personality of his stature can be 'public yet personal' at the same time. As on August 2015, he is the third most followed world leader and the most followed Indian personality with a twitter following of 14.7 million and 9164 tweets (Modi, 2015)¹.

He uses twitter extensively to update his followers on political and personal happenings, his life lessons and beliefs, along with photos and videos. It is his online presence which inspires other leaders, like the opposition party member Shashi Tharoor, to become visible and active on social networking site.

Emergence of new media has now made it possible for individuals to reach out to wider yet niche audience through direct communication. Social media, has enabled instant transfer of information through sources like Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, New website and phone applications. This change in pattern of information consumption, due to evolution of technology, has led to displacement of television. Further this evolution in technology has facilitated two way communication which was not possible with the radio or television or any traditional media, enabling reconstruction and re-view of communication channels between politics and mass media.

As per Gurevitch, one of the criteria's to establish political communication with masses, which means that it is not just sufficient to be on screen but it is important to register presence in the minds of the people using multi-media. Twitter has become a platform for

¹(<http://twittercounter.com/narendramodi>)

public to get involved in political discussions and have informed opinions on political events around them. This phenomenon has been made possible due to the constant flow of information or tweets from the politicians on their twitter handles. Twitter has allowed the public to 'express', and look at their political party leaders more critically.

Political Communication and Social Media: Internet has acted as a destabilizing agent in the political communication system. It has changed the existing trends of interaction between the public and the government and led to a democratization of the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005). Twitter and Facebook handles of popular political personalities have emerged as the first sources of information for both news and views, whether it is about their international trips or meeting with government representative or international dignitaries, paying personal tribute to reputed personality or expressing emotional connect with people. Politicians find it easy to convey messages through social media since it bypasses main stream media and yet the message is out in the public domain.

Over the last two decades, politics and mass media have gradually integrated into a single sphere. Social media has also effectively added another dimension to political communication. Now it is impossible to study political processes, entities, politicians and their agendas without considering the media (Giuliano, 2006). It has made it possible for the political leaders to have 'personal' communication with 'public'.

Michael Gurevitch, Stephen Coleman and Jay G. Blumler in their essay 'Political Communication—Old and New Media Relationships' discuss how there has been a paradigm shift in the way the relationship between politicians and media has evolved. The television-politics relationship though continues to be strong in terms of ownership pattern and appointment of key positions in media houses, digital media is giving a tough competition to this model of political communication.

Political communication has established a strong relationship through Twitter. Twitter began as a social media platform but today it plays a crucial role as influencer to bring about a social change or even a revolution like Arab Spring an Egyptian revolution and other such uprisings. Since twitter became a part of social history through the many revolutions, it has aided this information gained from masses to achieve confirmation on what media can do to provide detailed evidences about how technology-based social networks form and evolve over a period of time. According to Margot Gerritson, Head of Stanford University, Center of Excellence for Historical Significance, 'I think Twitter will be one of the most informative resources available economic, social, and political trends, as well as consumer behavior and social trends' (American Libraries, 2010).

Twitter revolution has become synonymous with the happenings in the Middle East. Inspired by this function that Twitter has served, researchers have referred to it as being platform that reflects social and political trends. However in addition to this there have been several situations where Twitter has allowed more localized revolutions to take place. Gurevitch refers to John Scupham's,(1967) writing who argued that "radio and television have shifted the emphasis of political controversy in the democratic countries from abuse to

argument. This is something which is not seen as a trend in social network media. But as per Blumler, television "conveys impressions of the world of politics to individuals whose access to serious coverage of current affairs is otherwise quite limited" and could "promote the development of more effective patterns of citizenship. This seems to be of a significant case with social media where citizenship per se has evolved more in terms of participation, interaction and partnership. This could be understood with the case of National Health Service in Britain which was a people's movement seeking accountability of the state towards citizens.

The angered public raised their voices on Twitter demanding answers from the officials regarding the credibility and functioning of NHS. They drew attentions to topics like health benefits and hospital tariffs. Twitter gave them the platform to directly interact with the officials to voice their opinions and demand answers (McKee, 2011). It is through these changing political trends online that has transformed Twitter into a reflector of social trends. The kind of positive impression that Twitter has carved for itself is not completely taken at face value. There has however been some strong resistance from researchers and scholars. According to Cowen (2009), the advent of new technology embraces the quality of brevity and is thereby causing a collapse of human culture and intelligence, which in turn is leading to an attention deficit culture. This has led to the allegation that Twitter purports negative cultural transformation in absorption of information. While the first allegation has been seen as true the second has been refuted. The shift from lengthy print to 'short - to the point' form of communication has given rise to a need to constantly replenish data and information. Information is broken into smaller bits and sent out frequently. This change in way of information consumption has led to people paying more attention to it. The short structure is causing more attention to be focused on bits of information rather than large quantities.

According to Ehrenberg (2012), Twitter has been one of the strongest sources of misinformation and misrepresentation of information. Due to direct posting by public there is no system of check or censorship taking place. It has thereby become a source for spreading false beliefs, political agenda and allegations. The greatest problem according to the author is that while misinformation spread very fast through social media the corrections doesn't gain much attention. Gurevitch provides an explanation for this occurrence. He says that agenda is no longer set by the combination of politicians and journalist, instead other influential and popular personalities like celebrities, political commentators and intellectuals have started setting the agenda, through sources like twitter, YouTube and Facebook

However many researchers disagree with this view. The Library of Congress is in fact creating an archive of twitter posts from March 2006 onwards because Twitter has become a source of information for research in identifying social and political trends (American Libraries, 2010). Twitter reflects changing trends in the society, and has increased impact on public discourse and communication, especially in the context of politics. The wide usage is a result of Twitter as a microblogging site by politicians due to its potential for increased political participation. Twitter has become as ideal platform for users to spread

information and gather political opinions publicly and immediately (Stiegetz & Dang-Xuan, 2014).

Twitter is rapidly becoming more than a platform for social interaction. This change has been driven by the presence of real time highlights, system for tracking and ranking of knowledge and discovery and information (Ben-Ari, 2009). It has grown in more spheres than just communication. It has evolved as one of the most used micro-blogging site, and become a forum for knowledge transfer and information sourcing. It acts as an "always-on" technology, which allows people to explore a stream of information based on their time and interest rather than to keep up with everything (Farkar, 2010). Gurevitch expostulates this idea and opines on the transformation of 'publicness'. He states that while the viral energy of social media and online media has allowed reputations to be created and destroyed, messages to be transferred at instant speed, agendas to be set and rumours to be floated and tested, it has also removed the barriers between private and public.

This idea of Gurevitch is reflected in the way Twitter is now being used by some of the prominent political organisations like the American Congress for instance where twitter accounts of politicians and the White House personnel are being used to create an instant two-way communication, thereby helping the congress to connect with the voters. Though this evolving system requires immediacy in responses, it has become the most popular means of communication between the Congress and the public (Shogan, 2011).

Gurevitch and Political Communication—An Analysis: The advent of new media technologies like political blogs, government websites, Twitter and other forms of social media have transformed the face of political news delivery. The traditional mainstream news media is getting rapidly replaced by these new media forms and the largest consumers of this new form of media is the youth (Pew, 2008). This change in pattern of consumption is leading to traditional media like the television to get gradually displaced by the Internet and its new age communication trends. Also it has led to the encroachment of the internet in areas that were previously dominated by print and broadcast media. However this change is more than a process of displacement of old with the new, it is an 'ecological reconfiguration recasting roles and relationships within an evolving media landscape' (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). The roles of politicians in the ecological system of their voters have transformed immensely since the growth of new media and political communication through these new media tools.

In this context we can refer to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi whose role changed from being a chief minister of a state to take on multidimensional role of a journalist¹, public motivator², social activist³, and a political commentator⁴. His role is no longer restricted to one within the parliament but has expanded to encompass a diverse variety of media roles. According to an observation, Narendra Modi with 14.9 million followers, is the most followed politician in India and third most followed politician in the world. With more than 9000 tweets addressing variety of issues like women empowerment, save girl child, promoting yoga, personal equation with colleagues and seniors, national

development, international relations and programmes undertaken by the government, Modi gives an apt example of how interaction between the public and the private motivates the audience to become active participants in the political process. It also resonates Gurevitch's argument of how politicians have become increasingly sensitive to their altered roles as news providers to the public. They are also aware of audience media usage and expectations from the politicians. In order to satisfy the audience politician's focus on providing information on issues that will help them connect to the audience more strongly and the traditional barrier that has existed between the two entities has been broken by the possibility for direct interaction and immediacy in response.

The leader of the opposition, Shashi Tharoor is another politician who has been actively using Twitter as a tool to connect with people especially youth and diaspora. Shashi Tharoor with a following 3.37 million is third most followed politician in India. His tweet, over 28,000 in number are of varied interests. However the focus of all his tweets is to provide new information, knowledge and education to his viewers. His most popular tweets are links to articles, books and videos urging his followers to absorb quality information and world-views. He strongly displays the tendency of updating readers about his personal involvement and visits to an achievers' residence as well as retweeting popular opinions. The core of retweeting reduces the gap between the public and the politician. According to Gurevitch's observation the role of new media in displacing traditional media, retweeting is a phenomenon that allows public to feel more connected to the politician as it gives them a sense of being heard, reflecting his view of transformed publicness.

Media until recent technological boom has behaved as a gatekeeper of the society and has acknowledged the role of being a watch dog. It shared information with the public it felt appropriate to reveal, in the angle they chose to propagate it. This 'setting' by the media underwent a drastic change with the advent of social media. People become the owners of information and did not require media to necessarily transmit information for them. Nor did the politicians felt the need to involve any intermediate to connect with the masses. In fact now, the politicians are choosing to directly convey to the public the information they see fit removing the need for a media gatekeeper which is significantly seen in the tweets of both the politicians observed. In some instances, they have left media starving for any exclusive coverage as the information would have been out on social media and that would completely obliterate any need for traditional media. According to Gurevitch with the growth of new media there is a reconfiguration and recasting of roles and relationships within the existing media landscape. Modi's focus on a digital India is another example which facilitates the implication suggested by him. Narendra Modi's Mobile application has changed the very image of a head of a governing body. He is now looked up as an icon who is making an attempt to connect directly with people and sharing with them his 'Mann ki Baat' which can be understood as recasting the role of leaders and mass media, establishing two was communication, allowing public participating and therefore reduce time or space gaps vital for political communication to build rapport. This focus of digitalization is extremely futuristic in its orientation and has become greatly useful as it allows for direct

interaction between the government and the public. Digital media is allowing users to act upon media content through comments, retweets, likes and other interactive measures (Gurevitch, 2009).

Narendra Modi's tweets on his international trips or personal experiences¹⁰ or Shashi Tharoor's selfie tweets¹¹ add to the dynamics of personal yet political communication as these tweets provide direct insight into not just political activities of these politicians, but also into their personal preferences. In this way social media has allowed information to surpass the constraints of geographical boundaries, removing the dependency on traditional media and making information transfer a more personalized affair.

'Publicness' transformed: The concept of the public and private divide that has existed between the politicians and the public is undergoing transformation with the growth of modern communication technology (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). This is made possible by the connectivity potential and viral energy of new media. Viral energy is an essential element to bridge the gap between the public and private because it allows for information to travel across the public at rapid speed, which in turn increases the interaction between the politicians and the public. It has also created the scope for a multidimensional approach in the transfer of information that moves beyond a print or broadcasting format.

Narendra Modi makes active use of the scope of multidimensional information delivery and viral potential of social media to gain support for the social causes and events of national importance. 'The viral energy of the blogosphere, social network sites, and wikis constitute a new flow of incessantly circulating publicity in which reputation are enhanced and destroyed, messages debated and discarded, rumours floated and tested' (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). This trait has enabled the eradication of traditional barriers that have existed between the public and the politicians. Along with removing these barriers social media has also added the additional element of responsibility by the politicians. With the presence of the element of virality brought about by social media the necessity of establishing confidence and trust among the public has become imperative. Narendra Modi strongly uses Twitter to showcase government's various moves towards behaving as a responsible government¹². A responsible government by popular description is one that is. Narendra Modi's tweets are highly aligned towards the popular view of responsible governance which is corruption free, addresses the need of the hour, accountable for its action and is focused on bringing about a positive change in the society through his frequent emphasis on schemes, initiatives and drives undertaken by his government for the betterment of people. Emphasis on statements¹³ like 'this will always remain a government for the poor' in his tweets are an example of rejecting the need to convey political message without using traditional tools of mass media yet to reach out people without diluting the intensity of the message.

Interactivity and remixing: According to Gurevitch the contours of public interaction with politicians have undergone a massive change with the advent of new media communication technologies. The expectations from politicians have increased with this change. Politicians and journalists are no longer the holders of information or public opinion. The public have

become stakeholders of equal weightage in the system of information exchange. Politicians in India however are responding well to this demand for accountability, interactions and personalized responses from the public.

The contemporary politicians unlike before are not focused on producing content in a polished manner but are instead more focused on producing instant and personalised content. Narendra Modi through his tweets provides personalized encouragement to achievers and personally acknowledging presence of less known people who are directly involved in government machinery yet often go unnoticed. This gives the government a strong image as being supportive of the country's aspirations¹⁴.

However the downside of this digitalization is the reduction in integrity and control over messages. The owner of the information no longer has control over it once it has been released on the Internet. Users have the power to manipulate and change messages as they see fit, furthermore the reactions on the Internet cannot be controlled. Messages can change in meaning based on interpretation and circulation, users have the power to remix content and reproduce content in many forms. The politicians or journalists therefore no longer own the information once it is published on social media.

Channel multiplication and audience fragmentation: Narendra Modi's international tours and meetings have been gaining great attention through his constant Twitter updates. The Prime Minister uses these tours as a direct reflection of Gurevitch's observation that the power of new media is that it is not restricted to only your geographical location but allows a worldwide reach of information. The Prime Minister's tours have been widespread, as have his continuous tweets and pictures of the same. His tweets on his international experiences and events have been a source of continuously updated news on the happenings and the aim of each visit. News on international visits of politicians is not reaching the audience through several different channels. While traditional media provides this news from a national perspective, the politicians use social media to provide the information from a personal perspective. Similarly Shashi Tharoor uses pictures and 'selfies' to tell the public about his involvement in international affairs and make use of this global reach of new media.

The Prime Minister's tweets on his international tours¹⁵ the conferences he attends and people he met. These tweets are designed to provide the public with instant information on the people met and the general agenda behind each meeting. This variety in messaging perspectives has led to a fragmentation in audience. While the young audience is seen to prefer information through new media, a section of the public depends on traditional media to consume the same information. With the change in information deliverance and the rise of channel varieties the mass audience is seeing clear fragmentation.

Conclusion: The study suggests that new media is the most preferred medium for politicians to share information and their political movements with the public. New media allows these politicians to reach out to a wider audience, and establishes a two way system of communication.

However this does not completely negate the relationship between traditional media and political communication. In a developing country like India where there is a huge digital divide; traditional media still continues to dominate the mass media market. The expansion of digital media has attracted a large number of youth and has given them an avenue to respond to media content instantly. This increase in interactive capacity has changed the patterns of communication between politicians and the public.

Gurevitch's observations of the changing role of agenda setters – from politicians and journalists to the public, has been seen in the Indian scenario through politician's interaction with the public through their tweets and social media exchanges.

These aspects make it possible for us to conclude that the parameters proposed by Michael Gurevitch seem to be directly applicable to the pattern of usage of social media by Indian politicians for political communication. Studying the cases of the twitter interaction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress party leader Shashi Tharoor it can be seen that the parameters defined by Gurevitch can be applied to understanding the goals of social media communication between the politicians and the publicness that is created through their interaction. At the same time it can be seen that politicians are aware of the fact that social media is the current vogue which caters to fragmented audience, and thereby keep up their interaction with calculated risk. What used to be part of television interviews is now being supported by tweets and response and retweets, but not completely replaced.

Both the politicians in the study, Narendra Modi and Shashi Tharoor, are using twitter more to define their 'publicness' and to create a system of two way interaction between themselves and the public. This has helped the public feel more relatable to them. It also implies that what was restricted between the four walls of PMO (Prime Minister's Office) is now out in public from the 'horse's mouth' to gain popularity, transparency and political communication. The twitter handles of these politicians are not just tools to convey information or connect to the public but also comes with the deeper purpose of encouraging active political participation among the public.

Notes:

¹ Modi, N [Narendra Modi], (2015, July 1).

A compensation of Rs. 2 lakh from the PMNRF would be provided to the families of the deceased. [Tweet]

² Modi, N [Narendra Modi], (2015, July 25). Unimaginable fervour at #ParivartanRally. Direction of the wind is clear. People want progress not 'Jungle Raj.' <http://nm4.in/1eodKQ9>. [Tweet]

³ Modi, N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 5).

These schemes are a part of our efforts to bring a positive change in the lives of be poor. This will always remain a Govt for the poor.[Tweet]

⁴ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, July 2).

- Farmers & traders can get opportunities to purchase & sell agricultural commodities at optimal prices in a transparent manner. [Tweet]
- ⁵ Tharoor,S [Shashi Tharoor], (2015, July 4).
Congratulating Dr.Renu Raj, who came 2nd in the UPSC exams,&with her parents (father a pensioner, mother a homemaker). [Tweet]
- ⁶ Tharoor,S [Shashi Tharoor], (2015, July 25).
My beloved grandmother, MundarathJayasankiniAmma, passed away this morning aged 98. Am heading to my village 4d funeral. [Tweet]
- ⁷ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 1).
Yoga: Connecting people, strengthening the bonds of humanity. #YogaDay <http://nm4.in/1JjLNF5> .[Tweet] Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/narendramodi>
- ⁸ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, July 1).
Today we commenced a special journey...a journey towards a #DigitalIndia where technology will play a pivotal role in India's progress. [Tweet]
- ⁹ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 17).
Launched 'Narendra Modi Mobile App'. Come, let's stay connected on the mobile! [Tweet]
- ¹⁰ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 6).
22 important agreements have been signed today that will give a new dimension to India-Bangladesh ties. [Tweet]
- ¹¹ Tharoor,S [Shashi Tharoor], (2015, June 3).
Pic of me taking a selfie with Kofi Annan! He was suitably amused by the experience . [Tweet]
- ¹² Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 26).
My thoughts & prayers are with the families & loved ones of those who lost their lives in the cowardly attacks in France, Kuwait & Tunisia. [Tweet]
- ¹³ Modi,N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 5).
These schemes are a part of our efforts to bring a positive change in the lives of be poor. This will always remain a Govt for the poor.[Tweet]
- ¹⁴ Modi, N [Narendra Modi], (2015, July 4).
Congratulations to all those who successfully cleared the Civil Services Exam & my best wishes as you begin the journey to serve the nation. [Tweet]
- ¹⁵ Modi, N [Narendra Modi], (2015, June 6).
22 important agreements have been signed today that will give a new dimension to India-Bangladesh ties. [Tweet]

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