
Role of Social Media in Indian Elections

Ram Awtar Yadav* and Dr. Vinay Bhushan**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication,
Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

**Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication,
Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

ABSTRACT:

With the number of users of social networking websites in India increasing in an unprecedented way, the impact of this medium is being seen on almost every aspect of human life in more influencing manner than the conventional media. And these users are utilizing this media for many purposes including socializing, discussing different issues, developing business, carrying out online campaigns, marketing and promotion and many more. The millions of people using social networking websites encouraged many political parties and the leaders to capitalize on this forum to reach out to them and increase the support-base through this medium.

With the assembly elections being conducted in five states of the country and the general elections nearing – the past few months saw an increasing number of pages and groups being created by the political parties and politicians to woo the voters and to see the inclination of the voters to draft effective strategies for garnering more and more support from the people.

Prominent leaders from all the parties like Narendra Modi, Shashi Tharoor, Sushma Swaraj, Jairam Ramesh, Arvind Kejriwal, LK Advani and others have become active on social networking websites and are trying to mobilizing people to gain in the general elections next year. Many surveys and studies conducted by different agencies too have predicted social media would be crucial in swinging the poll results. This paper aims at finding the kind of impact social media has made on country's voters through content analysis method wherein the reports of surveys and studies conducted by numerous agencies would be referred to for reaching a logical conclusion.

Keywords: Social media, elections, virtual media, new media, political parties.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

To be able to reach a logical conclusion and assess the impact of social media on elections, content analysis method has been chosen wherein different newspapers, websites and magazines were closely followed to compile the related contents which were minutely examined to find the out points consolidating the research work.

OBJECTIVES:

- ⇒ The paper aims at studying how the social media is influencing the elections in India.
- ⇒ It also tries to find out how are the politicians active on social media reaping good results in the elections
- ⇒ In this research paper, we have also tried to examine how millions of young voters are using the social media to gain political understanding through social media and making perception about the different political parties.
- ⇒ It also attempts to study the impact of social media especially on Delhi Assembly polls where the debutant AAP stole the show winning 28 seats in the state assembly.

HYPOTHESIS:

- Social media are playing a significant role in elections.
- It offers a great platform for the political parties and politicians to build online image and make their presence felt.
- It helps the politicians to connect with millions of people with great ease and hence mobilize them.
- Young voters, professionals and the middle class people find social media a good platform for political and social discussions.
- Fast increasing numbers of the social media users are prompting the politicians to create a profile online and get in touch with them.

INTRODUCTION:

The last few years have seen an unprecedented increase in the number of users of the social media like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others across the globe and India is no exception.

The number of social media users in India has gone the figure of 82 million and an expected increase of around 20 per cent by the year-end, has enabled people to use it in different ways for numerous activities. This, media according to studies, in India may swing around 3-4 per vote in the 2014 general elections.

Political parties too have gird up their loins to utilize this platform for reaching out to the voters through social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter wherein they can effectively communicate to the people saving both time and money. Taking into account the potential of the this new kind of media, the political parties and politicians have started getting in touch with the people of the country creating campaign pages, forming groups, their own profiles etc.

Now that people have started accessing Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus, Orkut, MySpace etc. also through mobile phones, its effectiveness to reach out to people has improved many folds. The social media has served as a great tool for the people for sharing information, holding discussion and forums on numerous issues concerning society, nation and humanity and many more. Today, people find it quite easy to convey a particular message to a number people through social media at one go without contacting everyone individually. And thus, for anyone wanting to get in touch with large number of people effectively, the social media is the first choice. As such, how can politicians do away with this medium? The political parties have employed special teams to ensure optimum use of the social media to woo the voters.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS CONSTITUENTS:

Social media refers to all the communication channels available to the people online for creating and sharing information, interacting, exchanging ideas and discussing different issues etc. Websites and web-based applications used for forums, social networking, social curation, blogging, microblogging and wikis are among the different social media being used by the people today.

Some of the popular social media which have become an important part of our lives are:

- **Facebook:** A free social networking website that allows us to create profiles, upload photos and video, comment on other's posts, send messages and stay connected with friends, family members, relatives and colleagues.

-
- **Twitter:** A free microblogging website that allows the registered users to broadcast short posts known as tweets. The members of this website also follow other users' tweets and comment on them.
 - **LinkedIn:** A social networking website developed especially for the professionals from varied fields and business community that allows the users to stay connected to the people they know, share their skills and expertise with each other and to create a community with the people belonging to the similar interest, profession, business etc.
 - **Wikipedia:** It is an online encyclopedia created by a group of internet users known as Wikipedians. Anyone registered on this website can create an article which is published after the verification by a team working behind the site.
 - **Youtube:** A video-sharing website that enables its users to both upload and download videos. Users can also download films, documentaries, video-songs, reality-shows, serials' episode available on it.

In addition to all these, there also are some other such social networking websites which are used by the internet users for social connectivity and interactions such as MySpace, Orkut, Google+, Pinterest, Stumbleupon, Tumblr, Flickr and others.

SOCIAL MEDIA & US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION-2012:

Various studies carried out by different agencies revealed the fact that internet and social media made a great difference to the way elections for the president were fought in the United States and their outcomes. One of the major factors that won White House for the second time for Barack Obama was effective use of internet, digital technology and social media to reach out to the voters especially younger ones. Obama had a dedicated team deployed especially for mobilizing voters through social media online.

Huffington Post, an American online news aggregator in a study revealed that around 29 per cent of the voters said their opinions were, moderately to extremely, influenced by social media content during the Presidential elections in 2012. Around 63 per cent voters felt that quality of information about the candidates and issues on social media was either same or better than traditional media. While approximately 40 per cent of the voters participated in

political discussions with others in their social networks online, 28 per cent said they displayed their political affiliation on their networks in different manners.

A TIME report said that Obama team raised a fund of around \$690 million through internet and social media as compared to \$500 million in 2008. The total fund raised by Obama went beyond \$1 billion as social media played a crucial role in bringing large number of small-dollar contributions \$50 or less from millions of people.

SOCIAL MEDIA & DELHI ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS:

Seeing the massive social media campaign carried out by the newly-formed Aam Aadmi Party and Bharatiya Janata Party in Delhi, people across the nation were concerned whether this new form of media would leave any impact on the polls. And now as the results are out and the AAP has come out shinning with stunning 28 seats in the state assembly taking everyone by surprise, a number of reports online and in the newspapers, magazines, and electronic news channels attributed AAP's success largely to the social media.

A report published by www.medianama.com read, "People may or may not have been influenced by the campaigns run by political parties, but the incessant debate, raising of issues, criticism and the conversations, the fight and even the hate-commentary that ensued on social media, led to their being a voter – at least in Delhi." The report said that the supporters of the party themselves were proactive in answering queries related to the AAP's manifesto and other issues related to it being raised by people on websites like – Twitter and Facebook.

The BJP was the first among the mainstream political parties to bring leaders online, livestream speeches, rallies and press conferences and then create a repository of these on YouTube, the reported added.

Another report on www.firstpost.com had said that social media is the big buzz word in the upcoming elections especially in metropolitan Delhi, where the newest entrant, AAP is riding an online wave. "AAP's CM candidate Arvind Kejriwal is far ahead of rivals when it comes to toting up the big numbers on social media. He has over 705,356 followers on Twitter while BJP's Dr Harsh Vardhan is trailing far behind at 12,021", the report further read adding "Delhi's current (then) CM Sheila Dikshit does not have a verified Twitter account."

Consolidating the idea that social media heavily influenced the Delhi polls was another report by www.slugpost.com that read, “The Delhi elections have redefined the social media campaigning in India. AAP used it better than any other party and the result is the evident.” It is the first time in Indian politics that a party has used social media so effectively. Although, AAP was fighting election in predominantly urban Delhi, but social media has left such mark on Indian elections never before, the report said.

On the very next day of the results in Delhi, a Times of India reported that social media had aided to the cause of AAP. The English daily’s report on December 9, read, “Even on social media, Aam Aadmi Party was different, often out-of-the-box.” The report quoted experts and social media watchers saying the success of the AAP’s online campaign lies in getting people act offline – something not many “online movements” could boast of.

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY POLITICAL PARTIES & POLITICIANS IN INDIA:

It cannot be denied that the new media that consists of social networking websites and the internet has increasingly affected the sphere of politics over the last few years. Like in other developed countries, in India too, the politicians have gradually recognized the power of the internet. Today many Indian politicians use social media for interacting with public, organizing and mobilizing supporters, gathering voters’ data, reaching the youth vote and others. The emergence of social media around a decade ago, in the early 2000s came as a great boon for the politicians across the globe although its popularity among the Indian political leaders gained momentum during the latter half of the past decade. But today this media has served as a great tool for them to connect with the voters.

Here, the paper explores how different political parties and leaders are using this new form of media to benefit in the elections.

Bharatiya Janata Party & Social Media:

According to a report of the English daily, India Express, the social media cell at the Delhi BJP office recruited a team of 20-25 people who helped the candidates boost their campaigns on social networking websites. Although all the candidates of the BJP were not available on the social networking websites, party gave a lot of emphasis on the role of social media in the

elections and therefore, it decided to offer the assistance of people who are trained on using social networking sites for mobilizing people.

The report quoted coordinator of the media cell of BJP, Khem Chand Sharma as saying, “Most of our candidates do not have the idea of effectiveness of social media campaigns and many do not even have an account. So, we will assist them in their campaigns and make them reach out to even those who cannot make it to rallies. Even a team from London and Sydney will be coordinating with us to assist us in our social media campaigning for the candidates.”

Even in states like Chhattisgarh where the assembly polls were recently conducted on 11th and 19th of November, BJP leaders were quite active on social media. Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Raman Singh has taken to tweeting the success of his government on micro-blogging site Twitter as he sought support from the educated voters to return for a third consecutive term as the chief minister of the state.

Rise of Narendra Modi on Social Media:

According to a report published by ndtv.com on December 10, 2013, Bharatiya Janata Party’s prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi is the most talked about person on Facebook in India beating the likes of cricketing legend Sachin Tendulkar. According to the Facebook, the report said, RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan and India’s Mars mission also failed to beat the Gujarat chief minister, who was the most mentioned person on Facebook in 2013.

The Facebook page of Narendra Modi boasts of likes from more than 6.8 million members of the social networking giant.

According to the website of Narendra Modi – narendramodi.in, in the six months when Modi was appointed the head of the Campaign Committee for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, his Facebook posts increased by 33 per cent and his tweets by 141 per cent. He has got more than 2.9 million followers on his Twitter account.

Taking the reach a step forward, Narendra Modi also joined Google+ Hangout in the month of August, 2012 and was reportedly the first prominent political leader of the country to join this social networking website. Mr. Modi, last year, also interacted with the people answered their various questions on numerous topics through a live video chat on Google+ Hangout which was hosted by Bollywood actor Ajay Devgn.

Every single post on Narendra Modi's Facebook-connect fetches him thousands and lakhs of likes. Iblive.com, in its report, had said that Modi is the first Indian politician to host a live chat through internet, joining the ranks of US President Barack Obama and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Modi, envisioning the power of the social media, actively took a plethora of social media platforms like Youtube, Google+, Pinterest, Stumbleupon, Tumblr, Flickr and others to share his thoughts and acknowledge people's active participation and welcoming their ideas for growth and development of the nation.

Many feel that Narendra Modi's idea of connecting with the people across the country merely with the push of button has modernized Indian political arena and has inspired many others to take on this virtual medium that helps in connecting, communicating and bringing the needed change in the society.

Similarly, the other stalwarts of the Bharatiya Janata Party too like LK Advani, Sushma Swaraj, Rajnath Singh, Arun Jaitley and others are active on the social media. Although the number of followers for them is far lesser than that of Narendra Modi but considering the fact that social media has emerged as an effective tool to connect to millions of people at one go even when they are on the go, they started their accounts on social networking websites especially the micro blogging site – Twitter. This website also helps them to remain in news as their tweets on it often gets space in newspapers and news channels helping them take their popularity graph upward among the voters.

Congress and Social Media:

Seeing the other parties, especially BJP which happens to be its biggest rival wooing the young voters through digital and social media, Congress too is mulling over using this media for the cause. According to a report published by www.business-standard.com in the month of September, seeing the increasing impact of the digital and the social media in shaping voters choices, especially of the first-time young voters, Congress party is emphasizing on an online presence in the run-up to the 2014 general elections. The party was looking for a specialized agency to handle its digital/social media account. According to the party sources, the report mentioned, several digital agencies were making 'ad pitches' for the account including Webchutney, Pinstorm, Oracle and Percept's digital wing.

The website quoted a party leader as saying, “The reason we wanted to have a specialized agency was that not just a high percentage of youth but a large sections of society were using digital media and we needed to target them.”

According to a report of the English daily, The Hindu Congress was using social media to woo voters in the state like Chhattisgarh as well wherein its page titled ‘Chhattisgarh Pradesh Committee and Chhattisgarh Congress highlighted the party’s manifesto for the recently concluded Assembly polls and the 2014 general elections. These pages were also used by the Congress party to target BJP by uploading messages against it.

Another report of the ndtv.com read, the Indian National Congress is putting its trust in new media with a focus on promoting new, younger faces like Ajay Maken who’s recently been given the charge of the media department of the party. Shashi Tharoor, who enjoys a huge following on Twitter and Minister for information and broadcasting Manish Tewari were also promoted by Congress to attract the young voters.

Rahul Gandhi’s focus on Social Media:

Taking into account the increasing significance of social media in connecting with the people and the leaders like Narendra Modi, his own party man, Shashi Tharoor and AAP’s convener, Arvind Kejriwal and others gaining popularity on this platform, the Congress national vice-president, Rahul Gandhi too has been stressing upon use of social media to woo the young voters available on this virtual platform who are set to play a vital role in the elections.

With the intention to exploit this media to the fullest to gain in the elections, he had also addressed a workshop dedicatedly organized on social media by his party in New Delhi on August 23. The workshop was organized with a view to train the party members to use social media for connecting to the voters to benefit during the both assembly and the general elections in 2014.

According to a survey conducted by Mint and Blogworks together, the Congress vice-president had jumped to second position in terms of most mentioned politicians on social media. Although there was huge margin in the number of mentions between Narendra Modi (1,255,011) and him (223,561), the latter was ahead of political leaders like Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, LK Advani, Congress chairperson Sonia Gandhi and others. Rahul Gandhi

who was on fourth position in the month of August had jumped two spots to rise to second next only to the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi.

An Indian Express report in April 2013 had read that Rahul Gandhi was focusing on social media to change the public perception about his party and the UPA government.

Rahul Gandhi himself is active on micro blogging site, Twitter and his account has around 47,000 followers.

Other senior leaders of the Congress party like Jairam Ramesh, Kapil Sibal (joined Twitter on November 28, 2012 and has around 23,000 followers), Sonia Gandhi and others also getting active on social media to reap advantage in the upcoming elections.

Aam Aadmi Party & Social Media:

Ever since it came into existence, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), has been using social media to mobilize voters, especially young voters, like no other party ever did. Using the social media, AAP has been able to drum up people cutting across the lines of castes, cultures, religions and communities. Using this new media, the one-year old political party has successfully tapped the young and the first time voters in Delhi as well as the other belonging to the middle-class society who are active on this virtual platform. Through this medium, the party ran a voter registration campaign in the institutes of higher education in Delhi, a report of exchange4media.mobi said.

AAP's convener, Kejriwal has constantly been among the top ten leaders in the Blogworks' Most-mentioned Leaders Index since its launch in April 2013, the report said.

AAP also resorted to the social media for raising funds for the party to contest Delhi Assembly elections held on December 04, 2013. According to a report published by The Hindu on October 30, 2013, AAP had managed to mobilize over Rs 17 crore in funds and as much as 35 to 40 per cent of the amount was collected online, a pattern which indicated the party's support base in the middle class. Out of the total of Rs 17 crore fund which the party had collected by October, Rs 1 crore was donated by Indian people living abroad which too was attributed, by the report, to the Kejriwal's interaction with the Indian diaspora in the United States, Hong Kong and others through social networking site, Google+ Hangout.

The AAP has around 3.6 lakh subscribers on Facebook and over 1.5 lakh followers on Twitter while Arvind Kejriwal has 6.35 lakh and 6.2 lakh followers on Twitter and Facebook respectively, The Hindu reported.

According to a report of www.firstpost.com on the day of elections in Delhi i.e. December 04, 2013, AAP's campaign on Thunderclap had 10,152 supporters and had reached 35,15,220 the same day.

Throughout the campaign period in Delhi Assembly polls, AAP has remained the most prominent political party on social media to garner support of young, first-time voters, working professionals etc.

The party also went on to upload the manifesto for each of the constituency of Delhi online which addressed the local problems of all the constituencies.

ELECTION COMMISSION'S CAMPAIGN ON SOCIAL MEDIA:

Even the Election Commission of India resorted to the social media as a platform to carry out aggressive voter awareness campaigns especially for the lakhs of the youths of the country who are a regular user of this media.

According to an article of The Economic Times, Election Commission had itself admitted that social media played the role of a game-changer in the recently concluded assembly elections in five states of which four registered a record voter turn-out except Madhya Pradesh. The commission, according to the report, had said that the young voters who are found on Twitter and Facebook keenly followed the aggressive campaigns on social media and were driven to come to the polling stations.

Other political parties:

Although, other political parties like Communist Party of India (CPI) and other regional parties are not that active on social media, in the days to come, they will have to come to this platform to connect with their voters and increase their support-base in their regions. The noted Indian television personality and Member of Parliament, Derek O'Brien goes to say, "If there are parties who are not using social media and think they are OK, they won't be anywhere 15 years from now."

CONCLUSION:

Having continuously and closely followed all the above mentioned reports, articles and statements, it was clearly visible that social media has been fast emerging as tool for the people to connect to millions of people merely with the click of a few buttons on the computer or the smart phones. As such, the political parties and the politicians have started getting active on this fairly new kind of communication medium to increase their support base across the country and to take their popularity graph upward.

The new form of media enables the politicians to create a powerful image for themselves online as in the case of Narendra Modi, Shashi Tharoor, Arvind Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi and others who are making their presence felt among the voters on the virtual platform.

These days, virtual elections have begun among the parties and the leaders on the different social networking websites which are showing the trend that could be gauged in the results of the actual elections being fought on the ground as well.

It has been noticed, of late, that the leaders and the parties who are able to make their presence felt on the social media are equally successful in garnering the support of the people in the actual elections. Therefore, social media's role is only gaining more significance in the elections with every passing day and this cannot be denied.

References:

I. Newspapers:

The Indian Express

The Times of India

The Hindu

The Hindustan Times

II. Websites:

www.ndtv.com

www.narendramodi.in

www.economicstimes.indiatimes.com

www.aamaadmiparty.org

www.firstpost.com

www.facebook.com

www.indianexpress.com

www.twitter.com

www.thehindu.com

www.ibnlive.com

www.business-standard.com

www.medianama.com

www.huffingtonpost.com

www.slugpost.com

III. Magazines:

India Today	Frontline
Media Vimarsh	Outlook

IV. Research Journals:

Media Mimansa
Mass Media

V. Research Papers:

Katherine Elizabeth Leuschner of James Madison University titled “The Use of the Internet and Social Media in US Presidential Campaigns: 1992-2012”

www.ijmas.com