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New Media: The Wooing of India's Voters

By Parama Sinha Palit

SYNOPSIS

New media platforms are increasingly becoming an integral part of political communication in India. Notwithstanding misinformation and disinformation that plague India's digital communication, both political leaders and members of the public are equally enthusiastic to employ Web 2.0 for communicating with each other. Yet, the digital phenomenon has not delivered all the desired electoral success.

COMMENTARY

OF INDIA's population of 1.3 billion, 337 million were users of smartphones in 2018. There is a total of 96% of active *Indian language users* accessing Internet through their mobile devices. Therefore, Indian political parties, including those based in distinct regions of the country, are aggressively employing new media platforms to directly try and influence public opinion by reaching a potentially large electorate. This has changed the nature of political communication in India.

In fact, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, also called the 'WhatsApp' elections, witnessed a rise in the use of new media platforms by Indian political parties, especially for wooing the millennials. While the importance of campaigning on television, radio and at political rallies are gradually declining, academics are saying the new media is fast becoming the central battleground of India's electoral politics today.

New Avenues for Political Participation

These platforms provide new avenues of politician–citizen interaction, introducing as one expert put it, 'a more multimodal, cross-referencing, and interactive style to the political communication genre' with *likes*, *shares*, *retweets*, and *follows* becoming standard terms in the campaign lexicon. Digital technology, while infusing public

sphere with a set of new elements like visual enhancement, emotional framing and information overload amongst others is also redefining political participation in a major way.

If political participation is defined as action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes, the arrival of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has assumed immense traction. Political aspirants must now view public input conveyed through ICT as a key ingredient for making informed political decisions.

Assessing Politicians via New Media

While content creation/framing and use of memes to drive home messages through new media platforms are increasingly shaping political discourse across the world, several studies have highlighted that images through social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook (FB) play a critical role in politics when members of the public are evaluating politicians.

These considerations have not only led Indian leaders to embrace these platforms but have embedded digital technologies in Indian political communication. Every political leader finds the new media platforms advantageous not only for tracking and monitoring real-time reactions and opinions of the public, but also for confirming, clarifying or contradicting messages real-time, often for damage control.

India is a pertinent example of how new media has made inroads into its political system with leaders and members of the public leveraging their online presence to get their messages out and for amplifying them further.

Regional Parties Moving into New Media

In India, the deployment of new media platforms in politics has been both aggressive and deliberate, often with a dash of humour. While the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi is the second most followed politician globally on social media, Indian regional leaders are quickly catching up, in an attempt to outdo the BJP's publicity machinery.

Mamata Banerjee, the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader in the northeastern state of Bengal has equally been focusing on building an arsenal of 'digital warriors' to garner more support for the party while its Twitter handle and FB page boasted 21 short films narrating stories of the 'common-man' – his achievements and well-being – attributed specifically to the TMC government schemes ahead of the elections in 2019.

Similarly, Akhilesh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party (SP) leader, whose stronghold is in the big northern central state of Uttar Pradesh, is also an ardent Twitter user. He pushed the *Kaam Bolta Hai* ('Work Speaks') theme on Instagram, YouTube, third-party websites and mobile applications. This was similar to the BJP's *Man ki Baat* ('Speaking my Mind'), hosted by Modi, for addressing the people of the nation on All India Radio.

Even a 'Grand Old Party' like the Communist Party of India-Marxist [CPI (M)] was unable to ignore the power of new media platforms. It increased its digital presence for reconnecting with the people at the grassroots.

In Andhra Pradesh, the new media is said to have propelled the YSR Congress of Jagan Mohan Reddy to power, defeating 'tech man' incumbent Chandrababu Naidu. With over 95% of YouTube's video consumption in India in regional languages, regional political parties like the YSR Congress leveraged the platform for connecting with the people during elections. Their *Ravali Jagan, Kavali Jagan* ('We want Jagan, Jagan should come') campaign song became the most watched political campaign song on YouTube.

New Media Not Sure Winner Yet

While political leaders enjoyed a considerable latitude in decision-making earlier, the changing environment has altered the relationships between leaders and the electorate, with electorate more empowered than ever before. Aiming to influence voters and shape voter behaviour, political parties use the new media platforms relentlessly to disinform and spread fake news. There is also a simultaneous tendency to cull speeches out of context to give it a communal narrative.

According to a 2018 study, India is one of 48 countries to have 'social media manipulation campaigns'. Yet, while regional parties in India have increasingly relied on new media platforms, it is interesting to note that online electioneering in Indian states has not translated into significant victories, except for the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh. This is perhaps a reminder that winning constituencies in a democracy like India requires much more than just technology.

It seems local conditions, preferences for local candidates and parochial prejudices are still decisive. As the Washington Post put it in a recent article, the "Indian electorate is still a complex amalgam of caste, class, regional and religious factors". More study is needed to tackle the use of new media platforms in electioneering in India.

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