

# New Media and Political Discourse in India: A Review

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**Abstract – Today's society is becoming more interactive and social, although the style of communication has changed. The exchange of information, unlike the earlier days, takes place through Facebook, Twitter, Emails, YouTube, WhatsApp, and so on, to communicate and disseminate information and knowledge with others. Political deliberation has been conducted through online media where politicians are able to reach out to the citizens virtually, notwithstanding their geographic location, and pursue information exchange and discussion.**

**In recent times new media has contributed to movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" in the United States, the rise of Spain's "Indignados" or anti-austerity movement, demonstrations in Tehran and Moscow, the rebellion in Egypt which lead to the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak, the "Twitter Revolution" in Moldova, etc. (La Pietra Dialogues, 2012).**

**Closer to home, the 2014 general elections in India were also influenced considerably by the use of new media such as social media. Savvy politicians leveraged social media cleverly to reach out to voters so much so that their rivals were forced to follow suit. The fresh voter population, aged between 18 and 23 years, who are active on the different forms of social media responded to the online "campaigning" and turned out in large numbers to vote, an unprecedented event in the history of Indian elections (Chao, 2014; Ramalingegowda, 2014).**

**This paper proposes to perform a review of the studies associated with the different social media used by politicians in India to woo voters and the response of the voters to this online political discourse.**

**Key words: New Media, Political Discourse, Social Media, Social Networks, Politicians, Voters**

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## INTRODUCTION

Internet usage has rapidly increased over the last decade in India. The number of users at the end of 2015 was 306 million compared to 243 million at the end of 2014. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) reported that the user base in India for mobile Internet services is estimated to reach 371 million by June 2016. China leads the mobile Internet race with a user base of greater than 600 million users. The US is currently second with a user base of about 375 million (IAMAI, 2015, 2016).

Internet users in India are comprised of both the urban and rural population. For instance, 219 million of the users in 2015 were from urban regions (approximately 53% of the overall urban population). The remaining 87 million users were from rural regions and it was found that this number had doubled from 2014. The users from urban and rural

regions differed in their purpose for Internet use. For example, the urban population was observed to use the Internet for communication, social networking, entertainment, online transactions, and shopping (in that order) whereas entertainment (52%), social networking (39%), communication (37%), and shopping (1%) were the preferred choices of rural users (IAMAI, 2016; Muthukumar & Muthu, 2015).

The above statistics indicate that Indians are definitely one of the most active social communities across the world and the influence of the Internet on the social and economic climate of the country is increasingly evident. Different facets of existence, such as education, healthcare, communication, entertainment, etc., are all being influenced by Internet use. Another aspect of the popularity of the Internet is the increased visibility to politics and political discourse. Accordingly, the

use of the different forms of social media in India is increasingly as an instrument in the hand of political tacticians and policymakers because of their widespread reach and influence (Katkar, 2014).

Over the years, media has progressed from being a “push” means of communication (i.e., monologue) to an interactive form (i.e., dialogue). In fact, it has become even more collaborative, such as in an open debate. In other words, individual beliefs and outlooks appear in the conventional media, thoughts are expressed more unrestrictedly and are unrestricted. The only control is through standards of community decorum. Consequently, progress in communication using social media was the obvious next step for a democracy like India. Indians are using the social media platforms to express their opinions, seemingly with a vengeance. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc., have thus emerged as the “fifth pillar” of media after print, TV, digital and radio. It is also gaining gradual acceptance as the “fifth estate” (media being the “fourth estate” of a democracy) (Mishra, 2015).

Across the world, the different forms of social media namely, Facebook, Twitter, Emails, YouTube, Whatsapp, blogs, etc. are increasingly being utilized to gain political leverage (Foley, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that the major political parties in India are also now active in these (S. Kaur & M. Kaur, 2013).

Historically, propaganda was used to influence the outlook of a population or a government. Propaganda is biased information used to sway an audience and promote a specific plan, and the selective use of facts is a crucial component (Marsili, 2015). Instances of situations where propaganda played a significant role include the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 which led to the establishment of the German nation; the First World War; the rise of the Nazis in Germany; the Second World War which saw the use of propaganda by the key participants in the war: Germany, Italy, Great Britain, the United States, Japan, and the USSR (Marsili, 2015).

In the current day, this role has been taken by political discourse over the Internet where the mere tweeting of a phrase can incite a mass revolt and overthrow dictatorial governments. The use of the Internet in politics can vary. For example, it can be used to mobilize voters and funds, advertise, recruit, communicate messages, target specific geographies, and unifying the masses. Evidence of this is now seen in India (Katkar, 2014).

A review of the studies associated with the different social media used by politicians in India to woo voters and the response of the voters to this online political discourse follows.

## THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIAN POLITICS

Political parties in India are attempting to use the Internet to increase their membership numbers, develop larger groups of volunteer, and to garner donations, votes, and backing. For example, during the 2014 general elections, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) sought nominations, suggestions and donations through its official website. Post the 2014 general election, all political parties have been found to regularly update their websites and to create new schemes and tactics to effectively use the Internet to gain political mileage. Political parties have not restricted their use of the Internet to websites but are also utilizing different social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to express their outlooks and perspectives on different matters (Jaidka & Ahmed, 2015). Social media is perceived to be a tool for a political candidate to directly engage with his/her voters (IRIS Knowledge Foundation [IKF], 2013).

Traditional campaigning strategies included the use of public rallies, print media, and advertising on television and radio. With the increase in Internet usage, computers and smart phones in the recent past, political parties have realized the potential of the online medium (Ahmad & Kumar, 2015).

It appears that Indian politicians have paid attention to Sey and Castells (2004, p. 363), who wrote, “*The Internet can, indeed, be an appropriate platform for informed, interactive politics, stimulating political participation and opening up possible avenues for enlarging decision making beyond the closed doors of political institution.*”

Researchers have studied the use of social media in politics both at the national and regional levels.

### Social Media in National Politics

The example of how the use of social media can affect national politics was first seen in the US elections with President Obama's campaign in 2008 which demonstrated how social media can influence the outcome of the election (Ahmad & Kumar, 2015; Datta & Hill, 2015). Obama's campaign had initially been in trouble and he was thought to be lagging behind the other candidates. However, the use of social media helped turn his campaign around. Conversely, in 2011, Congressman Andrew Weiner suffered negative effects from the use of social media, though not in an election campaign (Datta & Hill, 2015). In India, the 2014 election campaign of the BJP was built around Mr. Modi's popularity and his achievements as Chief Minister of Gujarat. His successful use of new techniques of communication, i.e., social media, was unprecedented in India and led to him

capturing the public's imagination and heart (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Scholars have studied if voting behavior is affected by the use of social media (for example, Biswas, Ingle, & Roy, 2014). About 149 first time voters participated in the 2014 Lok Sabha election and social media was used to reach out to and woo them. The majority of these first time voters are technology savvy and hence the influence of social media on their ultimate political choice was nearly a foregone conclusion.

Other researchers (for example, Pathak (2014) and Pathak & Patra (2015)) observed that the 2014 elections in India differed from all the earlier elections in the history of India. In particular, no other election has generated so much of buzz among young voters. The BJP and other parties borrowed tactics utilized by President Obama's 2012 campaign with the use of Thunderclap (an online platform) to make content viral.

### **Social Media in Regional Politics**

The use of social media by regional parties has been studied by different researchers. For instance, Parida and Das (2014) studied the use of social media in Indian politics by politicians in the state of Odisha. The Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik recognizing the potential of social media encouraged his party workers to use it to persuade the young voters who comprise >40% of the state's total body of voters. Similarly, the Odisha unit of the Congress party also commenced the use of social media prior to the 2014 Assembly elections. Subsequently, many members of both Parliament (MPs) and the Lok Sabha (MLAs) have become regular users of Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, etc. The content posted in these sites is found to be related to both matters of policy and to the personal existence of the politicians. Candidates were also observed to have campaigned using these social media sites in the Urban Local Body (ULB) elections.

In Karnataka also, social media was used extensively by political parties during the 2014 Assembly elections. Politicians used social media as an alternative means to reach out to voters. The two national parties (BJP and Congress) and one regional party (AAP) attempted to utilize social media during their campaigns. However, it was observed that while campaigns differed in terms of effort, interest and monetary investment, they chose to use the same social media tools. Of the two national parties, the BJP was found to be more aggressive on social media. The BJP's campaign was focused on their pan-India candidate, Mr. Modi, whereas the campaigns of the Congress and the AAP were oriented towards their local candidates (Nandan Nilekani) and partners (Janata Dal). Facebook, Twitter, and Google Hangouts were the most common social media tools used during the Karnataka campaign.

Mishra (2015), in an article for the World Economic Forum (WEF) observed how the 2015 elections in Delhi elections were a "compelling example" of political action and influence using social media. This election (or "battle of perceptions") was contested chiefly on Facebook and Twitter. The number of registered voters in Delhi for the election was 13 million. Out of these, 12.15 million were Internet users. Hence, social media was an obvious choice for the parties to use both as an electioneering tool and to engage party workers. Furthermore, it was more cost-effective than the conventional forms of media. However, in contrast to the 2014 General Elections, larger parties such as the BJP and the Congress preferred to use the traditional route of election rallies and advertising over customary media, while the AAP leveraged social media in their campaign. The Facebook 'likes' clearly defined the flow of votes in this election as AAP had 27.8 million, BJP 8.4 million, and the Congress a mere 5.1 million. Another important aspect of this election was that the feedback from the social media was integrated into the mainstream electronic and print media.

### **Social Media of choice**

Researchers have also found it relevant to study the choice of social media by politicians. For instance, A. Khatua, A. Khatua, Ghosh, & Chaki (2015) observed that Twitter trends (e.g., volume of tweets) can be a good indicator of electoral emotions. Thus multi-party political systems, such as India, can use Twitter data to predict changes (positive or negative) in the vote share. Jaidka & Ahmed (2015) on the other hand, investigated how the spread of information using information technology channels can help create political awareness and an "e-democracy". Social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter were observed to be extensively used in the Indian context. An analysis of the tweets posted by the official Twitter accounts of the leading political parties in the period leading to the election established that the more effective parties utilized Twitter to publish well-timed information, on their campaign activities in both online and offline modes, to their followers. The BJP was found to have made the best use of Twitter (for communicating with voters), followed by the AAP (self-promotion and emphasizing its election manifesto).

The use of the social media in the Indian general elections was also studied by Ahmad and Kumar (2015). They opined that political leaders and the public are able to use social media to communicate in an innovative manner. Social media can be used to spread political messages, learn about the different needs and interests of constituencies and voters, raise campaign funds, and establish support networks. The number of voters in the 2014 general elections exceeded 800 million. The estimated number of Internet users in India



exceeds 300 million and this number is expected to increase. Ahmad and Kumar (2015) found that Mr. Modi has 14.3 million followers on Facebook and 4 million followers on Twitter. Facebook reported that 29 million Indians made 227 million interactions via posts, comments, likes, and shares, about the 2014 elections since they were first announced.

The question of whether the use of Facebook 'likes' could be used to predict election outcomes was studied by Barclay, Pichandy, Venkat, and Sudhakaran (2015). These researchers analyzed the political trend on Facebook by using the number of 'likes' recorded on selected Facebook pages between 24 January and 12 May, 2014. They found a robust and favorable association between the number of 'likes' received by a party or a politician on an official Facebook page and the share of votes. Furthermore, they found that the timeliness (i.e., the proximity to the election) of the gathering and analysis of Facebook data also contributed to the accuracy of the prediction of the election outcome. A study was also performed to understand the influence of newspaper reporting on the political activity on Facebook (Barclay, Pichandy, & Venkat, 2015). This study found that favorable and unfavorable news reports on a party or a political leader affected the 'likes' recorded on the Facebook page of that party or individual.

## SOCIAL MEDIA STATISTICS FROM THE 2014 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Reviewing the social media statistics can help to offer a perspective of the effectiveness of social media use. A few salient statistics with regard to the use of social media by three leading parties (BJP, Congress, AAP) during the 2014 General elections are summarized below.

### Social Media Strategy of Indian Political Parties in 2014

Party Strategy	AAP	BJP	Congress
Facebook Pages	AAM Aadmi Party • Arvind Kejriwal for Hope • AAP for Hope • IITian AAP • India against corruption	Ek hi Viklap Modi • I Support Narendra Modi • Narendra Modi for PM • Mission 272+ • vote for change	Congress party • Congress India • Indian youth congress • Indian National congress • NSUI • Youth for Congress
Twitter	#Aapforhope #AAPpopularity #Arvindkejriwal4change #Indiaagainstcorruption #Thunderclap #Vote for AAP	#abkibaarmodisarkar #BJP2014 #Bharatiyajantaparty #Imodi #mission272+ #votefomamo	#congress2014 #congressagainstcorruption #indiancongressparty #voteforcongress #voteforRG #VoteForRahulGandhi
Blogging	www.aamaadmiaparty.org/blog	bjporg.blogspot.com	www.aiccblogspot.com
Google 3D	No	Yes	No
Google hangout	Yes	Yes	Yes
Door to door	Yes	Yes	Yes
YouTube	www.youtube.com/AAP	www.youtube.com/user/BJP4India	www.youtube.com/user/congresspartyindia
Websites	www.aamaadmiaparty.org arvindkejriwal.co.in	www.bjp.org www.bjpdelhi.org www.narendramodi.in	www.inc.in allindiacongress.com
Others	Pamphlets, Fliers, Road Show, Give a missed call and join AAP	Pamphlets, fliers, Billboards, printed ads, Television ads, Chai pe Charcha, Road show, Missed Calls	Pamphlets, fliers, printed ads, Television ads, Billboards or Hoardings, Road shows

### Popular Hash-tags by the Political Parties on Twitter

Name	Positive	Negative
AAP	#AAPpopularity #AAPSwipingDelhi #Newhopeforcountry #Thunderclap #VoteforAAP #voteforAamAadmiparty	#Aap420 #AapDrama #BhagoraAAP #MadCM #Nautankibaaaz #QuitAAP
BJP	#abkibaarmodisarkar #CyberHindus #imodi #Mission272+ #Namo	#BJP4riots #CongBJPquitIndia #Feku #FekuExpress #Secularism
Congress	#congressforyouth #voteforcongress #voteforRG #VoteforRahulGandhi	#Amulpappu #CongBJPquitIndia #indiaagainstcongress #Pappu

### Facts of political parties in social media to woo voters

Social Media Followers	AAP	BJP	Congress
Facebook Likes	2,500,000	3,400,000	1,800,000
Twitter followers	51,700,000	417,000	106,300
YouTube Subscribers	40,845	44,500	5,117
Google+	1,41,366+	7,398+	3,125+

### Facts of political leaders' followers on social media

Social Media Followers	Arvind Kejriwal	Narendra Modi	Rahul Gandhi
Facebook Likes	5,005,786	12,399,400	351,000
Twitter followers	160,000	3,690,000	NA
YouTube Subscribers	NA	132,803	2,221
Google+	579+	12,68,320+	2,118+

## CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed the different literature available with regard to the increased growth and popular use of social media by politicians in India. As India is now one of the world's most online countries, Indian citizens enjoy a high degree of Internet connectivity and share a growing perception that the information available online is more trustworthy and dependable than the information available through the conventional forms of media. Globally, India is ranked 3rd in the use of the Internet lagging behind only China and the United States. Consequently, the country is a noteworthy location wherein the influence of the newly emerged forms of communication such as social media on politics can be studied.

The rise of the use of Internet use and the associated use of social media was first briefly reviewed in the Indian context. Subsequently, the use of social media in Indian politics was reviewed. The use of social media in the national political scene as viewed during the 2014 General Elections was scrutinized. Following this, the use of social media in the regional scene was investigated. Studies which focused on the specific social media used by the political parties were also highlighted.

A brief summary of the social media statistics from the 2014 General Elections for three leading parties (BJP, Congress, AAP) were provided to offer a perspective of the effectiveness of social media use.

The significance of the use of social media for political campaigning gained prominence in the 2014 General Elections. Political parties and candidates placed a high dependence on social media to engage voters, recruit volunteers, and raise campaign funds. These campaigns highlighted the efficacy of social media in political campaigning in the new age. Social media was effective in reaching out to the tech- and Internet-savvy younger voter.

A few general motivations for why politicians use social media could be concluded from the current review. Firstly, politicians have found it beneficial to constantly engage the public on social media. In other words, campaigns are now persistently in progress in the online universe. Secondly, social media are cost-effective in comparison to the more traditional forms of media. Thirdly, the metrics of social media use (e.g., 'likes' on Facebook, positive/negative tweets, etc.) can help to gauge the 'mood' of the public and hence a politician (or political party) can accordingly manage their image or campaign. Fourth, any information on social media is instantly disseminated and hence a social media savvy politician can spread his/her message with great speed and effectiveness.

However, a few disadvantages were also observed from the use of social media. First, any accidental (or otherwise) upload and/or sharing of undesirable information cannot be prevented. Corrective measures can be taken, but due to the speed of information dissemination it may be too late. Second, earlier propaganda material used in election campaigns were carefully designed and scrutinized prior to publication. The use of social media does not allow for such time-consuming measures.

Overall, the use of social media by politicians for different types of political communication was found to be a rational choice in the current Internet age. Some of the forms of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, were found to be more popular than the others.

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