

BLITZKRIEG MARKETING: THE SOCIAL MEDIA WAY

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Abstract

The role of political communication, broadly – understanding the origin, transmission, and influence of information – is increasingly relevant in today's society. As information technology evolves the field must take into account rapid changes in the socio-technological environment, while also considering new ways of thinking about political communication. The present research paper studies the importance of use and rise of social media in the arena of Indian politics especially in general elections of 2014. It studies the impact of social media on voters in the age group of 18-40 years as they constitute the majority of the voting population. It tries to comprehend the factors that influence internet users to vote for political leaders. It also explores the sources considered trustworthy by respondents to learn about politics in general elections in India. The study was conducted soon after the general elections of 2014 took place. Primary data was collected during the months of June and July 2014 from different areas of Visakhapatnam City. A purposive sample of 225 respondents was selected for the study. Standard deviation and scaling techniques, etc. were used for the analysis.

Keywords: Social Media; Politics; Elections; Selfie; Voters.

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1. Introduction

Blitzkrieg is not a new term in the advertising world and in social media marketing. But it is an underrated and less known way of marketing. So what is “blitzkrieg”? The term is derived from a German “lightening” military tactic which was used in the Second World War. The German’s would attack quickly, unexpectedly and intensely on multiple fronts, inhibiting their enemies from properly retaliating. This paper discusses the use of this tactic in the general elections held in India during 2014.

India, being the largest democracy in the world, is a secular and socialist country. The Indian general elections of 2014 were to constitute the 16th Lok Sabha and for all five hundred and forty three constituencies. In India, conducting the general elections is a mega event. It is an exercise in planning and execution. It was held in nine phases from 7th April to 12th May 2014 making it the longest held election in the history of our country.

The general elections of 2014 in India had been very unique in many ways. It set many trends in the history of the largest democracy in the world. The first unique feature has been the use of social media. Most of the political parties and their leaders exploited the mass communication tools very effectively to reach the target people (13). The young breeds of new voters are seeking a more inclusive political dialogue (16). Use of social media has brought a change in the way youth relate to democratic values. Today users have become able to both receive process and circulate news and information in a new way (9). They are bringing both media and political parties under scrutiny. This has brought about a people centric approach to formation of government. Another positive development has been transparency in public discourse.

Second unique feature of general elections has been the tremendous increase in polling stations up by 12% making it a whopping 930,000 polling stations. There was an increase of 100 million voters since 2009 elections which make it the largest election in the world. Out of 2.7% of the total eligible voters; 23.1 million were aged 18–19 years. Third unique feature is transgender persons are allowed to vote as “others”. Fourth unique feature is the first for a general election: voters have an option to choose “none of the above”. Fifthly largest number of non-resident Indians have voted, making the journey to India solely to exercise their vote. As mentioned above

use of social media in the elections has had far reaching consequences. Use of technology and social media has propelled the Indian economy towards the cusp of a revolution. Out of 1.2 billion as many as 160 million are active users of social media, email and other online services (1). This study is limited to exploring the first unique feature of use of social media in general elections 2014.

The Mediating Role of Social Media in Indian Politics

Today most politicians have embraced social media. They are aware that to reach out to the largest segment of Indian population, that is, the youth they need to make their presence on social network. There has been a shift from using traditional methods to modern methods of communication. It is a revolution of sorts from the time the politicians depended on canvassing personally, using posters, cutouts, wall paintings to use of social media. Today, politicians and elected officials have come to realize the power of social media for both communicating political information and interacting with citizens (5).

The political party having the large presence in social media is BJP party. Senior party leaders like Narendra Modi, Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, Rajnath Singh, Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal have a huge following on the social network. Narendra Modi in 2009 joined Facebook and Twitter. He was also the first politician to use Google Plus. He has also reached a 15,000 mark of subscribers and has 1500 videos in YouTube channel. He is one of the most famous politicians on social media with approximately 1.3 million followers on Facebook page and 3.42 million followers on Twitter. People are highly responsive towards his updates by liking, commenting and sharing his updates. Sushma Swaraj has 95,000 likes on her community page on Facebook and more than 3 lakh followers on Twitter. Rahul Gandhi is very interactive on his Facebook page and he is a very active blog writer too for people to know his views on issues. He has approximately 2.5 lakh fans on his page. Manmohan Singh has an official page on Facebook with more than 3.5 lakh fans.

Table 1: Followers of Political Parties on Important Social Media Sites

Top Political Parties in Social	Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP)	Indian National Congress (INC)	Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)	1 st Rank
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Media				
Facebook	58.73 Lakh	33.47 Lakh	21.67 lakh	BJP
Twitter	6,30,000	1,35,000	6,70,000	AAP
Google Plus	2,500	2,300	2.13 Lakhs	AAP
You Tube*	66,000	10,000	43,000	BJP

Source *YouTube subscriber figures. Figures are of May, 2014.

As many as 58.73 lakh people were following BhartiyaJanata Party through Facebook and the party secured 1st Rank among the political parties in India (Table 1). AamAadmi Party has top rank in Twitter and Google Plus followers. Only BJP and AAP are the two parties who have top positions in social media sites.

Uses of Social Media in Elections

Creating awareness– Social media platforms during the last elections were used largely to make people aware about information like the party and its candidate’s profile. To state voter’s duty and responsibility, procedure of voting, the documents required at the time of voting, the geographical location of election booth etc. Google had decided to revamp its election hub to include features like “Pledge to Vote” campaign by introducing Google Election Tracker. Similarly Facebook also launched an election tracker called Facebook Election Tracker and introduced Facebook Talks series involving well-known politicians of India.

Marketing Through Social Media – As per a report by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), out of a total expenditure of Rs.400-500 Crore social media amounted to 10% of the marketing expenditure of all the political parties. Some innovative steps were Mr.NarendraModi’s ‘Selfie’ with election mark on finger, directly uploading of videos and messages in Facebook and other media.

Prediction of the Trends and Results–Paid Marketing and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) were used by politicians to improve their chances of getting reflected as the top search result in Google. Social media was seen instrument for prediction of the results of the polls and analyzing the trend of the polls (16).

Literature Review

GayatriWani et al. (2), put it aptly when they said “India’s 16th National general election which was held in nine phases during April and May, 2014 was probably one of the most awaited elections in the recent times”. First time in the world where social media was used extensively for elections was in the US. The US elections of 2008 were a breakthrough in social media research. It was recognized that social networks were a very important part of election campaign and its outcome. Important principles of the communication strategy were given due recognition in books published by Harfoush (3) and Plouffe (11). As stated by Maya Ranganathan (7), this general election saw “an intense focus on the social media as the most effective means to reach the 23 million first-time voters in a nation with 16 per cent Internet penetration”. As stated by O’Loughlin, B, social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube provide new ways to stimulate citizen engagement in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role.

One of Facebook co-founders, Chris Hughes, designed mybarackobama.com as a communication tool in social media. Similar scene was replicated in the Indian elections of 2014. According to a report by IAMAI, a study finds that now Facebook users are the new vote bank that the Indian politicians have to worry about. Kanagavel and Chandrasekaran (11) say that there is a multifaceted and interactive connection relationship between the audience and media messages. At the same time it is difficult to isolate the effect of media messages as it may not be the only factor influencing politics. It is also learnt that people tend to choose the media channel that supports their political viewpoints. More focus has been given to the political use of social media during election campaigns, but an area which needs to be studied is how disengaged citizens and youth can be encouraged to engage or re-engage in democratic participation on an ongoing basis. Macnamara et al. (2012) say recent years have seen a great deal of academic interest in the possibility of using social media to measure public opinion. Tenhunen et al. (2015) say ‘personal communication via social media brings political parties and politicians come in touch with their voters. This allows politicians to communicate faster and reach citizens in a more targeted manner and vice versa, without the intermediate role of mass media. Reactions, feedback, conversations and debates are generated online as well as support and participation for offline events.’

Need for the Study

In the last few years social media has become an important political communication channel both in India and globally. It allows political parties and voters to interact directly with each other. Therefore, political activities might get transparency and citizens might be more involved into political decision-making processes. In a digital age, political communication is, quite literally, at your command. The role of political communication, broadly – understanding the origin, transmission, and influence of information – is increasingly relevant in today's society. As information technology evolves the field must take into account rapid changes in the socio-technological environment, while also considering new ways of thinking about political communication. These renditions challenge the paradigms and encourage new analytical modes while reinvigorating questions about the politics of persuasion. Reaching target voter is very difficult even if the politicians have different communication channels. This study examines the social media role in Indian political communication.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are

- To study the role of social media on recent general elections in India.
- To comprehend the factors that influence internet users to vote for political leaders
- To understand the sources considered trustworthy by respondents to learn about politics in general elections in India.

2. Research Method

Data from primary as well as secondary sources were used. The secondary sources include the records of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, ASSOCHAM and other related offices and websites. An opinion survey was conducted to know the social media impact on voting behavior. Primary data was collected from the different areas of Visakhapatnam City. A purposive sample of 225 respondents was selected for the study.

Survey:For the purpose of the study a questionnaire was designed to elicit information from the sample respondents. The respondents gave their opinions through personal interactions and the structured questionnaire at a time and place convenient to them. The collected data was

tabulated for the purpose of analysis and interpretation and statistical techniques such as percentage, averages, standard deviation, scaling techniques, etc. were used for the analysis.

3. Results and Analysis

Table 2: Personal profile

(n=225)

Demographic variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	149	66.2
	Female	76	33.8
Age	18-25 Years	172	76.4
	26-40 Years	53	23.6

Source: Primary Data

Frequency distribution profile of respondents showed that 66.2 per cent of the respondents' were male while 33.8 per cent of the respondents were female (Table 2). Majority of the respondents are in younger age group (76.4 per cent) and remaining are in the age group between 26 to 40 years.

Table 3: Political parties won the elections based on...

Particulars	Score	% to MPS	SD
Religion	1018	90.49	0.840
Region	890	79.11	0.870
Development	812	72.18	1.047
Caste	838	74.49	1.041
Money Power	823	73.16	1.075
Young voter	863	76.71	1.108

Source: Primary Data

Many factors influence the voter to take decision to vote for political parties/candidates. The respondents were asked to reveal the factors that influence them in the elections. The data relating to the above is presented in Table 3.

As can be seen from the table, most of the respondents' revealed 'religion' plays a key role in general elections in India. This factor secured a score of 1018. 'Region' occupied second position with a score of 890. Young voter (score 863) and caste (score 838) are the next rated factors in the election. The other factors rated by the respondents are money power (score 823) and development (score 812).

Table 4: Do you have Facebook/twitter account?

(n=225)

Particulars	18-25	26-40	Total
Yes	167 (74.2)	42 (18.7)	209 (92.9)
No	5 (2.2)	11 (4.9)	16 (7.1)

Source: Primary Data

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage to the total.

Table 4 presents the data relating to social network membership. About 93 per cent of the respondents have membership in social networks. Out of the total, only 16 respondents (7 per cent) don't have membership in social networks. It implies that most of the respondents have membership in facebook/twitter.

Table 5: Whom do you follow on face book?

(n=225)

Particulars	18-25	26-40	Total
NarendraModi	67 (29.8)	24 (10.7)	91 (40.4)
Rahul Gandhi	31 (13.8)	5 (2.2)	36 (16.0)
ArvindKejriwal	47 (20.9)	8 (3.6)	55 (24.4)
SushmaSwaraj	27 (12.0)	16 (7.1)	43 (19.1)

Source: Primary Data

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage to the total.

The data presented in Table 5 shows that 40.4 per cent of the respondents are following NarendraModi on Facebook. After Modi, ArvindKejriwal has 24.4 per cent followership on Facebook. SushmaSwaraj (19.1 per cent) and Rahul Gandhi (16 per cent) are the other politicians who have followers on Facebook. Further insight into the table, the young voters' age group between 18 to 25 years representing 29.8 per cent of the total who are following NarendraModi's social web page.

Table 6: Have you taken keen interest in recent elections?

(n=225)

Age	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
18-25	111 (49.3)	41 (18.2)	11 (4.9)	7 (3.1)	2 (0.9)	172 (76.4)
26-40	37 (16.4)	8 (3.6)	2 (.9)	5 (2.2)	1 (0.4)	53 (23.6)

Source: Primary Data

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage to the total.

The data relating to respondents opinion on keen interest in recent elections was collected on a five point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree and it is presented in Table 6. The table reveals that about 66 per cent of the respondents strongly agreed that they had keen interest in 2014 general elections. However, a little over 6 per cent of the respondents expressed they were not really interested in the general elections.

Table 7: Opinion on learning sources about politics

(n=225)

Particulars	Score	% to MPS	Mean
Social media network is an important source to learn about politics	811	72.09	2.40
Efficacy of TV and print media to learn about politics	812	72.18	2.39
Efficacy of the internet to learn about politics	779	69.24	2.54

Source: Primary Data

Opinion of the respondents on learning sources about politics is presented in Table 7. ‘Efficacy of TV and print media to learn about politics’ is the highly rated learning source for the respondents. This variable got a score of 812 with a mean value of 2.39 and its Maximum Possible Score is 72.18. Social media stood a close second among the three variables tested. Its score is 811 and its Maximum Possible Score is 72.09. Internet obtained third position and its score is 779. In the tested variables TV & Print media, and Social media got almost similar scores (811 & 812).

Table 8: Credible sources about political news are of critical importance

Age	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
18-25	53 (23.6)	50 (22.2)	30 (13.3)	33 (14.7)	6 (2.7)	172 (76.4)
26-40	14 (6.2)	14 (6.2)	14 (6.2)	6 (2.7)	5 (2.2)	53 (23.6)
Total	67 (29.8)	64 (28.4)	44 (19.6)	39 (17.3)	11 (4.9)	225 (100.0)

Source: Primary Data

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage to the total.

The study reveals that half of the respondents either strongly agree or agree that ‘credible sources about political news are of critical importance’ and only five per cent of the respondents expressed their strong disagreement to the statement (Table 8). About 17.3 per cent of the respondents expressed their disagreement to the statement. However, there are 19.6 per cent of the respondents who took neutral stand in responding to the statement.

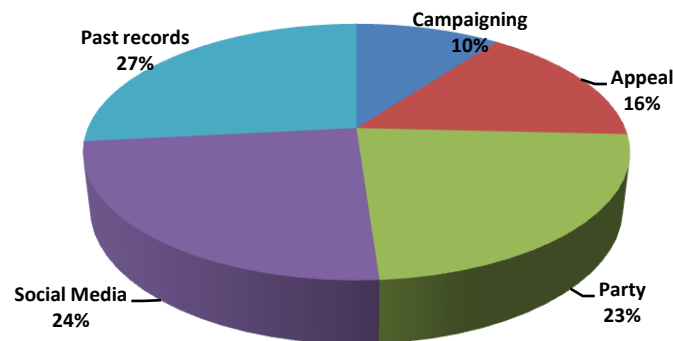


Figure – 1: Criteria for Voting

The figure 1 shows that the important parameter for a respondent to vote for a particular party or a politician was based on their past record, that is, developmental work carried out, perception about his/her previous performance or in some cases even criminal records. This signifies that for the respondents, irrespective of the media used for gaining political information, their primary criterion to vote for a candidate was based on the past developmental records (27% among the criteria). The second most important criteria for the respondents to vote for a contestant were 'social media campaigning'. Political party image and the history are the third criteria for the voters to elect a candidate.

4. Conclusion

In recent times social media has become an important political channel of communication in India (19). Social Media enables citizens to be more involved into political decision-making processes. It enables political parties and voters to directly interact with each other thus leading to more transparency in politics. The political parties, which have taken advantage of using social network, had a chance of enhancing their image and propagating their political messages. They have enjoyed active participation of their supporters. On the other side of the coin the rise of social networking has given rise to new ways of communication and social connection between young people but the older generation and their parents have been left behind in this digital/communication divide.

In this marketing tactic Twitter, Facebook and You Tube, TV, Print Media, posters, cutouts and wall paintings were used. Youth having internet connections and first time voters could be reached. Large number of non-resident Indians could also be reached. This surprised the other parties giving them no time to prepare. Multipronged, multifaceted and interactive connection between the audience and BJP Party gave no time for other parties to react. In short BJP Party found the 'unguarded' opportunity and concentrated their resources on that. This gave them a 'first mover advantage'. Vidya Raut states that during his address to IT professionals at the NASSCOM India Leadership Forum (NILF) 2014, Prime Minister Modi spoke about 'transforming India through technology'. He emphasized "Use of IT can put India on the road to

fast and inclusive growth. We need to empower the youth of the country,”Modi also said IT+ IT = IT (Indian Talent+ Information Technology = India Tomorrow).

The new India has to integrate the older Indians into their fold by making a concentrated effort to educate them. There have been tremendous changes happening in the world of social media and by 2020 a new structure of social media may come around that might integrate all of the different aspects of today’s social media. New mobile apps may break down social media into specifics. In fact a new name may evolve for social media. A British writer, journalist and political strategist, a former political correspondent with the BBC and as communications director for Tony Blair’s Labour Party, Lance Price says in his book named ‘The Modi Effect’ the recent elections can shed important new light on how the election was won-and the ever lasting impact it’s likely to have on India and the world.’ ‘The Modi Effect’ was reveal the inside story of the campaign – the most determined and innovative ever seen in India or the world – which has lessons for politics in every democracy on earth.” He goes on to add “Of all the elections I have ever reported on or taken part in, nothing compares to Narendra Modi’s contemporary campaign in India. It was breath-taking in its ambition and its execution”.

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