

## **Social Media -The New Weapon in Indian Democracy**

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### **Abstract**

Media has always been a significant pillar of the society. Apart from reporting the happenings, it also builds public opinion. This puts media in a powerful position in a democracy. The media space has changed a lot with the emergence of social media. It is a platform that reflects the pulse of the society. For the world's largest democracy India, elections fit as the greatest religion. Political marketing is growing in at a fast pace with every party bringing in more of newer tools and techniques to woo electorate. Formally launched on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2012, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ran its agenda and emerged as the second most voted party in the Capital. It drew young voters by creating an online buzz, using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. AAP effectively used these platforms to interact with voters, make voters aware about the party's manifesto and raising funds for their party, besides keeping the campaigning cost within limit. AAP strongly believes that social media would not be about "influencing" but "shaping opinion and policies". Even, regular tweets by celebrities and media barons motivate the general mass in creating their own opinion. The present study highlights the impact of social media as a platform of nation building through political, social and cultural democracy.

**Keywords:** public opinion, social media, political marketing

### **Introduction**

The role of media in a democratic system has been widely debated. India has the largest democracy in the world and media has a powerful presence in the country. The media today has well and truly spread its wings. From being limited to the whims of a few individuals, it has come a long way to become a means of social participation. Democracy in general terms is understood to be a form of government which is subject to popular sovereignty. It is essentially a rule by the people which is in contrast to monarchies or aristocracies. One of the crowing glories of the democratic system is the freedom of expression and the space that is provided to views from different sections of the society. A democratic system can run to its utmost potential when there is wide participation on the part of the general mass which is not possible without people getting informed about various issues. Reliable information resources are an important constituent of any democratic society. This is where media steps in. Mass media in its different forms have influenced human life in the present century. They have primarily provided information and entertainment to people across countries. Print media, being the leader over a considerable period of time has now got competition from Television, which is reshaping many of the social responses. Radio apart from providing news and views has also developed a flair for entertainment, thereby getting a lot of acceptance.

While the fourth estate has been in order for a long while, it seems to have realized its true potential and purpose in the new millennium only in the true spirit of democracy as envisaged by Abraham Lincoln's of being an institution 'of the people, by the people and for the people'. This has been facilitated by the advent of the social media. With its capability to overcome the geographical barriers and the owing to the near-absence of gatekeepers, the social media seeks to provide a platform of information - sharing to all the participating individuals. This is significant because information and social awareness have

emerged as important factors of human empowerment. Media has always been a significant pillar of the society. Apart from reporting the happenings, it also builds public opinion. This puts media in a powerful position in a democracy. The media space has changed a lot with the emergence of social media. It is a platform that reflects the pulse of the society. Even the traditional media channels keep an eye on ongoing social media trends. In the recent past, there are so many top news stories that originated from social media. Apart from highlighting issues that are socially relevant and crucial, social media has also exposed the connection between the government and the population. People are more aware of what our political leaders are up to. The discussions on political issues and implications are widespread and immediate.

### **Literature Review**

Raymond Williams (1980) highlights three aspects of communication. For Williams, public communication could only be rigorously understood by considering the process of 'skills, capitalization and controls'. To apply this principle to alternative media, James Hamilton (2000) argues that we need to talk of deprofessionalization, decapitalization and deinstitutionalization. In other words, alternative media must be available to 'ordinary' people without the necessity for professional training and excessive capital outlay; they must take place in settings other than media institutions or similar systems. Such media will then have the potential to more closely reflect the practices of decentralized, directly democratic, self-managed and reflexive networks of 'everyday – life solidarity'. John Downing (1984) considers radical media as the media of social movements, produced by political activists for political and social change. This signals an interest in considering media as radical to the extent that they explicitly shape political consciousness through collective endeavour. Downing (1984) and Downing et al. (2001) argue that the media of these movements are important for not only what they say but for how they are organized. Walter Benjamin (1982) argues that, in order for political propaganda to be effective, it is not enough to merely reproduce the radical or revolutionary content of an argument in a publication. The medium itself requires transformation: the position of the work in relation to the means of production has to be critically re-aligned. If the aim of radical media is to effect social or political change, then it is crucial, Downing says, that they practice what they preach. He calls this 'prefigurative politics' or 'the attempt to practice socialist principles in the present, not merely to imagine them for the future. To achieve this, Downing proposes a set of 'alternatives in principle' that draw on anarchist philosophy. This leads him to emphasize the importance of encouraging contributions from as many interested parties as possible, in order to emphasize the 'multiple realities' of social life (social oppression, political cultures, economic situations). Radical media thus come to constitute a major feature of an alternative public sphere. Thus, the global Internet – based network may be considered as a multiple of local alternative public spheres that together comprise a macro public sphere, which offers geographically dispersed participants opportunities to debate issues and events to collaborate on activist initiatives of a global reach.

Downing privileges media that are produced by non-professionals, by groups are primarily constitutes for progressive social change, the most detailed example being the rise of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) through the use of social media. Independent media enable 'ordinary' citizens to become politically empowered.

### **Media and Democracy**

The normative view of the press argues that the conduct of the media has to take into account public interests. The main public interest criterions that the media need to consider include freedom of publication, plurality in media ownership, diversity in information, culture and opinion, support for the democratic political system, support for public order and security of the state, universal reach, quality of information and culture disseminated to the public, respect for human rights and avoiding harm to individuals and the society (McQuail, 2005). Informing the citizens about the developments in the society and helping them to

make informed choices, media make democracy to function in its true spirit. It also keeps the elected representatives accountable to those who elected them by highlighting whether they have fulfilled their wishes for which they were elected and whether they have stuck to their oaths of office. Media to operate in an ideal democratic framework needs to be free from governmental and private control. It needs to have complete editorial independence to pursue public interests. There is also the necessity to create platforms for diverse mediums and credible voices for democracy to thrive. It has already been discussed that media has been regarded as the fourth estate in democracy. Democracy provides the space for alternative ideas to debate and arrive at conclusions for the betterment of society. The publicly agreed norms are weighed over that of actions on the part of economic organizations and political institutions (Barnett, 2004). Media plays one of the crucial roles behind the formation of public sphere (Panikkar, 2004). However, Barnett is of the opinion that in modern times the true sense of public sphere is getting eroded with the media of public debate getting transformed to mediums for expressing particular interests rather than general interests which are universally accepted.

### **Social media – The new weapon**

Barack Obama's use of social media in his 2008 Presidential Campaign has been widely acclaimed and written about. Simultaneously, Obama's ability to mobilize American youth not only energized his campaign, but ultimately became his strongest voting segment. Youth voters used social media to build a non-traditional voter-politician relationship with Barack Obama, how political fandom manifested itself during the campaign, and what this new, mediated relationship between politicians and voters could imply for the future of politics. As elections in Delhi were underway, Indian media reported that Arvind Kejriwal, founder of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had admitted to learn from Barack Obama's social media strategy of 2008, which many believe helped him win the White House. Seven thousand dedicated volunteers consisting of students, workers, and people on sabbatical from their jobs, and even retired government officials joined to help AAP rise to power.

A study by PR firm Edelman attributes Obama's 'landslide victory' primarily to his successful use of social media (Lutz, 2009). But what exactly is social media and how does it differ from social networking sites (SNS)? Social networking sites, which include Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, and YouTube, are defined by Boyd & Ellison (2007) as web-based services enabling individuals to:

- (1) Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system,
- (2) Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection,
- (3) View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media encompasses technology that allows for user-collaboration as well as User Generated Content (USG) which focuses on individual participation and content creation. For Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media includes: blogs, social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter), content communities (such as YouTube), and collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia). This study uses Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition of social media with sole focus on blogs, social networking sites, and content communities.

### **Social media and Indian Scenario**

India's National Elections slated to happen between April and May, 2014 is probably one of the most awaited elections in the recent times. It is not only becoming a sort of a presidential contest but is also creating waves for several other reasons. Among them, a very important one is the involvement of the youth. For a considerable period of time over the last two-three decades or so, the educated urban youth had completely alienated themselves from mainstream political activism. For a long time, associating with politics or political activism was a taboo and was considered a major negative in the path of a bright young

Indian's professional career growth. But things are changing and rather changing fast. The signs were all there for the last two-three years when the rapid popularity of the social media was making things undergo fast metamorphosis. Twitter and Facebook became great tools for the reluctant young Indian to actively engage at least in the discussions on political, economic, military as well as social issues. What started as discussions eventually became powerful groups for not just mere discussions but criticism and dissemination of opinion on several such issues which mainstream media would not discuss or show for several reasons. Initially most political parties did not take the social media and the rising wave of youth seriously and ignored it as a passing phase which would have no impact on voting patterns or electoral outcomes. Yet some political leaders found this as a great tool to connect with the educated and the middle class of India who for long had taken the voting day as an unexpected holiday to enjoy instead of voting. The reason for the success of social media and why some political parties have gained immensely out of it is because, most of the youth of India, that teeming millions working in ad agencies, research houses, IT companies, BPOs and in other spheres of the service or manufacturing sector do not get a chance to watch television or have rather distanced themselves from the ubiquitous television sets, but have hooked on all the more to the virtual world through their laptops, workstations and smart phones. Eventually what started as a mere virtual platform for discussions became a wonder tool for dissemination of information, advocacy, voter registration drive and voter mobilisation. There can never be any doubt that a large number of first time voters and a large number of those young people who have never voted in the past did vote with much enthusiasm in the recently concluded assembly elections. Each of the states that went to poll witnessed massive surge in the polling percentages which broke all previous records. This could not have been possible without the active participation from a large number of such voters who were not voting in the past. In respect of using the social media and especially Twitter and Facebook, BJP and especially its Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi had a head start and their popularity as well as reach through social media is far more than that of any other parties. Narendra Modi has the highest followership in twitter while in Facebook one can see many Facebook pages dedicated to him with considerable following. He was one of the early movers into the social media paradigm and it worked for him. Aam Aadmi Party too has to give a certain portion of its electoral success in Delhi to the impact it could create through the social media. However parties like Congress and several other political parties were late in realising the reach of the social media and the kind of impact it could create. Many of them are now trying to play the catching game. With elections merely two months away, social media campaigning is heating up with the focus changing to renewed drive for voter registration, crowd funding of events as well as development of election strategies. Social media is here to stay and it is increasingly becoming an indispensable tool for political democracy. With India's internet penetration on a massive upward journey, the reach would eventually extend to not just the educated mass of cities but also perhaps one day become a tool to connect with every Indian, be it urban or rural, be it the skilled or unskilled workforce, be it the elite or the rustic. Social Media is now an extended army of democracy of India from which nothing can be hidden.

Nirbhaya case had cut deep into the heart of people of India irrespective of caste, creed or religion. The unfortunate incident inspired a whole generation to stand together for women's rights and make the state answerable for its citizens. There were calls for social reform that were not based on clichés of being holistic but on equality for men and women in opportunity and access, in education and familial structures. An important part in raising this debate was played by the media, both national and foreign. The amazing characteristic of the nationwide protests was never called for by any political party or a religious leader. It was a people's movement and it was the conscience of the people who made them come out and demand justice for Nirbhaya. Television broadcast the developments all the time but people on the streets certainly were not watching Television. News reached them on their cell phone via Facebook and Twitter and also via other news sites. People received the reactions of prominent people who are respected and hold a special place in society on twitter and got bonded like never before. With so many people pitching in, it was people's movement. Social media also seethed with anger. People connected with each other

on social networking sites, offering an insight into how it has emerged into a space for nuanced debate. Within ten days of the incident, Facebook groups 'Gangraped in Delhi', 'Delhi for Women's Safety' received 5046 and 4263 likes respectively. Other Facebook groups such as 'Delhi Gang Rape – Please Don't Ignore "Must Read" For Damini', and 'Delhi Gang Rape – Protest' emerged as individual fight against such crimes. These groups acted like platforms and gave a voice to everyone, even those who want to protest against sexual assault cases in India even if they are out of the country.

Media activism of a powerful kind, of a type that jolts people out of their comforts and brings them on a same pedestal calling for both, meaningful dialogue and action for a better future, is not to be shunned, but actively promoted through social media.

### **Political Parties, Celebrities and Social Media Presence**

Today, most of the talking happens on social media. India's biggest chunk of population i.e. the young India spends a considerable amount of time on Twitter, Facebook and on mobile messaging applications. The reach might be questioned by traditional media players but today from politics to films, from an actor to a cricketer, everybody has a social media presence and is also using it effectively. With this new wave, brands realized that along with other mediums like radio, television, print, etc the consumer also happens to be on social media.

The novice party of Indian political system, Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) page on Facebook has got over 2 million likes till now. The twitter hashtag #DelhiDecides recorded over 81,000 tweets while #AAPSweeps had 61,000. AAP website even asks for donations, nomination for the Loksabha polls, membership, suggestions through its website and conducts opinion polls. AAP arranges their meetings, protests and agendas through Facebook, twitter, sites and blogs. The party ideologies are shared to individuals through social media and then passed to friends, followers, groups to have multiple effects. Social media is an ideal platform for self-promotion. Daily tweets, status updates, or photos keep celebrities in the public eye. A lot of them make use of several platforms all at once so they can keep all their fans updated. Article 19 (1) (a) of the Indian Constitution is rightly being used by well known personalities like Kiran Bedi, Chetan Bhagat, Farhan Akhtar, media barons like Barkha Dutt, Rajdeep Sardesai. They raise their voice against social issues and create a platform of public opinion formation.

### **Conclusion**

Social media, a relatively newer entrant in the field of mass media, has proved to be more democratic than newspaper and television. Social media has provided the opportunity for citizens who are conversant with the medium to express their views about a number of issues. In many cases groups have been formed by likeminded people who discuss and debate over a number of decisions on the part of the government and seek new ideas for way ahead. The power of the medium can be easily judged from the developments in India in recent times. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter were used to garner support for the rise of the nascent political party Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Social media has been used by various public service organizations, media barons, actors and N.G.Os to inform people about their objectives and also to make them aware of various initiatives on the part of the government as well as non government organisations for social upliftment. The barrier to communication is minimal in this medium which helps in the formation of a participative environment. There is also greater empowerment of the users through higher level of interactivity and flexibility in choice of media outlets. The potential of the medium lies in its ability to be more personalized by offering user-created content (Flew, 2009). Nevertheless, there is the threat of advertising revenues influencing media outputs. Those who control considerable wealth have the opportunity to sway public opinion in their favour with the help of mass media. In the 2G scam the Radia Tapes controversy brought in focus the journalist, politician and industrial conglomerate nexus. Developments like these are a threat to democracy and undermine the media fraternity.

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