



Original Article

Social Media and Indian Politics : A New Era of Digital Democracy

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Abstract:

This paper explores the transformative role of social media in reshaping political communication, participation, and discourse in India. As the world's largest democracy, India has witnessed a digital revolution that has altered the traditional landscape of electoral politics and citizen engagement. The study examines how platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been harnessed by political parties—especially during the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections—to reach wider audiences, influence public opinion, and mobilize grassroots support. Case studies, including the use of the NaMo App and data-driven campaigns, demonstrate how digital tools have enabled direct engagement with voters and changed the dynamics of political strategy.

Furthermore, the paper critically analyzes the challenges posed by misinformation, digital divide, fake news, and online hate speech, alongside the rise of political influencers and youth activism. It also highlights regulatory dilemmas and the need for balanced content moderation that protects free speech while ensuring democratic integrity. Through a mix of empirical data, social analysis, and comparative insights, the study underscores the dual nature of social media as both a democratizing force and a potential threat to public discourse in India. It concludes by offering recommendations for ethical and inclusive digital governance in a rapidly evolving political ecosystem.

Keyword: Social Media, Indian Politics, Digital Democracy, Political Campaigns, NaMo App, Misinformation, Political Communication, Youth Engagement, Political Mobilization, Fake News, Electoral Strategy, Political Influence, Online Political Discourse, Digital Participation, E-Governance

Introduction

In 2014, in the aftermath of India's largest election, Google CEO Sundar Pichai pointed to the emergence of "Jio-Internet." Mark Zuckerberg and the founders of Twitter and Instagram highlighted how the internet will change the narrative of socially underserved communities and help progress in sectors of education, employment, public service, and healthcare. For politicians out of power, renewed hopes were expressed by then Vice President of India Hamid Ansari and others as the new phase will be less patronage-driven. They looked forward to an edifice of communication built on the foundations of information sharing, checks against monopoly, and the right to be informed media. How far has this "shok sabha" dream come true? (Udupa et al., 2019). Within a matter of years, the political architects of a "new India" advised immediate remedial action as hate-fueled political mobilization on social media is run time bombs in jingoistic hands. Politicians are rushing to buy services from communication firms specializing in behavioral targeting. In reply, US Congressman commissioned a special committee on foreign interference in elections, and Singhal supported revealing the stonewalling tactics of every smartphone manufacturer or platform whose app permits communal incitement to rioting, vigilante lynching of tourists, Muslims, and Dalits, and social ostracization of those as "anti-nationals" who associate with dissent. To risk the use of that dreaded term, it is a "paradox of a democratizing medium" that too much freedom of expression has prompted worries about free speech not only among politicians and state functionaries but also among civil society. Could this be yet another instance of net-fueled optimism having once more been undone by naivety? Blog debates erupt in which contributors ask when India crossed that dangerous threshold dividing healthy political participation from political pandemonium. Some caught in echo chambers of social media emphasize the viral sway of the sensational. Others elaborate on thinking about benign co-evolution of the Internet and Indian politics, viewing the present blip as a mere "growing pain" similar to Western experiences.

Historical Context of Indian Politics

Paul Richard Brass has regularly maintained that Indian civilization has been one of the most vibrant forms of civilization. This vibrancy has been evident throughout history and has defined themes such as political participation and citizen's participation in Indian

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civilization. Their impact has been seen throughout Indian history, and many facets have been incorporated into a contemporary setting. A select few of these have been discussed here. This includes the comparative study of the representative, deliberative, and participatory aspects of contemporary democratic institutions and processes.

The study has mainly focused upon what most scholars in political science refer to as a democratic formula in light of which certain principles have been recognized and implemented in the modern political context all over the world. The historical developments in light of which representative institutions, participatory mechanisms such as political parties and interest groups, and deliberative mechanisms such as public comment procedures, public inquiries, and other forms of citizen engagement in policy-making and implementation have been experimented with have been highlighted. This has induced thoughts for the future course of Indian democracy, and questions have been posed as to whether Indian democracy is unfortunate in the sense that deliberative and participatory mechanisms have not yet been incorporated into a representative democracy. Nevertheless, citizen inquiry, citizen engagement in policy-making, implementation and accountability, citizen fora and other deliberative and participatory mechanisms are gradually being incorporated, and a significant and positive feature of this development in federal polity is that many of them have been adopted by many states (Udupa et al., 2019). In post-independence India, the Indian National Congress was dominant for a long time, and the opposition had little success. In such a situation, not many opportunities for political participation arose. Political participation from below was initiated after the reorganization of the states in 1956 and the emergence of regional parties in the southern states. But even during this phase, political participation was largely limited to traditional forms and to caste and religious issues. Concerns were raised about the low degree of political participation as a defining feature of Indian democracy. Concerns were raised about low levels of political activity reflecting failure of one form or another of citizenship or of the failures of political institutions or fears about anarchy or the resurgence of sectarian or non-constitutional authority, and critique of passive understanding of citizenship.

The Rise of Social Media in India

More recently, the nation saw a massive increase of social media platforms and fewer traditional media channels. Various social networking sites, including Facebook, and Twitter have made inroads into the areas where the political parties could not reach. In that backdrop, to reach out to the voters, the current prime minister used social media as a powerful campaigning tool through which he openly challenged the incumbent government. The momentum gained by the ruling party in the 2014 elections led to the why question related to how the ruling party wrested power from the incumbents. The transition of the political environment led to scrutiny in various spheres. With this background, the current study evaluates the implementation of social media strategy for the national elections of 2014. It studies the architecture and the operating framework of the BJP's NaMo App. This will help critically discern its possibility for dissemination, activism of the local party units, user engagement and evolving presence on Twitter in view of the impending elections of 2019. These elections are more so because of the possibility that with the scrutiny on the ruling party the opposition forces have come on a single platform to break the ruling party's stranglehold and use marshalling of different communication channels to reach out to the public. This necessitates a re-evaluation of social media strategy for the pole elections in 2019. For the current study Twitter has been selected as the only having multi-participant communication facilitation (Sharma et al., 2021).

India is the world's largest democracy, yet politically it is a complex nation. This nation has a rich historical past dating back to 8000 years and a political one extending back to the 6th century BC. Over 130 crores of people of diverse faiths and cultures coexist, with over 1700 distinctly spoken languages and dialects. It is a nation of choice and not simply outcome. In this complex democracy, information proliferates a lot, yet misinformation is unavoidable. The change of power earlier involved several traditional media channels, including radio, newspapers and television (Udupa et al., 2019). The rise of telephones and the internet provided access to a wider audience. More recently, the nation saw a massive increase of social media platforms and fewer traditional media channels. Various social networking sites, including Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, have made inroads into the areas where the political parties could not reach. To reach out to the voters, the current prime minister used social media as a powerful campaigning tool through which he openly challenged the incumbent government.

Impact of Social Media on Political Campaigns

Social media promotion has become an indispensable and fundamental part of every effective campaign. Its all-pervasive nature, as well as the large, youthful user base, makes it a potent tool to engage with an audience that would otherwise be hard to target. The politicization of social media promotion has sparked debates about its advantage for democratic engagement. Yet, it begs the question of how social media is utilized and what effect it has on political resources. The success of an online or offline campaign is directly related to the amount of interest and interaction it generates. Virtual campaigns allow people from various parts of the country to engage in a discussion and take ownership of a campaign without physically being present. It broke the traditional barriers to campaign accessibility, allowing the strength of issues to dictate discourse rather than geopolitical locations. Social media is a tool for citizens and organizations to communicate with one another freely while avoiding censorship by the government or other traditional regulating bodies, such as the print or television media. As a result, trust in broadcast media has been steadily dwindling, while internet-based social media has gained unparalleled traction in merely a decade (Sharma et al., 2021). A good percentage of this growing trend can be attributed to the more personal nature of internet communications. As users are not merely dormant consumers in the social media arena, but rather, they have become active contributors of material on an array of topics. Using these tools, people can post views that, unlike those with traditional media, do not jeopardize their safety or reveal their identity or background. Users are sharing, spreading, and passing on their views without caring much about whatever source they use and giving rise to information that is and have gone through minimal censoring. Hence social media acts to boost local narratives that may not have gone through broadcasts through traditional channels. Political experts and scholars claim that the milieu of elections has undergone a metamorphosis from merely an exercise of democracy to a well-planned campaign. Over the last couple of decades, the presence of the internet has increased manifold and so has the existence of social media platforms. Political campaigning on social media gained momentum during the US elections in 2008. Initially, it was used to merely broadcast messages, events, and speeches of political parties showcasing their strength.

1. Case Studies of Recent Elections

In the run-up to the sixteenth Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and in the formative years of the NDA government, several analytical studies were published that focused on the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the elections. However, very few public opinion polls focused on the role of the Indian National Congress in the aftermath of its defeat. This paper attempts to address that need with the following objectives. The 2014 elections emphasized social media platforms. The analytical and testable model considers the usage pattern of various social media platforms. The model was tested with a dataset containing real-time tweets

retrieved using the Twitter streaming API for the tenure of 122 weeks. A semi-automated process was developed to evaluate tweets and classify them based on their content. Various analytical and visualization-based tools were developed leveraging state-of-the-art natural language processing techniques to evaluate the patterns of social media usage and its correlation with poll predictions (Sharma et al., 2021).

A "Data-Driven Invincible Campaign" was the core proposition in the 2013 Bengaluru Namma Ooru elections in Karnataka. A holistic data-driven campaign was envisioned that consisted of aggregating appropriate data unique to Bengaluru and the Congress party, wrangling that data to produce actionable metrics for tactical policy decision-making, scoring potential Congress-aligned voters based on prescriptive analytics, planning and executing campaigns directed at those voters, and continuously measuring the response of the campaigns. As of May 2019, the Bengaluru Congress is the first pro-data political party in the country and has utilized data analytics extensively for various purposes like candidate selection, voter engagement, campaigning, and evaluating campaigns' effectiveness in the recent elections.

In recent years, the emotions of descriptions pertaining to alternative nominations to Chief Minister, the party's tilt to the hard-line, reservation schemes, and farm policy created a significant negativity in the proactive narratives of the party. In contrast, the actor-focused tweets exposed the Congress party to accusations that noise-based politics, by focusing on other parties in the context of price rise and hooliganism in latent discussions, tended to portray the party's desire to divert the attention of the voters. These narratives are shared by the detractors of the party in concerted campaigns. Wavelet analysis indicated that the inflations in such attacks corresponded to frees and rhythms in the proactive narratives of the party. Granger causality tests indicated that contemporaneous attacks of this kind preceded proactive queries and opinions by the Congress party.

2. Strategies Employed by Political Parties

In 2014 elections for the Lok Sabha, the BJP earned extra 50 seats compared to 2009 and was able to form a majority government with NDA leading 282 out of 543 seats. This victory was attributed to the social media strategy of BJP and its IT cell. A few months before the elections, Modi was conducting fundraisers in London and America, and the media frenzy was at its peak. However, people were still questioning his victory in Gujarat especially after 2002 riots and his educational background (Sharma et al., 2021). NaMo App was launched on February 2014, with some features including follow Modi's activities, join BJP and RSS groups, latest updates, track corruption and campaign with selfies. Several complaints were received with misuse of NaMo App whereas there were no queries about the adequacy of product mail. On February 7, 2015, around five months after Modi's announcement, NaMo App was withdrawn. The average asymmetry was lower in cases with a large number of tweets. The Telangana legislative assembly elections were the first state elections after the Indian National Congress became the ruling party of the Telangana state in 2014. Consequently, Twitter was primarily used for campaigning by many political parties. The NaMo App did not gain any traction amongst the users as the campaign was framed as nation-first and a self-promoting campaign. The amount of networked information in hashtag terms was found to be at par with tweets. Currently, with increased implementation of AI, new features such as audio-visual aids, etc., also provide instant updates to followers.

Social Media as a Tool for Political Mobilization

Today, social media has become an integral part of political campaigns that cannot be overlooked by any candidate or party. Political leaders leverage the power of social media networks to connect with a wider audience, engage people, and get feedback on various issues. A tailor-made application is created to receive suggestions from the public, fund events, and communicate future events with the supporters. Initially, it was mere fundamental new age campaigning, but the application helped them penetrate the grassroots in India (Sharma et al., 2021). Technology and intelligence Consultant with the mobile application leveraged SMS and push notifications along with social media making it the best social media campaign ever used by a party. After the successful campaign through social media, there is now a race to stay active on social media platforms where it is a matter of fight for visibility and staying ahead in the race.

In India, Facebook and Twitter have become some of the popular platforms for creating political awareness, campaigning, and discussions. This research paper tries to delve deeper into the effect of the mobile application on Twitter. The 2014 elections surfaced many new generation jingles, ads, catchy lines and slogans, fake statements, photoshopped photos, videos, and memes. The style with which the portrayed and presented its stand about itself, its opposition, and regarding key issues influenced the audience greatly and what majorly lead to the victory was the unprecedented social media dominance which has been achieved. This paper focuses on the effects of the mobile application which is a dedicated platform used to connect to its supporters. Sentiment analysis of the tweets posted regarding the application and understanding whether the sentiments portray any positive, negative, or neutral outlook for the application has been done.

1. Grassroots Movements

The political use of social media platforms has, at the very least, revealed two new aspects of public engagement within the democratic polity of India: first, the widespread everyday political engagement of ordinary citizens from all strata of society; and second, the consolidation of hierarchically different, yet interlinked, modes of political engagement in the country. The rise of social media suggests that Indian democracy has entered a new phase of political engagement that extends and augments previous forms and modes of engagement by utilizing affordances and constraints provided by emerging media platforms. Apart from seeing social media platforms as new spaces for the public expression of opinion, it is also important to see the usage conditions, user experiences, and resulting consequences of these media to understand how social media platforms can qualitatively alter established forms of public engagement. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that consumption and engagement with social media content is always framed by the wider landscape of sociocultural, political, and economic changes at the state, societal, and infrastructural levels (Udupa et al., 2019). New manifestations of political engagement by ordinary citizens occur within long-standing persisting infrastructural controls and restrictions. Layering upon traditional forms of public engagement, the rise of social media as new spaces for the public expression of opinion reveals new facets of the engagement of everyday citizens in politics that are fundamental to any polity but especially significant in the context of contemporary Indian democracy. New modes of political engagement, building upon and challenging earlier ones, are being practiced by ordinary people who, comfortably adopting and adapting global media technologies to the socioeconomic context, mobilize these modalities to express their political opinions and beliefs in relative anonymity, accessibility, and immediacy. Political engagement through social media has also consolidated different forms of political engagement—media exchanges of opinions and beliefs, political internships and affiliations, partisan mobilizations, and political commercial transactions—into both horizontal and vertical accumulative chains: chains of media content that consume and build upon one another; affiliations that form a political network connecting everyday

citizens and elite players from the political, media, academic, and entertainment spheres; and inherited and entrenched political practices and accumulations.

2. Youth Engagement

The majority of young adults worldwide, including India, are using social media platforms. Young adults increasingly utilize social media to formulate political views, share information, connect with others, discuss and resist media messages, and consider political action. The impact of using social media has received less attention in terms of whether appropriate information is necessarily used to influence attitudes or behaviors towards civic engagement. Democracy may consider not merely the technology's features but its societal characteristics. Studies have also concentrated on social media-enabled political engagement, but youths' hope to influence change has received minimal research interest. India is one of the fastest-growing social media globally and applications actively violated hundreds of Indian laws to influence the political landscape. Political motives on social media facilitate exposing government malice and holding them accountable using hashtags, videos, memes, images, audio, etc. The youth generation in India dominating the population has raised concerns on social media, from trolling politicians to rising hate. Cyberbullying, fake news dissemination, and hate-mongering nationalism proliferated on various group platforms, impacting society as a whole. Indian politics benefited by forming issues in support of right-wing populism, reminiscent of historical events. Locally in India, social media fueled similar debates and became the locus of policy and political maneuvering. Other platforms attracted users while showing intention in influencing elections.

Live debates regarding qualms on Cabinet seats, redressal of cow vigilantes, and ranting against rape continue to make headlines and accruing share of views reaching well into millions. Various social networks stirred the polity of Domicile-Riots-Quota. Violence of varied motifs broke out across the nation in cities charging the fullness of heritage and integralism. Political party affiliations and alliances staked by memes and narratives even in popular microblogging pages impacting appreciable following and news consumption.

Role of Influencers in Shaping Political Discourse

In India, political influencers have emerged as leading voices in shaping public opinion and political discourse. In recent years, social media influencers have gained prominence in shaping public opinion, becoming the primary sources of entertainment and information for the masses. Political influencers and content creators have become key weapons of candidates and political parties to woo voters. They share their views, opinions, memes, jokes, and analyses, often garnering millions of views and interactions. Political parties now understand the importance of influencers in setting the political narrative. As more parties embrace the digital revolution, there has been a burgeoning of political influencers in the country. Social media influencers and content creators are no longer restricted to making quirky content; instead, they have moved into the serious domain of discussing politics.

Currently, there are many media houses, platforms, and social media pages that report, discuss, and analyze different political happenings. They help audiences become aware of politics and also read news summaries, analyses, and reports without the chaotic and serious vibes of mainstream national media houses. Political communication on social media is communicating political news and views via social media platforms, private messaging apps, and direct peer-to-peer transfer of political information, opinion, and analysis. Political communication on social media has grown rapidly since the introduction of different social networking platforms that allow users to post, share and comment on content (Sharma et al., 2021). This growth in online platforms and social media usage has helped shape the political discourse of nations worldwide, including the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. However, the momentum gained in India has been unprecedented, forcing political parties and politicians to revisit their communication strategies. Information Communication Technology has transformed political participation and representation, with political parties developing social media strategies to connect with voters personally and help political parties and candidates reach voters with relative ease.

Misinformation and Fake News

The stigma of 'fake news' in Indian media was amplified by inaccurate news reports in the aftermath of the Pulwama terror incident in February 2018 (Dhruv Madan, 2022). Online misinformation is rampant on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, where they share news stories, opinions, and propaganda with the utmost ease and reach wide audiences. A huge amount of fake news has been active regarding the COVID-19 pandemic in India. There have also been hate messages against religious communities compiled and shared in the form of social media. The opening up of Internet toll free service for social media platforms has exposed the loopholes of moderation and fact-checking in controlling misinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown also played a role in driving the use of social media and increasing the number of users. Lack of personal contacts with friends and families encouraged the use of social media. Misinformation is also a part of languages because of many reasons, including language diversity, writing proficiency, and digitization. Almost everyone is on social media, but their proficiency is varied.

Misinformation can take various forms and be circulated in unknown languages. Misinformation that does not appear on mainstream platforms is circulated on social media, creating confusion about the languages in which news is either authentic or misleading. The lack of skills to question the intention or objective of viral news on social media strengthens the system of circulating misinformation. Politicians and political pundits use social media to promote their ideologies among the public at large. Some politicians were able to take advantage of public displeasure and polarization per the need of the hour. Due to their age and social status, they lack considerable access to mainstream media outlets to share their opinions on pressing matters of the public domain.

The accessibility of social media has empowered young homemakers in Indian villages to speak about common issues, such as price rises of household items, corruption, rampant crime, and social injustice. They use these platforms to seek justice against perpetrators who are often closely related to the powerful. Misinformation spreads faster than fact checks. Nonetheless, misinformation is an epidemic. It has made societies vulnerable and on the verge of wars. Cyber trolls and internet armies are changing world politics where nations can only remain as silent spectators. Political polarization and schizophrenia among state actors are creating a buildup in political propaganda.

1. Challenges in Regulating Content

With the unprecedented growth of social media popularity, regional vernacular languages are coming online for the first time. After the explosion of a new networked public sphere, many citizens began to rely on social media as their primary or sole source of news and information. The manifold and conflicting ways social media use is shaping everyday politics in "millennial

India" remain the focus here. New feelings, sentiments, and subjectivities produced in the (dis)affective spaces of social media are enabling fresh agential possibilities for citizen political agency, but these also entail new modes of social regulation fueled by fears of disruption (Udupa et al., 2019). The "Hindu" right-wing politics of memory and sentiment are the centre of analysis. This complex meme-making politics served to delegitimize political opponents while also presenting an assertive identity for ordinary citizens. But by deploying and popularizing stereotype memes, it also shows how social media were subsequently enlisted in new modes of social and political regulation, repression, and intimidation. Content regulation has become a visible point of popular ire. The growth of social media has coincided with the earnest emergence and increasing salience of a networked public sphere in "millennial India." Publicness, brought about by the intensification of circulation, can no longer hinge on conventional beliefs of hierarchical broadcast systems where the government talks (and everyone else listens). Instead, a prosaic notion of publicness is emerging with new horizons of sociality, temporality, and materiality. In this vein, citizens are acutely aware of themselves as both depositories as well as vectors of public agency. As public tastes, opinions, sentiments, and memories are shaped and sculpted by algorithms of circulation, citizen politics that reflects and responds to this atmosphere of unevent is coming to fruition. The seamless tuning between observance and performance of publicness creates new forms of political rituals and myths both of belonging and exclusion. The exploration of the ways citizen publicness not only reflects the socio-political matrix, but also reproduces it, becomes central in understanding this new political subjectivity that shapes citizen sentiments and agency.

2. Impact on Public Opinion

The Lok Sabha election in India held in 2019 was unique in many ways (Sharma et al., 2021). It was the second time the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came into power two times consecutively with full majority. It was the most polarizing election result in the history of Indian elections in that the BJP-led NDA alone won 352 out of the 543 seats. The single biggest factor explaining the BJP's phenomenal performance is sharp polarization over the issue of Hindu nationalism. More than 15 million first-time voters aged between 18 and 19 years were added to the nearly 900 million electorates in the period of General Election 2019. The 2019 elections saw a huge Modi wave. No government in at least three decades puts so much emphasis on one man and his charisma. Opposition parties, meanwhile, focused on attacking Prime Minister Modi. The focus of the BJP shifted from development in 2014 to national security by adding nationalism and patriotism to it. The claim is made that social media played a prominent role in shaping this consensus on nationalism in this election. Social Media is used by political parties extensively in the Indian polity to organize election campaign. Political parties use traditional media as well as social media to reach more voters in the new media society. Infomercials, advertising, blog posts, and tweets are some of the ways politicians can convey their messages. In India, it is estimated that more than 300 million young voters aged between 18 to 35 have either an account on Facebook or Twitter. Since election commission of India has prohibited broadcasting any election campaign on television to ensure a level playing field, social media is a fertile ground on which Indian politicians try to woo voters.

Digital Divide and Access to Social Media

A key feature of International Communication scholarship today is a recognition of the political, socio-economic, gendered, and cultural structures of power shaping Internet practices and online content creation. A diverse range of digital ethnographies, cable internationalism, critical studies of the Youtube algorithm, sceptical accounts of the global turn to video, and critiques of new transnational media cannot only analyze gerontocracy and feudal carceral regimes. Only recently, studies have started building on earlier theorization of actors, geopolitics, and transmediality and networked publics, innovation and migration; notions of cosmopolitanism, diverse articulations of deliberation, publicness, and accountability; and the theorization of discursive, material, temporal and territorial networks of interconnections, and un-constructions that explicate the social reworking of political power through media. Drawing on this body of work, an understanding of how hegemonic, coalition-based, diasporic, and local forms of power operate digitally is important, as is, this notion that digital vectors of change reinforce or rework existing structures of power is salient (Udupa et al., 2019).

During fieldwork among right-wing youth supporters in North India, these notions haunt qualitative data collection and analysis of social media studies of contestations over political expression, marginalization, censorship, and regulatory frameworks. So do literatures analyzing the role of social media in mainstreaming xenophobia, hate speech, and suspicion in political discourse. Fieldwork experiences with the right-wing new aberrant include protest against the anti-corruption movement, activism against social media platforms on a collage of digital threats, and assurances of state efficiency in relaying health information during the 2021 second wave of Covid-19. Such interpretations integrate concerns at the nexus of social skepticism of liberal technological optimism, outrage at digitally mediated hatred, and uncertainties regarding the worth of ethnography. Questions on the proliferation of the so-called digital divide in an already unequal India, access and usage vocabularies of the haves versus have-nots, the undoable nature of caste and the palpable vulnerabilities of the otherwise poorly understood user group are especially pressing.

At a time when an antidote to an interpreting Indian politics through a digital lens was urgently desired, a fieldwork entry should either rely on popular accounts of 'Facebook Genocide', 'Saffron WhatsApp', or 'Social Media Warriors'. Alternatively, fieldnotes must at least evoke reasonable living spaces, nine-odd-member WhatsApp groups, limited audio-only use of share-able bored social media across platforms; pity towards not feeling displaced with something as transformative as social media; and assurances of not being morons or being ideologically fixed in thoughts and patterns. Such underwhelming accounts of social media usages reflect a wide gap between how online spaces deform scholarship and dissociate feelings and experiences off campus. The situation causes worries about engagement with unexplored domains of social media and data ethics, and Facebook's disciplinary mechanisms.

1. Urban vs Rural Access

The digital divide and Internet censorship go hand-in-hand in the contemporary Indian context. For all of India's strides in digital infrastructure, the Internet remains inequitable. One of the most pronounced respects in which this inequity is manifested is the urban-rural divide among Internet users. 80 percent of urban Indians use the Internet, but only a quarter of rural Indians do. At a global level, regarding rural Internet users, India's performance is only better than that of the United States. Beyond censuses and government statistics, academia, civil society, and media also highlight the extreme fragility of India's digital domain (Udupa et al., 2019). On November 7, 2016, citizens of India demonetized their currency and two thousand five hundred rupee notes ceased to be circulated. This upheaval forced people to use digital payment platforms and Internet wallets. Also, under the pretext of fighting terrorism, people of Jammu and Kashmir were denied service providers for months. This many favoured the re-installation of peering points with data base, while the drama of the FPS is played out switched to other devices.

The 2014 Narendra Modi campaign and the success of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) similarly highlight pressing issues of data privacy in the subcontinent. While preliminary studies of the 2014 campaign suggested various ways in which it informed the campaign of this tech-savvy political party, generalizations about its imitative character or brand comparisons failed to understand the subtle heterogeneities of the global politics of technology. For instance, in several instances, large brand establishments have refused to build a presence in India. As such, the discursive construction of development by political parties becomes the means through which contested histories of entrenched democratic deficits in the subcontinent are articulated. A pan-national cuisine prepared separately by regional macro-localities yields a unity and universality to executable models of development.

2. Socioeconomic Factors

In the new digital milieu, social media platforms—particularly microblogging Twitter, instant messaging WhatsApp, and social networking Facebook—have become both arenas and instruments of political communication vis-à-vis the proverbial masses (Udupa et al., 2019). In an era of digital democracy, the nature and modes of political communication have changed in complex and contestable ways. This raises questions about temporal shifts in the quality, reach, and formats of political communication, as well as the new political forms, actions, and subjects these shifts have brought about. Citing intense debates on the desirability, potential, and outcomes of social media as communication instruments and spaces, recent work on the politics of social media has identified a trend toward new forms of political engagement, including participatory practices beyond representative arrangements, collective action through digital crowds, and exposure of longstanding inequalities of favor and disfavor.

Against this backdrop, a textual analysis of political tweets across three of the most recent Indian elections reveals the shifting political epistemologies at play in a period of intense social media communication. Twitter's microblogging format of tweets—textual, simultaneous, and directed toward a named others—enables the expression of familiarity and intimacy between political instantiations and masses. Over time, the textual length of tweets has decreased so that rhetorical brevity has become the hallmark of consequential utterances. The use of hashtags has expanded from the framing of political core issues and actions toward the organization of public commentary on tweets and the advertisement of tweets and threads. Nevertheless, the use of Twitter in Indian politics has produced problematic outcomes in terms of public elaborations of political identities beyond party affiliation and divisions between the worthy and the unworthy political public. Broadly, new faces of political subjectivity are conceivable in an analytic attempt to contextualize digitally oriented political engagement well beyond popular notions of “trolls” and “trolling.” In addition, strengthening and surveillance mechanisms are being set in place, on the one hand, to induce a regime of compliance, acceptance, and allegiance, and on the other hand, to navigate caution in the usage of social media.

Government Regulation of Social Media

While social media is the modern-day conversation that influences the growing political rhetoric and political shifts in any nation, regulating it remains a struggle for the Indian government. Although measures have been taken to address its improper usage, a lot still needs to be done. The government has put in place various regulations and codes of conduct for social media. The main motivators for regulation include protecting the interests of children and their safety, propagating proper rules of conversation, punishing those engaged in racism or discrimination, and preventing the fragmentation of a nation by spreading misleading information. The legislation and federal laws of various countries should be incorporated into Indian laws. An integrated commission or body should be appointed with experience in this field to look into these in proper detail. A parliamentary committee has been formed to focus solely on social media and fake news. The terms of reference of this committee should be on a broader basis like global laws. A similar committee should be created for social media where representatives from various social media platforms, security agencies, and technocrats should discuss appropriate solutions to regulate issues related to social media. As the government has formally taken these issues on board, it is important to support them with technical know-how and other necessary resources. In the present day where security concerns and political uneasiness are rampant, there should be no compromise in the security apparatus. It is true that such things cannot be done in haste and in a typical “bureaucratic manner”, where government agencies tend to sit on a proposal for ages. Proper decisions should be taken at the right time at the right levels and necessary resources should be provided to explore these issues and get rid of unwanted social media content.

Moreover, alternative views should also be included with a greater emphasis on public-policy controversy relevant to the Indian context. With polarised views on various relevant issues like demonetization, drawing attention to all the relevant discussion to the larger audience would providing a fertile ground for debate. All the processes should adhere to the rules of transparency and remove personal biases. Global case studies should be brought to the fore at this stage in order to enlighten the masses on how countries with a similar political ambiance have dealt with such issues (Sharma et al., 2021).

1. Current Policies and Laws

Social media networking sites, forums, and communities have changed patterns of communication and exchanges of information. Citizens can now interact with political leaders like celebrities. Discussions on national issues emerge from various sectors, affecting politicians' career paths, and likely influencing election outcomes. With increasing Internet users, second- and third-tier cities will affect socio-political environments. AMLO and Social Media platforms enable hashtag campaigns, government acknowledgment, and knowledge sharing. The Lok Sabha elections introduced voting systems, addressing complaints and grievances in less than 72 hours. Bollywood endorses candidates on social platforms. Information from various sources now travels across the globe quickly, leading to varied opinions and perspectives. Rumours can destroy a person's image in minutes. Smart media is pervasive in constructing political realities and influencing social and political imagination, with parties adapting accordingly. The Modi government has embraced social media impersonally (Udupa et al., 2019). NaMo App: PM Modi's official communication channel. Like a digital party office, NaMo collects information about the app and offers a vast tech landscape to explore a digital India. Citizens are invited to join meetings, view Modi's daily schedule, and attend events. The personal space of the PM is intertwined with the public of the government. The app can be seen as an innovation to create a digital chain of modernist responses to design action. Social media is a central site of contention and controversy, and the NaMo App augments the wildly uneven growth of newer Internet media in Hindi. Complaints of fake posts, ethnicism, trolling, and security take on new significance because of locality and cultural references, from ‘spoofing’ to candour that is often absent in other media. Smart media is bound to a complex state response, adapting or changing security perceptions (Sharma et al., 2021).

2. Debates on Free Speech

On February 21, 2018, the Indian Supreme Court heard a crucial petition challenging Section 69 A of the Information Technology Act, 2000. This provision allows the Indian Government to block websites and social media groups with impunity in the interest of sovereignty and integrity of India. Social media companies are also mandated to comply with requests for content removal. Not long after the new government assumed office, the controversial "Internet clampdown" has entered the ambit of litigation. A significant aspect of this petition is that it has been filed by an individual rather than a corporate entity, which is considered relatively rare in Indian cyberspace litigation before this. The current petition is one of the several ongoing cases surrounding issues of censorship, data privacy, and surveillance in cyberspace. However, the lawyer in her oral submissions contended that according to the Supreme Court's recent invocation of Article 21 and the right to privacy, "Social media is a basic necessity today... In a democratic setup, it is imperative that citizens enjoy free speech and privacy." Conspicuously missing in this rather extensive discussion of usage, provision, and limitation is acknowledgement of the importance of accountability mechanisms, an absence that is critical to unpacking the politics of "free speech" rhetoric in the Indian social media landscape. Despite the alarming proliferation of hate speech, misinformation, threats of violence, and calls for civil war in a number of online environments, very few instances of punitive measures against these violations have been made public by either the government or social media companies. Likely, the operational processes of these measures are kept opaque. This absence in turn suggests that due to the fact that the problem here isn't "free speech," the deniable lack of accountability is also being "legitimately" preserved. Internet governance in India has been subject to continual tension since its advent.

The early years of this period were characterized by the "Cyber Panic," where Internet-based interactions and transactions were feared to be threatening to the extant social and political structures. The post-liberalization growth of telecommunications led to a much desired "digitization agenda" spurred by new profit pools, and subsequently to a more lucrative online marketplace for information and advertisement. With the ubiquity of the Internet and social media, there is renewed horror over the "post-truth" era created by the rise of misinformation, hate speech, and radicalization. With the shocks of recent events, social media companies are now in the Indian Government's crosshairs, which have reacted with containment measures reminiscent of those during the Cyber Panic phase. With the absence of historically grounded analysis, the misunderstanding underlying the "free speech" rhetoric is at once overly simplistic and yet typically dismissive, a mirroring of the same dynamics constituting the free speech debates in broader Western contexts. The unfolding of this panoptic vision points to how the current moral panic surrounding social media use in India take cues from an original framing. However, it is also indicative of classic indigenous tropes crucial to unravelling the singularities of these debates: that of "the masses" as epistemically invalidity, or "sheeple."

Case Studies of Successful Digital Campaigns

In India, during the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, two classic case studies of digital campaigns merit in-depth examination, as they revealed the innovative techniques employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) to reach out to the youth electorate. These digital campaigns were not run like traditional pamphleteering, but made innovative use of social media and the digital medium, infusing a unique psychological dimension which proved crucial in amplifying the messages sent out to the people of India (Udupa et al., 2019). One of the first instances of Twitter being used in India as a campaigning platform occurred in 2009, when the BJP launched a campaign that sought to woo the youth towards the party's ideologies through a slew of chartered private jets piloted by youth who sought to capture the attention of a celebrity during the same campaign. Over the last few years, crafting humorous and memorable analogies of leaders of other parties have been the bread and butter of Twitterati engaging in political jest, but as the curtains were drawn upon 2019, the BJP embraced the medium that was always but never used proactively to set the agenda of mainstream discourse.

In 2018, BJP MP and candidate, Hema Malini, was trolled for a poorly articulated tweet attempting to speak on the construction of a flyover, only for the party's IT cell to launch a pre-emptive strike on Twitter by posting a video of their own botched job on a billboard. A similar fate awaited the INC when the party jumped into the digital landscape, armed to the teeth with its own arsenal of trolls who were targeting the BJP and government touchpoints months before the elections began in earnest.

1. Example of a Political Party

In the run up to the Lok Sabha polls of 2014, Narendra Modi launched his first official app - NaMo App - as part of his election campaign. A political app that runs on both iOS and Android platforms, NaMo requested all voters to join the change. The NaMo App is developed from scratch to provide exclusive and an all-encompassing experience to users indulging with Narendra Modi's campaign. The App aggregates the content related to Modi's campaign and provides material either in the form of text, photo, and video. To broadcast it, there is an option to share the same through Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, email, SMS, etc. The full Report also geared from the user experiences who rated the App extremely engaging through Reviews - "I have never seen such a smooth User experience on any other App available in India for Politics." The NaMo App has been focused upon as a potential stimulus to propel the first prime ministerial aspirant of India's political history who primarily thrives and campaigns through Social Network Sites like Twitter and Facebook (Sharma et al., 2021). Research was conducted following a quantitative perspective to study the NaMo App's influence on Twitter. The present work aims to present a brief overview of the results and a comprehensive understanding of the research methods, trends, and findings are documented in a consecutive manner.

During the run up to the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Narendra Modi launched his NaMo App for the first time in Indian political history. The goal was to amplify the outreach and gather votes for Modi's documented marketing and that has got an exceptional response leading political campaigning in the country. The voting trends, the gathering of innovation, and the political analytics, expert knowledge were illustrated with the proven case underscoring Modi and the NaMo App. The exponential outreach of social media has driven political parties to actively participate in digital issues utilizing social media networking sites and remixing opportunities to amplify their information, opinion, agenda, and collecting votes for enhancing accountability in the chaotic informational environment. The potential source of ascertaining advances in electioneering political agenda post NaMo's revelation as political involvement 3.0.

2. Analysis of Public Response

Pseudonymous identifies or encourages others to own and operate an account that incites others to use violence and tweet emojis of guns, knives, plus fire, with hashtags related to riots and terrorism, undermining the need for live location information to hold real people accountable (Sharma et al., 2021). Cabot tried to take control of such statements on Twitter, ensuring that perfect accountability exists and human judgment is ultimately involved. In addition to metadata, Twitter utilized machine learning to identify spicy tweets. Twitter was criticized for generalizing hateful and aggressive tweets about group

hierarchies. Various accounts, hash tags, and emoji semantics for the tweets were collated, along with tweets that incited riots and agitation in preference to expressing humor or sarcasm. The Glaive classifier was trained to predict the number of likes and retweets generated by such tweets, and to extract tweet-based alarm templates to pass on to law enforcement. Users' geographic location was handled as a sensitive parameter, and the executives indicated that people shouldn't further share such information to avoid manipulation. BCM + Me_2 was a concept where users volunteered to pass on emoji-annotated tweets in real time, archive them, and calculate which accounts tweeted how often and later use that information intelligently. In return, these users were offered some incentives by Twitter. Twitter keeping chaos under check was a proposed idea. Besides demotivating users from sharing hateful tweets, Twitter needed to heavily penalize a few and exercise control over variety, holding real people accountable behind those pseudonymous handles.

Minors were mentored on the importance of understanding the consequences of sharing information. Navigating schemas to reach out to sources – the why, where, how, who, and what of blogging was taught. To prevent neo-genesis trolls, a hub dedicated to intelligent handling of any rough mishaps was proposed. Twitter also lacked a facility for exporting members' tweets and contacts for use on other mediums. Eventually, users missed out on a lot of unfiltered information, leading to the creation of imitation accounts via APIs, resulting in spam.

Ethical Considerations in Digital Politics

The 2019 general elections in India marked a significant turning point for how political discourse in the country is constructed and consumed. In 2009, 2014, and 2019, the most transformational abundant objects for political information creation and (re)circulation were WhatsApp messages and viral videos. Whispers and rumors were responsible for influencing the outcome of the elections between 2009 and 2014. Politically contested memes, especially videos and images targeting political opponents or incumbent powers, began gaining noticeable political traction between 2014 and 2019, especially on newly emerged platforms, such as TikTok and Facebook. Overall, digital media were instrumental in convincing polarization in political positions taken by individual citizens on social media platforms. Once anything newsworthy is put online, it enters into a new relationship with time, in which incremental closure of the hermeneutic distance is continually pursued. The structurally open nature of the digital media ecology allows a certain mode of access to users that exposes them to an ever-increasing volume of information and opinion, rendering selective attention an urgent problem (Udupa et al., 2019). This widening, if not infinite, horizon of information retrieval limits the relevance of any single item. Consequently, the speed of online circulation becomes paramount as the index of relevance for an item's precedence in public consciousness becomes suspended indefinitely. Also, public attention to anything in the news is easily shifted elsewhere by the media's preference for new information over old. The efficacy of any item at making a persuasive case and legitimating intelligibility therefore cannot be assumed in advance. Each journey through the media is contingent on the affordances of any mode of publication and (non)reception. The public potential of any information to compel belief or propel action is continually subject to reinvention. The intent of this article is threefold. First, it examines the larger context of the social media markets in India. Second, the main affordances of the social media systems with an emphasis on commodification are discussed. Lastly, it investigates how the affordances manifest across particular platforms with reference to the case of the Indian Electronic Media and its cash for news reporting.

1. Privacy Concerns

Growing attention to social media platforms has raised concerns about how digital media affect traditional power relations. Analyses have focused on the impact of social media on elections and the visibility of protest movements. The more recent rise of a messaging app as a political tool adds a new dimension to the political economy of social media. The spread of digital connectivity in India has created new opportunities for the collective expression of political and social grievances. Diverse political actors, including party organizations, party leaders, political workers, government officials, and media persons, now produce and circulate participatory content referring to news events and political happenings. This emergent aspect of political participation complements the proliferation of political tweets and posts, status updates as well as ownership of user-generated content on these and similar platforms. Growing anger against prevalent social ills such as corruption, caste-based discrimination, and gender violence has triggered competitive output of vernacular narratives on diverse platforms, in addition to content management by political parties and state institutions. At the same time, these conditions of participation present challenges to accountability and deliberation because of the disjointed nature of the online public sphere. The pre-eminence of the old media, particularly their newspaper websites offering well-researched articles and in-depth interviews of political leaders, is visible in the vastness of the Twitter sphere when infused with self-talks and fake accounts.

Diverse social participations and contestations have relied on different social media practices, from hashtag activism to video capture, political tweeting, content management of pages, and the use of audiovisual clips. One key feature of the networked political actions in contemporary India is that they are shaped by the self-work of ordinary publics. With the growth of Internet media and affordable connectivity, avenues for amplifying political voices have also opened for ordinary citizens. The movement against gender-based harassment and activism online in India hold testimony to the disruptive effects of social media. Cases of targeted, abused, and beaten individuals are going viral on social media platforms. Harassment of women as a political tool is again showcased by obscene political advertisement films and sexual commentary on women politicians. Instances where male politicians have expressed their feelings via social media have been reported. Clip-based careless speeches have been trending in social media circles, while bigger publicity budgets seem to matter less. Social media echo chambers are defined as self-created spaces such as social media feeds and message boards where a filtered version of the world is presented and contested primarily among like-minded peers. In these echo chambers, views and interests are heard and recognised, shaped and debated. This phenomenon potentially leads to view fixation, closed-mindedness, and increased ideological polarisation and fragmentation, as exchanges among different viewpoints drop altogether.

2. Transparency Issues

Among these issues, in the context of social media and democracy, one important concern is the opacity of firms' operations. Specifically, there is a need for regulation (and self-regulation) on the control over platforms, but how to do so without putting at risk free speech and democratic values? Simply enforcing the same rules prevalent in a traditional media environment will not suffice. In answering this question, new understandings of technology's role in shaping public discourse may also come to light. These new understandings may pertain, for example, to the appropriate combinations of the roles of public regulators, industry self-regulation, and users in order to produce democratic and healthy online discourse (Udupa et al., 2019). On the side of social media firms, new understandings of the appropriate limits of their role in public discourse may emerge, as well as of these firms' responsibilities in propagating hate speech, disinformation, and other democratic ills, and the possible remediations for them.

New understandings of in-transparency and its negative effects on public discourse may help find solutions in this domain as well. Possible paths of research in this area include the definition of categories of public discourse malaise, considerations concerning applied research methodologies, and empirical studies developed in South East Asia, Brazil, Nigeria, and the US, followed by corresponding comments by other inquiry leaders in the area.

Meanwhile, the emphasis on action-research is a sign of hope that might offer ways of counteracting such malaise. Potential paths and technologies for doing so include academic crowdfunding of subscription-only academic journal articles, grassroots data leaks, public exposés of anticipated abusers, and other means of liberating publicly-owned knowledge from the top down. In the long run, the most potent antidote to the lack of transparency of both social media firms and new forms of public discourse is the discovery of better and trustworthy technologies supported by an informed movement of co-users.

Future Trends in Digital Democracy

The future of Indian digital democracy is dependent on how geographically and digitally expanded political participation and collective action will materialize. Will Indians transform grievances into political action, or succumb passively to social media's gossipy, fan-like dynamics? Will mass mobilizations re-emerge in traditional formats, or will they be digital-native and more online-centric? Will ruling parties compromise on their exploitative mechanisms or adopt more invasive technologies, or both? Will social media act to equalize participation, or further amplify political inequalities? Will states recognize the irreplaceable democratic functions of social media and protect them, or will they see social media as a new frontier of threats? What new groups will emerge, how will they mobilize, how much do they spend on technology, and how much is too much? Will digital peasants make national politics? Will targeted hate speech return? Will new data protections be enacted? Answers to these questions are tied to choices already being made (Udupa et al., 2019).

Recent protests in India highlight the exponential possibilities of traditional forms of mobilization finding new objects and tactics of digital engagement. Retaliating against cyber-anarchists is as much the future of Indian digital politics as unleashing their avatar, for controlling public messages is as important as producing them. State capabilities to answer political grievances and social conflicts will remain central, regardless of whether they are manufactured digitally or traditionally, and whether states choose to control rather than contain them. On the other hand, technology companies will remain germane to both expanding and constraining the avenues for expression. States and platforms in concert can choke off opposing figures' voices while amplifying fanaticism. Sifting rhetoric does not distract from the violence against the opposition and the habitual acts of bullying, trolling, gaslighting, screeching, and attacking in bad faith targeting the producers of opposite rhetoric, who are ready to push back and in turn victimize community members entrenched in the mainstream narrative.

1. Emerging Technologies

Stargazing in the 21st century entails scrutinizing social media platforms—the digital infrastructures on which contemporary politics, economies, and societies unfold. The promise of the network society—a citizenry empowered by participatory media formulating discourses outside the teleological arc of state and market—has become, by 2020, very different social and political realities that are reshaping major global developments: the rise of ultra-nationalism; the Islamophobia-fueled politics of xenophobia; and the proliferation of conspiracy theories about circulating viruses. Such developments entrench long-standing oppressions or instantiate novel patterns of retaliation, discursive actions animated by everyday forms of political participation imagined yet unrealized. How are experiences of empowerment and despair mediated by and inscribed in media practices? How do participants understand their digitally mediated realities and make sense of the affordances of social media? What social and institutional factors coordinate these efforts and configure their effects? How and what discourses propagate through participatory actions? What kinds of publics and senses of subjectivity coalesce and circulate as participants engage with conservative and progressive discourses? Empirical research examines these and other interrogations.

The variety of participations and contestations documented in the contributions have relied on an equally diverse panoply of social media practices: hashtag activism, video capture, political tweeting, and content management of pages. One key feature of networked political actions in contemporary contexts is that they are increasingly shaped by the self-work of ordinary publics. With the growth of Internet media and affordable access, avenues for amplifying political voices have expanded for ordinary citizens. The movement against gender-based harassment and activism online testify to social media's disruptive effects. Yet, it would be naïve to assume that social media expansion has translated into inclusive empowerment that can address entrenched forms of oppression. Cautioning against the celebration of participation as empowerment, "millennial" gestures toward conflicting faces of digital politics—new forms of civic engagement imagined to be above "divisive traditional politics" and the unabashed violence of digital circulation evidenced by incidents of vigilantism.

2. Predictions for Upcoming Elections

Events surrounding the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 are going to be little different from what they were in 2014 and 2019. New tools, technologies, and platforms would be utilized to draw attention to issues and candidates, to engage related audiences, and to counter adversarial perceptions. And the election campaigns, both traditional and on social media, will communicate ongoing issues and perceptions associated with candidates, polarizing them in the minds of the audience. Most importantly, there will be more transparency in campaign communication and better tools for detecting misinformation. However, anti-vaccine campaigns and conspiracies that could evoke health fears could be a hallmark of the 2024 elections (Sharma et al., 2021). One major strategy that political parties and the election commission can emulate is better transparency for campaign finances on social media, since a sizeable portion of the media budgets is increasingly directed to social media. A platform holding election ads should publicly disclose their sponsors and the amount spent on running them. There is evidence that non-disclosure and anonymity in content sponsorship can and has been exploited to disinform and influence perceptions, an issue from which India and other democracies are not immune to.

There are also several technological solutions that can help social media protect the state of democracy in the country. Social media channels can develop systems that would allow freely-donated budgets to a political party in free speech and democracy. Automated tools can help channels detect biases, misrepresentations, dishonesty, and misinformation associated with party and candidate perceptions but are slow to reach currently. A day could be devised where every account of a politician or political party is given 24 hours of blackout time, possibly at a critical time, forcing the campaigners to devote the time and money to finding other mediums.

Comparative Analysis with Other Democracies

Digital social media affordances have implications for assemblages of various actors and nets of power in different contexts, demonstrated through comparative analyses against digital politics in the Philippines, the U.S. 2016 elections, and more

broadly, practices of online political expression across Southeast Asia. As political actors enact agency and experiment on the sites of social media platforms, they contest rival claims to legitimacy. These analyses draw attention to the entangled relationship between structural conditions (e.g., platform rule, state policy) and actors' self-work towards target goals. Such analyses illuminate the need to treat political action and assemblages as situated and contextually specific across multiple scales (Udupa et al., 2019). Digital media scholarship has yielded insights into new practices of civic engagement on social media, particularly among users who platform ideologies, oppositional narratives, and political identity. A comparative focus on contestation dynamics is needed, attending not only to agency but also to deterrent forces, such as fake news and trolling, that compromise political expression on platforms. These forces need to be understood not as prior threats to political action but as part of the political assemblages affecting the formulation of news values, conditions of expression on social media, and forms of engagement both welcomed and regulated by political actors. By doing so, this understanding would enable an exo-ethnography of digital politics that places civic engagement under scrutiny, focusing on how online politics are assembled across platforms, across domains of action and non-action, bound by degrees of affinity.

1. Lessons from Global Practices

The chapters of this book drawn on field observations and interviews with distinct stakeholders—civil society activists, independent media professionals, working politicians, party insiders, and political industry practitioners—offer a preliminary consideration of the implications of the widespread social media engagement in Indian politics that is unfolding as the assimilation of digital technology is accompanying the expansion of democracy ever more. To make sense of the data-rich but conceptually limited sound bites, memes and “breaking news” that cross paths in the Andhra Pradesh political landscape, there is value in examining statements about digital politics that emerge from a cluster of case studies on global practices from which some early lessons can be drawn to better understand the implications of India's digitally crowded political ecosystem. These lessons begin with an observation that is perhaps a bit more general than specific to political digital engagement but one which should be acknowledged: it is a brave, new, and in certain respects dangerous world, where the meanings of democracy, citizenship and the rights of individuals as members of a nation or community are being vigorously contested, surveilled, monitored, and perhaps unavoidably transformed (Udupa et al., 2019).

Mobile Internet activists by the millions gather each day to share with others their ideas, beliefs, and opinions. This burgeoning activity crosses national, cultural, religious, and other boundaries too many and complicated to easily map. All political movements, even the most ancient and archetypal, are overdue for major re-examination.

2. Cultural Differences in Digital Engagement

What does social media “do” in political communication? This question has motivated narratives of disruption, trivialization, and change in journalism and elections, and has generated cross-domain investigations of media effects on democracy across global contexts. In India, this discourse is simultaneously taken up and challenged with a variety of scholarly and journalistic accounts documenting shifting communication and information chains for political messaging, engagement, and contestation. Broadly, these accounts resonate with several nodes of the above-mentioned “what social media does” questions. They discuss how social media has facilitated the expanded use of audiovisual messaging by politicians to question the factual basis of news coverage, the attractiveness of innuendo and subjective judgments over accuracy and accountability in political commentary, and the mobilization of millions for street protests demanding political change (Udupa et al., 2019).

In a more fragmented and competitive mediatized world, they also touch on the rising “noise” in public affairs discourse, the rise of nativist antipolitical politics that espouses exclusion, and the changing fortunes of large, established, transnational press entities evidencing panic and ad hoc super-heroic investments in digital units. Social media practices such as crowd-sourcing commentary through hashtags have increasingly shaped debates over the authenticity of prime-time hospitality, effectively hijacking the intimate agony of lived experience in public affairs, and drawing attention to bias, racism, outdated tropes, and ethical impropriety. As a compendium of development experiments in live struggles for corrective justice and hope, “millennial India” presents a variety of participations and contestations in the unfolding of India's digital politics since 2012 as it concretely and inevitably examines what social media “does” in political communication. These encounters speak to two changing but distinct historicities of media in public life. On the one hand, they afford fleeting and disaggregated glimpses into a media culture of passing commentary of public happenings that affect, enrage, and amuse people across myriad media forms. On the other hand, the taking-to-the-air of “ordinary” discourse may be accounting for a retreat from the public sphere on the part of traditional parties in India, working through familiarly undemocratic means—money, punch, and the sacrifice of new crude structure on the more venerable ‘brain.’

Conclusion

The advent of social media has changed the way politics is viewed and practiced in India. What was once the exclusive territory of the elite and the privileged class, with only the educated and experiential politicians allowed into the realm of politics, has now become a new arena for all (Udupa et al., 2019). With the access to social media, it has become easier for the masses to question, challenge, and analyze the policies and actions of politicians. The emergence of social media as a tool of communication has hastened this process. Anonymity has broken down the barriers of class and status. Critical jokes and memes mocking Modi have emerged on social media. The latest political developments are interpreted by the social media, and the latest controversies are shared and analyzed.

The participation of the middle and lower classes in online commenting on news sites and social media platforms has resulted in a deluge of critical comments against the ruling government. It literally flooded the mainstream news media with reactions and criticisms of Prime Minister Modi's latest moves. All the government policies, be it the move that last month to tie the subsidies to the direct bank transfers for the cooking fuel cylinders or the two-cuts service tax in the last budget or the announcement of the ‘Modi’ phone, were dissected publicly in various tones and ways across social media. Politicians have become a topic of joinable jokes and conversations, enabling a new perception of politics and the politicians. The complacency of the rulers with planned ignorance and disinterest has led to a perception that politics is an elite affair and cannot be touched or challenged, leading to censorship and self-censorship. The fear of bared words of ridicule and criticism, often relying on strange words, has permeated the political discourse leading to hyperbole.

In this rapid escalation of social media as new tools of communication in politics, it has been the expressiveness, flexibility, and manipulability of the word that have become dominant. The assertion that the domain of knowledge production has expanded can be backed with ample evidence. Politics, which was once exclusively confined to the hermetically drawn soil of the elite, privileged, and educated, has now found its way into the lives and habits of the masses. The newly-acquired right to speak

and challenge has led to unforeseen exaggeration and comic interludes. And nowhere but in digital sociality has the representation of the absurdities of politics found a wider reach.

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