

Changing Nature of Political Narratives in Indian Elections: An Analysis of Social Media's Role in shaping Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The changing nature of electoral communication over the past decade and the formation of new media discourse have transformed the electoral landscape of the Indian election. The past decade has also seen a significant shift from the use of traditional media platforms to social media platforms in election campaigning. Digital platforms provide users with space for social connection, engagement, and to express their pervasive online presence, thus also creating their digital identities. The increasing complexity of both media systems shows how digital technologies also interact with real identities. Media systems have also gone through significant changes from traditional media logic to hybrid media logic. A Hybrid media system contains components of both traditional media logic and social media logic, which interact and sometimes overlap. This paper examines how social media platforms have brought structural shifts in the processes and actions of political actors, citizens, and electoral management bodies. It also seeks to explore how new media system interacts with changes in the communication strategies of political actors and the creation of new digital discourse. Social media platforms extend the public sphere of citizens and provide an alternate space as online profiles where they write, share, and become part of a community for users having similar ideas. Increasing use of social media sites for political discussion, news consumption, and citizens' increasing political engagement sometimes paves the way for discourse for mainstream media. It also gives them a sense of "networked self," which allows them to express the different aspects of their identities in digital spaces. Also, these digital platforms need tighter ethical and regulatory frameworks for curbing voter manipulation, fake news, profiles, and political micro-targeting through new, emerging, sophisticated technologies.

Keywords: Hybrid Media System, Election, Social Media, Digital Discourse.

Introduction

Regular free and fair elections are one of the central features of democratic governance. Citizens play a pivotal role in the governmental process, in which they voice their opinions through votes. In the classic notions of democracy, citizens are expected to make informed, rational choices about their representatives based on information from the news media. However, Herman and Chomsky (1998) criticize and extend this argument further, that new media oversimplify the complex political issues and elite media actors set the agenda, topic for discussion according to their needs, which suits them, and manufacture the consent of the public. In this competing scenario public is marginalized, which has very limited choices for relevant information.

The rise of internet-based communication technologies has indeed widened the "public sphere" of citizens, where they can interact directly with each other and also with political elites. These media platforms provide greater and easier access to information and also a digital space for public participation, which in turns strengthen the democracy. As Habermas (1989) argued about the "Public sphere," which is the sum of all public dialogues, and it is performed through which public openly discusses and debates in the public spaces and governmental realm, and it is an active process of citizens' participation. Rather, "public opinion" is a static attribute of citizens that can be easily measured at a time (Chen, 2013).

Social media has brought some structural changes in the working and mechanisms of political parties, and it has opened a new digital space for citizens' attention and participation (Jungherr, 2023). Although the field of inquiry of digital media and political communication is not new, but there is very little substantial scholarly evidences which establish any causal relationship between the impacts of digital media on electoral outcomes, power relations, and the nature of party systems, and that research is generally descriptive in nature. As Jungherr (2020) also mentions, the four functions of Social Media are: Organizational structures and work routines, Resource collection and allocation, Achieving presence in the information space and reach, and digital media use as symbols. Digital media has changed the organizational structure of parties and campaign personnel, in which parties recruit dedicated team of experts for digital campaigns. With increasing sophistication and the need for technical experts for content generation, the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data Analysis for personalized campaigning, the need for political marketers and campaign managers is the need of the hour.

Earlier traditional media systems, which include print media, television, magazines, and pre-internet communication channels, in which information is passed through gatekeepers and citizens are the passive recipients of information. As Jungherr (2020) also argues, "As parties and campaigns cannot rely anymore exclusively on traditional media to ensure their presence in information spaces, they must become information providers themselves and achieve distribution through new and alternative media providers and channels". Parties are now also becoming primary sources of news through their dedicated websites and social media accounts, where they regularly tweet political information and relevant issues. The contents of the digital media sometimes also serve as primary information for traditional media, parties, candidates, and social media influencers, blogger used to share information and organize events which attract the attention of traditional media platforms.

The traditional model has a "two-step flow model" where news content and information flow from media outlets, institutional actors, to key influencers and opinion makers and then is disseminated to the public. However, social media provides spaces for continuous engagement and active participation with a series of interactive content in the form of images, videos, and memes. As argued by Chen (2013) "Social-media conversational trends are visible and provide strong signals to mass media and elites about public opinion. Social media platforms provide users with digital spaces for real-time engagement through comments, likes, sharing, and discussions through which citizens actively consume political contents which helps them to form their public opinion". Additionally, from the earlier time rhetoric has been a central part of the political process, which traditionally means "art of persuasion," through which politicians seek citizens' validation and accountability (Roe-Crines, 2025).

The digital transformation of news and information channels from traditional media logic to digital media logic has also forced political parties to adapt to the digital transformation for their online presence and voter reach. Political parties also use social media platforms as a symbol to assert their professionalism, significance, and rhetoric, and they try to get space in the public narrative through social media platforms. Recent scholarship on Social Media Analysis (SNA) argues that there is an increasing trend of using emotional messages on political, social, and cultural topics, which is termed as "effective polarization," leading to increasing dislikes for other parties and candidates (Lee & Blevins, 2024).

Contrary to the scholarship about the rise of digital media, which has undermined the relevance and death of parties, Chadwick & Stromer-Galley (2016) argue about the changing and renewing of their structures. They noted that "In some cases, parties are renewing themselves from the outside in. Citizens are breathing new life into the party form, remaking parties in their own changed participatory image, and doing so via digital means. The overall outcome might prove more positive for democratic engagement and the decentralization of political power than has often been assumed." As the findings and comparative analysis of both the United States and the United Kingdom (UK) of Aldrich et al., (2015) also suggest that there are considerable differences between both countries regarding the reach of online contacts. In the US, online messages have a diverse audience similar to that of traditional media, and it is becoming mainstream in nature, and in the UK, the model of informal communication is more formal communication between parties and leaders of the US. India has more than half a younger population that embraces technologies and ardent user of social media platforms. Parties are now embracing social media platforms as a tool to connect with voters, bypassing the traditional media channels to raise their issues and party agenda more effectively, directly to voters.

New Media and Political Discourse in Elections

Communication is the most fundamental aspect of human life, and through communication human mind interacts with each other and forms ideas, and it also shapes power relations. Castells (2009) highlights the importance of

“Networked Societies,” which is “the multimodal mass media and the interactive, horizontal networks of communication built around the Internet and wireless communication. Indeed, these horizontal networks make possible the rise of what I call mass self-communication, decisively increasing the autonomy of communicating subjects vis-à-vis communication corporations, as the users become both senders and receivers of messages” (Castells, 2009). These technological shifts also highlight the transformation of the nature of media from mass communication to mass self-communication in which citizens create and disseminate content.

The advent of internet-based communication has personalized the campaigning for both parties and candidates, and the reach of the online audience is somewhat smaller compared to the offline mediums (Aldrich et al., 2015). As compared to the Western media ecosystem, the transformation in election campaigning from traditional media to digital media in India is a smooth, gradual, and continuous process. In recent times the term social media is used widely and in simpler terms; it is an online space for production, distribution and storage of user generated contents where a large section of the population actively engages with each other (Chen, 2013).

In the Indian context, the transformation from traditional media to digital media has been rapid, and new phenomena and are still in the phase of evolution. As Chadwick (2017) argues about the transition as new media system which he called “Hybrid Media System” in which he defines as “The hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizational forms—in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics”. Indian media system bears the characteristics of a hybrid media system in which both media logics co-exist and complement each other, where actors of both media systems cross their boundaries with each other, set their goals and agendas within their media settings. BJP has successfully utilized the hybridity of the Indian media system bypassed the traditional media system, and reaching out to voters effectively (Neyazi et al., 2016). However, digital media is different from traditional media in its participation, mechanism sharing, and volume of information, and it also takes fewer resources and time to reach a larger audience (Dimitrova et al., 2011). It opens a new avenue of communication for all the stakeholders of electoral communication and decentralizes the information system, which also gives parties and candidates campaigning spaces that they would otherwise need more resources and manpower for mobilization. Regional parties and local candidates generally get less space on traditional media platforms, for them, social media plays a pivotal role in raising the regional and local issues and connecting with their audiences in their regional language.

Agenda-setting theory, which depicts how the media give importance and space to some issues and transfer issue salience from the news media to the public agenda, however, McCombs et al., (2014) have a different opinion about the social media role in agenda setting as compared to traditional news channel. The fragmentation of mass media audiences and the increasing use of social media platforms for entertainment and news purpose has seen substantial growth over the past decade. Feezell (2017) in his findings also notes that citizens which has low political interest and with the current media environment, have greater tendencies for influence through social media. This also argues about the role of social media in setting the discourse through “...if people are exposed to incidental news through social media, and it appears that they are, then social media may convey political information to users and perhaps, therefore, have an agenda-setting effect that reflects the content of mass media” (Feezell, 2017).

In the United States social media-based campaigning has been site of debate since the 2008 presidential elections. Earlier, Obama also used digital platforms extensively to reach young voters in the 2008 and 2012 elections. In the Indian context general election of 2014 marked the first personality-based or organized Americanized style campaigning model and this proved to be a watershed moment for election campaigning and the use of social media in elections. Subsequent election of 2019 was hailed as the first social media election by many scholars and academicians. As Lee and Blevins (2024) also argue, “discourse on social media ranged from the reasoned to the emotional”.

The diverse population, cultural and religious differences, despite the symbol of unity and diversity, also seems to be fertile ground for misinformation and fake news. One of the major hurdles of tracing and combating fake news is that it emerges through closed groups and platforms such as WhatsApp it very difficult to proliferate due to end-to-end encryption of these platforms (Jain & Bandhakavi, 2021).

Social Media and the changing nature of political Narratives in Indian election

The increasing role of media and communication with the inception of the Internet has also affected the political landscape. The increasing use of digital media, the flow of information among both leaders and citizens, and the young, active population have highly mediatized the election. Mediatization is a long-term and continuous process that has a direct impact on parties, citizens, and campaigning methods, and it also has spill-over effects (Strömbäck &

Esser, 2014). From the last two general elections there is an exponential increase in internet and social media users. In 2014, there were about 200 million internet users and 100 million active social media users (Rodrigues, 2020). As of early 2025, there are 806 million internet users and 491 million social media users, which is 33.7 percent of the total population (Kemp, 2025).

The use of social media for political purposes is a new phenomenon, and the 2014 general election marked as starting period. Tracing the journey of political use of these media platforms, following the India Against Corruption movement in 2011, members of this movement formed a political party under the leadership of Arvind Kejriwal which was actively present on social media, and later formed the government in Delhi. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a clear first-mover advantage since the general election of 2014, when it first effectively used digital platforms for election campaigning. In the 2014 general election BJP's prime ministerial candidate used social media as a direct communication channel for connecting with potential voters, and this marks the remarkable changes in campaigning methods. Although there exist huge digital divide and less social media penetration in the 2014 election, traditional media has played a vital role in amplifying and complementing social media, and is very crucial for connecting with 150 million new voters (Rodrigues, 2020). After the successful campaigning strategy of the BJP in the 2014 election, almost all the major political parties chased the trend and set their dedicated teams for social media management in the 2019 general election, which was hailed as "first social media election" in India.

Modi and his social media team have successfully crafted an image with engagement with celebrities, influencers, movie and sports stars, which brands his image as a tech-savvy leader. Several hashtags like #ipaydigitally, #indiafightscorruption, #selfewithmodi, #AccheDinAanewaleHai, in the 2014 general election, which advocates about development and change. In the 2019 general election twitter(X) campaigning of #chowkidar, #maibhichowkidar, and #ModiHiAayega through the BJP dominated the digital campaigning landscape and pushed their agenda (Rodrigues, 2020). In the 2024 general election, with the BJP, Congress, and regional parties also successful in sharing their agenda predominantly through Twitter(X) and Instagram, and WhatsApp a primary medium for sharing information within peer groups. Twitter trends such as # BharatJodoYatra, #IndiaAlliance of Congress, and #AbkiBar400Par backfired on the BJP's campaigning in the 2024 general election.

Social media also plays an important role in building the political agenda of Modi, which later diminished the mainstream media's power to question the actions of the Modi government (Rodrigues, 2020). The role of social media in the 2019 election is well argued, but the impact of social media and any profound impact is still debated. During the 2019 general election, at the demand of Election Commission of India, major multinational companies agreed to the Voluntary Code of Ethics (VCE) for free and fair conduct of elections, which includes awareness of voters, to take measures against potential violations of election misconduct, and disclose information about the political advertisements on these platforms. Amid the 2024 general election, the Election Commission of India released a notification on 6 May 2024 about the ethical use of social media during the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) period. The guideline states that "...social media for election campaigning, which needs to be regulated in the interest of transparency, ethical campaigning, and a level playing field during the elections.

Twitter is widely used for getting breaking news and knowing about the global pulse at any time, and it gives regional based trend and overall citizens' orientations at the time. Some Twitter(X) of politicians also gained mainstream media attention way back, as Arvind Kejriwal raised about granting Delhi statehood, Rahul Gandhi uploaded a photo during the 2017 Gujarat election, which sparked debate and headlines on major news channels (Singh, 2024).

In the general election of 2024 notable role of social media influencers is also seen for mobilizing young first-time and disinterested voters. In a conversation with Vinay Deshpandey, co-founder of Rajneethi, a political consultancy firm, Deshpandey shares that "Social media content is powerful and can influence the way a person feels about an issue". In the 2024 general election, the BJP is also ahead of its rival parties, and the BJP has almost double follower on X (formerly Twitter) than its rival Congress, and the dedicated IT Cell department manages over 50 lakh WhatsApp group (Paliwal, 2024).

There is also growing concern about trend manipulation and artificial trends by which political parties create misleading perceptions about likes and dislikes and about a common issue. As Jakesch et al. (2021) reveal that in the 2019 general election, the BJP has used a network of WhatsApp groups for trend manipulation, and the author has joined such 600 groups. In such groups, pre-written text and images, and cross-platform resources, are used to "hybrid configuration of technologies and organizational forms that turns online supporters into a manageable political resource". As of the report, suggested that the BJP has around 900,000 volunteers for managing their WhatsApp campaigning (Jain & Bandhakavi, 2021). Twitter (X) engagement data shows that from 2014 to 2019, there was about

600% increase in Twitter engagement. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the most mentioned political face, and BJP4India is the most popular party on the platform (Chaturvedi, 2019). This raises an important question of whether campaigning on these platforms is really publicity or propaganda (Hendrix, 2021).

The last general election has also seen the use of newer technologies, data analysis techniques, and personalized targeted campaigning techniques, which have somewhat affected and manipulated the voters' natural choices. The general election of 2024 has also witnessed the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and generative artificial intelligence for campaigning, which raises serious concerns about deep fake videos, doctored images, and tailored audio images that take days to process and generate are now being generated by a simple command of these generative platforms. Artificial intelligence-based platforms and their usages are not only limited to election campaigning and voter manipulation, it is also used for voter education, manifesto matching, and election management (P et al., 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

The rise of digital media has changed the social context and organizational structures of political parties, and there is a transformation from the print and broadcast era to the analytics turn, which is based on technology-driven, data-driven experimental campaigning. Over the past decade, social media campaigning has become an indispensable part of campaigning, and now it is becoming one of the central aspects of campaigning. Contrary to the traditional media, which is hierarchical in structure, digital platforms provides many to many communication in real time with immediate feedback to political elites. Although new media or digital media are seen as complementary to traditional media, both media systems have a lot in common with their audiences. These social media platforms also provide new avenues for personalized campaigning of individual candidates through which they connect with regional and local audiences and raise their issues. This also marks the decline of visibility of parties in the digital sphere, and more emphasis is given on individual personalities. Parties, leaders, and candidates are now sharing and criticizing through catchy interactive images, videos, and reels, blogs, caricatures of a shorter length which reaches to larger audiences. Another meta-analysis on social media analysis establishes that social media has a positive influence on engagement and political participation (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018).

These media platforms provide open spaces and large audiences, which proves to be easy for raising important issues, interest which is not covered by traditional media. The virality of information from the grassroots level, public grievances, public gatherings, movements, and protests are often raised by parties, and then it is covered by traditional media. There is a need for strong regulation of these media platforms from misuses and fake news, disinformation, hate speech, and possible voter manipulation through AI and big data analytics.

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