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Impact of social media on Indian politics in contemporary Era

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Abstract

The rise of the internet in the early 1990s, has led to the increase in the world's networked population. The networked population has greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech and a better ability to undertake united action. Social media has become a fact of life for civil society world over, involving many actors - regular citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, and also governments at large. Social media revolution in the Indian political scene is real, tangible and accelerating. Keeping an eye on upcoming Lok Sabha elections, the objective of this article is to study the impact of social media *viz.* Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and You Tube on Indian politics. No doubt social media is now being seriously considered by the Indian political parties as a mean to reach out to the electorate, but will it influence the Lok Sabha Elections in the same way as in Obama's Presidential elections? Social media has gained importance with the rise in youth population in India.

Keywords: Social media, digital democracy, social media and politics, E-Governance

Introduction

Social Media mirrors the real world and is all about conversations. Social media facilitate the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on and create content as means of communicating with social graph, other users and the public. Social media has emerged as a major tool where citizens are able to talk about the issues of day to day life and also of national importance. In 21st century, Facebook, Twitter and You tube are not just innovations in the internet world, but are fast emerging as influencers and opinion creators. What is the impact of social media in politics of a democratic country like India? With so much 'buzz' being created about social media and as more youngsters are joining in, the political parties have finally woken up to its importance. Everyone is recognizing this new and powerful medium to interact with the masses and make them participate and thereby enabling better communication. Indian politicians, be it young or old have started experiencing the impact of social media in one form or the other. Now, almost every political party used the social media to get their message across the masses. Political campaigns are in no way just limited to buttons and banners for politicians to reach their constituents. The new political arena is full of commercials, blog posts, and hundreds of tweets. Through social media, politicians are now able to constantly display their message through endless commercials, see direct responses to their actions via Facebook or Twitter, and connect with public (Foley, 2013) ^[4]. Social media creates a new political dialogue. It takes the power of political messaging away from the mass media model and places it firmly into peer-to-peer, public discourse. The word of mouth advertising—a recommendation from someone you trust—is the most powerful form of persuasion and social media creates multiple levels of trust based on relationships.

The Rise of Digital Democracy

Digital Revolution: In recent years, India has witnessed an exponential growth in internet penetration and smartphone usage, catapulting millions of citizens onto various social media platforms. Democratization of Political Discourse: This digital revolution has democratized political discourse, providing individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds with a virtual platform to voice their opinions, connect with like-minded individuals, and hold elected representatives accountable.

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- **Micro-Targeting and Personalization:** Political parties are using data analytics and artificial intelligence to tailor their messages and target specific demographics with precision.
- **Influencer Marketing:** Influencers and social media personalities wield significant influence over their followers. Political parties are using this phenomenon by collaborating with influencers to amplify their messaging, increase visibility and sway public opinion.
- **Real-Time Communication:** Using social media platforms, from live streaming rallies to hosting interactive sessions, politicians are leveraging these platforms to cultivate a more authentic and accessible image.

Positive Impact of Social Media on Indian Politics

- **Direct Engagement and Personalized Outreach:** These social media platforms have facilitated direct and unfiltered communication, enabling politicians to share their policies, perspectives, and visions instantaneously.
- **Democratization of Information and Participation:** Social media empowers citizens with diverse sources of information, fostering political awareness and enabling individuals to form opinions beyond the confines of mainstream media.
- **Revolutionizing Election Campaigns:** Hashtags, live sessions and group chats became indispensable for political parties, enabling them to interact directly with constituents, address concerns, and showcase achievements.
- **Empowering Grassroots Activism:** Social media's impact transcends traditional politics and extends to the realm of social movements and grassroots activism.

Examples: Movements like the Anti-Corruption Movement and the Nirbhaya protests found a platform on social media, enabling individuals to express grievances, organize protests, and garner public support.

- **Reshaping Campaign Funding:** Crowd funding and micro-donations through social media have democratized the funding process, enabling smaller parties and independent candidates to compete with more established players.
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- **Reshaping Data Analytics:** The advent of data analytics and sentiment-tracking tools has revolutionized election forecasting and public sentiment analysis and offers valuable insights for campaign strategists.
- **Bridging the Gap:** Social Media has increased the ability for ordinary citizens to take part in the political process and also has been actively used for influencing diplomatic relations between India and other countries.

Example: The Saksham App of ECI provides a number of features to help PwDs.

Arising Challenges that Need to be Tackled

- **Fake News and Misinformation:** The proliferation of fake news and misinformation poses a significant threat to the integrity of political conversations. The rapid sharing of unverified content can distort facts and manipulate public opinion.
- **Amplifying Polarization and Echo Chambers:** Social media has been criticised by many experts for its contribution to the amplification of ideological polarization. Users are exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing echo chambers that hinder healthy political debates.
- **Unequal Participation:** Social media distorts policymakers' perception of public opinion as it is believed that these social media platforms tend to represent every walk of life, but not everyone's voice is heard equally.
- **Disparity:** The distribution of effects around the world was also striking. Positive effects on political participation and information consumption were most pronounced in emerging democracies in South America, Africa and Asia. Negative effects were more evident in established democracies in Europe and the United States.

Way Forward

- **Media Literacy:** There is a need for investing in media literacy programs to equip citizens with the critical thinking skills necessary to identify fact from fiction and navigate the digital landscape responsibly.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Political parties and social media platforms must adopt transparency and accountability measures to combat misinformation, protect user data, and uphold ethical standards.
- **Regulatory Reform:** Policymakers must collaborate with industry stakeholders to develop robust regulatory frameworks that balance the imperatives of free expression with the need to safeguard democratic values and public welfare..
- **Digital Inclusion:** Bridging the digital divide through targeted interventions aimed at expanding access to digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and fostering inclusive online spaces for political engagement.
- **Role by Election Commission of India (ECI):** The ECI must ensure parity of treatment between political advertising on social media and traditional media and should strictly enforce model code of conduct and should increase vigilance on cyber activities of political parties.

Conclusion

The symbiotic relationship between social media and Indian politics is a double-edged sword, replete with opportunities and challenges. As technology evolves, it is imperative for policymakers, tech companies, and society at large to collaboratively navigate this terrain, harnessing the benefits of social media while mitigating its potential pitfalls. The advent of social media has enabled an unprecedented empowerment and engagement of the 'aam aadmi' for expressing political opinions. A positive development of social media emergence has been that the youth is talking about the political issues. Earlier the political discussions were restricted only to those who read newspapers, watched news channels or participated in discussions in nakkad of a village or clubs. But now, social networking has made the youth of India to sit up and discuss political issues. They spend time to analyze and discuss politics. They now have views on the happenings of political events and they also influence the administrative decision making. But getting the youngsters together to vote in elections and using social media as a platform to help political parties is still a pipeline dream. It may take decades in India to replicate USA in the use of social media campaigning and to influence the voters. so we should always participate in all electoral programmes for awakening our rights and values also.

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