

Social Media as a Tool of Political Communication

Dr. Francis Arackal
Amity University, Haryana, India

Abstract

Since the US elections in 2008 the close connection between Social Media and political communication has been brought to the fore. The effective role that Social Media has been made to play once again in the 2012 US elections and its conscious or unconscious replication in the 2014 Indian elections reaffirmed its significance in contemporary political communication. Scholars have confirmed that political candidates are increasingly turning to Social Network Sites (SNS) to persuade voters and that these sites have become prominent sources of political information. Political Communication as a field of study has been about the role of communication in the political process. This paper would like to focus entirely on Social Media as a tool in the political process. Political communication has its beginnings during and between the World Wars. There are various types of political communication and political media. Among the political media the Social Media seems to be the most widely used in contemporary political process. The three main elements of political communication are: ideology, propaganda and persuasion. The deployment of Social Media in putting forth one's or party's ideology, propagating one's or party's agenda, and persuading the voter is widespread as never before. Many scholars including Walter Lippmann doubted the efficacy of media in public enlightenment that democracy requires. For, they thought that media cannot tell the truth objectively. Harold Lasswell too took note of the tendency of media propaganda to dupe and degrade the voters.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Communication, Public Relations, Advertising, Political campaign

Introduction

The ubiquitous presence of social media has taken control of contemporary human life in almost all its aspects.¹ This is all the more perplexing since the social media has been here only for a decade or so. It won't be an exaggeration to state that social media has ushered in the biggest media revolution since the invention of the printing press. Being very much aware of the omnipresence of the social media the political class as a whole and individual leaders and candidates for various political posts have taken to the social media in a big way. This was exemplified dramatically with Barack Obama's effective use of it in the 2008 US Presidential elections. From then on there has been no looking back both for politicians and voters as far as the use of social media as a tool of political communication. By using the social media as a campaign tool Obama was able to capture the imaginations especially of the youth both in the US and abroad.

Naturally, the youth turned out to be the biggest chunk of supporters and voters for Obama's social media refrain: "Change we can". The social media momentum as a tool for political communication was kept up all through the four years of Obama's term of office and used it even more vigorously and effectively in the 2012 US election. Again, success was Obama's. The political class and leaders in India tried to replicate the US scene in the Indian elections of 2014. Narendra Modi came out victorious due to his more imaginative and massive use of the tool. Thus in the two largest democracies of the world social media established itself as the easiest and probably the least expensive tool of mass contact and communication. The present paper would like to examine and explain this latest phenomenon in the sphere of politics. Prior to doing that let us clarify some of the key concepts related to the topic.

Politics and Communication

According to the Blackwell *Encyclopedia of Political Thought* politics is "a process whereby a group of people, whose opinions or interests are initially divergent, reach collective decisions which are generally regarded as binding on the group, and enforced as common policy." This is especially true in coalition politics in which the main objective is to somehow capture power. And coalition politics is a contemporary reality in many countries of the world – India, UK – including Greece, the cradle of democracy. Not everyone is or must be interested in politics. For instance, a majority of today's youth is disinterested in politics due to what they perceive as deteriorating standards of political discourse, moral

¹ It is necessary to qualify this statement due to the obvious 'digital divide' that still exists in different parts of the world.

values, and leadership. A good number of those joining politics do so after inheriting a hereditary political mantle (belong to political families) or due to money power, which is a must for greasing one's own political machine.

In simple terms communication is the transfer of information from one entity to another. Political communication then is the sending of political messages through inter-personal, group or mass contacts. Chaffee (1975) defines Political Communication as the "role of communication in the political process." In Meadow's (1980) words Political Communication is "the exchange of symbols and messages between political actors and institutions, the general public, and news media that are the products of or have consequences for the political system." According to McQuail (1992), "Political Communication [...] refers to all processes of information (including facts, opinions, beliefs, etc.), transmission, exchange engaged in by participants in the course of institutionalised political activities." Media fulfil instrumental functions in political communication as a reporter of events, as a platform for the expression of political opinions, as an instrument of political party organization and weapon in inter-party conflicts, as a watchdog on governmental actions, as an instrument of government for information and influence.

In the end we may have to accept Mc Nair's (1995) view that the term 'political communication' is notoriously difficult to define with any precision, simply because both components of the phrase are open to a variety of definitions, more or less broad.

Origin and History of Political Communication

Political Communication as a field of study emerged during and between the two world wars. It took off with the study of propaganda used especially during the war. Harold Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927) noted that the people had been duped and degraded by propaganda during the war. Hence early focus of political communication was on war, fascist, stalinist propaganda resulting in a general preoccupation with persuasive effects of political messages through media. Of course, the first period of communication studies (1920s-1940s) was characterised by a belief in omnipotence of mass media, even though the main media present were only newspapers, magazines, and radio. With the coming of internet this belief has been all the more confirmed.

In the 1940s-1950s the first empirical studies of media effects, in particular campaign studies, were done. From this it was found that there were low levels of information, high levels of partisanship, and habitual voting. The 1960s were a decade of political and social upheaval in the Western world and Australia. Advances in communications technology meant that revolutionary ideas and voices of dissent could rapidly be transmitted and received around the world. Television was becoming the main information medium. Commercialisation, visualization and tabloidsation was becoming common in the media field. Professionalisation of political communication started with political marketing and campaign consultancy.

Blumler J.G. (2001) speaks of three ages of political communication: the first age from the 1950s characterized by easy access to media, political communication reflecting partisan positions, strong and stable political institutions. The second age 1960s to 1980s marked by limited-channel network television, consumerism, public skepticism about elites, increasing importance of political communication, and increasingly important role for media in political process, "the modern publicity process". And the third age from 1990s to the present has been witnessing proliferation within and beyond mainstream media, abundance of channels, unlimited reach, and possibility for interactivity. Internet has made possible virtual public sphere and e-democracy. Abundance of media has resulted in hyper-competition: 7X24-hr programmes, news cycle, and vying for TRP. Populism has set in and there is the 'talk-show-democracy' for all to see.

Public Sphere

This paper would like to propose that social media is a tool for political communication since social media has become the new public sphere. Jürgen Habermas² is one of the first to speak about the concept of public sphere. By the concept of 'the public sphere' Habermas means "first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Giddens, 2001). In *Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere* Habermas defines the public sphere as "a network for communicating information and points of view" which eventually becomes public opinion. Thus Habermas develops the normative notion of the public sphere as a part of social life where individuals can exchange views on matters of importance to the common good, so that public opinion can be formed. The public sphere comes into being when people gather to discuss issues of political concern. These discussions must take the form of rational-critical debate. At such debates emotion or emotive language is avoided and focuses on the rationality of the content alone. What brings the participants together is their common interest in truth, which meant that they set aside status differentials (individuals participate on equal footing). When such discussions and debates takes place in a large public body, they require specific

² Born on 18 June, 1929, Habermas is a German philosopher and sociologist. He is the first one to introduce the concept of 'the public sphere'. He is linked to the Frankfurt School of social thought. The School was inspired by the views of Karl Marx. It undertook an extensive study on the 'culture industry' – the entertainment industries of film, TV, popular music, radio, newspapers and magazines. The school is critical of the industry for undermining the capacity of individuals for critical and independent thought.

means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Till the internet and world-wide web appeared newspapers and magazines, radio and television (so-called old media today) were the media of the public sphere.

Agenda Setting

Media research from the 1970s have shown how media set the agenda for policy makers and the public and how policy makers (politicians) can make use of the media to influence the public. According to the agenda-setting theory, propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s, mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues. McCombs and Shaw, professors of Journalism at the University of North Carolina in U.S. – Chapel Hill – undertook what is known as Chapel Hill study, and demonstrated that the mass media could influence audiences in ways only previously speculated.³ It appeared that issue salience, or what the public considered to be the most important issues of the day, was being shaped by the mass media. McCombs and Shaw labeled this phenomenon “agenda-setting”, observing that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues”(McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Stated in a slightly modified form for our purposes, we can say that politicians and the public make use of this agenda-setting strength of the social media for political campaign (by the candidates) and for endorsing [following]⁴ or opposing (by the public) respectively.

Methodology

There is consensus that the goal of social research is to increase our understanding of society. Media research belongs to the Social Sciences realm. The contemporary generation lives in a media-mediated society, especially through the social networking sites. Hence politicians make use of social media for election and political campaigns to appeal to the voters, in particular to the youth. This is a recent phenomenon, in the political realm as a whole, in many countries. To understand this phenomenon the methodology employed in this paper is descriptive-explanatory. A descriptive-explanatory study generally attempts to describe a social phenomenon by specifying how it is happening and explain the reasons for it (Bailey, 1994). The paper attempts to describe social media as a highly effective tool for political communication. Explanatory statements vary greatly in scope and complexity, but all explanatory statements contain concepts. Concepts may be observable or non-observable (Bailey, 1994). In this paper concepts have referents that are readily observable such as the various social networking sites and how they are put to use for political communication.

Types of Political Communication

We can delineate many types of political communication: secret communication in politics in terms of bargaining over the number of seats to be contested, for instance and negotiations over policies and programmes; private communication about politics through inter-personal debates; public communication of and about politics through deliberation, information and rhetoric; horizontal communication in the form of interaction within elites or among citizens; vertical communication between government/elites and public, which is mostly top-down. The elite to masses nature of political communication can discourage participation. Of course, the elite to masses political communication is changing due to the penetration of internet, which we shall discuss later. The types of media that can be used for political communication range from personal contacts through hand outs and pamphlets, direct mail, newspapers and magazines, television and social networking.

Elements of Political Communication

The three main elements of political communication are: Ideology, propaganda and persuasion.

Ideology

The term ‘ideology’ was coined by the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy in 1795. “The concept of ‘ideology’ is often used in the media and the social sciences, but it is notoriously vague. Its everyday usage is largely negative, and typically refers to the rigid, misguided or partisan ideas of others: we have the truth, and they have ideologies” (Van Dijk, 2005). It is said to denote the general science of ideas, which was to clarify and improve the public mind. It was given currency by the French Revolution, by Napoleon, and by Marx. Later the term developed in many directions: Any systematic and all-embracing political doctrine, which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society, and to derive therefrom a programme of political action (Scruton, 1996).

An ideology is a system of ideas and beliefs about human conduct which has normally been simplified and manipulated in order to obtain popular support for certain actions, and which is usually emotive in its reference to social action (Watson and Hill, 1984). It also Refers to the important ‘belief systems’ adhered to by groups or whole societies - it is

³ In the 1970s nobody could have even imagined that social media would have the kind of multiplier effect that it has been having in the last few years, especially among the youth and through the youth, in the political sphere.

⁴ Following/liking on Twitter/Facebook.

our 'world view' or 'mind set' concerning how things are and ought to be. A society is a group of people who share certain key values and ideas. These values and ideas are called that society's ideologies. In Marxist and Marxian theories 'ideology' denotes any set of ideas and values which has the social function of consolidating a particular economic order, and which is explained by that fact alone, and not by its inherent truth or reasonableness.

Propaganda

Propaganda is a manipulation of the symbolic environment, and under certain circumstances be shaped by that environment. Propaganda messages seek to bring about much the same result as war but in a non-violent manner. It can be termed 'psychological warfare'. Paul Linebarger (1954) defined psychological warfare as "comprising the use of propaganda against an enemy, together with such other operational measures of a military, economic, or political nature as may be required to supplement propaganda". Harold Lasswell (1951) says psychological warfare is a recent name for an old idea about how to wage a successful war: "The basic idea is that the best success in war is achieved by the destruction of the enemy's will to resist, and with a minimum annihilation of fighting capacity". Development of new technologies of communication has altered the way propaganda is disseminated. Total propaganda campaigns will encompass all available means of communication. Communication Technology, especially Internet, has revolutionized propaganda.

"Propaganda and information management are normative aspects of modern democratic societies. Far from being exceptional, anomalous or aberrant elements in the democratic process, propaganda is a constitutive aspect of 'actually existing' democracy, democracy in the mass society" (Robins and Webster 1999). Political propaganda is 'the one means of mass mobilisation which is cheaper than violence, bribery or other possible control techniques' (Lasswell in Robins and Webster, 1999). Modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group.

Persuasion

Persuasion is a communicative process to influence others. A persuasive message has a point of view or desired behavior for the recipient to adopt in a voluntary fashion. A recipient relates to, or contrasts the persuasive message with his or her existing store of information, beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. A persuasive message can fulfil the need of both persuader and persuadee. Persuasion is transactional in the sense that people respond to persuasion that promises to help them in some way by satisfying their wants or needs. Hence persuader must think in terms of the persuadee's needs in the first place. Persuasion is a reciprocal process in which both parties are dependent on one another. (E.g., Politician – Voter dependence)

Political Public Relations

Public Relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. Public relations helps an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Political actors rely on communication to reach their key audiences, yet the term 'political public relations' is rarely used. Rather, commentators tend to refer to the term 'political communication' (Chaffee 1975, McNair 1995). Yet throughout its historical development there has been a clear link between public relations and the political sphere. There is evidence that public relations played, and continues to play, an important role in the development of democratic representative government. Ray Eldon Hiebert's (1966) biography of the early American PR practitioner, Ivy Lee, noted that in 1921 he made the link between politics and PR clear: "We live in a great democracy, and the safety of a democracy will in the long run depend upon whether the judgements of the people are sound. If the judgements are to be sound, they will be so because they have the largest amount of information on which to base those judgements." "Political PR is not a practice in search of an altruism or moral ideal. It is rooted in the pluralist, self-advantaging promotional culture associated with liberal democracy and free markets. Above all, it is communication designed to further the interests of its senders. They would not invest resources in PR if it were otherwise" (Moloney, 2006).

Public in Mass Society lack the information, knowledge and capacity to make appropriate political decisions (Graber, 2010). Political public relations can provide a voice to those who wouldn't necessarily have one - which is why true public relations does not exist anywhere other than a democracy (Lewis-Jones, 2008). PR acts 'as the enabling mechanism for public debate, therefore for public opinion and the public sphere' (L'Etang, 2006).

Political Advertising and Marketing

Advertising is a public promotion of some product or service; it is the business of drawing public attention to goods and services. Advertising in turn facilitates marketing. In the days when politics has become a business (especially for many political families such as the Bush family in the US) it is hardly any wonder that politicians resort to advertising their products (party and its promises to voters). Politicians invest money in promoting the political products in the hope of getting a handsome return. In 2012 politicians and political parties spent \$6 billion on advertising (Steel, 2012). But there is a need to distinguish between "contrast" ads pitting one candidate's stand on issues against another's, and pure negative advertising. In fact political ads are more negative than regular advertising. In the US there seems to be no accountability for

such ads because of 1st Amendment free speech rights. Academic research is divided on whether negative ads reduce voter turnout.

Political marketing involves treating voters like consumers, i.e. politicians and political parties use the same sort of communication techniques deployed in advertising and marketing to 'sell' themselves to voters. Politicians and spin-doctors become increasingly like salesmen competing for a piece of the market. This has resulted in politics and politicians being seen as just another product (like computers) to be sold using techniques like emotionalism, branding, packaging, aesthetic manipulation, and hype.

Because of the popularity and reachability of social media, it has become the prime locus for advertising, including political advertising. It is Barack Obama who pioneered this trend from the 2008 US elections. In the age of social media simply outpacing a rival by blanketing the airwaves with television ads no longer translates into a guaranteed win, say political consultants and advertising executives (Steel, 2012).

Political Spin doctoring

It is 'the attempt by an organization or individual to systematically influence the coverage of the news media through: [1] the planned production of information and events and/or [2] the creation of a manipulative relationship with journalists and media executives' (Bob, 2011). Pseudo-events takes place: (a) 'is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted or incited it; (b) is planted primarily for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced' (McNair, 2007). Some of the government advisers are in fact spin-doctors. Their activities often lack transparency and regulation. They make use of techniques such as leaks and off-the record briefings.

Origin and growth of social media

Some media scholars trace the history of social media to 1792 when telegraph was invented. From the point of view of its format – short – a telegraph message resembled today's Tweets – 140 characters/words. Telegraph was a revolutionary way to convey news and information. Pneumatic post⁵ developed in 1865 was another way for letters to be delivered quickly between recipients. Two important discoveries – Telephone and Radio - in the last decades of the 19 century enabled people to communicate across great distances instantaneously. The discovery of computers in the middle of 20 century and the Internet in the 1980s gave impetus to the thought of networking among people. In the developed world home computers were becoming common and social media took off in the form of Internet Relay Chats (IRCs). According to social media historians Six Degrees, created in 1997, was the first recognizable social media site. It enabled users to upload their profiles and make friends with other users. By 1999 the first blogging sites (e.g., Blogspot.com) became popular, creating a social media sensation.

Social media began to explode in popularity with sites such as Orkut, MySpace, and LinkedIn in the early 2000s. Sites like Photobucket and Flickr facilitated online photo sharing. YouTube created in 2005 provided an entirely new way for people to share videos online. But it is the founding of Face Book in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 that really catapulted social media as a world-wide phenomenon. Google+ tried to imitate Face Book's success but failed to catch up. Other sites such as Tumblr, Hi Five, Spotify, Foursquare, and Pinterest looked to cater to specific online needs of netizens. Today and in the years to come one cannot think of a world without social media. Social media is going to exist in some form or the other. Naturally political parties and politicians are trying to maximize its benefits for political communication.

Impact of Social Media

The impact of social media has been multifarious. Social media has challenged every aspect of contemporary life – social, cultural, religious, commercial, business, educational, travel, health and so forth. The focus of this paper is on its impact in the political sphere. Research has shown that social media has been very effective in marshalling public opinion and encouraging political participation, mobilizing voters in joining in online petition, posting short messages on Face Book and Twitter, expressing political support through blogs and uploading videos on YouTube. It is really a great leap from the times when political parties and candidates were dependent mainly on posters, cardboard, cut-outs, graffiti, banners and door to door campaigning to win over voters. We would like to examine some of these aspects in detail.

Social Media and Political Campaigning

Campaigning is an operation or series of operations energetically pursued to accomplish a purpose [e.g. an advertising campaign for a new product; a candidate's political campaign]. A political campaign is an organised effort to influence the political decision making process within a group /institution. In democracies, political campaigns often refer to electoral campaigns, wherein representatives are chosen or referenda are decided. Campaigning involves communicating your messages to a variety of audiences (local government, media, the public) and through different means (letters, leaflets, handouts, meetings, newspapers, magazines, radio, television and for the last decade or so the internet). It is since the 2008 US elections that the social media has emerged as a leading tool for political campaigning. It is said if the 2008 US

⁵ Pneumatic post utilized underground pressurized air tubes to carry capsules from one area to another.

Presidential elections embraced a 24/7 news cycle 2016 candidates are finding themselves in the middle of an election starkly defined by Twitter, complete with 24-second news cycles and pithy bursts. Twitter has emerged as a critical tool for political campaigns, allowing them to reach voters, gather data, and respond to charges immediately.

In contemporary times, however, campaigning is not restricted to the election time (season) rather it is ongoing, permanent campaigning, which refers to a shift away from being concerned only with communicating to voters during election periods. Instead elected politicians increasingly engage in on-going communication campaigns geared to present to the world positive images of themselves and their political parties. Effectively, contemporary politicians are permanently 'on show' and permanently engaging in impression management to maintain a positive impression of themselves with their constituency. Even after the 2008 election victory Obama did not cease to be on the campaign mood, which perhaps explains his unexpected triumph in the 2012 elections. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken a leaf out of Obama's campaign model and strategy. Modi too since coming to power in 2014, though with an absolute majority in the *Loksabha* (lower house), is on a permanent campaign mode. Of course, in the Indian political scenario since there is intermittent elections to one state assembly or the other, winning which is so very important for Modi and his party to have a majority in the *Rajya Sabha* (upper house) this is explicable. Even otherwise Modi has a big social media presence, largely built up on the Obama model. The wealthy and powerful Gujarati diaspora in the US has been obviously behind Modi's social media presence and its effective use in the 2014 general elections in India.

Social media use in political campaigning involves inter-personal constructs: Usually most voters discuss political topics and candidates with others, using those discussions to evaluate information while forming their own opinions. Their conversations include exchange of information, political arguments, and issue-specific news. Social media's inter-personal effect could be more among the youth as they read more news online and turn to the internet more often than any other source.

Social Media and Political Advertising

With social media becoming popular a significant portion of advertising has been shifted to social media platforms. This is also true for political advertising. Some estimate that 2016 US elections will fetch roughly \$1 billion in online political advertising and Face Book feels it is on track to increase its revenue from previous elections. According to experts "Big data algorithms allow advertisers and political managers to better target consumers online based on their social interactions across the Web and Face Book" (Chahal, 2013). But it turns out that internet does not have infinite capacity for political ads. Therefore premium space on the web has to be booked when it matters most. And the new game in political advertising is micro-targeting: at an atomized, individual level. At the same time there is a reasonable concern as to the effectiveness of social media advertising.

Social Media and Political Public Relations

In the time of old media politicians and candidates hired public relations firms to connect with their constituencies and voters. But in the social media era a political candidate cannot really be in the game if he or she is delegating social outreach to staff. His or her public relations has to be done on a personal level. The staff can, as they do in other areas, support that communication. The essence of that communication begins, however, with the candidate. Candidates who pass *all* of their social media engagement on to the staff will be missing big opportunities for authentic engagement with supporters. Politicians and candidates need to get involved in social media not in a cursory manner but in ways that have opened the lines of communication to an audience clamouring for transparency. They have to put social media to work for them by creating a conversation (dialogue) with their constituents. Social media communication strategy should be custom made depending on the communication that needs to be done.

Social Media and Political Agenda Setting

In general media has had two main functions: Mirroring society and agenda setting. Ordinarily, with exceptions mirroring society objectively, is what media supposed to do. Researches have shown that media also set the agenda for the society for its larger good. It's a normative function from which a responsible medium cannot run away. But with the arrival of social media the agenda setting function of so-called mainstream media or old media has been diluted if not taken away altogether. When political actors of all hues as well as citizens can use social media to draw attention to pertinent and pressing issues of society the agenda setting role of traditional media can only be on the wane. Surely, social media use of political agenda setting gets intensified in the run-up to elections.

Social Media as the New Political Public Sphere

What has been said above with regard to social media's role in political campaigning, political advertising & marketing, political public relations, and agenda setting makes it amply clear that social media has become *the forum* for political debates, discussion and opinion making. In other words it is the new public sphere. This of course can happen only when governments exercise the democratic imperative of net neutrality. Social media is also increasingly integrated in inter-media agenda-setting, as they serve as input to the mainstream media. The increasing cross-mediality between social media

and the mainstream media can be described in terms of creating “hybrid public spheres” in which the social and mainstream media overlap and interact (Bruns, 2012). The hybrid public sphere can challenge traditional power hierarchies and elite domination.

Conclusion

Once upon a time television was seen to be the dominant medium of political communication. In contemporary times social media is the default place where people spend their time and discuss issues that matter to them. Marshall McLuhan said Medium is the message. And like television before it, the social media will largely determine who is electable. Voters will be far more accustomed to being a fan of their political representative on Face Book and/or Twitter because it is becoming one of the main ways in which they communicate with. What we are witnessing is political communication coming full circle with social media: focus was initially on personal grassroots contacts, then it shifted to mass media, and is now returning to a one-on-one trust model in the digital age. It is said that to win at social media you have got to keep it personal. Social media as an inter-personal political communication tool will in all probability be the future. But this inter-personal touch will not go far wherever there is a digital divide. Besides, due to technological constraints concentration of web and other media delivery platforms in the hands of phone, cable, and satellite providers will give ample scope for sabotage, abuse, and chicanery. This is a serious limitation of social media as a tool of political communication.

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