

Use of Social Media for Political Engagement: A Literature Review



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With the rise in popularity of Social Media, politicians all over the world have started utilizing it for sharing their views and engaging with their followers. Comments of Facebook users have been found to positively influence the attitude of the viewers of the comments. Some researchers found that political socialization achieved through Social Media can be more powerful than traditional media. Thus, considering the growing use of Social Media for dissemination of political ideologies, more in-depth studies need to be conducted. The current research paper reviews existing studies in this context and provides direction for further research.

Keyword: Social Media; Politics; Political Campaign

1. Introduction

In this age ruled by different social media where people from diverse backgrounds come online to meet their friends and strangers alike in the virtual parallel world, marketers could not have been left behind! Social media which was once created for personal interaction among people has broadened its scope to include different activities of life. Marketing has got its latest platform to connect with consumers, engage them in interactions and ultimately utilize this platform for achieving organizational objectives. Similarly, politicians have been using various social media sites to connect with their followers and other common people in order to propagate their views, disseminate information and engage with political discussion, among other topics. The development of social media has led to the public being better informed about key political and economic issues of public concern. Social media is also playing a visible role in the competition among political factions (Bui, 2016). Social media has changed the political landscape and sparked a broad democratization of information faster than the mainstream media.

It is widely believed that Barack Obama won the Presidential Election of the USA in 2008 with his intelligent use of Twitter to spread his message among the voters (Bimber, 2014). During the Presidential election in 2012, Obama's campaign had much greater ability to respond in real time to unfolding commentary around political events (Kreiss, 2014), which probably facilitated his victory. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is another glowing example of politicians who have cleverly utilised social media to influence common people and subsequently win elections. Kenya's 2013 general elections too witnessed the critical role played by social media in shaping political landscapes (Bing, 2015). Social media has become so critical that the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, had to issue a statement that Facebook did not influence the recent Presidential Election in the USA in which Donald Trump has been elected as the President! Now the use of social media has become almost imperative in many countries of the world. The rapidly growing popularity and importance of social media can be understood from a study which reveals that political Twitter users are more interested in and engaged in politics in general and less trusting of the mainstream media (Bode & Dalrymple, 2014).

Considering its importance in influencing people to participate in various political activities, especially related to election, a thorough study of various social media for their role in political engagement is needed. Although social media is an emerging platform for communication, researchers have already started their work and studied the role of social media in political context. The present study provides a brief over view of the existing research in this field and subsequently suggests avenues of further research. In addition, this paper provides a comparative overview of the journals which accept such kind of research papers.

2. Methodology

Literature was searched in Scopus database with the keywords "social media", "politics" and "political campaign" for the period starting from 2010 till 2016. The keywords were restricted to search only the titles, abstracts and author specified keywords provided in the research papers. Only journal papers were chosen as generally journals are peer reviewed, while the same cannot be assumed for many conferences and books or book chapters.

2010 was chosen as the starting time as indexing of articles is available on Scopus since then only. Thus information about research in the last seven years is evaluated by this literature survey. Search was done in Scopus index as it is a highly reputed bibliographic database with nearly 22,000 titles from over 5,000 publishers all over the world, having nearly 24% of its contents coming from Social Science (Scopus, n.d.). Thus, Scopus provides the right combination of quality and quantity of research papers sourced from more than 5,300 journals related to arts and humanities, business management and accounting, decision sciences, economics and finance, psychology and social sciences.

Publication Outlets:

Every researcher looks for opportunities to publish the research findings in appropriate avenues. Universities and other higher educational institutes all over the world have started emphasising on publication as its number and quality indicate the intellectual capital of the organization. Researchers therefore often look at appropriate avenues to publish their research works. This section identifies those avenues and trends in research publication in the context of usage of social media for political purposes.

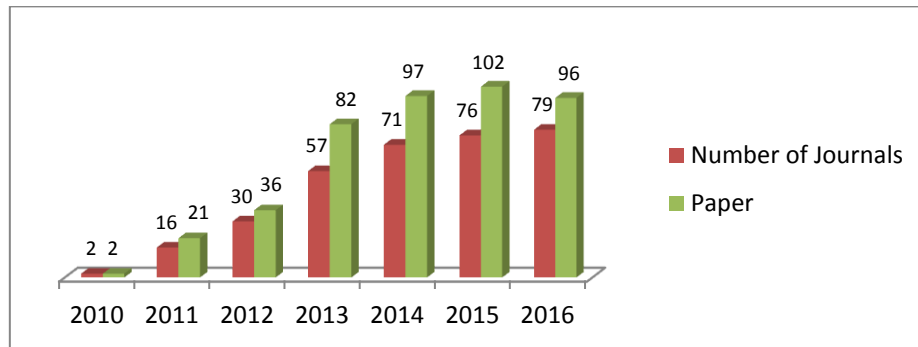


Figure 1 Year-wise Publication History

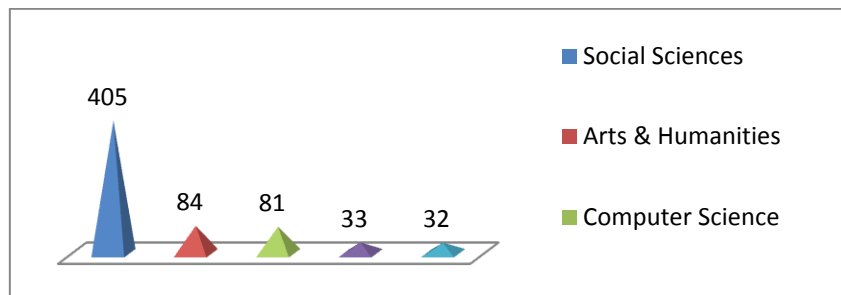


Figure 2 Subject Area of Studies

Search using the above mentioned criteria yielded 436 documents from 245 journals. As can be seen from the graph in Figure 1, the publication of articles related to politics in social media increased with every passing year. The most significant increase happened from 2012 to 2013, which saw a dramatic rise of 128% articles. The same year witnessed the most increase (90%) in the number of journals accepting research papers related to social media in the context of politics.

Figure 2 depicts the subject area to which the studies belonged. As can be seen, most of the studies (405) claimed to be from Social Sciences. Because of interdisciplinary nature of research, some studies have been reported under multiple categories. The next big area of studies identified is Arts & Humanities. Because of the very nature of social media, a good number of studies were found to be related to Computer Science.

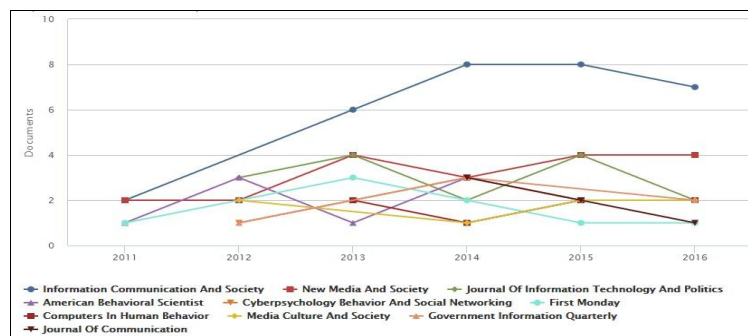


Figure 3 Articles per Year by Top 10 Journals

Figure 3 shows the trend of publication in top ten journals which have published papers on the concerned area of study. Information Communication and Society has published the most number of papers (31), followed by New Media and Society (19) and Journal of Information Technology and Politics (15).

Figure 4 depicts the affiliation of top ten authors of published papers in the research area of concern. While on one hand it provides a snapshot of the institutes where research on this topic is carried out, on the other hand it also indicates vaguely which countries have been probably studied till now. Thus, this Figure points out that there is scope of research in India to study usage of social media for political purposes.

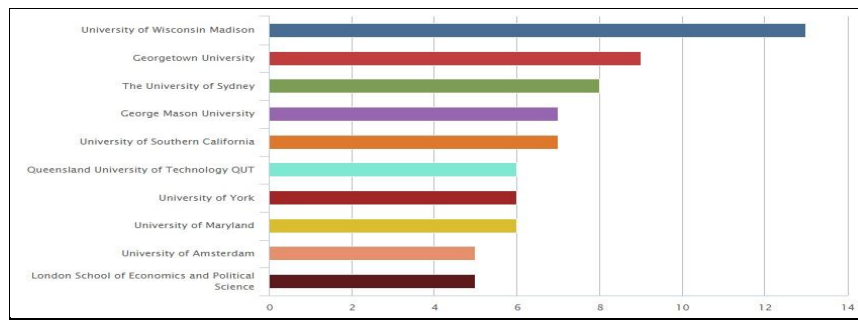


Figure 4 Affiliation of Published Authors

3. Literature Review

After thorough study of the research papers obtained through searching the Scopus database, the studies could be categorised broadly into four groups. These groups are related to (i) importance of social media for political purposes, (ii) content type or style of messages shared for this purpose, (iii) investigation of the mechanism of propagation of messages and (iv) investigation about political engagement and its relation either as antecedent or outcome of social media usage. Some of the prominent studies in each of these categories are briefly mentioned below.

Importance of Social Media:

Although most of the formal political players are still relying heavily on politicking strategies tailored for citizens adhering to the dutiful citizenship model, a growing portion of members of citizenry are turning to informal forms of political action better suited to their personal preferences, interests and goals. Often the traditional media informs citizens through social media as they frequently use news reports or commentary to support their positions (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2016). This has led researchers to study the impact of social media as well as the constraints on its use for the public (Bui, 2016).

Researchers have also found that social media platforms are transforming the way publics form and meet, but their capacity to bridge opposing viewpoints on divisive issues remains limited (Hendriks, Duus, & Ercan, 2016). Citing a controversy known as the "Miliband Loop" created during the 2011 UK public sector protests, Rintel et al stated that the internet is a dangerous place for the old rules of mediatisation (Rintel, Angus, & Fitzgerald, 2016). Again, using social media for political purposes have been found to significantly increase chances of protesting (Valenzuela, Somma, Scherman, & Arriagada, 2016) as well as participation (Boulianne, 2015)

In the study concerning the Singapore society, Tan (Tan, 2016) states that relatively low-budget independent films and the documentary genre in particular may evoke alternative histories vividly, give voice to the silenced, and channel these voices digitally into the collective cinematic and social media experience. This in turn may give voice to the political dissidents with their greater capacity to present a fundamental challenge.

Gordon & Perugini (Gordon & Perugini, 2016) has claimed that info graphics spread by Israel Defence Forces on social media are part of a broader apparatus of discrimination deployed by Israel to frame its violence post hoc in order to claim that this violence was utilized in accordance with international law.

Content Type or Style:

Shared artefacts of engagement are key to how individuals personalize expressions of a movement's goal, although the sharing of such artifacts in online spaces is not unproblematic (Clark, 2016). By using innovative use of tracking of corneal movement, Vraga et al (Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2016) found that news and social content garner equal attention, with politics trailing behind both. The style of the post matters for attention patterns, with richer content (e.g., pictures, links) enhancing attention especially for social and news posts.

Substantial differences have been observed in how female and male politicians communicate in the blogosphere as well as the outcomes in terms of feedback and impact. Female politicians, to a greater degree than their male counterparts, utilize blogging for the purpose of fostering a stronger connection with their readers as well as to enquire about ideas and policy perspectives. Although this strategy seems to be successful for fostering qualitative feedback from readers, yet female bloggers have far less impact than their male colleagues (Åström & Karlsson, 2016). Another study found that there are subtle differences between men and women in online activities, especially commenting on other users' statuses and the tone of communication produced by the respective gender groups, with men posting more negative comments addressed to parties as well as to other Facebook users (Vochocová, Štětka, & Mazák, 2015). In the context of Twitter also similar differences were observed between male and female politicians regarding their frequency and type of tweeting (Evans, Ovalle, & Green, 2016).

The number of adjectives and nouns, adverbs, pronouns, punctuation (exclamation marks, quotation marks and ellipses), question marks, advisory words (should, shall, must and have to) and complexity indicators that appear in content community posts' titles are found to relate to post popularity and number of comments. However, these relationships vary according to the category, for example, text-based categories (e.g. Politics and World News) vs. image-based ones (e.g. Pictures).

Some researchers have focussed their study on the use of satire for dissemination of political ideology. Along with the use of prose and cartoons, memes have evolved as an interesting expression of satire (Rahimi, 2015). Through content analysis with thematic tagging of memes, Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero (Martínez-Rolán & Piñeiro-Otero, 2016) found that Spanish

political parties using memes to spread the message through Twitter have significant differences in the use of memes. Through an experiment, Greenwood et al (Greenwood, Sorenson, & Warner, 2016) demonstrated a message-consistent persuasive effect of political comedy for both high and low salience issues, but found that message-incongruent commentary reduces this persuasive effect.

Mourao et al (Mourão, Diehl, & Vasudevan, 2015) conducted a content analysis of tweets posted by 430 political journalists during a presidential debate, which revealed widespread use of humor by journalists on Twitter, especially associated with the retweet function. About one-fifth of the journalists' tweets included jokes, suggesting a growing acceptance of the rhetorical device on Twitter. They found that journalists and commentators pointed their jokes toward political figures, but more sophisticated satirical comments were aimed at the news media or the debate process at large. Overall, political journalists tended to avoid humor as a means of criticism.

Message Propagation Mechanism:

Social media has appeared as both the tool that produced engagement and the space where this engagement unfolded (Dumitrica, 2014). It has been rightly pointed out that technologies network us, but it is our stories that connect us (Papacharissi, 2015).

Researchers have agreed that the digital media environment which allows diverse indigenous voices to be represented, but raised questions regarding which voices are heard as politics is increasingly mediated (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2015). Although the potential for users to learn political information from social media exists, it is not always realized within the general population (Bode, 2015). Thus studies have been conducted to reveal how individuals and organizations appropriate media resources to craft responses to debates, and what this reveals about sources of influence in political communication on social media (Edgerly, Thorson, Bighash, & Hannah, 2016).

Neumayer & Svensson (Neumayer & Svensson, 2014) suggested that different forms of political engagement online have to be taken into account when studying how online activism can contribute to social change. Jiang et al (Jiang, Leeman, & Fu, 2015) revealed that influential independent users and alternative commercial media, rather than official media, dominate the framing of the Democratic National Convention political discourse on Sina Weibo in China. This study is complemented by Nip & Fu (Nip & Fu, 2016) who found that ordinary citizens make up the largest category of initiators but that their power of opinion leadership is limited since they have to rely on media organizations to spread news. Media organizations also play a secondary role as the voice of the people. While individuals from some other user categories are able to become prominent opinion leaders, news workers are likely to be the most promising user category to challenge official propaganda.

Use of pro-attitudinal partisan news online has been associated with increased anger, but not anxiety, directed at the opposing party's presidential candidate and that anger subsequently facilitated information sharing about the election on social media, thereby suggesting that partisan media may drive online information sharing by generating anger in its audience (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Moreover, the effects of political content exposure on political expression on social media depend on how many friends post about politics, as well as whether that content is congruent or incongruent with one's political beliefs (Vraga, 2016). Facebook performances are perceived as multisensory, staged to appear personal, and tightly scripted. Although these characteristics serve an important solidarity function among like-minded individuals and groups, they leave limited space or tolerance for counter-scripts (Hendriks et al., 2016).

Incidentally, while some who engage in political participation enthusiastically embrace goals of persuasion, others opt for alternative conceptual frameworks, such as fostering citizenship by informing others and sparking deliberative dialogue (Penney, 2014). Social media has been found to be the primary medium for consumption of celebrity political appeals (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). Young voters use aspirational identification and attachment to a celebrity to negotiate political messages. On the other hand, acknowledging the support of others or criticizing the actions by political peers or media actors by politicians are found to be the most popular among social media users (Larsson, 2015).

Particular attention has been given to machine controlled bots by different researchers, which are created each day to provide services, flood out messages for political campaigns, write fake product reviews, or produce an underground marketplace for purchasing Twitter followers, retweets, or URL advertisements (Alarifi, Alsaleh, & Al-Salman, 2016). Woolley (Woolley, 2016) conducted an interesting investigation on politicized social bots to send out sophisticated computational propaganda. Using content analysis, the study provided variety of political bot-oriented strategies and presented details crucial to building understandings of these automated software actors in the humanities, social and computer sciences. Another interesting study concerning bots was conducted by Geiger (Geiger, 2016). He introduced the concept of "blockbots" which may support the curation of a shared block list of accounts, where subscribers to a blockbot will not receive any notifications or messages from accounts on the block list, thereby supporting counter-public communities, helping people moderate their own experiences of a site.

4. Political Engagement

Using online surveys, researchers found that the strength of the relationship between party membership and engagement decreases as the intensity of political discussion on social media increases. This suggests that political discussions on social media can narrow the divide in party-related engagement between members and non-members. Moreover, party organizational legacies may play vital role in the digital age too (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016).

It was found that users who engage in politics, whether this is through social media or other online or offline activities, are more likely to participate politically in more than one form of political engagement. Social media usage intensity is positively associated with social media political participation, while favourable perceptions about politicians who use social media is

associated with higher online participation activities among users. Gender is a significant factor for other online political engagement (Papagiannidi & Manika, 2016). Online political expression, facilitated by news consumption, enhances support for the existing socio-political system both directly and indirectly through nationalism. Partial inclusion of the public in the online deliberation process may serve to bolster system stability and legitimacy (Hyun & Kim, 2015). It is interesting to note that conspicuous affiliation with political parties indeed hinders intention to 'Like' political pages and is associated with social anxiety (Marder, Slade, Houghton, & Archer-Brown, 2016). 'Secret Likes' were found to be a successful method to increase gateway interactions.

Margolin et al (Margolin, Goodman, Keegan, Lin, & Lazer, 2015) empirically proved that Wikipedia editors are more likely to create Wikipedia pages for challengers who have a better chance of defeating their incumbent opponent and that the timing of these page creations coincides with periods when collective expectations for the candidate's success are relatively high. Another study found that Tweets may reveal the winner even seven weeks prior to the election (Maldonado & Sierra, 2016).

5. Research in Indian Context

Although there are a lot of studies conducted in foreign countries, only 9 studies could be found in Indian context, which elaborated on use of social media for political purposes [Table 1]. Four of these studies have been conducted empirically. Most of these studies are limited by consideration of only one particular social media site and only one event. Moreover, the studies generally fail to distinguish between the influence of social media usage and influence of the real world.

Table 1 Research on Use of Social Media in Indian Political Context

Study	Methodology	Finding	Limitation
(Hall, 2012)	Conceptual	Indian investment in public diplomacy is partly a response to concerns about the perceived growth of Chinese soft power and partly a function of changed beliefs in the foreign policy-making elite about the uses of new social media. India's new public diplomacy seems to have met with some success in augmenting its soft power.	A quantitative justification could improve the claims of the findings
(Hoskins, 2013)	Conceptual	Proposes three theoretical scenarios that constitute the range of possible state responses to the emergence of online public spheres: 'threat repression', 'polity absorption' and 'elite tokenism'.	Empirical investigation is needed to support the efficacy of the proposed scenarios
(Santekellur, Hosamani, & Singh, 2014)	-	Engagement through the internet by using social networking sites is very useful for political communication, especially when one is targeting the internet savvy voters	-
(Chaudhuri & Fitzgerald, 2015)	Case study based approach	Social media has enabled spontaneous mass movement across interest groups to express their protest during events	Only one specific incident related to the gang-rape in Delhi was considered.
(Aricat, 2015)	In-depth interview with 31 migrants to Singapore from India	Users test the affordances of social media before adding them to their usage repertoire. No goal-oriented use of communication technologies is made. Political discussion hardly leads to political action in the host country	Small sample size Only one country (Singapore) is considered.
(Barclay, Pichandy, Venkat, & Sudhakaran, 2015)	ANOVA, Factor Analysis and Regression Analysis	Strong positive correlation exists between the number of 'likes' a party or its leader secured on their official Facebook fan page and their popular vote share. The time period during which the 'likes' were recorded was found to have a moderating effect on the positive relationship between the 'likes' and votes.	Considered only 2014 Lok Sabha election in India. Only Facebook was considered as the social media platform. Political trend over longer
(Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016)	Log likelihood analysis and Latent Dirichlet Association (LDA)	During the 2014 Indian general elections, new and upcoming parties used Twitter for self-promotion and media validation, while established parties used it to supplement their offline strategies. It is also observed that the winning party's electoral success is significantly associated with their use of Twitter for engaging voters, the large population of first-time voters and levels of internet accessibility	Considered tweets in English only; Did not segregate contribution of offline campaigns' Considered only one social media platform
(Guenauer, 2016)	Qualitative study	Use of social media may enable new narratives from outside to enter in election campaigns in Meghalaya. They may alter public discussions and the way campaigns are run.	Lack of statistical confirmation.
(Safiullah, Pathak, Singh, & Anshul, 2016)	Linear Regression Model, ANOVA and Correlation	Positive correlation exists between volume of tweets and vote share	Only one social media platform, one election and vote share of three parties are considered

6. Further Scope of Research

The brief literature review points to the main focus areas of researchers who are investigating use of social media for political purposes. Although a good number of studies are available, scholars may attempt to find a niche from among the four categories identified in the literature review process. Future researchers may utilize the categorization of citizens provided by Fu et al (Fu, Wong, Law, & Yip, 2016) based on their political participation and media use: critical citizens; modestly politically active non-voters; voters; and disengaged individuals. This may help to explain behaviour of social media better. The dearth of study, especially of empirical nature, on this topic in Indian context also provides a good opportunity for researchers to explore the gap in research.

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