



New media and the shifting terrains of political communication

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New media is changing the conventional patterns of political communication, a field that had its heydays set forth by print, radio and television during the 1960s. Television became the 'constructor of political reality' (Gurevitch et al, 2009). Studies have shown that after the popularisation of television, people became more politically educated. In this context, Bourdieu's (1998) account of television journalism provides a detailed analysis of how journalism performed on television can contribute to depoliticisation of the political process. In television, political issues began to be associated with leaders rather than their political ideologies. Pierric Bourdieu (1998) argued that television tries to impose a particular vision of politics in the minds of its audience. Journalists are keen on discussing the tactics of politics and not the substance of politics. There is a paranoia associated with accessing the newest and hardest news to get. All these tendencies work towards producing an effect of depoliticization among the audience.

Bourdieu (1998) further noted that today's journalists are concerned with being 'not boring.' According to him, they should give more attention to investigating. A high event turnover and limited public attention has made journalists to take either extreme positions on issues or reporting on extreme events in order to satisfy public interest. He said that the public should be aware of the mechanisms at work and remove the journalistic race for the scoop.

With the introduction of new media, the number of people who relied on the internet and social media sites to acquire news is increasing exponentially. The shift from traditional media towards new media is an 'ecological configuration' (Gurevitch et al, 2009). New media is more inclusive where audience became a part of the political process in an unprecedented manner. Digital media has contributed to the undermining of traditional media. Along with it, digital media and technologies have improved the communicative balance of power by reconfiguring "access to people, services, information and technology in ways that substantially alter social, organizational and economic relationships across geographical and time boundaries" (Dutton et al. 2004, p. 32).

Social media as public sphere

The potential of the internet to revitalize political communication has been debated by many placing the central argument that digital media facilitates public deliberation (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002). While a certain degree of cynicism persists about new media and its role in political communication thus causing disillusionment among the public, opportunities to enhance political processes cannot be neglected. For instance, studying political talks (Graham, 2015) of and by the public in social

media, messenger apps and other digital spaces reveals the fecundity of digital media and its potential for public sphere. Active citizens need to talk about societal and political issues, which can increase the political knowledge of citizens (Bennett, Flickinger, & Rhine, 2000; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2001; Eveland, 2004).

Even though it is easier for the public to engage in political communication, this privilege is not equally distributed. Digital divide acts as a hindrance that weakens the discourse of participation by all. We cannot reject the potential of new media and social networking sites in creating a democratic space for civic interaction on politics. Policy reforms are needed in order to make the online realm a more inclusive and equal space. The hegemonic structure of society is reflected in the online space too. Technological innovations are creating new waves of social interactions that directly influence development discourses in the global south.

Social media, much like print and television, have enabled the production of discourses that helps in the development of a society and individuals. Social media have become “digitally enhanced public sphere” (Dutton et al., 2004, p. 32). The way politicians use such a space is also undergoing drastic changes. They have acknowledged the huge potential of such a public sphere that can be used to directly influence people.

Can internet become a public sphere?

Jodi Dean (2005) argued that deliberation is relegated to the secondary level and what matters is not the message but its circulation that eventually contributes to capitalism. This is in contrast to communicative action proposed by Habermas (1991), which refers to the collective and collaborative action taken after deliberative exchanges among participants in the public sphere. The likes, shares, postings etc. are useful to generate data in droves. While Habermas (1991) said that communicative deliberations are fundamental to democratic processes, Jodi Dean stated that they strengthen capitalistic citadels. Similarly, Jonathan Beller (2020) said that social media are economic media as messages and their meanings have been financialised and therefore are media of value abstraction and creation.

Much of political communication in digital media is driven by users. Internet has enabled users to participate actively in social media (McAllister, 2015) and in politics (Nam, 2012). Stieglitz, Brockmann, and Xuan (2012) found a robust relationship between politicians and social media users after studying the functioning of social media for political communication. This, in corollary, has improved communication between politicians and voters. Biswas, Ingle, and Roy (2014), after analysing the influence of social media in India, especially on voting behavior, show that social media unites people within political parties. The meanings of mediated messages find their resonance in the sharing, spreadability (Jenkins, 2013) of content and the ways in which users reinscribe content through their participatory actions. Some of the political opinions are expressed through creative or participatory forms of artefacts such as memes (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015).

However, the infrastructure of the digital media is designed and conditioned by the corporate and leveraged by the State to achieve authoritarianism to a disconcerting degree. In Beller’s (2020) terms, technologies, are reduced to entities of governance and manipulation or what is called command-control apparatus that also inhere in computational capital.

Shoshana Zuboff (2018) characterised the business model of social networking sites as ‘surveillance capitalism’ and describes it as ‘a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales’. Basically, OSNs were not created for political discourse production. The ultimate aim is profit

generation accomplished mainly through advertisement revenue.

In other words, when politicians engage in propaganda or campaigns, messages are delivered to audiences. At the same time, their attention is garnered to convert their engagement in social media as well as their expressive and affective actions to values. That would essentially mean that exchanges are stripped of content at all levels and it is only signals that continue to flow accumulating value across the distributed architecture of the networked ecosystem. Thus, social and communicative practices such as political campaigns and political advertisements integrate with economic and capitalistic ideals of social media. This combined with political economy of media in political communication has become fertile site of study with growing technologies, monopolization by platforms etc.

Use of bots in political communication

In political communication, the use of bots has transformed propaganda and campaign strategies. Bots are called “the web’s first indigenous species” (Leonard, 1998) and are used for automating spam messages (Zhuang et al. 2008). Social bots have the similar features of an account owned by a real person, that is, they mimic real users. Bots, on the other hand, are intelligent agents that can observe, navigate and influence to achieve some specific goals like making politicians look popular by covering the actual number of followers. They can also be used to urge people for donations. Political bots have the ability to manipulate opinion and circumvent standing legal procedures (Howard et al, 2018).

Political bots are in use to fake accounts and manipulate public opinion (Ratkiewicz et al. 2011; Woolley and Howard 2016). They are used to spread false information opposing the views of either right wing or left-wing ideas polarising the public and embedding bigoted perspectives in them. Likewise, political bots are used to produce counter narratives challenging science, for instance, in the case of vaccines thereby spreading false health information (Marwick and Lewis 2017; Broniatowski et al. 2018). During the campaigns of Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte, political bots were used massively to amplify the popularity in terms of metrics (Zhang et al. 2018; Uyheng and Carley 2019). Now, the use of bots raises suspicion when 50 percent of the accounts on Twitter or Facebook happen to spearhead political campaigns. Online spaces create situations for disembodied interactions which make it easier for bots to function. They can create impressions of a human being by producing opinions and maintaining social interaction. The coming of bots has only vitiated the landscape of political communication and has caused disruptions beyond repair. In other words, they sparked information warfare (Woolley and Howard, 2016). Malicious bot accounts sprouted in Twitter and they gave rise to misinformation and fake news. Bessi and Ferrara (2016) said that bots were used to manipulate public opinion:

The presence [of] social bots in online political discussion can create three tangible issues: first, influence can be redistributed across suspicious accounts that may be operated with malicious purposes; second, the political conversation can become further polarized; third, the spreading of misinformation and unverified information can be enhanced. (para. 33)

The potential manipulation by political bots can be curbed by appropriate policy and laws. In depth researches should be carried out in the areas of campaign finance, election law, voting rights, privacy and so on to come up with an inclusive solution. Better software and tracking of information flow can also contribute to the maintenance of social media and its intervention in politics.

Computational propaganda

The Russian intervention in the US presidential election of 2016 was a major event where computational propaganda was used to influence voting behaviour. Based on a study conducted by Sachi Angle, Devansh Gosalia and Ananya Paul, for the tweet #DelhiBurns, out of 7000 tweets, 1400 tweets were done by bots. These bots have tremendous retweet ability and can push any kind of propaganda-based information to the trending section. People could get manipulated based on such kind of information. With more people relying on social media sites to get news and information, deceptive misinformation or disinformation can be planted deliberately in the online space with the help of bots.

Political communication can influence the disposition of power in a democratic society. Public opinion can be socially engineered with the help of political communication. Technology along with artificial intelligence, big data and learning algorithms are creating innovations in the field of political communication. Especially in election campaigns, pre-programmed scripts have the ability to create digital content that can influence the voting behaviour of users. Internet acts as a mediating tool enabling a user to create content that is communicated through a network. The mediation is done by algorithms which are a subset of scripts. Algorithms can be considered as an expression of institutional form, because they have as much an agentic role as humans do in affecting the social conditions (Napoli, 2014 cited in Howard et al, 2018).

Beller (2020) focused on the complex technological substrate and its varied ideological presuppositions that favour capitalism through the functioning of algorithms and large datasets that are continually accumulated and coalesced in an emergent and never-ending spree. These new developments in theoretical and ontological concepts have expanded the scope of political communication studies as one could seek to explore capitalism within political communication or how the two intersect in the context of digitisation.

Discourses on surveillance capitalism and the engagement of algorithms for data analysis have been gaining traction recently. Although such techniques are used in quantitative analyses, the use of machine learning for qualitative data analysis is a recent phenomenon. Javier García-Marín and Adolfo Calatrava (2018) examined the effectiveness of using learning algorithms to locate media frames with the case study of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Further, the use of machine learning algorithms and software to scour vast tracts of textual and visual data from the internet has enhanced the potential of social-technical approaches to studying political communication. In that, algorithms are used to examine political videos and texts in social media such as YouTube, Facebook etc. to decode images, use of colours, number of people, as well as parsing texts into different sentiments, affective communication and messages among others. Earlier, studies in digital media focused on textual analysis (Small, 2010; Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner, & Welppe, 2010) or on how digital media deployed texts (Stromer-Galley, 2016).

There is diversity of data – driven campaign practices having different implications (Catherine Dommert, 2019). Data can be used in election campaigns to produce highly targeted impacts. For example, in the US during elections Facebook was used as a tool to deliver specific messages to users. Voters were being observed for a specific time and those who were likely to be confused or the persuadables were targeted. Their newsfeed was bombarded with specific advertisements on election and influenced their voting behaviour. Predictive modelling is the technique used by third parties to analyse behaviour of users to foretell what might happen in the future. Social networking sites provide conditions for microtargeting services with a minimal level of investment.

The major concern behind data-driven campaign practices is that there is no clear framework to define what is acceptable and what is undemocratic. Dommett analysed the practices that characterise data-driven campaigning and came up with questions like: who is using data in campaigns, what the sources of data are, and how data informs communication in campaigns. Voter data has been used by political parties for a long time. Currently there has been a paradigmatic shift in the way they collect data with the use of social media and studying behaviour of voters.

Sometimes, political parties use alternative tactics like minimizing the audience and sending them generic messages. Contrary to influencing the supporters of other campaigners, they appeal only specific voters who are important for that particular election (Dobber et al., 2017, p. 6). Likewise, campaigners sometimes offer contradictory messages to different voters and hence potentially mislead people about the positions they will take (Kreiss, 2017, p. 5)

People who do not have expert in the field can get involved with data extraction practices. Such people sometimes get data without charges by the voters themselves. And at other times they purchase data, from other sources like social media or magazines. There is also a possibility of producing 'purchased inferred data' (Dommett, 2019) which are inferences made about preferences on the basis of available data. Finally, microtargeting of voters allow parties to customize their campaigns. There are concerns about privacy and mis-targeting in this action.

The shortcoming of studies on data driven campaigning is that there are a few empirical studies on the subject. The democratic concerns over the practice of data driven campaigning should be discussed and a proper legal framework should be put in place. Otherwise, mis/dis-information, lack of transparency in financial matters, manipulation and so on can harmfully affect the democratic functioning of countries (Dommett, 2019).

Users as Co-creators

In contrast to large scale mass movements like the Arab Spring or the Occupy Movement, small scale social movements can also have impact on politics. These social movements use digital platforms by connective action. 'Connective action is based on personalized content sharing across media networks' (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). YouTube is said to support 'alternative political views' which contradicts the capitalistic motives of the platform (Medrado et al, 2019).

The study on the political movements in Brazil shows that the dynamics of YouTube also recommend the most popular content to the average user (Medrado et al, 2019). The political interest of small-scale social movements can get pushed to the fringes in the digital realm. The democratic functioning of society can be hindered by such practices. Currently, there is a lack of balance in the circulation of content in social networking sites and digital platforms.

The arrival of new technological features such as mobile phones and affordances such as cameras, editing tools, and the possibility to customise and filter one's tastes allowed visual modalities to become preponderant in mediated political communication (Messaris, 2019). The fusion of mobile phone cameras and social media has reversed the social space, time and social practices (Messaris (2019). Studying political communication around visuals, not necessarily produced by mass media but by mobile phones and subsequently enhanced, circulated to gather traction and popularity using strategies, edited to lend itself a new materiality than the context in which it was produced, its editorialising by citizens to comment and critique politicians through memes and other user-generated creative expressions are some of the domains that are notably fertile to examine. Manipulation of photographs is also common and is considered to be the most effective means, used perhaps deviously by opponent political parties and by

citizens, of upending the materiality of photography. This is referred to as post-photographic realm (Brand, Kelly, & Kinney, 1985; Mitchell, 1992; Ritchin, 1991) wherein the signification of the photograph lies outside the image - in the process of editing, manipulation, circulation etc.

Misinformation and disinformation

The unprecedented growth of technological sector has led to the disruption of lot of institutions and even democracy is not spared. Martin Moore (2020) presents how mis/ disinformation spew hatred and divisive politics. The election tactics used by American and Russian candidates showed the vilest nature of social media. They circulated deep fake pictures and videos of their opponents for defamation. They unleashed a mimetic warfare and this showed how unprofessional digital campaigning can get. The mainstream media was attacked and genuine voices of concern were tortured. As a result, truth began to get delegitimised.

While visuals afford intriguing and potential avenues for analysis of political communication/ messages, the rise of fake news and fake images along with AI driven deep fakes has stirred controversies and therefore new inquiries in political communication. The institutionalisation of fake news production and recruitment of people to engage in disingenuous propaganda by political parties requires to be examined from multiple perspectives - fake news and propaganda, mis/disinformation, mediated political communication in digital media contexts, affective labour and political communication etc. In this context, 'The politics of social media manipulation' by Richard Rogers and Sabine Niederer (2020), discusses the definitional issues, consumption including the question of persuasion and the critique of the idea that automation effectively addresses the problems.

"Political communication today is built on a visual foundation" (Schill, 2012, p. 119), political communication research has for long given primacy to texts and text-based methods. The text-based analysis has continued despite increased use of visuals in political communication research (e.g., Veneti et al. 2019). The role of visuals in political communication needs to be examined (Veneti, Jackson, Lilleker (year). The use of visuals has greater impact on the personalization of political communication in terms of politicians' work and their personality (Farkas & Bene, 2020) and this is more pronounced in social media (Enli and Skogerbo 2013).

Photography, precisely "ubiquitous photography" (Hand, 2012) and mobile cameras have made it easy to take and share pictures on social media, one of the ways by which politicians have acquired increased visibility (Messaris, 2019).

Algorithmic bias

According to a study (2020) on German users, it was proved that hyperactive users or people who are more active on social media than the average users, can influence political discourses and shape the public opinion. It shows that these users act as opinion leaders and can produce an agenda- setting effect (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020). However, the bias of data, arising from the ideological intentions associated with data collection practices, training datasets, the role of algorithms in contextualising the data based on multiple connections, produce discourses that are 'regimes of truth' (Foucault, year).

Moore (2018) highlights that increasing surveillance has led to a data and algorithmic bias whereby it could be used to target one group of people. Among machine learning algorithms there is a class called recommender systems. They offer "relevant suggestion" to users. The activities of hyperactive users can influence these recommender systems. There has been a major shift in the dynamics of political interaction between politicians and voters with the popularisation of social networking sites. Even though OSNs have the potential to accommodate

plurality of opinions, users are not equally active in the online space. The problems that concern the hyperactive users can become overrepresented. Political communication can be distorted due to such tendencies. The users have the roles of both consumers and citizens. OSN platforms adjust their recommendation algorithms according to popularity of the content. This practice can induce an asymmetry in contents that gets circulated.

Medrado, Vale, and Cabral (2019) argued that algorithms of YouTube can impact political communication significantly. OSNs' algorithm can create bias among its contents, likewise, YouTube algorithm can influence the recommendation of its videos to users. The authors selected two social movements in Brazil - the Homeless Workers' and the Indigenous Peoples' Movements, and one political party, PSOL. Then, a YouTube video from each of them were selected and using the YouTube's data-mining application Data Tools, they traced the recommended videos that were generated from each of the YouTube videos. The data were analysed for power relations involved in political communication using visual content drawing on theoretical perspectives related to platform studies (Veneti et al., 2019).

Political communication and digital media in India

The last decade saw the volatile functioning of political parties, the burgeoning of democracy and populism, and 'cyberisation' of participation across the world. While social media acts as an alternative media, it defers to media that assist the interests of state or corporate enterprises (Servaes, 1999). Further, political parties use social media to directly engage with voters. Social media allows for both mass messaging and micro-targeting. It is also bolstered by grass-roots campaigning and is immensely powerful in shaping public opinion. While working towards the making of a participatory democracy, social media can also be misused for propaganda, hate speech, and disinformation campaigns, which can undermine the pluralistic foundations of democracy (Mahapatra and Plagemann, 2019).

The interaction between traditional media and new media gave way to phenomenon like popularisation, personalization and populism. (Bracciale R & Martella A, 2017). This situation has hugely helped politicians, journalists and of course, citizens to propagate their agendas and ideologies. For example, several movements like Anna Hazare's fight against corruption or the rise of Aam Aadmi Party have effectively used social media to their benefits (Darshan & Suresh, 2019).

In India during the 2014 election campaign the Bharatiya Janata Party had effectively used technology to their benefits. The availability of cheap smartphones and the rapid decline in cost of data and internet services have allowed hundreds of millions of Indians to access social media and engage in political discourse (Panda et al, 2020). In the following years, India saw a major increase in fake news being propagated against Muslims and other underprivileged people, that, at times, led to lynching and death of several people.

In the Indian scenario, two of the most prominent examples where social media acted as a platform for crowd mobilisation for a social cause was witnessed in two instants: the anticorruption movement of 2013 and the movement against Delhi gang-rape. The Delhi assembly election results were also influenced by social media discourses (Pande, 2015). Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi used social media to connect with people and convey his ideas. Branding himself as the 'Vikas Purush', creation of the channel 'NaMo' and setting up of his hologram shows were part of his digital media campaigns. In a society where being online is considered as an index of being modern, this tactic worked like a charm. The content was created in a way that would effortlessly propagate the leaders' political affiliations. Similarly,

hyper-local messaging technologies like WhatsApp have been used by most of the parties to propagate their ideas.

Udupa (2019) shows that the ideology of social media backed politics is to use extreme speech and abuse through memes, troll videos and so on. Chopra (2019) throws light on the trend of using WhatsApp and Facebook to spread disinformation, fake news and for fearmongering which often leads to communal violence. In the new age of digital media, contrary to what was expected, women politicians find it extremely difficult to be on social media because of cyberbullying. Sometimes the gender bias that already exists in the society is reflected in digital realm too (Patterson 2016). Indian Women journalists and women activists too are not spared. They are threatened with violence, gang rape and stripping on Twitter (Arya, 2013)

Contrary to mainstream media practices, social media can be used to propagate messages that reaches the audience who choose to see it, along with a larger audience. For example, Indian prime minister Modi has not addressed the press but his social media activities always get the attention of mainstream media and these reportages will reach people who do not even follow him on social media. In this way he could design what should be communicated with people, which could not be done in a live television interview or media briefing.

Social media usage has helped in the normative positioning of India's politicians. Studies , however, show that such technology driven campaigning could not produce any massive change in the voting behaviour of the Indian public. But these tendencies can become problematic in the sense that they are being used to propagate hate speech and fake news that are divisive.

Conclusion

The increasing interference by digital moguls and business tycoons, such as Robert Mercer and Andrew Breitbart in the presidential election campaigning, for example in the US and the Cambridge Analytica scandal that erupted point to the shifting trends in political communication that demand attention and inquiry. These interferences have shaken the foundations of democracy. Moore (2018) says that an unholy truce was struck between politics, advertising/marketing and big data in several countries in order to sabotage the election process. Be it in Brazil or the US or India, some of the strong men of politics used these tactics to win the election.

With social media being critiqued over ethical decadence and fake news, its potential as a space for alternative politics has begun to wane. Like everything digital space also began to get institutionalized. Currently almost all politicians use social media to put forward their ideologies. More than seeking to garner support from the voting population, politicians use social media to draw support and attention from the diaspora and to create an amicable image of themselves to show to the outside world.

On a positive note, the internet and social networking sites are meant to provide an equal platform for all communities including those which were denied spaces in mainstream media. Social networking sites have been acting as sites of political mobilisation to fight against systemic injustice. Ironically, in recent years, the same social media sites have been acting as agents of division and polarization among the society. The OSNs promoting biased political content might result in the algorithmic manipulation of political communication. There is a need for additional transparency on the actual data-intensive recommendation systems used by the platforms, in order to resolve potential algorithmic interferences in the political discourse (Papakyriakopoulos et al, 2020).

Political communication should be carefully crafted as it can strongly influence public opinion and in turn the democratic processes. The digital platforms and social networking sites should try to come up with an appropriate framework that would not breach privacy of users and refrain itself from creating manipulative algorithmic design. Without a framework to decide boundaries of data mining to minimise privacy intrusion of individuals, the phenomenon of 'data mining' can blow out of proportions. In all, the imbrication of new practices and possibilities afforded by digital media has offered new structures of thoughts and discourses around how political communication inquiry materialises.

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