#Verdict2014: social media and changes in Indian legacy media during the 2014 Lok Sabha election

7

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In the days leading up to the 2014 Lok Sabha election in India, voters, journalists, and politicians[2] tweeted ferociously.[3] In Western legacy media, such as the BBC, journalists described the Indian election as the first social media battle (Patel 2014). For the first time, large numbers of politicians took part in Google Hangouts and used other social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, WeChat and WhatsApp to connect to voters, particularly the urban and tech-savvy (Reid 2014; Parkinson 2014). In Delhi, Atish Patel of the BBC wrote: "During the last general election in 2009, social media usage in India was minuscule... Taking a leaf from U.S. President Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, India's parties are using tools to crunch the insurmountable amounts of information social media generates" (Patel 2014). In the years following the 2009 Indian election, social media have allowed parties to connect to the "young, urban, upwardly mobile middle class citizen", building a "discursive construction of a binary between the 'old' politics/politicians and the 'new' politics/politicians in present-day India" (Chattopadhyay 2012).

The 2014 Indian election showed how journalistic uses of social media—especially Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp—are altering private and public communicative spaces. These social media platforms have allowed users to participate in public discourse and facilitated the democratisation of a networked public life. Social platforms allow for certain forms of this communication among users. Their technological infrastructure infrastructure shapes and is shaped by professional routines and influences news production (Belair-Gagnon, forthcoming; Russell, 2011). In light of the changing role of

social media in India, several empirical questions deserve attention: How do journalists use social media? How do social platforms alter power relations among participants in India's public sphere? How do social media interact within Indian public spaces? More broadly: what impact does social media have on the election's storyline?

This chapter discusses the ways that social media featured in the 2014 Lok Sabha election in India. More broadly, it identifies how Indian journalism is changing as a result of social media usage by politicians, journalists and "the people formerly known as audiences" (Rosen 2006). Building on previous work (Belair-Gagnon et al 2014) it uses the election in order to comment on how the spaces of flows, journalistic norms, and practices are changing. To explore the role of social media in the 2014 election, we interviewed a handful of Indian journalists[4] in the weeks immediately following the vote.[5] Our questions focused on the ways that political parties and other actors in the campaign used social media to contribute to discussions, and the ways that journalists used social media to cover the campaign.

New opportunities, old challenges

The 2014 Indian election saw unprecedented use of social media as a component of the country's political discourse. For the first time, India's Election Commission imposed rules on the use of social media in the campaign. These required parties and candidates to list any official social media accounts, accept responsibility for the actions of those accounts, and declare any funds raised by means of social media (Election Commission of India 2013). In our observations of social media activity during the election and in our interviews with Indian journalists, we identified several features of social media activity related to the election.

First, despite the numerical advantage of Facebook (93 million accounts), most journalists we spoke to identified Twitter (33 million accounts) as the principal source of news-related social media. In interviews, a data journalist claimed:

> Most political leaders have Facebook pages, and Facebook lends itself better to long debates, but the only social media

platform that drives the news cycle tends to be Twitter; many tweets became news in this election, but never a Facebook status update. Similarly, for journalists to break news, Twitter is the go-to medium. Some politicians used Facebook and Google Hangouts for moderated public chats, but I wouldn't say they really captured people's imagination in any big way. This was the pattern before the elections as well. The only major change during the elections would be a need to more closely monitor politicians' tweets.

Another journalist concurred:

Twitter was the main social media platform we used at *The Hindu*, and most other news organisations also focused on breaking stories through it. Personally, I found that the same Twitter updates that we put on our Facebook page did not get anywhere near the amount of views and comments as on Twitter. I haven't been able to figure it out yet, but we do need to find out how to tailor our content for Facebook. Though we used Twitter before the elections, it was during the campaign and on voting and result days that we really focused on beating other Delhi-based news handles in being the first to report a development. We experimented with live-tweeting the swearing-in ceremony of the new government, which helped us increase our followers considerably.

The growth of Twitter as a tool of political discourse is also reflected in a set of post-election statistics released by Twitter. During the 2009 campaign, one single active Indian parliamentarian had more than 6,000 Twitter followers. By contrast, in the 2014 campaign more than a dozen candidates had more than 100,000 followers and several had more than 1 million. During the election, the most common non-partisan hashtags were #Elections2014, #India2014, #IndiaElection, #LokSabha, #LoksahbaElections2014 and #Verdict2014. In the closing days of the election, the hashtags #GetInked,[6] #PollofPolls, and #Raceto272 gained popularity. Together, these hashtags featured in more than 56 million tweets worldwide.

Second, the two leading candidates for prime minister had divergent social media strategies. Rahul Gandhi of Congress had a

minimal web presence, with a very basic official website (provided to him by the Parliament of India) and no official account on Twitter, Facebook or any other social media platform. Gandhi left that work to networks of supporters, who created accounts such as @BewithRG (90,000 followers). The Twitter handle @RahulGandhi (10,000 followers) was taken over by opponents of Gandhi, who posted parody statements throughout the campaign. In contrast, Narendra Modi of the BJP made active use of a multilingual website and attracted 4.3 million followers to his Twitter account (@NarendraModi). Modi's account tweeted several times daily during the campaign, mostly in English but also in Hindi and Gujarati. The tweets promoted his record as Chief Minister of Gujarat, criticised actions of the governing United Progressive Alliance, and posted photos from election rallies in different parts of the country. For more than a year before the election, Modi's supporters had added the hashtag #SaluteModi to tweets with positive comments and images of Modi. During the election, the most popular pro-Modi hashtags were #iSupportNamo and #WeWantModi. After the BJP won the election and Modi was sworn in as prime minister, his supporters switched to the hashtag #MyPMNaMo.

The journalists we spoke to were impressed with the ambition and coordination of Modi's use of Twitter, and surprised by Rahul Gandhi's lack of apparent interest in social media. One journalist told us:

> [Modi] and his massive, very organised machinery have used social media very effectively. His tweets often make news because they often have a sharp point, beyond the usual festival wishes and condolence messages that politicians usually put out. His vast team of staffers and volunteers amplify his message.

Curiously, it was the older main party candidate, Modi (who, at 63, is two decades years older than Rahul Gandhi), who made more effective use of a medium typically associated with young people. And it was the candidate less at ease in English who sent out thousands of tweets, mostly in English, to an online audience. Modi, the son of a tea-seller, is more comfortable in Gujarati and Hindi than in English; by contrast, Rahul Gandhi studied in the United States and United Kingdom, and has a native speaker's command of English.

Third, social media has allowed for a new set of prominent voices to reach wide audiences. Some journalists complained that self-promoting experts have been featured too often in the news, when their only claim was a large set of followers on social media. One journalist we spoke to argued:

> I can clearly see an unfair premium accruing to experts on Twitter in Indian journalism. There are academics and political analysts with very little research work to their credit who I see getting repeatedly quoted in the Indian media for no other reason than that they put their views out on Twitter often and are easy to contact. It worries me sometimes that the media is taking more cues than it needs to from Twitter, turning Twitter into a slice of India, when it is most certainly not.

These experts on Twitter include politicians, journalists, activists and academics. Some have legitimate claims to specialised knowledge about political affairs, but others are experts less in content than in their ability to use the medium and become an expert source in print journalism. This latter group is able to gain prominence on social media for two main reasons. One is the low barrier to entry presented by the technology. Would-be social media personalities need only a nearby internet cafe or smart phone to use Twitter or Facebook. A second reason for such personalities is the absence of certain institutions that play a large role in offline political discourse. A journalist told us:

> Many major government's arms are not yet on Twitter. The most important sources of information in this election—the Election Commission and the security forces—were not on Twitter, so at best you would get a journalist tweeting from a news conference that might also be televised.

With some government institutions on social media and others not, journalists who want a social media quote sometimes turn to popular sources rather than to authorities.

A fourth feature builds on our findings in a recent study of news production and social media in India (Belair-Gagnon et al. 2014). With the number of Facebook and Twitter accounts growing and

more public figures taking part in social media discourse, these platforms have emerged as new beats for reporters. Emerging forms of storytelling remain exclusive in terms of social media skills, types of news organisation, and access to social media. In geography, social class and economics, the early usage of social media in India has followed old lines of media haves and have-nots (Freitag 1989; Sarkar 1993; Singh 2009). In their efforts at social media participation, journalists have reached an unrepresentative segment of India. Social media include disproportionate numbers of young, urban, middle and upper class citizens. The journalists we spoke to identified a tension between, on the one hand, the utility of social media in providing live updates on fast-changing events, and, on the other hand, their awareness that social media alone could not capture the sights or sounds of the world's largest election.

In this election, we see two interrelated changes that have legitimised social media in Indian political discourse. The first is the institutionalisation of social media in elected politics. Previous studies have also emphasised the disruptive role of social media in protest movements (Belair-Gagnon et al. 2014). The public fasting by activist Anna Hazare in 2011 and the protests in response to the Delhi gang rape in 2012 show the potential social media offer in mobilising supporters, broadcasting information about the protests and demands, and covering protest movements. Social media gained initial usage in India as tools of protest and crisis reporting; in this election, they became tools of mainstream political institutions, especially the triumphant BJP. A second change has come in the inclusivity of social media discourse. While social media are far from representative of India's vast poor, rural and non-English speaking populations, there is now an established national conversation on social media, especially Twitter. This is in line with what Prasan Sonwalkar called for several years ago. On the cusp of the 2009 Lok Sabha election, he wrote that "much of the hope for journalism lies in the chaotic and diverse context of everyday life in India, and the vast potential for inclusiveness and growth" (Sonwalker 2009: 378).

Finally, the growth of social media debate, with Modi as a major participant, created a meta-narrative about the election. Those looking for evidence of a new India can look to the confident use

of social media by an outsider to national politics and the emphatic electoral defeat of the old India of Congress and the Gandhi dynasty. Similarly, the institutionalisation and greater inclusivity of social media in this election allow for a meta-narrative of a networked India that has, in a short amount of time, integrated social media into its political narrative. This election has shown that the social media space in India is shaped by larger questions of access to technology, and by social, economic, and linguistic divisions within the country.

Taking stock

Political and journalistic usage of social media during India's 2014 election grew out of social media usage during other recent political events. Previously, social media played a role in the coordination and coverage of large-scale protests. For this reason, previous studies have emphasised the role social media played in crises, both as a disruptive tool and as way for reporters to manage the flow of information in rapidly changing situations (see Broersma and Graham 2012). In a previous study, we found that journalists in India used social media as news beat, and that Twitter was the most important social media tool for journalists. We also found that social media provided a space for activists, intellectuals, reporters, politicians and citizens, including ex-pats residing in India and Indians living abroad (Belair-Gagnon et al 2013; Belair-Gagnon and Agur 2013).

We call for more empirical studies, including ethnographic studies of media production and emerging media in India. There is a need in communication studies for more comparative analyses of media systems. This type of research allows us to explore how media shape political campaigns and their coverage, and illustrates tensions between old and new India. These studies also highlight the challenges journalists face in reporting a large, diverse, and changing democracy. The election represents one of the most significant recent moments in journalism and social media in India. It has provided an opportunity for policymakers, politicians, and members of civil society to re-think how the internet, particularly social platforms including Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Google Hangouts, can foster a participatory and inclusive media culture.

More than that, this election has shown that future elections in India will include not just legacy media, but also a new set of participants and debates on social media.

Endnotes

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2   The largest number of tweets on #Verdict2014, one of the most popular hashtags used during the elections, came from three other groups: a citizen, a blogger, and a pro-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). First, @realbhartiya defines himself as, "A Proud Nationalist. Opinions personal. Retweet not an endorsement! India." Second, @KiranKS, is an Indian blogger who uses Twitter to provide a "running commentary of thoughts and excerpts of what I read/absorb." Third, @iSupportBJP, an account owned by @ivivekbansal, Vivek Bansal, a "social media Expert, Writer & Researcher" and BJP supporter. While providing opportunities for network and communication power during the Indian election, social platforms remained a discursive space where new and old power fought to achieve democratic goals within a socially defined space.

3   They made particular use of the hashtags #Loksahba, #LoksahbaElections2014, #Verdict2014 and #MegaExitPoll. Some tweets were re-tweeted in greater numbers than others. Using #Verdict2014, @realbhartiya tweeted, "RT @ibnlive: All India (543 seats): NDA 270-282 seats (BJP 230-242), UPA 92-102 seats (Congress 72-82) #Verdict2014." @realbhartiya was re-tweeted 423 times. @KiranKS also tweeted, "Beyond Modi, If there is one man who has almost ensured #Verdict2014 going in favour of BJP, it is this management". @KiranKS's tweet was re-tweeted 404 times. Data gathered on ScraperWiki the three days before the elections results in May 2014.

4   We have anonymised the identities of the journalists we interviewed for this chapter.

5   In our interviews, we asked questions about efficient and inefficient uses of social media during the election, changes in the relationship between journalists in news production, mode and contenders.

6   Voters receive an ink mark on their index finger to show that they have voted and prevent them from voting twice.

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