

Online platform by indian political parties media essay



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In the early years of Indian Independence political communication was considered to be addressing peaceful rallies and dropping election pamphlets from a plane to persuade the Indian Voter. The post liberalization has already seen three paradigm shifts, Firstly the Nehruvian Socialism in the 1960's, then the hard lined discipline of Indira Gandhi and economic freedom in the 1990's. the liberalization of the Indian economy has changed the way of communication ranging from cable television to telecommunication and then bringing on to the online platform. Earlier the communication during elections used to take place in rallies and depended a lot on politicians interpersonal skills. But the political parties are soon realizing the importance of this Digital Era to connect with the youth of the country. The Political parties know that the youth are going in the transformation from Digital Migrants to Digital Natives. They are present with their true identities on the Digital platform. This requires the political parties of India to adopt methods which have been never adopted before. In the recently hard fought Lok Sabha Elections of 2009, all major political parties of India had hired Ad and Media Agencies to manage their Brand Image.

Understanding Political Communication

Political communication is a sub-field of political science and communication that deals with the production, dissemination, procession and effects of information, both through media and interpersonally, within a political context. This includes all usage of Media, speeches by politicians, Opinion leaders in the community to influence the decision process and it also includes the formal and informal discussions in the general public.

The Study of Political Communication revolves around 3 basic elements.

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The Political Party

The Voter

The Medium of communication

The Political Party

As per the Ace Electoral Network, A political party is defined as an organised group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions, that seeks to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office.

Political parties perform key tasks in a democratic society, such as

Aggregating and articulating needs and problems as identified by members and supporters

Socialising and educating voters and citizens in the functioning of the political and electoral system and the generation of general political values

Balancing opposing demands and converting them into general policies

Activating and mobilising citizens into participating in political decisions and transforming their opinions into viable policy options

Channelling public opinion from citizens to government

To perform these above mentioned key tasks, the political party should be able to communicate their objective clearly to their Voters. With the increase in the number of mediums a party can use to communicate with their voter,

a consistency in the communication objective should be must.

Communication objective is derived from the Brand Proposition the party wants to display to the general public. Harrop (1990) perceives political marketing as being not just about political advertising, party political broadcasts and electoral speeches but covering the whole area of party positioning in the electoral market.

Maarek (1995) conceptualises political marketing as “ a complex process, the outcome of a more global effort implicating all the factors of the politician’s political communication”. Maarek explained the Difference between commercial marketing and political marketing.

Figure 1: Commercial and Political Marketing, two parallel strategies.

In the above figure Maarek tries to point out the difference between Commercial Marketing and Political Marketing. Such a parallel cannot be drawn, as a party’s “ product” consists not of its political communications but of:

- a) Its ideological platform and its set of policy proposals.
- b) The party leader, the candidates and party officials.

In Maarek’s view, political marketing has become an integral and vital component of political communication. In his words: “ Political communication...encompasses the entire marketing process, from preliminary market study to testing and targeting”.

The Voter

The aim of any type of communication is to convince the receiver. All marketers try to convince their customers about the product. Here the marketer is the political party and the customer is the voter. But there are certain differences between mainstream marketing and political marketing with respect to the voter.

Lock and Harris (1996) identify four main differences between mainstream and political marketing:

All voters vote on the same day, everyone makes choice as per their own methods or requirements

There is no cost attached to casting a mandate for a particular party, therefore no cost when considered from an individual point of view but a very huge cost from a society's point of view.

Even though you must have voted for a particular party, even though it's not elected, you will have to live with it.

There is no choice to vote for a political party or the candidate, basically the service given is unbundled. The candidate and the political party both are generally taken into consideration while making the choice.

The main role of PR activities is to improve the perception of the political party or the candidate. Today political parties are involved highly in PR activities during elections; the Bhartiya Janata Party had the India Shining campaign in 2004 which triggered a new PR era in Indian Politics. The

Congress party ran the Secular campaign successfully in 2009. No political party has left any stone unturned in the field of PR, whether it is print or television or even digital.

The Indian Voter today is exposed to a minimum of three different kinds of medium in a day, it is important to reach out to this person when it's most effective. It is very difficult to improve the perception of the candidate or the party in a short term; it requires a long term perspective with a consistent proposition to the voter.

The Medium

The early beginnings of democratic thought in the eighteenth century, political philosophers have recognized the crucial role of un-inhibited public debate and free speech, which was later, extended to the demand for a free press (Votmer, 2007)The notion of a ' marketplace of ideas' is based on the liberal belief that no single agency be allowed to have the last say on the course of politics. Rather, it is through public exchange of argument and counter-argument that the ' truth' eventually emerges (Mill 1859, reprinted 1974). From the perspective of the ' marketplace of ideas' argument, the media are usually assigned a more passive role, serving as a forum where a variety of groups and individuals are given the opportunity to express their views. Arguably the mass media serve as the main link between governments, political parties, candidates, etc. and voters, as the opportunities for direct communication between citizens and their representatives are extremely limited both in terms of the scale of the audience reached and the scope of the issues covered. However, the media are not just channels conveying the messages politicians want them to

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communicate to voters. They are also active participants in the creation of political messages (Cook 1998).

In a democracy like India, The medium of communication is the single most important factor through which political parties reach out to the people. Political Speeches, coverage, events are all part of the medium of communication. Even hate speeches, rally by political parties only make sense if they are reported by the print or the television medium. In the print there are articles that report the unfolding of different events through the day, the television has live screening of interviews and events. As film stars became popular figures in Indian politics, movies became an important medium of political communication. This all is the part of the medium through which political marketing talks place.

Today the digital medium is yet another medium which cannot be ignored by any political party. Blogs, Social media, websites, email, viral marketing and websites itself has brought about a paradigm shift in ways political parties could present itself to the voter. The print and television mediums are generally active only during election campaigns but the digital medium is generally active all through the year.

The Digital Medium: The Game Changer

Not so long ago, Television and Print were the mainstays of most marketers media plans with radio and outdoor and a few other things filling in the gaps where appropriate. Even with the emergence of the internet in the late nineties television commercials were heavily favored by the dotcoms as the way to build their brands. The internet is now over a decade, it's certainly

isn't new . In fact, any product that advertised itself as new ten years on would be laughed at or even sued by the authorities . Today Digital channels are mass and mainstream reaching global audiences. For example in some markets, a popular website can reach a staggering part of the population. It's not just the big portals or social networking sites that command large audiences. Perez Hilton, the web king reaches an estimated 5 million people daily via the blog. (David Meerman , 2004)

While digital channels are now mass, they can also be extremely targeted allowing for singular interactions with consumers. This is one of the defining benefits of new media. Marketing through the digital platform can be extremely personalized in many ways. Personal Emails or SMSes might be tailor made to suit every individual needs. They can be content differentiation also, as different mailers could be sent to different individuals based on their likes and dislikes.

New Media are essentially social. Everything in digital format can be easily replied to by everyone. The best part of digital medium, that it can be viral. Any exciting piece of communication through the digital medium can be easily replicated and produced in the same form. There are basically two types of Digital Marketing. The first one is the pull strategy and the second is the push strategy. The pull strategy basically consists of attracting consumers/visitors to a particular website or a blog or even watching a video (youtube). Here the initiative is on the consumer to visit the particular digital platform. The pull strategy requires a substantial marketing budget as the numbers of competitors are more. Also the pull strategy does not allow you to be personalized to the user, as the same content is viewed by all viewers.

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The push strategy basically consists of sending emails and SMSes to the target audiences. The push strategy could be extremely personalized, for example a political party could send in different SMSes to people of a region affected by floods and a different message to people affected by Naxal issues.

Use of Internet as a Political Communication Tool

The internet is a perfect example of customer centricity in political communication. The internet acts as a one stop platform for people to interact with politicians, discuss their problems. The primary problem in India was that people were finding it tough to connect with politicians except during elections when politicians wanted their mandate. The internet as a platform itself can act as a connection tool for the people with the politicians. But internet is not utilized to its true potential; internet is often seen as a tool to spread awareness about a politician or a political party. (David Meerman , 2004)

Before the internet platform emerged, it was believed that the people would go to the administration for help or issues, but the internet could give way to a system which would bring the government and political parties to the people. The focus of the internet could be to generate efficiency in the system which will indirectly benefit the government. But the important thing with the internet is that the tool works best when the consumer uses it for a dialogue and not a monologue.

Online tools

There are a variety of tools available today for use of political communication. These tools are generally used by the people for entertainment or networking purposes. These tools can consist of blogs, social networking sites, news sites, video streaming and group sites. These tools can be used by have great political applicability. These tools can be used to generate public attention and also to act as points of salience. The internet is generally open systems and are accessible all public. The internet today has no dependency on computers as the internet can be accessed through mobiles. Every tool present on the web today has a specific use and can be used to target niche audiences.

Importance of youth in elections

The analysts believe that the segment of youth would be the most critical in the forthcoming elections. Unfortunately this segment has registered a dismal participation in the elections upto this point. This segment of youth is identified as being rationale and will be having the capability of taking decisions. This segment can easily identify the right and wrong between things, they understand the importance to cast votes in elections too; the only thing that is lacking is a platform to connect with this target audience. The political parties today should be involved in giving out communication messages which are more relevant in times of today. The youth of today feel that they are disconnected with politics just because of the lack of use of appropriate communication tools by the political parties. That is why it is very important to understand the consumption of messages by this segment.

Understanding the Psyche of the Indian youth in Elections

The Indian youth is one of the largest segments of the Indian Society; they surpass any other segments present in the Indian Voting Canvas. In the recent Lok Sabha elections of 2009, the voting percentage among the youth was an abysmal 20%. The influencers in the case of youth are their parents, if the parents decide to cast their vote then the youth generally follow them otherwise they don't cast their vote. Most of the youth today does not find it intriguing enough to talk about politics, the trend is slowly changing but it is still an urban phenomenon. Most of the youth today look at the Election Day as a holiday; they generally plan out long weekend holidays on account of election days. The youth of today believe in the saying " Be the change", they volunteer to NGOs and help other organization, they firmly deem that rather than relying on politicians or political parties, they themselves take the onus of changing the landscape of this country.

Generally Youth does not cast their vote on the pretext of saying that their vote does not make a difference. The youth of today in the range of 20- 25 years, have seen all the major political parties at the centre (1996 – 2009), so the feeling of nothing changing in the Indian Landscape is pretty evident. The youth also believe in the fact that they have never been asked to vote. When researched this led to the vicious cycle phenomenon in Indian Politics, the Indian urban segment and youth are the two segments which generally registers the lowest amount of voting percentages. This is the primary reason why politicians and political parties pay very less or no attention to them. Due to no attention to them the youth do not get any personalized or communication that makes relevance to their life during election days. Many

youth of today feel that the process of casting votes is a tedious one, as one never know how to register and when and where to vote. Before the Jaago re campaign, there was no particular online platform which educated the youth about the process of casting votes.

Need and Rationale for the Study

Changing voter profile of the country – The voter profile of this country is fast changing, the faster the political parties adopt the change, better will be the results for the political party in the Long run.

Media fragmented – As the media of today is getting more and more fragmented, the traditional means of reaching the voter might not work, and innovative means of reaching the same voter might be needed.

Americanization of Politics in India – Learning from the recently concluded Americas Presidential elections, the use of social media had been used exhaustively along with other online tools. This can pave the way of the changing political propaganda as it takes place today

Research Design

Literature Review

Knowledge and Learning's

Content Analysis of Websites

Conclusion/ Recommendation

Learning's

Expert Interviews

Research Objectives

Following are the research objectives:

To analyze and compare the websites of different political parties and understand their offering in the digital medium

To analyze the different promotional activities done by political parties on the digital platform.

Research Methodology

Information gathered through data published, websites, reports. The books and articles for reference would be sourced from the KEIC library of Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad

In -Depth interviews would be conducted with professionals from the digital marketing industry and the people responsible for PR of political parties.

Content Analysis of Websites would be done of the websites of the major political parties of India

The content analysis of websites will be done on several labels like Information on the website, Informing the people, engagement with people, appeal to people , media releases given on the website and transparency achieved by the website

Content Analysis in general is conducted in several discrete stages. Although the following stages are given in sequence, they need not be followed in the same order.

Formulate the research question : Analyzing and comparing websites of different political parties in India (Four national parties are taken in the consideration set)

Define the population in question: The population would be all the data that is available on the internet about these political parties.

Select an appropriate sample from the population: The sample for population would be the websites of these parties. (Official websites)

Select and define a unit of analysis: The unit of analysis would be the pages on the website. Each page would be analysed from the website. The units would be :

Information of the web site

Interaction with People

Appeal to the people

Service to the people

Media Coverage and Public Relations

Transparency

Sampling

A panel of experts from the digital marketing industry would be chosen with their political knowledge in mind. For selecting the panel snowball sampling would be used

The sample for selection of websites would be of the four national political parties of India

Research Questions

Some sample questions which would be asked to the panel of experts would be as follows

How important do you feel is the online platform in today's age for political parties?

Describe what is the appropriate time for political parties to use the online platform?

Where is the online platform best likely to fit in the entire process of political propaganda?

Could you tell us some campaigns which u liked/disliked by political parties?

What would be the extent of use of online platform in political campaigns, five years down the line?

Limitations

Confidential information would be withheld as the topic of research is sensitive subject which is politics

Data Collection

The data collection was done in two phases for the Four National Parties of India. This was decided by the number of seats won by each of these parties in the recently concluded General Elections. The initial data was collected on January 5 – January 7 2010. This data was recorded in an Excel sheet based on the selected variables. After this interviews were taken with the Media / PR heads o the respective political parties. This helped me in cross checking and validating their claims about the website and also to help me fill in gaps during my initial collection. Also a link analysis was done to check the traffic for these websites during the election period, as these links are more active during election periods.

Data and Analysis

The research would be done on the following websites:

National Party

Website URL

Indian National Congress (INC)

<http://www.congress.org.in/>

<http://www.congress4india.com/>

Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)

<http://www.bjp.org/>

<http://www.bjpinidia.in/>

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Samajwadi Party (SP)

<http://www.samajwadipartyindia.com/>

<http://www.spmumbai.org/index.aspx>

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

<http://bspindia.org/>

<http://www.bahujansamajparty.net/>

The Research was done on two websites of each political party. The first data collection was carried out on January 5 – January 7 2010 and the second data collection was done between February 5 – February 7 2010. The purpose was to find if the websites were updated. In all cases however the content was not changed.

Findings of the Research

The political parties have yet not realized the importance of the updates of the websites. They did not update the sites on a day to day basis, although it is technologically possible to update the contents in real time today.

The sites of the Indian National Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party are more updated than the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party. There are more than 32 features on the INC website put together compared to 29 of the BJP party. The Samajwadi party and BSP haven't updated their sites since a very long time; they have far less features than compared to the counterparts.

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The better contents and updates in the BJP site could be attributed to the experience of the BJP elections in 2004. New Media including internet was used extensively during the elections of 2004. BJP has hired a New Media agency for handling only their New Media campaigns in 2009. INC lagged behind in the use of internet during the elections so far and appeared to have attempted to catch up with the BJP.

BJP has sites for all the states of India; these are for the local communication in the state. BJP had the India Shining campaign as the theme in which the party had extensively used New Media.

Language of the Content of Website

Maharashtra state has the local language called Marathi and Gujarat has Gujarati. There are 71, 936, 894 (6. 99% of the total population) Marathi Speaking people in India where as 46, 091, 617 (4. 48% of total population) people of India speak Gujarati. This is against 90, 000, 000 (10. 66% of total population) in India. Yet the parties have totally neglected the regional language. No one has given regional font for download.

Campaign Strategists bank heavily on the local language to write text for bills, posters, billboards, and advertisements etc. Hence logically they should write contents of the sites in local languages to reach majority voters. However this study revealed that the sites depended only on English.

None of the all the eight websites of political parties in Maharashtra and Gujarat had site analytics , date of the last update of the website and site map.

The date for last updating is necessary in some situations. For Example – political parties announce their candidates for elections in two three phases or more. They announce various lists and it changes even after announcements. If the date of last updating is given, the visitors of site can easily come to know whether it is an odd list or the latest one. This happens with other types of content too.

Site Map is a feature that helps the user to easily locate the needed information on that site. They also act as a navigation aid by providing an overview of sites content at a single glance. If the number of links is very large, the site map helps visitors to access all content on the site.

Webmaster: Details of the webmaster (email, phone or fax) are necessary because a visitor can write to him/her in case the site or part of it does not function. All sites had Telephone number to only the head quarters and no region wise contacts.

All sites had given the indication of a copyright. This prohibited others from using the website content for free. Visitors counter is another feature which is neglected by these sites , the visitor counter helps getting everyone an idea about the popularity and utility of the site.

Unit Analysis of Websites

Information of the party

Indian National Congress

The site of the Indian National Congress had given Information about the history of the party , the latest manifesto, List of candidates and the current Office bearers.

Bhartiya Janata Party

The Bhartiya Janata Party had given Information about the Organisational Structure of the Party, History of the party, List of states under BJP rule and the current list of Member of Parliament

Samajwadi Party

The Samajwadi party had given information regarding the performance of the party in the recent elections and the list of candidates for the Lok Sabha Elections in 2009. There was no mention of any kind of History of the party and the party manifesto

Bahujan Samaj Party

The Bahujan Samaj party website was more focuses only on current activities of the party and no information about the past. They didn't have the list of candidates or constituency which they have won in the recent elections. There was no mention of any kind of organisational structure in the party.

There was no mention of Alliance partners of any of the websites under perview

Interaction with People

Indian National Congress

The website of the Indian National Congress had given option to submit their feedback, comments, suggestions and complaints. There was no Toll free number mentioned on their website.

Bhartiya Janata Party

The Bhartiya Janata party was more people and new media friendly they had subscription to RSS feed

They also had an opinion poll on their website to know peoples view on a particular issue.

Samajwadi Party

The website of the Samajwadi Party had only contact numbers of the head office and respective branch offices. They had no other latest interactive features on their website.

Bahujan Samaj Party

The website was least interactive among websites of all the parties. The party was more interested in a monologue and not a dialogue with its voters. The website had no links or any other such things to keep the voters updated on the happenings.

Appeal to the people

Indian National Congress

The Website of the Indian National Congress does not appeal to vote for it neither their alliances. There is no way that anyone interested in joining the

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party could apply for a position. There was no appeal for a donation for a noble cause.

Bhartiya Janata Party

The Website of the Bhartiya Janata Party does not appeal to vote for it neither their alliances. There is no way that anyone interested in joining the party could apply for a position. There was no appeal for a donation for a noble cause.

Samajwadi Party

The Website of the Samajwadi Party does not appeal to vote for it neither their alliances. There is no way that anyone interested in joining the party could apply for a position. There was no appeal for a donation for a noble cause.

Bahujan Samaj Party

The Website of the Bahujan Samaj Party does not appeal to vote for it neither their alliances. There is no way that anyone interested in joining the party could apply for a position. There was no appeal for a donation for a noble cause.

Service to the people

Indian National Congress

Every website should be user friendly at the base level and somehow it should help us in the entire process of voting. The website of the Indian National Congress had no links for what's new on the website, FAQ s etc.

Bhartiya Janata Party

The website of the Bhartiya Janata Party had links what's new is happening to the political party in India. There was no service of any kind to the people.

Samajwadi Party

During Elections, finding your name on the voters list is one of the most tedious tasks for any voter. Samajwadi Party is the only party which is providing voters list to its users. This is one of the most useful features on any of the websites.

Bahujan Samaj Party

There is no feature of any kind on the Bahujan Samaj Party Website. The lowest on service to people.

Media Coverage and Public Relations

Indian National Congress

The Media Coverage and Public Relations is an integral part of any website, it gives you a coverage on the latest happenings of the political party. The media coverage in the INC website give you info only on the election results and not on the party achievements in each of their state.

Bhartiya Janata Party

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The BJP Website has put photo gallery section at the front of their home page and audio-video features to attract the visitors

Samajwadi Party

The Samajwadi Party has their media section updated and it has given it list of latest joins in the party on the website. The party is not in power in any state so its only mentioned its achievements when they were in power

Bahujan Samaj Party

The Bahujan Samaj Party uses it website to effectively communicate its latest achievements, especially in the state of Uttar Pradesh where it's a ruling party. Other News of the party is lost in the clutter of information which is present in the website.

Transparency

Indian National Congress

Transparency is one thing that the Indian voter likes to see with every political party. The site didn't try to remain transparent about declaring the assets of their candidates even though it was a simple thing to do. All the details of assets of a particular candidate are given on the site of the Election Commission of India.

Bhartiya Janata Party

The site didn't try to remain transparent about declaring the assets of their candidates even though it was a simple thing to do

Samajwadi Party

The site didn't try to remain transparent about declaring the assets of their candidates even though it was a simple thing to do

Bahujan Samaj Party

The site didn't try to remain transparent about declaring the assets of their candidates even though it was a simple thing to do

Unit Analysis of Websites

INC

BJP

SP

BSP

Information on the Website

Good

Good

Fair

Fair

Interaction with people

Fair

Fair

Fair

Poor

Appeal to People

Poor

Poor

Poor <