

Does social media and democracy work in symbiosis in India?

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ABSTRACT

Social media handles, viz., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. have captured the internet for a long time now and the same attracts the attention from a heterogeneous set of users. These social media handles are also very popular in India and the same are being conceived as channels of democratic governance wherein citizens express their opinions on diverse perspectives from time to time. Citizens across different socio-demographic backgrounds are engaged in voicing their opinions and grievances via social media accounts. In this vein, the present study seeks to underline the manner in which social media is conducive for democracy in India-a developing country. Apart from providing the taxonomy of research across social media-democracy symbiosis, the study is based on responses from 12 experts-specifically the faculty members of social media department- such that their responses underline the need for having a conducive environment for furthering social media-democracy symbiosis. The study concludes with directions for further research and practitioner implications.

Keywords: Democracy, Interviews, Social media, India

INTRODUCTION

The onset of online era has ushered in a different tempo in the way governance is progressing across the world and especially in developing countries like India. It needs to be underlined how social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. have fanned out in the recent years and dominated the web space (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Users across the board are engaged in interacting with other stakeholders like the communities, government, nonprofit sector, artists, bureaucrats, sportsmen and the like via the social media handles. Social media provides the opportunities to the users to express their opinions freely within the ambit of decency, non-violation of privacy and observance of ethics as enshrined in the “terms of use” and “privacy policy”. Besides engaging in normal conversations, social media is a useful tool for voicing dissent. Thus, in the realm of administrative governance, citizens use social media for expressing their opinions on a diverse set of issues that may impinge upon or have a bearing on the lives of the citizens (Carr & Hayes, 2015). The role and significance of social media becomes all the more important in the face of movements for Freedom of Information and the dismantling of Official Secrets Act etc. The need for Freedom of Information is that citizens should be able to seek information regarding various

aspects linked with public policy and administration from the concerned personnel. In line with the fact that the hitherto existing policies of reserving government data in silos needs to be done away with, it becomes pertinent that the governments should make provisions of making available and accessible the administrative information for public gaze and this would further transparency in functioning besides bolstering citizen trust in administration (Price, 2013). Furthermore, in the times of collaborative and participative administration, citizen interaction with the government via social media needs to be furthered, especially in a developing country like India where physical access with the government is often hampered given the hierarchical levels of administration and direct access via social media may be a better option in these tumultuous times. Given this background, based on the inputs from 12 experts, i.e., the faculty members from the social media department in a popular private university, the present study seeks to provide the ways in which social media interfaces might be conducive for administrative expediency. Thus, apart from outlining the opportunities and challenges associated with the social media interactions with the administration, the present study also delineates the taxonomy of further research in this realm.

Background

Freedom of information has been the consequent sphere of the rights and voices expressed by the people over a number of years for bringing about transparency in administration. Conceding that the politics of the day has been entrenched in corruption and secrecy, the need to bring out the hitherto-concealed information for public gaze is important in order to secure the trust of the citizens, by and large. Likewise, citizens have the right to freedom of speech and expression in all the major constitutions of the world- case in point being India where the Article 15 of the Indian Constitution speaks volumes of the guarantee to the citizens to the right to freedom of speech and expression and the same is also expressed in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution. In this context and to spearhead the global drives towards ensuring the proliferation of the Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression, Indian government has implemented the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, which was implemented in 2006 to provide succor to the citizens as far as their access to publicly held information regarding functioning of administrative bodies is concerned.

Concomitantly, with the expansive reach of internet, the social media handles like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. have also expanded their reach across all sections of citizens (Kent, . Social media operates as an ecosystem and the same becomes all the more important given that stakeholders like the government, citizens, nonprofit sector professionals, artists, businessmen, entrepreneurs, etc. Thus, the level and expanse of interactions with and among different stakeholders assumes critical importance given the themes and topics for discussion among themselves (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Furthermore, given the privacy settings of the individual users, the levels of “visibility” of the “posts” by the users lends a more vibrant discussion forum for the different stakeholders thereby providing them with the opportunity of lending their views. Social media in developing countries assume an altogether unique proportion given the economic development, socio-demographic profiles of the citizens, literacy levels, infrastructural development, digital divide, etc. Thus, users across different age groups and backgrounds are able to interact with each other and also with the government across a range of ideas and perspectives.

Interaction of social media users with the government assumes different formats and the same is

reflected in the democratic progression over a period of time. Social media usage and government policies form a symbiotic relationship and users are able to express their views on different political and public policy issues at a point of time. The range of interactions is diverse and the same may be reflected in the counter-arguments and rebuttals exchanged between the multitudinous set of users. Thus, there are cases where the public policies, bureaucrats, politicians or other influential individuals are discussed and deliberated upon in terms of the positives and negatives about the same.

In line with the nature and scope of relationships, the taxonomy for research areas in the interaction between social media and democracy may be formulated (Table 1). It may be deduced that five taxonomic classification are possible across social media and democracy linkage: user-centric (focused on the users hailing from different backgrounds), usage-centric (emphasis upon the manner in which social media is used as a conduit for interactions on subjects linked with public policies and other matters of governance), issues raised (linked with the topics and themes that are burning issues or may be pertinent in future), democratic dissonance (issues where the users are not holding a unanimous voice in a range of matters) and democratic convergence (when the users are able to express their views on a particular dimension with one voice).

Classification	Indicators
<i>User-centric</i>	Engagement of users across different socio-demographic backgrounds; Personality characteristics; Contexts in terms of developing or developed countries; Professional backgrounds of the users and democracy; Level of interests in democratic issues vis-à-vis social media; Challenges associated with interfacing via social media
<i>Usage-centric</i>	Issues raised-nature, scope, frequency and network; Interactions within and without the social media network; Limits imposed on usage of social media; Privacy concerns; Terms of use while interacting via social media
<i>Issues raised</i>	Nature and scope of the issues; Relevance, timeliness, appropriateness, adequacy of the issues raised; Significance of the pitch raised and its impact
<i>Democratic dissonance</i>	Extent to which the users are not in agreement with each other with regard to any specific issue of pressing concern or the one that existed in the past or is likely to gain momentum in the future
<i>Democratic convergence</i>	The level and extent to which users are in agreement with each other with respect to the public policy or democratic issue and they raise their voices (by supporting the “post”) in unison

Table 1: Taxonomy of research in social media and democracy symbiosis

Research context

To appreciate the manner in which social media and democracy symbiosis linkage gets materialized, we solicited opinions from 12 experts working as faculty members in a social media department working in a prestigious private university. Interactions with the experts were made after following

a specific research protocol wherein the aims and objectives were clearly mentioned regarding the study. Semi-structured interviews were used for soliciting views from the experts who had been cooperative enough in providing leads for conducting further interviews. Specifically, the interview questions veered around the taxonomic divisions of academic research as identified in Table 1.

For understanding the user-centric emphasis on the social media-democracy linkage, it was pointed out by the experts that Indian users are very secretive and shy in their outlook and do not voice their opinions where there are sensitive matters under scanner or where there are issues that might invade their privacy way too much. Thus, personality characteristics of the users are important considerations regarding the manner in which the users discuss and deliberate upon the public policy issues. Indian users tap social media for different purposes such that their families might be significant influencers in making decisions or opining on particular political or social issues.

In terms of the usage-centric research, it was pointed out by the experts that the social media is being tapped for expressing satisfaction, happiness or opposition to a particular politician, policy-maker or any other entity directly or indirectly linked with the public policy and the messages across each of these reflections. Usage patterns also vary in terms of the frequency of social media usage and the overall information-seeking behaviors, i.e. the knowledge of the current affairs or the politics of the day, of the users.

Regarding the issues raised via interactions via social media in the context of public policy and politics of the day, it may be pointed out that the issues may pertain to the social, economic, political, entertainment, or any other issue that might have intersections with the public policies. Depending upon the currency of the subject and its relevance, it becomes important that the users appreciate the pitch with which the particular issue is to be raised at a point of time.

Given that the users interact with a number of stakeholders apart from unlike-minded users, the criticism leveled against the users for voicing a particular issue becomes proportional to the significance of the issue. A hoard of voices joins hands in criticizing or opposing each other and this rebuttal and refutable stance takes shape in the form of actions like “blocking” the other critical voices.

Lastly, the interaction of users via social media for the discussion of democratic issues results in unanimity in terms of the combined voices pertaining to a particular issue. Thus, those who are in favor of a particular issue are expressing the same opinion and supporting the user by “reposting” or “re-tweeting” etc. apart from leaving favorable remarks on the particular “post”.

Conclusion

The burgeoning expanse of social media across the globe has resulted in multitudinous engagement with the users from different backgrounds. Thus, social media has resulted in developing an entirely vibrant landscape where the voices interact with one another behind the internet interfaces. The study pointed out how the social media is being tapped by the users for discussing and deliberating upon diverse policy issues or other social concerns that are being managed or orchestrated by the politicians or public policy makers. A taxonomy of research across the linkage between social media

and democratic issues has been advanced in the study and the same is being supported by the expert opinions by following a semi-structured interviews' format. Findings from the study reveal the many-fold interactions among the users and the salience of democratic themes touched by them. The study leaves practitioner insights as well. That there is a need for furthering a clear-cut agenda regarding the social media policies to promote the freedom of speech and expression needs no clarification. Lastly, the study is relevant for the academic community in terms of the further experimental and empirical validation of the findings from our study.

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