

Twitter & Democracy: Is Twitter a Tool for Two-Way Political Dialogue or Has it Turned into a Platform for Trolling and Propaganda?

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Abstract

Social media platforms have become an inseparable part of Indian metropolitan society and are essential tools of self-expression. Micro-blogging through Twitter has gained participants from the general public to public figures like politicians, personalities from creative industries, sports and others.

How has this helped the citizens connect with their representatives? Has it strengthened democracy by creating an open, two-way communication between the citizens and their representatives? Or, has it become a platform for dumping propagandist messages on the citizens? Or worse, turned into a trolling platform - scaring people who take a step towards effective dialogue?

This paper aims to answer these questions through the content analysis of Twitter profiles of five prominent political figures of the country using purposive sampling technique. A qualitative approach to understand the problem at the micro level has been employed. During the course of analysis, the two-way symmetric model of communication (as given by Gruning in Excellence theory) has been utilized. It acts as a base to analyze the communication patterns between the political figures and the citizens. The theory has been used to label the communication patterns as positive dialogue, propaganda or trolling. The findings of the study can act as a basis for public representatives and their communication spokesperson to improve their dialogue with the masses.

Keywords: Twitter, Democracy, Micro-blogging, Two-way symmetric model of communication, Excellence theory, Propaganda, Trolling

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media is an indispensable platform for communication today. Every other Indian metro-polite is a part of at-least one social media platform. Twitter as a platform has gained huge popularity among the masses. Political discussions have reached a new dimension on Twitter. Some even tout twitter as 'the go to platform' for political news. In such a scenario, it is apt for politicians to be active on this

platform. And, many Indian Politicians are a part of the twiterrati. But are they interacting with the masses or just giving their Information and gaining followers? Or are they being mercilessly trolled?

This paper aims to analyze the communication between politicians and the masses, to analyze if the politicians have a dialogue or indulge in propaganda. "Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist."(Jowett, O'Donnel) How can those politicians, who do participate in propaganda, improve their communication process? Also, are other politicians being a victim to repeated, unconnected, negative comments ie trolls? This paper aims to find answers to these questions.

II. OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Previous studies about Twitter politics indicate that, "Twitter opinion leadership makes a significant contribution to individuals' involvement in political processes, while Twitter use itself or media use motivation does not necessarily help individuals' political engagement".(Park, 2013) Other studies about politics and user gratification reveal that, "Twitter users found that the more months a person is active on Twitter and the more hours per week the person spends on Twitter, the more the person gratifies a need for an informal sense of camaraderie, called connection, with other users"(Chen, 2011).Whereas, the opinions about political engagement on social media states that, "Social media news use has direct effects on offline political participation and indirect effects on offline and online political participation mediated via political expression." (Zheng & Zuniga, 2014). While there are many studies from the perspective of the masses, there are few that focus on the Politicians' perspective. This study aims to fill the gap through Twitter Politics from the politician's point of view.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Excellence theory by Gruning has been used as the theoretical framework to analyze political

communication. He has proposed four models to judge the communication process in the Public Relations perspective. The same has been applied for political communication in this paper. According to Gruning, Communication can be one-way manipulation as given in the publicity model, one-way sharing of direct facts as given in the public information model, or two-way communication with out waiting for feedback as given in the asymmetric model, or it can be two-way , feedback based Communication as given in the two way symmetric model of communication. In this paper, political communication has been placed under one of the above mentioned categories.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) Is political communication tilted towards dialogue or propaganda?
- 2) What is the impact of trolls on political communication?

V. SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

Twitter profiles of four politicians have been chosen using purposive sampling technique. Content analysis of the Twitter profiles of the chosen four politicians will be carried out. The theoretical framework will be used to categorize the overall profile as one-way manipulative, one-way informative, two-way asymmetrical or two-way symmetrical communication.

VI. ANALYSIS

The profiles of Sushma Swaraj, Narendra Modi, Suresh Prabhu, Arvind Kejriwal have been chosen for analysis. Sample tweets from the analyzed tweets have been displayed along with the analysis.

A. Sushma Swaraj:

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 10 Jul
We also have a visa application pending for an Indian national Mrs. Avantika Jadhav who wants to meet her son in Pakistan /5

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 10 Jul
I see no reason why should he hesitate to give his recommendation for nationals of his own country. /4

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 10 Jul
All that we require is his recommendation for the grant of medical visa to Pakistan nationals. /3

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 10 Jul
I am sure Mr. Sartaj Aziz also has given his consideration for the nationals of his own country. /2

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 12 Jul
Replying to @vidyatweets
Pls don't worry. We will do everything possible.

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 12 Jul
Our Consul General is in touch with the Governor of Najran. He is updating me on regular basis. /3

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 12 Jul
I have spoken to Consul General Jeddah. Najran is 900 Kms from Jeddah. Our staff is rushing by the first flight available. /2

Sushma Swaraj @SushmaSwaraj · 12 Jul
I am aware of the fire tragedy in Najran in which we have lost 10 Indian nationals and six injured are in the hospital.

From the analysis of Sushma Swaraj's profile, it is indicated that she is constantly replying to tweets by the masses. From the analysis of her tweets, it is found that phrases like 'Pls don't worry', 'I am in constant touch', 'I am aware of the fire tragedy' are used by her. She has used a conversational tone, and on the basis of Excellence theory, her communication has been classified as political dialogue.

B. Narendra Modi:

Narendra Modi @narendramodi · 1d
On soil health card, discussed further bettering of processes & adopting more technology so that the farmers receive maximum benefit.

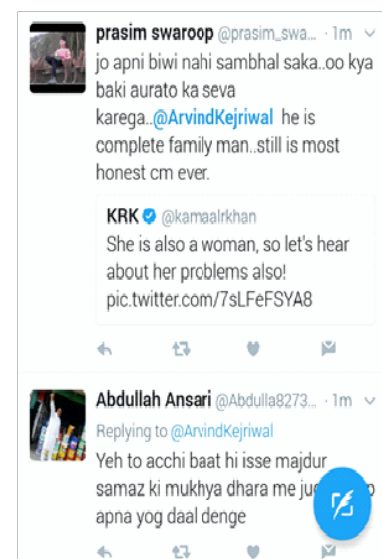
Narendra Modi @narendramodi · 1d
Reviewed the progress of 2 important agriculture sector related schemes- soil health cards & PM Fasal Bima Yojana.

PM reviews progress of Soil Health Cards and PMFBY
narendramodi.in

The analysis of the tweets by Narendra Modi reveals that though his tweets are informational, he has not participated much in political dialogue with the masses. The tonality is non-personal and one way in nature. And according to Excellence theory, his communication can be placed under the one-way information model.



C. Suresh Prabhu



From the analysis of tweets by Suresh Prabhu, it has been revealed that he has replied to the tweets of his followers. Usage of words like I, your and we , indicate a conversational tone. We can thus, infer from the Excellence theory that he has successfully engaged in political dialogue, a two way communication with his followers.

D. Arvind Kejriwal

Sl.no	Politician	Type of Communication
1)	Sushma Swaraj	Two-way political dialogue
2)	Narendra Modi	One-way information dissemination
3)	Suresh Prabhu	Two-way political dialogue
4)	Arvind Kejriwal	Trolled during communication

The above replies to Arvind Kejriwal indicates that his attempts for political dialogue has not been received well by the masses. Repetitive trolling has reduced his political dialogue with the masses.

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The analysis of the twitter profiles of the above four politicians are summarized in the following table:

VII. DISCUSSION

The analysis has given clear indications that political communication has a wide spectrum, with different politicians interacting differently with the masses. While politicians of the current era, understand the importance of social media in reaching out to the masses, they also need to understand the best practices of the different social media channels.

The research questions have been answered as follows:

- 1) Is political communication tilted towards dialogue or propaganda?

From the analysis, it can be inferred that while few politicians like Sushma Swaraj and Suresh Prabhu are incorporating, 2-way political dialogue, some others like Narendra Modi are more focused

towards one-way information dissemination, basis the Excellence theory of Public Relations. Thus the communication is a mixture of dialogue and one-way information flow. Thus, current political communication is more positive than the past, but it can better if more politicians shift towards two-way communication.

- 2) What is the impact of trolls on political communication?

The research study of Arvind Kejriwal’s profile revealed indiscriminate trolling through negative comments. This indicated a decrease in his interaction with the masses. Trolling has thus, reduced political dialogue.

VIII. CONCLUSION

While some politicians do participate in dialogue, some others have been forced to avoid dialogue on account of indiscriminate negative comments ie trolling. Analysis of twitter profiles, indicate a downward curve in interaction between the politicians and the masses on account of negative comments. This is the primary reason why they avoid interaction and switch to one-way propaganda mode of communication.

A suitable solution has to be reached to improve political communication. While it is essential that citizens need to be more conscious and think before they tweet, politicians have to find a different technique like ignoring trolls and responding to positive criticism, rather than overall avoidance of interaction.

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