Social Media Catalyst for Democratic Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT:

According to research, Social Media mirrors the real world and is all about conversations. Social media facilitates the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on, and create content as a means of communicating with the social graph, other users, and the public. Social media platforms offer individuals unprecedented opportunities to connect, share information, and organise around political causes, transcending geographical boundaries and traditional hierarchical structures. Through these platforms, marginalised voices can amplify their messages, galvanising mass support and fostering collective action. However, this phenomenon also presents challenges, as the viral nature of information dissemination can lead to the spread of misinformation and the creation of echo chambers. Nonetheless, social media's ability to rapidly disseminate information and mobilise individuals has indelibly transformed the dynamics of political activism, shaping the way movements form, evolve, and influence societal change in the 21st century.

KEYWORDS:

Social Media, Political Mobilization, Democratic Participation, Digital Activism, Indian Politics.

Introduction

The emergence and widespread adoption of social media platforms have undeniably revolutionised the landscape of political mobilisation and activism. In an era characterised by digital connectivity and instant communication, these platforms have empowered individuals and groups to engage in unprecedented forms of political expression and organisation. Social media's reach transcends geographic boundaries, enabling rapid dissemination of information, real-time coordination of events, and the creation of virtual communities centred around shared political goals.

As a result, political activists have harnessed the power of social media to amplify their messages, galvanise support, and catalyse collective action on a global scale. However, this phenomenon also raises complex questions about the authenticity of online engagement, the role of algorithms in shaping discourse, and the potential for both constructive change and polarisation. Understanding the multifaceted impact of social media on political mobilisation and activism requires a nuanced exploration of its dynamics, as it continues to reshape the way societies engage with political issues and strive for transformative change.

Classification of Social Media Websites Social media websites can be grouped as Social Networking sites, Social Bookmarking websites, social news websites, Social Photo and Video Sharing and Wikis. Social Networking sites like Facebook, Hi5 and Last.FM interact by adding friends, commenting on profiles, joining groups and having discussions. Social Bookmarking websites, viz., Del.icio.us, Blinklist, Simpy interact, allow users to tag websites and search through websites bookmarked by other people. Social News websites Digg, Propeller, and Reddit interact by voting for articles and commenting on them. Social Photo and video–sharing sites, such as YouTube, Flickr, etc., interact by sharing photos or videos and commenting on user submissions. Wikis (Wikipedia, Wikia) interact by adding articles and editing existing articles.

Impact of Social Media on Political Mobilisation: In the digital age, the dynamic landscape of communication has undergone a profound transformation with the advent of social media platforms. One of the most notable consequences of this shift is the significant impact on political mobilisation. Social media's pervasive influence has redefined the way individuals engage with political issues, transcending traditional boundaries and enabling unprecedented levels of participation and activism.

This interconnected virtual realm has facilitated the rapid dissemination of information, fostering dialogue, galvanising social movements, and empowering citizens to shape political discourse like never before. However, this transformative power is not without its complexities, as the intersection of social media and political mobilisation also raises questions about information accuracy, echo chambers, and the manipulation of public opinion. As such, understanding the multifaceted impact of social media on political mobilisation is essential for navigating the evolving landscape of civic engagement and democratic participation.

Low Barrier to Entry: Traditional political participation often required significant resources and institutional support. Social media lowers these barriers, allowing even marginalised groups and individuals to participate actively in political discourse.

Rapid Mobilisation: Social media enables rapid mobilisation of individuals around specific issues or events. Hashtags and online campaigns can quickly gain momentum, leading to offline demonstrations and actions.

Personalised Activism: Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow users to personalise their political engagement. This personalised approach can increase engagement and commitment to political causes.

Social Media and Indian Politics:

What is the impact of social media in politics of a democratic country like India? With so much 'buzz' being created about social media and as more youngsters are joining in, the political parties have finally woken up to its importance. Everyone is recognising this new and powerful medium to interact with the masses and make them participate, thereby enabling better communication. Indian politicians, be they young or old, have started experiencing the impact of social media in one form or another. Now, almost every political party uses the social media to get their message across to the masses.

Political campaigns are in no way limited to buttons and banners for politicians to reach their constituents. The new political arena is full of commercials, blog posts, and hundreds of tweets. Through social media, politicians are now able to constantly display their message through endless commercials, see direct responses to their actions via Facebook or Twitter, and connect with the public (Foley, 2013). Social media creates a new political dialogue. It takes the power of political messaging away from the mass media model and places it firmly into peer–to–peer, public discourse. The word–of–mouth advertising—a recommendation from someone you trust–is the most powerful form of persuasion, and social media creates multiple levels of trust based on relationships.

Social Media and Political Parties: In recent times, the Indian political landscape has seen two major national parties, the Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party, fighting an online political battle.

Online propaganda is aggressively used against each other. Each and every medium is used to wage a war of words. One tweet leads the other to respond immediately. The most famous tweets from both sides were the BJP calling Rahul Gandhi 'Pappu' and Congress calling Narendra Modi 'Feku'. Both parties try to downplay the achievements and exaggerate the failures of each other. Both sides claim to have a large number of followers.

The political parties have their own websites, which was not seen some years back, and some of them also use other social media to interact with people. With every party having its own website and leaders being active on different media, it makes the citizens feel that they are within their reach. The need to take appointments or wait for them to talk is no longer required. The leaders are accessible at the click of a button.

The Congress party's new vice president, Rahul Gandhi, who is one of the icons of youth in India, has used almost every social medium apart from actual communication to interact with the people, especially the youth. He has used social networking websites like Facebook to talk to people, and prominent people as well as the common man interacts at the same time. He also writes blogs to share his views with people. Mr. L. K. Advani of Bharatiya Janata Party has his own blog. Mr. Shashi Tharoor of the Congress Party was one of the first politicians to start tweeting. Mr. Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, has used all media to interact with people. He has been effectively using social media to disseminate information and remain in touch with the young population of India. He has often quoted that the power of social media should be harnessed to involve youth in the democratic process. The impact of his approach is visible in the Gujarat elections.

Social Media and Karnataka Elections Now the big question is, do the online campaigns and followings convert into votes? Do the people who express views online go to the poll booths and cast votes? Let us analyse the State Legislative elections of 2013 in Karnataka. It is home to Silicon Valley, i.e., Bangalore, with many people using the internet. The total Population of Karnataka is 5.273 crore (52.73 million), with 33.98% people living in urban areas and the rural population being 66.01%. Every political party was seen using social media to get their message across to the masses, be it the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Karnataka Janata Party, or Janata Dal (Secular). The parties had set up an IT Cell that is in charge of the official Twitter,

Facebook accounts, blogs and YouTube Videos (Mishra, 2013).

BJP was far ahead in social networking than its opponents. But the elections saw a huge defeat for the ruling BJP government. The role and usage of social media in the Karnataka elections were limited to the urban, tech–savvy youth, and the social media presence did not camouflage the issues like governance and corruption. Moreover, the real challenge of political leaders was to reach out to the rural population, who are the real voters, which constitutes 66.01% of the state population, and are largely illiterate, and a very meagre number are tech–savvy.

Impact of Social Media on Democratic Politics:

Social media's impact on political activism has been profound, revolutionising the way individuals engage with political issues, voice their opinions, and mobilise for change. These platforms have transcended traditional barriers, offering a global stage for dialogue, information dissemination, and organisation. From facilitating rapid dissemination of information and galvanising collective action to enabling marginalised voices to find resonance, social media has accelerated the speed and reach of democratic politics.

However, this digital revolution also presents challenges, such as the spread of misinformation and the potential for echo chambers. As society navigates these complexities, understanding the intricate interplay between social media and democratic politics is essential for comprehending the evolving dynamics of modern civic engagement.

Diversification of Activism: Social media has given rise to new forms of activism, such as clicktivism and hashtag activism. While criticised for being shallow, these forms of engagement can serve as entry points for individuals who may later become more deeply involved.

Global Networking: Social media transcends geographical boundaries, enabling activists to connect and collaborate across continents. This globalisation of activism has led to the sharing of strategies, resources, and support on a global scale.

Amplification of Marginalised Voices: Previously marginalised groups can now bypass traditional gatekeepers and use social media to amplify their voices. This has contributed to the visibility of underrepresented issues and perspectives.

Challenges and Concerns: In an ever–evolving world marked by technological advancements, shifting societal norms, and global interconnectedness, a myriad of challenges and concerns have come to the forefront. These multifaceted issues span across various domains, encompassing economic, environmental, political, and social spheres. As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, we find ourselves grappling with the implications of climate change, the ethical dilemmas posed by emerging technologies, the pursuit of equitable socio–economic development, and the preservation of democratic values in the face of diverse ideological landscapes.

These challenges and concerns are not isolated but rather intricately intertwined, demanding innovative and collaborative solutions that transcend traditional boundaries. As we delve into an era of unprecedented possibilities, addressing these pressing issues with a proactive and holistic approach becomes essential to shaping a sustainable and inclusive future for all.

Misinformation and Polarisation: The rapid spread of misinformation on social media can undermine the accuracy of political discourse and contribute to polarisation. Echo chambers and filter bubbles further exacerbate this problem.

Digital Divide: While social media has the potential to enhance political engagement, the digital divide limits access to these platforms, potentially excluding certain demographics from participating fully.

Superficial Engagement: Critics argue that social media activism often stops at sharing posts or signing online petitions, without leading to tangible, real–world impact.

Implications for Democracy and Social Change: The intricate interplay between democracy and social change yields profound implications that resonate across societies and generations. At the heart of this dynamic relationship lies the potential for transformative shifts in political landscapes and societal norms. Democracy, with its emphasis on inclusivity, participation, and representation, serves as a catalyst for social change by providing platforms for marginalised voices to be heard and advocating for equitable policies.

Concurrently, social change, whether driven by grassroots movements or evolving cultural paradigms, exerts pressure on democratic

systems to adapt and evolve in response to the evolving needs and aspirations of the people. This intricate dance between democracy and social change underscores the fluid nature of governance, as they mutually shape and redefine one another, ultimately steering the course of nations and the trajectory of progress.

Empowerment and Participation: Democracy transforms subjects into active citizens, fostering social change through informed public dialogue, community action, and improved accountability of institutions.

Social Transformation and Equality: It acts as a tool for promoting equality, addressing discrimination, and protecting marginalised groups, though structural inequalities (e.g., in education or caste) often resist rapid change.

Conflict Resolution: Democratic systems are directly correlated with effective conflict resolution, providing a peaceful mechanism for managing societal disagreements and diverse interests.

Challenges and Pressures: Growing disillusionment with representative models has led to a push for more direct, participatory, and local–level democracy, as traditional institutions sometimes fail to address grassroots needs.

The Role of Civil Society: Civil society organisations are essential for bridging the gap between citizens and the state, holding governments accountable and fostering the social cohesion necessary for sustainable development.

Enhanced Civic Engagement: Social media can empower citizens by offering them platforms to voice their concerns, engage with political issues, and demand accountability from authorities.

Democratic Backsliding: The manipulation of social media for disinformation campaigns or divisive purposes can undermine democratic processes and lead to social and political instability.

New Avenues for Change: Social media has facilitated the rapid organisation of movements that challenge the status quo, leading to significant social and political changes in various contexts.

Conclusion

The impact of social media on political mobilisation and activism has been profound and far–reaching. A positive development of social

media emergence has been that the youth are talking about the political issues. Social media platforms have provided a dynamic and accessible arena for individuals to engage in political discourse, share their viewpoints, and organise collective actions. They have facilitated the rapid spread of information, enabled real-time awareness of political events and issues, and fostered a sense of global interconnectedness among activists.

While social media has empowered marginalised voices, facilitated rapid mobilisation, and played a crucial role in galvanising social and political movements, it has also introduced challenges such as the spread of misinformation, echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs, and the potential for digital suppression by authorities. Nonetheless, the overall influence of social media on political mobilisation and activism remains significant, reshaping the landscape of civic engagement and underscoring the need for critical digital literacy and responsible online participation. Though it may not bring in huge changes immediately, it will play an important role in creating political awareness, which in itself is a huge step forward for a developing country like India.

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Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.