



Research Article

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Use of Social Media by Indian Cabinet Ministers to Propagate Their Work and Connect with Masses

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ABSTRACT

The political use of social media in India has assumed a whole new role, scale and meaning. While abundant research has been done on how politicians use social media for campaigning during elections, this research aims to go further and discover how social media is used when elections are over and governance is on. This research will focus on the use of Facebook by cabinet ministers to connect with the masses and inform them about latest political and administrative developments relevant to their departments and their work and to provide interesting glimpses into their personal lives. Most of the cabinet ministers have their official Facebook pages. This research will analyze the content they posted on their official Facebook pages with the help of Fanpage karma, an online tool for social media monitoring and analytics.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a major tool for information dissemination in India. Realizing its broad user base and effectiveness in connecting with the masses the political class is increasingly using social media to connect with voters. Facebook is India's most popular social media platform, with over 497 million active users (Degenhard, 2023, Clement, 2019), which is more than any other country. After the launch of Jio sim in October 2015, the data prices in India plummeted, and subsequently, there was an explosion in the number of mobile internet users. The monopoly of mainstream media as the dominant supplier of political news ended and people began to source political information from social media. They could now give their instant feedback on government policies and actions, a facility not available on mainstream media.

Stieglitz and Xuan (2012) state that social media is increasingly used in a political context to enter into direct dialogue with citizens. Mahayana (2018) writes that the

two-way communication offered by social media, helps politicians understand voters better. Prakash (2019) has observed that the impact of intensive communication through social media has been decisive for the nature and character of electoral contests as it enables users, at a relatively small financial cost, to bombard the electorate with political messages. Enil and Skogerbo (2012) state that social media extends the arena for personalized political campaigning. Singh (2019) says that political parties are increasingly using technological tools like data analytics, surveys, and alternative media to construct effective and micro-targeted campaigns. Sadashivam (2019) credits social media with giving force and coherence to the fractured voice of ordinary people, which is mostly missing from conventional media.

Use of social media as a political tool

The first major example of the political use of social media is the 2008 US presidential election, where the

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nominee of the Democratic Party, Barack Obama, deployed social media as an important tool to connect with voters (Rosentiel, 2008). Obama's masterful leveraging of web 2.0 platforms marked a major E-ruption in electoral politics around the world as campaigning shifted from old-style political machines to horizontal dynamics of online social networks (Dutta and Fraser, 2008). Social media has been instrumental in the ouster of several dictatorial regimes in North African countries as younger citizens used social networking platforms to organize large demonstrations and circumvent state controls over traditional media (Arafa et. al., 2016, Shearlaw, 2016). Many scholars have opined that Facebook and Twitter might have significantly contributed to Donald Trump's election as president of the United States (William, Girish, and Gulati 2017).

Social media in India

Philipose (2018) documents the rise of social media as a useful tool for mass communication and mobilization in India by zeroing in on five events that took place in from 2011 to 2015. These five events are the India Against Corruption protests in 2011 for the passing of ombudsman bill, the spontaneous protests after brutal Nirbhaya gang rape in Delhi in 2012, the unprecedented arrival of Aam Aadmi Party in 2013 Delhi assembly elections, emergence of BJP as victorious in 2014 general elections and the sweeping of Delhi assembly elections by AAP in 2015. According to Mahapatra (2019), social media helps political parties save time, resources and efforts of physical coverage of 543 constituencies, 930000 polling booths and a 900 million-strong electorate, by reaching out to more voters on a personal level, in an interactive format. Describing the role of social media in the 2014 general elections Sardesai (2015) states that, through Facebook, Narendra Modi was able to connect with a broad urban audience as 13 million people made 75 million Modi-related interactions during the two election months on Facebook in 2014. 29 Million People in India conducted 227 million conversations regarding elections around 2014 general elections (Chakrabarty and Hazra, 2016). Tharoor (2019) writes that political parties have extensively turned to social media. He further says that Facebook has gathered a huge user base in India and no politician can afford to ignore it. Pillai (2017) writes that an Indian internet user spends 40 percent of his online time on Facebook and its family apps. Pai (2019) opines that social media can swing four to five percent of the votes in elections.

Social media and cabinet ministers

With the current dispensation in India being headed by a tech-savvy prime minister, the cabinet ministers are fast following in footsteps. Most cabinet ministers have their official Facebook pages to publicize governance policies, schemes and events related to ministries, share important data and statistics and keep the country posted about their professional and personal lives. While

abundant research has been done on social media usage by politicians for electioneering, this research focuses on the use of Facebook by cabinet ministers to discover how social media is used when the election is over and governance is on.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The extensive data on the Facebook pages of 23 cabinet ministers from 16 August to 22 September 2020 has been analyzed in this research. The data was sourced from Fanpage Karma, an online social media monitoring and analytics platform. There were 24 union cabinet ministers in all at the time of data collection and all of them had official Facebook pages, with the exception of S. Jaishankar, the minister of external affairs. The research has analyzed data available in the form of the number of posts, fans, reactions, comments, shares, and page interaction from the official Facebook pages of all 23 cabinet ministers to ascertain reasons behind their usage of Facebook and how successful they were in connecting with public via Facebook.

The Performance of Facebook Pages of cabinet ministers on various indices

Engagement, Growth Rate and Page Performance Index are the three most essential indices to measure the performance of a Facebook page. The engagement displays an average amount of how frequently a fan interacts with a page's posts. It is calculated by dividing the daily amount of likes, comments, and shares by the number of fans. Growth rate is the average weekly increase in the number of fans. Page performance index or PPI is a combination of page engagement and growth. The table below contains data pertaining to aforementioned indices for analysis.

Table 1 shows the page of then union minister for animal husbandry, dairying and fisheries, Giriraj Singh, as best performing on all three indices, with a PPI score of 89. He is followed by Arjun Munda, the union minister for tribal affairs and late Ram Vilas Paswan who held the consumer affairs, food and public distribution portfolio with respective PPI scores of 76 and 68. Giriraj Singh is known for making candid, albeit controversial, statements and is considered one of the most recognizable faces of the cabinet. Giriraj Singh's impressive PPI score proves popular rhetoric's ability to attract traffic on online media. This data upholds mainstream media where cabinet ministers who can supply with visuals and sound bites that can boost TRPs and attract viewership are preferred over the ones who practice verbal restraint. However, it is not the whole story as delineated in further analysis of data. Arjun Munda has an entirely different image to Giriraj Singh, with mainstream media rarely running primetime stories based on his statements. The third best-performing cabinet minister, late Ram Vilas Paswan was a veteran politician with a unique style of communication and, like

Table 1: The page of then union minister for animal husbandry, dairying and fisheries

No.	Page	Page Engagement (%)	Growth Per Week (%)	Page Performance Index (%)
1	Amit Shah	0.68	0.01	7.0
2	Arjun Munda	4.92	0.56	76.0
3	Arvind Sawant	0.86	0.09	13.0
4	Dharmendra Pradhan	1.08	0.04	11.0
5	Dr. Harsh Vardhan	0.57	0.13	13.0
6	Dr.MahendraNath Pandey	0.89	0.13	16.0
7	Dr.ThawarchandGehlot	1.39	0.09	19.0
8	Dr.RameshPokhriyalNishank	1.56	0.33	33.0
9	Gajendra Singh Shekhawat	2.2	0.24	32.0
10	Giriraj Singh	6.22	0.74	89.0
11	Harsimrat Kaur Badal	0.67	0.01	7.0
12	Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi	0.45	0.06	8.0
13	Narendra Singh Tomar	1.53	0.24	29.0
14	Nirmala Sitharaman	0.88	0.51	32.0
15	Nitin Gadkari	0.64	0.29	21.0
16	PiyushGoyal	0.39	0.18	14.0
17	Prakash Javadekar	0.91	0.36	26.0
18	Pralhad Joshi	1.79	0.07	17.0
19	Rajnath Singh	0.39	- 0.01	5.0
20	Ram Vilas Paswan	3.63	0.49	68.0
21	Ravi Shankar Prasad	0.28	0.02	5.0
22	Sadananda Gowda	0.21	0.02	4.0
23	SmritiZubinIrani	0.27	0.04	6.0

Arjun Munda, did not dominate headlines during most of his tenure. While Giriraj Singh's occupation of first place on page performance index is a clear indicator that raw, unrestrained content can reign supreme on Facebook too, Arjun Munda's PPI score denies it the position of a norm. Despite their vastly different images and page contents, Facebook pages of both have done exceedingly well. Late Paswan's page scoring third-highest PPI, further affirms this. This contrast underscores the need for a holistic approach (Chadwick, 2013) to the role of information and communication in politics, which does not exclusively focus on old or new media but maps where the distinctions between old and new media matter and where those distinctions may dissolve.

Analysis of Fans, Posts and Responses on Official Facebook pages of cabinet ministers

The table below contains statistics on fans, posts and responses on the official pages of cabinet ministers for analysis.

According to the Table 2, the aggregate of reactions, comments, and shares differs vastly from minister to minister as while home minister Amit Shah's page had traffic of 2777377 over 28 days, then Minister of chemicals

and fertilizers, Sadanand Gowda's page only attracted traffic of 13257. However, put together, the facebook pages of 23 ministers were able to attract traffic of 8132458 over 28 days. Per day, the ministers were able to get 290444.92 reactions, comments, and shares on their posts. This is a humongous number, and yet it does not include the reactions, shares, and comments on posts shared by followers and the friends of followers.

Easy Way to be Present among Constituents

While being on a prime-time show or the first page of a top-circulating newspaper may be equally effective for cabinet ministers to reach out to a big audience, they would have to invest much more time and resources for such an arrangement. On the other hand, all they have to do is to type and post on Facebook. It is impossible to be personally available to the mainstream media for interviews frequently for union ministers due to the nature of their job. Only 7 of the 23 cabinet ministers who are covered in this research are Rajyasabha MPs. Usually bulk of the cabinet is formed by Lok Sabha MPs, who also have to worry about their constituents, whom they cannot meet as consistently as a normal parliamentarians and whom they have to face during their campaign for reelection.

Table 2: Fans, Posts and Responses on Official Pages of Cabinet Ministers

No.	Facebook Pages	Fans	Posts	Total Reactions, Comments and Shares
1	Amit Shah	14597081	82	2777377
2	Arjun Munda	116140	113	158122
3	Arvind Sawant	101533	47	24479
4	Dharmendra Pradhan	1048817	389	317191
5	Dr. Harsh Vardhan	1145794	119	181104
6	Dr.MahendraNath Pandey	302768	40	75427
7	Dr.ThawarchandGehlot	66661	75	25876
8	Dr.RameshPokhriyalNishank	1046151	254	452713
9	Gajendra Singh Shekhawat	442428	190	271782
10	Giriraj Singh	357205	157	612771
11	Harsimrat Kaur Badal	730434	64	136953
12	Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi	380291	121	48226
13	Narendra Singh Tomar	368828	145	157083
14	Nirmala Sitharaman	478047	65	115975
15	Nitin Gadkari	1315432	45	233854
16	PiyushGoyal	8645143	223	946030
17	Prakash Javadekar	95135	201	24046
18	Pralhad Joshi	203639	142	101830
19	Rajnath Singh	6850135	39	756467
20	Ram Vilas Paswan	121605	191	122806
21	Ravi Shankar Prasad	2151475	123	171255
22	Sadananda Gowda	221520	33	13257
23	SmritiZubinIrani	5342113	50	407831

Ravishankar (2009) calculates that based on data from 1977 to 2014, an affiliation with the ruling party reduces a member of parliament's (MP's) chances of reelection by nine percentage points. Although there is a perception that holding a cabinet portfolio insulates a candidate from anti-incumbency to an extent, there are copious instances of cabinet ministers losing elections. In the 2004 general elections, the number of defeated cabinet ministers stood at 12. In 2014 general elections, out of 16 cabinet ministers who stood for reelection, 13 lost with some finishing a distant third and fourth in the race. In light of these statistics, the cabinet ministers have to worry as much about connecting to their constituents and communicating their achievements as any other politician. The most feasible option for this purpose is Facebook.

Safety from Distortion and Misinterpretation

The philosophy of "It leads if it bleeds" has been followed by a segment of media for long. It has created an atmosphere where an innocuous slip of tongue on a live or even recorded interview can snowball into a major controversy. Sometimes, even a perfectly delivered statement can be misinterpreted and a nasty media trial can ensue. On social media platforms like Facebook, communicators can design,

shape, and mould the message as they desire. Most of the content shared on Facebook pages of cabinet ministers is in the form of text which is less vulnerable to distortion and misinterpretation than verbal utterances.

Feedback from Receivers of Message

Lewin(1943) conceptualized the character of gatekeeper in the process of information flow. The gatekeepers control the channel through which information flows. The media had the role of gate-keeping until the evolution of social media which has rendered the gate-keeping function redundant. The presence of gatekeepers made information prone to edits and filters before it reached the receiver. It also exposed feedback to similar treatment before it reached the sender. Social media has solved this communication predicament by connecting the sender directly to the receiver. Cabinet ministers can now receive unadulterated feedback from followers on their posts. An honest analysis of this precious primary data can keep them well apprised of their performance.

option to communicate in local dialect

Hindi and English news channels dominate the mainstream news media, as evidenced by BARC's 2018 report "What

India Watched,” which estimates the combined share of Hindi and English news channels in total advertising revenue of news channels to be 79 percent. India has a huge plurality of languages. Some states do have well evolved regional press, but none of them would have the reach of Facebook where users can now type in many Indian languages. Cabinet ministers often post on their pages in their native tongues to strike a personal chord with the voters in their constituencies and home states. Even the non-speakers of the language can understand such posts through translation provided by Facebook.

The Sheer Number of Fans

In 2019 general elections, there were 910512091 or approximately 900 million eligible voters (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2019). 67.4 Percent of total eligible or approximately 600 million voters exercised their franchise. The total number of followers of fan pages of 23 cabinet ministers is summed at approximately 46 million. If we compare numbers of followers on fan pages of cabinet ministers to overall voter statistics, they might seem infinitesimal. However, a different picture begins to surface as we get into details. BJP polled 37.76 percent or almost 230 million votes in 2019 parliamentary elections (ECI Report, 2019). INC won 19.7 percent or almost 119 million votes. The difference between the two parties was approximately 110 million votes. Even if half of over 46 million followers of fan pages of cabinet ministers are genuine and individual people, that number would be almost 23 million, which is almost ten percent of BJP's total votes. It would be almost 20 percent of total INC votes. It would be over twenty percent of BJP's margin of victory over Congress. Out of 5 recognized national parties besides BJP and Congress, only BSP and TMC can approximate this number with their voters. Remaining national parties like NCP, CPI, and CPI(M) cannot even reach half-way to that number. Even with aggregate of votes polled by all three of them, they fall short by several millions of that number. Biswas (2019) calculates the number of swing or floating voters in India to be at least 12 percent and possibly more. That would mean over 70 million votes in 2019 general elections. The number of genuine followers on cabinet ministers' fan pages would equal a third of swing voters. Facebook allows cabinet ministers to create a giant, country-wide network of purveyors of their messages. Interacting directly on a daily or even hourly basis with millions of masses scattered all over this vast nation is a major advantage for cabinet ministers.

CONCLUSION

As demonstrated in the research findings, Facebook is a powerful medium of communication contemporarily. Cabinet ministers are in constant need to communicate important messages to a large audience. Facebook provides an imperative promotional value to their work at the minimum investment of resources and allows them to

stay connected to voters. Due to the interactive nature of Facebook, it helps create a dialogue between voters and their elected representatives. Social media exempts cabinet ministers from the need to appear frequently on news channels for interviews which entail higher financial and temporal costs. For cabinet ministers, it is absolutely necessary to convey their messages to the target audience in their original form. A channel of communication not controlled by anyone other than the sender of the message precludes any possibility of distortion and misinterpretation of the message. Facebook helps cabinet ministers shed the mental distance between them and the common citizen. Personalized posts containing family pictures, festival greetings etc. are an incredibly effective tool for them to bond with common people. Without this tool, most of the time, they would only be seen on media in work mode, creating an aura of elitism around cabinet ministers. Cabinet ministers use Facebook to connect with young voters who associate more easily with tech-savvy politicians. Facebook provides a vast user base, allowing cabinet ministers to reach and engage with a wide audience. They can tailor their communication to specific demographics, increasing the effectiveness of their message. Facebook's interactive features enable direct engagement, fostering relationships and trust with voters. It is cost-effective compared to traditional media, while its data analytics provide insights for strategic communication. With the potential for content to go viral, real-time updates, and grassroots mobilization, Facebook offers a powerful platform for cabinet ministers to amplify their message and drive meaningful engagement.

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