

Research Article

Functionality and Effectiveness Analysis of BJP and INC Websites

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to discover the relevance of websites as a tool used by BJP and INC political parties of India in the present scenario when web 2.0 has overshadowed all the other platforms to engage with public. The study selects period of non-election period, i.e., routine politics to assess party's normal behavior, outside of the obsession of an election campaign. The data for the analysis were collected during the last week of December 2018. During this period, no election campaign was going on. The findings of the data focus on two important aspects of political communication through websites, i.e., Information flow which includes information provision, resource generation, campaigning, networking and participation; and site delivery which includes navigability, visibility, multimedia, accessibility and responsiveness. Further, the researcher also tries to examine the popularity of the website through monthly page views, link analysis and geographic distribution. Using Alexa Way back Machine, the researcher compares the present view of parties' website with its earlier view. The results suggest that web-based communication is mostly party-initiated top-down and one-way approach.

Keywords: Websites, Political parties, Information flow, Site delivery

Introduction

Norris defines political communication as an interactive process which involves constant sharing of information between politicians, media and citizens.¹⁰ Earlier, political communication was mediated through media like traditional, print or electronic. Since last one decade, it has grown significantly with the advent of information technology. New media has provided space for common people to voice their thoughts. Political communication, which in the beginning was under the influence of dominant elite, is now giving more space to the common citizen for having political discourse. Norris has also further bifurcated political communication in three eras. According to him, the earliest era of political communication involved face to face communication between politicians' and citizens during

door to door campaigns, meetings, rallies and hustings. The modern era of political communication saw the use of satellite television in carrying political advertisements. Third era of political communication started with use of digital technologies ranging from website to blogosphere to email services to social networking sites.

McNair in first edition of his book *An Introduction to Political Communication* did not consider internet as a significant tool for political communication.¹¹ But he himself, in the fourth edition of the same book, discussed about the geographical reach and effects of the internet in the context of 2004 US Presidential Election. Obama's 2008 Presidential Election is called to be the first election where the use of social media showed a very significant impact. Gibson, Ward and Lusoli (2002) study claimed that in the mid-1990s political parties

went online and built their online websites for six main reasons which are as follows: information provision to public and 'old' media, campaigning, targeting youth audience, symbolic significance, virtual infrastructure/efficiency gains and soliciting voter/member feedback and participation. Since then website is treated as an essential tool for online political communication. Obama's official website *mybarackobama.com* was linked to 30 different social media platforms. One can say Obama's election campaign was the beginning of a new era of political communication. Obama campaign made extensive use of innovative technological applications such as an application was devised for iPhone users so that they could make donation, find out Obama's campaign offices and information about events; a facility was also added to *mybarackobama.com* so that users could customize as per their preference. Chadwick stated if utilized properly and strategically, websites will improve aspects of political interactivity.⁹ Internet is expected to be a probable platform that may act as a bridge and narrow the gap between individuals who require information for decision-making and the sources of such information. After the advent of web 2.0, there is an ample research going on about how it has helped political parties and candidates around the world to influence the voters to mobilize and win elections. Historically speaking, website web 1.0 was the first online platform that political parties ever used before the advent of web 2.0 in online political communication. The purpose of this study is to discover the relevance of websites as a tool used by BJP and INC political parties of India in present scenario when web 2.0 has overshadowed all other platforms to engage with public. According to Gibson and Ward (2000), political parties have basically five goals, i.e., information sharing, resource generation, networking, campaigning and promoting participation. Hence, evaluation criteria and coding scheme to study functionality and site delivery is taken from the Gibson and Ward, along with certain criteria added by the researcher herself.

Scope of the Study

In this study, the researcher has collected data at one point in time (Dec 2018). However, because of technological developments, it is sure that features of the website can be replaced by other advanced features or dormant features can be removed. Therefore, future researcher who will be willing to study the changes in these websites may use this data to know the differences.

Limitation of the Study

It is quite possible that as the technology advancement comes, features change; so future analyses of websites will yield different findings. This could be a limitation of this study.

Literature Review

Adogla⁷ did qualitative content analysis for analyzing six websites of political parties of Ghana ahead of two general elections, i.e., in 2012 and in 2016. Furthermore, the researcher also did in-depth interviews of six officials of the political parties, who were having charges of operating these websites. The study revealed that majority of the parties only used one-way downward flow of information rather than using it for interaction purpose. Russmann¹⁴ investigated the political parties' websites during Austrian and German federal elections of 2008 and 2009 respectively. Apart from doing structural analysis of websites, the researcher also analyzed whether features of the parties' websites were directed towards a general audience or targeted towards a specific groups of voters such as youth, women, minority, media, etc. The findings suggested that all the websites were aimed at general public except one party of Germany. However, when data of specific target groups were analyzed and compared among one another, it was evident that political parties used websites to attract media more than any other groups.

Schweitzer¹³ did an integrated quantitative analysis of the functional, formal and content-related aspects of German political party websites during the 2002 national elections. Similar study was done by Vaccari¹² where he studied overall 27 sites of Italian national parties in the 2006 parliamentary elections along three main lines of enquiry: information, participation and professionalism. The study done by Karandikar⁸ investigated the media convergence and communication features of websites of political parties in India. In this study, through the method of purposive sampling, websites of 26 political parties of India were selected. The mixed method design which is a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach was used by the researcher for the study purpose. This research work is exploratory and experimental in nature. Besides the above mentioned mixed method, the researcher also conducted four experiments for judging the aesthetics, color theme, layout and the language of the websites. To look at the participatory, informative, mobilization, interactive and web 2.0 features of the websites, the researcher also visited and studied websites of all the political parties included in the study. Kruikemeier⁵ did the comparative analysis of website of parties and candidates of five different countries. He examined interactivity, political and mobilization features of 63 websites and 416 pages in Germany, Romania, Hungary, The Netherlands and Great Britain. Kaushik¹ did the content analysis of political parties of India. The data revealed that majority of the parties are having different features and patterns attached to their party websites like web 2.0 applications, options, designs, etc. Mukherjee² did the comparative analysis of websites of political parties of India

between Dec 2004 and Jan 2005, with party preparedness for the general elections of 2009. This study further investigated the popularity of parties' websites. The result suggested that two national parties, i.e., BJP and INC, had completely changed their look of their party's website whereas NCP and CPI had not done any major changes. Further, BSP and SP didn't have party official websites. Park and Thelwall³ studied the linking pattern and social networking of South Korean politicians' websites with other political actors. It was found that majority of the politicians' websites were linked with their affiliated parties. Conway and Dorner⁴ analyzed the various functions parties were doing through their official websites. The researcher used indices such as information provision, resource generation and participation by looking at the availability of email addresses, chat rooms, feedback opportunities, etc. and networking by looking at link-in and link-out of the websites and campaigning by looking at availability of logos, advertisements, etc. Crossland and Chigona⁶ did a similar kind of study by analyzing the use of websites by small political parties of South Africa during elections. The researcher studied the functions and effectiveness of these websites.

Objectives

- To measure the popularity of the websites through monthly site popularity rank, link analysis and geographic distribution
- To examine whether both the parties were using website as a tool of campaign (function) and effectiveness (site delivery).

Research Questions

- To what extent do BJP and INC websites in India have information and resource generation provision features?
- To what extent do political parties utilize interactive features to communicate with the citizens?
- What ways do political parties do campaigning through their website visitors into their?
- How much their website has changed in last one year for the preparedness of upcoming 2019 Lok Sabha Elections?
- How do BJP and INC differ in their use of websites for online political communication ?

Research Methodology

Universe: All the seven national political parties of India.

Sampling Technique: In selecting the sample, the purposive sampling technique was used to select the political parties and their websites because they formed the basis for the research.

Sample: The selected national political parties for the study.

Party	Foundation Year	Party Symbol	URL(s)
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	1980		http://www.bjp.org/
Indian National Congress (INC)	1885		https://www.inc.in/en

Method

The popularity of the website through monthly page views, link analysis and geographic distribution was analyzed taking data from Alexa. To know the contents of home page one year earlier, the Wayback Machine (www.archive.org) was used. For analyzing two important aspects of political communication through website which are information flow and site delivery, the study applied qualitative content analysis for the purpose of data collection. Both the site was evaluated with a coding scheme that features a number of variables. Scores were assigned to both the websites for all individual variables present in 10 subsections. Indices for sections and subsections were then calculated by adding the scores of all relevant variables.

Unit of Analysis: Website

Sample Frame: The study selects period of non-election period, i.e., routine politics to assess politicians' and parties' normal behavior, outside the craze of an election campaign. The data for the content analysis were collected during the last week of Dec 2018. During this period, in none of the countries an election campaign was ongoing.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

Objective 1:- In the first step alexa.com (subsidiary of Amazon.com) was used for measuring site popularity, traffic rank in-links and geographic distribution of visitors, etc.

Table 1. Site Popularity

Party	Global Rank	Country Rank
BJP	82,450	5599
INC	109,994	6971

The rank is calculated using a combination of average daily visitors to this site and page views on this site for over past three months.

Website is the medium through which a political party tells the world of its presence. Higher-quality websites tend to attract more links. Looking at Table 1, it is clear that BP is more popular in world map than INC as well as receiving much more traffic than INC.

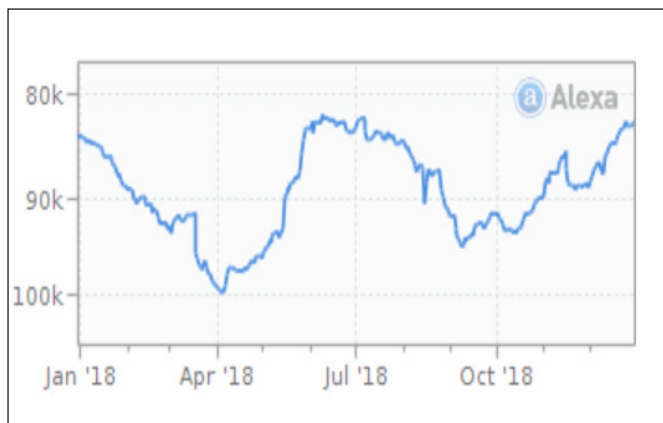


Figure 1.Visitors traffic on their website (BJP)

Source: Alexa Rank (31st Dec. 2018)

Table 2.Geographic Distribution of Visitors (in percentage)

Party	India	Outside India	
		United States	United Arab Emirates
BJP	93.7%	3.2%	0.7%
INC	93.1%	1.6%	1.84%

Source: Alexa

Table 2 explains the distribution of viewers according to geographic disparities. Researcher has identified country-

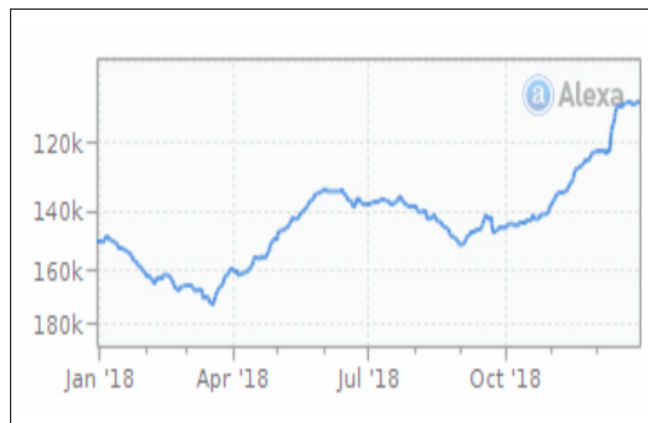


Figure 2.Visitors traffic on their website (INC)

Source: Alexa Rank (31st Dec. 2018)

wise visitors with the help of similar web. Similar web identifies visitors mostly in two broad categories: India and outside India. It is evident from Table 2 that BJP is extracting more number of visitors from the US.

Analyzing the traffic pattern of users who visited the websites is shown in Figure 3.

It is clearly evident from Figure 3 that INC has received much more traffic as compared to BJP.

Earlier View of Website of BJP and INC (Dec. 2017)

From the above screenshots of INC and BJP sites, the researcher find out that there are no changes at all in the functions as well as site delivery facility provided by the parties during the last one year.



Figure 3.Comparative Analysis of Traffic Overview

Source: Similar Web

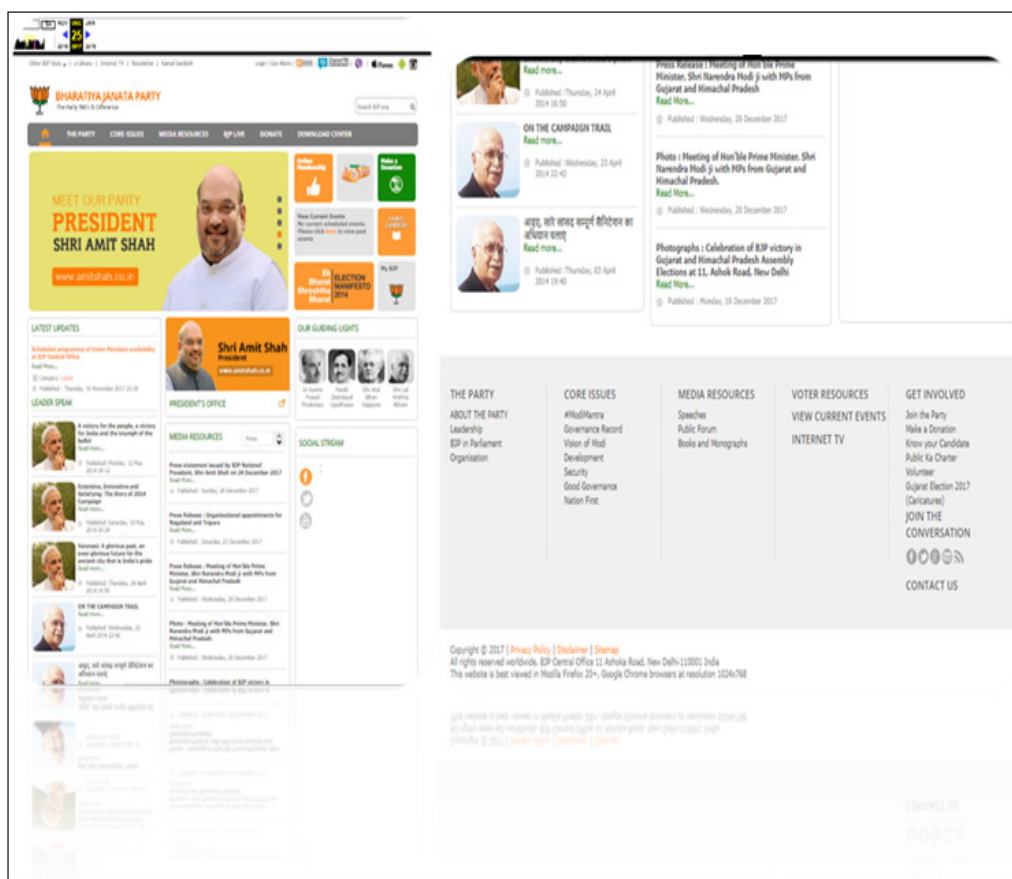
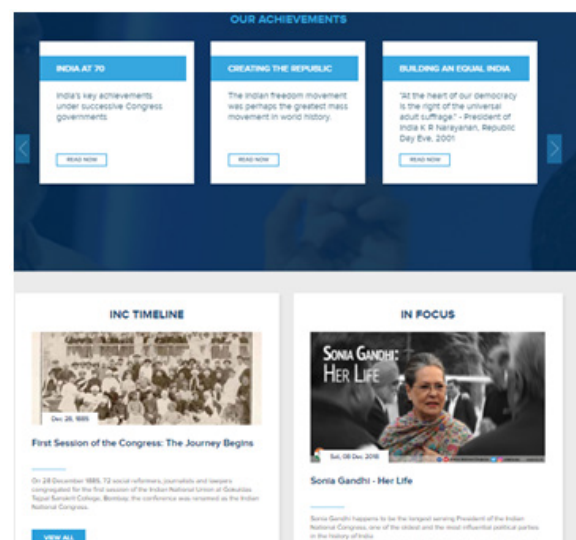
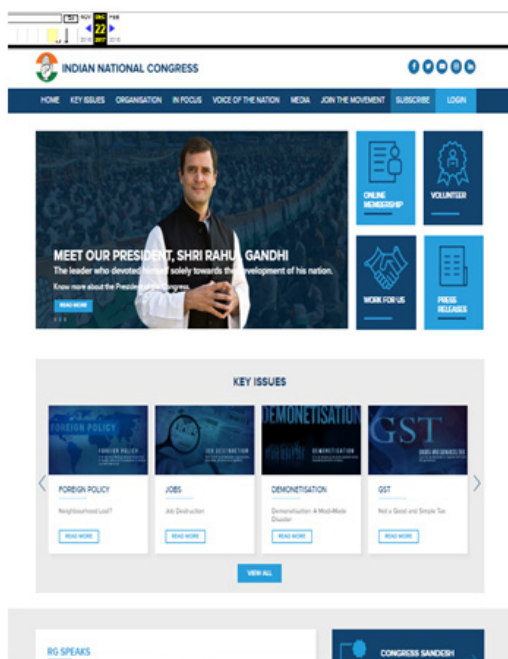


Figure 4. Earlier View of BJP Website (Dec-2017)



Figure 5. Recent View of BJP Website (Dec 2018)



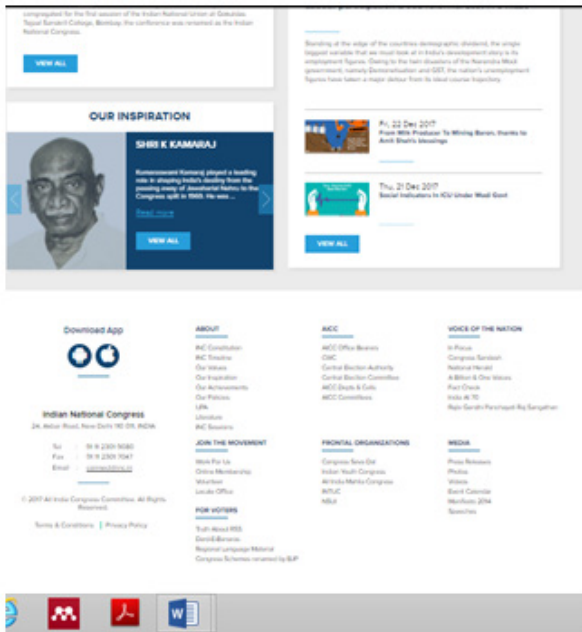


Figure 6. Earlier View of INC Website
(Dec 2017)

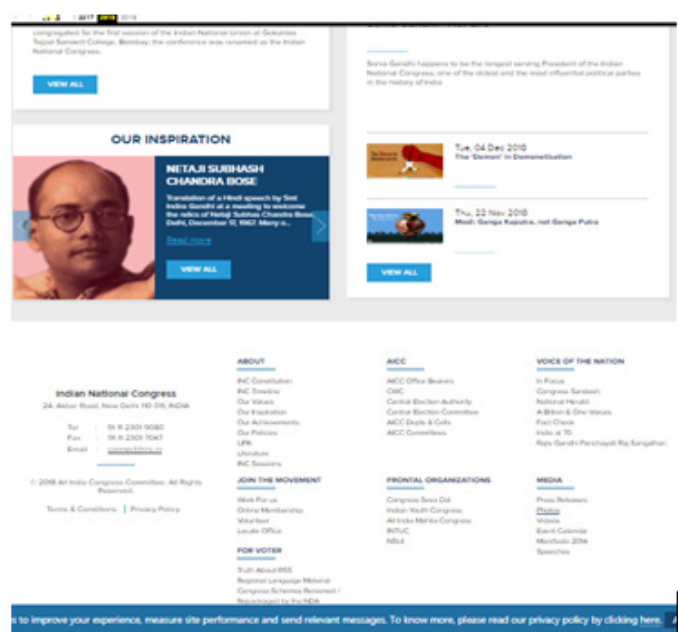


Figure 7. Recent view of INC website
(Dec 2018)

Table 3. Downward Information Flow Features on Party's Websites

S. No.	Items	Bharatiya Janata Party	Indian National Congress
1	Logo of the party	✓	✓
2	Information about the history of the party	✓	✓
4	General information about the political system	---	---
5	Party's Top Leader Profiles	✓	✓
6	Party's candidates' profiles	✓	✓
7	Party governing body	✓	✓
8	Different committees of the party	✓	✓
9	Link to party existence in different state	✓	✓
10	Policies	✓	✓
11	Manifesto	✓	✓
12	Party publication	✓	✓
13	Newsletters	✓	✓
14	Media releases	✓	✓
15	Events calendar	✓	✓
16	Contacts No./Fax	✓	✓
17	Frequently asked questions	---	---
18	Background information about current issue	---	✓
19	Electoral information	---	---

20	Information regarding EVM machine	---	---
21	Books and monographs	✓	---
22	Search box	✓	---
23	Grievance redressal forum	---	---
24	Internet television	✓	---
25	Mobile app facility	✓	---
26	e-library	✓	---
27	Photo gallery	✓	✓
28	Video gallery	✓	✓
29	Get alerts/ subscribe	✓	✓
30	Login facility	✓	✓
	Mean	0.76	0.63

Objective 2 Information Provision

Table 3 presents basic information given on the selected parties' websites, such as the name of the party, homepage sign, contact address, search facility within the website, etc. and information regarding party history, organization, books, monographs, information about different committees and other facilities given on respective political party websites. It is clear from Table 3 that both the political party websites have information regarding concerned party history, news and updates and photo gallery on their separate websites. But, when it comes to grievance redressal forum, none of the parties is having this feature on their website. Internet television facility and search box facility is absent from the home page of INC website. It is also interesting to see that BJP is allowing to see photographs and press release year-wise starting from 2000 to 2018.

Table 4.Resource Generation

S.No.	Items (Additive Index 1–3)	BJP	INC
1	Donation Donation help (1), Donation FAQ (2), offline/online transaction (3), no reference (0)	✓	✓
2	Selling of merchandise Download form (1), online inquiry form (2), online transaction (3), no reference (0)	---	---
3	Membership Download form (1), online inquiry form (2), online/cheque transaction (3), no reference	✓	✓

Except providing online form and option for payment, none of the parties has given any information regarding FAQs. However, BJP has given helpline contact number as well as e-mail address for entertaining query related to donation. BJP is providing online proforma to join BJP party as well as giving facility to download the e-form of the same. In INC website forms are available to assist visitors in filling up details and identifiable information for becoming a member of INC and to join party online.

Table 5.Integration

S. No.	Party	Total Links	External Links	Duplicate Links
1	BJP	n/a	n/a	n/a
2	INC	187	17	52

The researcher tried to took out in-links and external links of BJP and INC websites through Alexa as well as through various other website analysis software such as searchenginereports.com., etc., but it was found that BJP website is not allowing to retrieve the data. Hence, it is not possible to compare the data of both the parties.

Table 6.Interaction

S.No.	Items (Cumulative Index)	BJP	INC
1	Games	---	---
2	Chat room	---	---
3	Online debate forum	---	---
4	E-mail to feedback	---	---
5	E-mail to contact	✓	✓
6	Online poll	---	---

One of the important features that should be present in any website to encourage interaction from visitors is the availability of exchange of information or views. And when it comes to website of a political party, the presence of this facility should be there because through this facility the voters can share their views, such as on statements made by leaders of political parties, or any events organized by political parties, or they can make public complaints or can give feedback regarding some issues. However, Table 6 confirms the previous studies on use of website for interaction and information flow which showed that political parties mostly use new media only for the purpose of downward dissemination of information. It is quite evident from Table 6 that neither BJP nor INC provides any forum for discussion except providing e-mail address for contact. There is no presence of any chatting room in both the websites. Overall, both of the sites were not found very interactive.

Table 7.Campaigning

S.No.	Items (Cumulative Index 0 or 1)	BJP	INC
1	Negative campaigning	---	✓
2	Credit claiming	✓	✓
3	Cookie	---	✓
4	Download of promotional materials (logo)	---	---
5	Become online volunteer	✓	✓

BJP website was more ahead in claiming credit for the work the party has done whereas the INC website contains both its promotion of good deeds as well as attacking BJP on recent decisions taken by the government. INC website is providing separate link for voters where information related to truth about RSS is displayed in video format. Also, INC website is having separate section in the name of key issues where NDA's government decisions related to demonetization, foreign policy, GST are criticized heavily. Along with this, INC site is having separate section in the title of 'Prosperity in the UPA Tenure' where they are showcasing details of their achievement in every sector through fact depicting in graphs. Recruitment of volunteers was also significant in both the parties. BJP is providing a form which is asking to fill personal and social details of the visitors so that they can become a BJP volunteer. Same is with the INC website. But, INC is also providing a separate form in the name of 'work for us' where they are asking to share resume of the visitors with them.

Almost both parties are having good presence and link over SNSs but it is interesting to note that only BJP websites are facilitating users to RSS feed which automatically

disseminates current information or contents for those users who have subscribed to these RSS feeds. None of the political parties' website has wiki and podcast/vodcast on their party websites, but it is good to see BJP doing tagging at the bottom of most of its content.

Table 8.Web 2.0 Features

S. No.	Web 2.0 Feature	BJP	INC
1	RSS feed	✓	---
2	Blogs	---	---
3	Wikis	---	---
4	Book marking and tagging	✓	---
5	Facebook	✓	✓
6	Video sharing	✓	✓
7	Instant messaging	---	---
8	Twitter	✓	✓
9	Podcast/Vodcast	---	---

Comparative Indices

The score here is additive in the sense that one point was added for each of the following items that were present:

Table 9.Web 2.0 Features

Name of the Party	Max Possible Score	BJP	INC
Information	30	24	19
Resource Generation	9	4	2
Integration	n/a		
Interaction	6	1	1
Campaigning	5	1	4
Web 2.0	8	5	3

Table 9 reports the findings about the overall presence of both the parties in terms of online access. Providing information appears to be the major goal of both the political parties, as both of them have scored more than 75% in the information index. Both the parties have presented an extensive list of information about the organisation. In terms of interaction, picture is slightly skewed; both the parties facilitate fewer debates with leaders, nor do they provide any forum for discussion or giving feedback. Of all the functions examined, interaction appears to be a generally lower priority for both the parties. Even for resource generation, parties seems to be interested in only generating funds by providing online form and transaction. Merchandise was not promoted. Neither of the parties bothers in providing FAQs related to donation or list of donors. Recruitment for volunteers was seen as significant in websites of both the parties.

Site Delivery

Table 10. Web 2.0 Features

S.No.	Features	BJP	INC
1	Graphics	1	1
2	Multimedia (Additive index) Moving icons (1), audio (2), video(3), live streaming (4)	3	3
3	Accessibility (In principle) text only option (+1), text only document to download/print (+1), language translation (+1), blind visually impaired software(+1), Information in regional Language (+1) (in practice) site working (1), inaccessible (0)	3	2
		1	1
4	Navigability (Additive index) Presence of search engine (1), home page icon on each page (2), site map (3), menu bar on each page (4)	4	2
5	Visibility Yahoo party index, present		
6	Privacy policy	1	1
	Total Score	13	10

Out of the selected political parties, only BJP is providing its users to view BJP website by different font sizes, having site map in the bottom of its homepage. However, none of the parties has any facility for visually impaired persons. Although BJP is offering a version of website in Hindi language, also in the section where call is being given to join the party, facility to switch the proforma in Hindi language is present. INC though not providing facility to change website language into others, but is providing many information related to different acts and schemes in regional languages of India like Kannada, Assamese, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil Telagu, etc., in the section of regional language material. However, BJP is well equipped in terms of navigation tools by providing search box in each of its pages as compared to INC website. INC lacks somewhere in providing easy accessibility to its visitors. Both the parties are providing information related to privacy. The link to privacy statement and disclaimer is located at the bottom of the home page in BJP website. They have clearly written what all information they are collecting and also using for what purpose the website may use personal information of the visitors. At the end they are also providing a contact postal address for asking questions about this privacy policy or the treatment of visitors' personal information by the website whereas in INC, terms and conditions and privacy policy is used.

Conclusion

- Web-based communication is mostly party-initiated, top-down and one-way approach.
- Parties are using websites primarily for distributing information widely.
- of the five functions examined, the supply of information was one of only five functions in which both the parties were engaging and it provided the highest mean score on the index.
- Online campaigning was the second function in which both the parties were engaging. Nonetheless, their engagement in this function was limited to offering facility to become member, or join to work for the party, promoting themselves and attacking opposition.
- The interaction index demonstrated that the neither BJP nor INC was taking advantage of the greater interactivity and two-way communication that is possible on the internet. Both websites had postal and contact e-mail address; there were very few other opportunities for genuine interactivity. None of the websites had a chat room or provided any opportunities for online debate.
- The ability to gather feedback from the visitors seems to be negligible in websites of both the parties.
- In terms of site delivery, BJP was much more effective as compared to INC.
- The site was let down especially in terms of navigation by INC.
- Figures 1 to 4 represent earlier and recent views of website of INC and BJP. The earlier views as available on the archive are shown. The appearance of sites of both the parties is same as earlier. There are no changes at all.

Suggestions

With the advent of web 1.0 and development of websites, internet became a significant political tool in offering one-way communication for politicians. However, in the present scenario, online politics is no longer valued for its one-way and top-down communication approach. It is now admired for providing opportunities to have two-way communication between political parties, candidates and potential voters. So, these political parties should strive to include more and more features to their websites in order to keep their essence and purpose alive.

Recommendations

Further studies can be carried out to know the viewpoints of users of political party websites and find out the impact of websites on the campaign activities of political parties.

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