

Use of New Media as a Tool of Public Relations: The Delhi Traffic Police Case Study

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Abstract

The Delhi Traffic Police is one of the largest traffic police forces in India. Managing traffic in a city teeming with vehicles is a massive challenge and transparent communication is extremely important to convey to people all the important information pertaining to the flow of traffic in the city. Therefore, the Delhi Traffic Police was one of the India's first government organizations to implement new media tools in its communication strategy. The police force introduced a website, social media channels in Facebook, Twitter besides also starting helpline services on WhatsApp. This study endeavored to find how effective has been the implementation of these new media tools. Content analysis of the leading newspapers as well as the study of the social media channels of the organization revealed that the adoption of new media has resulted in enhancement of the public image of the organization.

Keywords: Traffic, Media, New Media, Facebook, Twitter, Coverage

Introduction

Delhi Police is arguably the largest metropolitan police force in the world today, with a bigger strength than the police forces of major global cities such as London, Paris, New York, and Tokyo. At present, its strength is approximately 76,000 personnel. The Delhi Police force is divided into three ranges, 11 districts and 180 police stations. A Commissioner of Police heads the Delhi Police. Unlike all other police departments across the country, the Delhi Police does not report to the provincial government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, rather it directly reports to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

The jurisdiction of the Delhi Police spans over approximately 1500 square miles, with a population of about 1.6 crore. The challenges faced by the force are multifarious as, being the national capital, Delhi is always a target of the terrorist and insurgent groups.

Delhi Police's traffic wing is in charge of implementing the majority of the new media tools used by the organization.

The city of Delhi today has more than 65 lakh vehicles registered. In addition, lakhs of vehicles from the neighboring states, which are part of the National Capital Region, also ply on the city's roads every day. In fact, Delhi has more vehicles than the number of vehicles combined in the other three metropolitan cities of Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. To add to these issues, Delhi also has the most extensive road network, in comparison to any other major city of the country. Being the national capital, the safe movement of VIPs and dignitaries without causing major traffic disruptions is another continuous challenge. These vehicles are also major contributors to the pollution levels of the city, due to which the police also has to cooperate with the pollution control authorities in reigning in the erring vehicles. Therefore, managing traffic in such a humungous and ever-growing urban center is a monstrous challenge. Presently, the Delhi Traffic Police is headed by a Special Commissioner.

Any traffic police force working in any part of the world will always be in front of the public eye. If the traffic situation

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of a place is under control, the efforts made by the traffic police there may go completely unnoticed. However, in the event of deterioration in the same, the traffic police will always be the first to get brickbats from the public.

The public relations challenges of the Delhi Traffic Police are more profound than probably any other police force in the country. Being the capital of the nation, any major traffic breakdown in the city immediately becomes national news.

The media presence in Delhi and the adjoining areas is massive. Approximately 500 newspapers of almost all major languages are published from here. Another 100 television channels are also active all through the day. Innumerable internet news portals further add to the numbers. Even though the frequency mode (FM) radio channels are not allowed to broadcast news programs, but they do discuss the major events taking place in the city and also contact the Delhi Traffic Police for relevant answers.

In the new media sphere, the Delhi Traffic Police has been one of the early movers. The Delhi Traffic Police has adopted a slew of new media tools, as a part of its public relations strategy. As the social media today has obliterated the status of the journalist as the gate keeper of information, the Delhi Traffic Police has tried to reach the masses directly through the effective use of social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to these, they also have a comprehensive and well-maintained website along with a number of custom-made helpline services.

Objectives

- To study and analyze the new media tools adopted by the Delhi Traffic Police in detail
- To analyze the impact that the use of these tools have on the overall public perception about Delhi Traffic Police

Methodology

Content analysis and social media analysis are the main methods by which the study has been carried out. Content analysis of three leading print media publications has been done to find out whether the Delhi Traffic Police has benefited with the employment of new media tools. The newspapers which were selected for content analysis are – The Times of India, Hindustan Times, and The Indian Express. These newspapers were selected as these have very high readership in the National Capital Region.

Social media analysis of the Facebook and Twitter pages of the Delhi Traffic Police was undertaken to analyze how these pages were actually reaching out to their target customers. The number of updates put up by the organization, the following comments, speed of response back to the people, rate of increase of followers, etc., were the main

points on the basis of which the social media analysis was made. In addition, the website of the organization was also thoroughly studied to assess whether it was really of any substantial help to the target audience.

Review of Literature

New media as an academic discipline is relatively new and therefore, the literature available about its growth and role as a tool of public relations is rather limited in comparison to some of the more established domains of mass communication. However, in course of this study, the researcher did come across many articles and write-ups which helped in taking the study forward.

New Media is a 21st century catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images, and sound. In fact, the definition of new media changes daily, and will continue to do so. New media evolves and morphs continuously. What it will be tomorrow is virtually unpredictable for most of us, but we do know that it will continue to evolve in fast and furious ways.¹

In the recent times, the terms new media and social media have often been used to explain the same thing. On many occasions, they are also used interchangeably for each other. “Not all media is social. Media becomes social when you can interact with the content via comments or conversation. While old media was a passive form of entertainment, new media is interactive entertainment or edutainment. Social media, on the other hand, requires a conversation between the content creator/s and the audience. Social media is about the people who engage on the platform. If people are connecting through the media, then it is social.

Basically, social media is a subset of new media, but not all new media is social. In order for new media to be considered social, it needs to have an element of interactivity where the audience can contribute, connect, or collaborate with the content. On Twitter, the audience can share your content or talk with the content producer. Instagram allows followers to comment on, share and like photos. Blogs can be social and invite conversation in the comments or they can turn comments off and just create new media. Comments, likes and the ability to share content make media social. Other phrases for social media or new media are digital media, interactive media and user generated media.²

Larabie,³ in a study titled, *A Reflection on the Role of New Media – From Peer-to-Peer to Protest*, also recognizes that new media is enabling more participation by the audience. Participation is also a widely used term, especially in the context of new media technologies that enable peer-to-peer file sharing, and encourage users to actively create and distribute content. This participation is believed

to have widened social spheres and revitalized political communication, addressing many problems associated with traditional media.

Similar to the path of preceding technologies, new media has permeated many different social, political, and economic realms, transforming the way we carry out daily life. However, the emergence of new media has given rise to a set of assumptions surrounding technological advancement that overlooks historical dimensions and ways of thinking about new technology. More specifically, the 'newness' of new media carries with it a renewed sense of optimism about technology and its ability to drive social change, revive political landscapes, and foster economic prosperity.³

Indian public relations professional Thomas,⁴ in an article titled, *How is Social Media Evolving PR*, writes about the manner in which new media is changing the profession of public relations. "In the early days, the internet consisted of one-way communications in the form of static websites and two-way communication through email. Over the past several years, the internet has grown to the most premiere medium for two-way or multi-way conversations which changed the dynamics of public relations (PR). Just a few of examples include social interaction through Facebook, tagging in Technorati or Digg, and micro-blogging sites like Twitter."⁴

Social media website www.maximisesocialmedia.com claims that an overwhelming majority of public relations practitioners today use the social media for their professional requirements. "A recent survey found that an eye-opening 80% of public relations professionals routinely use social media to cultivate media relationships, share important company news and solicit feedback. Perhaps even more importantly, clients and business affiliations are turning to social media as a primary source of news and information about products, services, or other updates of interest."⁵

Purcell, in his study, says that new media has the capacity to alert the people about a certain event or piece of news even though they may finally have to rely on the other modes of media to get the details. "Social networks act as alert systems for the most engaged news consumers."⁶

Sardar, in his discourse, has opined that the corporate houses must accept and integrate social media in the e-mail era. By accepting three simple steps that is, assess, influence and evolve while incorporating social media, different industries can facilitate free social media publicity.⁷

There have been many studies which have tried to analyze the paradigm shift that new media is bringing in the sphere of journalism. Now, the journalist is not the only disseminator of news to the society. There are many other alternative media to do that. "The venerable profession of

journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information."⁸

Content Analysis

In order to establish the effectiveness of new media as a tool of public relations for the Delhi Traffic Police, the content analysis of the print media coverage of the organization was extremely necessary since the media coverage not only gave an insight into the various new media tools employed by Delhi Traffic Police, but also reflected on the response these new initiatives got from the target audience.

The analysis also brought to light how the media covered the Delhi Traffic Police prior to the introduction of the new media tools and how they covered them after the introduction of these tools. For the purpose of conducting the content analysis, three frontline English daily newspapers were selected. These three newspapers were – The Times of India, Hindustan Times, and The Indian Express.

The collective readership of these three newspapers in the national capital is approximately 40 lakh, with Hindustan Times leading with about 23 lakh readers. The content analysis mainly takes into account the coverage of Delhi Traffic Police three months prior to and three months after the introduction of the new media tools such as SMS service, social media pages, etc., in October, 2010. However, to make the study more in-depth, the researcher has also studied certain random newspaper coverages of the years 2008 and 2009 and they gave a more detailed idea about the problems the city's drivers were facing prior to the introduction of these new initiatives.

In addition, Delhi Traffic Police launched two new initiatives – mobile application and WhatsApp number in 2014, due to which the news coverage of 2014 has also been studied for a better understanding of the research topic. For the purpose of content analysis, 71 news items pertaining to the Delhi Traffic Police could be found and the following findings have been deduced on the basis of these clippings. The key findings of the content analysis are as follows:

- **Convenience of the target audience, leading to positive media coverage and image building.** It can be noticed that the introduction of new media facilities immensely contributed to the improvement in its goodwill and image building.

For example, on 17th July, 2010, The Times of India reported, "Cops to SMS jam updates". Presenting a very positive

image of the police force, the story says, "Starting Friday, commuters can get mobile updates from the traffic police on traffic congestion in the city. The updates will be sent via SMS after one subscribes to the service. So all you need to do before setting out from home is check your SMS inbox and decide the route you should take based on the advice of the cops."

Hindustan Times carried a story by the news agency, Indo-Asian News Service (IANS) on 19th July, 2010, which says, "Its Twitter and Facebook accounts have thousands of followers. Now, the Delhi traffic police's SMS alert service on traffic jams and diversion updates, launched three days ago, has already logged 21,240 subscribers with a majority describing it as a "world class service".

It could also be noticed that the introduction of the SMS service had a lasting impact on the image-building exercise. A year later in July, 2011, also The Indian Express reported, "The Delhi Traffic Police's efforts to ease congestion on city roads by using unorthodox methods seem to have borne fruit. Nearly a year ago, the department had initiated an SMS service that provided commuters with updates on traffic jams, bottlenecks and congestion. Today, the service has turned out to be a major success," the report said.

After the introduction of the WhatsApp number in October, 2014, the Times of India reported with a Press Trust of India story with the headline, "Delhi traffic police launch new WhatsApp helpline".

In the story, the correspondent writes, "The Traffic Police had recently asked Delhiites to come forward and complain about illegal parking in the city through their Facebook page and traffic helpline numbers 1095 in order to curb the menace of 'parking mafia'. The launching of a WhatsApp helpline is seen as a step forward in this direction.

Delhi Police has been making concerted efforts of late to utilize the potential of WhatsApp, the popular messaging app, to reach out to the citizens and also for effective communication among themselves."

On the same topic, Hindustan Times reported with the headline, "Delhi traffic cops now on WhatsApp, invite complaints from public". The correspondent Saumya Pillai writes, "Soon after the number was opened to the public, complaints and queries started pouring in from across the Capital. In a few hours, over 250 messages were received on the number.

"To reach out to the traffic officials, the complainant only has to mention the nature of the offence, which could be a traffic violation, unauthorised parking, overcharging, refusal or misbehaviour by auto or taxi drivers, faulty traffic signals or any other issue related to traffic management in the city.

"A video footage or a photograph can also be attached along with the name of the complainant, the place where the incident has happened, and the date and time of occurrence."

The extensive coverage of the launch of the WhatsApp number also indicates that such initiatives facilitate positive press coverage and increase the goodwill of the organization. These steps are not at all cost intensive but at the same time, are easy to implement.

The launch of the mobile application of the Delhi Traffic Police also got tremendous coverage in the media. Hindustan Times carried a news item attributed to the news agency Indo-Asian News Service which wrote, "Through this mobile application – a brainchild of Delhi Traffic Police – the commuters will also be able to report about faulty traffic signals.

"The application, which can be downloaded from Google Play Store, also has a feature to enable measuring of distances and calculating fares.

"Besides, the application will also provide information on accident-prone areas and waterlogged areas. The application will be made available for Windows phones and iPhone."

- **Relatively higher negative media coverage, prior to the introduction of these new media tools.** The content analysis revealed that before the introduction of the new media tools, the number of negative media coverage was higher.

In a story dated 20th January, 2008, Hindustan Times reports, "'Smart policing' can clear traffic jam" indicating towards the need to bring in tech-savvy new media reforms in traffic policing.

The story by Sidhartha Roy says, "Mumbai and Kolkata always had them but traffic jams and chaos are becoming a part of life in the capital too. With 54 lakh vehicles out on the city roads every day and construction projects all around Delhi, this is expected but should we just crib and curse while stuck in mile-long jams till the Commonwealth Games delivers us from the mess? No, there are solutions available only if the government, traffic police, and civic agencies are willing to implement them."

In another story dated 12th August, 2009, The Times of India reports how rains spelled disaster for the motorists in the capital and how there were no mechanisms to alert the motorists beforehand about the areas with traffic jams.

"One spell of rain is all it takes to throw traffic completely out of gear on the capital's roads. Commuters relived the horror of the last downpour after Tuesday's rain caused

waterlogging on several major arterial roads. Signals were left on the blink, resulting in jams during the evening rush hour. The worst affected were Ring Road and Outer Ring Road where water got collected at several spots."

- **Scope for improvement in the implementation of the new media tools.** In case of Delhi Traffic Police, the response to the introduction of traffic updates via SMS received overwhelmingly positive response. However, in case of the introduction of some other new media tools such as e-challans, there were some news stories that criticized the delay in implementation.

In a story dated, 13th August, 2013, the Hindustan Times reports, "Delhi: After delays, e-challan finally sees light of day." The story also mentions, "The e-challan project had faced a number of administrative and technical roadblocks. These included the machine malfunctioning due to weather conditions and the inability of policemen to operate the devices."

However, similar to the coverage of the Delhi University, such stories were very few in number and primarily focused on problems in the process of implementation and not the usefulness of the initiatives. For example, the above-mentioned story also appreciates the initiative and says, "The e-challan has replaced a traffic policeman's age-old challan book. It aims to help the police catch repeat offenders as it will be linked to the central database and will provide the policeman a record of previous traffic violations, if any. Traffic police claim the device will enable them to raise at least Rs. 120 crore per annum through e-challans, about three times the average annual amount of Rs. 45 crore."

Social Media Analysis

The study of the new media tools employed by Delhi Traffic Police cannot be complete without the detailed analysis of their social media usage.

The Delhi Traffic Police has presence on both Facebook as well as Twitter. Apart from a website, they also have an official app, which updates the users about the traffic situation in the national capital. The analysis of the social media tools are as follows:

Facebook

Delhi Traffic Police has been running a Facebook page since 2010. It is quite prompt with updates and has a large number of regular subscribers. The analysis of the performance of the Facebook page is as follows:

- **Reach:** As on 25th January, 2018, the official Facebook page of the Delhi Traffic Police has 256,066 likes, which is among the highest for any social media page of a

government organization. In comparison, the page of the Mumbai Traffic Police has only 3020 likes and that of the Kolkata Traffic Police has about 141,484 likes. However, if we take into consideration the fact that Delhi has about 65 lakh registered vehicles, the reach of the Facebook page does look very insignificant minuscule. However, this initiative has brought the Delhi Traffic Police a lot of positive press coverage and general goodwill, which are important parameters of any public relations initiative.

- **Daily activity:** The second parameter on which the social media analysis has been done is the frequency at which information is shared by the Facebook site. A thorough study of the page reveals that the Delhi Traffic Police is pretty active in sharing information. On an average, there are about eight to 10 posts detailing about the areas with traffic snarls of vehicular breakdowns. In addition, the page is also utilized to highlight the public service initiatives of the Delhi Traffic Police such as organization of road safety weeks, various training programs, etc.
- **Clarity of information:** No social media page can become popular if the information shared is not clear and precise. In case of the Delhi Traffic Police, the clarity of information is commendable. In short sentences often involving about 20 words, details are shared about traffic jams. Aspects such as exact location, nature of the problem are clearly mentioned. The humane side of the force is also displayed as the Traffic Police also invariably promises to take the necessary measures and expresses regret about the problem. Further, most of the posts are bilingual in both English as well as Hindi, which ensures that the information reaches a larger audience. One specimen of a post is:

"Breakdown of DTC bus No. DL1PC 8878 at Dwarka Sector-1 Power House Red Light, causing congestion, shall be removed soon. Inconvenience regretted."

- **Response time to queries:** The response time to the queries made by the people is also quite prompt. In most cases, it was observed that a reply was sent from the Delhi Traffic Police within a couple of hours, which signifies that the page was being monitored. Another praiseworthy aspect of the page is that the complaints, negative feedback from the visitors have not been edited out. Rather attempts have been made to address them. Due to this, gradually in the last few months, the number of abusive comments have also come down.

People's Response: The final parameter of the social media analysis was the participation of the people in the page. In this aspect, we found that greater participation and interaction from the subscribers of the page is necessary. For most of the posts, the numbers of comments were

below 10 and the number of likes or shares was also around the same. This signifies that while a lot of people have 'liked' the page, many are not interacting as actively as they should.

However, a media report on the London-based daily *The Daily Mail* conveys very interesting data that over 22,000 offenders have been booked by the effective use of the Facebook page.

"Logging in to Facebook has turbocharged the Delhi Traffic Police. They hopped aboard the social networking bandwagon just two years ago and have already booked more than 22,000 traffic offenders via the site. The road rule violators netted on the Net include 725 policemen and several VIPs.

"The fact that the force's FB page has attracted over 1.23 lakh members is also ample evidence that this unique experiment to open a real-time, two-way communication channel with civic-minded residents of the Capital is a runaway hit. It has enabled road-users to interface smoothly with the traffic police by bypassing bureaucratic bottlenecks." (The Daily Mail, London, 2012)

Twitter

The Delhi Traffic Police also runs a Twitter Handle. The following is the analysis based on the parameters already mentioned above:

- **Reach:** As on 25th January, 2018, the official Twitter handle of the Delhi Traffic Police – @dtptraffic had a mammoth one million followers. In comparison, the official Twitter handle of the Kolkata Traffic Police – @KPtrafficdept has little over 15,000 followers. This clearly shows that in using the extremely popular site Twitter also, the Delhi Traffic Police has stolen a march over the traffic police forces in other big cities of the country.
- **Daily activity:** The tweets posted by the Delhi Traffic Police are the same that are posted on the Facebook wall. On an average there are about ten tweets every day, which is quite impressive. In total, Delhi Traffic Police has tweeted more than a lakh times so far.
- **Clarity of Information:** Delhi Traffic Police uses easy language and conveys the details pretty clearly. Apart from informing about the snarls, they also convey when the jam has been cleared. For example, on 25th June, 2015, a tweet said, "Traffic is now normal on Ghazipur flyover."
- **Response time to queries:** Unlike Facebook, queries made by the users were much fewer on Twitter. However, since the Facebook page is monitored regularly, it can be assumed that the Twitter Page is also monitored and the responses of the people are conveyed to the concerned authorities.

- **People's response:** Much like Facebook, the interactive response of the people on Twitter is not significant. There are very few comments, retweets, etc. In conclusion, it would be fair to say that both the Facebook and Twitter pages of the Delhi Traffic Police are professionally managed and the numbers of their followers are sure to grow in the years to come, as more and more people come under the ambit of using the internet-based media platforms.

WhatsApp

In another praiseworthy initiative, the Delhi Traffic Police has launched an official WhatsApp service, through which complaints, photographs, videos and suggestions can be sent to them regarding the national capital's traffic situation. Through the number (+91)8750871493, the citizens can reach the Traffic Police authorities and post their complaints. The initiative was launched in October, 2014.

Apart from sending complaints, suggestions through messages, pictures and video clips, the WhatsApp helpline can also be used if somebody's vehicle is towed away for improper parking. However, the WhatsApp number cannot be analyzed as per the parameters on which the other social media platforms have been studied since the format of WhatsApp is entirely different.

Findings

This study has endeavored to analyze the role and potential of new media as a tool of public relations in the Delhi Traffic Police. On the basis of the content analysis and the social media analysis of the new media tools employed by the police force, the following are the major findings of this study:

- **Success of new media as a public relations tool:** From the study, it has emerged that the employment of new media has helped the Delhi Traffic Police garner a lot of positive coverage in the traditional media, which clearly signifies their tremendous success. The content analysis of three leading English newspapers – The Times of India, Hindustan Times, and The Indian Express – was done to gauge the same and it was found that after the employment of the new media options, the negative coverage by the traditional media decreased to a certain extent. More importantly, the news of the introduction of these tools also led to good coverage in the media.
- **More accessibility for the people:** The employment of the new media tools by the traffic police in the national capital has made the force more accessible to the people. Because of these tools, the organization has reached its target audience in a better way and the people also have been able to gather the necessary information through their websites, social media pages,

mobile applications, etc.

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