

Online Political Information, Public Opinion and Political Activism - A Descriptive Analysis

Prabanand Chandrasekaran

Assistant Professor, Dept of Journalism, D.G. Vaishnav College, Chennai-106.

Abstract

The primary research interest is in the area of uses and users of online political information. Online Journalism aided by social networking sites, smartphones, fast mobile networks and visual communication apps are playing an increasingly important role in influencing the political opinion of the society. Unlike the conventional form of news dissemination by the traditional electronic media like the television or radio, the online news of information offers the users an option of immediate feedback or response to any news content thereby neutralizing the information from the source) and consolidating the information along with their own inputs. This feature of online journalism along with the technology, creative applications and extremely fast reach of news to a wide audience through mobile devices has added a new dimension to the political information available online. Such an increasing reach is making a demand for an in depth study of the users and uses of political information because misinformation and abuse of online resources can have serious consequences on our society. On the other hand, the heterogeneous nature of the users also plays an important role in their approach towards any information. The demographics and socio-economic position of a user also might affect their news assimilation behaviour. This in turn shapes their reaction towards the news content which makes the dynamics of public opinion formation even more complex and thus makes the analysis of the users a must.

Adding on to the issue is the affiliation of political parties to media houses which relay the news. This is significant because it might affect the credibility of the source in the minds of the users and also have a direct impact on their dependency of online political information on social networking sites and applications rather than the conventional media like television. Its impact on the user and public opinion also needs to be studied.

Further, the form and style of political news online has changed from that of the traditional media. The content is presented in a more humorous, entertaining format along with catchy visuals and graphics, which might also be the reason for the deeper social penetration of such news content. Thus analyzing the reception and transmission of such information by the users is required.

Investigating the Style, form, design of the online political news content, its impact on the users of various backgrounds and how it impacts the public opinion formation is the general goal of the research.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Information, Public opinion, Activism, Misinformation

Introduction

Social media has become an important part of the contemporary information ecosystem. Social media have become increasingly relevant in election campaigns as

both politicians and citizen have integrated them into their communication toolkit. However little is known about which type of citizens employ social media to discuss politics and stay informed about the current affairs and how they integrate the message into their social connections they

E-mail Id: prabanand.c@gmail.com

Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0082-6198>

How to cite this article: Chandrasekaran P. Online Political Information, Public Opinion and Political Activism - A Descriptive Analysis. *J Adv Res Jour Mass Comm* 2018; 5(4): 123-126.

counter through these online networks with the off line political activism. The rise of Social media across the democracies raises important questions for social scientists.

As Norris(2000) claims, the complete theory of democracy requires the media to function as public arena, mobilizing agents and watchdogs against abuse of power. To an extent that an increasing proportion of the citizen use social media to acquire political knowledge and participate in the political process and that social media have helped channel various large and small scale uprising and bursts of citizen outrage, these environments have become relevant for representation and democracy and thus subject worth studying for the political and social scientists. As social media are embedded in the everyday life of users and allows multiple types of Social relationships, social media may contribute to political information and participation not only directly by providing the information but also as catalysts to online and off line conversations among citizens there by impacting broader audience beyond those who engage in digital environment and thus shaping the public opinion. The potential of Social media appear to be more promising in political context as they can be the enabler for more participation and democracy.

However, there is a challenge of dealing misinformation and the spread of biased news spreading on the social media. Social media is used as the platform of political rivalry. The need for the assessment of the credibility of the political content among the social media user forms an area of concern and whether the ability of users to identify and check the flow of false information also needs to be studied. The issue of Cambridge Analytica exposing Facebook of psychological manipulation, entrapment techniques and fake news campaigns by harvesting and the use of personal data makes it necessary to explore the online political information and its impact on public opinion formation.

Materials

Social media is defined as a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological & technological foundations of the web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. (Kaplan & Hanelein 2010)

Recently, Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Wikis play an important role in shaping political communication in US and other parts of the World. (Aday et al 2000 & Benkler 2006, Bennet 2003; Farrell and Drezner 2008, Sunstein 2002; Tumusjan et al 2011). The information available on these social media applications constitutes the online political information. All forms of communication undertaken by politicians and other political actors for the purpose of achieving specific objectives. Communication addressed to these actors by non-politicians such as voters

and activists. Communication about these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials and other forms of media discussion of politics, such as blogs and social media posts are the online political information.

The functioning of representative democracy depends, among other things, on the quality of citizen's information about public affairs (Powell 2004) and on the breadth, intensity and capacity of the citizen to participate in various types of political activities (Verba et al 1995). This represents the political activism.

There is a vast data of online political information available but the corresponding challenge is to analyze the large volumes of user generated content after implicit links between users in order to give meaningful insights into the diffusion of information, opinions and sentiments as well as emerging issues and trends (Leskosec 2011; Agarwal et al 2011; Nagarajan et al 2011)

However, as Zeng et al(2010) also point out, social media analytics face several challenges such as enriched set of data or meta data of human centred computing with own unique emphasis on social interaction among users, semantic inconsistency, inaccuracies, misinformation and lack of structure as well as dynamic nature of social media data and their sheer size.

Theoretical Framework

Two Step Flow Theory

This theory asserts that information from the media moves in two distinct stages. First, individuals (opinion leaders) who pay close attention to the mass media and its messages receive the information. Opinion leaders pass on their own interpretations in addition to the actual media content.

The term 'personal influence' was coined to refer to the process intervening between the media's direct message and the audience's ultimate reaction to that message. Opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviours and are quite similar to those they influence.

The two-step flow theory has improved our understanding of how the mass media influence decision making. The theory refined the ability to predict the influence of media messages on audience behaviour, and it helped explain why certain media campaigns may have failed to alter audience attitudes and behaviour.

The Third Person Effect

Davidson (1983) defines the third person effect hypothesis as a likelihood that "individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication

(weather or not the this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than themselves”.

In addition to describing a difference in the perception of effects of mass media on oneself and others, Davidson(1983) suggests that this difference in perception may also influence one's behaviour in that the impact that they expect this communication to have on others may lead them to take some action. Any effect that the communication achieves may be not due to the reaction of the ostensible audience but rather the behaviour of those who anticipate or think they perceive, some action on their part of others. Thus leading to activism. The presence of third person effect is an indicator of Activism.

The measurement of third person effect typically involves asking people two different types of questions, one focused on the perceptions of the influence of media on oneself, and the other on the perceptions of influence of media on others. A third person effect is found if people report that others are more influenced than they themselves are by the mass media. Social distance, perceived knowledge and media exposure are three factors constituting the third person effect.

Method

Simple Random sampling was used to collect data. An online survey was conducted and data was collected from 114 respondents. The relationship between exposure of online political information and public opinion formation was studied by analyzing the data on Ms Excel for correlation. Third person effect was also studied using the questionnaire consisting 15 questions.

Results

- The Survey had 36 female and 78 male respondents respectively.
- 58% of the respondents use Social media as their primary source of News.
- Facebook was the most popular social media platform for political information at 68% followed by WhatsApp at 23% and twitter 7%.
- 15% of the respondents were into WhatsApp political groups.
- 64% feel that Memes are the most effective tools for political messages.
- Audio visual content is preferred over written text.
- 57% of the respondents felt that the interactive nature of online journalism (comments and feedbacks) has not effect on the news.
- 59% of the respondents have political discussions online.
- 89% of the respondents preferred Social media over traditional media during times of crisis.

- 67% of the respondents have had arguments within their political WhatsApp groups.
- 27% of the respondents have left WhatsApp groups after disagreement.
- 75% of the respondents were victims of misinformation.
- 93% of the respondents cross check before sharing political content.
- 88% of the respondents feel they can identify false political news.
- 74% of the respondents feel that people cannot distinguish between real and fake content.
- 88% of the respondents feel that Socio economic factors have more impact on public opinion formation than social media exposure.
- 56% of the respondents feel that social media alters the existing values and beliefs than reinforcing it.
- 64% of the respondents feel that Memes shape public opinion.

Conclusion

The exposure to political information social media and its impact on public opinion formation is inconclusive. However, the user behaviour was studied. The choice of social media tool for effective communication could be concluded. The third person effect strongly exists among the social media users and the social distance is prevalent among the online users of political information. This indicates activist tendencies among heavy social media users of political content. There is a need for media literacy as the rate of victims of misinformation is high.

References

1. Baran, Stanley J. Theories of Mass Communication http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0767421906/student_view0/chapter12/glossary.html. Nov 13, 2003.
2. Howard PN, Parks MR. Social Media and Political Change: Capacity, Constraint, and Consequence. *Journal of Communication* 2012;6(22):359–362, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01626.x> Published: February 28, 2012.
3. Tufekci Z, Wilson C. Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square. *Journal of Communication* 2012; 62(2):363–379. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01629.x>.
4. Corners JL. Understanding The third person effect. *Communication Research Trends* ISSN : 01444646
5. Zúñiga HGd, Jung N, Valenzuela S. Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2012;17(3):319–336, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01574.x> Published: April 01, 2012.
6. Kushin MJ, Yamamoto M. Did Social Media Really

- Matter? College Students' Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election. 608-630 | Published online: 20 Nov 2010. Download citation <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2010.516863>.
7. Dahlgren P. The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation. 147-162 | Published online: 21 Aug 2006 Download citation <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600590933160>.
 8. Vaccari C, Valeriani A, Barberá P et al. Social media and Political Communication: A survey of Twitter users during the 2013 Italian General Elections. *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica* 2013; 43(3): 381-410. DOI: 10.1426/75245.
 9. Riviera Italians do science politics Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media, 2nd Edition (Frontiers in Political Communication, Vol. 22) File Name: Rhetoric Online: The Politics of New Media, 2nd Edition (Frontiers in Political Communication, Vol. 22).pdf
 10. McNair B. An Introduction to Political Communication, Edition 6th Edition First Published 27 June 2017 eBook Published 6 July 2017 Pub. location London Imprint Routledge. Pages 266. eBook ISBN 9781317611721.

Date of Submission: 2018-09-27

Date of Acceptance: 2018-10-08