

# The Online Public in India: An Analysis of BJP's Online Election Campaign

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## **Abstract**

*The 2014 general elections in India were significant for a number of reasons. One of them was the widespread use of social media by many of the parties in their campaigns. This essay is not an analysis of the effectiveness of social media used by political parties in the campaign. It is the examination of the social media campaign used by the Bharatiya Janata Party -BJP for the national elections in India in 2014 and how this has created an effective 'public', as defined by Michael Warner. The essay will examine online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and the BJP's community organizing website - Mission 272+ to demonstrate this.*

**Key Words:** *Public, Tweeter, Facebook, BJP,AAP, Elections, Social Media, Mission 272+*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Michael Warner, in his article *Publics and Counter Publics* describes 'a public' as a 'partial totality which is thought to include everyone within the field in question (Warner, 2002).' It is more than just a group brought together by common interests. It must transcend one's friends list to include strangers. A 'public' organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or pre-existing institutions such as the church, commerce or government. Warner differentiates 'publics' from nations, races, professions, or any other groups because 'publics' do not saturate identity. It also does not require a permanent state of being, even minimal participation is sufficient (Ibid).

This essay examines the means by which BJP's online campaign for the national elections in India in 2014 has created an effective 'public', as per Warner's definition. The essay will examine online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the BJP's community organizing website – Mission272+ to demonstrate this. Between January 1987 and August 1989, state run *Doordarshan's* serialization of the *Ramayana*- the great Indian epic, coincided with the high point of the *Ram Janma Bhumi* campaign. The BJP took advantage of the record setting viewership of the show to promote its agenda to attack a mosque built on the site believed to be the birthplace of Lord

*Ram* and replace it with a grand temple dedicated to him (Rajagopalan, 2001). Despite the show not being created by the BJP, they were able to leverage its popularity to create a 'public'.

## THE BJP AND TECHNOLOGY

Today, we are witnessing the emergence of another 'public' created by the efforts of the BJP's online campaign for the national elections. The BJP has always been very tech-savvy. They were the first party to launch a website in 1998 and had a strong social media presence in the 2008 elections (Kaul, 2014). The run-up to the 2014 elections has, once again demonstrated the BJP's penchant for riding the technology tidal wave. A sign of their genuine belief in the potency of social media is the hiring of IT gurus Rajesh Jain and B.G. Mahesh as advisors for their online activities (Thopil, 2013). A majority of the campaign is focused on the individual – Narendra Modi, as opposed to the party. However, all the messaging contains subtle and some not-so-subtle hints at *Hindu* nationalism.

## MAJORITY 272+

Warner describes 'publics', as 'lacking any institutional being. They commence with the moment of attention, continue to predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated.' They are virtual entities, not voluntary associations (Warner, 2002). The BJP is currently using a central online platform to organize volunteers and funds. Its website Majority272+ ([www.india272.com](http://www.india272.com)) describes itself as 'an Online and On-ground Volunteering Platform to help the BJP in its Mission towards gaining a 272+ seat majority in the 543 seat *Lok Sabha*- the nation's highest seat of power.' This website transcends the usual announcements about upcoming campaign events and information about the candidates, to subtle (and not-so-subtle) attempts to use messaging laced with *Hindu* nationalism to influence and create a 'public'.

All the information available on the website is also made available across other platforms such as a Facebook app and an Android app to ensure better accessibility. In addition to direct view of Modi's Twitter feed, visitors have access to e-books titled 'Modi's Gujarat Miracle', 'Modi 2002' and 'NaMo Vision'. The thumbnail of the 'About Us' video asks visitors to "Join the Mission to ensure that India gets the leadership it needs." The video is dotted with strong phrases such as 'A grand opportunity towards nation building' and 'strong and vibrant India', the latter being reminiscence of Modi's Gujarat campaigns. When the narrator of the video refers to the past 67 years, viewers are

confronted with depressing black and white images, while the mere mention of the name 'Modi' brings colour to the screen. An especially interesting sequence is when a series of images of young people, obviously from different parts of the country flash across the screen while the narrator says, "Your volunteering will make a difference. You are the change that India needs to see."

As you scroll down, you are introduced to a few more testimony videos. One example is hotelier Rahul Mehta, an young professional and one of the volunteers on the website describing the people he met on the websites forum as "like-minded people, working towards the common goal of better governance and civic awareness building up to the elections." He confidently endorses the BJP stating that information from the forum is "synthesized, processed and passed upwards to the political leadership." He is one of the many volunteers who contribute their time as a 'specialist' talking specifically about how his profession is going to be aided, should the BJP come to power. There are also volunteers who help answer general questions such as where to vote, how to vote, etc.

The websites intended audience is obviously young, English or Hindi speaking, middle class and professionals. Phrases such as 'nation-building' and 'vibrant' are meant to connect Modi to Gujarat's progress with a promise to replicate it on a national scale. The website logo consists of 543 dots of orange and green, of which orange largely outnumbers the green. People can draw inference on the use of colour depending on one's political or religious affiliation.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA**

Warner suggests that a 'public' might be considered to be stranger relationality in a pure form as compared to other ways of organizing strangers such as nations, religions, races, guilds, which select strangers based on territory, identity, belief or some other test of membership. A 'public' unites strangers through participation alone. Strangers come into relationship by its means, though the resulting social relationship might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable (Warner, 2002).

The BJP has been incredibly effective on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well. While several senior BJP leaders such as Sushma Swaraj, Rajnath Singh and Arun Jaitley actively tweet to a strong following, none possess the stardom that Narendra Modi has achieved on Twitter and Facebook. When this paper was being written, Modi had more than 10.5 million fans on Facebook (Narendra Modi's Facebook Page, Feb 16, 2014 ) and was very close to reaching 3.5 million followers on Twitter (Narendra Modi's Twitter Page, Feb 16-23, 2014) - the highest of any Indian politician surpassing the Congress MP Shashi Tharoor. Not surprisingly, '#modi' was also the

most trending topic in politics in India in 2013 (2013: The year of Twitter in India). His tweets and status updates are both in Hindi and in English. Each status update on Facebook enjoys numerous 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments', and his tweets are retweeted constantly.

## VIDEO ON YOUTUBE

Warner mentions that an important precondition of a 'public' is members' activity, however relevant, and not on its members' categorical classification, social position or material existence. In the self-understanding that makes them work, 'publics' thus, resemble the model of voluntary association that is so important to civil society (Warner, 2002). Public discourse is not necessarily dispersed from a central source and absorbed directly by a receptive mass rather it circulates into what Warner calls "a social sphere created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Ibid).

In addition to a large number of 'memes' and news reports that critics and fans alike share on Facebook about Modi and the BJP campaign, there has been active participation in content creation. One example is a fan video titled '*Na Mo Youth Anthem*'. In this video the creator - Sugavanam Krishnan uses a catchy tune, accompanied by special visual effects to proclaim Modi as a 'preacher', 'conqueror' and 'curator'. The chorus of the song is a chant "*Na-Mo-Na-Mo-PM-Go!*".

The appeal of this video is for a very different class of Indians from the ones on Twitter and Facebook. While the messages and videos described earlier are meant for consumption by an educated English/ Hindi speaking elite this video which comprises of a series of words ordinarily found only in a thesaurus is meant to be an anthem for individuals from a very different educational and economic back-ground.

Affluence is no longer an indicator for internet and mobile phone usage in India anymore. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India estimates that as of June 2013 there are 198 million internet subscribers in India of which 89 percent accessed the internet through mobile devices. Social media use jumped last year in India, with Facebook's active users growing to 82 million by mid-2013 - up 15 per cent in six months. Question-and-answer site- *Quora* estimates that by 2020, India will have more people online than the United States (Roy, 2014).

Webfluenz, a company that monitors and analyses social media has done a detailed analyses of the three most prominent parties on social media. Their results show that the Congress has failed to effectively participate in the social media frenzy surrounding the elections. The party has only 1

million followers on Twitter compared to the BJP's 2.1 million. What is more troubling is they rank lower than both the *Aam Aadmi Party* and the BJP in terms of positive sentiments expressed in 'tags' (Webfluenz, Feb 16, 2014).

A fair comparison for the BJP would be the AAP which has the most number of mentions across Twitter and Facebook, 69% of which was positive. While the BJP focuses its social media content around Narendra Modi, the AAP has created a niche for itself as an 'anti-corruption' force. The rallying around one figure, especially one that epitomizes nationalism is another sign of the BJP's attempts to create a nationalist 'public' (Ibid).

## CONCLUSION

An Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) report lists 160 out of 543 constituencies can be termed as 'high impact' which indicates likelihood of being influenced by social media in the general elections. However, 256 are classified as 'no-impact' constituencies (Kaul M., 2014). Even though the better half of constituencies are no impact constituencies, the same report estimates that political parties will spend up to 5% of their campaign budget on social media (Sivadas, 2014).

While it is unclear if the BJP's adoption of effective social media strategy will lead to a positive result in the elections or specifically in the 160 'high-impact' constituencies, it is evident that its high level of social media use indicates the tool's potential for political impact. With access to social media increasing, connectivity improving and technology becoming cheaper, the percentage of voters being impacted by social media will only increase in the coming years. However, what is becoming increasingly clear is that their efforts, despite being primarily geared towards elections have ignited a new 'public' – one that spends large amount of time online, ready and eager to change the perceived system of corruption at the centre.

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