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STRATEGISING THE NEW MEDIA CAMPAIGN OF 2014 LOK SABHA POLLS

Vibhor Mohan

Research Scholar, School of Communication Studies, Panjab University, Chandigarh.



ABSTRACT

Apart from the major political parties, even individual candidates for the 2014 Lok Sabha election roped in political campaign strategists who did not merely post political content on the social networks but also managed the overall online campaign. The work profile of the online campaign strategists included image building of the politician, taking on the rivals and effectively managing the discourse in cyberspace so that a favourable agenda is set for the elections. The paper includes survey of 20 campaign strategists to specify the key functions involved in managing a positive online campaign that not just gives informative updates to the voters but

also contributes to the overall projection of a candidate. The findings show that a sizeable number of campaign strategists took up the job of managing WhatsApp groups to monitor the kind of content that is posted therein, supervised the political discourse on the online accounts and also countered hate speech by supporters of rival parties or candidates.

KEYWORDS: online election campaign, campaign managers, New Media, social networks.

1. INTRODUCTION

A large number of politicians used New Media channels like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp along with

their traditional campaign in the election. As many of them were themselves new to using these, they hired campaign strategists who could also ensure that there is no negative sentiment against them and online smear campaigns by rivals are countered. The process of managed online campaigns can be seen in light of the Diffusion of Innovation Theory that explains how, why, and at what rate new technology and ideas spread through cultures. To be able to self sustain, an innovation must be widely adopted, reaching a point of critical mass. So where the politicians were initially adept at using the social media that was limited to a Facebook account, for managing an active Facebook page and accounts of other channels, including multiple WhatsApp groups requires professional help. As explained by the theory, since it is a new phenomenon, there are still laggards and only a section of politicians launched online campaigns in the 2014 election.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Agencies specializing in digital political campaigns have sprung up in response to the opportunity and are even offering money back guarantees, says Arulchelvan, S. (2014), adding that the seeds of New Media campaign in India were sown in 2004 when the BJP set aside 5% of its campaign budget for “e-campaign, revamping its campaign website, pushing out text messages, pre-recorded voice clips and e-mails to its database of 20 million e-mail users and 20 million phone users.” At present, an estimated 7,000 professionals in the United States now earn all or part of their living on political campaigns in this \$6 billion annual industry (Burton & Shea, 2010, p. 9; Issenberg, 2012, p. 4). Strategising includes processes like “narrowcasting,” a term that dates back to the early 1990s; just as Computer databases had streamlined the processing of political information for direct mail, both e-mail and Web page customization followed suit (Howard, 2005, p. 8). The Obama campaign represented “the fullest realization of trends in the political field toward crafting better means of collecting, storing, analyzing, and acting upon data about citizens, their online behaviour, and their social relationships” (Kreiss & Howard, 2010, p. 1033). The ‘Americanisation’ of election campaigns across democracies post-2008 is seen as an influence of the Obama campaign. Most politicians, on their own, do not get much time to analyse their online campaigns. For instance, Conway et al (2013) point out that despite presidential primary candidates during the 2012 campaign Buddy Roemer tweeting more than his rivals, his increase in followers still did not match that of popular politicians. Some even believe “there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to use Twitter” (Golbeck et al., 2010). Damage control was a tough call for campaign strategists as information on New Media tends to go viral instantly. Wasswa, H. W. (2013) points out, “Social media campaign strategist also had to counter propaganda about their candidates that was being peddled on SNS by their competitors. Given that updates on SNS are instantaneous, campaign strategists had a lot of trouble controlling the damage on the image of their candidates in the event news came about on something bad they did.”

In the run up to the 2017 assembly elections in Punjab, there were professional public relations companies offering to take up the job of individual campaign strategists, many of whom in 2014 were party volunteers who had some experience of handling the social media. Public Relations companies offered both “online and offline campaign planning and execution” Vibhor M. (2016, September 5).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The emergence of online campaign strategists on the India political scene is a new phenomenon. From the time when party’s think tanks would decide which issue is to be raised when, now it is the online campaign teams that give direction to the political discourse by starting a new hashtag or sparking off a debate by posting a question on Facebook page or Twitter account of a candidate. In line with this, the following research objectives were finalised:

Rq1: What are the key functions of a campaign strategists’ job profile in managing the online campaign?

Rq2: What is the ‘managerial’ task taken up by a majority of the campaign strategists?

4. METHODOLOGY

A survey of campaign strategists working for individual political leaders or parties was conducted in Punjab and Chandigarh and they were asked about their work profile. In all, 20 voters were selected using non-probability sampling procedure due to the fact that this vocation is still not that common.

5. RESULTS

The findings show that the campaign strategists took a variety of initiatives to contribute to the online campaign. The managerial functions of an online campaign strategist (also referred to as online campaign manager) can be broadly categorised into 12 different heads (Table 1). However, a majority of the strategists said managing the WhatsApp groups created for getting support for the candidate or for mobilising cadres was one of their key job profiles.

Table 1: Work profile of campaign strategists during the 2014 election

Work profile	Frequency
Managing WhatsApp groups	6
Advise candidate on political positions for a desired image	4
Supervising new media campaign	4
Countering hate speech	4
Taking on rivals	3
Coordinating with IT professionals hired for managing pages	2
Approving content for new media platforms	2
Generating online debates with voters	1
Replying to comments on behalf of the candidate	1
Assisting in Google hangout and Facebook interaction	1
Managing YouTube channel	1
Training IT cell members	1

6. CONCLUSION

Since the size and budget of campaign teams of each candidate or party varied, the online campaign strategists had to take up multiple jobs. It included focussing on different New Media channels including Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube. However, since WhatsApp was a key element in the 2014 Lok Sabha campaign, a majority of the campaign strategists focussed on it. Apart from sending out WhatsApp updates about the politician or party to individually or on broadcast lists, the campaign strategists managed WhatsApp groups of voters or party cadres. This job included keeping a watch on the content to make sure that no objectionable posts find their way; they also moderated the political discourse to set a favourable agenda for the politician.

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