

Alternative Media in New Millennium - “Use of the Social Networking Sites for Social Campaigning: The Anti-Corruption Campaign (Jan Lokpal Bill)”

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Abstract

In the present hi-tech, globalised world alternative media has gained so much popularity among the users which cannot be denied. The impact of the alternative media has been witnessed by the entire world in the recent Arab Spring. People around the world actively participated in the revolution through this medium.

There are so many examples stating the power and impact of these medium for awareness. One such example we have is the Anti-Corruption Campaign (Jan Lokpal Bill), the campaign initiated by social activist Anna Hazare. The present study is an attempt to find out whether these alternative media (the social-networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc.) are useful for the promotion of social campaigns or not. The research will also try to find out how people respond and what do they think about such campaigning through the social-networking sites.

Keywords: Alternative media, April Spring, Janlokpal Bill, Social networking sites, Anti-corruption campaign

Introduction

To match the international pace, India is progressing with a remarkable speed but like many developing economies, India faces large-scale corruption at all levels of government and the private sector, as well as in everyday transactions in the public sphere. According to the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2010 of the Transparency International (TI), the nation is ranked a poor 87 among 178 countries with a score of 3.3 out of 10 (cited in Bhanu, 2011: “Politics of Lokpal”).

The social activist Anna Hazare, known for his rural development work in his home state of Maharashtra, began a fast unto death to prevail on the Indian Government to draft a stronger anti-corruption Jan Lokpal Bill. Wearing a Gandhian cap and white khadi (home-spun), with a portrait of Gandhi displayed prominently behind him on the public stage. This inaugurated spontaneous demonstrations and protest marches in New Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of the country, when, with the support of other prominent and iconic civil society representatives, the movement went viral in urban India. The point that captured the eyeballs and was especially noteworthy was the use of social networking sites or platforms such as

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Twitter and Facebook to mobilise online and offline support for the Campaign. The campaign got tremendous and overwhelming support through these social-networking sites.

The present study is an exploratory study of the social networking sites used for promoting social campaigns. This is an attempt to study how useful are these sites for the success of such campaigns.

Research Methods

This study is a part of the larger study on *"The Use of the Social Networking Sites for Social Campaigning: The Anti-Corruption Campaign (Jan Lokpal Bill)"*. The social networking sites (Twitter and Facebook) were chosen for study because, today these sites are very much popular among the general public specially the youth. And the sites are gaining tremendous popularity as one of the most effective medium of communicating to the mass audiences.

Basically the method used in the study was secondary data collection method and interview method. Few research papers, related to the social media, were considered for the study. Various social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter were monitored to collect the data. A number of blogs were also considered to collect the factual data regarding the campaign on the sites. Thirty Five respondents (regular users of Twitter and Facebook) were taken randomly and interviewed, to know the impact of the campaign through these social-networking sites.

Literature Review

Since the mid 1990s, internet has become an increasingly significant and highly effective campaigning medium. And today, it is being used for all type of commercial as well as social campaigning worldwide. A number of researches and articles have been published in the recent years that intensively discussed the impact or the effectiveness of the campaigning through internet especially through social networking sites.

In the modern age, the new communication technologies have given new dimensions to the interactivity of the media, which is now being used for massive campaigning through internet more precisely through the social networking sites. A great number of researches are being carrying out continuously to prove that interactivity is the key variable for studying the applications and impact of the new media technologies. The ability for message receivers to respond to message senders has developed into a principle component of the conceptualization of interactivity (Wang, 2006).

According to Shannon and Weaver, feedback is important in the process of communication. Feedback plays a very important role in social campaigning. Interaction with the users is the backbone of any social campaign. Earlier, other Medias - including print, electronic, traditional and advertisements - were used for the purpose, but with the advancement of high technologies, today, internet has provided a great platform to the people for their active participation.

Other sources like various Twitter and Facebook accounts, pages dedicated to Anna Hazare, different blogs supporting the

campaign, printed magazines, books and knowledgeable persons were contacted to gather the data.

Facebook and Twitter Monitoring The Anti-corruption Campaign

According to statistics cited on Shubho Sengupta's blog, within the first four days of its existence the anti-corruption movement had 116,000 fans on Facebook, 5,600 followers on Twitter, and the highest interaction rate of the top 10 Facebook pages in India (2011: "The anti-corruption movement"). At the same time, Sudarshana Banerjee, reporting a few days after the beginning of Hazare's fast unto death reports: "Anna Hazare is the top trend of India in Twitter, and is followed by lokpal, Mera Neta Chor Hai [My Politician is a Thief], and Jantar Mantar" (2011: "Fast Unto Death"). While this may look like a case of online support only, there is ample evidence to suggest that it translated into offline action. According to an article in The Economic Times, the movement's Facebook page is not only attracting comments in the hundreds, but is also "serving as an effective platform to coordinate protests in various cities" (Anna Hazare: Support comes in form of tweets, 'likes').

Janlokpal's page on Facebook, and the events and albums on this page receive a few mentions in the Twitter feed over the course of the week. One of the tweets also refers to the movement's own Twitter application. Another appears to request Twitter users/followers to use Janlokpal in their anti-Corruption tweets as it is "the official tag of Anna Hazare Jan Lokpal movement". This is noteworthy as despite the movement's attempt to distance itself from any organised political or non-governmental group, it is nonetheless distinguishing itself on social networking platforms as a distinct civil society movement with a recognised leader.

The anti-corruption movement/campaign itself is confined to urban centres, with calls for meetings to occur, or protest marches to commence, in well-known metropolitan public spaces such as Jantar Mantar and Ramlila Maidan (both in New Delhi). Secondly, the percentage of urban dwellers accessing Twitter or Facebook to participate in Janlokpal's online deliberations is unlikely to be substantial. Although this participation has not been measured, it is telling that according to the World Bank's 2009 statistics, only 5.3 per cent of the total Indian population have access to the Internet ("Internet users - per 100 people").

Given this, those commenting on Janlokpal's Twitter feed, or viewing its Facebook albums and events is a miniscule proportion of the entirety of India's body politic. Why, then, did the leaders of the civil society group bother to engage with, and have considerable presence and activity on the above social networking sites?

This is evident in online blog and forum posts that comment on the role of new media in the dissemination of the anti-corruption movement. For instance, digitally-savvy blogger Babita Mishra attributes the success of the social media campaign to finding a grassroots leader in Anna Hazare, and identifying a widely understood cultural symbol in Hazare fasting to death at the Jantar Mantar (2011: "The anti-corruption movement"). The

figure of Hazare is particularly crucial in creating an amalgam of Gandhian methods (harking back to India's well-known non-violent independence struggle) and new content popularised through social media and television. Another web post refers to him as "Modern Mahatma" and "Mahatma Gandhi 2.0" ("Web's social sites"), thereby reinforcing both the inflection of new media, and also nostalgically referring to a past consisting of seemingly unproblematic political hierarchies and leaders. However, as Aditya Nigam's analysis points out, such nostalgic elements may have moralist appeal, but they also possess authoritarian tendencies as exemplified by Hazare's frequent appropriation of Hindu symbolism in addition to Gandhian protest methods (2011: "Anna Hazare and the 'middle class'").

Meenu Martolia, engineer by profession and a regular Facebook user told that she continuously monitored and actively participated in the whole Campaign on Facebook, she even changed her profile picture to support the campaign and even motivated all her friend to support the good cause through Facebook and participated in the candle march in Jantar Mantar. Neha Singh, management student and Facebook user told that during the Campaign she updated the most about Anna Hazare just to be an active participant in the campaign. She got all the information about different marches through Facebook and she went and participated with her friends.

(Shah, 2011: "Young Indians Fight Corruption on the Internet"). In his blog devoted to mapping youth trends and differentiating Indian youth from their western counterparts, Vaustav Sengupta writes that not only is India one of the youngest countries in the world with 60% of its population less than 24 years of age, but also that this is the first ever non-socialistic generation with both aspiration and money (2011: "Anti corruption movement").

This also appears to be a youth mobilising strategy as according to The Economic Times, "many youngsters, who joined protests or fasted in solidarity with Hazare, said in television interviews that they first learned about the issue from social media" (Anna Hazare: Support comes in form of tweets, 'likes'). It is such youth who constituted the offline support base of the movement in India's metropolises. For instance, according to Mayank Gandhi, Mumbai coordinator of India Against Corruption (IAC), 90% of their volunteers were obtained through Facebook (cited in Web's social sites).

Scope for Future Research

This study was limited to only two social networking sites (Twitter and Facebook). Similar study can be carried out for other social-networking sites and blogs, with same or different social campaign. The content of the interactivity of the Twitter and Facebook users is not studied in the present study. A separate study can be carried out to study the users-interactivity content. Content analysis of the feedback of the users can be carried out for the same or such campaigns.

Implications of The Study

The findings of this research are expected to be useful for the successful social campaigns through social-networking sites. The campaigners will be able to know how and what type of message they should put on the sites in order to make it more and

more effective and successful among Twitter and Facebook users.

Conclusion

The whole study concluded, as the brief account of the anti-corruption movement's or campaign's Twitter and Facebook feeds suggest, the Campaign had a strong presence and impact on social networking sites, which was ostensibly translated into online activism in the form of demonstrations and big turn outs in public meetings in New Delhi, Mumbai and other parts of the country. Our preliminary look at sample Twitter and Facebook posts suggests the re-iteration of several themes including calls for Gandhian strategies, participation in the drafting of the Janlokpal Bill, civil unrest, and social networking platforms. Through these social networking sites, people felt like participants in the campaign directly. They felt like being the part of a social cause through such sites. During the campaign, maximum users spent more than regular time on the sites to monitor the latest updates. Many users who use these sites just for fun and entertainment, for the first time due to the campaign, they find these sites socially awakening and relevant.

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