

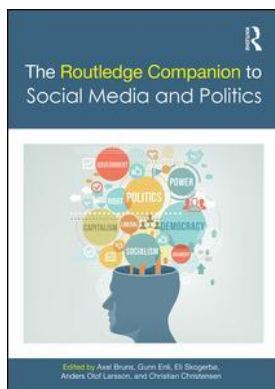
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SOCIAL MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIONS IN INDIA

Rajesh Kumar

Introduction

In India, having a conversation on social media is the new *mantra* for success—be it business or governance, political parties or politicians. Social media is also ‘setting the agenda’ for traditional media, such as television and newspapers (Rodrigues and Ranganathan 2015). The key ingredient of such a framework is to not only ensure information dissemination but to also facilitate its sharing and encourage participation that generates conversation and comments. While discussing ‘social media and civil society action in India’, this chapter will be concentrating on *expressive social media* which are generally referred to as Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and microblogging services (e.g. Twitter). SNSs have taken off globally since 2006 and have empowered hundreds of millions of users to share content among online communities and create an Internet society. It has been found that about two-thirds of all active Internet users have spent time managing a social networking profile, and more than 80 per cent have visited friends’ social network pages, with microblogging services used by 51.9 per cent of active internet users globally (Universal McCann 2013). While the growth in SNSs new users in North America has started to level off, it is growing substantially in other regions. Many top SNSs, such as Facebook and MySpace, made efforts to become more culturally relevant in markets outside the U.S. and thus demonstrated rapid growth in their global user bases (ComScore 2013). They are generating high interest in Asia where the SNS phenomenon is flourishing. India has 243.2 million Internet users (19 per cent of the total population) and 106 million (8 per cent of total population) active social media users (Naidu 2014). Of active Internet users, 44.6 per cent in India are using microblogging services (Universal McCann 2013).

SNSs and microblogging services are being used by the common people for information sharing and also for generating consciousness about different issues and concerns of public interest. News of the shooting and bombing in Mumbai, India, in 2008 was first reported via Twitter and Flickr, before any of the mainstream media had reported on the event. *The Telegraph* reported that, during the attacks, there were approximately 70 eyewitness tweets every five seconds (Deborah 2011). Campaigns such as Batti Bandh; Justice for Jessica, the 2008 Gateway of India rally after the Mumbai attack; and, most

recently, *It Is My Arunachal: Dream on China*, have leveraged the existing network on social media websites (Thirani 2011). Civil society protests in India—from justice to the victims of Godhra, to those living around the Koodankulam nuclear facility (in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu), to those affected by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur—are occupying significant space in social media and are keeping democracy alive in India. Within this context, this chapter attempts to understand and analyse a civic action in India, namely India Against Corruption (IAC), which is considered to be largely driven by social media.

Social Media: A Force Multiplier for Civil Society Actions

The uses of social media during the Arab Spring present an interesting set of cases for examining theoretic perspective on the relationship between social media and mass action (for e.g. Bimber et al. 2005; Flanagan et al. 2006; Segerberg and Bennett 2011). A significant portion of early research and analysis indicated that social media played an important role in the collective actions that resulted in the overthrow of the governments, for example, Egypt and Tunisia (Iskander 2011; Kavanaugh et al. 2011; Khamis and Vaughn 2011). Social media contributed to collective action in four ways (Lynch 2011): (1) by making it easier for disaffected citizens to act publicly in coordination; (2) by creating information cascades that bolstered protesters' perceptions of the likelihood of success; (3) by raising the costs of repression by the ruling regimes; (4) by dramatically increasing publicity through diffusion of information to regional and global publics. All of these functions were not served by one specific social media platform at a given point in time and in a given context. In fact, different social media platforms provided a variety of facilitations that were important at a given point in time. At one time they provided forums for early critiques of the regimes, and at another they helped in forming public opinion and providing logistical assistance to those organising protests against the regime (Aouragh and Anderson 2011; Howard et al. 2011).

The historic developments and transformations that have taken place in Egypt and Tunisia showed that the digital sphere, which cannot be wholly regulated or shut down, has become a potent platform for protests (Thirani 2011; Wilson and Dunn 2011). In Yemen, for example, as the Egyptian revolution was going full steam, a 24-year-old youth, Al-Razaq Al-Azazi, started a Facebook group called *Let's Change the President*, which he later renamed *Revolution Against Ignorance* in preparation for pro-democracy demonstrations. More than 1,200 people defied the government and accepted the site's invitation aptly named *Yemeni People Uprising*, challenging the three-decade-long regime of their government (Michael 2011).

When Japanese journalist Kosuke Tsuneoka was kidnapped in Afghanistan, he used Twitter to send out the message. Tsuneoka had been held for five months by Islamic militants but got access to his Twitter account when his kidnappers asked him to show them how to use their mobile phones. He was released two days after the tweet was sent (Deborah 2011). Yet another example of social media strength: before the media even got a sniff of the news about Osama Bin Laden's death, on Twitter an unknown user broke the news to the world when Sohaib Athar, an information technology consultant living in Abbottabad, started tweeting when he noticed some unusual activity in his town (Deborah 2011).

Kumar and Thapa (2014), in a study titled “Social Media as a Catalyst of Civil Society Movements (CSMs) in India,” aimed to identify whether social media are potent tools for catalysing CSMs. The users surveyed expressed a minimal influence of social media tools upon them, yet there was evidence of optimism about their role in CSMs. Users surveyed gave definite pointers so as to infer that social media may be of great use not only in informing them about the onset of a particular civil society initiative/movement but also for catalysing such movements. Many were optimistic that there is enough scope for growth in the Indian Internet market. As per the estimates, an Internet user in India spends, on average, 13 hours per week online and this number is likely to reach 16 hours per week. The time spent online will largely be spent on social media, photo/video sharing, e-commerce and also on utilities/banking/bill payments (Aggarwal 2013).

Media are potent tools for disseminating information but they are not limited to dissemination—they invariably shape our outlook on the world and our perception of reality. Scholars have debated the influence of media in determining our perception of reality through various studies, such as agenda-setting theory, framing, priming, gatekeeping, uses and gratification theory (U & G), individual difference theory, expectancy-value theory, and cute cat theory of digital activism. Uses and gratification theory directly places power in the hands of the audience. Rather than assuming that media messages have direct, uniform effects on those who consume them, the U & G perspective proposes that receivers make deliberate, intentional decisions about the media messages they expose themselves based on personal needs and desires (LaRose et al. 2001). Individual difference theory also stipulates that different people react differently to the same stimuli: people go for selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention in accordance with their established convictions and beliefs. They also tend to ‘read into’ the message and perceive whatever suits them. Expectancy-value theory (Palmgreen and Rayburn 1984), on the other hand, proposes that media use is accounted for by a combination of perception of benefits offered by the medium and the differential value of these benefits for the individual audience member. Yet another theory, cute cat theory of digital activism, developed by Zuckerman (2008), posits that most people are not interested in activism. Rather, they wish to use the Web for mundane activities, including surfing for pornography and ‘cute cats’. Within the ambit of the theories detailed above (some of them propounded before the onset of social media), the role of social media in civil society actions or movements may be discussed and understood. It may also be noted that it is the volume of potential participants, unencumbered by time and space, coupled with interactivity, which distinguishes social media from other media.

People pay significant attention to the opinion and mental states of others when judging and determining their own behaviour (Malle et al. 2001). Individuals try to understand people’s motives and the degree of intentionality before expressing their opinion for an event, issue, or situation (Lagnado and Channon 2008). People also use new media platforms to acquire information about others (Westerman et al. 2008) and use it to shape and modify interpersonal impressions, even among those who are already acquainted offline (e.g. DeAndra and Walther 2011). Thus, social media has a potential to impact people’s perception and opinion regarding social and political issues. It may also change the way people express themselves and participate in social and political issues and concerns.

Social Media for Social and Political Mobilisation in India: The IAC Movement

In India, social media have been providing a valuable tool for political and social organisation and also for social activism and mobilisation of mass opinion on issues of public interest. For voicing concern on issues such as corruption among public functionaries and political dispensation, social media offer great potential for mobilising people for participation in social movements. It is also useful to the leaders who organise such movements or emerge from such movements. Here an attempt will be made to explore the role of social media in India's widely participated mass movement known as India Against Corruption (IAC), organised in 2011. It is pertinent to understand the prelude to this massive mass protest, largely catapulted by social media. Following major corruptions and scandals reported by media and political groups in opposition, the then Indian government drafted a version of a Lokpal Bill in 2010 (for creating an institution to monitor/restrict corrupt practices in public funded organisations and by public functionaries). A Group of Ministers (GOM) also considered this draft bill for tackling corruption (PIB, Govt. of India 2011). However, social activists and civil society groups considered the proposed bill as weak, as it did not cover the prime minister, members of parliament, and cabinet ministers. The simmering discontent turned into a mass agitation and protests in the year 2011 led by a 74-year-old civil activist Anna Hazare of Ralegan Siddhi, a small village in the state of Maharashtra, India. Hazare has been a mass organiser and had previously organised successful mass protests and efforts for decreasing alcoholism and ensuring water access for individuals in rural areas (Sawyer 2011). He has also been instrumental in advocating for the Freedom of Information Act in India since 2003, which eventually was passed in 2005 (AnnaHazare.org). He has been leading anti-corruption protests for two decades. However, the 2011 anti-corruption movement, organised under the banner of India Against Corruption (IAC), was the largest one led by him. IAC activists were of the opinion that the Lokpal Bill proposed by the then government was too weak because the provision of ombudsman made under it could not investigate actions of elected officials. The government's argument was that an ombudsman should not be given powers to investigate elected leaders because it would make him or her too powerful and would weaken the democratic structure (The Economist 2011). In spite of series of talks with IAC functionaries, the then government failed to arrive at some consensus with regard to the structure and form of the Lokpal Bill. Demanding a stronger bill, Hazare and his team members from IAC launched a hunger strike on 5 April 2011. Mass protests erupted in support of IAC. People gathered in large numbers at Jantar Mantar and later on in Ramlila Maidan, New Delhi, the national capital. Protesters were pressurizing the then Indian government for forming a Joint Drafting Committee for a Lokpal Bill with five ministers and five civil society members. This civic action or movement sparked extensive discussions across news and social media. Large number of people also came out to the streets in support of IAC movement (Khorana and Ramaswami 2011). After four days of Hazare's fasting, the government agreed to form a joint drafting committee, and Hazare ended his fast. After witnessing so many ups and downs, the Lokpal Bill was finally passed by the Indian parliament in December 2013.

Anna Hazare has been fighting against corruption for a long time and has gone on a Fast unto Death campaign many times in his life. But the reach, publicity, and fame that the Lokpal Bill gave to him were unbelievable (Prabhudesai 2011). This could not

have been possible without the SNSs. The second fortnight of August 2011 saw one of the largest mobilisations of people in recent years against corruption in India. The struggle led by Anna Hazare dominated the media all through the fortnight. A new feature during the movement was the participation of people through SNSs, which helped people to mobilise in different corners of the country in support of Team Anna. Twitter, Facebook and other SNSs and blogs have also played a significant part in bringing people together in peaceful demonstration, candle protests and so on. Team Anna may have been the first major beneficiary of this technology (Viswanathan 2011). More than 150 Facebook pages related to Anna Hazare and India Against Corruption (IAC) were created and used almost round the clock for days. The official IAC Facebook page has managed to attract more than 3.2 *lakh* fans so far (Ohri 2011). According to Buzzref.com, the IAC Facebook page received more than 71,000 ‘likes’ and 13,000 ‘comments’ for a mere 170 posts uploaded in the month of August 2011. On 14 April 2011, an IAC post on Facebook, “Aage Bado Anna Hazare, Ham Tumhare Sath Hain [move forward Anna, we are with you]” gathered 127,396 ‘likes’ (Prabhudesai 2011). Not only Facebook but Twitter was also abuzz with messages showing support for Anna Hazare’s campaign. “Anna Hazare” and “Jan Lokpal” became the most discussed subject on Twitter in India, at that point of time. YouTube too was not far behind. Hundreds of videos were uploaded in support of Anna Hazare’s campaign, when the campaign was in full swing (Prabhudesai 2011).

IAC movement used all the key media tools ranging from electronic media, social media, and websites to mobile phones. A 16-member team of IAC based in Mumbai had the task of sending the messages about the movement to one million cell phone users across India who had registered on a telephone number advertised on newspapers and networking sites. One million cell phone users received two SMS every day from IAC. In the ‘missed call campaign’, citizens were asked to give a missed call to the number 022 61550789 for supporting IAC. Nearly 25 million people gave a missed call to the number. The IAC official website www.indiaagainstcorruption.org also provided contact details of volunteers and event schedule in all cities. IAC also used this media to counter misleading claims of government and other actors. New/Digital media because of its qualities of speed and reach became a key tool for information dissemination for this movement. A national daily, *The Times of India*, had also launched an online campaign—ACT (Against Corruption Together), where number of voters increased from 0.4 million to 1.2 million in just three days with almost 14,000 votes being added every hour. No social movement in last three decades in India had witnessed such huge mobilisation for an issue of public interest (Desai 2011).

India Against Corruption (IAC) organisers and supporters used social media to disseminate relevant information quickly and mainly to organise mass protests. Common people also used social media to show support for IAC and Anna Hazare, indicated on Facebook by ‘likes’ on posts. In the first four days of its existence, IAC had 116,000 fans on its community Facebook page (Khorana and Ramaswami 2011). Common people also created many other Facebook pages and provided momentum to the movement. Individual social media users debated the relevant issues, posted statuses, and uploaded videos and photos throughout the movement. According to one estimate, the total online support for the movement was around 1.5 million people (Kurup D 2011). Facebook hosted multiple Anna Hazare-related pages in English and Hindi, with tens of thousands of followers and

supporters. The official IAC Facebook page had more than 500,000 followers as of February 7, 2012 (India Against Corruption Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/IndiACor). Users could follow and access information about the anti-corruption movement through applications for smart phones and other mobile devices. The IAC smart phone application had as many as 50,000 users (Google Play 2012). The organisation used all these outlets to publish photos of Anna Hazare fasting, pro-Lokpal rallies, and examples of corruption. During this social media campaign, Hazare gained support from other prominent Indian activists, as well as the general populace. The intensity of protests can be gauged by the fact that in the first six months of 2011, the Indian government requested 358 removals from Google, mostly from Orkut and YouTube, the majority of such requests pertained to social media content criticizing the government (The Times of India 2011). However, Facebook posts and news reports showed that this anti-corruption movement was centred in urban areas. The Facebook demographics suggested that the movement engaged urban men and women but left large segments of the population out of the ambit of debate which perhaps led to withering out of the campaign (India Facebook Statistics 2012).

The massive use of social media in the Lokpal movement was a trend setter and could be seen as a successful experimentation for a common cause. People could use social media content to gauge the status of the movement and to identify the goals it seeks to attain. Moreover, the movement which was initiated by the social media influenced the mainstream media as well and it carried the news and activity of IAC with added intensity and frequency. User activity peaked as social momentum grew during the various action phases of the movement; however, it sharply decreased following some form of governmental action. Positive government action increased user activity for a short period of time when Facebook users discussed the government action on the issue. However, government actions and initiatives also halted or reduced the protest actions on ground as social activists waited for the government to fulfil a promise or for some progress in desired direction. This limitation of social media for civil society action was well reflected throughout the IAC protests and agitations in 2011.

A study commissioned by U.S. Government Office of South Asia Policy (Bong et al. 2012: 30), titled *Analyzing Social Media Momentum: India's 2011–12 Anticorruption Movement*, analysed the content related to IAC movement posted on Facebook. It says:

Government actions taken to repress the movement were significant in the natural log of comments model regression, and they correlated with an increase in the number of comments. Negative government action was not significant in the natural log of likes model. This difference makes sense when we consider the nature of the like action. A Facebook post detailing an unfavorable government action would garner fewer likes than a neutral or positive government action simply because movement supporters would disagree with the activity and therefore decline to like it. Thus, a post about a negative government action would not be expected to induce a large number of likes but would more likely lead to an increase in the number of comments as Facebook users discuss the implications of the action. Contrary to positive government action, which may lead to temporary lulls in user activity, negative government actions seem to act as catalysts, increasing social media momentum and triggering further

on-the-ground responses if the negative action is not effective in forcing the movement to change direction or fail at achieving its goals.

Positive and negative actions of the government also influenced mass activity on social media. For example, the police arrest of Hazare in August 2011 provided a big push to Facebook activity and boosted protests on ground as well. However, when the Lok Sabha passed the Lokpal Bill on 27 December 2011, the common people's activity and reactions on social media decreased substantially, so much so that the movement organisers had to use social media to tell the people that the movement was reorganising and shifting focus. Thus, the government's positive action on the legislation decelerated movement support and created an identity crisis for IAC leaders who in turn changed the goals and direction of the movement. Tracking activity related to specific posts could help the movement to better define its message and purpose and better use themes that resonate most with social media users. Overall, social media proved as an excellent organising tool during IAC movement. The content and focus of the posts provided a daily insight into the function of the movement and the message it was trying to advance. The dexterity with which IAC organisers used social media for mass mobilisation and opinion formation may be an example worth following by such civil society movements in future.

Conclusion

Civil society actions in India can still be attributed to the traditional mass communication tools. However, it is also worth noting that traditional media such as television, radio and newspapers are largely influenced by what appears in social media, a phenomenon made visible during the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement in 2011. Most of the prominent news channels in India have created their Twitter hashtags aiming to involve people in news gathering or for gathering feedback pertaining to issues and topics of public interest. Over the past two decades, communication and information infrastructure has spread enormously in India and so are its users. Although it is yet to reach a scale in percentage basis comparable to many developed nations, the population measured quantitatively is significantly higher (third largest in the world). The full horizon of opportunities has yet to be explored, as there is enough space for innovations leading to greater access for users. If the government of India and respective state governments and the governance model bring forth a situation where social media use is facilitated by introducing and expanding new technology into far-flung areas of the country, we may have a scenario where social media could be a force multiplier for civil society initiatives. The 'Digital India' project planned by the present government of India aims to connect every citizen through broadband services, more so through smartphones. This may empower a big chunk of population and may also boost digital activism of the type witnessed during India Against Corruption (IAC) movement. It's worth mentioning here that users are not merely absorbing entities: they also participate in disseminating information. And social media are known for their ability to enable the dissemination of information with just one click. Perhaps the term 'social media' is a summation of the terms social and media—the media which provides the opportunity of socializing in a real time basis. Unlike traditional mass media products, which are remotely produced and brought to us by a broadcast mechanism, social media has a potential edge over other such media by socializing the content in terms of contribution, sharing and use.

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