

The Internet For Engagement with The Electorate : The Indian Scenario

Rahul Gadekar*
Aparna Khadikar*
Dr Kiran Thakur*

Abstract

India was among the first countries in Asia to enter cyberspace in the mid-1990s. Politicians realised the importance of the Net to reach out to voters as it allows communication in real time and affordably. The experience of political parties in USA, UK, Ecuador, Korea and other countries have shown how the interactive capabilities of the Internet can be used effectively in campaigns.

This paper reports on such a study on e-engagement in the western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat during the Parliamentary Elections April 2009. It is a part of a broader study on the use of the Internet for campaigning in the elections monitored during the 2009 poll. The researcher has taken into account the following aspects about the e-engagement of people: use of interactive functions on their websites, response from the people, most used interactive tools, utility to solve the election-related problems of the voters and promptness to respond to the emails etc.

The researcher has monitored the updates of the websites of political parties of eight national and state parties after the Election Commission of India announced the poll schedule in April. The data collection continued till 18th May, when the election results were announced.

The study was to ascertain if the Indian politicians try to engage people during campaigning. Initial data indicated that only few politicians cared about the e-engagement. This study would establish if the Internet campaigning was only one way process, from sender to receiver.

Keywords : Electorate, e-Engagement, Online-Elections, Online-Campaign, Internet for Voting.

1. Introduction

Communication technology development is widely recognized as a salient feature of modern society in the so-called 'information age'. As more and more people are connected with computers, especially the Internet, the new medium is rapidly attracting attention of the communication scholars (Kim & Weaver, 2002). In the 1990s, the Internet revolutionized the communication world like never before. It has become a new communication medium that is different from most forms of communication that we are used to (Truetzschler, 1998). Due to the rapid development of the Internet during the last several years, communication scholars have begun to study this new medium.

Internet has played a major role in connecting the world. Interactivity is the most important feature of the Internet besides its reach and ability to spread the information. It has rejuvenated the concept of communication through new media. It has challenged the dominance of radio and TV with its interactive power. Therefore it proved effective in democracy as it provided a way for people to participate in the governmental activities.

Many countries in the world have witnessed the use of the Internet for election campaigning. Politicians are aware that this new medium has potential that can be explored for their political

success. Many of these politicians and political parties in the world did use the power of Internet for their political campaigning successfully. Barack Obama proved the success of this medium during US presidential elections in 2008. The relation between the Internet, political participation and democracy has attracted a growing interest among political scientists as well as communication and media scholars (Polat, 2005). Takaaki Ohta in his article, "Elections – Unlocking Democracy", has stated that "Internet electioneering has a number of advantages: improving communication between candidates and electors, financing efficiency and the vitalisation of third party electioneering (Ohta, 2009).

Interactivity is the key to the successful communication. It is important in all types of communication, mainly political communication. Websites are the new tool of political communication that is being used by the politicians worldwide for their election campaigns. Therefore interactivity of the websites is being discussed among the communication scholars nowadays. But there is no research that examines what features of a website actually enhance or impede civic engagement, despite calls for more such information (Coleman et al, 2008).

Internet has increased the possibility of people's political participation in democracy because of its many characteristics and features. The Internet has ability to make communication easier, cheaper and faster. It is argued that the expanded communication capacity of the Internet can lead to more frequent acts of participation (Polat, 2005). Coleman et al, 2008 argued that opportunities for greater engagement and activity might lead to improved participation (Coleman et al, 2008).

In India, politicians and political parties started using Internet during the last decade. General elections held in 2004 saw extensive use of new media by BJP, the then ruling party, for their election campaign called 'India Shining'. The Internet provided the parties a platform and most of them used it extensively, if not successfully. Most parties jumped on the Internet bandwagon using websites and portals (Kluver et al., 2007). Indian politicians have been using traditional media like rallies, door to door visits, roadside meetings, hand bills and road show etc for election campaigning. The main focus has been on the face-to-face interaction with the voters. During recent years many politicians used their websites too for campaigning. But are these websites serving the purpose for which these were hosted, including for interaction with the electors? The present study is an attempt to find the answer to this question. This is part of a larger study on "The Use of the Internet for Electioneering: The Cases of Maharashtra and Gujarat", which was carried out in April-May during General Elections 2009.

2. Literature Review

Internet has become an increasingly significant campaigning medium since the mid 1990s. It is being used for election campaigning worldwide today. From the beginning, study on campaigning websites remained one of the most fruitful areas of Internet research. Several articles and studies have been published in recent years that discussed the functions and effectiveness of the campaigning websites (Wang, 2006). Interactive function of the Internet is one of the most fascinating topics in this area.

New communication technologies have given new dimensions to interactivity of the media which were now being used extensively for political communication. Researchers persistently claim that interactivity is a key variable for studying the uses and effects of 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 has an important place in political campaigning. Interactivity is one of the most important functions of political communication. Interaction with the voters is the backbone of any election campaigning. In India, politicians have been using many traditional media like road shows, rallies, door to door visits etc. to interact with the voters. The traditional media which are supportive of face-to-face interaction are being used most by the politicians. Interaction with the aspiring voters is the only dependable way to know their feelings and feedback, which is helpful to decide campaigning strategy (Yadav, 2009).

Internet has provided a wide platform to the people for their political participation. It is beneficial for institutions in democratic countries. Due to its political participatory power, it has become an important part of the democracy and politics. But many scholars argue that the power of Internet is not being utilised properly. For example, Wang argued that the Internet has properties that make increased participation possible, but currently it is not being used to promote increased deliberation among citizens or between citizens and politicians. However, Internet access has been shown to be a predictor of civic participation (Wang, 2006).

Hibberd argued that there could be no doubt that political websites provided a cultural space for the public discussion of political affairs. While the promotion of such sites should be broadly welcomed, their addition to political communication should not be overstated (Hibberd, 2003).

The interactivity of these websites is being studied by the communication scholars worldwide. In Taiwan's 2000 presidential election, candidates' websites tended to skew web interactivity towards candidates' interest, not towards voters' interest. The Internet was used little more than an added political marketing tool and the claimed 'interactivity' between candidates and voters remained merely an illusion (Wang, 2006).

The study of the three major parties' political websites during general election in UK in 2001 concluded that the party websites were used primarily for re-engaging politically-alienated voters. These sites were not utilised to respond to the queries asked by the voters (Bowers-Brown & Gunter, 2002)

Though the interactivity is the most powerful feature of the websites, at some places it was neglected purposefully to avoid its undesirable consequences. For example, according to Stromer-Galley, during the US presidential campaigns in 2000, the websites of the candidates were found to avoid interaction between candidates and voters. The reason behind this was to avoid the possibility of loss of control and ambiguity of campaigning communication (Stromer-Galley, 2000).

Many features make a website interactive. These features give opportunity to the people to act. Wang in his paper referred to Schneider and Foot, 2002, suggesting that conceptualising campaigning websites as 'online structures' for individuals to take political actions. Online structures were conceptualised as particular electronic spaces comprising of various web pages, features, links and texts within which individuals were given opportunities to act (Wang, 2006). From a user's point of view, interactivity appears to be associated with some simple cues in the context of web-based mass communication. Users' perceptions of interactivity seem to be positively associated with the number of hyperlinks present in a website, as also the number of linking actions initiated by the user (Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Brown, 2003).

People benefit from these interactive features for various purposes. Youth are presumed to be the most users of Internet and of these interactive features as well. Young people certainly use the Internet for participation, broadly defined to include information seeking online newspapers, peer communication, emailing/voting/interacting with websites, content creation and visiting civic or political websites (Livingstone, 2007).

The present study is an exploratory study of the websites of the political parties and candidates contesting from Maharashtra and Gujarat, states of India, during the General elections 2009. This is an attempt to study the interactivity of these websites. This research team studied the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. Are the websites of political parties and candidates of Maharashtra and Gujarat interactive?
2. What are the features these politicians use to make their websites interactive?
3. What are the most used interactive features of these websites?
4. Do these politicians respond to the queries and feedbacks sent by the people?

3. Research Methods

This study is a part of the larger study on "The Use of the Internet for Electioneering: The Cases of Maharashtra and Gujarat". This study was carried out during Lok Sabha (People's House or Lower House of Indian Parliament) elections 2009 which was held in April-May 2009.

The western states of India, Maharashtra and Gujarat, were chosen for the study because these are two of the most IT penetrated states of India. There are 48 constituencies in Maharashtra and 26 constituencies in Gujarat. The websites of the state units of the national political parties in India were covered under this study.

The period of study was from 1st April 2009 to 18th May 2009. This time-frame was selected for the study because April 02 was the date of issue of notification for the election to all the 26 constituencies in Gujarat. This was also the date of issue of notification for election to ten of the total 48 constituencies in Maharashtra that constituted the third and the final phase of election process in this state. The data collection for the study was concluded on May 18, 2009, two days after counting of votes

began. By May 17, results of all the 543 constituencies in India were declared.

4. The Preliminary Study

The names of the political parties and candidates were taken from the official site of the Election Commission of India (www.eci.nic.in). Websites of political parties and candidates were found out by carrying out Google search and from print media covering the electioneering scene. Websites of national parties were studied to find out whether these carried links to the web pages of their regional units and candidates fielded by them.

After the last date of withdrawal of nominations in various phases of the poll in the two states, a list of all the candidates was made available at www.eci.nic.in, by the election commission of India. Besides carrying out Google search, prominent newspapers available in Ahmedabad and online editions of major newspapers of Maharashtra were scanned to find out news stories mentioning hosting of websites by candidates. URLs of the websites thus identified were compiled to begin the study.

Other sources like media organizations, journalists and knowledgeable persons with whom the team members had contacts were used to gather the data. The exercise yielded URLs of websites of seven political parties (Annexure: 1) and 24 candidates (Annexure: 2) contesting from the two states.

5. Quantitative Research

The data of interactive features of the websites were recorded in an Excel sheet. Besides this, the research team sent emails to these websites on the contact details mentioned at these websites. The data of the response the team received was recorded. Feedback forms were submitted where contact details were not given. A questionnaire having 14 open ended questions (See annexure: 3) was emailed to the political parties and candidates on their e-mail addresses given on their websites. The data of the response was recorded.

6. Qualitative Research

In addition to the recorded data, the team also documented observations about the points that were not covered in the data. The campaign strategist and web designers of the websites were interviewed by the research team. Five interviews were taken.

7. Data Collection

The data collection was carried out twice during the election period to check, if the politicians added new features, updated the contents or made any changes to their websites during the campaign time.

The initial observations of some of these sites were recorded on April 1st. Subsequently data was recorded twice in an Excel sheet on the basis of selected variables.

8. Dates of Data Collection

Initial observation of some websites was recorded on 1st April 2009. The observations of the websites of political parties were recorded twice from 8 to 10 April 2009 and on 26 April 2009. Similarly, the observation of the websites of candidates was recorded twice from 24 to 26 April 2009 and on 30 April 2009.

9. e-Mails to Political Parties and Candidates

e-Mails were sent to the political parties and the candidates to check whether they respond to messages of visitors. These e-mails were sent on the contact email addresses given on the websites of parties and candidates. Some candidates did not have the contact e-mails. In that case the contact form or feedback form that was available on the sites was submitted. The content of these messages was to seek some information regarding the election. These e-mails were sent three times during the election period. The text of the replies was recorded.

10. Findings and Discussion

10.1 Websites of Political Parties

Four out of the six parties had the facility for the visitors to submit their feedback, comments, suggestions and complaints, when the data was recorded first time on April 8th.

No political party gave discussion forum or a similar feature to provide platform to the people to express their opinions on different issues.

Four parties had audio-video features on their websites. Two had given Facebook, one had given Orkut, two have given Twitter, two have given links to their blogs and one had provided RSS feed. Two websites had provided the feature called opinion polls on various issues varying from politics to social concerns. Only three parties provided their contact emails on their websites.

During the election period no additional features were added on these websites of political parties when the second data collection was carried out from 24 to 26 April.

11. Websites of Candidates

Twelve out of 24 websites of the candidates provided the facility to people to send their feedback, comments, suggestions or complaints. It is a very basic feature which is a source to know the feelings and opinions of the visitors. But most politicians did not provide it.

Only three candidates provided a feature called 'Discussion Forum'. Fifteen websites had given audio-video features. Six websites had given Facebook, two had given Orkut, four had given Twitter, ten websites had links to the blogs of candidates, three had given RSS feed and two websites had a feature called opinion poll. BJP Gujarat had used blog effectively. They had a special team to look after the blog. That special team used to go online and post new contents on the blog (Yadav, 2009).

12. Feedback

Only one website, that of Priya Dutt, had the facility to upload the feedback received from the visitors of the website. Two feedbacks that were sent as a test by the research team also got uploaded on the website. No other website uploaded feedbacks got from the visitors. Some politicians posted these comments received from the people on their blog after filtration of text unfavourable to the host candidates. But these comments were not uploaded on their website.

Out of 24, three candidates did not provide any contact mail or any contact facility such as contact forms or feedback forms on their website. Two candidates had an auto-reply facility but no reply was received from them later when a member of this team mailed them a query. It means that the politicians did not bother about e-mail queries from the people. On the website of Dr Mallika Sarabhai too the contact details were not provided. The reason behind it was to avoid the abusive emails from the people. Hence, only feedback form was there without disclosing any direct contact details (Mallya, 2009).

13. e-Mails Sent to the Political Parties and Candidates

13.1 Political Parties : The research team sent four e-mail messages to all the political parties on the following dates: 14th April, 22nd April, 29th April and 5th May 2009. These messages were sent on the contact emails provided on their websites. The team did not get any reply from any of these political parties. There was nobody to attend to these mails received at the Gujarat Congress website (Patel, 2009).

13.2 Candidates : Very few politicians responded to the emails that the research team sent to them. There were some auto replies. First message sent on 29th and 30th April got replies from four candidates : Dr Mallika Sarabhai, Meera Sanyal, Arun Bhatiya, and Azam Panasare. The replies from the websites of Dr Mallika Sarabhai and Meera Sanyal were prompt as the team received it the same day on which the message was sent. They also responded in detail to the questions that were asked by the research team in the mail sent to them. Dr Sarabhai's web campaign team was very prompt about attending to such emails and feedbacks. There was separate arrangement to look into the feedback (Mallya, 2009).

14. Discussion

A communication is effective only when the sender gets response from the receiver of the message. It is more important in political communication where politicians have to convince the voters to gain the maximum votes. But the data suggests that the politicians of Maharashtra and Gujarat have neglected the feedback from the people which they could have received through their websites. Many of them had not given the facility to people to give their feedback through website. Those who have provided this facility had not given that much importance to it. Some interviews with the website coordinators and designers revealed that the feedbacks that were received were not checked regularly.

Except few, the politicians do not attend to the queries sent by the people to them through e-mail.

Some politicians had given links of the social networking sites such as Orkut and Facebook. While clicking on these links people can go directly to the home pages of these sites and can link to the online communities of the politicians. Dr Sarabhai who was the independent candidate from Gandhinagar used Twitter and Facebook effectively. Facebook has helped her more as she had 2200 members in the Facebook. She also used Twitter to update details about her activities during campaigning (Mallya, 2009).

Some politicians used audio-video features effectively to engage the visitors of the site. It was used very attractively by the Gujarat BJP website. It had the audio-video features at the prominent places of their homepages. It was done on purpose to attract and engage the visitors (Yana, 2009). Dr Shashiranjana Yadav, the chief convenor of the IT cell of BJP Gujarat stated that people like to listen and watch audio-video features. This prompted the campaign team to put them on the front of the websites. These included audio-video clips of the speeches of the party leaders, campaign songs, clips and videos. These were the most visited pages of the website (Yadav, 2009).

Dr Sarabhai was prompt to answer to the emails sent by the people. Besides emails, her office also received hardcopy of letters which were also responded. They received average 4 to 5 emails every day and the team made sure that the emails were answered within 24 hours (Mallya, 2009).

These politicians still strongly believe in traditional media for election campaigning and in interacting with voters. In Maharashtra and Gujarat interactivity of Internet cannot replace the traditional methods of political communication. The most important and effective method is face-to-face interaction. While referring to Weare (2002), Polat has stated that not all communication forms are affected equally by the Internet. Moreover, it is unlikely that the Internet can replace traditional forms of communication, especially face-to-face interaction (Polat, 2005).

These traditional media and internal personal sources are more dependable for politicians to know the feedback of people about them (Yadav, 2009).

Most previous studies suggest that the candidates' websites were used more primarily as marketing channels for the benefits of candidates than channels for enhancing two-way interaction between voters and candidates (Wang, 2006). The present study also shows similar results. The politicians of Maharashtra and Gujarat seem to have used their sites more for their marketing than to interact with the voters.

Political parties neglected the feature of Discussion Forum. It provides platforms to people to express their opinions on various topics and get to know the reactions of other people. Online discussion groups allow citizens to 'do their daily jobs and still participate within their daily schedules in discussions that interest them' (Wright & Street, 2007). It also helps the website to engage the visitors for longer time.

15. Scope for Future Research

This study was limited to the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. Similar study can be carried out in the other states of India. The

impact of the interactivity of websites was not studied in the present study. A separate study can be carried out to study this impact factor. There is also a need to study the content of the online interaction between politicians and voters through various social networking sites as well as blogs. The content of the interaction through these interactive features can be studied. A separate study can be carried out on the use of the blogs for election campaigning. Content analysis of the online discussion forums on the websites of the politicians can be carried out.

16. Implication of the Study

The findings of this research are expected to be useful for the politicians while campaigning through their websites. They will be able to know which features they should put on their websites in order to make it more effective and voter friendly. Web designers and coordinators of the websites of political parties and candidates can get guidelines to design websites with interactive features. The people in general and voters in particular also will be aware about the interactive power of the websites.

17. Conclusion

The study established that the websites of the politicians of Maharashtra and Gujarat are not interactive. They do not use these websites to interact with people. Though some politicians used a few interactive features in their sites, these were not enough. Such features remained underutilised. Though interactivity is the power of Internet in mobilising people, it was not used effectively by the politicians for their election campaigning. The purpose of these websites was limited only to have the presence on World Wide Web and not to be main tool for interacting with the voters.

Feedback, Discussion forum, Audio-video features, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, Blog, RSS Feed and Opinion Poll are the features that were used by the politicians of Maharashtra and Gujarat to reach the visitors of their website. Audio-video features and blogs were used most by the politicians as compared to other features.

Politicians ignored the feedbacks and emails received from the people through Internet. Many did not bother to provide such facility to people to send feedbacks. Even some of the contact e-mail addresses provided on the websites did not work. Except very few, politicians did not bother to respond to the queries and doubts asked by the people online.

The research concludes that the politicians of Maharashtra and Gujarat do not use interactive features on their websites effectively to interact with the voters. Their websites remained the one way communicators and were used more for marketing of the party or the candidates rather than interacting with voters.

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Annexure

Annexure 1: Websites included in the study

After the search, the research team was able to find seven websites of political parties and 24 websites of candidates contesting from Maharashtra and Gujarat as follows:

(Abbreviations used in the following table: BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party, INC – Indian National Congress, SS – Shiv Sena, SP – Samajwadi Party, NCP – Nationalist Congress Party, PGP – People’s Guardian Party, IND – Independent Candidate)

Websites of political parties:

Sr No	State	Political Party	URL
1	Gujarat	BJP	http://www.bjpguj.org/
2	Gujarat	INC	http://www.gujaratcongress.org/loksabhaelec2009.php
3	Maharashtra	SS	http://www.shivsena.org/
4	Maharashtra	BJP	http://www.bjpgmaharashtra.org/
5	Maharashtra Mumbai	SP	http://www.spmumbai.org/
6	Maharashtra Pradesh	NCP	http://www.nationalistcongressparty.com/sp.htm
7	Maharashtra Pradesh	INC	http://www.maharashtrapcc.org/

Websites of candidates

Sr No	Candidate	Constituency	Political Party	URL
	Gujarat			
1	L K Advani	Gandhinagar	BJP	http://lkadvani.in
2	Mallika Sarabhai	Gandhinagar	IND	http://www.mallikasarabhai.in
3	C. R. Patil	Navsari	BJP	http://crpatil.com/
4	Satyajit Gayakwad	Vadodara	INC	http://satyajitgaekwad.com
	Maharashtra			
5	Gopinath Munde	Beed	BJP	http://www.gopinathmunde.com
6	Anil Shirole	Pune	BJP	http://www.anilshirole.com/
7	Ram Naik	Mumbai North	BJP	http://www.ramnaik.com/
8	Kirit Somaiya	Mumbai North East	BJP	http://www.kiritsomaiya.com/
9	D S Kulkarni	Pune	BSP	http://dskforpune.com/
10	Milind Murli Deora	Mumbai South	INC	www.milinddeora.com/
11	Priya Sunil Dutt	Mumbai North Central	INC	www.priyadutt.org/
12	Gurudas Kamat	Mumbai North West	INC	http://www.gurudaskamat.org/
13	Pratik Prakashbapu Patil	Sangli	INC	www.pratikpatil.com
14	Suresh Shamrao Kalmadi	Pune	INC	www.sureshkalmadi.org
15	Dr.Sanjeev Ganesh Naik	Thane	NCP	http://www.sanjeevnaik.com/
16	Vilas Lande	Shirur	NCP	www.vilaslande.com
17	Azam Pansare	Maval	NCP	www.azampansare.com
18	Samir Bhujbal	Nashik	NCP	http://www.samirbhujbal.com
19	Adhalrao Shivaji Dattatray	Shirur	SS	www.shivajirao.com
20	Suresh Prabhakar Prabhu	Ratnagiri – Sindhudurg	SS	http://www.sureshprabhu.in/
21	Arun R.Kejriwal (adv)	26 Mumbai north	IND	http://arunkejriwal.com
22	Meera Sanyal	Mumbai south	IND	http://www.meerhsanyal.in
23	Pravin Madhukar Thakur (adv)	Raigad	IND	http://pravinmthakur.com/
24	Arun Bhatia	Pune	PGP	http://www.arunbhatiaelect.com/

Annexure 2 : Information of the Interactive Features of a website

	Engagement of people	Data on features provided to visitors to interact with the political party through the website.
1	Feedback , Comments, Suggestions, Complaints	A feature which provides facility to the users to give their feedback, suggestions or ask about any complaints.
2	Discussion forum	A discussion forum where users also can post their comments and views on various issues
3	Audio/video features	Any audio or video clips put on the website
4	Facebook	Link to Facebook, a social networking site which is popular among the youth
5	Orkut	Link to the Orkut, another a social networking website.
6	Twitter	Link to the twitter, another a social networking website.
7	Blog	Link to the Blogs promoted by the party
8	Opinion Poll	Online Opinion Polls organised by the website