



Algorithm in Action: How Social Media Influences Political Communication in India

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Received: 12.03.2026; Accepted: 19.03.2026; Available online: 31.03.2026

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative role of social media platforms in influencing political communication within the Indian democratic setting. By tracing the evolution of political messaging from ancient oratory to modern digital platforms, the study highlights a significant paradigm shift toward direct, data-driven, algorithm-based engagement. By focusing extensively on the 2024 General Election, the article provides a comparative analysis of the digital strategies employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC). Key findings reveal a “war of capital and data”, characterized by the saturation of low-cost ads, micro-targeting of local constituencies, and the rise of short-form video content such as YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels. Furthermore, the paper explores the emergence of AI-powered analytics, the influence of third-party political influencers, and the increasing professionalization of campaigning through political consulting firms. While social media has empowered grassroots activism and direct leader-to-voter communication, it also presents critical challenges, including the violation of campaign “silent periods” and the proliferation of AI-generated misinformation. The study concludes by projecting future trends, such as the rise of regional social platforms and the necessity for stricter digital regulations and digitally literate electorate to safeguard democratic integrity.

Keywords: Algorithm, Election, Micro-targeting, Political Communication, social media.

Introduction:

Political communication is the heart of a healthy democratic system. It involves all the targeted and purposeful communication about politics. Political communication can be defined as a process of transmitting information among politicians, the news media and the public (Norris, 2001). If we trace its development from the ancient civilizations to the contemporary world, then we will observe that the systems of political communication are dynamic and constantly evolving (Swanson, 2004).

The origins of political communication can be dated back to ancient civilizations including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome. In such civilizations the leaders used oratory, written proclamations and decrees to convey the messages, to back their authority and to influence public opinion about their rule (Tsouparopolou, 2015). Apart from this traditional mode of communication, the first attempt to convey political messages and communicate digitally with the masses was made in 1960 by former United States President John F. Kennedy during his presidential campaign. He was labelled as ‘Television President’

because of his extensive and strategic use of television in his campaign to reach targeted audience (Bimber, 2014). Following this trend, in 2008 American presidential election, Barack Obama first used social media as an effective tool of communication with American people (Bimber, 2014). The strategy of leveraging internet by Barack Obama and successfully utilising Television by John F. Kennedy have fueled a significant paradigm shift in political communication. This paradigm shift has changed the way of influencing public opinion and communicating with the electors.

In Indian context, the unavoidable development of social media platforms including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, WhatsApp and the boom in smartphone and internet access, the political scenario has become complex and dynamic. These online platforms have emerged as common stage for publication discussion and debate about political issues (Biju, 2016). The increasing significance of social media in Indian politics became more relevant during the 2014 general election when political leaders and parties began leveraging these platforms extensively for campaign and political messages (Chauhan, 2024). Since then, social media has become a significant tool in shaping political narratives, influencing voter's perception, communicating directly with the masses and facilitating new forms of political mobilization. This article examines how social media has transformed political communication in India. It explores the dynamic relationship between political actors, digital platforms, and citizens, while also highlighting the challenges associated with this transformation.

Social Media in Indian Politics:

The integration of social media in Indian politics has ushered a new era of influence and engagement. With the proliferation of internet into common masses, social media is emerging as a potential new way of communication. It provides direct channel to politicians for communicating, connecting and engaging with the public (Chopra, 2014). In recent years ahead of every general election, Indian political parties are using social media effectively and aggressively to propagate and promote their ideology, mobilize public opinion and to set policy agendas. Since the 2014 general election, the two major political parties- the BJP, who is currently leading the coalition government in the centre, and the INC, the main opposition party in the parliament have invested heavily in digital media campaigning (Shivaraju, 2025).

Through the social media platforms political parties can engage directly as well as continuously with the voters. Unlike traditional media, social media can shape and determine public opinion more effectively and can reach out even to the remotest part of the constituencies. In contemporary times, social networking sites have given common folks more space and opportunity to participate in all social issues. It has also played a significant role in mobilizing people as activists and in generating citizen response to political activities (Katkar, 2014). Social media can circulate news and information in real time without any delay like the traditional medias. This fosters an ideal environment for discussion and deliberation. The government and political outfits use social media as quick way to share updates and information. It provides them a cost-effective platform for discussion and interaction with the public (Chopra, 2014).

This has transformed the landscape of political communication, campaigning and public engagement. Social media has fundamentally reshaped Indian political scenario. Platforms like X (Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp have empowered citizens with greater access to

information, updates and news. Politicians and parties heavily rely on these new-age mediums to connect directly and closely with the voter, to disseminate or circulate their messages and to mobilize support for their agendas. This real time interaction and targeted outreach have significantly impacted the political strategies and the voting behaviour. Social media acts as a powerful tool for grassroots activism, political participation and reshapes the attitudes, how citizens participate in the democratic processes of India.

The 2024 General Election and Social Media:

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections indeed marked a significant shift in India's political communication systems. Unlike the traditional print media or television, social media platforms have emerged as key tools for political outreach. It moved beyond simple online presence to become a sophisticated, complex, algorithm based and data driven battleground. Here is a detailed elaboration of this shift.

According to *Election Commission of India*, in 2024 there were 979.7 million registered electors (HT News Desk, 2024). Of these, an estimated 500 million were active social media users, primarily on platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube. This has created a mammoth number of digitally connected electors who has been targeted by various political parties (Pal, 2024).

Massive Role of Social Media:

As noted by *Professor Joyojeet Pal*, social media's influence operated on two critical fronts:

- **Top-Down Communication:** Political communication has largely moved from traditional broadcast media to direct engagement online. Prominent politicians and their teams now use platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube as primary output channels to broadcast their message directly to citizens (Pal, 2024).
- **Last-Mile Outreach via WhatsApp:** The most significant shift occurred in "last mile" voter mobilization. Political parties leveraged WhatsApp for regular, targeted messaging, including ideological content and voting-day reminders. Crucially, this coordination was powered by granular electoral roll data, allowing parties to identify and target specific voter segments with high precision (Pal, 2024).

A Tale of Digital Campaigns: Data from the CSDS-Lokniti Report:

A comprehensive study by *Lokniti-CSDS*, published in *The Hindu*, provides a data-driven look at how these strategies translated into action, revealing a contrast between the campaigns of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (Congress).

Advertising Volume and Spending

The data shows a chasm in digital strategy and financial firepower. On Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram), the BJP ran 41,127 ad campaigns, compared to the Congress's 1,041, a ratio of nearly 40:1. This gap was even wider on Google (including YouTube), where the BJP ran a staggering 225,695 ads versus the Congress's 9,251, a 24:1 ratio (The Hindu, 2025).

However, the spending ratio tells a different story. On Google, the BJP spent approximately ₹56 crore, which was only about 2.7 times the Congress's ₹21 crore. This discrepancy between the volume of ads and the amount spent highlights fundamentally different strategies, the BJP focused on low-cost, high-volume ads to create an overwhelming sense of presence. On Meta, 65% of its ads cost less than ₹1,000 and the Congress invested in

fewer, more expensive ads to generate impact. On Meta, 34% of its ads were in the high-cost bracket of over ₹1,00,000 (The Hindu, 2025).

- **Targeting and Reach**

The BJP's campaign was intensely micro-targeted. In the first phase of the election, it micro-targeted 96% of its ads, effectively fighting 543 distinct local battles. In contrast, the Congress micro-targeted only 32%, essentially fighting one national campaign (Korada, 2025). The BJP also showed a preference for reaching younger demographics, placing 53% of its ads on Instagram, while Congress ran 86% of its ads simultaneously on both Instagram and Facebook (The Hindu, 2025). Despite the BJP's higher volume, the Congress's high-impact approach yielded results in terms of reach. On Google, 21% of Congress's ads surpassed one million impressions, compared to just 3% for the BJP (The Hindu, 2025).

- **Language and Messaging**

The language of ads revealed contrasting centralizing and federal strategies. The Congress was highly centralized, with 92% of its Meta ads in Hindi. The BJP, while also using Hindi for 72% of its ads, demonstrated a more regionalized approach by distributing the rest across languages like Bengali, Odia, Marathi, and Tamil (The Hindu, 2025) (Korada, 2025). Thematic analysis shows that the BJP's messaging followed the typical style of a ruling party. Most of its communication focused on direct "vote appeals" (52%), asking people to support the party. This was supported by positive themes such as "infrastructure development" (10%) and "overall development" (8%), highlighting government achievements and progress. In contrast, the Congress party's messaging was more reactive and critical. Much of its communication focused on "attacking or criticizing the ruling party" (27%) and raising economic concerns, especially issues like "unemployment and inflation" (26%), which affect the everyday lives of citizens. (The Hindu, 2025) (Korada, 2025).

- **The Silent Period and Regulatory Challenges**

The digital shift has also made it easier to bypass election regulations. An analysis of the 48-hour "silent period" before polling, when all campaigning is banned, revealed potential widespread violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). During these windows, the BJP ran a massive 179,070 ads on Google compared to the Congress's 8,149. A sample analysis of these ads for actual MCC violations found that of the 958 sampled Congress ads, 698 (73%) were in violation. For the BJP, out of 2,996 sampled ads, 492 (16.4%) were in violation. While a higher percentage of Congress ads broke the rules, the BJP's immense volume meant it committed a far greater absolute number of potential violations (The Hindu, 2025).

- **The Rise of Third-Party Influencers and Unregulated Spending**

The 2024 elections also saw the growing influence of third-party campaigners including individuals, consultancies, and advocacy groups not formally tied to parties but running their own targeted ad campaigns. The *Lokniti-CSDS* study identified 31 of the top 50 spenders on Meta as third-party advertisers, with their expenditure ranging from ₹6 lakh to ₹7.3 crore during the analysis period (The Hindu, 2025).

This unregulated spending raises concerns about transparency. These entities often used catchy and provocative names and focused heavily on negative content, which was found to have a far greater reach, especially among younger audiences (almost 83% of negative ads were consumed by those aged 18-34) (The Hindu, 2025).

The 2024 Lok Sabha elections were a digital turning point, transitioning politics from the rally ground to the screen. The data confirms a “war of capital and data”, where the voter is increasingly treated as a consumer to be micro-targeted (Korada, 2025). While the BJP perfected a machine of volume and granularity, the Congress attempted high-impact critiques. The rise of unregulated third-party actors or influencers and the apparent ease with which campaign silence periods were violated, hints significant challenges for the integrity and transparency of future democratic elections (The Hindu, 2025).

Direct Leaders-to-Voters Communication:

In the 2024 elections, the politicians have shifted their focus to communicate with the electorate and moved away from traditional media intermediaries. Political communication has moved from television broadcast or print to direct communication (Pal, 2024). The 2024 cycle saw the rise of short-form video as the dominant medium for this type of communication. The Indian Express reported that between April 1 and May 30, 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official YouTube channel uploaded 258 YouTube Shorts, which averaged approximately 850,000 views per video-nearly 20 times more than the average for full-length videos on his channel. On Instagram, Modi's 37 Reels during this period garnered close to 100 crore (1 billion) views, averaging 2.7 crore (27 million) views per Reel (Barik, 2024). Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's channel saw even higher engagement with short-form content, as his 185 YouTube Shorts accumulated around 67 crore (670 million) views (Barik, 2014). Besides, shorts and reels political parties have also reached out to voters through various messaging platforms including WhatsApp and Telegram.

AI and Social Media Analytics:

The general election of 2024 was a stage where the new-age technologies had taken over the campaigning techniques. One notable aspect of this election was the extra-special use of social media analytics and targeted advertising. AI powered algorithms analysed vast amount of user data to micro-target specific demographics with tailored political messaging. This approach allowed the parties to personalize messages that can easily align with the beliefs and orientations of targeted audience. These effective use of AI and social media algorithms had maximized the impact of their political campaigning (Nair, 2024).

Digital Campaigns:

During the polls this year, the political parties have also conducted digital campaigning specially on major social networking platforms such as, X, Facebook and Instagram. Users have joined these campaigns virtually and promoted their preferred political ideology. For example, the BJP has conducted various digital campaigns, such as *Modi Ki Gurantee*, *Phir Ekbaar Modi Sarkar*, *Pahela Vote Modi Ko*, *Mera Pariwaar BJP Pariwaar* and so on. The INC has launched digital campaigns too, such as *Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra*, *Aapka Yogdan Nyay Ka Abhiyan*, *Mera Vikas ka Hisab*, *Haath Badlega Halaat* and others (The author has collected information from various social media platforms). The main motivation behind these campaigns was to reach out to a wider and diverse audience and gain political supports.

Uses of Hashtags:

Hashtags are widely used in social media specially on X (formerly Twitter) to join in a larger and multidimensional conversations. Political parties or leaders often introduce hashtags to foster a larger conversation on specific issue or event and to analyse and understand online public opinion. For example, during the election this year, some of the trending hashtags in

favour of BJP were- #Abkibar400par, #PhirEkBarModiSarkar, #BJP4IND, #ModiKaParivaar, #ModiKiGurantee. The BJP and their leaders and supporters have used these hashtags to promote their party ideology and agendas for the electoral gains. The INC and their supporters have also used various hashtags to mobilize people along with their values and objectives. Some trending hashtags in favour of INC was #HaathBadlegaHalaat, #GintiKaro, #ModiMustGo, #RahulParBharosaHain and others (The author has collected information from various social media platforms). The Election Commission of India (ECI) has also introduced and joined hashtagged conversations on the social networking sites to educate and raise awareness among the voters for the elections. It has highlighted the empowering nature of elections, enabled the individuals to exercise their rights and responsibilities. The hashtags were #NothingLikeVoting, #Ivote4Sure, #ChunavKaParv and #DeshKaGarv (ecisveep,n.d.)

Modern and Innovative Campaign Strategies:

Recent years have seen a shift from mass media broadcasting towards more analytics driven, algorithm based, emotionally optimised targeting (Singh, 2025). Some of the modern and emerging strategies of campaigning are as follows,

- **Influencer Collaboration**

Recent elections saw a boom in the use of social media influencers to reach younger voters. Through the influencers the political parties can construct a sense of authenticity that somehow the traditional political ads often lack. This makes them an effective tool to influence or shape youth political culture (Suna, 2014). The influencers' posts or ads on various social media appear to be natural and spontaneous, but they are actually carefully planned by a team to achieve their interest. Political parties have increasingly collaborated with popular figures on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram to present their narratives in a way that feels personal and non-confrontational to the average audience (Tedx Talks, 2020).

- **Data-Driven Micro-Targeting and Tailored Emotional Messages**

Political parties nowadays use data analytics and social media algorithm to study voters' demographics and online behaviour and engagement. This allows them to send personalized political messages to different groups of voters (Singh, 2025). In many cases, these strategies are curated to influence specific emotions by identifying what kinds of messages particular individual are more likely to respond to (Bakir & McStay, 2022). Also, the politician's image is constructed to match the expectations of different voter groups. In this way the politician often becomes a symbol onto which voters can rely their own hopes and aspirations.

- **The Professionalisation of Campaigning**

Political campaigning in India has become increasingly professionalized, with political consulting firms recruiting young minds to plan campaign and decide strategy. Firms like Indian Political Action Committee (IPAC) offer salaries comparable to top corporate jobs, attracting talented graduates into the world of political strategy. Many of these organizations present their work as a form of "nation-building," which further adds to the appeal for young professionals (Singh & Anand, 2024).

- **Regional Social Platforms**

The rise of regional social platforms mainly language based has enabled the political actors to engage with diverse cultural and linguistic communities. This allows the parties to bypass the linguistic barrier of the mainstream platforms and convey their narratives to deeper and

more localized voters. (News Desk, 2025).

Future Trajectory:

The trajectory of the political communication in India points towards several key trends which includes:-

- **Rise of Regional Social Media Platforms:** In the near future it is expected that the regional social media platforms are going to be more stable and accessible. Targeted messaging to specific groups in regional language will soon become a most priority areas. This will enable deeper and hassle-free engagement with various linguistic communities (News Desk, 2025).
- **Presence of More AI Generated Contents:** Deepfake, AI speech generation of leaders and political bots will continue to mislead public over false propaganda. These will more likely continue to challenge the democratic stability and fuel political hostility.
- **Stricter Social Media Regulations:** Governments are expected to strengthen rules for digital sphere to promote more accountable and sensible political communication amongst actors and users and to improve digital safety for all.
- **Digital Identity Verification:** Potential moves toward identity verification on social media platforms to curb anonymous trolling, hate speech, and narrative manipulation are also expected in near future (Vedanta IAS Academy, 2025).
- **Expansion of Digital Literacy:** Schools and higher educational institutions will increasingly teach the students responsible online behavior and fact-checking to promote digital safety.
- **Enhanced Citizen Journalism:** With the ease of accessing digital devices and internet more individuals are expected to cover political events directly through social media. This will bypass gatekeepers in traditional communication mediums and will make governance more transparent and the voters will become more informed and capable of choosing better political actors for their well-being (Vedanta IAS Academy, 2025).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, social media has successfully altered the core of political communication in India, by shifting the focus from traditional mass broadcasting to algorithm driven digital communication. These platforms offer significant utility including the ability to connect with voters in real time and provide a cost-effective and more accessible alternative to traditional communication systems. As evidenced by the last general election, the political parties have moved beyond simple online presence to embrace sophisticated, algorithm based and data driven rally ground where voters are increasingly treated as consumer to be micro-targeted. However, the evolution of social media as a tool for political communication is a double-edged sword. While it fosters greater voters' participation and accessibility, it also introduces significant challenges to democratic stability. Misinformation, fake news, unregulated third-party influencers, and AI-generated 'posts', 'deepfakes', 'speech fabrication' raise urgent concern regarding transparency, integrity and accountability. Privacy and data security concerns also arise due to the collection and processing of personal data for micro-targeting and personalized ads delivery. Addressing these challenges is crucial for ensuring the responsible use of social media as a tool for political communication. The 2024 general election has witnessed the Professionalization of digital campaigns, the weaponization of AI for misinformation and rise of influencers as key political actors. While

these technologies empower citizens and increase political engagement, they simultaneously threaten democratic stability through polarization, echo chamber and erosion of truth (Shivaraju, 2025). Looking ahead, the trajectory of Indian politics will likely to be defined by a deeper engagement with regional linguistic communities and a move toward stricter digital rules and identity verification. To preserve the integrity of the future election, it is very much essential to balance the innovative power of these digital technologies with robust regulatory framework and an informed, digitally literate electorate.

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