

The Bharatiya Janata Party’s Online Campaign and Citizen Involvement in India’s 2014 Election

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The impact of the Internet on politics and electoral campaigns is the focus of considerable—and, as yet, unsettled—debate. This article focuses on the manner in which the Bharatiya Janata Party—which became the first party since 1984 to win an absolute majority in India’s parliament—engaged citizen supporters in the party’s successful social media campaign. Employing data from interviews with party functionaries and volunteers, we examine the extent to which interaction with supporters represented an effort to shift away from the traditional top-down model of campaigning toward a participatory approach.

Keywords: India, BJP, election campaign, participation, citizens, 2014

The World’s Biggest Election

The technological changes associated with the rise of the Internet have transformed many structures and methods of contemporary political communication, and their impact has been viewed as particularly significant in terms of altering the crucial but historically distant relationship between political campaigns and ordinary citizens (Margetts, 2006). Indeed, it has been asserted that the interactive potential of digital networked technologies has facilitated the unprecedented involvement of citizens in political campaigns, “reconnecting political parties with their civic roots by providing the basis for a more democratic mode of organization” (Gibson, 2015, p. 187).

Certainly this claim was frequently articulated in the context of India’s 2014 general election, in which more than 554 million registered voters turned out at a record rate of 66.4% to give a decisive win to the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, ending decades of fractious coalition rule in the country. Conducted in nine separate phases over a five-week period, this mammoth electoral exercise, according to observers, was characterized by the unprecedented involvement of ordinary citizens (Chao, 2014; Khullar & Haridasani, 2014). Supporters of the BJP were viewed as especially active in employing the affordances of social media to share political information, organize events for candidates, promote party messages, and encourage members of their social networks to support the party, with young voters seen as playing an especially critical role (Mandhana, 2014; Virmani, 2014). But although the rhetoric

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surrounding citizen participation in India's 2014 campaign has been considerable, the nature of the interaction between political parties and their supporters remains something of a black box. In the case of the victorious BJP, for instance, although the party developed programs to engage voters, there is little empirical information about the nature of voters' involvement with the BJP campaign or their ability to shape or influence political messages in any way.

This article investigates the dynamics of the relationship between the BJP and its supporters during in the 2014 general election. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with party functionaries and volunteers for the BJP, it explores the manner in which the party engaged with potential supporters and voters in the context of its expansive social media campaign and investigates the degree of influence that such supporters had on the campaign's repertoire of activities in the online context. The central issue that this study thus explores is the *manner* and *extent* to which the BJP campaign represented the introduction of a potentially new, grassroots-oriented mode of political campaigning in the Indian context, based on enhanced public participation and interaction in the electoral process—a shift that may contribute to strengthening democratic participation by citizens.

Digital Technologies: Mobilizing or Normalizing

The rise of digital communication technologies has generated significant debates surrounding issues of political participation that are central to democracy. Indeed, dating back to the rise of the Internet in the 1990s, scholars had begun to discuss the implications of Web-based technologies for the relationship between citizens and institutionalized political structures, with cyber-optimists (Dertouzos, 1997; Rheingold, 1993) arguing that in the new media environment, "existing hierarchies of power and influence would be flattened, any individual would have an equal share of voice independent of their status and politics would develop an inclusive and participatory character" (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2015, p. 3). Indeed, adherents of this position seemed to make the case that, whereas in the past when citizen participation in the political sphere had been essentially limited to the act of voting for political elites, the Internet created new possibilities for popular engagement and participation, impacting the traditional relationship between political parties and voters.

A counterpoint to this celebratory narrative was, however, offered by other scholars who asserted that Web-based technologies had done little to increase political participation. Pointing to the existence of a "digital divide" (Norris, 2001), they emphasized that the Internet largely reinforced existing patterns of participation (Davis & Owen, 1998), so that affluent, educated voters continued to participate online, while poorer and less educated citizens were unable to participate effectively due to limited knowledge and technological access. In this vein, Margolis and Resnick (2000) made the case that, despite the Internet's potential to empower ordinary citizens and enable them to challenge established political structures, this was unlikely to happen and that "far from remaking American politics, the development of cyberspace and particularly the WWW, seems more likely to reinforce the status quo" (p. 54).

This debate between representing the so-called mobilization and normalization/reinforcement theses has continued to evolve in recent years. Some scholars have argued that "digitally networked action" has enhanced participation, especially among youth (Sloam, 2014). Others have pointed to an

expansion in the range of participatory behaviors (Earl & Schussman, 2008) and varied forms of engagement in the online context (Gil de Zuñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009), while yet others have emphasized the democratizing role played by new technologies in building online communities around shared political interests (Castells, 2008).

Put differently, these scholars view the Internet as having the potential to increase political participation by ordinary citizens, who are in a position to obtain political information, engage in political discussions, and interact with other citizens (Chadwick, 2006). Some researchers have moreover argued that new social media technologies have not only brought politicians and parties closer to potential voters but actually facilitated the rise of greater interactivity on the part of citizens, with the Obama campaign of 2008 offered as an example of growing citizen involvement in political campaigns (Barr, 2009). Similarly, Koc-Michalska et al., in their work on Polish elections, identify new forms of participation and make the case that "there is some form of Internet-based impact that is positive for widening political participation" (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2015, p. 5), while Gibson (2015) argues that the rise of citizen-initiated campaigning (CIC) devolves power over core tasks to the grassroots, thereby challenging what she calls "the dominant professionalized model of campaigning" (p. 187).

On the other hand, this perspective is challenged by scholars who argue that social media use has little measureable impact on political knowledge or sense of personal efficacy or participation (Zhang & Chia, 2006). Karpf (2013), for instance, makes the point that empirical research has shown only "small, positive correlations between Internet use and various forms of political participation" (p. 2) and, in some cases, "no robust relationships at all" (p. 2). Others, such as Hindman (2009), have emphasized that only small minorities participate online, while Stromer-Galley (2014), commenting on citizen engagement in contemporary U.S. presidential campaigns, concludes that, "although much hope still pervades popular and academic thinking about digital technologies (especially the communication technologies captured by the phrase social media) the reality is that political campaigns do not use DCTs to genuinely engage citizens and supporters" (p. 5). Questioning the notion that Web 2.0 technologies have fundamentally altered the relationship between campaigns and people, she argues that the affordances of technology are harnessed primarily to "direct and control citizen supporters to work in concert to achieve campaign goals" (p. 5).

The impact of the Internet on politics and electoral campaigns is thus the focus of considerable—and, as yet, unsettled—debate, with little evidence to confirm either the mobilization or normalization thesis. Moreover, the empirical evidence that is available remains largely focused on Western polities, with comparatively little being known about the relationship of technology and politics in the developing world. The Indian case, where, despite Internet penetration being only 19% in 2014 (Internetlivestats.com, 2016),¹ the exponential growth of Internet users at a rate of 20% to a total of 233 million during the 2014 election, offers a potentially interesting case study to examine the manner in which increased access to online technologies might have impacted the party–supporter dynamic in the Indian context.

¹ India's Internet penetration is currently estimated at 34% of the population (liveinternetstats.com, 2016).

Consequently, in this article, we focus on how the Bharatiya Janata Party—which became the first party since 1984 to win an absolute majority in the Indian parliament—sought to engage citizen supporters in the context of the party’s expansive and electorally successful social media campaign. We also reflect on the broader issue of the degree to which the BJP campaign’s interaction with citizen supporters represented an effort to shift away from the traditional top-down model of campaigning toward a participatory, bottom-up approach that potentially enhances deliberative democracy. By exploring this issue, we hope to develop greater insight into the broader question of the extent to which Web 2.0 technologies are in fact altering the relationship between campaigns and people. We explore this issue by offering some background on Indian political campaigns, explain this study’s methodological approach, and outline our findings and conclusions.

Indian Electoral Campaigns and Technology Use

Until the late 1980s, India was more or less continuously ruled by a single party, the Indian National Congress, which—except for a break in 1977, when it was swept out of power in the election that followed the two-year suspension of civil and political liberties by its leader Indira Gandhi—dominated the country’s political landscape. During this period, election campaigns in India were predicated on the notion that citizens were concerned with local and regional issues and tended to focus on parties rather than candidates. Campaigns were also primarily focused on rural constituents with parties employing traditional get-out-the-vote methods such as public rallies and candidate appearances across the countryside. Urban voters, on the other hand, were approached through door-to-door canvassing as well as the distribution of posters, handbills, flags, and banners, typically in regional languages (Seidman, 2008). For the first 50 years of independence, election campaigns in India were thus distinctly low tech in nature, displaying few signs of the televisualization that increasingly characterized elections in the developed world.

This established pattern began to shift at the turn of the century, when the BJP, which had been governing India as the leader of a center-right coalition government since 1998, decided to alter its strategy in the general election of 2004 by launching the nationwide India Shining campaign. This campaign differed significantly from previous election campaigns in its use of technology to reach voters (notably those in urban areas), with about 5% of the party’s campaign budget being directed to e-campaigning; the revamping of the party’s website; and pushing out text messages, prerecorded voice clips, and e-mails to its database of 20 million e-mail and mobile phone users (Gupta & Gowda, 2010). Although the BJP-led coalition lost the election, its 2004 campaign established the template for the 2009 parliamentary election, when the BJP’s L. K. Advani became the first national leader to launch a personal website with interactive features such as an active forum and a blog and later added links to Advani’s Facebook page. The party also established IT cells in 350 districts across 22 states and 4 union territories (Chopra, 2014). Indeed, for a party that otherwise espoused deeply conservative values, the BJP proved surprisingly proactive in its embrace of technology.

This emphasis on the use of digital technologies that initially emerged in the 2009 campaign gained significant momentum in 2014, with a particular thrust on the use of social media platforms. In fact, because Indian voters were more likely to access the Internet via mobile devices, political parties not only developed smartphone apps such as the BJP’s 272+ mobile app aimed at voters but also made use of

existing mobile messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Line (Khosla & Sharma, 2014). Whereas in the past online electoral strategies had centered on *websites*, in the 2014 election, political parties focused on the development of effective social media outreach, which was widely identified as key to electoral success (Patel, 2014). Consequently, while websites and blogs continued to be part of the repertoire of online tools utilized by political parties, both the BJP and the recently formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) made social media the central focus of their online efforts to connect with supporters.² In fact, arguably, both parties made extensive use of Twitter and Facebook—which emerged as the most widely used social media platforms during the campaign—to engage potential supporters by sharing campaign-related materials such as videos and memes and encouraging them to mobilize others to volunteer and donate as well.

However, as an established party with the ability to leverage considerable financial and organizational resources, the BJP emerged as a leader especially in the use of big data and analytics, using a state-of-the-art social media war room to track potential voters across India's 92,000 villages (Kaul, 2014; Sudhaman, 2014). It also benefited from the fact that its leader, Narendra Modi—an early adopter of social media among Indian politicians who joined both Twitter and Facebook in 2009—had, by April 2014, not only racked up 12.46 million Facebook supporters, compared to 4.9 million for AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal, but had the fastest growing Facebook page of any politician worldwide. Similarly, on Twitter, Modi had 3.6 million followers, more than twice that of Kejriwal's 1.6 million (Goyal, 2014). The BJP's social media campaign, which centered on the personality of its leader, Narendra Modi, was thus significantly more extensive in terms of scale than that of either the Aam Aadmi Party or the Congress Party. As journalist Anant Goenka, who heads the new media division of the Indian Express newspaper group, put it, "The BJP is by far ahead of the rest, there is no comparison especially with the Congress, although a lot of the Aam Aadmi's campaign has been on social media too" (Crabtree, 2014,).

The turn toward social media, which formed part of the electoral strategies of all parties—albeit to varying degrees—was motivated by a combination of factors. Aside from the previously mentioned growth in Internet use, India witnessed a significant expansion in social media use with the number of users growing to 90 million in the period leading up to the 2014 election (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2013). Meanwhile, use levels are especially high among the approximately 150 million citizens between the ages of 18 and 23, who became eligible to vote for the first time (Chilkoti, 2014; Virmani, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the BJP campaign engaged with such first-time voters—large numbers of whom were disillusioned with the corruption, poor economic performance, and dynastic politics associated with the ruling Congress-led coalition (Stokes, 2014)—a key focus of its electoral calculus. The BJP's candidate for prime minister, Narendra Modi, frequently reached out through his Twitter account and YouTube videos—which were translated into several regional languages—to this group, emphasizing issues such as jobs, security, and the use of technology (Bhan, 2014).

² The Congress Party was slow to integrate social media into its campaign and, as a result, had a limited social media presence compared to both the BJP and AAP.

In fact, during this period, media accounts repeatedly referred to the BJP's attempts to "make over" its image by "transcending" what Graham (1990) termed the "limitations of its origins"—in particular, its traditional identification as a party of the Hindi-speaking, northern heartland, supported primarily by middle-class, upper-caste Hindus and draw in supporters from the ranks of young, first-time voters (Chacko & Mayer, 2014; Kumar, 2014). According to Basu and Misra (2014), the BJP's success in recruiting young voters was clearly reflected in "the strong positive correlation between the proportion of first time electors and change in BJP's vote share (between 2009 and 2014) across Indian states" (p. 5). Consequently, they argue that "one of the important factors underlying BJP's unprecedented electoral victory" (p. 6) was its ability to reach out to first-time voters—a development that the campaign attributed to the effective deployment of a "grassroots" social media campaign involving thousands of supporters who actively promoted the party's message.

Methodological Approach

To examine the much-touted relationship between the BJP and its supporters, we conducted in-depth interviews with both key party functionaries and citizen volunteers. We identified participants by employing a nonprobabilistic model and a purposive snowball sampling method. The purposive sampling approach was adopted because we wanted to learn about the specific experiences of certain types of individuals rather than developing a random sample generalizable to the population as a whole. Indeed, as Kvale (1996) points out, qualitative research interviews are "attempts to understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p. 1) and thus enable researchers to "delve more deeply into those individuals, settings, subcultures, and scenes, hoping to generate a subjective understanding of how and why people perceive, reflect, role-take, interpret, and interact," in the words of Adler and Adler (2013, p. 8).

We began by contacting party officials from the BJP's IT division. This unit not only played a crucial role in the formulation of the party's overall campaign strategy, which had a significant online component (Kumar, 2014), but was responsible for the development, coordination, and implementation of all online activities (Pradhan, 2013). We also reached out to individual volunteers—many of them with technical backgrounds—who were identified by members of the IT cell as having played a key role in helping the BJP develop and manage its online strategies, especially on social media platforms. This brought in our first group of participants of party functionaries and volunteers. During our initial interviews, we asked participants to help us identify others (either party functionaries or volunteers) who had been involved in the development and implementation of the party's online strategy and who might be willing to participate in our study. Eventually, we interviewed 20 individuals between December 2014 and January 2015. This number exceeds that identified by Kvale (1996), who has said that between 10 and 15 participants in an interview-based study represents a reasonable attempt to go beyond the anecdotal and develop an adequate mechanism to "investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation" (pp. 102–103).

Of the 20 participants, 8 were party functionaries whose principal responsibilities involved online campaigning, with a specific focus on social media planning and mobilization. They included seven men and one woman and were between 25 and 50 years in age. The 12 citizen volunteers were all men and

ranged in age from mid-20s to early 40s. This group was composed of graduate students and professionals, mostly in technology-related fields; many of them had taken lengthy sabbaticals from their jobs/academic programs and joined the campaign as early as 2013.

The fact that there was only one woman in the sample was not surprising given the gendered nature of Internet use in India, where men account for 71% of Internet users, and women account for just 29%. The gap is only slightly lower in urban India, but there, too, 62% of men use the Internet compared to 38% of women (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2015). Moreover, the lack of women in the sample may be explained by the fact that the leadership structure of the BJP itself has tended to be male dominated with few women in leadership or prominent positions (Menon, 2011).

The party operatives were based in India, and the volunteers were based in India and in the United States. The interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and were based on semi-structured questions about the nature of the interactions between the BJP campaign and its supporters. To ensure that the participants could respond frankly to our questions, we promised them anonymity.

Managed Volunteerism?

As presented by the party, the BJP's digital campaign was projected as a grassroots effort aimed at engaging supporters and encouraging them to participate in the campaign's efforts. Underscoring this point, Arvind Gupta, head of the BJP's IT division and chief architect of its online electoral strategy, in a 2013 interview said that the BJP's campaign was a shared endeavor between the party and ordinary people. As he put it:

It's all joint. . . . We have experts which are all internal. We take a lot of opinions; a lot of people come and give us their opinions. We are actually an aggregator of all those ideas and feedback, and we execute them. So it's a people's campaign. (Kalra & Lalmalsawma, 2013)

Offering evidence of the party's interaction with citizens, our respondents pointed to the fact that many of Narendra Modi's speeches as well as the BJP's election manifesto were crowdsourced. They also emphasized that issues that Modi addressed in his campaign rallies and speeches were often based on comments and suggestions obtained from the public through online forums and via Twitter, as well as questions posed on the party's Facebook pages, such as "I Support Narendra Modi" or "Narendra Modi for PM," which had been set up, they said, to interact with supporters (Price, 2014). They also highlighted Modi's interactions with voters via Google hangouts, where he responded to their questions in a live format that was also streamed live on YouTube and his Google+ page as well as the *Chai pe Charcha*³ initiative, where questioners could gather at designated tea shops to engage in Q&A discussions with Modi through online video hookups. They pointed out that many of the questions Modi addressed at these events were in fact identified by supporters who could vote via Facebook polls as to which questions he should address.

³ The term *Chai pe Charcha* translates to "discussion over tea."

Most significantly however, party functionaries and volunteers alike touted the BJP's India 272+ volunteer platform as an open space⁴ where supporters who registered using an e-mail address could connect with BJP leaders, offer advice and suggestions, and organize activities at the local level. Using the 272+ mobile and suite of Facebook apps, they said, ordinary supporters could choose to engage in activities such as translating candidate Narendra Modi's speeches into different languages, writing songs highlighting Modi's achievements, coming up with catchy slogans, and encouraging others in their online and off-line networks to circulate political jokes and messages using WhatsApp, which emerged as the mobile messaging platform of choice among BJP volunteers.

Volunteers also said that people were encouraged to compete with one another to persuade others to pledge their support to India 272+ and Modi for Prime Minister by sending their electoral roll numbers to the campaign. This helped the party create an impressive database of voter IDs and mobile numbers that let BJP workers identify the specific polling booths where a voter was registered and enabled the local BJP unit to inform voters of the booth number and location. More importantly, on election day, the party could be sure that a particular voter had indeed cast a vote. In keeping with the logic of hybridity that Chadwick (2013) sees as characterizing contemporary political communication, volunteers who signed up on the 272+ platform could also participate in door-to-door campaigning and engage in various types of neighborhood outreach.

The template for the 272+ platform—which appeared to have been drawn from the online Dashboard developed by the 2012 Obama campaign—thus offered BJP supporters a variety of activities in which they could choose to participate and ranked volunteers on the basis of their ability to mobilize voters on the ground. As one party functionary put it,

We had people signed up via the Internet in all 543 constituencies. Through India 272+ we have created a mechanism for people, especially youth to get involved and contribute to our campaign. This was the major point of setting up the platform . . . to reach people who might not be traditional BJP supporters and get as many of them to engage with us and promote our views and candidates. (personal interview, December 16, 2014)

But while all supporters could freely join the India 272+ site to access and circulate information, pledge support, or suggest themes for speeches to the party leadership, their "participation" on the platform was mainly confined to such actions. In fact, our respondents almost universally agreed that, although the affordances of the BJP's online platform undoubtedly facilitated a degree of popular engagement by citizen supporters—certainly far more than in prior elections—key campaign activities remained a closely managed effort on the part of the campaign.

⁴ The BJP stated that 272+ was an open forum and that moderators only limited abusive comments or spam. Our participants echoed similar claims, but the only comments we found on its Facebook page expressed positive sentiments regarding the party.

Indeed, many of the participants in our study acknowledged that they had initially hoped that the online campaign, which many of them helped formulate, could operate largely as what one volunteer called "a distributed ecosystem without a centralized top down structure," but they admitted that in practice this proved challenging from the management/organizational point of view. They pointed specifically to the difficulties of projecting a consistent message across platforms, preventing hard-line Hindu supporters from expressing sentiments that could alienate those who were likely to vote for the BJP for economic reasons as well as ensuring that information was put out in a coordinated manner. In other words, their responses revealed a tension between the BJP's stated goal of enhancing popular participation in the campaign and the difficulties inherent in ceding control and potentially giving rise to what Nielsen (2009) terms new types of "labors," including overcommunication, miscommunication, and communication overload that "impede rather than enhance" the workings of campaigns.

Concerns that unregulated citizen participation would create problems, they said, meant that most ordinary supporters were limited to undertaking relatively mundane activities; volunteers who were tasked with significant and specialized tasks related to mobilization and communication generally represented a small and highly select group. Explaining what she called the party's strategy, a leader of the BJP's social media cell in New Delhi said:

On one hand, we try to identify volunteer leaders by seeing who is interacting with us on social media. We look at how active they are, what they are posting and then we message them. . . . Facebook is the way that we reached most people because it's much more widely used in India compared to Twitter. We are looking for people who share our views or seem sympathetic to them and have a wide network to which they can send out our messages. In a way, we have a dual strategy. On one hand, we try to reach the maximum number of people, especially young voters to get them on our side, but on the other hand, we are very careful about who leads our initiatives and we manage their activities carefully. (personal interview, December 10, 2014)

She emphasized that choosing high-level volunteers constituted "a long, drawn-out process" and that the party typically sought certain types of individuals—notably those who supported Narendra Modi and his politics, expressed pro-Hindu and nationalist sentiments, and challenged the political narrative articulated by what the BJP and its followers deride as the "pseudo-secular" English language media on social media platforms. Other party leaders concurred with this assessment and said that individuals whose social media postings tended to be along such lines were generally supportive of the BJP and its endeavors.

According to Chopra (2014), "hundreds of small cells" made up largely of young men, many of them employed in the technology/software industries, who support the BJP and its leader Narendra Modi, have "mushroomed" all over India. As she puts it,

You can call them Internet or cyber Hindus. Their daily agenda is to pick the news, put up pictures and articles that criticize the ruling Congress party and praise Modi or the BJP. They are the online crusaders who actively counter anti-Modi coverage. (p. 56)

It was these types of individuals whom the BJP typically sought to recruit for key roles. In other words, even as the party presented its 272+ platform as an inclusive space, the vast majority of citizens were clearly restricted in the types of activities in which they could engage.

Aside from carefully recruiting “volunteers” who conformed to a certain archetype and could be distinguished from ordinary supporters who participated on the 272+ platform, our interviews revealed that the BJP also provided them with extensive training and ensured that they operated within the framework provided by the party. For instance, a regional leader from the state of West Bengal who had been charged with organizing volunteer efforts on social media, revealed that he had organized multiple training workshops to “train and acclimatize volunteers,” using materials developed at the national level. Other party representatives agreed that similar training efforts had been undertaken in other states as well. Explaining what the training involved, a leader from West Bengal said:

We show videos and other work of Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders to our specially chosen volunteers and talk about what kinds of discussions or posts can be created around them, what kind of issues can be generated and how volunteers can do that. Before the 2014 parliamentary elections, we conducted workshops all over the state. For the 42 parliamentary seats in West Bengal, we recruited a certain number of social media volunteers for each of the 42 candidates and these volunteers used to update information about the candidates. The idea is that volunteers follow the message that has been developed internally. (personal interview, January 6, 2015)

Similarly, volunteers also admitted that the party played a significant role in determining the direction of overall activities. For instance, a U.S.-based volunteer who has played a major role in the Modi campaign’s efforts to forge a special relationship with diasporic groups explained that the party essentially dictated the two-step procedures that ordinary volunteers were required to follow:

They were told to engage with voters on social media by informing them about the BJP’s achievements and vision. We were also asked to tell people to call a number set up by the party and give a missed call. Then closer to the elections, volunteers were asked to send WhatsApp messages and make personal calls to people in India to go out and vote for the party. People could decide how many people to call in a day but had to make a total of at least 200 calls. Overall, however, the party decided in what order volunteers were to do things and how. There was a type of script in place. (personal interview, December 13, 2014)

Another social media convener belonging to the group Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP) said that, in addition to being tasked with posting on major party-related issues, volunteers were given explicit directions in terms of their online activities:

Use the Facebook feature of “boosting posts” to get as many eyeballs as possible . . . promote BJP pages to people between 18 and 65 . . . like the pages of popular BJP

leaders and sympathizers and promote their posts on our pages and tag these individuals in our posts. (personal interview, January 9, 2015)

He also emphasized that the group was told to carefully track which stories got the maximum comments and to add other stories with similar themes. In addition, the BJP provided members of his group with telephone numbers of Indian voters as part of a program termed "India Calling." The group members were asked to reach out to the voters and ask them to vote for the party. He said that several 10-member teams made calls and that the leader of each team was responsible for gathering feedback and reporting back to the OFBJP leadership, which in turn communicated it to the central command of the BJP. Other social media volunteers from the BJP underscored the fact that the party tried to maintain a 24-hour cycle of voter and media engagement by taking advantage of the fact that their volunteers were often located in different time zones, such as the United States.

In terms of materials, too, volunteers said that the party provided a variety of images, posters, charts, and infographics that highlighted successes in BJP-ruled states, such as Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, as well as positive economic data from the period when the BJP-led coalition was in power at the national level in the late 1990s. They said that they were asked to post these items to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to not only inform young and urban voters whom the party was trying to reach but influence mainstream media coverage. This closely parallels the findings of Kreiss (2012), whose analysis of U.S. presidential campaigns found that campaign staff tended to produce content that was aimed at media professionals while fitting with "the genre expectations of social media users, in the attempt to shape journalistic coverage" (p. 10).

According to volunteers, the party offered a vast corpus of ready-made material focusing on a range of topics on a password-protected section of its website. And it was from this centrally controlled and maintained repository that most volunteers obtained the bulk of the material that they posted and circulated on various social media platforms. Volunteers also pointed out that a substantial portion of the hashtags and Internet memes—generally considered to be organic developments arising out of popular consciousness—were actually conceived by party leaders and given to supporters, who were asked to promote and popularize them. Thus, #AbkibaarModiSarkaar, meaning "this time a Modi government," a hashtag that was widely used and trended on Twitter, was in fact handed down from the top. A volunteer explained that key volunteers like him who were involved in communication were required to not only post in favor of the party and candidate Modi but:

Consistently follow the official hashtags and generate content around them. We were told to tweet everything using the official hashtag as much as possible. The idea was to work in a disciplined and organized way because the only way to get things to trend on Twitter and make sure that lots of people see it is to have a huge volume of tweets, and that can only happen when everybody who is posting does it to the same hashtag. (personal interview, January 9, 2015)

In terms of actual messaging—in addition to being encouraged to use party-generated and -approved materials—supporters and sympathizers of the BJP were given a clear directive to focus on

issues of governance, economic development, and leadership while actively avoiding polarizing issues such as religion—a stance that closely reflected both that of Narendra Modi as well as the BJP more generally during the 2014 campaign. Although this could have represented a conflict for those who held strong pro-Hindu beliefs, the party sought to deal with this by encouraging such individuals to think in terms of the larger goal of electoral success for the party, which could only be achieved by reaching out to a broad spectrum of potential voters. As one party leader put it:

We tell volunteers to engage people with facts and figures and stay away from other things. This is because young people and urban voters are most interested in the economy and questions of employment and development, not in questions of Hindutva. (personal interview, January 13, 2015)

Both supporters and party leaders agreed that volunteers were strongly “discouraged” from posting controversial articles or engaging in debates with those who were opposed to the BJP, its leader, or the cultural beliefs with which it has been traditionally associated. Thus, even though in the past, so-called Internet Hindus have been frequently associated with aggressive behavior online—“obsessively trolling the net, looking for slights,” in the words of historian Ramachandra Guha (2012, p. 10)—BJP volunteers were specifically instructed to avoid “duels” or “trolling behavior” during the party’s 2014 online campaign. Instead, they were told to counter opposition by providing what one BJP supporter termed “positive” and “correct” information. Indeed, a BJP IT cell leader said, “We were told to counter misinformation by sharing correct information but refrain from any controversial disputes.” A social media cell leader said that during the 2014 election, the campaign had changed the manner in which it interacted online:

In the past, we would try to see what people opposed to us were saying and then try to debate them, argue with them and question their point of view. That took a lot of time and energy, and we don’t focus on this anymore. We have realized that there is nothing to be gained from doing this. We cannot convince those who are totally opposed to us and our message. We want to reach the youth voters or the urban undecided voter who is not happy with the Congress . . . people who can be convinced to vote for the BJP. (personal interview, December 19, 2014)

Consequently, she and other BJP leaders said that the party had asked its supporters to focus on “getting the BJP message about its economic record and accomplishments out to voters, especially younger, first-time voters.” Aware that urban and young voters in India have been historically disconnected from political parties and unwilling to participate in campaign events, the BJP sought to reach out to these groups using the affordances of technology. Indeed, both party functionaries and volunteers alike agreed that the main purpose underlying the BJP’s online campaign was to establish “touch points” and “engage” with the maximum number of voters, especially the often elusive younger and urban voters, and encourage them to promote the party’s message on their social networks. When asked whether ordinary supporters had the ability to influence the crafting of the party’s electoral messages or strategy, party leaders and volunteers alike acknowledged that it was limited. Elaborating on this, a social media cell leader for the BJP said:

We prepare materials and information and send out posters, graphics, visual images . . . once in a while if someone makes a good point we might pick it up, but mostly we send out stuff and try to engage people who seem supportive and try to get them to mention Modiji's speeches or post clips. Mainly we want to get people, especially young voters, to focus on *our* campaign. (personal interview, January 3, 2015)

The relationship between the party and its supporters was perhaps best summed by a BJP volunteer who said that "teams worked like sleeper cells—inactive on the political scene but ready to strike when the ordered, and the marching orders came just a few months before the elections" (personal interview, January 9, 2015). Thus, contrary to sweeping claims—such as the one made by the head of the BJP IT cell—that the 2014 election reflected an organic, grassroots approach, the evidence from our interviews indicates that the party continued to centrally manage outreach efforts. In fact, most of our participants acknowledged that participation by most ordinary citizens was limited and restricted to relatively mundane online tasks and that volunteers were closely monitored and supervised by the party. In other words, there had not been a profound shift from the situation in 2012, when Rajeeka Kacheeria of the BJP's IT cell said in an interview that:

Everything that happens on the Internet and social media is done under the guidance of Mr. Narendra Modi . . . a senior party professional clears even the smallest of our doubts on anything related to the net. It is not possible that conversations can happen as per the whim and fancy of a single individual. ("Everything on Social Media Is Done," 2010,)

Conclusion

While party leaders referred to the BJP's successful engagement and interaction with ordinary citizens, the process—in the words of one party operative—remained "quite tightly controlled." Based on our interviews, it would appear that the BJP's 272+ online volunteer platform offered the party's supporters and sympathizers several options to engage with the campaign both online and on the ground compared to previous campaigns, which offered negligible opportunities for popular participation. But while the 2014 campaign cannot thus be conceptualized in terms of a Manichean participatory/not-participatory frame, the BJP appeared to enable only a limited form of participation, paralleling the "managed interactivity" identified by Stromer-Galley (2014) in the context of the Obama campaign.

Although the party employed certain affordances of technology to "signal" to supporters its inclusive and participatory nature, it did not engage in more extensive dialogic interaction with them, and the vast majority of volunteers remained subject to considerable centralized control. Thus, claims of a bottom-up campaign stance notwithstanding, there was a distinct gap between the participatory potential of Web 2.0 technologies and the more limited forms of participation that supporters were invited to undertake in the BJP's online campaign.

We suggest that the approach adopted by the BJP can be understood as driven by rational considerations. On the one hand, the BJP sought to engage young and urban voters—who, though

disenchanted with the ruling Congress Party, were nevertheless unlikely to buy in to the BJP's traditional religious and caste based appeal—by appealing to them as a forward-looking, inclusive party, engaging them in *their* virtual spaces. On the other hand, the party had to contend with the organizational challenges posed by a large-scale online campaign that required it to “manage” participation in order to avoid miscommunication and retain control over the message. As Foot and Schneider (2006) explain, “While campaigns want to involve a large number of supporters, they also want to establish the terms of their involvement” (p. 6). Arguably, fearful of potentially losing control over the online campaign—identified by Vaccari (2010) as a typical concern among parties—the BJP facilitated the participation of supporters mainly in what a party functionary termed “properly structured ways.”

Overall, the 2014 Indian election indicates that, although access to the affordances of social media technologies provided by a growth in Internet penetration enhanced the ability of citizens to participate in the BJP's online electoral activities to some degree, this ability was constrained by the party's need to ensure that the online campaign was conducted in line with its communicative goals. From a broader standpoint, these findings call into question pervasive assertions about shifts in the traditional top-down relationship between campaigns and supporters in the Web 2.0 era. As this case study demonstrates, although online technologies can open up campaigns to popular participation, the overall imperatives of the command-and-control logic of campaign structures remain significant.

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