



Can internet trolling aid a political party to win an election in India?

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ABSTRACT

Trolling in the form of memes has been there for a long time since the advent of the social networking platforms. One may ask how memes on the internet can affect one's political perception and even choices; well there can be many contradictory answers to this typical question, so the answer may differ with person. Each individual engages themselves in different political and social environment and therefore might agree or disagree with the statement that political memes especially for the purpose of trolling has impact on people's political preferences. This study of the political impact of online trolling will be very difficult or nearly impossible to be carried out on a large population, so this study will be confined to theoretically exploring possibilities of trolling as an instrument of political parties in an objective of spreading its propaganda for the purpose of winning the election. With changing time, people are getting more engaged in online platforms and so this study is relevant as the impact of the latter on people's political perception is only moving upwards.

Introduction

On the internet, all of us have come across political memes at some point of time. According to Richard Dawkins, a meme is an amusing or interesting item such as a captioned picture or video or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media (Merriam-Webster). Memes has been used immensely for the purpose of trolling on the internet; according to an internet source, a troll is internet slang for a person who intentionally tries to instigate conflict, hostility, or arguments in an online social community (GFCGlobal).

Numerous studies on the impact of social media on political perception and preferences have been conducted so far, some of which that are relevant to this study are as follows:

- 1) While doing her research Kulkarni has arrived at the conclusion that internet memes are used as a tool in political discourse but doesn't impact much on the audience's political preference although it can help enhancing political engagements (Kulkarni, 2017). To support her findings I can say that people tend engage themselves more when they come across memes they find interesting on the internet through comments in various social platforms.
- 2) Wihbey in his research found that postings on social networking sites reveal surprises for many users when it comes to the political views of their friends and three-quarters of social networking

site users say their friends post at least some content related to politics on the sites from time to time (Wihbey, Social Networking Sites and Politics, 2012). His another research finding concludes that political bloggers are much more likely to link to others who share their political views (Wihbey, Cross-ideological Discussions among Conservative and Liberal Bloggers, 2008) .

- 3) Erisen's findings from his research point towards a conclusion that cohesive social network with strong ties lead to less causal and complex thinking whereas weak ties which is a result of being in different social contexts tend to act as bridge to different domains of information (Erisen & Erisen, 2012).

Though numerous studies about the effects of internet and social media on the political behavior of the public have been conducted so far there are still many aspects of it which can't be empirically tested or give accurate results. Sometimes the respondents that are selected for the purpose of the research might not give their answers truthfully and chances are there that they might be unaware that they are already under the influence of the information they have been accessing on the internet regularly. People may stick to their political preference due to their strong ties they have maintained with their peers and avoid being exposed to other groups and new people as explained by Erisen and this causes them to never try to explore new ideas and know more people. This might be the reason why Kulkarni on her study found out that there is no major impact of memes on the people's political preference because people never get to come out from the comfort zone they created. To support their statement further I would like to mention about Wihbey's work where he found that people tend to link and like to those who have similar kind of views and avoid those who think differently than them.

Although I don't disagree with them, I find my hypothesis which presupposes that trolling by the party campaigners or supporters can also make enough impact to change a political discourse even to the extent of aiding a political party win an election and in the era of e-governance it has relative importance. How and why it is possible will be our objective of this study.

Why it is inconvenient to do an empirical testing on people's political behavior?

Before arriving at an answer to this question, one must know that human behavior is unpredictable and can be influenced by different stimuli. When a research is done in a laboratory where the variables can be controlled, it can offer accurate results. But when it comes to a social experiment which includes human beings as subjects it becomes quite difficult to get error-free results. Suppose if I carry out a survey based on some questionnaires such as, do you think a political meme can influence enough to change your political decision? The responder may deny being influenced due to various reasons such as because of their ego he or she might feel inferior if they answered yes as some may want to prove themselves as tough person who isn't swayed by anything except their own decision. But what if they were subconsciously being influenced by such posts when they come across it on a regular basis?

I would like to bring up about Whibey's writing where he quotes, "Politically active voices, particularly younger voters, who use the Internet to express their opinions are moving away from neutral news sites in favor of those that match their own political views" (Wihbey, Birds of a Feather Tweet Together: Integrating Network and Content Analyses to Examine Cross-Ideology Exposure on Twitter, 2013). People tend to attend to those things that interest them and avoid those which don't and this also applies to the virtual things they interact with on the internet as well. If you are a regular user of any of the social networking platforms, you'll find users getting involved only to those pages and groups which you like and avoid to those they don't. To make user experience better even those online services shows you filtered results according to your activity but how does it affect you? Let's assume that a foodie person gets online and comes across some posts related to food, wouldn't a person be tempted and go for it, situation might have been different if he wouldn't have come across such posts. Same goes for memes for the purpose of trolling, though some of those can impact the society in a positive way but it always isn't the case. Most of the time, it's used to target another ego to degrade their reputation and creates more chaos than any reconciliation.

Understanding more about internet trolls

As Dawkins defines memes as a sharable material either in the form of an image or video through the internet which carry some message or humor, but how does it differ from trolling? Well trolling is different in the sense that it uses satire which may be used to mock someone else's weakness (Dictionary.com). We must know that meme can be a component of trolling as a means of mocking others.

Internet and new generation

Social media platforms have considerable number of youths these days, some of them engaging in various socio-political activities from time to time. According to Stenstrom, now-a-days people rely more on electronic news than the old traditional newspapers (Stenström, 2009). We must know that newspapers are prepared in a much systemic and professional way but what we see on internet might be of same news topic but the key difference will be the time and effort put into preparing it. News on the internet has become more of competition of different media houses being concerned in publishing faster and attracting more users rather than generating reliable news. A considerable number of the people on the internet are self-learning, and try to act as an expert with whatever knowledge they possess, so let's think about what's going to happen when a youth with less experience and less political awareness comes across with online posts viz. a troll meme or some fake news? Think about it for a minute, what will happen when he or she finds a post on the internet amusing to them and read it and doesn't bother to cross check the sources for its authenticity and even decides to share it to others? Well the answer is simple, more and more people will be able to access it and it will cause more problem than spreading positive message. Why does it happen though? One of the reason maybe that some people feel lazy to check the reliability of the news source before sharing it to others or they believe the news to be true to their knowledge. This could be avoided if they were more open to others' views and opinions and had more ties with people with different outlook than themselves; they would have become more aware of such issues and could have acted more carefully to stop spreading fake news or hate messages.

The above mentions are also the reason why trolling is acceptable to significant amount of people in the online communities and also they might find it very entertaining to them. Thinking can be influenced and worsen in a wrong group who's not open to new ideas and people can be manipulated by some people with sinister objectives, so one must be careful.

Does trolling really help out a party in its political campaign?

Online political campaigns are very popular these days, public has become more politically aware and will support only those party who knows how to respond to their unattended demands. Politics in the name of religion or caste is very common in India; so politicians must know how to cater the public interests and act accordingly to get majority of support from different caste and religion. Especially in the era of internet it is very important to stay in the spotlight and be a public hero and the face of the party and show them that you are serving them well and working for their cause. As we know sometimes even doing little for the public and highlighting it again and again through media can influence many people especially in Indian context where majority are poor and uneducated and the public can be manipulated through emotions. For example, a party affiliated to a particular caste or religion is a reason enough for that particular section of the public to support them.

So what we have learned is that public image is very important for a party to survive, if the public feels that the party has not been doing very much for them, then the party might suffer defeat or lose potential vote in the next election. We know that since olden days the media has been a tool for spreading false propaganda to target opposition party and it becomes even better when scandals of the opposition party are exposed. Trolling can be said to be a modern tool for a party to target opposition's weakness which can degrade the latter's reputation in the public. Trolling can influence many especially in a country where majority are uneducated and poor but majority has a device to connect and access the internet and some can be easily manipulated.

Big political parties have their own people or affiliates who do the dirty job for them behind the curtains, like spreading false propaganda and running troll pages or groups on the internet. It must also be noted that some of them might not be working directly for the party but just are supporters from the common public. But the question here lies is how does it affect the opposition party? We know that some leaders are irreplaceable and are an important asset for the party which they belong; once their public image is tarnished it's sometimes very difficult to replace his or her position, so the opposition party's objective might be to target specific leaders to be taken out from the competition, which will gradually weaken the target party.

Conclusion

Let's narrow down to whatever we have learned from this study so far. The purpose of this study was to find out whether trolling can be used as a device by a political party to target its opposition ultimately aiding the former to win an election. The answer is yes to an extent it can, as we have already seen many instances in this study where political parties used media and trolling as a device to target other political parties to degrade the latter's public image; they specifically target influential leaders or someone of high stature and position from the opposition party. Again in this study we also found that a considerable amount of people are engaged on the internet come across pages and posts often related to trolling and sometimes they enjoy sharing them too not knowing the effects of it on others; they can be influenced by such posts as some people are less politically aware and some of them even think or act as an expert with whatever knowledge they have learned from the internet on their own. They are also not open to views and opinions that are different than theirs and the reason for it perhaps because of their ego and we also have seen that they tend stick to their own group for the same reason. Another reason why it is easy to manipulate people in India is because of its large populations who are poor and mostly because they didn't have access to proper education and also they tend to support political parties based on emotions and social ties rather than judging on the basis of the positive changes they bring about in the society. It must be kept in mind that successful political party knows how to use media in their favor, sometimes doing less and bragging more through can serve the purpose of attracting more supporters. Not denying the fact that people won't support a very incompetent political party as public has become more political aware because of the internet as well. Unlike some people who keep themselves away from different viewpoints some are open to other thoughts and ideas and act more rational. It is also worth to mention that although trolling can be used to degrade the opposition political party, it will not be effective in some instances such as the opposition is very competent and who can show public their results of change and development in the society and also if the opposition is strong enough to counter and control media and it has influential leaders who is supported by different sections of people. Lastly, I would to say that whatever I have narrated in this study has only covered some aspect of the topic I chose for this study and is based on my point of view and is always open for constructive criticism.

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