The Appeal of Influencers to the Social Media Outreach of Indian Politicians

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ABSTRACT

Democracies around the world have different levels of dependence on influencers outside of mainstream politics in their outreach efforts. In this study, we examine the case of India, specifically the relationship between politicians in power and "influencers", such as celebrities and media accounts, they follow on Twitter. We find that while politicians engage with these accounts to the same degree to which they follow them, the media accounts at the highest levels of engagement share the same ideology as the politicians who follow them. No similar alignment exists between celebrities and politicians, which requires future work of analyzing the content of engaging tweets in order to define the extent to which these accounts have political influence.

INTRODUCTION

Politicians have historically engaged popular public figures around the world, especially when it comes to campaigning for elections or promoting their own political brands. This has been central to campaign politics throughout India, where celebrities from an influential film industry have historically played an important role in endorsing politicians or turning to politics themselves [3, 8]. India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has been known to aggressively engage celebrities in various ways - both as champions in government schemes, but also though consistent social interactions in casual encounters [7]. The significant effect these influential figures have on the political sphere is well documented: celebrities sway the public towards one side or the other in elections [4, 12, 13]; the media casts the government and politicians in a particular light [4, 9]. The involvement of celebrities in mainstream electoral campaigns has been subject of much discussion – a strand of recent work has examined their influence on political style in a mediatised realm, particularly given the rise of populist politics in various parts of the world [6, 11]. In the age of social media, celebrities and other public figures who wield sizable influence online also become increasingly important to the outreach efforts of politicians trying to push forth an agenda [5].

However, outside of mainstream celebrities, there is another, increasingly important group of stakeholders - online influencers. The category of "influencers" can be nebulous and open to definitional disagreement - past work has characterized them as public figures with significant online following, on how socially embedded they are in their community, their engagement with that community, or the expertise of the content they create [1, 2, 12]. Many recent studies have done their analysis by combining a variation of these metrics in order to identify influence within the context of the communities they study [1, 9]. Such influencers form a new layer of political sentiment movers in elections [10], but it can be difficult to define them or understand their value in campaign outreach.

In this work, we approach the relationship between influencers and politics in India by examining the following behavior of mainstream politicians. We do this to two ends: First, we seek to find whether politicians in power are seeking value in non-politician accounts. Second, we seek to determine if being followed by politicians is a helpful indicator of whether one can be understood as having political influence.

METHODOLOGY

In our study, we focus on Members of Parliament (MPs) in India and the non-politician accounts they follow. Specifically, we use the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as they are the current major party in power, with the goal of understanding the importance of public figures for re-election, from the eyes of a party in power. Of the 269 sitting MPs from the BJP in the 2014-19 parliament as of April 2019, 228 had accounts that were public. We collected the Twitter user data of the accounts followed by
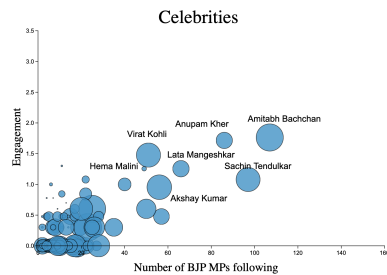
(a) Pearson Coefficient: 0.748
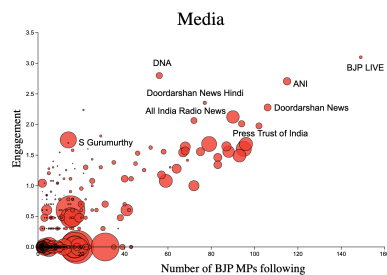
(b) Pearson Coefficient: 0.754
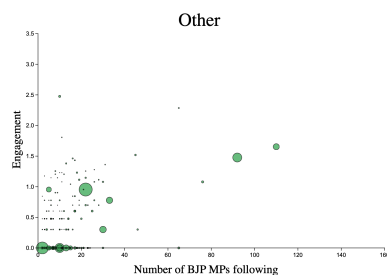
(c) Pearson Coefficient: 0.534

Figure 1: Each bubble represents a non-politician account followed by a BJP MP. The size of the bubble corresponds to the size of the account's following on Twitter. The x-axis represents the number of BJP MPs following an account and the y-axis (log-scaled) represents the number of tweets by an MP that retweet or mention the account.

these 228 MPs to create as initial set of "influencer" accounts - at this point referring to celebrities, media, and non-celebrity influencers. We use "media" as a comparator group of influencers since media accounts of both individual media persons and media houses have significant following and online engagement value.

We refer to this as dataset A of size 3450. We check for how many total BJP MPs follow a given account in A. We then filtered A by removing all accounts with less than 10,000 followers and followed by only one MP. These accounts are assumed to be irrelevant for our research because of their limited reach, and also to ensure that no account incidentally followed by a singe politician is included in the sample. After these filters, we are left with dataset A' of 1353 accounts.

We manually annotated each account in A' as one of the following categories: politicians/government org, celebrities, media, relevant (to the Indian context) others, and non-Indian others. Of these categories, we filtered A' to only include those that are distinctly non-politicians (celebrities, media, and relevant others). We collect the tweets of every BJP MP within a 6 month period and count the number tweets that contain a retweet or mention of an account in A'. We compute a total engagement score for each account in A' by summing the number of tweets by an MP that retweet or mention the account.

RESULTS

We present plots that show a relationship between the number of BJP MPs following a non-politician account and the log scale of the number of tweets engaging, as measured through mentions or retweets, with that account (represented by a bubble). The size of the bubble corresponds to that account's followers count. Out of all non-politician accounts, 18% are celebrities, 38% are media such as news outlets or self-identified journalists, and 44% are "others" which are accounts that we identify as influencers, but are neither from the mainstream media nor celebrities from any other field.

Figure 1a shows this relationship for celebrity accounts followed by BJP MPs while Figure 1b does the same for media. Both show a positive Pearson correlation greater than 0.7 between the two metrics. We see that figures 1a and 1b both have significantly larger bubbles, since the following of celebrities and major media houses is large. Figure 1c, however, shows a relatively less significant correlation for other accounts relevant to the Indian context. This is arguably because the "other" category of social media accounts do not have the same scale of influence on social media as major celebrities or big media accounts. However, their being followed by a sizable number of politicians nonetheless highlights their importance to the party as influencers [12].

We also see that as a bubble goes away from 0 in the Y axis, it means those accounts are more engaged, whereas those closer to 0 are relatively less engaged by the politicians. Among the celebrity accounts, these are celebrities who have relatively less political account or are less important for political actors, whereas for the media accounts, these are primarily global media accounts like CNN,

FoxNews, BBC, Al Jazeera etc, which politicians may follow, but do not necessarily enagage since their engagement tends to be with domestic media. However, if we look at the more engaged media accounts - we find that the highest levels of engagement are with those acounts known to be pro-ruling party – ie the party media mouthpiece (BJP Live), the two national news outlets - Doordarshan and All India Radio, and the ruling party-aligned Asian News International (ANI). From among celebrities, there is not the same ideological alignment with the ruling party, but a logic in the key actors that lays the ground for further research. As we see in Figure 1a two of the most significant bubbles are of party-aligned celebrities (Kher and Malini), two are the two highest paid sportspersons (Tendulkar and Kohli), and two others are among the top filmstars (Bachchan and Kumar). All of these rank among the most followed Indian celebrities on social media.

These results are intuitive, and underline the soundness of the methodology of seeking out following and engagement behavior as a means of examining politicians' relationship with influencers. The results with mainstream celebrity influencers also suggests that the MPs' strategy may signal a diversification of celebrity connections that help create broader potential for outreach, a question for further research.

What is conclusive from our initial analysis is that there is more to the relationship of MPs and their friends than just a simple following; they also actively retweet and mention them. This finding yields further interesting questions: do other facets of influence like expertise and embeddedness characterize this relationship? Can we use these facets in order to identify the non-politicians that play a role in political public opinion?

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Studying who politicians choose to follow can be a useful metric in understanding what they deem useful to performing their public personae. In this work, we have demonstrated a means to identify the types of, and examine the extent of polarity of accounts that politicians see as influencers based on their Twitter following information. The number of celebrities followed by politicians, as well as the extent to which they are engaged (roughly at the same level as engagements with media) underlines the significance that politicians accord to the celebrities and other online influencers.

In order to offer a more scalable identification, we need to design experiments that analyze the content of the tweets of these potential influencers. These accounts may prove to be a valid seed set for identifying and characterizing influencers as they exhibit the metrics defined in past studies to measure influence [1]. Furthermore, while in this article we only looked at politicians from a ruling party, in future work, we would like to compare how they compare with opposition politicians.

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