Influencer collaboration on YouTube: Changing political outreach in the 2024 Indian Elections

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Abstract

With the increasing importance of highly followed accounts of influencers on social media platforms like YouTube, politicians have started considering these as an alternative to mainstream media interviews. We examined this trend and shortlisted five YouTube accounts that have featured high-profile politicians in the run up to the 2024 elections. We find that the political-influencer engagement works to the benefit of both parties involved, that the choice of influencer is driven by a politician's agenda, and finally that unlike in engagements with mainstream media journalists, where a soft interview can undermine the credibility of a journalist, with influencers this can be done while upholding the respective brand images of both parties. We propose that this is an important trend that is likely to continue as more politicians find influencers as a gateway into untapped audiences to promote themselves without the inconvenience of journalistic mediatization, in turn enabling new spaces for formal political promotion.

Introduction

India has the world's largest YouTube subscriber base with 462 million users[1] engaging with the platform. Social media influencers, with millions of followers, form a critical part of YouTube's broadcast media ecology and are now central to brand building on a wide spectrum of consumption domains from food and finance to travel and technology. Several influencers boast larger viewership than mainstream media networks and boast the ability to dramatically influence the prospects of a product or service that gets featured on them. With the increasing polarisation of mainstream media in India, there is a gradual convergence of like-minded politics on news channels. Influencers whose main thread is not directly political then emerge as spaces where audiences with diverse political views exist. Consequently, an influencer who boasts a following with a range of persuasions can bring more to the table of a politician seeking minds to convert than those in echo chambers of partisan media.

Collaborating with these influencers in the form of interviews or appearances allows politicians to access an untapped audience. Influencers also have a relatively younger audience, investing

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in them makes sense for a political party as a long-term strategy. Politicians can piggyback on the informal style of their content to present humanised versions of themselves while controlling a narrative that may get derailed by aggressive questioning from a trained political journalist.

Findings

We see that a number of online influencers can already claim more interviews with major national politicians than most political journalists can claim during the period studied. Table 1 provides an overview of the overall statistics on reach, the style of the interviews, and the metrics of access related to the specific interviews. Of the five most viewed interviews, three are from the channel of Ranveer Allahabadia, better known online as 'Beer Biceps.' The top five, in order are Beer Biceps' interview of foreign minister S. Jaishankar, Elvish Yadav's interaction with Haryana Chief Minister ML Khattar, Beer Biceps' interviews with Union Ministers Nitin Gadkari and Smriti Irani, and the Curly Tales (Kamiya Jani) interview with INC leader Rahul Gandhi and Nitin Gadkari.

Influencer	Category of Influencer	Following	Politicians Interviewed	Interview Style and Language	Views on the Video	Likes
Curly Tales	Food & Travel	- 2.84 Million - 3,893 videos - 1.1 Billion views	Anurag Thakur	Formal, Hindi	152000	3400
			US Ambassador	Formal, English	336000	9000
			Shinde Family	Formal with CM Shinde, less formal with his children, Hindi	503000	9100
			Aaditya Thackarey	Semi Formal, English	379000	11000
			Rahul Gandhi	Formal, English	1500000	56000
			Nitin Gadkari	Formal , Hindi	1500000	38000
Technical Gurji	Technology	- 23.4 Million subscribers - 5,288 videos - 3.6 Billion	Ashwini Vaishnaw- Connectivity	Formal, Hindi	207000	12000
			Ashwini Vaishnaw- Google	Formal, Hindi	84000	5500

			Ashwini Vaishnaw-5G	Formal, Hindi	435000	28000
		views	Piyush Goyal	Formal, Hindi	332000	3800
			Rajeev Chandrashekhar	Formal, Hindi	43000	3100
			Gajendra Singh	Formal, Hindi	60000	4700
Vivek Bindra	Motivational Speaker	- 21.3 Million subscribers - 1,116 videos - 1.9 Billion views	Kiren Rijiju	Formal, Hindi	100000	5400
			Nitin Gadkari	Formal, Hindi	500000	26000
			Manoj Tiwari	Formal, Hindi	244000	12000
			Gautam Gambhir	Formal, Hindi	801000	44000
			Piyush Goyal	Formal, Hindi	129000	7000
Elvish Yadav	Comedy	- 14.8 Million subscribers - 806 videos - 1.4 Billion views	Piyush Goyal	Informal, Hindi/Haryanvi	564000	57000
			Manohar Lal Khattar (CM of Haryana)	Informal, Hindi/Haryanvi	7700000	702000
			Nirmala Sitharaman	Informal, Hindi/Haryanvi	998000	106000
			Jai Ram Thakur (Then CM of Himachal)	Informal, Hindi/Haryanvi	667364	71000
			Tejasvi Surya	Informal, Hindi/Haryanvi	570000	58000
Beer Biceps	Lifestyle	- 6.79 Million subscribers - 1,112 videos - 1.3 Billion views	Piyush Goyal	Formal, English	1100000	39000
			Milind Deora	Formal, English	241000	5500
			Dr S. Jaishankar	Formal, English	8400000	336000
			Atishi*	Formal, Hindi	265000	10000
			Raghav Chadha*	Semi Formal, Hindi	811000	32000
			Rajeev Chandrashekhar	Formal, English	428000	15000
			Nitin Gadkari*	Formal, Hindi	3000000	97000

			Smriti Irani	Semi Formal, Hinglish	1800000	59000

- Data as on January 18, 2024
- *Interviews with Atishi, Raghav Chadha and Nitin Gadkari were a part of Ranveer Allahbadia's YouTube Channel

Table 1: Description of the five YouTube influencers, their key political interview and engagement metrics

We find that the BJP completely dominates the landscape with these five influencers with many more politicians and engagements per politician than others. Social media emerges as a space where a subset of politicians engage in brand building - thus rather than a broad cross section of politicians, a smaller number of politicians whose content is more engaged by the general public, especially younger users, appear on influencers' channels. Thus Piyush Goyal, Nitin Gadkar, Rajeev Chandrashekhar, and Ashwini Vaishnav, all of who work broadly in "development" related spaces appear multiple times in YouTube interviews.

We find that the choice of influencer depends on the narrative about themselves that the politician wishes to push. Influencers are known either for domain specialties such as food and travel (Curly Tales), technology (Technical Guruji), business leadership (Vivek Bindra) or for their style of engagement such as earthy comedy (Elvish Yadav), or a mix of contemporary urban lifestyle conversations (Beer Biceps). These particularities in their audience segments allow the influencers to frame the politicians in a specific way that moves away from the typical politician presentation to voters, humanizing them and bringing lifestyle rather than political program to the fore.

For instance, Minister for Information & Broadcasting and Youth Affairs, Anurag Thakur, otherwise known for his incendiary speeches presents a softer, personable side on Curly Tales, where her channel's focus on food and travel makes for seamless conversation on the millets program, or the Dharamsala stadium in his home state of Himachal Pradesh. Similarly, 'Technical Guruji' Gaurav Chaudhary's straightforward technical explainers for consumer technology allows for accessible engagements with Minister for Railways, Communications, Electronics & Information Technology, Ashwini Vaishnaw. Like the devices that take centerstage over Chaudhary in his shows, Vaishnaw gets to be front and center, and puts forth his positions on complex policy matters with little nuance. Since Vaishnaw's discussions are on digital transformation, it fits well within the content profile of Technical Guruji's show. Vivek Bindra's standing as a business guru allows for his guests to present their positions as aligned with a positive vision of India's economic future. His own engagement with a range of major policy issues including same sex marriage, Uniform Civil Code, The Collegium, etc. allows for the semblance of authority during policy conversations.

In contrast, Beer Biceps and Elvish Yadav have a very different style which is aimed almost entirely at younger audiences. Beer Biceps uses an informal style with a lot of popular culture references, and approaches politicians with an affective naivete that allows for them to come across as authoritative without needing to emphasize power. Elvish Yadav on the other hand

comes armed with an image of a snarky fast-talking Haryanvi, which is appealing to younger working class North Indian audiences, and his vlogging style makes for a casual "behind-the-scenes" look into politicians lives that humanizes them.

Apart from Curly Tales and Beer Biceps, all the remaining three influencers have only collaborated with BJP politicians. These two have spoken to Congress, Shiv Sena, and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) politicians as well as the US ambassador and German Ambassador to India respectively. While politicians' use of influencers is interesting for a range of reasons, the US Ambassador's engagement on an influencer's YouTube channel opens a new form of engagement specific to international diplomacy.

Curly Tales

Kamiya Jani

Subscribers: 2.87 million
Category: Food & travel

Overview

Kamiya Jani has interviewed politicians from across the spectrum - Bharatiya Janata Party, Indian National Congress and Shiv Sena besides interviewing the US ambassador to India, Eric Garetti. Her style focuses on the 'person behind the politician' i.e. getting beyond the public persona to dig into the individual outside of their professional setting. The interviews are framed as less overtly political, eschewing policy issues and sticking instead to what drives the individual. Even when politicians discuss their political stances, they are not pressed further, and Jani typically moves the conversation back to more personal topics around travels or food preferences.

Most interviews aim to get at the genesis of how the politician came to be who they are, exploring their upbringing and childhood memories, family, and hobbies, eventually settling on politicians' experiences with travel destinations and food. The interview style is generally conversational, and often takes place in restaurants, dining tables, and in some cases, in outdoor locations. The language of the interview is usually a mixture of English and Hindi.

Jani's style is interactive, and as an interviewer, she drives the conversation, and generally keeps control over the engagement, bringing it back to topics she wants to engage in. Her interviews usually have at least one point at which the politician is asked for food, restaurant, and travel recommendations. In addition to the political collaboration, Jani also collaborated

with the Government of India for a documentary titled, 'Dharohar Bharat Ki' which showcased Prime Minister Narendra Modi's efforts to preserve India's culture and heritage.

Snapshot of Political Interviews on Curly Tales

Rahul Gandhi

The interview with Rahul Gandhi is centered around the 'Bharat Jodo Yatra' that was undertaken by Gandhi in 2022 when he marched from Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of India, to Jammu and Kashmir covering 3,500 kilometers over almost 150 days. The episode began with Jani giving a behind-the-scenes tour of Bharat Jodo Yatra, and how the yatris managed to travel and stayed as they moved from one state to another. In the beginning of the interview, Jani set the agenda by telling her audience that she'll be focusing on the 'person-behind-the interview' i.e. Rahul Gandhi, highlighting the person behind the politician. They shared a meal together right outside Gandhi's van where he rests after walking during the day, this gives the viewer some insight into the process of the Yatra. Jani's series of questions are centered around Rahul's personal life, though he intermittently brings the conversation to politics. Gandhi emphasizes his Kashmiri Brahmin background, and how his own family background is a reflection of the diverse social fabric of India - great grandfather's family was a Kashmiri Pandit family based in Allahabad whereas his grandfather, Feroze Gandhi, was a Parsi. While talking about his educational background, he very nonchalantly highlights how his education suffered because of constant security breaches and assassinations in the family, highlighting his family's direct experience with sacrifice for the nation. Jani diverts the conversations from political aspects of his life to non-political questions about food and travel, and while she does probe him about the objective of Bharat Jodo Yatra, she does not get into the more contentious political concerns around the notion of "division" and "joining" in the naming of the yatra. The interview presents Gandhi as intellectual, fit, thoughtful, and personable.

Figure 1: Kamiya Jani and Rahul Gandhi share a meal during the Curly Tales 'Sunday Brunch'

We created a word cloud of the top 50 comments on YouTube for the interview with Rahul Gandhi, we find that there is a mix of positive and negative engagement. There is still a good deal of mockery aimed at Rahul Gandhi, referring to him as 'Pappu', but we also find users leaving comments that he emerges as a gentleman from the interview.

Figure 2: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments for the Curly tales interview with Rahul Gandhi

Shinde Family

The interview with Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde is crafted around the Ganesh Chaturti festival, and starts featuring Shinde's sweet tooth, highlighting his love for Modak. While not explicitly political, the use of Ganesh Chaturti is culturally synonymous with Maharashtra. Shinde opens his engagement by discussing his presence at key Sarvajanik Ganeshutsav (community Ganesh Chaturthi festival) in the state capital of Mumbai, in his home constituency of Thane, and at his own home -- emphasizing that he is a leader with strong

roots, and one who keeps an eye on his familial duties. Shinde himself is in the video very briefly, and the action shifts quickly to his son Shrikant and daughter-in-law, Vrushali. The interview takes place at a dinner table with a large spread, set up with Maharastrian-style thalis, using a mix of English, Hindi, with the occasional Marathi thrown in. Curly Tales personalizes the engagement by discussing their love story with anecdotes about how the couple were cleverly flummoxed into the arrangement by their parents.

The interview makes the couple personable by engaging their experiences shopping together, movie watching habits, and we see the couple engage in friendly disagreement over spending behavior. Curly Tales uses a rapid-fire set of questions for the couple, in which they answer questions about each others' likes and dislikes, which makes the couple seem very much in love. Yet the conversation also confirms that Shrikant is a skilled professional -- a doctor, but also a devout man who prays daily and regularly visits places of worship. The engagement highlights the struggles the family has gone through, establishing their working class credentials from their humble beginnings in a tenement (chawl) in Thane to their hard-fought current-day status at the helm of the state's affairs in the swank official residence of the Chief Minister in Malabar Hill.

Figure 3: Kamiya Jani with Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, and his son, Kalyan MLA Shrikant Sinde in front of a Ganesh idol

We created a word cloud of the top 60 comments on YouTube for the interview with the Shinde family, we find a number of interesting comments -- we see that the Thackeray family is talked about, specifically Aditya Thackeray, and also that the term "gaddar" meaning traitor is used to refer to Eknath Shinde, who broke with his former mentors to join the BJP.

We also find that there is a tension between the use of Marathi and Hindi in the comments. As can be seen in the word cloud in Figure 4, it appears to be the case that most of the comments have mentions of Eknath Shinde primarily, referred to as "cm" and "chief minister" despite the bulk of the interview being about his son and daughter-in-law. While his son's name (Shrikant) is still mentioned from time to time, her daughter-in-law is not mentioned as often at all. While there are some positive mentions such as them being humble, there are also mentions of Shinde being a "puppet" Chief Minister.

Figure 4: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments for the Curly tales interview with the Shindes

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Technical Guruji

Gaurav Chaudhary

Subscribers: 23.4 million
Category: Technology

Overview

Gaurav Chaudhary aka Technical Guruji has only interviewed BJP politicians, especially Ashwini Vaishnaw who is the Minister for Railways and Electronics & Information Technology who has featured in his videos multiple times in the last one year. His interview style is less interactive than Curly Tales (Kamiya Jani) and revolves around the tech policies of the government - what they have done in the past ever since coming to power in 2014 and

what they are likely to implement in the future. Chaudhary usually asks leading questions which are centered around the government policies and it gives a chance to the politician to speak, in detail, about their policy oriented work. The ministers are better positioned to drive the conversation as compared to Chaudhary who intervenes only to ask about policy-oriented questions.

It also gives an opportunity to the minister to weave their own narrative which leans towards the work done by the Modi government since 2014 and the future initiatives. The interviews are sprinkled with conversations around Modi's vision for India and how they intend to achieve it, especially in the case of Ashwini Vaishnaw, Rajeev Chandrashekhar and Piyush Goel.

The ministers also give vivid descriptions about the tech-focus and digitisation policies of the Modi goverment and its benefits for the Indian service sector as well as for the common man. Discussions also focus on the future of AI, infrastructure building, promotion of digi-yatra, UPI and digi-locker.

There is a considerably less focus on the political ideology of the BJP and contrary to Curly Tales where interviews take place in an outdoor location, Chaudhary interviews them either at their residence or office. Even the background is consciously chosen - sometimes it is against the backdrop of Indian flags or against a photo of Modi which adds to his projection of a charismatic leader of the nation. The language of his interviews is a mixture of English and Hindi (with more emphasis on Hindi).

Snapshot of Political Interviews on Technical Guruji

Ashwini Vaishnaw

Vaishnaw has appeared on Chaudhary's channel three times in the last one year - two interviews and once he featured as a part of a Google India event in which he spoke at length about Google's production in India. The first interview with Vaishnaw began by plugging in Azaadi ka Amrit Mahotsav (to mark 75 years of Independence) and India's adoption of 5G wireless technology.

The minister took the lead and questions revolved around a series of government initiatives, irrespective of whether it was tech related or not. Vaishnaw is direct, and rather than a conversational feel where the minister speaks largely to the interviewer, much of the conversation has him looking and speaking straight into the camera. The interview discusses government policies around marquee branded initiatives - Digital India and Make in India - focusing on basic descriptions of semi-conductors, setting up of bullet trains and manufacturing in the telecom industry.

In the interview, Vaishnaw is established as a technocrat. He highlights his IIT-Kanpur background, and on multiple times, uses props to make points, describing the semiconductor manufacturing process by using a silicon wafer and circuit board, or displaying a miniature

train. This style is similar to technical guruji's show-and-tell method of talking through new devices.

Figure 5: Ashwini Vaishnaw in conversation with Gaurav Chaudhary (Technical Guruji)

While Vaishnaw discusses the need for various policy moves such as the data protection bill, telecom bill, cyber-security bill, he avoids getting into the details. This process sells the idea of foresightedness on part of the government, but since the interviewer does not ask well-informed or substantive questions, the minister does not have to defend specifics. The setting of the interview has a large photograph of Modi in a power pose. Since the two men have done multiple interviews together, there is also a sense of camaraderie - exchange of fist bumps and a casual style of exchange.

Other exchanges between Technical Guruji and Ashwini Vaishnav include:
Story of Nayaa Bharat
Google for India

In the word cloud of the top comments from this video, the most prominent words seem to entreat the public - thanking him for his work, congratulating him for being a good minister. There are also several messages referencing his erudition, and requests for interviews with other ministers, most significantly, Nitin Gadkari. A small number of responses refer to the rail accident which occurred under his ministership.

Figure 6: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments from Technical Guruji's video with Ashwini Vaishnaw

Piyush Goyal

The hour-long interview takes place in Piyush Goyal's office who is the Minister of Textiles, Minister of Commerce and Industry and Minister of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution. To contextualize the interview and its relevance to his YouTube audience, Chaudhary sets the agenda and states that he's going to focus on the policies of the government with respect to technology. Digitisation emerges as the most common theme of the dialogue and how it has reached far-flung areas of the country and is easily accessible by people from every section of the country. Chaudhary endorses the policy by referring to the G20 summit and how digital India provides an edge to India over other countries. The interviewer, rather than play the job of an examiner, turns endorser by reiterating the key talking points of the interviewee.

Figure 7: Piyush Goyal with Gaurav Chaudhary on the Technical Guruji show

As with Technical Guruji's style of presenting the technical artifact in the means that make sense to it's purchasers, the focus in the interview is of presenting the government as serving citizens as customers - thus Goyal discusses consumer grievances being made easy by launching a government help-line, the increase in the number of jan-dhan accounts over the years, and the government's e-commerce website. Artificial Intelligence is presented as something that the state makes active efforts to curb where needed, so as to allay fears of things running out of control. There is casual reciprocity, as Goyal asks Chaudhary how he came up with the concept and its unique name, and a gentle pat on the back as the minister emphasizes the importance of influencers like Technical Guruji in spreading digital literacy by breaking complicated tech-policies for the average Indian viewer. The interview is more formal that the interview Chaudhary has conducted with Vaishnaw but this back and forth between the two adds a touch of informality to it.

The word cloud from this interview as is seen in Figure 8 shows that compared to Ashwini Vaishnaw, Chaudhary's name is mentioned much more under this video with the words "guruji" and "technical" having high frequencies along with "Gaurav", his first name. There is not much being spoken about Piyush Goyal, most of the comments are congratulatory in nature.

Figure 8: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments from Technical Guruji's interview of Piyush Goyal

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Vivek Bindra

Subscribers: 21.3 Million
Category: Motivational Leader

Overview

Bindra follows a prime time show style set-up where he invites ministers in his show called 'Bada Bharat Show: Season 2'. The show is based on the concept of interviewing people from across domains about their unique stories. The political interviews are a part of this series. He has only interviewed BJP ministers. The format of the show is similar to a prime-time interview taken by news organizations and begins with a montage of snippets from the interview. It takes place in a studio and the video includes animations, tickers, coming-up next segments and pull-quotes.

His interviews are more overtly political as compared to other influencers, and he probes the ministers on multiple topics - work ethics, controversies they have been associated with, the policies they have implemented. However, professional journalists who may typically stay neutral to a politician's achievements, Bindra does not hold back from praise, such as offering congratulations on delivering the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. He does raise questions on specific issues of broadbased concern -- for instance, on same-sex marriage, on uniform civil code, on bringing the North-East to the mainstream, but his tone is not confrontational, thus allowing ministers to have a safe space for dialog on political ideology.

This engagement with political topics allows Bindra to present himself as a serious digital journalist, then as simply a YouTube influencer. He asks leading questions - often presented as a problem that the government needs to solve, then allowing the respondent a way to articulate their proposed solution. This allows politicians to address their agenda, but since the style of back-and forth is energetic with quick counter-questions and interjections, the interview appears interactive. Interviews typically end with a rapid-fire segment that revolves around the politician's personal life and political stance.

Snapshot of Political Interviews on Vivek Bindra

Nitin Gadkari

As the interview begins, the tone set is of Bindra as an admirer of Nitin Gandkari, with the interviewer showering his subject with praise as a statesman, an organizer, and as an ethical manager. The initial set of questions focuses on infrastructural projects headed by Gadkari, prompting him to highlight getting them done punctually, and within budget, both of which are

presented as anomalies in Indian governmental work. Bindra uses corpspeak, congratulating Gadkari's 'solution-first' attitude compared to his predecessors.

Figure 9: Nitin Gadkari with Vivek Bindra on The Bada Bharat Show - Season 2

The interview focuses less on the political ideology of the BJP and emphasizes more on his work ethics and approach towards politics. Bindra lets Gadkari address his relationship with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and rumors about his being a potential competitor to Modi, by letting him clear the air about any political aspirations about prime ministership.

The word cloud for the interview shows Nitin Gadkari being at the center of the discourse, rather than Bindra, and conversations are largely congratulatory. One item that gets a significant number of comments is that of the Shiv Sena and its founder, Balasaheb Thackeray.

Figure 10: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments from Vivek Bindra's interview of Nitin Gadkari

Kiren Rijiju

Kiren Rijiju gave the interview to Bindra in 2023, when he was still the Minister of Law and Justice. As with Gadkari, Bindra is congratulatory in his approach to Rijiju, allowing him to establish himself as a self-made man. The opening teaser to the conversation presents the conversation as though it will be hard-hitting -- that the interview will address nepotism among judges, the ethical issues of undermining same-sex marriage, the issues of law and order around bulldozer politics. However, the way these actual conversations are engaged is uncontroversial - Rijiju leans to the constitution to reject normative positions for same-sex marriage, and procedure to ward off confrontation over the judiciary.
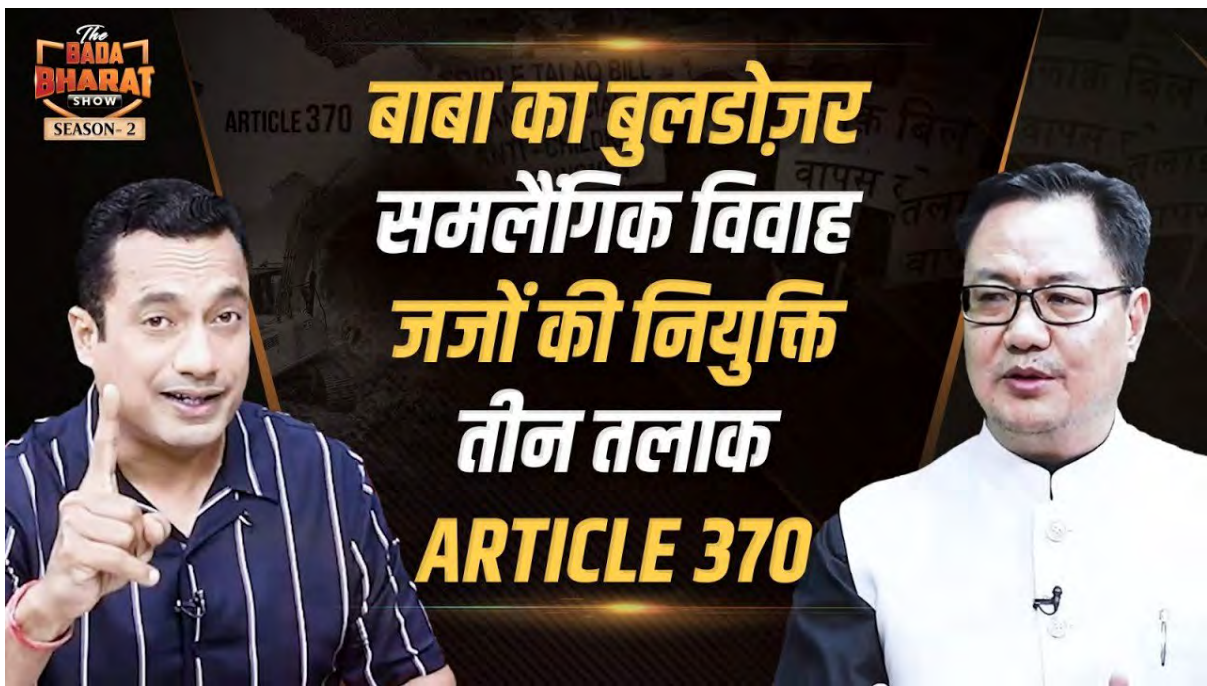
Figure 11: Kiren Rijiju interviewed on Vivek Bindra's YouTube channel

On bulldozer culture in Uttar Pradesh, Rijiju presents the state's actions as being conducted in a procedurally appropriate manner, and further, that the culture itself lends itself to stronger governance. While Bindra raises the issue of extra-judicial action, he does not raise specific cases that would make it more difficult for Rijiju to dodge questions. Instead, Rijiju is able to make the case that the net outcome of bulldozer culture is to give a greater sense of safety to the citizens of the state, upon which he is not pushed further. Precisely because the interview is presented as a grilling, it allows Rijiju to present his position without moral ambiguity.

Judging by the word cloud for this interview, the distribution of the frequency of word occurrence is more varied with no one set of words being mentioned too much. Of the words that do appear in the word cloud, there is the continued observation of some discourse regarding the minister's portfolio with "kanoon" translated in English as law being a common occurrence in the comments section.

Figure 12: Word Cloud of the top 60 comments on Vivek Bindra's interview with Kiren Rijiju

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Elvish Yadav

Subscribers: 7.7 Million
Category: Comedy

Overview

Yadav has the most distinct format as compared to other influencers since he doesn't interview any politician rather vlogs about his meet and greet experience. The focus is on the behind-the-scenes journey rather than the politician, who despite being the subject of the interview appears only briefly.

The central focus of Yadav's vlogs is his own journey - what he decides to wear to meet with the politician, how he plans to get there, what food he ate there, what gifts, if any, were offered to him, what the conversations were, and finally, what suggestions he offered their team. Thus rather than the politician coming across as the expert who does a favour to the vlogger by appearing on his show, there is the appearance of a give and take in which Yadav is an expert offering counsel to the politician's strategy. Typically, as a proof of the engagement, selfies and photos with the politician will get added to the video.

Unlike the other interviewers, Yadav is fairly open about political aspirations and has mentioned the need for young people to join politics to bring about change. He has hinted at his preference for the BJP and its ministers, at times calling out Smriti Irani and Ashwini Vaishnaw as being better than their predecessors, or highlighting them as down-to-earth. His trademark style is an informal, tongue-in-cheek style of addressing his audience, using POV angles and speaking in a mix of Hindi and Haryanvi. Interestingly, Yadav used to be invited to meet BJP ministers as a part of their social media outreach program before BJP politician Maneka Gandhi accused him of supplying snake venom at rave parties last October, upon which an FIR was filed against him.

Snapshot of Political Interviews on Elvish Yadav

ML Khattar

The meeting with Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar was not a typical political interview, but rather part of a meetup in Gurugram organised following his victory in the reality show - Bigg Boss OTT 2. The crowd is massive, and the political undertone is set by chants of 'Har Har Mahadev' that start off the video. In keeping with a vlogging format, starting at home with the blogger's journey to the venue, the visuals then run the audience through the back-end work of running an event, building anticipation for the Chief Minister's arrival, and slipping in brand promotions as it goes along. The show features the politician mainly with respect to an on-stage felicitation of the YouTuber, highlighting that he is important enough to be engaged by the state's highest politician. The narrative keeps Yadav as its central focus with much engagement with the crowd. As far as the politician is concerned, the draw is the crowd that Elvish is able to raise, thousands of youngsters, mainly men, show up at the event which has little performance other than felicitations by various individuals on stage. This is a means for a politician to hook into a very unique phenomenon in youth culture, through a young man who has clearly gained a significant fan following of his own.

Figure 13: Haryana Chief Minister ML Khattar meets with YouTuber Elvish Yadav prior to the stage function felicitating him

The word cloud for the comments under this video, as is seen in Figure 14, is rather unique in that the influencer is much more significant than the politician, who only gets minor attention, that too through the mention of the state rather than his name. This speaks to the fan following of the YouTuber, who is the main draw, rather than the politician.

Figure 14: Wordcloud of the top 60 comments on Elvish Yadav's vlog with Haryana's Chief Minister ML Khattar

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Beer Biceps

Ranveer Allahbadia

Subscribers: 6.84 Million
Category: Lifestyle
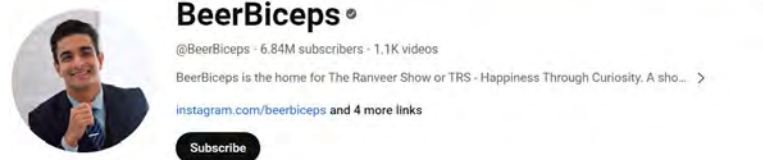
Overview

Ranveer Allahbadia, who goes by Beer Biceps on YouTube, has interviewed politicians from the Congress, BJP and AAP. He has also interviewed the German Ambassador to India and Bhutan, Dr. Philipp Ackermann. These interviews follow a podcast format and are a part of his 'The Ranveer Show' where he questions the interviewees on the lines of both political as well as non-political content. The interviews are very interactive, casual and take place either at Allahbadia's studio or in the office of the minister.

In some cases, videos begin with a MyGov disclaimer, indicating it is part of a sponsored collaboration with the Government of India. Interviews begin with a teaser commentary on what to explain and briefly summarize the experience of interviewing the politician. His style of interviewing, and how formal the interaction is varies depending on the politician. Thus engagements with Smriti Irani and S. Jaishankar are formal and guarded, whereas with the much younger Rajya Sabha member Raghav Chadha, the style is far more casual. In general, Beer Biceps' videos are among the most successful, often crossing the 1 million views mark, and are curated in a manner that they can easily be edited into small reels which can gain traction of their own.

Snapshot of Political Interviews on Beer Biceps

Raghav Chadha

Allahbadia begins by questioning Chadha about his early days at AAP, how the party came into existence, his professional career as a Chartered Accountant and his own trajectory. The interview focuses on young Indians' aspirations and political positions, Allahabadia himself addresses the notion that politicians can get more traction online among younger voters by speaking with influencers rather than with journalists. He speaks about his political naivety as

compared to a more politically aware influencer like Samdish (and he refers to him multiple times during the course of the interview), and also asks Chadha about how his party plans to strategize over reaching a 'capitalistic audience' like Allahbadia's viewers who are content with Modi government.

Figure 15: Raghav Chadha interviewed on Ranveer Allahbadia's YouTube channel

Unlike interviews with BJP politicians where Allahbadia poses his questions in a manner that seems like an endorsement of Modi (by asking what the politician likes about Modi or has learnt from him), he adopts a critical approach while asking about AAP leadership, Arvind Kejriwal, and his manner of operation. Chadha makes use of every opportunity to build a positive image of Kejriwal by sharing an anecdote about him and how he makes things work in Delhi despite the roadblocks that BJP throws his way.

Smriti Irani

Smriti Irani's interview takes place as a two part series - part one focuses on her life as a politician and a cabinet minister and part two focuses on her personal life and motherhood. The video begins with the MyGov disclaimer, Allahbadia acknowledges that she's part of the talk because it's important to be a part of the communication that can be leveraged. During the interview, Irani discusses her stint as the education minister and her role in setting up the New Education Policy in an inclusive fashion, but eschews discussion of any controversial topics

during the tenure. She also addresses her tenure as the Minority affairs minister, specifically how she subsidized Hajj for Muslims, but throwing in the refrain of appeasement politics from the Congress.

Figure 16: Smriti Irani interviewed on BeerBiceps's YouTube channel

The second part of the podcast features her personal life, but Irani steers the conversation back to policy making and her transition to politics. She presents herself as an underdog who struggled on her own to climb up the ladder of politics through her sheer will to give back to society.

The word cloud of comments from the conversation with Smriti Irani shows that she emerges as a much bigger locus of conversation than her interviewer. While there are mentions about her portfolios, current and erstwhile, they aren't too frequent with "education" being the only one which even got picked up by the visualization.

Figure 18: Word Cloud of the top 60 comments from BeerBicep's interview of Smriti Irani

Conclusion

In summary the trend of politicians interviewing with social media influencers as a means of political outreach is here to stay. If anything, we should expect a lot more engagement between politicians and social media influencers in the months to come. As we see here, the BJP clearly has a massive advantage over other parties with these five influencers, but the spread of influencers in various languages is broad, and these influencers are mostly relevant for national level politics, for the kinds of politicians who have a broad, cross-regional profile. While the YouTubers highlighted here largely cater to younger audiences, the reach of YouTube covers a vast majority of the electorate, and there are important influencers across age groups, regions, and languages.

The objective here is not necessarily to win elections, but rather, to win a discursive battle on what a specific party, politician, or ideology stands for. Influencers allow politicians to present an alternate image of themselves, without the baggage of formality, or the weight of policy conversation. By giving us a glimpse into the lives of politicians in casual settings, influencers can help humanize politicians, and in the same vein an interview with an influencer is also a point at which a politician can save him or herself the inconvenience of difficult questions that a professional journalist can ask. At the same time, a servile professional journalist can end up making an interview seem planted, whereas with an influencer, the same standards do not apply. Influencers then become a means for a politician to generate political content posing as apolotical content. For the influencer, engaging with politicians is a means to extend their own reach -- as prior research has shown, engaging politicians is hugely beneficial for the view counts of influencers' content.

It is also important that the ruling party has a massive advantage by virtue of being a ruling party -- an interview with an influencer for a ruling politician can always be presented as an engagement with a government official, rather than with a politician. With formal funding mechanisms for the government to engage influencers, this further advantages the ruling party

in presenting its positions while opposition parties would need to spend up front, or cajole influencers to get similar gigs.