
Studying Politicians' Social Media use from a Multi-disciplinary Perspective: Examining the Indian 2019 General Election

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Abstract

Social media use by politicians is a complex and multi-faceted issue that can be understood differently depending on the framing. The overwhelming majority of research on social media and elections is located outside the Global South, where the issues in online

political speech present a very different set of challenges given the style and history of media use in election cycles. In this short paper, we present our approach to studying Twitter use by politicians in India in the run-up to the 2019 General Elections. Our approach includes both quantitative and computational techniques such as verifying accounts of politicians based on their profile text, and qualitative techniques including in-depth studies of political actors such as social media managers and politicians themselves.

Author Keywords

Twitter, Social Media, Politics, India

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;.

Introduction

Social media is central to the experience of digital living around the world. This is increasingly true in parts of the Global South where a range of social, economic, and political exchange takes place online, but in fairly unequal ways as different populations have different access to the internet and social media. On one hand, this presents challenges to political actors on how they choose to represent themselves to adapt to these differences, but on another, this lays bare the spectre of new forms of exclusionary political communications in which marginalized populations are further removed from the political process.

Social Media and Elections at the Margins in India

Elections in India present a unique case relevant to this dichotomous communicative universe enabled by social

media. A diverse and economically unequal society, India at one has the largest population of undernourished families and the largest population of Facebook users.

General Elections in India, are typically the largest voting events in the world by sheer size of the electorate, at nearly over 800 million voters. In addition to the massive number of politicians standing for election into the Parliament, a number of states go for federal/Assembly polls synchronously with the parliamentary elections.

The 2019 elections in India will also be a watershed moment for social media in politics. With the prime minister himself noting that only candidates with a minimum of 200,000 followers will be given tickets to stand for elections from his party, there has been intense pressure on politicians across the spectrum to build and utilise a social media presence.

Political Account Database

Constructing a comprehensive political database involves a combination of human and computational techniques. We have constructed a list of political actors from the national all the way to the municipal levels using a mix of electoral rolls, natural language processing techniques, and crowdsourced information processing in evolving a stable list of political handles.

The multi-lingual and code-mixed nature of Indian social media, existence of spurious accounts, and lack of norms with writing presents a range of challenges with identifying what is a politician's Twitter account. We have built a classifier that, with minimal human intervention, collects politically affiliated Twitter

handles and extracts relevant attributes from their profile (Figure 1).

Online Organizing across Domains

Using ethnographic work among non-profits in the social sector, as well as with politicians and political communications experts, we map how, when, and why organizers use social media and technology, as compared to traditional methods of engagement. We examine the differences between social sector organizing and mainstream political organizing.

In addition to interviews, our work also includes examinations of the visual discourse of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to contextualize the ways in which political identities are performed online by politicians. We examine the role of access to resources, political competition, state priorities, party positions, and individual style in building online political identities.

Changing Stakeholder Engagement

Using qualitative research with politicians who are currently standing for elections or have in the past, we map stakeholders of political campaigns. In particular, we look at the role of brokers and political intermediaries in outreach to voters and examine how social media is mediating the vote conversion process.

Using data from urban and rural constituencies, we explore ways in which technologists and data scientists have emerged as central to political campaigns in the current Indian election. Our work raises questions on the role of regulation as trends in campaigning change.

Visualizing Political Information

Finally, our work presents challenges with visualizing political social media data for general consumption by the public. We present our experience in the construction of a public-facing digital interface that can be manipulated and used by non-experts with intuitive outputs.

Workshop Contribution

India is one case of online political engagement by political actors of a kind that will be replicated in various settings in the years to come. Our goal in this work is to present a set of tools and approaches in studying political social media that can be useful in conducting similar studies in other parts of the world. Both the qualitative and quantitative methods used here are intended to be extensible and replicable, our goal of joining the workshop is to get feedback from others on ways it can be improved and used by others.

Conclusion

Our goal with this presentation is to bring forth some of the complexities with building a comprehensive agenda for studying social media use by politicians in an active electoral cycle. We propose that a mixed methods study helps consider the intricacies of politicians' electoral behavior with greater nuance and contextualization.

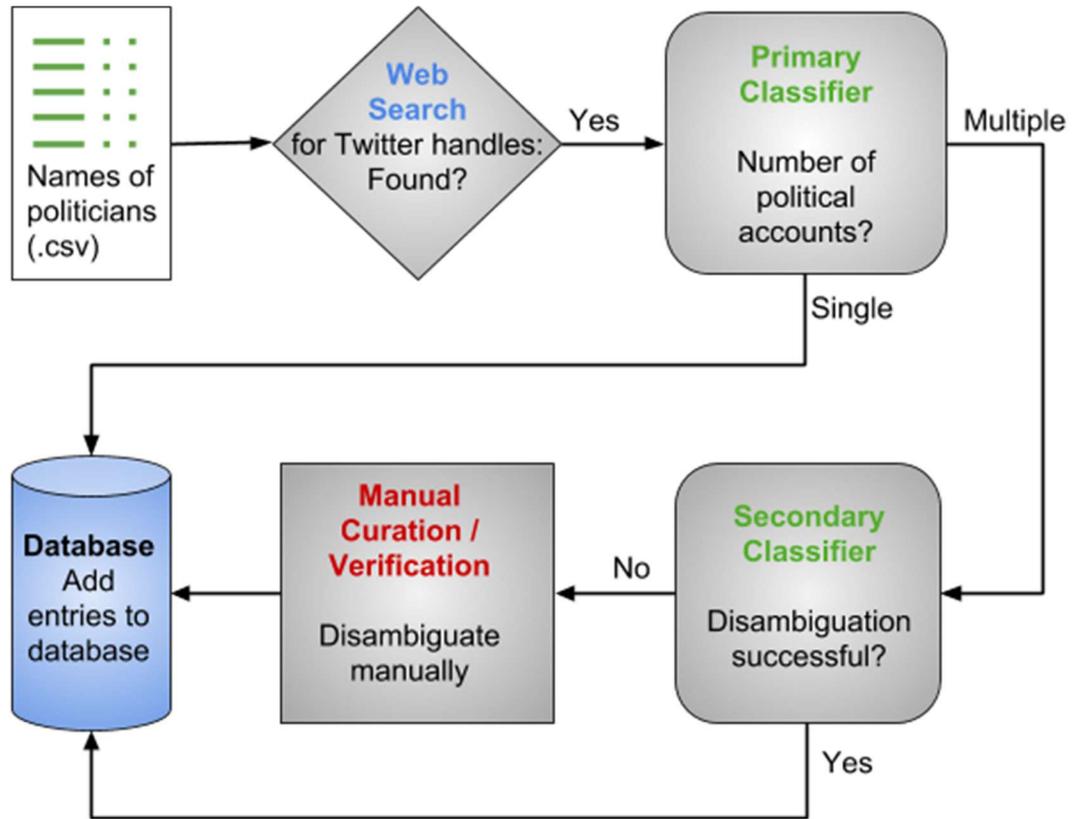


Figure 1: Flow diagram of political account classification