

@NARENDRAMODI, OR HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BRAND: JOYOJEET PAL

30/01/2015 *Guest post by Joyojeet Pal*

Political Social Media had a minor event this week. The world's two most followed elected leaders on social media, shared the media centerstage. Barack Obama, with 45 million fans on Facebook and 54 million followers on Twitter, and his Indian counterpart Modi, with 27 million on Facebook and another 9.8 million on Twitter, together command the arguably most powerful political brands on social media. In a rare moment of realpolitik bromance, Narendra Modi sent Barack Obama a smiley for quoting Shah Rukh Khan in the Lok Sabha. A day later, Narendra Modi became the first Indian politician to use Twitter's new video feature in a carefully cut 30-second monologue.

Modi campaign's exceptional presence on social media is not news. He is India's most "liked" person on Facebook. While he still trails actors Amitabh Bachchan the Khan troika and the Dalai Lama from among India's resident Tweepers, his average of adding 20,000 followers daily for much of the last year should put him safely past his competition by the end of the year.

The prime minister also does more than Tweet or update his status. He has an active YouTube channel, feed on the microblogging platform Tumblr, a widely followed photo network on Instagram, and "pins" images and videos to a Pinterest page. In most of these channels, the prime minister speaks directly to his followers. There is no apparent intermediary, no third-person voice. Every morning, you can wake up to a tweet from the man himself, or catch a status update on Facebook. When the need arises, you can listen to his "Mann ki Baat" missives on his YouTube channel.



There is a small bipolarity in the image it helps build. On one hand is the RSS strongman, once fondly remembered for his trademark appearances on political stages wielding swords and firebrand speeches. On the other is a man with a selfie hashtag associated with his name, whose holograms gave speeches throughout the country in the run up to the election, and whose YouTube feed stands among the best curated media outreach accounts by any

politician. It isn't clear whether this PM can run regression equations as well as the last one, but his fingers would certainly appear more nimble on a smart phone.

There are two things interesting about Modi's very active presence on social media. First, the idea of technology is in and of itself a valuable association in Indian politics, one that has been used or aspired to by a number of political leaders in the recent past. Although the idea of technocracy, per se, is not new, the use and comfort with digital artifacts is an important element of the politician's public image, particularly given the broader aspirational environment in the country, where working with technology is largely seen as a means of social ascendance.

Second, Modi's presence on social media is itself a means to speak directly to his constituents and maintain a certain brand image. The image of Modi as a modernizer has been a steady part of the public discourse of his tenure as the Gujarat chief minister; social media enables the prime minister to solidify this discourse and develop it in new directions.

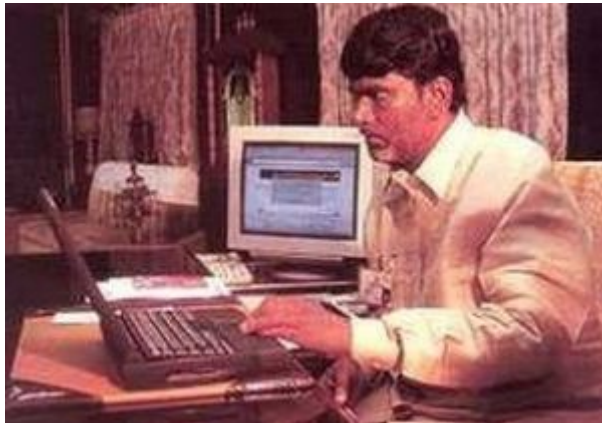
Politics, Digital Technology and an aspirational frame

In the mid-2000s, the DMK released a short video of a Tamil anthem — an ode to the Tamil language — called “Semmozhiyaan Tamil Mozhiaan.” The lyrics were penned by party supremo M. Karunanidhi and the music was composed by A.R. Rahman. The music video, shot featuring a number of leading public figures from the state, included a series of carefully curated scenes from across Tamil Nadu intended to rouse a sense of statehood. These included pictures of lush landscape, heritage sites, ancient Tamil inscriptions, visual arts, children in school, people in traditional garb — but also pointedly used imagery of people using technology. A man uses a mobile phone to type a message in Tamil to his son presumably living abroad, and a young woman, ostensibly new to urban life, proudly takes her first job at a tech firm and instantly starts using Google in Tamil. Tamil was at once the language of tradition and modernity.

The technology-driven political vision is not new to India. Arguably right from the Nehruvian era, politicians representing growth through technology — whether driven by dams, electricity, roads, factories or telecom — have come at various points to represent a political vision of modernity through a mix of the political discourse and policies they espouse. There has traditionally been a spectrum of political images, at one end of which has been the ‘earthy’ politician whose appeal is driven by some form of group affiliation or patriarchy and consequently consideration to that set of concerns. At the other end of the spectrum is the ‘erudite’ politician whose draw, outside of the inconvenience of fighting elections, is built on an ability to represent a broader, often national vision. But the computer and mobile device has altered this discourse in one important way.

Modernity through a factory or road represented a certain value for the worker in the factory, or for that person aspiring to be one. However the rapid growth of access to mobile devices and, increasingly, access to computing in private and public places, has brought the aspiration of working with technology very broadly across classes. The DMK in its anthem was being very strategic in ensuring that the featured technology worker in its music video was female and apparently not urban.

The tech-savvy politician we discuss here is the relatively more recent phenomenon of the politician whose association with digital technology in one way or another is used to establish modernity as part of a political persona. By the late 1990s, large cutouts of the DMK's mayor M.K. Stalin speaking into mobile phones started to appear. At the time, mobile phones were still new technology. The image of a young Stalin holding up a phone was a sign of modernity and a nod at the question of what represented the next generation of the DMK's political leadership.



Referred to as the “Laptop Minister” and “Powerpoint Prophet” in the popular press, N. Chandrababu Naidu epitomized the tech-savvy politician in the 1990s. Naidu publicly started using the term CEO to refer to himself instead of “chief minister” to underline a means of distinction from the existing paradigm of political management. Naidu released a series of images of himself with his fingertips on computer keyboards and alongside key figures in the Indian and global tech sector, including Bill Gates himself.

Naidu released a ‘Vision2020’ document for Andhra Pradesh, underlining his vision for economic reforms for the state. Naidu’s ascendance as a technocrat seemed to turn him into a global political player — sharing the stage with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair during his tenure. Naidu’s CEO appeal to the national English-language press underlined ways in which technical know-how turned him from a regional politician to one who could represent India on a global neoliberal stage. And since Naidu, technology has always been a bankable news story in a country that loves its Infosys even when it won’t vote Nandan Nilekani into Lok Sabha.

The use of computing tech-savvy was relatively a more Southern phenomenon as the tech industries of Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad took off. Ministers and politicians used the means at their disposal to very publicly inaugurate tech centers, encourage engineering institutions, give away laptops to youngsters, or meet with technology luminaries to underline this dichotomy in their political images — representing on one hand their affiliation with caste, religion, or cause, but also with the secular goal of encouraging a technology economy. But over time, the phenomenon spread. Tarun Gogoi of Assam, Raman Singh of Chhattisgarh,

Mukul Sangma of Meghalaya, Naveen Patnaik of Orissa have all at some point run wildly publicized laptop giveaways.

At times, technology became a space for political sparring. After the DMK started distributing laptops with pre-loaded wallpapers of Karunanidhi, Jayalaitha came up with her own version, with her picture emblazoned onto the body of the laptop in case the wallpapers were replaceable. Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav sparred over his laptop giveaway scheme, the latter's version had both his own face and that of his father pre-installed as wallpapers, and the laptops reportedly stopped working if one tried to get rid of the wallpaper.

Indeed, the association with technology needn't have anything to do with winning the actual elections, as Naidu's debacle in the 2004 elections would attest. For many politicians, the image of modernity builds a face of viability to urban aspirational classes, and helps articulate an aspirational frame for their voting constituencies. Naidu carefully uses his ties to NTR's political and caste base outside of setting up computer centers at his constituency Kuppam, Akhilesh Yadav represents the laptop-distributing heir to the wrestler charisma of Mulayam Singh, and Stalin builds on his father's literary status and appeal of Tamil nationalism. The association with technology represents what the politician also stands for, in addition to the traditionalist ties that win elections.

Arguably, for Narendra Modi the traditional base is not an issue. Let us turn now to what technology extends for him.

Technology and political rebranding

Modi was criticized publicly at the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) in 2003 for his role in the Gujarat riots. The critique was normative and economic — a bad state of political affairs makes for nervousness among investors. The stand-off led to an important political victory for Modi as a group of firms from Gujarat threatened an exodus from the CII, forcing its leadership to eventually capitulate and formally to Modi.

Since the incident, the official line on development in Gujarat has been that the Modi government gave industry an environment to thrive and therefore had the backing of the industry in the state. The branding of Modi as a modernizer for the state has steadily found traction irrespective of any close examination of Gujarat's growth trajectory, especially alongside other high-performing states in the nation.

But while Modi continued to win elections in the state, the ghost of the riots lingered. In a famously uncomfortable interview with Karan Thapar in 2007, Modi stopped the cameras within minutes of starting as the conversation veered toward the riots. Internationally, Modi remained a pariah. He was on the list of people barred from entering the United States for severe violations of religious freedoms, and much of the UK and EU had a de facto boycott on all visits or interactions with Modi by high-ranking officials. To much of this, his traditional base was impervious. He remained virtually unbeatable at the polls in Gujarat.

Later in his tenure as Chief Minister, a series of well-orchestrated images of Modi appeared in the popular media. These featured him in sylvan, peaceful settings, reading a financial newspaper while wearing a tracksuit, swans roaming about, with a copy of Obama's biography and an open Apple laptop nearby. The message came through in multiple ways. Here was a modern, forward-thinking man who understood the economy, had a global vision, used the latest technology, and stood for peace. He even dressed differently from the standard Indian politician. An image of Modi on an IBM ThinkPad likewise made its rounds, and while the slightly awkward single finger on the keyboard persisted a la Chandrababu Naidu, Modi's image had an orchestrated erudition to it.



In 2009, a Facebook page appeared for Narendra Modi. It started with a single post, written on behalf of Modi and urging followers to join the “NaMo League” for updates from the Gujarat chief minister. That was the only post for the entire year. The next year when Modi surfaced on social media, he spoke in first person, addressing the people directly.

In 2012, Modi did an online Google hangout with Ajay Devgan. Devgan was at the time riding a wave of popularity after the release of *Singham*, and the Google hangout became a forum for people to ask Modi questions directly online. Modi's Twitter account gained a following in 2012, hitting 1 million followers during Navratri that year. Even though Modi was not formally on the national electoral stage at this point, he was already second only to Shashi Tharoor on social media following. Here it's worth differentiating between the two and their respective online strategies. Tharoor, a diplomat-turned-politician, had a relatively active online presence, and in one way that presence was very different from Modi's. Most of Tharoor's daily tweets were about himself, his daily activities, his views on issues. This is not very different from how many individual people, including celebrities, use Twitter.

Modi's account, while highlighting his work, was much more about his political vision. Modi repeatedly tweeted to supporters, mentioning national events and festivals and calling out to a range of national icons, particularly those who have traditionally appealed to the right like Rani Lakshmbai, Veer Savarkar, Lala Lajpatrai, Sardar Patel, and most frequently Swami Vivekananda.

Modi's Twitter feed was cognizant of shout-outs to people with whom his political and social constituency intersected — including Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the Thackerays, Mata Amritanandamayi, and Baba Ramdev. He tweeted about major events in the national imagination including sports and religious occasions, he even paid timely condolences for

people not directly in the political process but active in the popular imagination, including chef Tarla Dalal, actor Pran, and journalist Khushwant Singh.

Perhaps one of the most inventive uses of social media has been Modi's occasional call-out to the casual citizen. On his birthday in 2013, on Sept. 17, his account suddenly "followed" a number of his most active followers. The follow-back strategy was instantly seen as a call to action — a large number of the people who were followed back immediately changed their profiles to Modi's face and noted their willingness to do whatever was needed to push his campaign forward. In one swift move, Modi reaffirmed his position as a Karyakarta. He was willing to lend his followers his ear the same way they pledged their allegiance online.

The strategy also included reaching out to celebrities for causes that appeared larger than his own. Six months before the general elections, he tweeted to a list of some of the most widely followed celebrities including film stars, cricketers, and spiritual figures, urging them to get young voters to register. The implicit message was that this was not just good for him as a politician, but for the country as a whole. The use of the nation, and what is good for the nation, instead of himself or the BJP, remained a hallmark of his Twitter account. Indeed, when Modi finally won the election, the Tweet said "India has Won." It remains the most retweeted message in India to date.

Modi's masterful use of social media goes hand-in-hand with a broader policy of using technology very visibly. Accompanying his Facebook and Twitter accounts was a "Chai pe Charcha" campaign of discussing national issues over tea with citizens via online video. The tea metaphor was used symbolically to highlight Modi's history of having worked at a tea shop, but the conversations were mediated through technology.

The son-of-the-soil calling card accompanied the elaborate technology-enabled outreach during the election campaign. Trucks went around the country projecting 3-D holographic speeches, a mobile app was created for people who wanted to organize and track the campaign. There was even a brief initiative to brand a 'NaMo' android phone. To date, his messages on social media avoid controversy and are a clever mix of uplifting banalities, shout-outs when needed, and gentle inspirational notes to self.

Beyond just the first-person voice of his Tweeting, Modi's first-hand use of technology was visible and significant. Images of Modi on his cell phone and taking selfies went viral quickly; #SelfieWithModi was one among tens of hashtags dedicated to the man. The latest, large-screen Android was an apt companion for a man who didn't need a safari-suited sidekick to pass him the phone when a call came. Here was a man who had already rolled his sleeves up.

The millennial Modi

For many younger voters, the enduring image of Narendra Modi may not be that of the man associated with riots, but of a charismatic leader with a rousing nationalist message. The use of social media has changed the equation between the leader and his constituency in such a way that the news media must rely on the same sources for the commentary that the citizen does, if news channels aren't bypassed altogether.

Modi can choose his message and decide how and when to package it, and when the next trend on digital communication comes about he can feel assured he'll have the right team to help him master it just the same. If this election was any indication, Modi may as well start a franchise on political social media.

Many across the political spectrum looking at the young Indian voter believed the Khakhi stain would be too hard to rub off the Modi campaign. But they didn't see the selfie coming. Modi is probably a bigger draw among the young urban population than just about any other leader we have had in recent years. As for the extended electorate, his party machinery already stands atop a solid base

Attributions of social media revolutions were gallantly handed out to Anna Hazare when thousands of young Indians followed Facebook status updates and Twitter feeds to show up at marches, sit-ins, and candlelight vigils. The air was crisp with the distributed sudden impact of people's power, with the wonder that technology could bring together minds, organize flash mobs, and make the hair stand at the back of your neck with the fervent sense of being in a movement.

But the revolutionaries forgot that the knife cuts both ways. Public relations agencies exist for a very good reason. The same technologies that bring towers down can be used by institutions to build their own ramparts.

Someday, Narendra Modi will overtake Kim Kardashian on Twitter. And we won't be able to say that we didn't see that coming.

Most Followed Twitter accounts from India

	Handle	Followers	Following	Tweets
Amitabh Bachchan	@SrBachchan	12.9 million	943	38,100
ShahRukh Khan	@iamsrk	11.1 million	75	8,147
Aamir Khan	@aamir_khan	10.9 million	7	263
Salman Khan	@BeingSalmanKhan	10.4 million	10	41,500
Dalai Lama	@DalaiLama	10.2 million	0	1,080

Most Followed Indian Politicians on Twitter

	Handle	Followers	Following	Tweets
Narendra Modi	@narendramodi	9.8 million	1060	6,967
Arvind Kejriwal	@ArvindKejriwal	3.3 million	109	4,793
Sushma Swaraj	@iamsrk	2.2 million	0	2,994
Smriti Irani	@smritiirani	1.3 million	205	6,742
Rajnath Singh	@BJPRajnathSingh	1.1 million	8	1,098

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