An Empirical Study on Political Communication in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Political communication campaign involves the usage of various forms of communication tools. It involves advertising through various commercial media, public relations using various media platforms, addressing potential voters' gatherings, propagating anti-incumbency stories, and using every social event to build a positive perception about a political party. However, in India, the elections are won based on many parameters along with political communication like, religion, region, development, caste, and money power. These are only one set of parameters, but if you look at the elections to be held in 2014, there are some very interesting challenges that have been added to these parameters. Young Indians in the age group of 18-35 years constitute 65% of the voting population, and the media consumption pattern of this young India is different. For them, the Internet is the primary medium for accessing information. Through this empirical research, an effort has been made to understand the Internet savvy audiences' perceptions about the Internet as a medium to learn about politics, and to ascertain whether political information consumed on social networking sites has any influence on the respondents' decision to vote. The study found that engagement through the Internet would be one of the very useful media for political communication, especially when one is targeting the Internet savvy voters.

Keywords: customer engagement, political advertising, social media marketing, digital media

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Political communication plays a key role in a democratic system; it carves a political party's image. With every event that unfolds, a positive development, a crisis or a scandal, a major achievement of the political party/government/ politician, there is a new opportunity to shape a political party's image, and it all depends on how a political party communicates to different stakeholders and what tools/medium you choose to communicate, because the medium is the message. Election in any democratic nation is one of the largest national events and during this phase, political parties use political communication to the maximum to achieve a favorable electoral verdict. Like many democratic nations in India, use of advertising as a political campaigning tool has grown significantly over the past few years. Enlargement of voters' size, availability of technically advanced communication platforms, rising complexities and competitiveness in political scenario are considered as major reasons for the growth of advertising in the political context (Sharma, 2011). Commercial platforms like television, print, and radio have been extensively used for political communication, and in some cases, the expenditures are more than some of the country's largest advertising brands.

✎ **Winning Elections in India :** In India, elections are won based on many parameters like religion, region, development, caste, creed, and money power. These are only one set of parameters, but if you look at the elections to be held this year, there are some very interesting challenges that have been added to these parameters. 65% of the voters in 2014 would belong to the age group of 18-35 years, which is 505 million voters, and 100 million voters among them are voting for the first time. The Table 1 presents the statistics about the young and first time voters' population of India,

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Table 1. Young and First Time Voters' Population of India

India's Total Population	1.2 Billion
Voting Population of India	777 Million Voters.
Youth Voters In India Age (18-35)	505 Million
First time voters who would cast vote in the 2014 general elections	100 Million voters

Source: Adapted from The young voter (2013, January 25). Lime Mint. Retrieved from http://www.livemint.com/Politics/97tVCJkTlhMm7hAcbasZEN/The-young-voter.html

Table 2. Internet and Social Media Population of India

Internet population in India	105Million Users
Social media users in India	62 Million Users
Facebook Users in India	60 million Users

Source: Adapted from IAMAI. (2013). Research report. Retrieved from http://www.iamai.in/rsh_pay.aspx?rid=rXiopaUzE7s=

who would cast their votes in the 2014 national elections. The psychographics, demographics, and media consumption of these voters is different. All political parties in India are taking these statistics very seriously and each one of them is trying to know - what motivates this young India? , from where do they learn about politics?, how do we reach them?, and from where should we communicate to them to persuade them and win their votes.

✋ **Population of the Internet and Social Media Users in India :** The importance of engaging these Internet savvy voters is recognized by some eminent politicians and political parties in India; some of these politicians are Mr. Shashi Tharoor, Mr. Narendra Modi, Mr. S.M. Krishna, Mr. Rajiv Chandrasekhar, Captain Gopinath, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and many more. The Table 2 provides an insight on the total number of Internet users and social media users in India.

With the help of this empirical study, we attempted to understand what is the perception of Internet savvy audiences about the Internet as a medium to learn about politics. How do they evaluate the political candidates before they vote, whether there is any influence of social media on their voting decision. In the following section, the literature gathered from various empirical research studies would aid in enhancing our understanding of the subject.
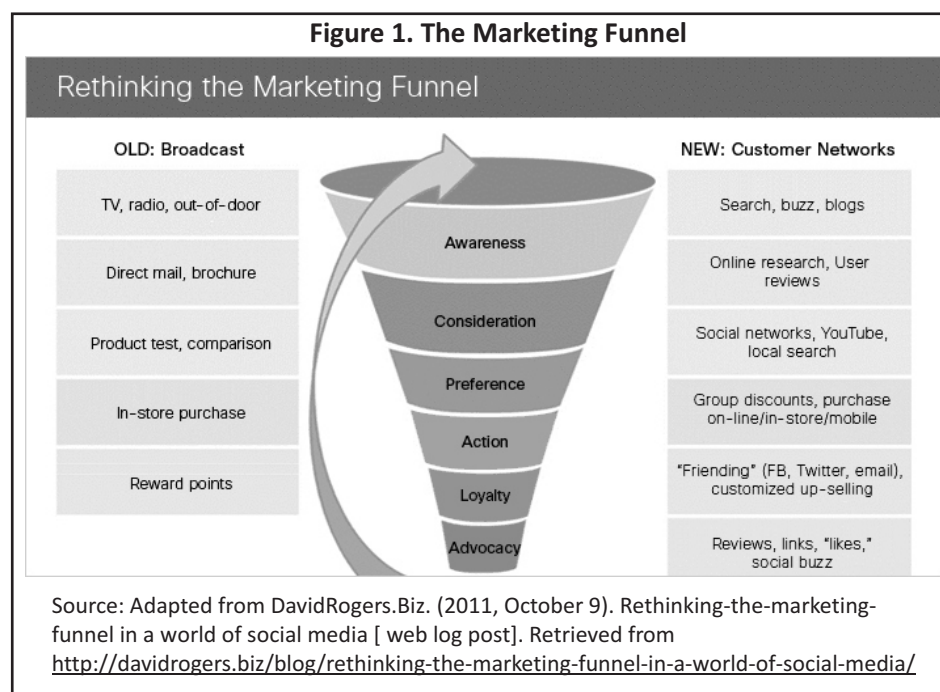
Review of Literature

✋ **Positive Impact of Digital Media Messaging:** The growing radius of new media has a serious impact on both developed and developing countries' political communication. The Internet played a very important role in Barack Obama's election campaign in the 2008 US presidential elections, in Ghanaian presidential elections held in December 2008, and in National elections held in Zimbabwe in 2008. In Arab countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, new media played an important role to propagate against the unpopular rulers. It has been found that the new media technology has changed the political attitude and behavior in the countries where it is used frequently (Riaz, 2011). In the USA, hundreds of civic websites were created in the last decade to engage youth in political developments; these efforts have provided some of the essential skills for civil and political engagement for the young Americans. Interactive media makes it much easier for the American youth to learn about today's critical issues, express their views about the issue, and participate in major political developments (Montgomery, 2008).

According to research conducted by the Pew "Internet & American Life Project," the number of Americans citing the Internet as their first source of presidential elections campaign news increased by 23% since 2004, and individuals relying on television declined by 4%. The survey data shows that younger people are more heavily present among new media users and the trend will accelerate (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009). In the context of a political democracy, voters who use new media to seek information, interact with campaigns, and share their views with others are likely to feel better informed, more politically efficacious, and are more willing to participate in the democratic

process (Gurevinch et al., 2009 ; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, McLeod, Friedland, & Nelson, 2007; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Sharma (2011) revealed that political news covered in newspapers and televisions are the two important sources of information during the elections. The research also revealed that the Internet is one of the most important media sources after news covered in the newspapers and television channels. IAMIA (Internet and Mobile Association of India) and IRIS Knowledge foundation published a report in June 2013 on "Impact of Social Media on 2014 National (Lok Sabha) elections". According to the report, out of 543 constituencies where the Lok Sabha elections (National elections) would be held in 2014, social media would have a high impact on the voters in 160 constituencies, a moderate impact on voters in 67 constituencies, a low impact in 60 constituencies , and in the remaining 256 constituencies, there will be no impact of social media.

✎ **Digital Media is also Changing Consumer Behavior Theories :** Traditionally, marketers modeled consumers' buying decision as they progressed from awareness through consideration, preference, action, and loyalty; this is called as the marketing funnel. DavidRogers.Biz. (2011) proposed the following rethinking of the marketing funnel in the world of social-media. The Figure 1 explains the concept in detail.

Figure 1. The Marketing Funnel

Source: Adapted from DavidRogers.Biz. (2011, October 9). Rethinking-the-marketing-funnel in a world of social media [web log post]. Retrieved from http://davidrogers.biz/blog/rethinking-the-marketing-funnel-in-a-world-of-social-media/
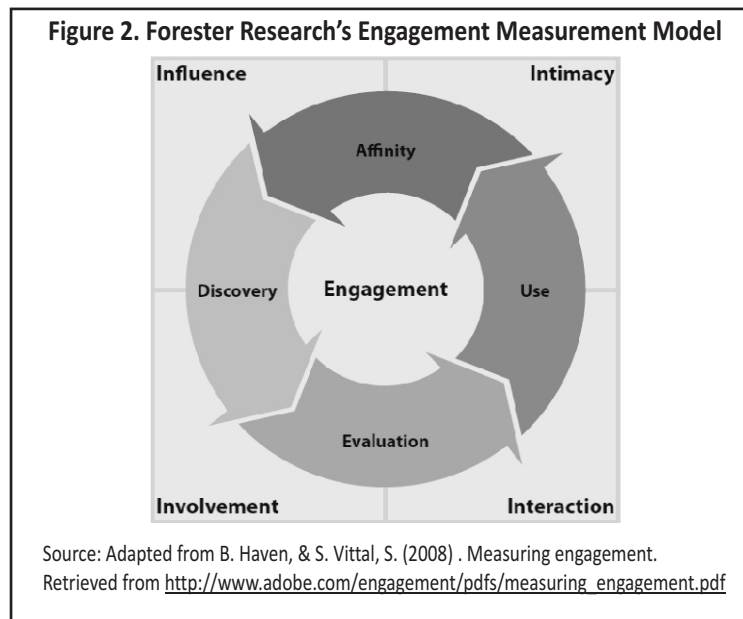
A marketer's job is to move prospects from the larger end to the smaller end of the funnel, but the funnel has outlived its usefulness. Today, marketers don't dictate the path people take, and they don't lead the dialogue of marketing communication (DavidRogers.Biz., 2011). Though the primary act of awareness is still created by the marketer to communicate to the buyer that a particular brand exists, he also informs the buyer about the key features of his specific brand. But factors like recommendations from friends and family, experts' product reviews, word of mouth (WOM) on social media, competitive claims, first hand experiences expressed by the consumer, and many more factors are not controlled by a marketer. Especially in the online media, where a whole world of avenues are at a customer's finger tips, it is very difficult for a marketer to understand what kind of communication is being spread about his brand.

Customer engagement (CE) is the solution that marketers have devised in order to come to terms with the social, technological, and dynamic young consumer who consumes media differently. In a nutshell, it is an attempt to create an engaging dialogue with target consumers and stimulate their engagement with the brand. Now, this model does not only apply to brands and marketers, but it also applies to any entity which wants to communicate to its stakeholders. Today, political communication also needs to engage the new set of young voters who consume media differently. The following definitions provide comprehension about customer engagement : According to Hollebeek (2010), customer engagement is the level of expression of an individual customer's motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent

state of mind characterized by a degree of activation, identification, and absorption in brand interactions. According to Bowden (2009), customer engagement is a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers of a service brand, as well as the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers of a service brand. According to Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef (2010), customer engagement is customers' behavioral manifestation towards a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers, including word-of-mouth, activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging, and writing reviews. There is an increased interest in customer engagement studies, new definitions, and empirical research studies are providing a lot of clarity about the subject. At the same time, traditional media metrics look irrelevant today.

✤ **Traditional Media Metrics that do not Matter Anymore :** Traditionally, media houses measure the impact of a communication campaign based on GRP/TRP in television, circulation, and readership in print medium, and listenership in radio. None of the above metrics can evaluate whether advertising could capture the attention of the viewer, if it could hold the customers' attention in the contact, whether this exposure increased the brand awareness, if this exposure enhanced the brand value, and what is the total interaction across the channels (Haven & Vittal, 2008). It has been witnessed that with the rise of new media channels such as Facebook, YouTube, Google, and Twitter, customers are able to take a more active role as market players and reach (and be reached by) almost everyone, anywhere, anytime. Today's consumers thus serve as retailers on eBay, media producer-directors on YouTube, authors on Wikipedia, and critical reviewers on Amazon.

Figure 2. Forester Research's Engagement Measurement Model

Source: Adapted from B. Haven, & S. Vittal, S. (2008) . Measuring engagement. Retrieved from http://www.adobe.com/engagement/pdfs/measuring_engagement.pdf

✤ **Benefits of Digital Customer Engagement over Traditional Media Communication :** The biggest benefit of digital media engagement is the ability of the platform to communicate in two ways, and in this way, each communication campaign's effectiveness can be measured. Forester research's engagement measurement model shown in the Figure 2 describes how a digital customer engagement campaign can be measured. By applying 4Is of engagement, that is, involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence, customer engagement can be measured (Haven, Vittal, Overby, & Cokeh, 2008).

✤ **Involvement :** A stage where a customer gets involved with a piece of digital communication, this can be measured by unique site visits, views of the video/advertisements, website page views, and time spent per page. The data received on the basis of the above parameters would reveal when and how the consumer gets involved with a brand.

✤ **Interaction:** Consumers' use three basic criteria to evaluate a brand, **i)** credibility, **ii)** validity, **iii)** relevance. Interaction metrics provide right measures to marketers and reveal what specific actions people take while deciding

whether the product is good or bad for them. Some of the indicators are first time online or offline purchase, request for a free sample, loyalty card registration, user generated content, and comments on the blog.

✥ **Intimacy:** Intimacy tracking allows marketers to understand and measure people's attraction towards a brand after they buy or possess a product or a service and use it. Intimacy metrics include satisfaction rates, sentiments expressed in customer service calls, brand affinity, and sentiments expressed on the brand forum.

✥ **Influence:** Influence presents an opportunity for marketers to measure the impact that individuals have on others in their brands' context. Influence metrics include word of mouth, net promoter scores, fan websites, viral user generated contents, and loyalty.

By applying these 4Is, one can thoroughly measure the engagement levels and persuade the consumer in his favor.

Scope and Objectives of the Research

65% of the voters who will cast their votes in this year's general elections in India belong to the age group of 18-35 years, which is 505 million voters, and 100 million voters among them would be voting for the first time. From a political party's perspective, it is very important to know about the media consumption of these young Indians - what are the parameters which motivate them to elect a politician?, how would the new media (digital media) play a role in political communication? This research focuses on understanding the above discussed points and attempts to achieve the following objectives :

a) To determine whether Internet as a medium to learn about politics has a better efficacy as compared to television and print as a media to learn about politics,

b) To understand what are the major attributes based on which the Internet savvy voters decide to vote,

c) To comprehend whether social networking sites have any influence on the voting decision of the respondents.

Methodology

✥ **Research Design:** With the help of the survey based technique, this exploratory research tries to explore and provide clarity about digital media consumers' choices and preferences about media consumption.

✥ **Sampling Plan:** Digital media savvy respondents in the age group of 18-40 years were chosen from Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, and Delhi and were interviewed. Total sample was 144 respondents, with around 30 respondents from each city.

✥ **Data Collection Plan:** Questionnaire technique was used to collect the responses, the medium opted to receive the questionnaire was an online medium.

✥ **Instrument Design:** The questionnaire designed consisted of 13 questions, with elimination questions to understand the relevance of the respondents. The questionnaire consists of 19 Likert's scale statements (5 point scale) with statements ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

✥ **Pilot Testing:** A pilot survey was conducted on 15 respondents, and necessary changes were incorporated in the final study.

Analysis and Results

This phase of the research paper is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the two different scenarios of how digital media was positively used to influence the electoral verdict. The first-phase discusses about Mr. Narendra Modi's digital media campaign carried out in 2012-2013, during the Gujarat elections, and Mr. Barack Obama's digital campaign done during the US presidential elections in 2008. The second part discusses about data analysis of the empirical research conducted for the present study.

PART A

1)   Mr. Narendra Modi's Digital Media Campaign : Mr. Narendra Modi, elected as Gujarat's chief minister for the 3rd time in 2013 Gujarat elections, used the digital media very effectively to engage prospective Gujarati voters; Gujarat is one of the most urbanized states in India. Mr.Modi's ability to tap the first-time voters and the youth in the youngest nation of the world was a great strategy. Today, Mr. Narendra Modi has the highest number of followers (Indian fans- 1.34 million) (see Figure 3) on Facebook followed closely by Barack Obama (Thadeshwar, 2013). On Twitter, he has 12, 44,133 followers and his videos shared on YouTube got 49,42,000 views . Youth (18-24 years) is the most popular age group on his Facebook page and Ahmedabad is the most popular city. The Table 3 explains a range of digital media formats used by Mr. Narendra Modi during the 2013 Gujarat elections. He was nominated among the top 5 political personalities globally who made a mark on the web in 2011, along with U.S. President Barack Obama.

Table 3. Mr. Narendra Modi's Digital Media Campaign

Platform Type	Media Vehicle
Search Engines	Google, Yahoo, Bing
Social Media Platforms	Facebook, Twitter, Google+
Blogging Platforms	Blogspot, Quora
Online Video Sharing Platforms	Youtube, Google+ Hangout
Online News Channel	Namo Gujarat - NarendraModi's exclusive news channel in Gujarat
Web Properties	Firstpost.com
Web PR	Nomination in Mashable.com - Most famous politician on web

Source: Adapted from J. Thadeshwar (2013, February 2). Narendra Modi's online marketing strategies. TechTheBest! Retrieved   from   http://www.techthebest.com/2013/02/02/narendra-Pmodis-online-marketing-strategies-jay-thadeshwar/

Figure 3. Snapshot of Digital Platforms Used by Mr. Narendra Modi

Source: Adapted from J. Thadeshwar (2013, February 2). Narendra Modi's online marketing strategies. TechTheBest!
Retrieved from http://www.techthebest.com/2013/02/02/narendra-Pmodis-online-marketing-strategies-jay-thadeshwar/

2)   Mr. Barack Obama's Presidential Election Campaign, 2008 : National elections to be held in India in 2014 are quite similar to the 2008 presidential elections held in the USA; in both the scenarios, the majority of the voting

Table 4. Demographic Break-Up of USA Voters Who Voted for Mr. Obama in 2008

Demographics	Obama	McCain
Age 18-29 years	69%	29%
Age 65+	44%	54%
African- American	96%	3%
Latino	67%	30%
Asian	63%	34%
White	43%	55%
First time Voters	72%	27%
Male	49%	48%
Female	56%	43%

Source: Adapted from M.J. Piskorski, L. Wing, & A. Smith (2009). *Barack Obama : Organizing for America 2.0*. Harvard Business School Case 709-493, April 2009.

Table 5. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.882	19

Source: Authors' Research

population comprises of young voters under 35 years of age. Social media was the most important medium for Mr. Barack Obama to become the first Afro-American president in the history of the USA in 2008. The Table 4 shows the demographic break-up of USA's voters in 2008 who voted for Mr. Obama. 69% of the youth and 96% of the African-Americans were the two segments, which decided the results in Obama's favor (Piskorski, Wing, & Smith, 2009). Analysis of Barack Obama's campaign reveals that 52% of the American voting population was in the age group 18-29 years, though they were Blacks, Whites, and various shades of brown skin color, but what they shared commonly was new media, social networking sites,and a huge urge to involve themselves and bring the change (Piskorski et al., 2009). Obama's campaign started with the launch of a website and blog like my.barackobama.com and www.barackobama.com. The campaign team created official pages on many social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Myspace, YouTube and nearly a dozen of web 2.0 sites. This resulted into 2 million accounts being created on   my.barackobama.com , 200,000 offline events were conducted by influencing through online communication, 35,000 groups were formed, 4, 00,000 blogs were posted, and most importantly, this campaign could raise $30 million of campaign fund for Mr. Obama (Piskorski et al., 2009).

Part B

✎   **Data Analysis:** We used IBM SPSS Data Editor, version 20 to analyze the data. Relevant statistical tests like ANOVA, Chi-square, *t* -test, and statistical tools like frequency tables and weighted average tools were applied to analyze the data comprehensively.

✎   **Reliability Statistics :** The Table 5 reveals Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.882 on a total of 19 items. This proves that the internal consistency of the findings has acceptable reliability.

✎   **Efficacy Comparison - Internet vs. Traditional Media (TV & Print) :** Opinions about the following 5 Likert's scale statements were collected and analyzed. To analyze if the efficacy of the Internet as a medium to learn about politics is higher than the efficacy of TV and print media to learn about politics, ANOVA test was applied. The following were the statements used :

1)   The respondent has a keen interest in politics,

2)   Efficacy of the Internet to learn about politics is very good,

Table 6. ANOVA Test Statistics

Internet	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13.249	3	4.416	6.407	.000
Within Groups	96.501	140	.689		
Total	**109.750**	**143**			

Source: Authors' Research

Figure 4. Criteria for Voting

Source: Authors' Research
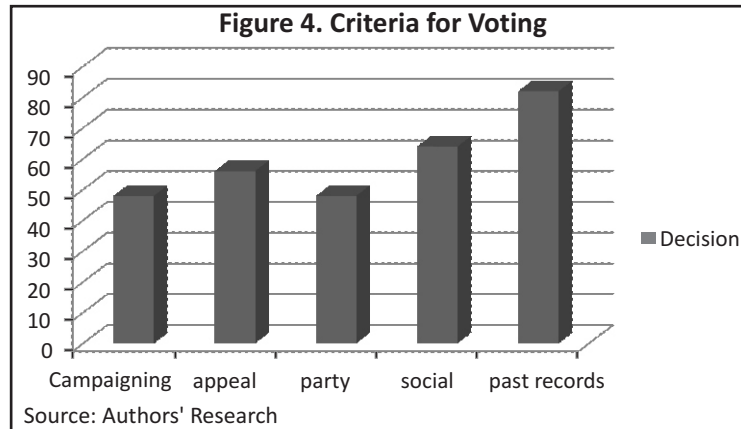
3) Efficacy of TV and print media to learn about politics is very good,

4) An individual's online network is an important source to learn about politics,

5) Credible source about political news is of critical importance.

The Table 6 describes the results of the ANOVA test. The computed F value is, $F = 6.407$ and the table value for the same with 5% level of significance is equal to 5.41 ($F = 5.14$). As the computed F statistics is greater than the corresponding tabulated value, we can conclude that the Internet has higher efficacy as a medium as compared to print and television media to learn about politics, and the null hypothesis (H_{01} = Internet as a medium to learn about politics does not have a better efficacy as compared to television and print as a medium to learn about politics) is rejected.

↳ **Important Parameters Considered While Voting for a Candidate :** The Figure 4 shows that the most important parameter for a respondent to vote for a particular party or a politician was their past record, that is, developmental work, criminal records, and the perception about his previous performance. This signifies that for the respondents, irrespective of the media they used to learn about politics, their primary criterion to vote for a candidate was based on the past developmental records of the political party or the candidate. The second most desired criteria to vote for a candidate or a political party was the perception of the candidate or the political party on social media. This signifies that the respondents had a stronger faith in their social network messages as these messages originated from the network of a trusted source - their friends or family members.

↳ **Most Trustworthy Sources to Learn About Politics :** We tried to get an insight into which are the most trustworthy sources (media) to learn about politics for the respondents. It can be inferred from the Figure 5 that according to the respondents, the newspaper was the most trustworthy source (media) to learn about politics followed by television (media). However, mirco blogging sites stood at the third position as the most trustworthy source (media) to learn about politics. This proves that though all the respondents who participated in the survey were Internet savvy, on a trustworthiness scale, traditional media sources like newspaper and television were the most reliable sources to learn about politics.

↳ **Association Between Respondents Who Believed "Internet is a Useful Medium" and Their "Age" :** With the help of chi-square test as explained in the Table 8, we tried to understand the following association statements. Association between "people who believed that the efficacy of the Internet as a medium to learn about politics is high"
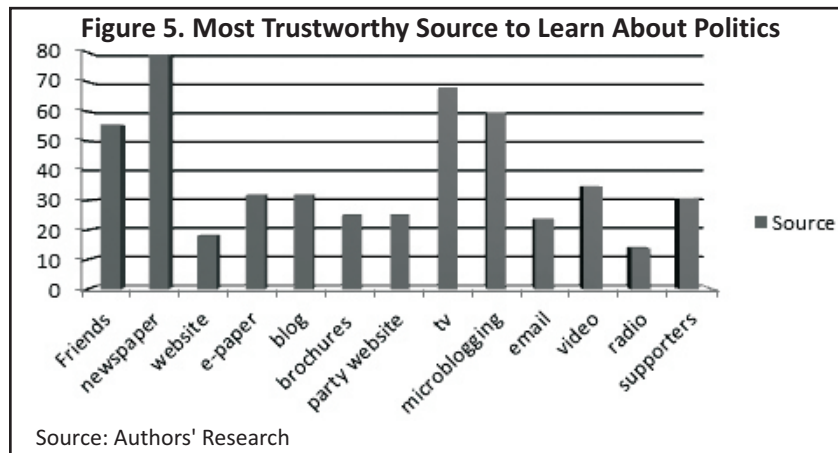
Figure 5. Most Trustworthy Source to Learn About Politics

Source: Authors' Research

Table 7. Efficacy of the Internet * Age Cross Tabulation

	AGE			Total
	18-25	**26-40**	**>40**	
Strongly Agree	13	7	0	20
Agree	51	29	0	80
Neither Agree Nor Dis agree	19	9	0	28
Disagree	10	2	2	14
Strongly Disagree	0	2	0	2
Total	**93**	**49**	**2**	**144**

Source: Authors' Research

Table 8. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	24.333a	8	.002
Likelihood Ratio	15.938	8	.043
Linear-by-Linear Association	.717	1	.397
N of Valid Cases	144		

Source: Authors' Research

and their "Age". The chi-square test statistics describes the association. The Table 7 reveals the cross tabulation test results.

✍ **Null Hypothesis (H_{02}) :** Respondents who believed the "efficacy of the Internet as a medium to learn about politics is high" and their "Age" are independent parameters. Using the *P* value approach, it can be observed that the computed chi-square value 24.33 with 8 degrees of freedom is higher than the table value (15.51) at 5% level of significance, and the *P* value is less than 0.01, which is far below the level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. If we look at the number of people in the age group of 18-25 years (Table 7), who largely agreed (*Agree + strongly agree*) with the statement "efficacy of the Internet as a medium to learn about politics is high," they constituted 69% (64 out of 93 youth) of the total population between the age group of 18-25 years. We can infer that in the youth age group of 18-25 years, there is a stronger belief in the Internet as a medium with high efficacy to learn about politics; hence, political messaging targeted towards the youth should use the Internet as a primary medium to communicate.

✍ **Influence of Social Networking Sites on Voting Decisions**

✍ **Null Hypothesis (H_{03}) :** Political information consumed on social networking sites has no influence on participants'

Table 9. *t* - Test Statistical table

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SNS Influence to Vote	144	1.75	.762	.063

Source: Authors' Research

Table 10. One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 0					
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
SNS Influence to Vote	27.564	143	.000	1.750	1.62	1.88

Source: Authors' Research

Figure 6. Online Sources to Learn About Politics

Source: Authors' Research
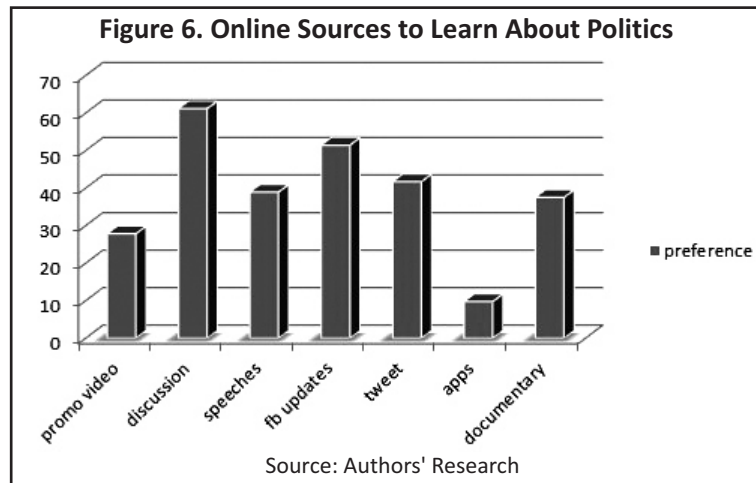
decision to vote. As established in the Tables 9 and 10, the *P* value is 0.000, which is less than $\alpha = 0.05$. So, the null hypothesis is rejected, therefore, we can conclude that political information consumed on social networking sites has an influence on participants 'decision to vote.

↳ **Most Preferred type of Online Communication :** The Figure 6 reveals that online communication in the form of online discussions (like discussions on social media platforms, Google Hangout, discussions on blogs, and so forth) is the most preferred online form of communication for the respondents followed by Facebook updates. During 2013 Gujarat state elections, Mr. Narendra Modi's digital promotion campaign consisted of all these platforms extensively (refer to Table 3), and it helped him to become Gujarat's chief minister for the third time. Hence, we can conclude that political parties should use digital discussion platforms and Facebook updates to communicate with their prospective voters.

Conclusion and Research Implications

A medium is the message, if you are targeting young, socially high, tech-savvy voters, the Internet is the best medium to reach out to them. Today, every brand's task to reach the most desired audience is getting tougher. It is especially difficult to reach out to those digitally savvy voters, who vote once in five years, and who consume media differently. Politicians need to have a different media strategy. It is very evident from this empirical study that the Internet enriches political learning as the platform provides political news through various sources. The study revealed that the respondents trusted the political information when they are informed about political news from their online network sources. Traditional media like newspapers and television still have a very high credibility to learn about political developments and respondents have a firm belief that the political communication using social media has a significant

influence on their voting decisions. Youth would constitute around two third of the eligible voters' population, who would vote in this year's (2014) national elections. Social media is largely consumed by youngsters in India, and no political party or politician can ignore this medium. The political parties and politicians should include social media in all political communication plans and allocate budgets and closely work on social media platforms to ensure the desired political verdict.

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