

Impact of social media on Political Discourse and Shaping Public Opinion: A Comprehensive Study on The Students of Dibrugarh University

Abhilash Boruah

Assistant Professor, Centre for Studies in Journalism and Mass Communication, Dibrugarh University, India

Abstract

Social media is mainly a collective form of websites and applications that emphasize communication, engagement, content sharing, and collaboration. People mainly use it to communicate and engage with friends, family, and different communities, whereas businesses use social media to track consumer issues, market their products, and promote them. But apart from these clear views of the uses of social media, it has a greater impact on political discourse, moulding public opinions, and ultimately influencing voting behavior. The objective of this study is to offer a thorough analysis of the influence of social media on political discourse and the formation of public opinion. The study is conducted on the under-graduate students, post-graduate students, and research scholars of Dibrugarh University in order to analyse the students' perceptions of the impact of social media on political discourse and public opinion formation. The study employed a questionnaire as a method and tool of data collection. The study investigates the extent of the use of social media for political purposes, the perception of its impact on political discourse, its impact on polarization and echo chambers, and their ultimate impact on voting behavior.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Discourse, Public Opinion, Polarization, Echo Chambers, VotingBehavior

1. Introduction

Social media has developed into a dynamic and comprehensive platform in the present digital age. Mainly emphasizing communication, engagement, content sharing, and collaboration, it also serves an important purpose in the corporate world by allowing companies to respond to customer problems, market their products, and broaden their customer base. Apart from that, social media's impact on political discourse and public opinion formation is a significant and increasingly noticeable component of the medium. The purpose of this study is to give a thorough understanding of the complex interactions between social media and the moulding of political discourse and public views. This study focuses on undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and research scholars of Dibrugarh University in order to shed light on their viewpoints and views on how social media affects political discourse and the formation of public opinion.

To achieve this objective, the study employs a questionnaire as a method and primary tool for data collection. Through this approach, the research investigates the extent of the use of social media for

political purposes, the perception of its impact on political discourse, its impact on polarization and echo chambers, and their ultimate impact on the influence on voting behavior. The polarization of opinion and the development of echo chambers are two worrying effects of social media in the present context. Although social media can provide a platform for free speech and expressions of one's opinions, it can also serve ideological polarization, where individuals want to engage with content aligning with their existing beliefs and augmenting those opinions, ultimately leading to broadening of ideological differences. On the other hand, social media algorithms are designed so as to keep users on the platform for extended periods of time by presenting them with content that is likely to engage them, which ultimately creates echo chambers by exposing the users to a narrow spectrum of viewpoints that support their own and a lack of exposure to other viewpoints, resulting in the entrenchment of radical beliefs. The study also sheds light on the contribution of social media platforms to political polarization in society. Furthermore, it also questions whether social media platforms should take responsibility to reduce echo chambers and promote diverse political perspectives.

Ultimately, the study aims to explain the complex relationships between social media and political engagement and their ultimate impact on voting behavior. By doing so, it aims to shed light on the complex interactions between the real-world dynamics of politics and public opinion and the virtual world of social media, paving the way for a more in-depth comprehension of this transformational phenomenon.

2. Research Method

The study adopted a quantitative explanatory design as its main methodology. The study was conducted at Dibrugarh University, situated in Dibrugarh, Assam, India, as it has a diversity of students belonging to various regions of Assam as well as various states of North-East India and other states of the country. The university also has international students from various nations worldwide. The targeted population of the study consisted of both male and female students, as well as other categories of undergraduate, post-graduate and research scholars at the university. The sample of the study was selected from a population of approximately 4600, which included males, females, and others ages between 15 to 30 age group.

The sample was obtained through simple random sampling. Simple random sampling was employed so that the study could reach to any undergraduate student, postgraduate student or research scholar. The sample size of this research is 100 respondents, out of which 53% were males, 46% were females, and 1% were others. Out of the 100 respondents, 41% were pursuing graduation, 57% were pursuing post-graduation, and 2% were pursuing doctoral programmes.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1: Demographic and social characteristics of the respondents

3.1.1: Respondent's Distribution by Sex

100 respondents participated in the study out of which out of which 53% were males, 46% were females and 1% were others.

Table 3.1.1: Respondent's Distribution by Sex (N=100)

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
MALE	53	53%
FEMALE	46	46%
OTHER	1	1%

TOTAL	100	100%
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3.1.2: Respondent’s Distribution by Age

100 respondents participated in the study out of which out of which 1% belonged to the age group 15-17, 90% belonged to the age group 18-24 and 9% belonged to the age group.

Table 3.1.2: Respondent’s Distribution by Age (N=100)

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
15-17	1	1%
18-24	90	90%
25-30	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

3.1.3: Respondent’s Distribution by Programmes

100 respondents participated in the study out of which 41% students were pursuing graduation, 57% students were pursuing post graduate and 2% students were pursuing doctoral programmes.

Table 3.1.3: Respondent’s Distribution by Programmes (N=100)

Programmes	Frequency	Percentage
GRADUATION	41	41%
POST-GRADUATION	57	57%
DOCTORAL	2	2%
TOTAL	100	100%

3.2: Respondent’s Distribution by their activeness on social media platform/platforms

The respondents were given the names of social media platforms that they actively use. 60 respondents mostly use Facebook and 79 respondents actively use Instagram. 21 respondents use Twitter, 16 respondents use LinkedIn, 10 respondents use Snapchat and only 8 respondents use other social media platforms.

Table 3.2: Respondent’s Distribution by their activeness on social media platform/platforms (N=100)

Programmes	Frequency	Percentage
FACEBOOK	60	57%
TWITTER	21	20%
INSTAGRAM	79	76%
LINKEDIN	16	15%
SNAPCHAT	10	9%
OTHERS	8	6%

3.3: Respondent’s Distribution by the amount of time they spends on social media per day on average

The respondents were asked how much time they spend on social media per day on average. Out of 100 respondents, 11% spend less than 1 hour on social media, 40% spend 1 to 2 hours, 32% spend 2 to 4 hours on average and 17% spend more than 4 hours on social media per day on average.

Table 3.3: Respondent’s Distribution by the amount of time they spend on social media per day on average (N=100)

Time	Frequency	Percentage
LESS THAN 1 HOUR	11	11%
1-2 HOURS	40	40%
2-4 HOURS	32	32%
MORE THAN 4 HOURS	17	17%

3.4: Respondent’s perception on the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion

The questions were intended to address the main objective of the study which was to examine the perception of the students of Dibrugarh University towards the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion. When respondents were asked how influential do they think social media is in shaping political opinions, only 7% responded with 1 stating ‘not influential at all’ and 24% responded with 5 stating ‘very influential’. When asked, have they ever changed their political views or opinions because of social media, they researcher receives almost an equal response of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, 36% and 37% respectively and the remaining 27% responded ‘may be’. On asked about how trustworthy they find social media platforms as a source of political information, 22% responded with 1 stating ‘not trustworthy at all’ and only 2% responded with 5 stating ‘very much trustworthy’. In response to an another question, do they believe social media platforms have contributed to political polarization in society, 47% responded ‘yes’, 9% responded ‘no’ and remaining 44% responded ‘not sure’. When asked about have they ever unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their political views, 33% accepted it as ‘yes’ but 57% denied as ‘no’ and 10% responded as ‘not sure’. On asked about do they believe social media platforms should take measures to reduce echo chambers and promote diverse political perspectives, 64% responded ‘yes’, 6% responded ‘no’ and remaining 30% responded ‘not sure’. In the next question the respondents were asked have they ever been influenced in their voting behavior by political content encountered on social media, on which only 22% accepted it as ‘yes’ but 62% responded it as ‘no’ and remaining 16% responded it as ‘may be’. On asked about has their engagement on social media translated into offline political activities, such as attending rallies, participating in campaigns, or joining political organizations, 23% responded ‘yes’, 57% responded ‘no’ and 20% responded ‘may be’. In the final question, the respondents were asked to mark in between 1 to 5 on how influential do they believe social media is in mobilizing individuals for offline political activities, to which 6% marked 1 stating ‘not influential at all’ and 12% marked 5 stating ‘very influential’.

The respondent’s perception are as elaborated by the Table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Respondent’s perception on the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion (N=100)

Sl. No.	QUESTIONS	FREQUENCY (f)	YES	NO	NOT SURE/ MAY BE	TOTAL
		PERCENTAGE (%)				
1	Do you primarily use social media for political news and discussions?	f	35	30	35	100
		%	35	30	35	100
2	Do you think social media is influential in shaping political opinions?	f	81	4	15	100
		%	81	4	15	100
3	Have you came across political contents or political discourse over social media?	f	66	17	17	100
		%	66	17	17	100
4	Have you ever actively engaged in political discussions on social media?	f	16	69	15	100
		%	16	69	15	100
5	Have you ever changed your political views or opinions because of social media?	f	36	37	27	100
		%	36	37	27	100

6	Do you believe that social media platforms provide a balanced representation of different political perspectives?	f	27	42	31	100
		%	27	42	31	100
7	Have you ever encountered or witnessed political misinformation or fake news on social media?	f	80	6	14	100
		%	80	6	14	100
8	Do you believe that political bias and selectively disseminating information on social media platforms is possible?	f	67	7	26	100
		%	67	7	26	100
9	Do you believe that social media platforms have contributed to political polarization in society?	f	47	9	44	100
		%	47	9	44	100
10	Have you ever	f	33	57	10	100

	unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their political views?	%	33	57	10	100
11	Do you believe social media platforms should take measures to reduce echo chambers and promote diverse political perspectives?	f	64	6	30	100
		%	64	6	30	100
12	Have you ever been influenced in your voting behavior by political content encountered on social media?	f	22	62	16	100
		%	22	62	16	100
13	Has your engagement on social media translated into offline political activities, such as attending rallies, participating in campaigns, or joining	f	23	57	20	100
		%	23	57	20	100

	political organizations ?						
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Source: Research Findings

3.5: Respondent’s perception on the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion in terms of a 1-5 scale

The respondents were given a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing ‘not influential at all’ and 5 representing ‘very influential’. When the respondents were asked to choose from 1 to 5 on the question of how influential they think social media is in shaping political opinions, 7% chose 1, 13% chose 2, 26% chose 3, 30% chose 4, and 24% chose 5, signifying social media to be very influential in shaping political opinions. In the next question, the respondents were asked to choose from 1 to 5 on the question of how trustworthy do they find social media platforms as a source of political information, 22% chose 1, 40% chose 2, 28% chose 3, 8% chose 4, and 2% chose 5, signifying social media platforms to be very less trustworthy as a source of political information. In the next question, the respondents were asked to choose from 1 to 5 on the question of how influential do they believe social media is in mobilizing individuals for offline political activities, 6% chose 1, 17% chose 2, 41% chose 3, 24% chose 4, and 12% chose 5, signifying social media platforms to be influential in mobilizing individuals for offline political activities.

Table 3.5: Respondent’s perception on the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion in terms of a 1-5 scale (N=100)

Sl. No.	QUESTIONS	FREQUENCY (f)	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
		PERCENTAGE (%)						
1	How influential do you think social media is in shaping political opinions?	f	7	13	26	30	24	100
		%	7	13	26	30	24	100
2	How trustworthy do you find social media platforms as a	f	22	40	28	8	2	100

	source of political information?	%	22	40	28	8	2	100
3	How influential do you believe social media is in mobilizing individuals for offline political activities?	f	6	17	41	24	12	100
		%	6	17	41	24	12	100

Source: Research Findings

4. Findings

The students were asked various questions related to their perceptions of the impact of social media on political discourse and shaping public opinion. From the survey, the researcher came to the conclusion that almost all the students believes that social media is influential in shaping public opinion.

The first question was that do they primarily use social media for political news and discussion, on which the researcher receives a mixed response, where 35% said ‘yes’, 30% said ‘no’ and the remaining 35% said ‘may be’. On being asked how influential they think social media is in shaping political opinions, only 7% responded with 1 stating ‘not influential at all’ and 24% responded with 5 stating ‘very influential’. On the next question, have they come across political contents or political discourse over social media, 66% said ‘yes’, 17% said ‘no’ and the remaining 17% said ‘may be’. In response to the fourth question, have they ever actively engaged in political discussions on social media, only 17% responded ‘yes’ and 15% responded ‘may be’ but 69% responded that they do not engage themselves in any political discussions on social media. Against the fifth question, have they ever changed their political views or opinions because of social media, the researcher receives almost an equal response of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, 36% and 37% respectively and the remaining 27% responded ‘may be’. In the next question, only 27% believes that social media platforms provides a balanced representation of different political perspectives whereas 42% responded ‘no’ and the remaining 31% responded ‘not sure’. In the sixth question, the respondents were asked if they had ever encountered or witnessed political misinformation or fake news on social media to which 80% responded that they had encountered or witnessed political misinformation or fake news on social media whereas only 6% responded ‘no’ and 14% responded ‘may be’. In the seventh question, "Do you believe that political bias and selectively disseminating information on social media platforms are possible?" 67% responded ‘yes’, 7% responded ‘no’ and 26% responded ‘may be’. When asked about how trustworthy they find social media platforms as a source of political information, 22% responded with 1 stating ‘not trustworthy at all’ and only 2% responded with 5 stating ‘very much trustworthy’. In response to the ninth question, do they believe social media platforms have contributed to political polarization in society, 47% responded ‘yes’, 9% responded ‘no’ and the remaining 44% responded ‘not sure’. When asked if they had ever unfollowed or blocked someone on social media due to their political views, 33% accepted it as ‘yes’ but 57% denied it as ‘no’ and 10% responded as ‘not

sure'. When asked if they believe social media platforms should take measures to reduce echo chambers and promote diverse political perspectives, 64% responded 'yes', 6% responded 'no' and the remaining 30% responded 'not sure'. In the twelfth question the respondents were asked have they ever been influenced in their voting behavior by political content encountered on social media, only 22% accepted it as 'yes' but 62% responded it as 'no' and the remaining 16% responded it as 'may be'. When asked if their engagement on social media has translated into offline political activities, such as attending rallies, participating in campaigns, or joining political organizations, 23% responded 'yes', 57% responded 'no' and 20% responded 'may be'. In the final question, the respondents were asked to mark between 1 to 5 on how influential they believe social media is in mobilizing individuals for offline political activities, to which 6% marked 1 stating 'not influential at all' and 12% marked 5 stating 'very influential'.

These are the various responses the researcher has gotten from a sample of 100 students of Dibrugarh University currently pursuing graduation, post-graduation and doctoral programmes. The whole research is based on these findings.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has offered a comprehensive exploration of the tremendous influence of social media on political discourse and the shaping of public opinion. After a thorough analysis of the data collected from the undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and research scholars of Dibrugarh University, the researcher has gained valuable insights into the multifaceted roles that social media platforms play in the contemporary political landscape.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that social media, while originally designed for social connectivity, has evolved into a powerful political tool. It serves as a platform for shaping public opinions and political discussions. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that 69% of students at Dibrugarh University do not engage themselves in political discussions, although they have come across such discussions and debates. The students also believe that balanced representations of different political perspectives are not possible through social media. On discussing the impact of social media on contributing to political polarization in society, 47% of students responded 'yes' whereas only 9% responded 'no'. It has become evident that social media is contributing to political polarization which drives political attitudes away from the center and toward ideological extremes. When asked about the reduction of echo chambers for which social media platforms should take measures and promote diverse political perspectives, 64% of students responded 'yes'.

Furthermore, the study underscores the undeniable influence of social media on changing political views or opinions. The ability of the information and narratives being spread on these platforms to alter public opinion, affect voting decisions, and even affect the results of elections. But surprisingly, mixed results can be seen through the data collected. 36% of students responded 'yes' and 37% responded 'no' to the question of changing their political views or opinions under the influence of social media. On the other hand, 62% of students responded 'no' to the question of being influenced in their voting behavior by political content encountered on social media.

In a rapidly changing and progressing media landscape, understanding the relationship between social media and politics is vitally important. Through the study, it can be understood that technology is not neutral as 67% students responded 'yes' to the possibility of political bias and selective dissemination of information on social media. To conclude, it is not enough to merely acknowledge its impact; we also

need to think about how to best utilize the potential of social media for constructive political engagement while minimizing its negative effects.

6. References

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