

Citizen Engagement on Government Facebook Pages: A Study on Select Government Departments

Mohit Solanki*, Nishant Guvvada, Nancy Yadav, Narender Dhakerwal, Ripusudan Adhikari

MBA students, Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University
E-mail: *mohit1solanki@gmail.com

Abstract—Social media usage has substantially increased over the past couple of years. Based on these trends, governments are trying to move to this new medium as a way of communication and engagement. However, little attention has been given to citizen engagement and communication. Social Networks like Facebook and others have a vast scope to engage citizens, primarily youth, in a two-way communication to discuss issues relevant to functioning of our democracy. Social platforms are increasingly being used by many private organizations to engage their customers for better customer satisfaction and brand visibility. The study endeavors to come forward with the present scenario of citizen engagement on select Government Facebook Pages and suggestions on how this citizen engagement can be increased for mutual benefit of both parties. The study basically demonstrates how two-way engagement by the government can lead to higher levels of citizen participation, which is measured by fan comments, likes and shares on the Government's Facebook page. The paper will be of substantial help to government organizations to understand the current scenario of citizen engagement on Government Facebook Pages and how these platforms can be leveraged for enhanced two-way communication and citizen engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media are computer-mediated tools that allow users to create, share or exchange information, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual communities and networks. Social media has been defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Furthermore, social media depend on web based and mobile technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. They introduce significant alterations to communication between communities, businesses, individuals, and organizations.

Many agencies have been utilizing social media for years, using blogs, Facebook, and other platforms to publicize their vision, purpose, and activities; build support spread news; attract volunteers and donors; and engage with interested segments of the population.

As governments have moved into the digital age, a lot of focus has been on citizen engagement and service. An appearing part of the e-government movement comprises social media and its part in meeting citizen needs for clarity, answerability, accessibility, and engagement. Social media has the capability to be an instrument for governments to connect citizens in a way that enables bidirectional information processing and increased engagement.

The use of social media by government is a low-cost way to increase citizen participation and service delivery for public sector. Social media is a platform for governments to disseminate and collect information from citizens. However, based on examination of pages, government use of social media is often bound to information sharing that does little to actually engage citizens.

Due to expanding internet penetration and a huge youth population, Facebook has enlarged its user base in India to 112 million - which is the largest after the US. Facebook, which had more than 100 million users in April, saw its monthly active users' base touching 112 million at the end of September. The number of daily active users from India is 52 million. India has the largest user base outside of the US for Facebook.

According to the report, nearly 1 billion users worldwide will access the popular social network through their mobile phones at least once each month in 2015. India -- the world's second largest Facebook audience - will cross 100 million mobile phone users for the first time this year and by 2017, will have more mobile users than the US.

A study titled 'Coming of Age on Screens', which aims to understand people's attitudes and behavior both online and offline found that 77 % of the users in the 13-24 years age group agreed that they can't leave their house without their mobile, while 63 % agreed that they would prefer to give up their TV for their mobile phone which explains the need by organizations to exploit this platform to meet their objectives.

[10]

So, this paper aims to,

- Understand the present situation of citizen engagement on government Facebook pages.
- Elaborate upon the need for leveraging this platform for enhanced engagement with citizens for better functioning of democracy.
- Study the ways that are being used by organizations, primarily private, to leverage this platform which can be employed by government to increase engagement.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media has been defined as websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Social media networks allow web-based interaction and collaboration among users that can be affordably stored, allocated and are participatory [4]. As an inexpensive way to increase citizen engagement, clarity, answerability, and service delivery in the public sector, the use of social media by government is seen as an alternative. They are seen as channels that assist two-way interaction between government and citizens and thus generate new possibilities for online participation [5]. A large priority of governments remains citizen engagement and service as they proceed into the digital age. Social media and its part in meeting citizen needs for clarity, answerability, accessibility, and engagement can be safely considered as a rising part of the e-government movement [1]. The stylemark applications found in the social media spectrum include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and hundreds of others. The growth of social media forms and use has been unparalleled [2]. However, the impact of these tools depends on an array of factors, including specific local government practices, the quality of content and citizen response. What does not necessarily create a genuine relationship between the bureaucracy and the public is Governments using social media asking for input from citizens [6]. Ultimately, a government's social media presence does not warrant participation from citizens.

1. Facebook is the largest social network community, with 97.4 crore members worldwide as of December 2012 [7]. Facebook introduced Fan Pages in 2007 as a way for organizations, private and public, to communicate with the public systematically and economically [8]. As much as it is a place to hear what the public is saying about government, Facebook can be a channel for local governments too to communicate information. With a major proportion of the Indian population participating on Facebook, the platform provides governments a distinctive opportunity to coherently engage and inform citizens [3]. The social media outlets provide the opportunity for citizen communication and connection which Governments have been profiting on. Due to the extensive expansion of social media, its use by both organizations and individuals for professional and

personal reasons has come to the front line as an issue underlining the intersection of this new form of media and citizen participation and engagement.

2. Even though the influence of internet on citizen participation and engagement is often discussed, the specific effects of social media have only just started to be scrutinized [9]. Research on social media and engagement is generally built on assessing government-side quantitative actions, such as the number of fans a Page has at a given time. However, that research becomes deficient in examining the engage potential of Pages since social media is based on bidirectional interactions and by looking only at how well a government uses a Page to inform would not be sufficient [8]. This study seeks to identify what, if any, relationship exists between the interactions of citizens and government on Facebook that may lead to engagement, and what characteristics of Pages support engaged interaction and thus to understand and explore the citizen perspective and to examine the potential of Pages as spaces to engage.
3. Currently, there is limited literature examining the effects of this new form of communication and engagement and there are many unanswered questions for government organizations around how to effectively leverage social media and produce an impact on engagement. The preponderance of social media literature focuses on both its promotion and risk of use in government [1]. This paper seeks to broaden the knowledge base surrounding governmental social media engagement strategies.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand Citizen Engagement on select Government Facebook pages. Governments at all levels in many countries routinely use the most popular social networks including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to reach broad audience. A descriptive approach has been undertaken in this paper.

Six pages were analyzed over a 60-day time frame from 1st July, 2015 to 30th August, 2015 with every post recorded and categorized along with the no. of Facebook interactions.

The six pages chosen include:

- Ministry of External Affairs, India
- Ministry of Defence, India
- Ministry of Home Affairs, India
- Ministry of Railways, India
- Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, India
- Ministry of Finance, India

Data collection included content analysis of six Facebook Pages chosen.

Organizations get an opportunity to interact with Facebook members via Facebook pages in the following ways:

- **Liking:** Prompts members to join a Facebook Page by choosing to click “like”, noting their affinity for an organization by becoming a member of a specific Facebook Page.
- **Organizational Posting:** Allows the organization (i.e. Facebook Page owners) to share information announcements, event information, updates, links, photos and videos with their respective Fans by posting on the Facebook Page wall.
- **Post Liking:** Allowing Fans to give a virtual “thumbs up” to a post on a Facebook Page by choosing to click “like” on each post.
- **Commenting:** Allowing Fans to comment or ask a question responding to a post on a Facebook Page.
- **Sharing:** Encourages fans / members to share information such as news stories, event invitations, website links updates, meetings, announcements, photos and videos posted by the Facebook Page owners.
- **Facebook-based Content Integration:** Fans can post content, a comment or ask a question to the organization.

The number of likes a Page has is often considered the measure of the overall success of a Page, with more likes associated to higher value and legitimacy. However, evaluating a Page based on its total no. of likes is a superficial measure that does not provide information on engagement, popular content or what users are saying. To evaluate the role of Facebook Pages in government-citizen interactions, the usual measures of engagement-likes, comments & shares are expanded by the response to information posted by either the citizens or government on the Page.

These elements, along with features that inform, such as posts, photographs and videos are taken to have a more comprehensive look at the engagement through Facebook Pages currently.

Finally It will be suggested how this engagement can be increased for mutual benefit of both parties. Also how many organizations are leveraging Facebook pages for engagement will be elaborated upon.

4. DATA REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

Ministry of External Affairs posted significant number of photographs. Therefore, it has generated more interaction and response from fans.

Most of the Government sites’ posts consist of photos of functions, ceremonies or meetings which are used by these ministries for engaging citizens.

None of the government sites are raising issues of national importance through which these sites could have obtained opinion of common people regarding the same.

Table 1: Statistics for the Facebook pages of various ministries

Month- July to August	Ministry of Finance	Ministry of Railway	Ministry of Information and Broadcasting	Ministry of Home affairs	Ministry of defense	Ministry of External affairs
Total no. of likes on page	796875	407494	1030292	100540	25438	1072957
Total no. of posts	12	12	22	26	28	31
Total no. of likes for a post	7600	22282	104701	1422	2596	109223
Total no. of comments in a post	233	921	926	252	113	819
Total no. of shares	471	5157	10967	149	417	9838
Total no. of pics	12	17	379	32	114	1017
Total no. of videos	0	0	0	0	5	0
Avg. likes per post	633	1857	4759	55	93	3523
Avg. comments per post	19	77	42	10	4	26
Avg. shares per post	39	430	498	6	15	317

Ministry of Defense, which was inactive in past few months, showed good response after the merger of its two Facebook pages and was able to generate interaction which was mostly seen on the armed forces Facebook pages.

Ministry of Home affairs was the least able to generate interaction with common people and the relevance of its posts was also not as expected.

Most comments made by people were about praises for the post, raising issues or irrelevant posts advertising to like some unrelated pages.

The government had not responded to the comments of public in any of the pages which indicates a one-way interaction between the government and the citizens. Being responsive to comments is one approach government can take to transform a page from merely being an information platform to one where more of two-way engagement between both the government and common public takes place because it shows that the government is listening to what the public is saying and hence would encourage the public to being more vocal regarding their opinions on the various actions and policies of the government.

5. FINDINGS

The findings, with respect to the objectives of the paper, are as follows:

1. All the selected government departments are active with a healthy frequency of posts per month (an average of about 7 posts per month.).

2. All the pages of different government departments under study post information regarding good functioning of their departments/government, the activities they perform or their action plans.
3. None of the selected government department pages attempt to address queries posted in the comments section by the public.
4. Many comments posted on each page generally raise some national level issue which goes unaddressed.
5. **Ministry of Finance:** Posts are regarding new policies, meetings with dignitaries, functions. Most of the comments generally raise questions on the implemented policies, about national issues, praising a post or the government. Very few spams were observed.
6. **Ministry of Home Affairs:** Most of their Posts consist of Photos of functions, laying foundation or dignitary meeting. Most of the comments on their posts are either praising the government or raising some issues.
7. **Ministry of Railways:** Most of their posts consist of photos are railway stations, trains, bridges, facilities, accidents, inauguration of a new station. Most of the comments are praising the government, most of them raise some issue and many are irrelevant.
8. **Ministry of Defence:** It posts about its relief operations provided, national level or international level meetings, posts dedicated to Late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam. People raise relevant issues such as OROP in their comments and convey their feelings toward the nation with comments like "JAI HIND" etc.
9. **Ministry of Information and Broadcasting:** It posts day to day news of government activities while people comment just to praise the government or spam with advertisements but raise no relevant issues
10. **Ministry of External Affairs:** It posts mostly pictures of foreign visits of government officials such as PM Modi's foreign visits, Summits attended, pictures depicting relations with other nations. Most of the comments just praise the government.

The findings clearly put forward the absence of a two-way communication. Information dissemination is the on-going practice. Gauging by the data (number of likes, shares, comments); Ministry of External Affairs is the most popular on social media. This may be due to the fact that MEA has the highest number of posts in the duration of our research.

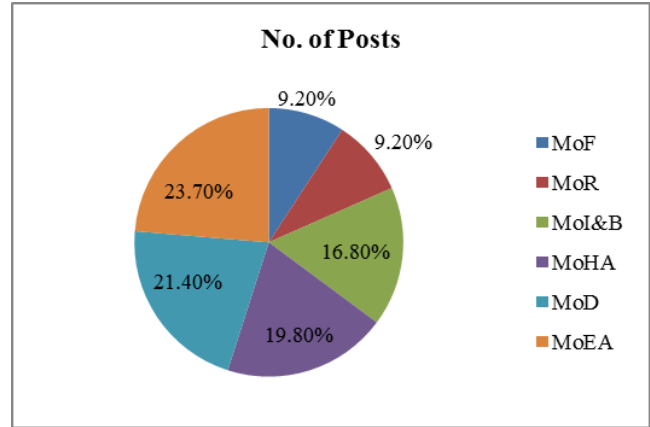


Fig. 1: Statistics for total number of posts on the Facebook pages of various ministries

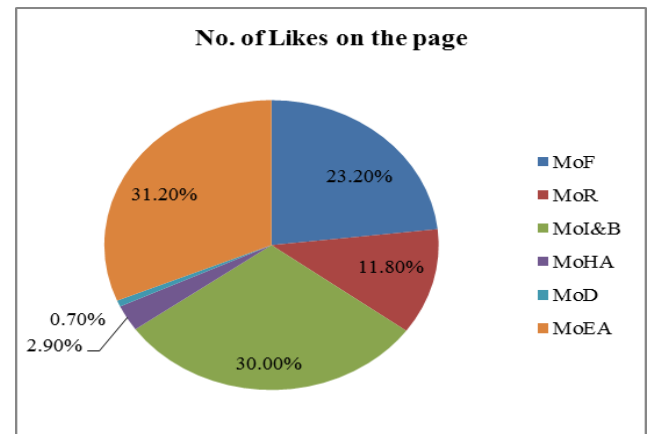


Fig. 2: Statistics for likes for various ministries

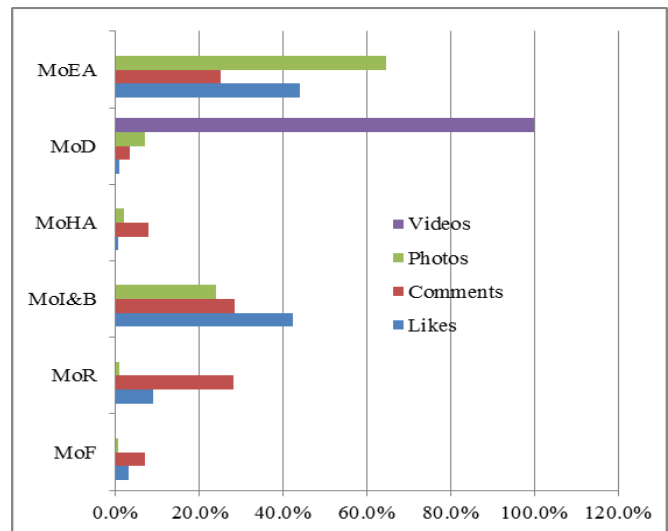


Fig. 3: Statistics for total number of videos, photos, comments and likes on the Facebook pages of various ministries

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis of Facebook pages along with several data analysis, point to several recommendations for the government seeking to use Social Media beyond a channel for informing and more as a tool of engagement:

- **Use of multiple channels to effectively reach your audience:** Social Media works best when it is used along with, and not in place of, traditional forms of communication. Broadcasting information through as many channels as possible will ensure maximum.
- **Post dynamic content:** Visual content such as photographs and videos provide a much quicker way to attract attention/response of users. More visuals should be used in the posts.
- **Be interactive:** The government should prepare itself to be more interactive and engaging citizens by responding to comments, answering questions etc.

7. CONCLUSION

Based on the data collected, it can be stated that there exists no two way communication between the government and the public. It is observed that only information dissemination is focused upon by the Government on these social media sites and not information collection. In this era of technology where there is accessibility of internet and hence a high usage of social Medias by the mass, it becomes imperative for the government to utilize these social media platforms to the fullest. India, being the largest democracy which implies that every citizen has direct/indirect and active participation in the political decision making, needs to have a feedback system in the government looping back the pros and cons of the policies and decisions. There have been many instances when people were required to give their opinions regarding a subject matter, for example, the net neutrality issue where TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) asked for a consensus to be posted on their site (www.trai.gov.in). In this case, many people were not aware of the issue itself as well as the consensus asked by the authority. Ultimately, the issue was raised by some concerned groups on social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc. Decision making and policy

amendments in a democratic society can become easier by the use of social media.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bertot, J. C. & Jaeger, P.T. (July 2010). Using ICTs to create a culture of transparency: E-government and social media as openness and anti-corruption tools for societies. *Government Information Quarterly* 27(3), 264-271.
- [2] Lenhart, Amanda, Purcell, Kristin, Smith, Aaron, & Zickuhr, Kathryn. (2010). *Social Media and Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults*. Pew Internet and American Life Project. Pew Research Center. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults.aspx>
- [3] Grossman, L. January 3, 2011. 2010 Person of the Year Mark Zuckerberg. *Time Magazine*, pp. 44-74.
- [4] Mergel, Ines. 2013. *Social media in the public sector: a guide to participation, collaboration, and transparency in the networked world*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [5] Nabatchi and Mergel. 2010. *Participation 2.0: Using Internet and Social Media Technologies to Promote Distributed Democracy and Create Digital Neighborhoods*. In *White Paper: Promoting Citizen Engagement and Community Building*, edited by James H. Svara and Janet V. Denhardt, Phoenix, AZ: Alliance for Innovation. 80-87.
- [6] Morse, Ricardo, S. 2006. "Prophet of Participation: Mary Parker Follett and Public Participation in Public Administration. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 28(1).
- [7] Social Bakers. n.d. "United States Facebook Statistics." <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebookstatistics/united-states>.
- [8] Strecker, Amy. 2011. *Flocking to Facebook: How local governments can build citizen engagement*. Paper presented at the annual Capstone Conference for the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Public Administration Program, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, April 20. <http://www.mpa.unc.edu/sites/www.mpa.unc.edu/files/AmyStrecker.pdf>.
- [9] Conroy, Meredith, Jessica T. Feezell, Mario Guerrero. 2012. Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, Volume 28, Issue 5: 1535–1546.
- [10] Facebook's India user base grows to 112 million. (2014, December 16). Retrieved from http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-12-16/news/57112655_1_userbase-100-million-users-daily-active-users