Research Article

‘Creating’ Political Awareness through Social Networking – An Empirical Study with Special Reference to Tamil Nadu Elections, 2011

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Abstract While social media enable users to communicate with one another, they also allow them to influence each other. This user control of social media has important implications in the facet of politics. This research will examine whether and how the increasing use of social media, Facebook in particular, by young adults has an impact on their attitudes and participation patterns in politics. With assembly elections held in Tamil Nadu (the eleventh largest state in India) in the month of April 2011, the political participation of the young adults, and especially their political content-sharing practices on Facebook, was analyzed using online observation and survey methods.

Keywords Social media, political participation, social networking sites, political mobilization, viral sharing

Introduction

‘Social media’ is a term that is increasingly being used by everyone nowadays. Social media is a means of sharing information that depends heavily on interaction between individuals.

According to many researchers and scholars, with the advent of these interactive new technologies the pattern of political engagement has experienced a tremendous change in the last decade. The use of the Internet, and social media in particular, by citizens, political parties and organizations may facilitate the widespread of political information, establish new means of online political participation and also modify users’ political attitudes and involvement.

Uses and gratifications theory explains how different people use the same media messages for different purposes to satisfy their psychological and social needs and achieve their goals (Katz, 1959). Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) looked at the uses and gratifications for Internet use and they found five primary motivators: information seeking, passing time, interpersonal utility, convenience and entertainment. Clark, Lee and Boyer examined, in an exploratory manner, the gratifications students derive from using Facebook and how dependent they are on the site. Their findings matched existing research in that students used Facebook for very similar reasons to those Papacharissi and Rubin found for people using the Internet. In this study, this theory will be used to test whether the young adults use social media for political communication with any of these motivations.

Many social sciences studies suggest to an increasing extent that the boundary between virtual and real worlds is blurring. Although it seems paradoxical, it can be said that there
are few differences between activities taking place in these two worlds. Yet the question still arises as to whether online political participation can effect or influence political activity and knowledge. The communicative situation in which social media users find themselves appears to be contradictory: on the one hand, the users can present themselves in a highly controlled manner while, on the other hand, the risk of excessive sharing appears to be great. Social media has a few clear-cut advantages over traditional media. Thanks to these advantages, and with the media becoming extensively prevalent, it has affected the political scenario in the western world to a great extent. In India, where there is an increase in the number of social media users, the political engagement of young adults is an under-researched phenomenon. The study will focus on Tamil Nadu, one of the states in South India. With the Tamil Nadu general elections taking place during this research study, there was scope for the users to share content related to politics and politicians. This paper will analyze the role played by social media during the 2011 Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections and will also examine whether its usage by young adults changes their attitudes and participation patterns in politics.

The Dravidian movement for nearly four decades has governed the politics of Tamil Nadu. The movement has also changed the party that occupies the seat in the state legislature. It has been claimed that the most politically significant election in India was the Tamil Nadu elections last year, where the main battle was between the two Dravidian giants – the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the opposition All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), since the outcome will affect the central government, in which DMK is a key supporter.

The main aim of this study is to analyze the role played by the social media when it comes to political communication, and to focus on young adults’ involvement and their political content-sharing practices with respect to the Tamil Nadu elections, 2011. First, it examines the political content shared by young adults and their motivations. Secondly, it analyses whether the online political engagement has an effect on offline political participation activity. It is interesting to note the trends in the political content shared in the online profiles of the young adult users who are supporters of a particular political party, as well as those of non-supporters. In this study, a group of young adults were interviewed and their political content-sharing practices were examined using content analysis and web survey methods to get a deep understanding of how social media participation works. In particular, the conclusions will underline the value of social media in driving young adults to participate in political activities and also the critical interaction between media and politics.

Media and Politics
One of the most important aspects of studying media and politics is to have a clear understanding about the relationship to be analyzed. This may be either the impact that the media have on politics or the effect that the political system has on the media (Oates, 2008). This study will focus on the former, which basically involves the role played by the audience both in media and politics. The three-step model of media, which involves production, content, and audience, is not always static in terms of media and politics. When it comes to politics, where the media plays a passive role at times, there are two additional media models that suggest a slightly different relationship. These are the democratic-participant model and the developmental democracy model. The democratic-participant model proposes a more equal and interactive relationship between the media and the audience. This model depicts the role of the Internet in politics (ibid).

To a certain extent, the relationship between the audience and media messages is perceived as a multifaceted and interactive connection. In particular, it is difficult to isolate the effect of media messages, because it is only one factor among a variety of political influences. This is made even more complex by the fact that people choose the media channel that supports their political viewpoints. This study comprises an analysis of Internet content, and social media in particular, which includes public opinion data in its theory about the relationship of the media to the political sphere.

Social Media: An Introduction
Social media is the use of web-based technologies to make communication interactive. Social media thrives on ‘comments’, ‘replies’, ‘following’, and ‘sharing’. Information is multi-cast in social media and received only by people who choose to receive it. The social media landscape is vast and growing, and may require several internal people to listen and participate every day.
It is quite difficult to categorize different social media as there are many services offering several functions. According to Lietsala & Sirkkunen and Karjaluoto (2008), social media consists of 8 different genres or categories that involve the possibility for social interaction. They are: content publishing & broadcasting, discussion forums, content sharing & social bookmarking, social networking sites, joint production, virtual worlds, attachment services and aggregation services. This study will concentrate on social networking sites and one site in particular. In simple terms, social networking sites are websites that connect people. These sites allow people to build personal web pages and then connect with friends to share content and communicate (Winchester, 2008). Social network sites are a prominent type of the various forms of user-generated social media that are sometimes grouped under the term “Web 2.0” (Gustafsson, 2010).

**Social Media's Role in Politics**

As mentioned above, the emergence of social media, and social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube in particular, have transformed the political landscape. No longer are people passive audiences for political messages; now the new media gives them enormous opportunity to participate more directly in the political process and potentially to change its course (Evans, 2010).

In the paper “This Time It’s Personal: Social Networks, Viral Politics and Identity Management”, which involves a pilot study on Swedish social media users, Gustaffson (2010) found out that the Swedish participants had a cynical view towards political campaigns on Facebook. Many of them maintained the notion that participating in political campaigns online in various forms generally fulfilled two functions: it builds your public or semi-public identity as you express political views and concerns, and acts as an excuse not for taking a more active part in a campaign. Offline activity was viewed in general as being more important or real. When it comes to politics, it is still debatable whether social media is a marketing tool or a field for civic responsibility. Social media is an under-researched phenomenon, which needs to be both studied and conceptualized as a tool for and site of politics.

The concept of social capital allows us to investigate whether online networks enable users to keep in touch with the members of their networks. It is possible that new forms of social capital and relationship building will occur on online social network sites and when it comes to online political social media users, they rely mainly on weak ties to be informed of political news.

**Social Networking Sites and Political Content Sharing**

The most distinctive feature of social networking sites is their interconnectedness with other types of social and mainstream media. It is easy to upload media content, post it on your Facebook profile or GroupTweet, or forward it to the friends in your network. Henry Jenkins (2006) defines this core concept of viral sharing as “getting the right idea into the right heads at the right time.”

In their article “MyFaceTube Politics: Social Networking Web Sites and Political Engagement of Young Adults”, Baumgartner and Morris (2009) give an explanation of social networking sites as sites which allow individual users to post messages and interact with others either one-on-one or in groups. The impressive growth of social networking sites has attracted much attention because the sites have made people’s personal relationships more visible and quantifiable than ever before (Economist, 2010). The most important reason for their phenomenal growth is something called the “network effect”. This implies that the audience of a social network will grow slowly at first, and then explode once it passes a certain point (ibid).

With information being available on the web and people being more aware of this than ever before, the focus is no longer on acquiring information but on putting it together in a useful way (Gustafsson, 2010). The process of how information spreads or goes viral is of interest not only to organizations but also to journalists. This information ranges from political content to funny home videos. “In basic terms going viral can be defined as a phenomena used in reference to Internet content that spreads rapidly through a population by being frequently shared with a number of individuals. In other words, a link goes viral because most of the people who get it forward it to their Friends list or post it in their online status. In the field of political and social activism, the phenomenon is known as viral politics” (ibid).
This process of viral sharing can be examined as one of the major ways of conveying information to members (both strong and weak ties) in their networks. The political content shared accounts for the dissemination of knowledge in an indirect way. So, it is quite essential to analyze what kind of content goes viral on these sites.

Indian Scenario in Terms of Social Media Use for Political Purposes

Compared to the western world, India appears to be lacking in terms of the use of social media for political purposes. The main reasons are the digital divide and the fact that not many Indian politicians use the medium for campaigning purposes. Yet some politicians in India are increasingly starting to get up to date and be part of the virtual world. In the year 2009, the central election campaigns featured both the Bharathiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress using social media strategies to target younger audiences.

The reception of new media technologies, and social media in particular, among Indian voters from regional states was tested by Vangal1 (a software company) in the regional elections. The company chose Tamil Nadu for its social media analysis for various reasons. The total number of voters in Tamil Nadu is 45,900,000, which is about 63% of the Tamil Nadu population. Tamil Nadu has 3.2 million overall Internet users, of whom 1.33 million are broadband Internet users. It is the largest by number of all the states facing elections. So, in this study this has given rise to questions such as that of the extent of political engagement among young adults as considered by traditional (voting) political participation and alternative (non-voting) political participation.

Facebook is used all over the globe and it is the favorite for many young adults. Even in terms of politics, people prefer to use Facebook to disseminate information through social media. A good example to cite here is the US elections, when over 1,000,000 people installed the Facebook application 'US politics', the application that measured users' responses in the year 2008. This made Facebook an enormously popular and influential new way to interact and voice opinions.

As of April 2011, India had an estimated audience of 23,387,380 Facebook users2, with more male than female users. The percentage of Indian Facebook users in terms of global audience is 3.58% and the majority of the users belong to the 18–24 age group.

Methodology

The research methodologies used are online observation and survey. The survey method involved the online distribution of questionnaires whereas online observation involved an analysis of Facebook profiles of the users who share political content.

Online Observation

There are a number of ways that ethnographers have tried to study the Internet. The methodological approach of virtual ethnography has been widened and revised through a range of other methods. There is an important difference between ethnography of users and ethnography of a social media site. The latter is an ethnography of a system (or culture, or space, or context) and can be implemented to expose and examine the ideologies and philosophies within such a system, e.g. within Facebook (Raynes-Goldie, 2010). Then the ethnographic data collected is analyzed to provide an explanation to the Facebook experience of the people who share political content. Almost since the advent of the term ‘virtual ethnography’, ethnographies of online cultures and communities has been conducted that are purely observational, in which the researcher is a specialized type of lurker (Kosinetz, 2006) and not really participating in the online communities. However, there are some other researchers who have articulated on the importance of a participative approach, in which the researcher actively participates as a member of the online community. In this study, the researcher created a new profile and performed the role of a ‘lurker’. The researcher got acquainted, in the sense was added as a ‘friend’ by the users who share political news and information actively through political forums and pages related to Tamil Nadu politics. This was done mainly to get access to the users’ ‘profile’ on Facebook, the site where the online observation was carried out. The researcher kept track of what the informants did on Facebook by regularly reading their profiles and ‘news feed’ (a feature that displays news about your friends’ latest activities on your Facebook homepage). These users

1 Viewing Tamil Nadu Elections from the Lens of Social Media (2.5 Millions Mentions) Retrieved on http://www.pluggd.in/tamil-nadu-elections-and-social-media-297/
were spotted in the online forums and pages where political discussions took place. The profile created was anonymous and certain information was added to the profile to show that the profile was active. The researcher didn’t reveal the identity while sending friend requests to the people who share political content. It was quite interesting that almost 90% of the users, to whom the friend requests were sent, added the researcher back. This act of adding an unknown person (researcher) by the users shows that they wanted to increase their weak ties in order to reach as many people as possible. Online observation was done to analyze the online political content shared by the young users during the period of the 2011 Tamil Nadu elections addressing the first research question of the study.

The sample included 50 Facebook profiles, of which 20 profiles belonged to those who are ardent followers of the DMK party; another 20 belonged to those who were affiliated to the AIADMK party. The remaining 10 profiles were unaffiliated profiles, in the sense that they did not have any political party affiliation but still shared political content. These profiles were chosen according to the convenience of the researcher since the aim was to select only avid social media users who share political content related to TN politics and politicians. In total, 303 videos and 278 photos were analyzed. The content shared were studied based on few parameters and the main units of analysis were links, status updates and photos. The profiles were analyzed from February 20th 2011 to March 30th 2011 since it was during this period that election campaigning was at its peak and more political content was shared in relation to the elections on 13th April 2011. Various aspects of the political content shared as well as certain features of the online profiles were analyzed based on different parameters. For example, parameters of the links examined were videos, articles and photographs. The features of the profile studied are gender, language, profile picture, type of activity, amount of content shared and the political view on the profile page.

Survey
To conduct large-scale research it is important to select a suitable method for the data collection. First of all, it should be mentioned that the survey was carried out using questionnaires. There are three different ways in which the sample population can answer these questionnaires. First, respondents can be interviewed by telephone, the so-called CAI method (computer-assisted telephone interview). This is for people who have a landline telephone; usually more elderly people than younger ones. The second way to interview people is to go into their homes and interview them there. The CAPI method (computer-assisted personal interview) is a representative survey method because the sample is selected randomly. The third method is called CAWI (computer-assisted web interview) or web-based interviews. Here e-mail is sent to a wide range of addresses, including a link to the questionnaire, or a link is posted in different forums. This questionnaire has to be relatively short because the chance of discontinuing is very high. Another weak point about this method is that it is more likely to get a younger audience and only those who are familiar with the Internet. In this case, the questionnaire was distributed online in the form of a web survey in Facebook forums and also direct messages from the researcher. The sampling considered for this research was non-probability sampling. This sampling was chosen because in this study we are going to concentrate only on young adults who are active in social networking sites and those who use them regularly. Thus, here people are not chosen randomly but intentionally and purposefully, so that the sample represents a particular group of people who are ‘online political users’: users who share political content related to Tamil Nadu politics avidly or rarely. Online users who were part of any political group were considered. Unlike the previous method, here the identity of the researcher was revealed in the short survey invite along with the survey link.

A sample of 110 young adults aged 18–30 were surveyed using purposive sampling. Since online users who share political content related to Tamil Nadu politics are spread across various regional cities, no location was specified. Thus the collection of data is distributed among young people belonging to various cities, mainly from Tamil Nadu. Personalized inbox Facebook messages and discussions in online groups/forums were the primary tools of distribution by which this survey was conducted. Then the online survey was sent to the political groups and posted on discussion forums and sites about and by politics and politicians. Since the sample was identified using purposive sampling, the survey was also posted individually on the Facebook walls of the respondents who supposedly share political content avidly, and sometimes e-mails were sent.
Results

Online Observation

In the months (February and March 2011) leading up to the election, young users used Facebook to connect and interact with others around them in a number of ways. Among the various activities, it was noticed that many campaigned in support of a political party or sent Facebook messages related to the campaign or the elections to friends. Few of them revealed online which candidates they were going to vote for in the April elections. Nearly 20% used Facebook to organize or get information about in-person meetings to discuss political issues in the campaign. Taken altogether, 76% of young adult users did at least one of these communication-related activities in the months leading up to the April elections.

Out of 50 profiles viewed, 13 users wrote only in English in their profiles, 3 users used the regional language Tamil, and 34 users used both English and Tamil (bilingually). All unaffiliated profiles analyzed had their personal portraits as profile pictures. Out of 20 DMK-affiliated users, 7 users had their personal portraits and 13 had other pictures as their profile pictures. Other pictures encompass political party flags, politicians/candidates and political party achievement or endorsement posters. 11 users belonging to the AIADMK group/page had their own pictures whereas the remaining 9 users had other pictures. The researcher witnessed changes in many profile pictures during the last week of March.

All of the online political social media users whose profiles were analyzed, except a few in the unaffiliated category, mentioned their political ideology/orientation in the information page. Those unaffiliated users who describe their political ideology as liberal (11%) were roughly twice as likely as conservatives (5%) or moderates (6%) to take part in these online forums.

Nearly half of the young adults who were affiliated to a particular political party actively took part in online discussions and shared political content in online group forums related to the campaign or political issues in the months leading up to the April 2011 election. Demographically, young adults aged 18–24 were more likely to take part in online discussion groups. All members of the DMK and AIADMK groups ‘like’ or were part of at least three pages/groups and at most eight pages/groups. Out of 10 unaffiliated profiles analyzed, only two users participated in the “Amma for Tamil Nadu” and “Vote for DMK – 2011 elections” pages.

The frequency of the political activity was analyzed during the period during which political content was shared. From the end of February to 10th March it was noticed that users who were affiliated to the DMK and AIADMK groups shared political content on average twice in three days whereas unaffiliated users very rarely shared such content. However, during the last two weeks of March, DMK/AIADMK-affiliated profiles shared at least three items of political content each day, while unaffiliated profile users shared such content every other day.

There are many differences between being involved in any online political activity and offline political participation. However, both sharing political content and taking part in political activities constitutes political participation. Online political activity in terms of politics may be a status update that mentions politics, a wall post about politics or politicians, or a link about politics. Even posting any photo or video of someone at a political event or regarding politicians or creating any events for meetings/volunteering comes under political activity. Using applications related to politics, attending quizzes, answering questions and also following the pages of a political group or politician also fall under political activities (Figure 1). Of the young adult users, 96% posted news, photos, web links or videos on their friends’ walls to spread political news and information. Comparatively far fewer (4%) of those users who were not affiliated to any political groups, i.e. unaffiliated profiles, posted content on their friends’ walls.

80% of the young adult users shared political videos of which 44% belonged to DMK and 36% to AIADMK respectively. In the months leading up to the April elections, 31% of adult Internet users went online to watch videos about the candidates or the campaign. Most of the young adults were more likely to watch political videos related to the 2011 Tamil Nadu Elections after seeing publicity campaigns on television. Along with watching videos online, adults went online to share photos, videos or audio files related to the election with others. Out of 50 profiles analyzed, it was found that 39 users shared videos and nearly 303 videos were shared related to politics and politicians.

Nearly 20% of the unaffiliated young adult users who use social networking sites for various other purposes shared photos related to politics and politicians, compared with 41% of the DMK-affiliated users and 39% of AIADMK users. Altogether, 80% of the users shared photos. Most of the photos shared by DMK supporters were achievement, endorsement and manifesto...
posters, and also portraits of M.Karunanidhi and M.K.Stalin. Even though AIADMK too shared their posters, it was found most of the photos were anti-DMK. The unaffiliated users shared mash-up photos and satirical cartoons.

Only 7% of the unaffiliated users shared their thoughts on any political event, person or party or described any political scenario. 93% of the users who are ardent followers of a particular political party wrote blogs either in English or Tamil and shared them. It was found that the majority of the AIADMK-affiliated users wrote blogs.

Almost everyone shared news links and web page links. This was the commonest activity witnessed of all political content sharing practices by the young adults. Just like other media-prediction polls and surveys conducted about traditional media, on Facebook election polls were conducted to predict the win using applications. This activity was popular among AIADMK supporters with 16 of the 20 profiles analyzed conducting and participating in polls.

The most common activity of all was to follow a particular political party or person and also to like a political person/party page. It was found that most prominent Tamil Nadu political figures from major parties were on Facebook, as were those from other parties, such as Vijayakanth. Both DMK- and AIADMK-affiliated users were part of the online political groups and followed many politicians whereas unaffiliated users very rarely liked or followed such pages.

**Survey**

Out of 110 respondents, 97.3% were male (107 in number) and 2.7% were female (3 in number). It was hard to differentiate between users in terms of gender since 97% of the participants were male respondents. Respondents (N=110) aged between 18 and 30 were chosen for the sample. The majority of the participants belonged to the 26–28 age group (M=24.66, SD= 3.60). Apart from them, the 18–19, 20–21, and 22–24 age groups were almost equally distributed with 15%, 16% and 17% respectively.

75% of the total respondents obtained political news and information from traditional media channels such as TV, radio and newspapers whereas comparatively fewer respondents (68%) used social media; so traditional media played a dominant role in imparting political knowledge. Nearly 60 respondents (59%) had received an online invite to join a political group or support a political cause. Half of them (49%) supported a political cause or had taken part in a political activity as a result of an online request. It was found that social media is used as a source of political knowledge for its convenience and up-to-date information (Figure 2).

When political participation was analyzed, it was found that nearly three out of every four students (75 percent of the respondents) shared news links related to politics; this was found to be the major activity among young adults in terms of political participation (Figure 3). Around 62% of the young adults posted or sent messages or made posts on others’ walls. 57% of the respondents commented on photos and videos. Nearly half of the people posted photos (54%) and 38% posted or shared videos. Even blogs were written and posted on current issues and 38% of the respondents were involved in this particular activity.

It was found that the main reason behind people flocking to these sites to share political content was to spread awareness, as the majority of the respondents (87%) agreed, whereas the next commonest option chosen was ‘seeking information’ (60%). The lowest number of the respondents said that they shared political information for its sheer entertainment factor (Figure 4).

Online participation led to many offline political participation activities. The majority of the respondents followed up a particular politician or party (49%) and these online activities led to a voting decision for nearly 45% of the participants. Nearly 39% of the respondents took up volunteering activities and 34% attended meetings and political events. Only 17% shifted loyalties from one political party to another due to their online political participation. A relatively modest number of online young adults were found to participate in volunteer activities related to the campaign.

**Conclusion and Future Research**

There have been intense debates about the impact of the Internet on politics ever since Internet usage became a prominent part of political media in the late 1990s. With social media not that popular in the field of politics in India, this survey was done to investigate the audience in terms of the role of social media in political communication. The findings showed the effect of the new interactive technology on young adults’ personal engagement with politics. It was also noted
that the social media has the potential to bring about a revolution in ways of thinking about politics and in the way political parties campaign.

Social media technologies certainly contribute to a weakening of the digital divide and give a voice to marginalized populations. There has always been a skeptical view of political campaigns on Facebook as previous research (Gustafsson, 2010) has shown that participating in political campaigns online was just an excuse for not being active in real-life campaigns. In this study, it has been shown clearly that online activities has led to offline participation. The results are cited here in order to shed light on the motives and actions of participants in viral politics and reveal how further research must take those motives into account.

The results clearly show that young adults engage in political activities both in the virtual world and in real life. Political engagement is indeed occurring within the Facebook environment, suggesting that the social networking site, which is popular among young people, is an opportunity for them to express and share their political views. The implications of this finding have the potential to change the way candidates and political organizations think about online campaigning and help them use social network sites to achieve a huge impact.

This study is limited due to the fact that we only examined members of the Facebook website, and that those users were all based in one geographic location. Additionally, the use of a snapshot survey prevents us from establishing the cause and effect of the situation. The timing of this study was chosen to fit in with the 2011 Tamil Nadu election. Elections are times of high political engagement due to their level of importance. Consequently, the levels of political activity reported in our sample are likely to be greater than those in periods between election cycles.

Although this study primarily focuses on the objective of finding whether online political participation imparts political knowledge and encourages substantial expressions of political participation in activities such as volunteering for a political organization or attending meetings, it is also important to note that the affordances of the site may persuade young adults to have discussions on politics. For young adults, communication about politics may prove to be a crucial component in setting the stage for later political activity. Getting them involved in political discourse, whatever the method is an important first step in revitalizing democracy. The sample studied in this research overwhelmingly reported that they use social media to bring about change in society and to spread awareness of a particular political party among young adults.

The uses and gratifications theory, on which the whole study is based, has been proved since the reasons or motivations behind why young adults flock to these sites coincide with the uses and gratifications theory which Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) proposed for Internet use. It was found that majority of the young adults shared political content in Facebook either for purposes of spreading awareness or seeking information. Very few respondents shared political content for the entertainment factor, which satisfies the theory in terms of online political participation.

When the findings of this research are analyzed using a model comprising measures such as Facebook intensity, political activity and network exposure to the political activity (Ellison, Lampe et al., 2008), it is found that all three are inter-related in terms of political participation among young adults. The analysis of the political content shared by the users shows that general intensity of Facebook use is only slightly associated with political participation but tendency to use Facebook a great deal for political expression and to receive political messages is highly linked with that outcome. One explanation of the research findings could be that those who are politically active in other settings are also politically active on social media. They are the ones who are more accustomed to political messages. On the other hand, social networking sites, and Facebook in particular, may also provide an environment for unengaged users to explore political activity, which then translates into real-world political participation.

A trend was noticed in the political content-sharing practices of politically affiliated users with respect to the 2011 Tamil Nadu assembly elections. The announcements and major meetings scheduled for elections affected the online discussions. According to the Vangal social media analysis with respect to the Tamil Nadu elections, it was found that AIADMK had a lot of mentions in the discussions and online groups of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. Similarly, in this research comparatively more users were identified as supporting the opposition party, i.e. All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kalagam (AIADMK), and they shared political content avidly. With nearly eleven hundred thousand new first-time voters included in the electoral rolls before the assembly elections, experts believe these voters might have contributed significantly to the big 78% turnout for the Tamil Nadu poll (that is 3.67 million out of the total electorate of
4.71 million). So, it can be aptly said that social media has played a significant role in keeping the Tamil Nadu young adults informed and imparting political knowledge.

There are various perspectives from which people view the impact of the Internet on politics. It enables radicalism by helping like-minded people find and connect with each other. It also provides varied sources, which does not improve credibility. To address these issues, future research should analyze the impact of other social networking sites on political participation. A random sample of all users of a social networking site would also benefit this area of research. Even though the timing of this research to coincide with the 2011 Tamil Nadu assembly elections is not a limitation, it would be advisable also to do research during a time period outside of an election period. This would add a different dimension to the social media and political participation research, complementing the results presented in this paper. Since the Tamil Nadu Elections this year witnessed lot of young adults participating in online political activities, it can be said that social media campaigning by political parties themselves has the potential to bring about tremendous change in civic engagement in the upcoming years. Beyond survey research and content analysis, experimental interventions would also prove useful in moving this area of research forward by providing a means to establish a cause-and-effect relationship.

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FIGURES

Figure 1. Type of Activity

- Comment on videos/photos
- Status updates
- Join groups/follow/like pages
- Participate in polls
- Share links
- Post blogs
- Post photos
- Post videos
- Make wall posts

Figure 2. Why use social media

**Why do you use social media (facebook/twitter) as a source of political knowledge?**

- Up-to-date
- Informative
- Free access
- Convenient
- Accessible

Figure 3. Political participation

**What kind of activities do you get involved in terms of political participation in social networking sites?**

- Comment on other posts
- Share news links
- Make wall posts
- Write blogs
- Post photos
- Post videos
Figure 4. Why share political content

Why do you share political content?

- Entertainment/ time pass
- Spreading awareness
- Information seeking

Figure 5. Offline Participation

Has online participation led to any of these offline political participation?

- Voting decision
- Follow up the particular political party/leader
- Volunteering
- Attending political meetings/events
- Shifting loyalty from one political party to another