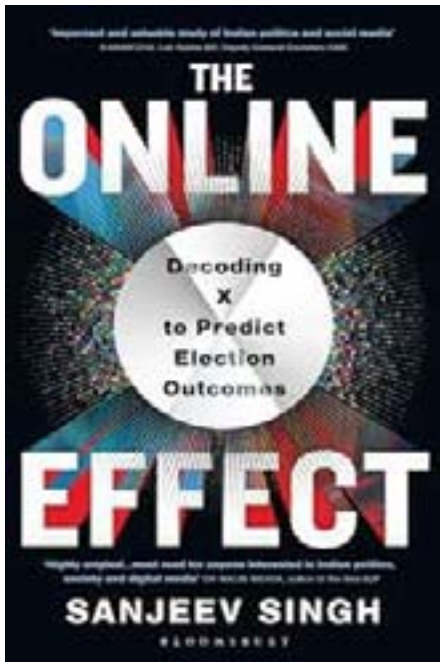


Reviewing the Online Effect and the Promise of Platform-Based Electoral Prediction



1. Introduction

The *Online Effect: Decoding X to Predict Election Outcomes* provides a timely and empirically informed contribution to discussions of digital politics in India, making the case that social media activity or behaviour on X/Twitter can be reliably connected to electoral outcomes in terms of vote share. From nearly twenty years of journalism, and a multi-state quantitative study, Sanjeev Singh proposes the Singh–Srivastava Vote Predictor (along with data scientist Rishabh Srivastava): a model that progressively links online engagement metrics with offline electoral outcomes while providing due insistence that online campaigning complements but does not substitute for traditional ground mobilisation. This review contends that by conceptualizing Indian political Twitter as a quantifiable campaign field, the book legitimizes a new branch of political communication in the Global South but also leaves unanswered how causality works, whether its findings are platform dependent and whether Twitter opens up or closes down space for democratic alternatives questions that future research will need to address unquestionably.

Scope, Context, and Central Argument

The kernel of Singh's claim is that political communication through X can be measured to produce predictive insights about electoral performance in multiple Indian states that are disparate in development. The Singh–Srivastava Vote Predictor takes a variable-centric approach, calculating engagement likes, retweets, replies and other

interaction variables on the social media accounts of politicians and parties, and then correlating these engagement metrics with subsequent vote shares across assembly and national elections. Singh juxtaposed the argument of the book with context of the rapidly expanding internet penetration in India: between 2014 and 2019, the internet users ascended from approximately 250 million to about 640 million, making online political communication structurally salient for over 50 percent of eligible voters in the Lok Sabha elections in 2019.

The monograph is rather openly positioned as an attempt to escape anecdotal stories regarding the “Twitter election” by putting forward a formalized framework for measuring the association between engagement and votes. Singh extends earlier research in political communication that has treated social media as an indicator of behavior for example, studies demonstrating how “more tweets” or sentiment analysis can be useful in inferring citizen preferences and voting intentions in European contexts but he relocated those concerns into the particular institutional context of a multi party, federal, and highly unequal democracy. In this manner, *The Online Effect* becomes one of the first reach for large-scale social media measures to be incorporated with other, already well established toolkits of Indian psephology and campaign analysis.

Approach and the Singh–Srivastava Vote Predictor

While the book is meant for a general audience, its methodology section describes the construction and validation of the Singh–Srivastava Vote Predictor, a statistical model linking engagement measures to vote shares within seven Indian states. Singh describes partnering with states as diverse as the relatively wealthy Maharashtra and Haryana and the more impoverished and agrarian Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand and thus takes advantage of subnational variation in socio-economic context to assess the robustness of the engagement–vote relationship. The central methodological shift is towards engagement, not output: Singh is at pains to stress that “more tweets do not equal more engagement”, and that prediction is about activists as defined by a user's active interaction with political accounts.

He discusses the longevity of the model, as the platform goes through changes. Singh points out that his study was done before Twitter had been purchased by Elon Musk and before various policy changes regarding access to data and changes to the structure of APIs have

made it difficult to replicate. Even so, he contends that the underlying logic of the model still holds because engagement has a strong correlation with vote share, independent of any particular technical aspect of the platform's design. He simultaneously refuses to run the model again in this context, calling a complete replication in different states a "humongous exercise," highlighting both the size of the original collection and how difficult it is when platform data restructures their policies.

This approach gives rise to a number of significant issues from a research-journal perspective. It works at a number of levels: firstly, showing that predictive correlations can be produced from engagement metrics even in states with significant digital divides, implying that engagement may track involved portions of the electorate whose behavior is representative enough to predict wider outcomes. Second, by drawing from within-platform statistics (e.g., Twitter's own accounts of 4.8 million elections vis-à-vis non-election tweets in up to five state elections in 2018 and 3.2 million for the more recent Haryana and Maharashtra contests), Singh makes a strong case that election seasons generate unique, quantifiable spikes in digital political activity. However, because of its non-technical nature, sampling strategies, operationalisation of engagement variables and model diagnostics are not here as explicit as might ideally be the case for full scientific scrutiny.

Vote Share and the Limits of Predicting Online Engagement

A key analytic contribution of the book is its unwavering resistance to exaggerate the predictive capacity of online activism. Pointing out the example of Rahul Gandhi who was more successful on Twitter during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections than Narendra Modi But lost due to a comparatively weaker ground strategy, Singh clarifies that online campaigns "cannot be a replacement for offline campaigns". Furthermore, this example illustrates that the Predictor should be interpreted as a reflection of a certain type of political salience and salience, not as an independent cause of electoral results.

As the excerpts cited earlier from those empirical chapters suggest, higher engagement scores almost consistently correlate with a greater vote share for parties and leaders in the states examined in the book (including poorer ones) That predictive correlations live on in less developed states like Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand is credited to the "digital revolution of 2016" - the year affordable data and smartphones created "a genuinely digital consumption society". Singh here makes a break from strictly platform-focused accounts to connect the effectiveness of digital campaigns to larger global changes in media access and consumption.

Somewhat similarly though very differently as well the book's focus on correlation brings the usual warning that engagement could be endogenous to campaign strength

more broadly. Politicians with high levels of engagement tend to be those with higher levels of organisational reach, media exposure, and resource advantage; digital metrics may thus reflect electoral power, rather than predict it independently. Singh partially concedes this by viewing social media interaction as which "adds value to the brand of a political actor", and which needs to be "supplemented with analogous offline strategy along with mass mobilization of the Party cadre and supporters."

Politicians as Content Creators/Curators

The Online Effect's unique selling point is its longitudinal investigation of how politicians behave as content producers who follow recognizable trajectories of digital activity through consumption, curation, creation and collaboration. Politicians and their teams learn [i] "how to hook a follower" [ii] "how to keep a follower engaged" and [iii] "how to ride out cycles of disengagement and re-engagement as followers log-off and come back." This account of the process is grounded in a communication-theoretic sensibility where the first click marks a moment of entry, scroll and interaction continually marks moments of sustained engagement, and later returns mark reengagement that communicates satisfaction with past seconds of experience.

Politician accounts function as places for information and persuasion in this framework. Singh notes, "Every major political handle has a team tracking what sorts of posts their followers are engaging with and to what degree and using this information to guide both messaging and issue selection." Its curation, or reposting of larger content by other accounts, is interpreted as a tactic to establish credibility and/or keep a certain idea or sentiment "on top of a follower's mind," thus prolonging discursive life of preferred narratives through multiple accounts and media. The book goes on to discuss the idea of "collaboration," a point where content is created primarily by followers, and the politician operates in more of a community manager role, suggesting that digital campaigns can develop into more diffused and participatory systems.

This conceptualisation is useful for scholarly debates on digital campaigning, in that it connects well-established campaign functions agenda-setting, message discipline, and base mobilisation to textual practices on X. It opens the door to more detailed research into how different parties and leaders move between these stages, how they allocate work between central teams and volunteers, and how these practices differ across ideological groups and election stages.

Reframing Audiences to Enhance the Persuasive Affordances of the Digital Public Sphere

Singh then provides nuance to the concept of followers themselves, identifying critics, rational users, biased users, and followers who are believers (with high affective identification with specific leaders). This separation corresponds to a rich literature in political psychology on motivated reasoning and partisanship, but is here contextualized in the within-context dynamics of mentions, replies and quote tweets by Indian politicians. Singh describes various motivations



and approaches for each category: for instance, engaging even hostile commentators is important to show that the company is open to criticism, and trying to convince critics via comments, and need for information dense content for rational followers who “will only be satisfied once they have sifted through all the information and find it to their satisfaction.”

This conversation is situated into an argument about social media as an almost thoroughly efficient model of political communication. Singh argues that politicians uniquely advantage themselves as content creators: they are already public figures, have privileged access to information through government channels, and their job involves a professional approach to persuasion. This means that their accounts become locations where updates and strategic framing meet a politically attractive combination for citizens interested in substantive news as well as interpretive guidance. Through this, social media platforms blur lines between news, opinion, and mobilisation, enabling leaders to sidestep traditional journalistic filters to set both the agenda and tone of political discourse itself.

This view reinforces the necessity to regard political accounts not only as a source of campaign imagery, but as an integral component of a hybrid media system through which content transmediates from X to television bulletins, newspaper columns and messaging apps. This circulatory logic is evident in Singh's discussion of the layering of tweets in newsrooms or the segments in the television election coverage dedicated to politicians' tweets. The Online Effect therefore enjoins scholars to incorporate social media metrics into larger media ecosystems analyses, as opposed to thinking of social media as a standalone speculative digital ghetto.

Offline Campaigns, Digital Divides, and Representativeness

One of the significant strengths of the book is its contention that online and offline politics are inseparable. Singh makes the point time and again that even the best performance on X cannot make up for poor ground campaigns as for example in 2019, despite the Congress winning on some digital parameters, the mobilisation of the Bharatiya Janata Party stood out on the organisational front. Burson has done this not only rhetorically it impels a more nuanced reading of the Predictor's success: projections may be accurate, he implies, because the online and offline campaign efforts are becoming more and more converged in a “blending of the online and offline worlds” and not because the online world has overtaken the offline world.

A detail-oriented approach to divisions in tech usage over time and by subpopulation is also articulated with more subtlety than is typical in a journalistic analysis. According to Singh, predictive correlations still survived even in the economically weaker states due to the expansion of mobile internet post 2016, bringing wide sections of the electorate online and doting with digital political communication,

thereby narrowing long prevailing urban rural and class-based gaps. Nevertheless, there are still questions of demographic representation: while the aggregate user numbers are provided, an equally disaggregate engagement metrics broken down by age, gender, caste or region to know which constituencies contribute the most to the visible engagement in the metrics that go into the Predictor. For audiences at journals, this implies a promising agenda for subsequent studies that would integrate Singh's model with survey data or voter file linkages to explore the ways online engagement maps to salient social cleavages and voting classes.

Normative and Theoretical Implications

The Online Effect also does much more than simply report empirical findings; it also raises fundamental normative questions about the impacts of elections becoming ever more datafied and platform-mediated. The book puts agnostic engagement in the centre, pointing to the incentives of political actors to maximise visibility, controversy and affective resonance to stimulate interactions. Singh defines agenda-driven content as the tendency of parties to choose one agenda over another, thus emphasising their performance in one area while ignoring overall policy failures, or refraining from mentioning issues like employment where they fare poorly.

Singh's description of consistent, bidirectional interaction and diverse content, however, conveys a more deliberative possibility, one where leaders 'open their ears' to supporters, challenge dissent, and introduce followers to global narratives and to leaders elsewhere with similar ideas. The resultant duality of what engagement is shaped by the presence or absence of media platforms available to the public and the rivalry within the delegation where engagement is understood as manipulation versus as participatory listening, is not yet theorised in the book, but has a clear empirical representation and might usefully be approached as in the frameworks of the deliberative democracy, connective action or populist communication theory.

There is also another normative issue that deals with reliance on platforms. Singh writes in a very explicit manner that the fundamental change in the way X is governed under Elon Musk dependent on the kind of automation it uses and the way the API functions is breaking down the “large community of developers” involved in data scraping and curation. This recognition illustrates the important nature of research models and democratic monitoring practices that can be compromised and dismantled by one-sided decisions from large commercial enterprises as to who has access to the data. While the book poses this largely as a technical/logistical problem, research journals may take this as a sign that they should step into the bigger discussions about platform governance, transparency, and the public good of political comms data.

Assessment and Contribution

The Online Effect succeeds in at least three respects of special relevance to research journals in political communication, media studies, and South Asian politics. First, it provides a clear, empirically-grounded case for social media activity being correlated with vote share across Indian states successfully diverse conceptual and practical approaches for incorporating digital metrics into electoral assessment. Second, it offers a detailed account of the functions and affordances of X for content curation, creation, and collaboration by Indian politicians and parties, synthesizing communication-theoretic and journalistic insights. Third, it contextualized these practices within a shifting digital and institutional landscape both in terms of infrastructure growth of internet access and the destabilization produced by platform policy changes.

The limitations of the book are those associated with methodological transparency and theoretical development. Statistical assessors also praise the Singh–Srivastava Vote Predictor as statistically robust although readers get limited insights into an actual model specification, operationalisation of engagement variables, or controls for confounding factors like incumbency, party organisation, or regional concerns. Similarly, although the book is sensitive to normative issues of influencing behavior, bias, and agenda-setting, these issues are not consistently connected to current theoretical literatures in political communication or democratic theory, resulting in conceptual insights that may be under-developed compared to the richness of empirical material.

The Online Effect is an attempt to demystify academic research into simple language. It should probably be read less as a traditional academic monograph and more as a field-opening, practice-informed, empirically rich, but field-closing, contribution. The narratives for its model and case give a solid basis for future work that could: 1) Combine predictors based on engagement with survey or experimental data to solve the problems of causality and representativeness. 2) Systematic comparison of Indian patterns against other large democracies with parallels in the spread of “transmedia” election dynamics. 3) Investigate the relationship between platform governance and algorithmic curation to the ability to substantively do digital campaigning over time.

Digital Democracy in the Global South is an important and provocative text for journals and scholars in this sub-field. It shows that Indian elections, which have always been a laboratory for survey-based psephology, are now an important arena for understanding the relationships between social media interaction, party organisation and electoral competition in a large, plural and growingly connected polity.

Reference

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