Political rebranding in the Global South: Of technology tales and the Modi factor

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On 31 May Dr Joyojeet Pal, Assistant Professor of Information at University of Michigan, gave a talk at LSE, where he discussed Modi's rise on social media as an important example on political brand management, and how his specific outreach strategies have evolved overtime. Here, **Saanya Gulati** *explores the key themes raised in the discussion.*

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's social media usage is a story that will go down in the annals of Indian history. His tweet "India has won" on the day that India's General Elections results were announced remains the country's most re-tweeted tweet. Similarly, the selfie that he took with premier Li Keqiang during his visit to China, was called "the most politically power-packed selfie in history". But Modi's tryst with social media dates back to 2009. This is where Dr Joyojeet Pal, who delivered an ICT4D series seminar on "Twitter and Political Rebranding in the Global South" to LSE students, began his story.

2009 was the year in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi's party, were soundly defeated in India's General Election. It's unsurprising that social media played a role in the BJP's comeback strategy. But that's not to say it was the reason for their rise to power – especially in a country where Internet penetration remains at 10%. Less than 5% of the citizenry were active Twitter users in 2009. So, as Dr. Pal rightly questioned, why would Modi, or any politician catering to a low proportion of voting citizenry on social media decide to invest in it?

Two factors are worth considering here: the first is the longstanding relationship between technology and politics in India. The discourse on technology and development remain deeply intertwined in India's political domain. However, as Dr. Pal demonstrated many of these policies often centre on welfare state populism, such as laptop handouts in the run up to elections, similar to initiatives like Peru's 'One Laptop Per Child'. In 2012, India's drive to create the world's cheapest tablet, *Aakash*, was another nationalistic attempt to project technology as part of its development agenda. Although many of these programmes have failed to produce substantive results, they are significant in terms of injecting a new technocratic language into the political discourse, and signalling a new kind of inclusive modernity.

But in addition to the symbolic power that technology possesses, Modi's own political background is relevant to understanding the rationale behind using social media. For one, his connection with the communal riots of Gujarat (despite his formal acquittal by the Supreme Court) has continued to haunt him, particularly in the international arena. In 2005, Modi was banned from entering the United States for violations of religious freedom, while UK government officials maintained no contact with him during his visit in 2003.

Undoubtedly, this presented a considerable barrier to developing his image as a global statesman, which became increasingly necessary as Modi's national political aspirations materialised. As Dr Pal speculated, if Modi won the election despite being on social media – a likely prospect considering the climate of anti-incumbency, among other factors – he would have been a harder personality to sell in the international world. And thus was born the new Modi brand.

The Modi Brand on Social Media

Much of Dr Pal's research focuses on the personal brand that Narendra Modi created on social media. The research method he adopted was a qualitative coding of 8,117 tweets from Modi's account between February 2009 and October 2015 that were divided thematically, and slotted into specific time periods, based on major political events.

Studying the account's activity well before Modi was elected as the Prime Minister provides a more holistic narrative of how the brand was built. For example, it was possible to observe the professionalisation of the account after 2011, marked by a notable change in language and tone. More interestingly, it was almost exactly at the time Modi was declared the Prime Minister in 2014 that the account began to mirror typical engagement patterns of a celebrity account.

PM Narendra Modi with PM Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore. Credit: Narendra Modi CC BY-SA 2.0

A closer look at the activity on Modi's Twitter account also reveals the different frames that constitute the Modi brand, and how they were strategically activated. For example, as Modi started to consolidate his image as a global statesman, after winning the election, the proportion of controversial tweets drastically decreased. Instead, these confrontations were assigned to a second rung of Twitter handles, or what are popularly known as 'trolls' in Internet lingo. These accounts usually express allegiance to Modi in their profile picture or Twitter handle (example: @VictoryForNamo, @NamoTeaParty) and are infamous for picking verbal arguments – usually in the form of inflammatory comments and insults – with anyone who is overtly critical of Modi and his policies. A well-known incident of this kind was the onslaught of attacks directed at a Bollywood celebrity who expressed her concerns with Modi's campaign called 'Selfie With Daughter' that was aimed to raise awareness about the girl child by encouraging fathers to take selfies with their daughters.

Although Twitter was the primary focus of Dr Pal's study, it was situated within the wider ambit of Modi's media strategy. This approach is valuable when discussing the Modi brand, considering that one of its key messages is to project him as a man for all seasons. For one, Modi is present on a wide range of platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and even Pinterest. In addition to the more conventional topics such as development and good governance, which constituted core components of his electoral campaign, Modi's YouTube channel caters to the more mundane matters, such as stress management, or yoga poses. Many of these videos are mirrored from his weekly radio show called *Mann Ki Baat*, in which he discusses a wide variety of topics that are broadcast across the nation.

Related to this, is the second unique aspect of the Modi brand, which is that while it remains deeply intertwined with technology, it has used innovative routes to ensure that its messages reach those who do not have access to it. While *Mann Ki Baat* is one such platform, his use of the hologram during the campaign was another successful technique that allowed his presence to penetrate the most remote rural areas without physically appearing himself.

Repercussions for the Modi brand: rhetoric versus reality

Modi makes for what Dr Pal calls a 'textbook case on political brand management.' But the more profound questions relate to its implications. For one, the nature of the medium allows a great of control over managing one's brand external image. That Modi has not held a single open press conference since becoming the Prime Minister is telling. But as a student in the audience rightly pointed out, it also makes his silence on certain issues all the more deafening. This is particularly pertinent in light of a recent incident where ministers in the Modi cabinet have intervened in student politics and attempted to silence voices that are perceived as a threat to the political establishment. While the strategy adopted has been one of deliberate deflection in many of these matters, and raises questions around democratic accountability, their real impact on the Modi brand will be determined by its consumers.

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