



## DIGITAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN WEST BENGAL

Mahua Basu

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



#### Author Details:

Associate Professor  
Banipur Mahila Mahavidyalaya  
Banipur, Habra, 24 Pgs. (N),  
West Bengal, India

#### Corresponding Author:

Mahua Basu

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#### Abstract

Political communication has transformed over the years with the emergence of new media like digital platforms. Earlier, traditional media consisted of print media primarily. Thereafter, with the emergence of the digital and social media platforms, media language has undergone a transformation resulting in a consequent transformation in the political language. This transformation has had a profound impact upon political discourse in democratic societies over the world. The various theories of media like priming and agenda setting shows how the language and rhetorical devices used in the media are adopted by the political actors. Media language shifts influence the language of political communication resulting in a transformation in the ways political actors connect with their audience.

**Keywords:** *Media language, Political discourse, Framing theory, Digital media, Agenda setting*

### Introduction

In the initial period (1920-2000), print media occupied the predominant place. Newspapers like The Statesman, Anandabazar Patrika, Bartaman, and The Telegraph shaped political opinions through editorial endorsements and investigative reporting. With the establishment of radio station in 1927 broadcast media came into play. Then again, just after the declaration of emergency, Doordarshan, the official television channel was established in Calcutta. Both the radio station (Akashbani) and the television channel (Doordarshan) was government controlled. Doordarshan also started its dedicated news programme 'Khas Khabor' in Calcutta which was followed by the operation of some private news channels like Tara News and ETV News. Today, the media scenario in West Bengal has an array of private news channels like ABP Ananda, 24 Ghanta, News 18 Bangla etc which have become major platforms for political debates. The digital transition phase (2000- 2010) resulted in the emergence of numerous digital social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp which have now been expanded to include X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, You Tube which has dramatically expanded the scope of political communication. The traditional methods of political communication have become expansive with politicians utilising the various social media platforms with professional help to reach their target audience.

This paper seeks to investigate how transformations in media, from traditional print and broadcast media to digital and social media have led to a transformation in the language or language of the media resulting in a corresponding change in the language of politics. Political language has adopted these new media languages which has led to a shift in the ways in which political actors communicate with their target audience. The emergence of the internet and the explosion of the digital technology has transformed the ways of mass communication resulting in a corresponding transformation in the political language and the ways of political communication.

### The Media-Politics Language Connection

The vernacular press in West Bengal had always played a very important role in shaping political consciousness since independence. Regional newspapers not only served as a medium of information but also acted as a vehicle for political mobilisation leading to the creation and preservation of a unique linguistic political culture whereby the Bengali Language has emerged as a political resource. With the rise of Television this has been further strengthened which has become a very important tool of political communication. It has been argued that television has always played a very important role in political communication. Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in their media agenda setting theory has demonstrated how people are prone to believe that an issue is of immense importance if the media covers it extensively. Continuous and extensive media coverage creates an impression upon the people. Also, when complex political phenomenon is transformed into simple political language by the media, it is easily accepted by the people. Media framing is thus an important aspect of using certain rhetorical

devices in such a way so as to make it simple and easy for the people to grasp complex political phenomenon. Media framing creates certain frames wherein some aspects of a political event is highlighted.

### **Digital Media and the Change in the Language of Politics**

With the emergence of the internet and the rise of the digital media, the language in the media has undergone a transformation resulting in a change in the language of politics. The emergence of various social media platforms has altered the ways of political communication and new methods of political communication has evolved. This has resulted in a number of changes in the political language.

Data analytics has become an important aspect of political communication in order to differentiate and identify the various strata of audience. This enables microtargeting of the target audience and also sending personalized messages for electoral gains. The political actors can now use different types of language to target their audience comprising of formal language, colloquial language and also emotional appeals.

Another aspect of the explosion of the digital media and social media platforms is the brevity of messages. Political actors now resort to short and direct messages to communicate and connect with the target audience in place of lengthy political messages and policy discussion which was the norm earlier. This has given the politicians an advantage. They can tailor their communication methods according to the media platform they are using. YouTube shorts, Instagram reels have now become the new methods to connect with the voters.

Digital platforms have also led to the emergence of viral culture. It is now of immense importance to become viral in order reach a greater number of people. In order to become viral, politicians' resort to various means such as using provocative statements, emotional language, sensational statements, memorable slogans so that a larger number of audiences can be reached. Polarization has become an important aspect of political rhetoric in order to expand the audience reach. In order to stand out and above all in a crowded digital space, it is essential for the political actors to employ such methods to reach the target audience.

Digital media has also led to the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers where algorithm and data analytics play a key role. These tools help to create content as per the consumers likes and filters out opposing content. This in turn, leads to a false sense of belief amongst the consumers that there is no opposing or different view from that which they are seeing. These algorithmic content creation makes it extremely difficult to access cross party communication.

### **Strategic Media Adaptations by Political Parties**

The CPI(M) had played a dominant role in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011 in West Bengal politics. During the initial stages, the media language of the CPI(M) was class based, relying on Marxist-Leninist ideology. Media language during this time employed complex analytical frameworks and the terms used frequently included 'bourgeoisie', 'proletariat', 'dialectical materialism.' Religious terminology was avoided and the language in the media sought to remain secular. Political issues were analyzed through the lens of class. The language was anti-imperialistic with slogans like 'break the black hand of Congress'. The communication style was disciplined with strict emphasis on ideological messaging. However, with the rise of digital media platforms the party faced significant challenges to adapt to the changed situation. Although they have made their presence felt in the digital arena, their communication methods still rely on traditional methods like rallies, meetings, demonstrations, protests. The Trinamool Congress which came to power in West Bengal after overthrowing the CPI(M) led Left front government in 2011 has successfully adapted its technique of political communication to embrace the various digital methods. Although in the initial phase it relied heavily on traditional methods of political communication like rallies, protests and demonstrations and till today organises such rallies (21<sup>st</sup> July), it has adopted the digital methods of political communication and engagement and employed them simultaneously in order to counter the sophisticated and superior digital technology and infrastructure employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The TMC have portrayed themselves as the protector of Bengali cultural pride with Mamata Banerjee insisting on screen time for Bengali cinema in multiplexes, demanding the status of a classical language for Bengali and also starting a second language movement. The language employed by the TMC shifted from formal to emotional and familial, (Didi ke Bolo) and political communication became more conversational. The media language emphasized regional cultural identity. The various cultural events became opportunities for political messaging and connecting with the people. For instance, Durga Puja became one of the most important events and the Chief Minister has organized a Durga Puja carnival to showcase this event and use it as a method of political communication.

The BJP has used the digital media platforms aggressively to establish their presence in West Bengal. They have used the social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube to connect with the target audience and broaden their support base. They have tried to control the narrative in West Bengal through identity politics and nationalism. The BJP also introduced the communal rhetoric in West Bengal politics. Slogans like 'Hindu-Hindu bhai bhai' was coined.

### **Digital Platforms and Language Change**

Politicians have adopted the language used in social media platforms. Hashtag campaigns like have become widespread. Digital acronyms like IYKYK (if you know you know), IMO (in my opinion), IFDNK (if you did not know) are being used increasingly by the politicians to communicate their messages. Messages have become short, resembling sound bites even in traditional media formats. There is a regular mixing of Hindi, English and Bengali terms in order to reach a broader audience. Short messages via reels and shorts are communicated to the target audience who can easily view them even on their mobile phones. Visual images

have helped to reach audiences who are uneducated. Cheap mobile phones and affordable data plans have further helped in this transformation.

Moreover, various celebrity endorsements, a glimpse of celebrity lifestyle including the lifestyle of politicians have resulted in establishing a connection with the people through the digital platforms. Facebook live, Instagram are means to directly engage with the people. All political parties and also politicians now have their official Facebook page, you tube Channel, many of which are run by professionals. It is now possible to react to any event within seconds and reach the people through these digital and social media platforms like X, Facebook, Instagram etc. another phenomenon which has changed how political communication occurs is the rise of citizen journalists. Anybody with a mobile phone can record an event and post it on social media resulting in widespread circulation.

### Conclusion

Thus, although the traditional methods of political communication have shifted and the language of media has changed to a great extent, there are certain drawbacks of the digital revolution. First and foremost is the spread of fake news which is a cause of concern and has raised the necessity of a regulatory body to control the content of social media platforms. The 2021 elections demonstrated the superior digital technology of the BJP. However, it did not translate into electoral success. Thus, it would appear that digital presence does not necessarily mean electoral success. Digital presence can strengthen the traditional methods of political communication, but it appears that it cannot replace the traditional media channels for political communication. The existing methods of political communication can be reinforced by the digital media platforms including social media.

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