
Indian Political Parties Miss the Convergence Opportunity

A study of websites of Indian political parties during the Loksabha Elections 2009

By

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Abstract

This research examines the design, functional and formal features of websites of political parties in India using an integrated quantitative approach. The research is mainly based on a study by Eva Johanna Schweitzer (2002) on German political party websites, normalization and equalization hypotheses of cyberspace and a study of reading pattern of websites by Jacob Nielsen. The results of the study indicate that websites of Indian political parties use the informative, top-down approach to communication with the public, rather than a participatory one. The lack of vernacular version of the websites indicate that political parties do not use their websites to communicate with the neo-literate population which would prefer reading content in their own language. In terms of design, the equalization hypothesis of cyberspace finds more empirical evidence than the normalization theory. Finally, results show that the websites of Indian political parties have scope for improvement to use the Internet as a participatory, convergent medium.

Introduction

The internet is arguably the most convergent medium today. The applications developed for the internet facilitate communication through text, audio, video, online discussion forums, blogs, guest books, community sites, webcasting, banner advertisements and also enable commercial transactions. Content-wise, features like these would make websites a convergent medium enabling the political parties to interact with the public. Internet provides an opportunity to communicate with the common man and party workers alike, without incurring the exorbitant costs of the traditional media like newspapers, television and the radio. With internet penetration increasing at the rate of about 16 percent every year, political parties cannot ignore the large voter base of internet users. This research

has been carried out when the Lok Sabha Elections are being held in the year 2009 in India to study the websites of political parties and study how they use the convergent medium of the internet.

What makes a good website?

There are various parameters to test a website's communication capabilities. For this research, the parameters used to study the websites of political parties in India are design, formal and functional. This research also tests the equalization and normalization theories with respect to the Internet.

A Review of Literature

The Internet, its communicative features and its uses, especially with respect to political communication, have been studied by various theorists. Sarcinelli (1998: 277) ascribes a 'communicative hinge function' to parties in the democratic process forming a communication channel between state agencies and citizens, in both the process of opinion formation and the process of interest mediation. Andrea Römmele¹ states that in a democracy, political parties perform the function of connecting the government and the governed with each other. He further argues that new ICTs will play different roles for different parties. While some parties use the new technology for active participation, others focus on top-down information dissemination and broad monitoring of public opinion. Political websites facilitate the possibility of communication with the public which is interested in political discourse, but not interested in direct interaction or participation in the political process. Having a website also facilitates better administration within the party and intra-party communication between workers. In a study of European political websites, Pippa Norris² found that party websites facilitate 'bottom-up' communication from citizens to parties and elected officials. However, various studies on political websites indicate that the two most common reasons for setting up a website are rather mundane. Most of the political websites are created either for their symbolic value, or are created to appear modern, relevant and up-to-date with contemporary times. (Roper, 1999; Tops *et al.*, 2000).³

¹ Political Parties, Party Communication and New Information and Communication Technologies, Andrea Römmele
<http://ppq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/7>

² Pippa Norris, Preaching to the Converted?: Pluralism, Participation and Party Websites, *Party Politics* 2003; 9; 21
<http://ppq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/9/1/21>

³ Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?. Contributors: Rachel Gibson - editor, Paul Nixon - editor, Stephen Ward - editor. Publisher: Routledge. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 2003. Page Number: 13.

Rachel Gibson argues that parties have concentrated their interest on employing new ICTs to increase their campaign effectiveness, rather than for participatory purposes. Internet penetration in many countries is still poor, enabling only a minority of the population to access the websites, hence making the television as the most popular channel to disseminate political messages. Moreover, political parties' hierarchical structures mean that staff responsible for ICT strategy have less of a free hand than those involved with loose protest networks.⁴ Svetlana V. Kulikova and David D. Perlmutter⁵ state that new media like the blog can serve the purpose of promoting the ideology of the promoter of the blog or the website. New media could thus become an important tool in generating public opinion. Thus, whether for a top down approach towards communication, or participatory approach, it could be concluded websites of political parties do have a role to play in political communication.

The Importance of Design

“Page design is the most immediately visible part of web design” (Nielsen, 1999, p. 17). The layout of the web page, the organization of links and different sections on the web page and optimal use of graphics have equal importance in deciding the users' perception about a website (Mullet, 1995), (Sears, Jacko, and Dubach, 2000), (Diaper and Waelend, 2000). Avi Parush et al, conclude in their study that visual layout of the web page could determine the performance and usability of the website.⁶ The associative, selective and ordering capabilities of graphic features make them important in a website design; better the design and placement of the graphic elements, better is the ability of the user to grasp the content with more clarity. (Baker & Wickens, 1995; Haber & Wilkenson, 1982).⁷ Another study conducted by Jacob Nielsen⁸ using eyetracking heatmaps reveals a more thorough understanding of how users 'read' a website. The study shows that users often read web pages in an F-shaped pattern: two horizontal stripes followed by a vertical

⁴ Political Parties and the Internet: Net Gain?. Contributors: Rachel Gibson - editor, Paul Nixon - editor, Stephen Ward - editor. Publisher: Routledge. Place of Publication: New York. Publication Year: 2003. Page Number: 242.

⁵ Svetlana V. Kulikova and David D. Perlmutter, In BLOGGING DOWN THE DICTATOR? The Kyrgyz Revolution and *Samizdat* Websites

⁶ The Impact of Visual Layout Factors on Performance in Web Pages: A Cross-Language Study Avi Parush, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, Yonit Shwarts and Avy Shtub, Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel, and M. Jeya Chandra, Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania

⁷ Chris Forsythe, Eric Grose, and Julie Ratner, eds., Human Factors and Web Development (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998) 226, Questia, 4 May 2009 <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=78587767>>.

⁸ http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html accessed on May 30, 2009

stripe. Users first read in a horizontal movement, usually across the upper part of the content area. This initial element forms the F's top bar. Next, users move down the page a bit and then read across in a second horizontal movement that typically covers a shorter area than the previous movement. This additional element forms the F's lower bar. Finally, users scan the content's left side in a vertical movement. Sometimes this is a fairly slow and systematic scan that appears as a solid stripe on an eyetracking heatmap. Other times users move faster, creating a spottier heatmap. This last element forms the F's stem.

Thus, it is important to have a good design to attract the user to the website and also to increase the time the user spends in browsing through. In this study, a special emphasis will be given to the 'F' reading pattern of websites of political parties in India.

Equalization and Normalization on the internet

The internet breaks down the barriers of class, size and clout.⁹ On the internet, every political party, large or small has an equal chance in terms of visibility. This is the *equalization theory*. Studies conducted by various researchers like Gibson and Ward (1998), Bimber and Davis (2003), Kamarck (1999: 114), Margolis et al.,(2003: 58) suggest that the Internet has an equalizing effect. It is low cost, interactive and provides speed and ease of multimedia transmission. Smaller and fringe parties stand a better chance of keeping pace with the major parties on the Internet than they do in traditional political outlets and can thus potentially reach a larger audience. In a study conducted on election campaigning by German party websites, Eva Johanna Schweitzer states that the equalization theory found more favour as compared to *the normalization theory*.¹⁰

As opposed to the equalization theory, the normalization theory suggests that the 'normal' real world patterns of socioeconomic and political relationships are reflected in the cyber world. This hypothesis implies that just as the major parties dominate the sphere of everyday domestic politics, so they come to dominate cyberspace. The reasons could be

⁹ EQUAL ACCESS, UNEQUAL SUCCESS – MAJOR AND MINOR CANADIAN PARTIES ON THE NET
Tamara A. Small

¹⁰ Election Campaigning Online German Party Websites in the 2002 National Elections, *Eva Johanna Schweitzer*, *European Journal of Communication* 2005; 20: 327 <http://ejc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/3/327>

very high visibility of the major parties or increasing costs of services of skilled web designers (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 26).¹¹

To summarize, most studies indicate that political websites have mostly two common features; firstly, they serve as 'brochure' or information sites, ignoring the participatory and interactive features like blogs, chats, guestrooms, etc., secondly, websites of minor parties lack professionalism in terms of home page construction, layouts, designs and graphic and animation features. This research will specifically study if this hold true for websites of Indian political parties.

Language of the Website

Language is also an important issue when studying media usage. Robin Jeffery examined the developments that characterized the Indian-language press for thirty years (1976-1996) against the background of Indian politics after the Emergency and found that the circulation of newspapers increased five fold and that the winners of this newspaper revolution were the vernacular newspapers.¹² The boom of Indian-language newspapers transformed readers into consumers at the same time as it met their increased desire for information and political participation.¹³ Three factors were responsible for the newspaper revolution - literacy, purchasing power and political awareness. This clearly emphasizes the importance of publishing content in vernacular language on the internet. Since political websites are a channel for communication between the party and the general public, ideally all political websites should have their pages made in at least one vernacular language.

Method of Study

In a study on websites of Italian parties during the 2006 elections, Cristian Vaccari tested the following parameters: Information Dissemination, Interactivity, Responsiveness, Presentation, Freshness and Visibility.¹⁴ Eva Johanna Schweitzer studied the German Party Websites during the 2002 National Elections testing Accessibility, Navigation,

¹¹ Kim Strandberg, "Online Electoral Competition in Different settings: A Comparative Meta-Analysis of the Research on Party Websites and Online Electoral Competition," *Party Politics*, 14 (March, 2008), 223-244.

¹² India's Newspaper Revolution: Capitalism, Politics, and the Indian-Language Press 1977-1999, Robin Jeffery

¹³ Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*, London: Verso, 1996

¹⁴ Italian Parties' Websites in the 2006 Elections, Cristian Vaccari, *European Journal of Communication* 2008; 23; 69, DOI: 10.1177/0267323107085839, <http://ejc.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/23/1/69>

Updating and Quality of design.¹⁵ This researcher has tested Indian political websites using the following parameters:

1. **Design:** For studying design, the researcher has concentrated on the F-shaped reading pattern as mentioned above. For this, the researcher has captured a screenshot of the home page of every website and overlaid an F shape on top of it, just below the mast head of the website. Apart from the F pattern, the researcher has noted the presence or absence of graphics and animated elements and their placement on the home page.
2. **Functional aspects**
 - a. **Participation features:** The researcher has analysed the websites on their participation features like availability of Postal Address, Email, Phone no, Feedback form, Online complaints/suggestions form, Online opinion polls, Chat room, Blog, Facebook / MySpace, Guestbook / Forums
 - b. **Information Features:** General information about the political system, General information about the election, Party history, Information about party organization, party members, party programme – Manifesto, Official documents, Current party news, Newsletter, Press releases, Photo archive, Videos, SMS service, Search Engines
 - c. **Mobilization features:** Local candidates, Online fundraising, Online party membership, Online volunteering, Online subscription to party publications, Download of promotional material (e.g. logos, screen savers)
 - d. **Integration/networking features:** Intranet/login for members, Links to satellite home pages/partisan websites, Links to politicians' personal home pages, Commercial links, Links to NGOs, Links to media organizations, Other links (education, jobs, etc.)
3. **Formal features:** These include features that any website should have. It also includes some technical features like loading time, meta tags, etc. Formal features are further categorized into
 - a. **Accessibility features:** Loading time on average (56k modem), English version, Vernacular version, Font problem, Download article, RSS feeds

¹⁵ German Party Websites in the 2002 National Elections, Eva Johanna Schweitzer, European Journal of Communication 2005; 20; 327

- b. **Navigation features:** Site map/index, Search engine,
- c. **Design:** Photos, Graphics, Animated icons/banners, Videos, F Pattern of design, Gimmicks
- d. **Technical:** Web server, Meta Tags, Broken links

To analyse the data gathered, indices were calculated for each aforementioned category to compare the different website components in a clear and uniform way. Therefore, the number of website features found in one category (e.g. information, mobilization, or navigation) was divided by the total number of website elements available in that class, thus resulting in an index quotient for each category between 0 (all elements absent) and 1 (all elements present). Wherever a feature was found not to be functioning, it has been marked as not available.

Sampling

As per the Election Commission of India¹⁶, there are seven national level political parties, forty-eight state level political parties and one thousand registered unrecognized political parties in India. This research has considered only those political parties which have a presence in the Loksabha. Out of these, this researcher could locate/search websites of twenty-two parties. The researcher uses the terms major, minor and fringe parties as per a study Major parties are those that hold more than 30 seats in the Loksabha. Minor parties hold between three and 30 seats in the Loksabha. Those who hold below three seats are fringe parties. The classification is as per the 2004 Loksabha party position. As an exception, websites of two regional political parties, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam(AIADMK) and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena have been included for the study. Though AIDMK does not hold a single seat in the Loksabha, it is a major party South India and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, is contesting its first Loksabha elections, and could be a major contender. Rashtriya Janata Dal does not seem to have a website. However, during search on the internet, an 'unofficial' website was found, which has been included in the research. Twenty-one websites of political parties were selected for the study. This researcher has used Google as the primary search engine and has chosen only those sites that appear on the first page of the search. This is important because if the meta tags of a website are not designed properly the link does not appear on the first page

¹⁶ <http://eci.nic.in/>

of Google search unless the site is extremely popular. The list of websites studied and their URLs are included in Appendix I of this paper.

Limitations

1. Due to paucity of time and resources, only twenty-four websites were studied.
2. The websites have been downloaded and analysed only on the last day of the Lok Sabha elections. No updates were studied.

Research questions

Do the websites of Indian political parties confirm to the F Pattern of viewing a website?

Does the internet act as an equalizer in terms of design for websites of Indian political parties?

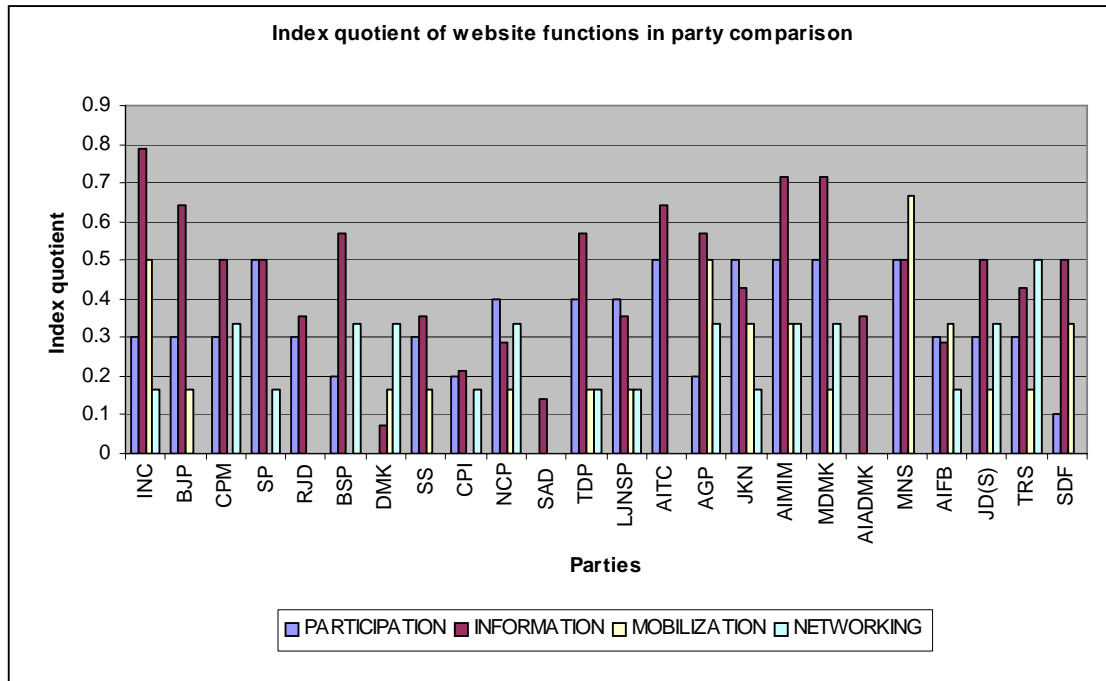
Are the websites of Indian political parties more informative than participatory in nature?

Observations:**Design features:**

Though most of the websites studied follow the F shaped design pattern, there are some glaring exceptions. The Indian National Congress, the oldest party that, arguably, has the widest voter base in the country does not follow the 'F' shaped design on the home page. A collage of photographs of the top leaders of the party has a lot of white space around it, with the party logo on the extreme right. This space is kept with no apparent reason as it pushes the other content out of the view. The placement of graphics, text as well as coloured tables appears unplanned and unaligned. The website is exhaustive in terms of content. However, in terms of layout and design the website of the party defies standard parameters. The other big party, BJP follows the standard requirement of design and graphics.

AIMIM is perhaps the ideal site in terms of layout and design followed by the BSP and MNS. This is relevant in terms of the equalization theory that suggests that minor and fringe parties are able to compete on equal terms with big parties on the Internet.

Table 1: Index quotient for website functions



Functional features:

Participatory:

The study presents some interesting results. The two biggest political parties, INC and the BJP clearly use their websites as an information tool than as a participatory one. In contrast, websites of smaller parties like SP, AITC, JKN, AIMIM, MDMK, and MNS fare better in participatory features. The BSP, DMK, SAD and AIADMK websites have no contact information. Even a major party website like the BJP does not have a feedback form. Only three parties, LJNSP, MDMK and TRS have an online opinion poll feature. Overall, most of the websites are poor in participatory features.

TABLE 1: Participation Features in Indian Political Websites

Item	IN C	BJ P	CP M	SP	RJ D	BS P	DM K	SS	CP I	NC P	SA D	TD P	LJNSP	AIT C	AG P	JK N	AIMI M	MDM K	AIA DM K	MN S	AIF B	JD(S)	TR S	SD F
Postal Address	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗
Email	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Phone no	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Feedback	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓

Online complaints / suggestions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	x
Online opinion polls	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	
Chat room	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Blog	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Facebook/MySpace	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Guestbook	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x		

Information features:

Most of the parties are strong on information features. Except AIMIM, none of the websites had any general information about the political system. SS and LJNSP did not even have the party history online.

However, most have more information than participatory features. Very few websites had an internal search engine. Most of the parties had photographs and videos, except a few like the CPI which had no photographs and graphics. Only SS and AIMIM had SMS feature. Strong informatory features and poor participatory features clearly indicate a top down approach towards communication.

TABLE 2: Information features on Indian political party websites

Item	IN C	BJ P	CP M	SP D	RJ P	BS P	DM K	SS I	CP P	NC P	SA D	TD P	LJNS P	AIT C	AG P	JK N	AIMI M	MDM K	AIA DM	MN S	AIF B	JD(S) S	TR S	SD F
General information about the political system	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
General information about the election	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	-	x	x	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x
Information about party history	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Information about party organization	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x	-	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
Information about party members	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	-	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Information about party programme	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓

Integration and Networking features:

TRS ranks the best in networking features whereas the websites of BJP, SS and AITC had no networking features. Only DMK and AGP had links to media organizations and DMK and TRS had links to other organizations giving general information.

TABLE 4: Integration/networking features on Indian political party websites

Item	IN C	BJ P	CP M	SP	RJ D	BS P	DM K	SS I	CP I	NC P	SA D	TD P	LJNS P	AIT C	AG P	JK N	AIMI M	MDM K	AIA DM	MN S	AIF B	JD(S)	TR S	SD F
Intranet/login for members	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x
Links to satellite home partisan websites	✓	x	✓	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x
Links to politicians' personal pages	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x
Commercial links	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x
Links to NGOs	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Links to media organizations	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Other links	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x

Clearly, Indian political websites do not entertain the concept of giving information other than that of their own party. Therefore, a user cannot expect any general political information.

Formal features:

TABLE 5: Formal characteristics of Indian political party websites

Category/Item	INC	BJP	CP M	SP	RJD P	BS P	DM K	SS I	CPI P	NC P	SA D	TDP SP	LJN C	AIT C	AG P	JKN IM	AIM MK	MD	AIA DM	MN S	AIF B	JD(S)	TRS	SDF
Accessibility																								
English version	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Vernacular version	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	x
Download article	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	✓	x	x	✓
RSS feeds	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Navigation																								
Site map/index	✓	✓	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Search engine	x	✓	x	x	x	✓	x	x	x	x	x	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	x	x	x	x

Design																					
Photos	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓
Graphics	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Animated icons/banners	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Videos	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
F Pattern of design	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Gimmicks	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
Technical																					
Font problem	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	-	-	-	-	✗	-	-	-	-	-	✗	✗	✗	-
Meta Tags	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
Broken links	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗

Language:

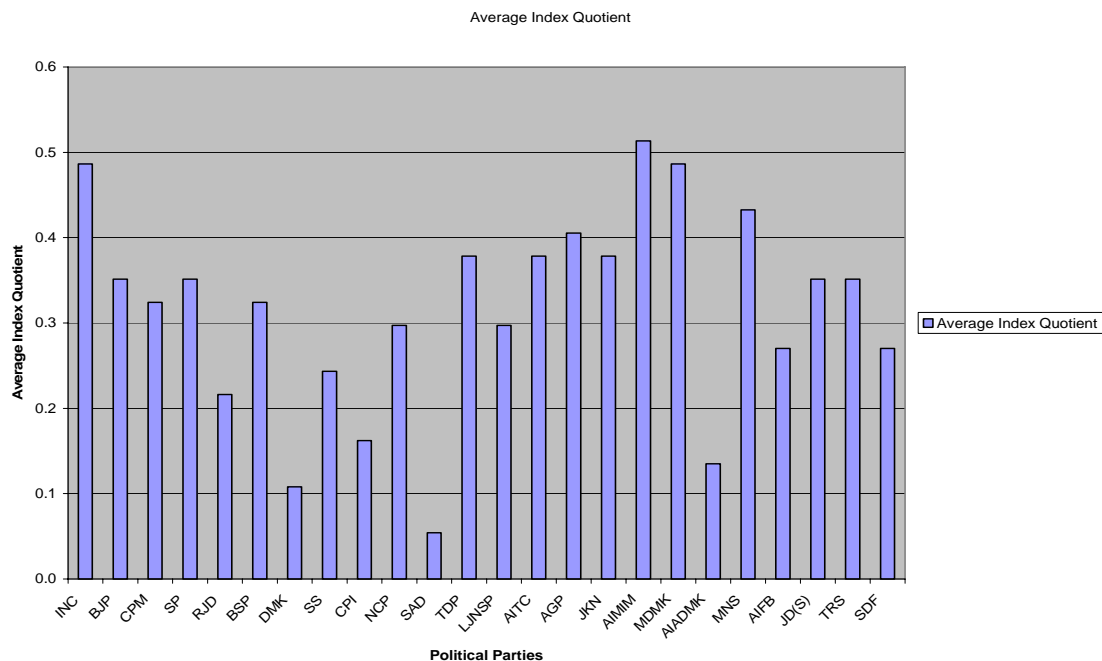
In a country like India, it is important to have website content in vernacular language. Surprisingly, though having rich graphic content, the BJP website lacks a Hindi version of the website. There are a few features that can be downloaded. However, unlike the INC website, it does not have a separate Hindi version. Even websites of minor parties like the MNS had a link to the Marathi version of the site on the home page. The SS website too does not have a link to the Marathi section, which is surprising considering that the party is known for its policy on ‘Bhoomiputra’ and ‘Marathi Manoos’. In contrast, the MNS and the SP websites have the option to visit either the English or the Marathi section right on the home page. All the websites that had content in vernacular language had taken care to either use a dynamic font or facilitate font download. On the CPI website, though there are numerous links, many pages are ‘under construction’. The DMK website had broken links. One of the important aspects in optimizing a website for search engines is well designed meta tags on the home page of the website. Among the major party websites, BJP had an elaborate meta tag code written, INC had none. RJD, BSP, DMK, NCP, TDP and LJNS were the other websites with well designed meta tags. None of the sites had the feature of RSS Feeds.

Conclusions:

A good political website would include all possible features of participation, information, mobilization and networking. It would be technically sound. In India, every website would ideally have a vernacular version of the site for the newly literate and ‘net savvy’ population. Political parties cannot afford to ignore the large population of Internet users. The average index quotient of the functional aspects of the websites of Indian political parties barely reaches 0.5. A fully featured website would have reached 1.0.

The website of AIMIM ranks the highest in terms of number of features available, followed by the INC, MDMK and the MNS websites. In terms of design, the minor and fringe parties are able to compete with the major parties. This gives credence to the equalization theory. However, almost all the websites have a visual element focusing on the leaders of the party. The front page of most of the parties is leader centric. In this aspect, the normalization theory holds true.

Probably the most glaring aspect in this study is the lack of vernacular version of the website. Clearly these websites have not targeted the neo-literate population which would prefer reading content in their own language. Very few websites have the new interactive communication tools like blogs, guestbooks, opinion polls, RSS feeds. Some do not even have feedback form or contact details.



This makes it apparent that most of the political parties in India have hosted their websites as a brochure employing a top-down communication approach rather than an interactive one. Certainly, websites of Indian political parties are not convergent in nature.

Scope for further research:

The scope of this study was very limited. A more exhaustive study could reveal more interesting aspects on how the political parties in India look at the internet as a medium of communication. This researcher has already started another study of websites of political parties and that of leaders' websites. This study will also include features like frequency of updates, download times and content analysis.

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APPENDIX I

List of websites studies with their abbreviations and website URSSs.

Name of Party	Abbreviation	Website URL
Indian National Congress	INC	http://www.aicc.org.in
Bharatiya Janata Party	BJP	http://www.bjp.org
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	CPM	http://www.cpim.org
Samajwadi Party	SP	http://www.samajwadipartyindia.com
Rashtriya Janata Dal	RJD	http://www.rashtriyajanatadal.com/
Bahujan Samaj Party	BSP	http://bspindia.org/
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	DMK	http://www.dmk.in/
Shiv Sena	SS	http://www.shivsena.org/
Communist Party of India	CPI	http://www.cpindia.org/
Nationalist Congress Party	NCP	http://www.ncp.org.in/
Shiromani Akali Dal	SAD	http://www.akalidalamritsar.org/
Telugu Desam Party	TDP	http://www.telugudesam.org/
Lok Jan Shakti Party	LJSP	http://www.lokjanashaktiparty.com/
All India Trinamool Congress	AITC	http://www.trinamoolcongress.com/
Asom Gana Parishad	AGP	http://www.asomganaparishad.in/
Jammu and Kashmir National Conference	JK	http://jknationalconference.org/
All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimmen	AIMIM	http://www.aimim.in/
Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	MDMK	http://www.mdmkonline.com
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	AIADM K	www.aiadmcallindia.org
Maharashtra Navnirman Sena	MNS	http://www.manase.org
All India Forward Bloc	AIFB	http://www.forwardbloc.org/
Janata Dal (Secular)	JD(S)	http://www.janatadalsecular.org.in/
Telangana Rashtra Samithi	TRS	http://telanganaonline.com/
Sikkim Democratic Front	SDF	http://smilingsikkim.com/