Social media and Mobile telephony: Mapping the innovative communication strategies in development sector

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Abstract

This paper by no means attempts to gauge the entire development sector which is gigantic in size in a country like India. It’s a small attempt in learning about the new innovative ways which are being employed by some of the key NGO’s which have their local and regional presence and work at the grassroots. We argue that every development issues is unique and harbours its own communication problems, hence requires a tailor made approach to communication methodology to reach out to the concerned community. But how effectively social media and mobile technology is being used by these stakeholders of development and to what end is the matter of concern here. The non-profit sector depends upon their relationship with various members, donors and stakeholders instrumental in garnering both financial and advocacy support. Effective mobilisation of all these fronts simultaneously is key to maximising productivity and achieving success for the program. The aims of this paper are multifold. Firstly, the paper aims to map the integration and usage of social media in the communication methodology of the various organisations which are at the forefront of community development initiatives at the grassroots level. In that, it identifies various techniques which are used for interventions in the way projects and communities are mobilized and desired ends are achieved. Social media is a great tool that Non Profit Organisation can use to communicate with their audience, market their services, connect with their networks or improve the way they work and promote their social development agenda. It came out from the study that NGOs’ are using social media to raise the funds from the Donor agencies. They show progress of work to the Donor agencies using social media by uploading news about the project with pictures.

Introduction

There exist a great deal of research in academia on the strengths and uses of social media in mobilizing communities and driving change. But the potential of social media is yet to be tapped at the fullest and some of the best examples, as we strongly believe, are being employed by the local players such as NGO’s and CSO’s in the development sector who are working at the grassroots and are at the forefront of driving social change. The combination of mobile technology and social media are also proving useful in the way
development strategies are being implemented and the messages are disseminated to the target communities. The key question which drives this research is how local and regional development actors and stakeholders are using social media in combination to mobile technology in launching developmental interventions in areas critical to societal development such as female foeticide, girl child rights, literacy programs and health reforms such as tuberculosis and polio. We aim to bring together some of the novel and innovative methods being employed by the NGO’s and CSO’s in reaching out to the target communities, and launching interventions at the grassroots. This paper is an attempt in adding to the existing knowledge base of the scholarship which deals with the uses of the social media and mobile technology in development communications.

The development sector primarily runs on donor funding, either governmental or private. In the recent years, donors have become conscious of how they fund the NGO projects. Their heightened concern about how the money is being spent has triggered a new phase of accountability for the development sector which extends to on-the-ground visible productivity of the projects apart from conventional audit system. Social media beyond doubts due to its omnipresence and reach has emerged as a tool across various sectors such as business and government to maximise their productivity by reaching out to their target audiences, and for this very purpose proves to be a great tool for the development sector too to maximise their productivity and thereby accountability. As a USAID document on the use of social media notes, “social media offers development practitioners and NGOs a chance to move away from “push” (one-way) communications and move toward a type of communication in which they can interact with, listen to and engage constituents.” (2011, NGO-tips).

Objectives

The aims of this paper are multifold. Firstly, the paper aims to map the integration and usage of social media in the communication methodology of the various organisations which are at the forefront of community development initiatives at the grassroots level. In that, it identifies various techniques which are used for interventions in the way projects and communities are mobilized and desired ends are achieved. It further attempts to map the success of various methods on social media which are being employed by some of the key players in the development sector in reaching out to their target audiences, and in performing public relation activities. In so doing, the paper employs personal interview and structured questionnaire methodology to bring together the details of various methods being used to exploit the potential of the social media.

Methodology
This paper primarily employs qualitative approaches to data gathering. In that, it uses unstructured interviews of the key people especially the communications managers at the NGO’s and CSO’s who can give a detailed brief on the way the social media an mobile technology is being used by their organizations. A total of 10 NGO’s and CSO’s in Delhi and surrounding areas have been identified for the purpose of data gathering. A separate figure from - an independent organization- suggests that of 10,000 NGO’s only 2000 are currently active. The following parameters were strictly adhered to during the sampling process;

i. The organization should be working at the grassroots level and is directly engaged with the local community.

ii. It should have a clear cut communications methodology for message dissemination and networking.

iii. It must have its active communication department or strategist.

We do not intend to generalize any of our findings as the sample size is not anywhere close the threshold of the total number of NGO’s in this country. Hence, any generalizations would result in flawed conclusions. Nonetheless, the investigation, we argue, would throw some light on the new methodologies being adopted by the development sector in harnessing the impact of various projects and fostering donor relationships.

**Scope of the research**

This paper by no means attempts to gauge the entire development sector which is gigantic in size in a country like India. It’s a small attempt in learning about the new innovative ways which are being employed by some of the key NGO’s which have their local and regional presence and work at the grassroots. We argue that every development issues is unique and harbours its own communication problems, hence requires a tailor made approach to communication methodology to reach out to the concerned community. But how effectively social media and mobile technology is being used by these stakeholders of development and to what end is the matter of concern here.

The non-profit sector depends upon their relationship with various members, donors and stakeholders instrumental in garnering both financial and advocacy support. Effective mobilisation of all these fronts simultaneously is key to maximising productivity and achieving success for the program. But this proposition has its own limitations. In India where only about 12% of the citizens are online, the social media poses its own challenges due to the lack of access of ICT technologies primarily in the rural areas. Nonetheless, the 12% of net savvy population in the country translates into 130 million placing India at the third position just after US and China. The challenges are largely in those belts of the country where the ICT access is poor or unavailable. But this too is being taken care of with novel ideas like IT kiosks being installed in rural India. There are about 150 IT kiosk projects running in India aimed at serving different
purpose such as “birth, marriage, and death certificates, electricity bill collection, land records, email services, and consulting on medical and agricultural problems” (Seth et al. 2006)

Major Findings:

Kind of issues Dealt: Most of the (7 out of 10) organisations are working on education like education for all, vocational education, education for girls as these NGO’s states that education is one of the most powerful weapons in fighting poverty. Rest are working on water conservation, rain water harvesting, health and sanitation, vocational training for youth, environment, family and community counselling centre, rural training institute were the main issues that these organisation generally deal with.

Usage of Social Media as part of Communication Strategy: All the respondents stated that they are using social media in wider communication strategy for their organisation. They use social media mostly (6 out of 10) to upload news with pictures about their organization to increase people’s participation in the various campaigns. Also to show their donor agencies the usage of their money on the various projects or to raise funds for their organisation. Rest stated that they use to for brand building, promotion of the events, posting real life stories, to maintain relations with the audience.

Activities NGOs’ Performs using Social Media: The most prominent activities that are performed using social media are daily updating the organisational news and events with pictures. The next most prominent was giving platform to connect with more and more people as well as connecting with the donor agencies this limits every time visiting the Donor agencies. Other respondents stated that they promote campaigns using social media, marketing, brand building, opinions and polls and crowd mobilization as well as greetings of the day.

Social Media as an Effective tool for Social Interventions: Social Media is a great tool for social intervention as all the respondents agreed on this. Majority of the respondents believed that social media is a platform which is practical, connects people directly, reach larger audience, engage in a more informal, personal manner, social media is able to identify and connect with online opinion-makers, raise awareness of their operations and enhance their brands in the process. Social media also facilitates collaboration across institutional boundaries quickly and inexpensively. NGOs collaborate with supporters by crowd sourcing ideas, feedback, and content for programs. Any information posted in here will grab a lot of attention. The social media scenario changes from time to time and if cleverly used, it can cause great revolutions.

Engagement of NGOs’ in Grassroots activitism: Half of the respondents said literate people from the community become the head of the community people and they act as a linkage between the organisation people and community people as they community people feel that this person belong to our community so
they can relate well with them. Rest of the respondents stated that they engage volunteers and market upcoming events to ensure people mobilisation.

**Donor relations and fund raising for awareness campaigns and common people engagement:** A majority of the respondents quoted that the organisation send the reports of what the organisation is doing from time to time and also new events for the financial situations like if a donor is supporting for the education of a child so updates are given to the donor about the child’s performance as earlier what child was and what is child’s performance now. A few quoted that it is an excellent platform for a donor organisation. Creates a positive vibe about the campaign and sense of successful target delivery.

**Popularity of social media adding NGOs’ growth:** It’s a low cost device which is growing in leaps and bound these are reasons to that is adding to the popularity of social media also reaches to large audience

**Social engagement and reach:** As the popularity is increasing day by day the engagement of people is rising. The organisation gives platform to people to like and dislikes various activities on Social Media as it is about reaching and connecting with different people in the world. It is not limited to only India but worldwide. According to the data quoted by emarketers one in four people use Social media.

**Effect of Social Media on Development Activism:** Almost (8 out of 10) organisation is using social media. The respondents stated that development activism on social media is very common these days and if we are not engaging our self through social media then goals and targets are not achievable. It’s more of engagement of people coming together and starting a revolution. Few stated that they do not indulge in development activism.

**Commonly used Social Networking websites:** The most commonly used social networking websites were Facebook, Twitter and Youtube by the organisations. Linkedin and flickr were used by few organisations.

**Conclusion**

Social media is a great tool that Non Profit Organisation can use to communicate with their audience, market their services, connect with their networks or improve the way they work and promote their social development agenda. The key features of social media are participation and interaction, connecting people and providing the tools to have conservation – all important components of NGOs’ day-to-day work. Strategic use of social media is actually helping these organisations to measurably reach new people. It also brings added value to mission-driven work. Social media is propelling nonprofits goals to build a movement around a core advocacy issue, improve customer services or programmes, reach new donors, or raise awareness of a nonprofits brand around the world. It came out from the study that NGOs’ are using social
media to raise the funds from the Donor agencies. They show progress of work to the Donor agencies using social media by uploading news about the project with pictures.

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