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A New Kind of Partnership: Social Media and Governance in the Modi Era

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The day after his “keynote address at the Internet.org summit”² in New Delhi on 9 October 2014, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of the online social networking service ‘Facebook’, met India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss the possibilities of how and where social media could play a part in the implementation of various government policies relating to health, education, tourism etc. In particular, one of the results of the discussion was the agreement that Facebook would assist the Government of India in its mission of achieving a clean India in five years. Launched on 2 October 2014, the ‘Swachh Bharat’ (Clean India) campaign, which aims to reduce littering and improve the state of sanitation in the country, has harped on by Modi recently, including during his recent visits to New York and Washington.

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² Mankotia, Anandita Singh. 2014. Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg meets PM Narendra Modi and IT minister, agrees to partner govt in NOFN project. *The Economic Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-10-11/news/54899772_1_digital-india-connectivity-lab-national-optical-fibre-network>.

Whilst there, Modi met several CEOs of some of the top companies in the United States including Google Chairman Eric Schmidt among many others in a bid to attract greater investment into India and develop the country's infrastructure and business environment. His engagement with big business has long been part of his leadership style. Just before his US trip, Modi met former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates³ along with his wife Melinda Gates in New Delhi. The problem of sanitation was one of the main issues that came up in the discussion as Modi spoke to them of his goal of "installing toilets in bus and rail stations in the country's 500 biggest towns".⁴ This reveals the importance Modi has placed on the 'My Clean India' campaign and his desire to partner with business and technology leaders in implementing it.

With Facebook to lend its knowledge and assistance to the Indian Government in developing a mobile application for the 'My Clean India' campaign, several conclusions can be drawn. Not only does it suggest the increased likelihood of the mission's effectiveness, as such an application would encourage public participation and involvement due to the mission's increased accessibility via social media. It also points to Modi's broader strategy to incorporate social media into his style of policy implementation. This is further evident from the various other ways he has made use of the internet, such as at the mission's launch where he "asked citizens to take photos of garbage, upload them on social media, upload videos of them cleaning the spot, and finally upload a picture of the clean spot".⁵

There is a clear effort being made by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party to utilise social media in a highly productive manner, taking advantage of the fact that the country's youth are the most likely users of social media as well as the most active. A Tata Consultancy Services GenY Survey that took place across 14 Indian cities in 2012-13 revealed that "Post-Millennials are showing themselves to be even more focused than Millennials"⁶ when it came to accessing the internet. The state's desire to capitalise on the technological potential of India's youth population is especially evident in the address made by BJP General Secretary P Muralidhar Rao at a workshop on social media in Hyderabad on 9 October 2014 where he

³ **Editor's Note: The current Chief Executive Officer of Microsoft is an Indian-American, Satya Nadella.**

⁴ Gates, Bill. 2014. Impressions of India: Meeting the New Prime Minister. *Gates Notes* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.gatesnotes.com/Development/Meeting-Indias-New-Prime-Minister>>.

⁵ Rukmini, S. 2014. Modi launches 'My Clean India' campaign. *The Hindu* [online]. Available from World Wide Web:<<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modi-launches-my-clean-india-campaign/article6468047.ece>>.

⁶ Halder, Debarati and Jaishankar, K. 2013. *Use and Misuse of Internet by Semi-Urban and Rural Youth in India*. Tirunelveli: Centre for Cyber Victim Counselling, p.2.

noted that youth, technology and democracy were a powerful combination that can make India a superpower.⁷

The involvement of social media developers in the implementation of government initiatives is a trend that seems to have caught on in many countries over the past few years. In the UK the Government recently provided mobile application developers with “£2m in the hope”⁸ that they can boost the business of high street retailers and town centres. Singapore too has been quick to recognise the power of social media as several government agencies are providing mobile applications for citizens to use. The National Environment Agency’s myENV application helps “people find recycling locations” and alerts them with updates on “pollution control, public health and the cleaning and upgrading timetables for hawker centres”.⁹ It remains to be seen what the mobile application for the ‘My Clean India’ campaign will be capable of achieving, though it is possible that it may perform some functions similar to myENV.

The increasing attention to the potential impact of mobile applications by the Indian state is reflective of the popularity of the mobile phone in India. Now “the single largest category of consumer goods in the country”,¹⁰ the mobile phone is no longer simply a communication device. Rather, the advent of mobile applications has catalysed the mobile phone’s insertion into the country’s social fabric. It has established an almost permanent presence in people’s daily lives, from being used for banking and online shopping, to finding information such as addresses, prices and timings, all the way to accessing entertainment such as music and games. The extent to which the mobile phone has become a tool with which people organise and enhance their lives reveals the potential it carries to transform the way in which civic duties are performed and government services are delivered.

The partnership between Facebook and the Modi Government could be a highly beneficial one for several reasons. First is the ability of Facebook to empower the millions of Indian

⁷ N, Rahul. 2014. ‘Youth, Technology and Democracy make India a superpower’. *The Hindu* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/youth-technology-democracy-make-india-a-superpower/article6491755.ece>>.

⁸ Butler, Sarah. 2014. Welcome to the local high street ... on your smartphone. *The Guardian* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jun/01/local-high-street-smartphone-apps>>.

⁹ Channel News Asia. 2014. On NEA’s mobile app: Recycling locations, cleaning schedules for hawker centres. *Channel News Asia* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/on-nea-s-mobile-app/1318216.html>>.

¹⁰ Jeffrey, Robin and Doron, Assa. 2013. *Cell Phone Nation: How Mobile Phones Have Revolutionized Business, Politics and Ordinary Life in India*. Noida: Hachette, p.6.

citizens who in their day-to-day lives face social and economic barriers that otherwise prevent them from actively participating in, and benefiting from, government initiatives. Corruption and administrative delays are some of the problems that would be reduced as mobile applications would provide citizens with a direct means of accessing services offered by the state in the medical and education sectors, for example.

Second is the effort Facebook has put into creating a model that caters to the cultural diversity of India. Despite being an online platform, Facebook has not always proven to be able to transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. In Japan, for example, known for its relatively tech-savvy society, “less than 2 per cent of the country’s online population”¹¹ uses Facebook. However, the efforts that Facebook has made to adapt to the Indian context – such as supporting “10 popular languages”¹² in India rather than operating solely in English – conveys that it understands some of the nuances of the Indian social landscape that are crucial for ensuring success in establishing a large user-base outside the English-speaking demographic.

Third is the country’s abundance of graduates trained in technical subjects who are well-equipped to further the policy-related role of social media. The commitment to improving the implementation of government policies through the use of social media may not only provide youth with a greater means of participating in civic activity, but also employment and a livelihood. As social media and mobile applications establish a greater presence in India, this may lead a strengthening of India’s entrepreneurship culture which will in turn reduce the reliance of young job-seeking graduates on the MNCs and government that are facing difficulties in absorbing the large number of graduates in the country. These are some of the opportunities that can make this partnership a fruitful one.

However, for all the talk of social media being an “enabler of a lot of things”,¹³ challenges remain. Despite India being home to “the third-largest Internet user base in the world - about 120 million Indians go online every day”,¹⁴ the vast majority of the country’s population do

¹¹ Tabuchi, Hiroko. 2011. Facebook Wins Relatively Few Friends in Japan. *The New York Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/10/technology/10facebook.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

¹² Thomas, Thomas K. Benefits of bringing connectivity to India are going to be profound: Zuckerberg. *The Hindu* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/benefits-of-bringing-connectivity-to-india-are-going-to-be-profound-zuckerberg/article6485775.ece>>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pathak-Narain, Priyanka. 2014. A Mobile Developer Looks To Indian Languages. *The New York Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/26/a-mobile-developer-looks-to-indian-languages/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0>.

not figure in the story of India's so-called 'internet revolution'. The problem of weak infrastructure "has kept India's Internet penetration low; at 10 percent".¹⁵ This "is much lower than the average of 40 percent across aspiring countries"¹⁶ and will therefore mean that social media is limited in terms of what it can achieve unless major investment is put into developing the relevant infrastructure. Whether Facebook can be truly effective in connecting citizens to the state and its services depends on the ability of the government and telecom operators to work together to increase internet accessibility.

Nevertheless, the meeting between Zuckerberg and Modi signals a keen interest by the Modi Government to look to non-traditional sources of knowledge and manpower for the purposes of enabling and improving policy implementation. The integration of social media into the 'My Clean India' campaign marks an addition to the long list of Modi's various efforts to use technology in his political campaigning and delivering of policies. Under the Modi administration, it is becoming clear to see how social media has begun to expand from being a solely political tool to one that forms an important part of the emerging partnership between technology and governance.

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¹⁵ McKinsey. 2012. *Online and upcoming: The Internet's impact on India*. McKinsey & Company: Technology, Media and Telecom Practice, p.2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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