

***Political Communication – Reach and Relevance  
(A Case Study of Delhi)<sup>1</sup>***

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**Abstract**

In the nineteenth century mechanical printing replaced direct communication/dialogue/ speech. In the wake of the twentieth century radio and television occupied a corresponding space along with print media as a source of information and communication. The advent of the twenty-first century introduced the Internet thus multiplying the cognitive, affective and behavioral impact of communication. In the course of these developments, the traditional means of political communication – one-to-one communication, posters, murals, banners, group meetings, etc. – are losing their relevance. Does it disturb the democratic spirit of a country? Is media grabbing the domain of political communication or is it intentionally left vacant by the apathetic political activists? Objective: To contest and question the role of political communicators (other than media) thus recognizing the hegemonic spread of media. The concomitant questions are: 1) How effective are the various means of political communication? 2) Can political communication ensure people's participation a democratic objective? 3) How far has political communication been able to influence people's participation in the political system in Delhi per se? Methodology: The main source of data for this empirical study is the information obtained by a structured questionnaire served to a randomly selected sample of about 1100 residents of Delhi during February 2014 to February 2015. The data collected has been analysed from the perspective of various research questions. The same analysis will be used to supplement the enquiry proposed in this paper.

Keywords: political communication, participation, democracy

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is adapted from the Innovation Project Report submitted to University of Delhi, India. Dr. Vandana Mishra (author of the paper) was the Project Director of the project titled "People's Participation – Political Communication Interface: Mapping Socio-Economic Trajectory of Voters in Delhi" during 2013 -2015.

## **Introduction**

Over the years, the multiplicity of research approaches used by political communication scholars has been developing. Earlier, scholars and practitioners of politics simply observed how people communicated about politics, analyzing what appeared to be the consequences, and speculating why these consequences were occurring and how they could be produced or avoided. In modern times, study methods have become far more deliberate and systematic, beginning with formulating hypotheses, which are then tested, using a variety of methods. Such formal investigations have been greatly aided by the development of sophisticated communication technologies. Though the research tools and technologies have changed, the main foci of research have remained the same.

The overriding concern of this paper is an idea that the key to building trust between the government and the society is communication. Democracy, itself, is best understood as a continuous dialogue between the governors (or those who aspire to be so) and the governed about their values and priorities. The task of political elites is to understand the pulse of the public, and develop the dispositions and aspirations of the electorate into a political and public policy agenda. The role of policy communications in democratic governance is about winning hearts and minds – a vital but much understated aspect of policy-making in India. We hesitate to own up policies, even those which are manifestly beneficial to us, because we are (intentionally or unintentionally) alienated from the policy making process. All communication that flows from the power corridors often appears to be partisan and is majorly a formal informative exercise rather than an attempt towards making democracy more participatory. Though the government, political parties, media, business, civil society and other groups make all possible efforts to address people in an attempt to influence their participation in the political system, the nature and extent of people's response to various types of communication is, however, at best a wild guess. To our knowledge this area is still under-researched and no systematic study has been made to understand such behavioral response of the people. Hence the proposed study.

In a parliamentary democracy, developed means of communication between government and governed ensures that the former is responsive to the latter. Electors are required to choose between various alternatives on offer, and need information before they can express choices. If the government intends to continue to govern by consent, it also requires information about the electors – behavioral configuration, demands, aspirations, reactions, etc. This is from where the unending 'government-governed communication web' is sewn.

The word 'communication', though sounds simpler, has been given varied meanings: flow of information to stimulate a response; sharing information, an idea, or an attitude; sharing elements of behavior; meeting of minds, or creating an understanding; transmission of information from one (or a group) to another (or a group) through symbols; and so on. One common thread passing through all these definitions is the element of 'sharing' something between people – information, ideas, behavior, understanding, internalized experiences or feelings.

The understanding of the word 'communication' will not be complete without mentioning that 'mere presence of two people together is communication'. Because any action a person takes in the presence of another (silence, making/ avoiding eye contact, moving away, heavy breathing, etc.) has a message value (and can be interpreted and understood, if need be). Paul Watzlawick rightly remarked that 'one cannot not communicate when in the presence of another'. With this in mind, we began study.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### A. MEDIA AS A MAJOR SOURCE OF POLITICAL INFORMATION

- 1) The phased out yearlong interaction with the people of Delhi and the opportunity of observing three elections in Delhi (Elections for Delhi Legislative Assembly in 2013 and again in 2015 and Lok Sabha elections in 2014) enabled us to identify various modes of political communication employed by the government and various interest groups. Some of the more important modes were media (electronic, print and social media); rallies; area meetings; posters; handbills door to door campaign; *nukkad nataks*; wall writing; *padyatras*; personalized gift items like caps, t-shirts, wrist bands, batches, key chains, collar pins; and interaction with political activists. Out of all these, media is considered as the major source of providing political information across all socio-economic categories (Table Numbers 1, 2). For example, in the category based on income nearly 50% of the respondents get political information from media. Media appears to have partially supplanting more informal channels of communications in party organizations also.
- 2) The impact of posters, hoardings, handbills, wall writing, etc. on which political parties spend crores of rupees has a very little impact on educated people. (Table 2)
- 3) Another important finding is that people do not receive much information from political activists. The data shows that people get more information from friends as compared to political activists. In the education based category this difference is noticeable: among undergraduates-10.90% get political information from friends as compared to just 5.56% getting such information from political activists; these percentages in 'others' category are 18.90% and a bare minimum of 6.46% .(Table 2)

### *Discussion*

Media has been able to make its reach wider and deeper into the society. The ways in which a particular event is verbally manipulated, broadcasted or published has a significant impact on the political attitudes and behavior of the people. The educated respondents were aware of the inbuilt bias of the private news channels and the resultant manipulation of the news but, because of lack of time, accessibility and economic viability of the media, and availability of diverse opinions, they still believed that media is the best source of political information. Posters, hoardings, wall writings, murals, etc., almost fail to make an impact as a source of political information. The observation is that on most of the posters and hoardings the picture of a politician dominates rather than the message. Also, such posters and hoardings gather attention majorly from those who are either ideologically/politically committed

or have a close or even a distant connection with a particular leader or activist. The experience of the researchers indicated that among the uneducated and the lower income group, people were more attracted by the photos, colors, and style and large and creative designing of the posters and hoardings and not by the messages.

The strategy of political parties to reach the citizens through posters, hoardings, wall writings, handbills etc., appears to have failed significantly. It is a reality that during inter-election period the political parties neither organize activities or programs to involve people (other than dharnas, rallies or protests wherein also little attempt is made to enlist active participation) nor do they plan to interact with the people on regular basis. Surprisingly enough even when political activity was at its peak in Delhi, the political activists failed to be an effective source of political information.

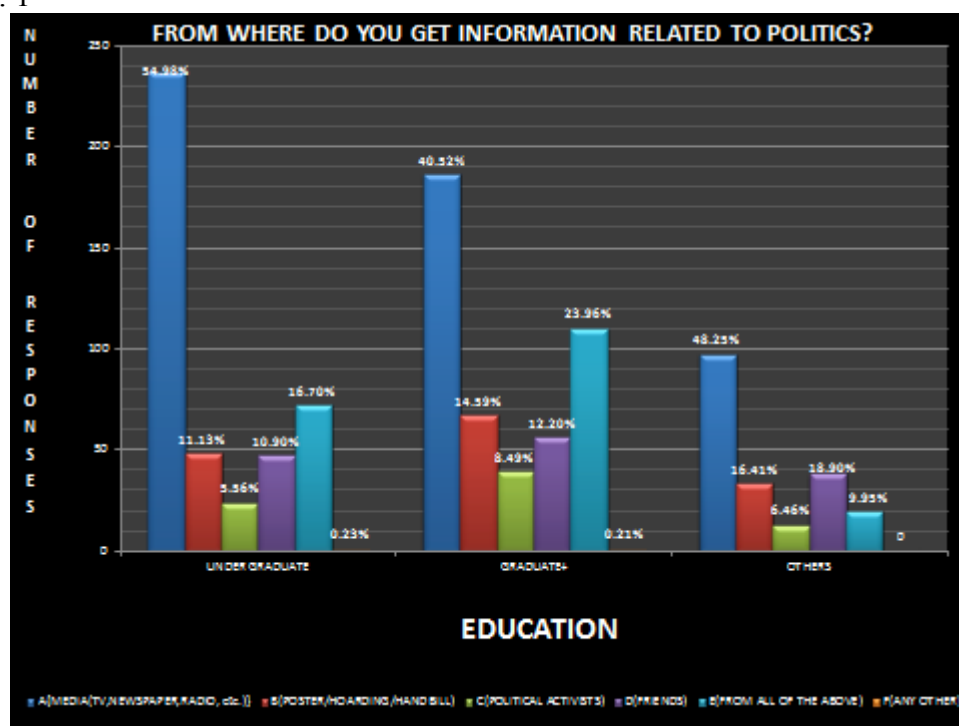
Table-1: Sources of Political Information according to Income of the Respondents

Source of political information	<25000	25000-2.5 Lakh	2.5-15Lakh	>15 Lakh
A Media (TV,newspaper,radio, etc)	145	237	133	33
B Poster/hoarding/handbill	32	71	34	8
C Political activists	20	17	25	13
D Friends/Family	44	48	36	9
E From all of the above	42	68	53	32
F Any other	1	0	1	1

Table-2: Sources of Political Information according to Education of the Respondents

Source of political information	Undergraduate	Graduate +	Others
A Media(television,newspaper,radio, etc.)}	237	186	97
B Poster/hoarding/handbill	48	67	33
C Political activists	24	39	13
D Friends/Family	47	56	38
E From all of the above	72	110	20
F Any other	1	1	0

Figure: 1



## B. Maximum Use of Political Communication is Made During Elections

All through the year political parties and government agencies make innumerable efforts to communicate policy initiatives, programs, actions, dissents and alternatives to the people. Here also television and newspapers become the most prominent agents to communicate the above messages. Since both these media are majorly unidirectional, i.e., information from the sender (government or the political party) is communicated to the receiver (citizens), people's opinion or their desire to engage the political activist/representative in a dialogue is rarely taken into consideration. Approximately 50% of the people, across all considered socio-economic categories, were contacted by the political activists/leaders/representatives only during elections. (Table 3 and 4)

- 1) About 20% of the people were never contacted by any political representative/leader/activist.
- 2) About 22% of the people were contacted once a year or just by chance.

Table-3: Frequency of Political Communication according to Profession of Respondents

Frequency of political communication	Business	Service	Others
A Frequently(once or more than once a week)	2	14	15
B Seldom (every month/3 months/6 months)	12	31	26
C Very rare once a year/by chance/not certain)	42	79	57
D Only during election time (for their interest only)	85	163	186
E Never	29	65	81
F Any other	0	3	1

Figure: 2

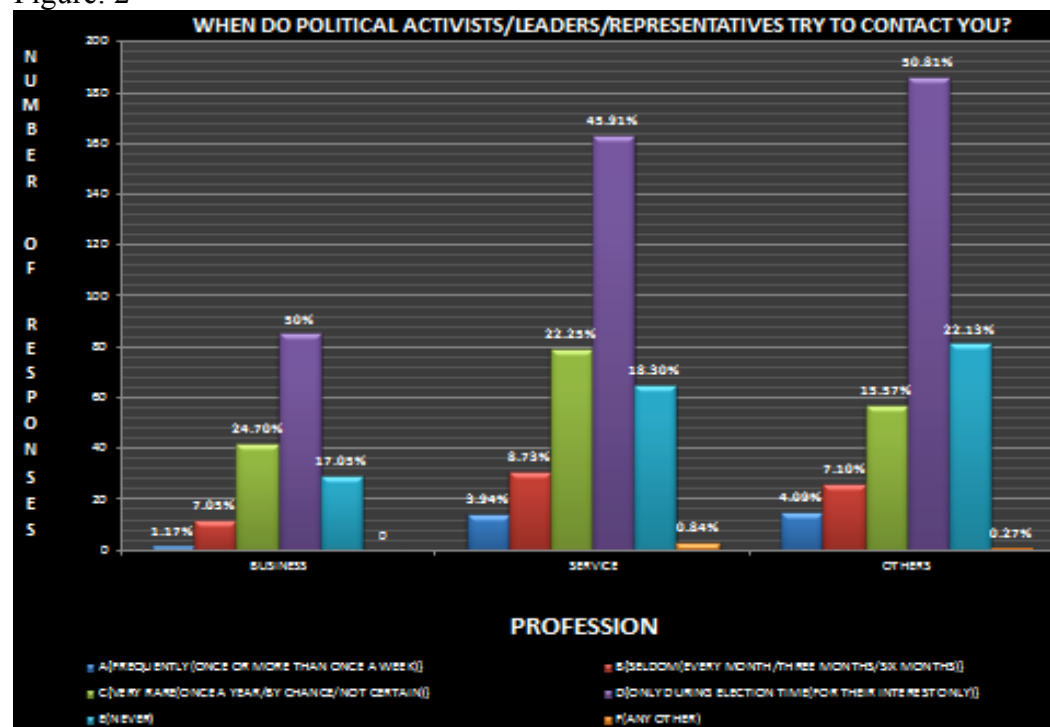
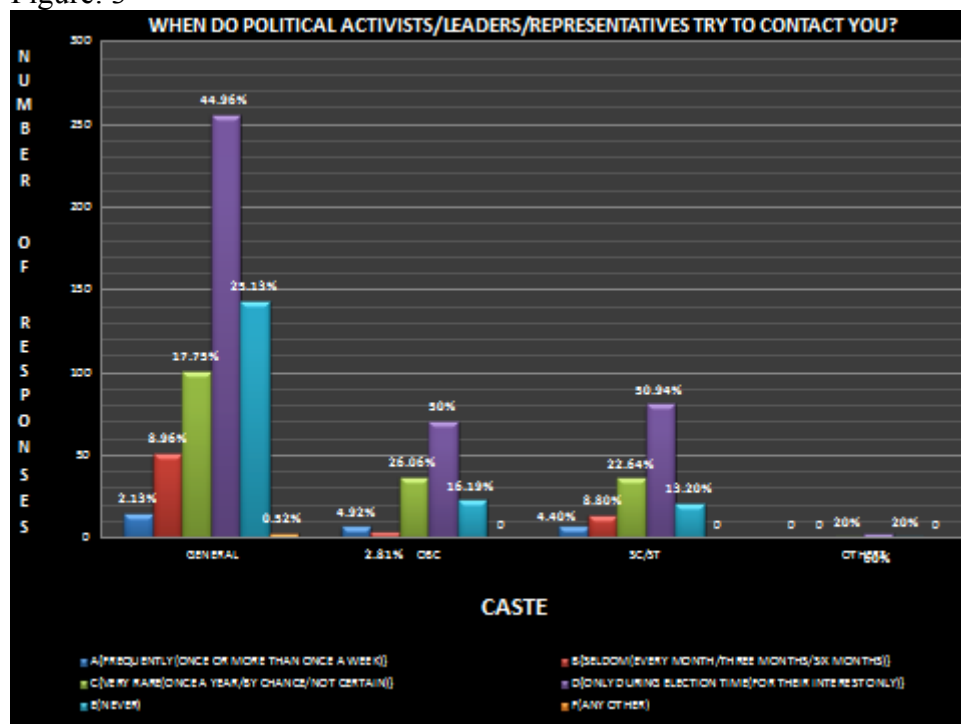


Table-4: Frequency of Political Communication according to Caste of respondents

	Frequency of political communication	General	OBC	SC/ST	Others
A	Frequently(once or more than once a week)	15	7	7	0
B	Seldom(every month/three months/six months)	51	4	14	0
C	Very rare(once a year/by chance/not certain)	101	37	36	1
D	Only during election time(for their interest only)	256	71	81	3
E	Never	143	23	21	1
F	Any other	3	0	0	0

Figure: 3



### Discussion

The timings of this project gave the researchers an opportunity to engage the respondents during and around legislative assembly elections and Lok Sabha elections. This was the time when every political party was making all out efforts to reach maximum number of voters through various means – posters, handbills, media, nukkad sabhas, door-to-door campaigns, padyatras, etc. As a result most of the respondents were aware of the major issues, important candidates, controversies, and future agenda of political parties. But their views about these electoral campaign activities and the desperate attempts of the political parties to communicate were well understood as ‘calculated efforts to garner votes’ by almost all the respondents.

The informal discussions with the respondents centered on the structured questionnaire raised concern about two issues:

- a) Political parties treat the people merely as voters and yet do not bother to inform them or communicate with them frequently. Parties have failed to establish a network to get a feedback from the people. Even during elections efforts are made to ‘sell’ their own agenda, public friendly policies, and ‘brand leaders’ to the people rather than enlisting the demands and requirements of the so called ‘voters’. Even when political representatives/leaders interact with them (that too during elections or rarely ever) they only talk about what they have in mind. It is mindboggling that a sizeable number of respondents in these categories know very well that these representatives *only pretend* that they are listening to the people!

- b) Media is considered as the most important, accessible, economical and effective source of political communication but the most desired form of political communication turned out to be 'one-to-one communication'. Citizens prefer frequent meetings and one-to-one communication/interaction with the political activists/representatives. They might get information from media but people want to participate in decision making process. But they are unaware about the avenues through which they can participate.

#### IMPACT OF VARIOUS MEANS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The basis on which the respondents judged the impact of political communication varied depending on their profession, age, and education. The broad classification of such factors is:

- i. Accessibility
- ii. Availability
- iii. Trust
- iv. Possibility of Communication/Interaction
- v. Economical
- vi. Interesting/Invoking curiosity
- vii. Timely
- viii. Continuity

The lack of participation in the political processes was attributed to the following reasons:

- i. Insufficient information regarding participatory avenues
- ii. Lack of organised efforts from the government or the political parties to enlist participation
- iii. Inefficient and meaningless political communication
- iv. Political apathy on the part of the citizens

#### Conclusion

Though the means used to influence citizens are ample in number and are used frequently by different political actors yet the above mentioned reasons raise a genuine concern. The users of the means of political communication have yet to realise the power of persuasion that they possess. Abraham Lincoln, once said: '...he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decision. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Political Debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas* (G.P. Putnam, New York and London, 1924), p.228.



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