

Use of new media in the government run PR machinery: an Indian perspective

Tomojit Bhattacharjee*

Abstract: *The Public Relations machineries of the government or the public sector establishments of all countries, irrespective of whether they are democracies or not, play a very important role in disseminating information about the various activities and welfare schemes of the government they represent. In case of democracies, their role is extremely crucial since their success or failure in spreading the good word about the activities of the government often decide whether the party in power emerges victorious in the elections or not. In case of the Government of India, the public relations and advertising activities are handled by primarily two agencies – the Press Information Bureau (PIB) – for media relations and the Directorate of Audio Visual Publicity (DAVP) for advertisements. The other crucial arms of the government such as the police, defence forces, railways, public sector undertakings etc have their own public relations departments. Generally, the information regarding the activities of the government are spread through press statements, conferences and print as well as audio-visual advertisements. However, the use of new media, that is, digital platforms available through internet have also become potent alternatives for the government to spread information. Effective use of this new option has tremendous potential since, using new media is cost effective and the dissemination of information is instant with the added advantage of instant feedback. The public relations machineries of the private sector have been very prompt in adopting these technologies and now a days, new media forms a very important part of their public relations strategies. However, the same cannot be said about the government sector. Barring a few exceptions, new media usage is still at its nascent stages in the government sector in the country. The Prime Minister of the nation, Mr. Narendra Modi is very active on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and also runs a website called www.mygov.in where he invites citizens to submit their suggestions and grievances. The Ministries of Railways, Petroleum etc also have substantial presence on social media. Among the important central government organisations, the Delhi Traffic Police has presence on both Facebook and Twitter. They also have a mobile application and a dedicated WhasApp number for registration of complaints. The University of Delhi, a prestigious centre for higher education also, has a Facebook page to address the queries of the people. However, most of the government establishments lag behind in using new media. While, the usage of new media tools by the central government bodies is gradually improving, the scenario among the provincial governments of the states is rather bleak. The states execute their public relations activities through the directorates of information and broadcasting. Most of these arms do not have any social media presence and their websites are also poorly designed lacking any relevant information. Important arms of the government such as provision of certain services, complaint redressal can be done very effectively online, but the efforts in the Indian scenario are still not adequate. One of the primary reasons behind the inadequate usage of new media by the government arms is the apparent lack of penetration of the internet. However, as regards the penetration of the internet as well as the use of social media, India is today among the fastest growing markets in the world. Through programmes such as ‘Digital India’, the government of India is also trying its best to take internet to the villages and improve the overall infrastructure. Therefore, the public relations machineries working under the government must incorporate new media into their functioning as this will ensure much faster dissemination of information among the people of the nation. The use of new media has tremendous potential in forming positive public opinion regarding the activities of the government. The social media can help the government send messages instantly and the feedback also would be immediate and genuine, which would help them frame their future schemes and policies better. With the use of social media and an effective interactive website, the organisations would also be able to offset negative criticism of the government by the traditional media by directly connecting with the people through Facebook posts, tweets, clarifications on the website and so on. They would emerge as the gatekeepers of the information themselves and would not depend on the traditional media to carry their news.*

I. Objectives of the study

1. To analyse the current scenario of new media usage by the public relations establishments of the government run departments and undertakings in India.

2. To study the potential that the new media tools have to improve the quality of communication strategies employed by the public relations establishments of the government run departments and undertakings in India.

II. Methodology

For the study, the researcher has conducted a content analysis of the news reports that appeared on the two leading English dailies published from Delhi – The Times of India and Hindustan Times, about the launch of the ‘Digital India Week’ on 1st July, 2015. Detailed social media analysis of the social media pages of the Prime Minister’s office (Facebook, Twitter) as well as those of other ministries – the Ministry of Railways and the Ministry of Petroleum have been done. The websites – www.mygov.in, www.pib.nic.in have also been analysed in details.

III. Review of Literature

Even though the use of new media tools in the sphere of media in general and public relations in particular, are a recent phenomenon, there have been many studies analysing the role and scope of new media in the world of media as a whole.

However, before we proceed towards studying the literature that has been generated to analyse the role of new media in the world of media as well as in public relations, let us take a look at some definitions of the term new media and its usage in relation to the other recently coined term ‘social media’.

“New Media is a 21st Century catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound. In fact, the definition of new media changes daily, and will continue to do so. New media evolves and morphs continuously. What it will be tomorrow is virtually unpredictable for most of us, but we do know that it will continue to evolve in fast and furious ways.” (Socha and Eber-Schmid, 2012)

In this review of literature, we shall look at the impact of both new and social media as tools of public relations practices. Canadian Research Firm, FAD Research, in a study titled, “Changing Media, Changing Roles: New Media Comes of Age” had mentioned about the role of the new media tools in changing the overall media landscape of the world way back in the year 2006.

“Media consumption is gravitating towards increased use of interactive platforms that are not tied to a single location or confined to the display of a single type of media. Media programming is being promoted and distributed across a wider array of platforms.

Consumers are headed towards reaching a state of ultramedia, a condition whereby all media is accessible at any time from any location. Media production is no longer a business that occurs in discrete silos as producers need to consider the array of channels open to them to reach an audience. Conducting regulation of the media environment has become increasingly complex (and irrelevant). Traditional media packagers and distributors continue to be disintermediated as producers find new ways to go directly to market.” (FAD Research, 2006)

Christine Larabie, in a study titled, “A Reflection on the Role of New Media – From Peer-to-Peer to Protest” also recognises that new media is enabling more participation by the audience. “Participation is also a widely used term, especially in the context of new media technologies that enable peer-to-peer file sharing, and encourage users to actively create and distribute content. This participation is believed to have widened social spheres and revitalized political communication, addressing many problems associated with traditional media.

Similar to the path of preceding technologies, new media has permeated many different social, political, and economic realms, transforming the way we carry out daily life. However, the emergence of new media has given rise to a set of assumptions surrounding technological advancement that overlook historical dimensions and ways of thinking about new technology. More specifically, the ‘newness’ of new media carries with it a renewed sense of optimism about technology and its ability to drive social change, revive political landscapes, and foster economic prosperity.” (Larabie, 2011)

Among the research works that focus on the role of internet in public relations, one interesting study undertaken in the United States in 2007 recognized the huge scope of internet in devising public relations strategies. “The Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues”. (McAllister & Taylor, 2007)

Much earlier in 1999, American researcher Lisa Hoggatt of the San Jose State University, in a thesis had also mentioned about the immense potential of new media technology, then perceived only as the internet as a tool of public relations.

“New media technology is rapidly evolving the media industry and the practices of mass communications. New media technology is the application of digital (computer) technology to mass communications. In a few short years, two main factors associated with the technology have changed the media

landscape. The Internet emerged as a communication medium. Even though the Internet is still in its infancy, its impact on society, commerce, and the government is already phenomenal. In addition, the interactivity and immediacy inherent in digital technology have changed the models of media production and business for all media". (Hoggatt, 1999)

Many studies globally have mentioned in details about the benefits of social media in the sphere of public relations also. Brad Smith, in an article titled "Why Social Media is the new public relations" published in the Fixcourse newsletter opines, "Social media dramatically lowers the cost of customer acquisition, and increases the lifetime value of a customer exponentially".

"It also has the added bonus of being inherently viral, which means that when you reach a certain point, your customers will do your marketing for you. Each new customer will bring one or two customers of their own, simply through recommendations."

"One of the biggest advantages of social media is that it allows you to have a two-way discussion with people. This helps you to create a bond, and makes sure they remain happy customers," he further mentions. (Smith, 2011)

There have been many studies which have tried to analyse the paradigm shift that new media is bringing in the sphere of journalism. Now, the journalist is not the only disseminator of news to the society. There are many other alternative media to do that. "The venerable profession of journalism finds itself at a rare moment in history where, for the first time, its hegemony as gatekeeper of the news is threatened by not just new technology and competitors but, potentially, by the audience it serves. Armed with easy-to-use Web publishing tools, always-on connections and increasingly powerful mobile devices, the online audience has the means to become an active participant in the creation and dissemination of news and information" (Bowman and Willis, 2003)

"The public is clearly part of the news process now. Participation comes more through sharing than through contributing news themselves." (Purcell, 2010)

The researcher here has also tried to find out if there has been any study regarding the present role, impact and potential of new media tools in the public relation activities in the government run departments and undertakings of India. However, it was found that there has not been any such study. Therefore, it is very vital to take up a detailed research study towards this direction.

Introduction

New media today is an integral part of the public relations strategies of the corporate houses. New media courses are being taught in universities and organizations providing digital media solutions have sprung up all over the country. The public sector is also gradually warming up to the benefits of the new media tools, but the penetration of these tools is nowhere near the reach new media enjoys in the private sector.

New media has tremendous potential in reaching out to the people with the government's public welfare related information. The internet based platforms such as websites, social media, mobile applications etc which collectively comprise the term 'new media' can be very effective because they are instant and not at all cost intensive. This study endeavours to analyse how much new media is being currently used by the public relations departments and arms of the government in India and what is the overall potential in this sector.

Public Relations infrastructure of the Indian Public Sector

The Indian public sector today composes of both departments and undertakings controlled by the central government and the respective state governments. While the departments are mostly engaged in carrying out the basic responsibilities of the government towards the people such as law and order, education, taxation, food supply, health, sanitation etc, the public sector undertakings mostly are into sectors such as transport, telecommunication, aviation, petroleum, gas supply etc. Though most of these undertakings have been created to provide services to the people, they are also supposed to generate revenues and contribute to the earnings of the government. In many cases these undertakings also are in direct competition with rivals from the private sector.

Therefore, irrespective of whether it's a government department or a public sector undertaking, proper communication with the target audience is most important for the discharge of services to the people. Moreover, being government run organizations in a democracy like India, they are directly accountable to the country's tax payers for their performance.

The democratically elected governments are also keen to display their achievements to the people so that more and more people can reap benefits from these services and in turn they can reap electoral benefits in the subsequent elections. Due to all these reasons, it is very important to maintain competent communication channels with the people of the country. For the purpose, the central government has a dedicated agency for the maintenance of media relations called the Press Information Bureau (PIB).

The PIB was established during the British era in the year 1919. Subsequently, it has expanded to all parts of the country with eight regional offices and 34 branch offices covering all state capitals and major cities. All major departments of the central government have a PIB officer attached who looks after the issues related to the media. Generally, he arranges the press briefings, drafts the press releases and briefs the concerned minister or the senior bureaucrats about the queries of the press. The state governments also follow the same pattern and have directorates of information and publicity. The public sector undertakings also have their own elaborate public relations departments.

New media usage in the Indian public sector

In comparison to the private sector, the overall new media usage by the Indian government sector remains abysmally low. While, following a government mandate, all departments and undertakings of the central government have websites, the same is not the case with the state government establishments. However, efforts are being made today to change the state of affairs.

The government today runs a number of schemes aimed towards introducing more and more internet supported services for the convenience of the people. However, in comparison to India's global position as one of the leaders in the information technology sector, the use of new media by the Indian government establishments seem minimal.

The National e-governance plan was one of those ambitious projects launched in 2006 to take the basic facilities provided by the government to the people more conveniently.

"The National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) has been formulated by the Department of Electronics and Information Technology (DEITY) and Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG). The Union Government approved the NeGP, comprising of 27 Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) and 10 components on May 18, 2006.

The NeGP aims at improving delivery of Government services to citizens and businesses with the following vision:

Make all Government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets and ensure efficiency, transparency & reliability of such services at affordable costs to realize the basic needs of the common man." (www.india.gov.in, 2015)

E-tendering has also been introduced in most of the leading public sector undertakings and central government departments. The government is gradually proceeding towards enforcing e-tendering for all high value tenders. Many state governments have introduced 'time bound services' mechanisms as per which the basic public services such as issue of birth/ death certificates, pension payments etc are to be made within a specific period of time. For such assignments as well, internet based services are being employed. In such cases, the internet based facilities are playing a major role in also eliminating corruption and remove red tape from the system. Other public interface media of the government such as the public grievances mechanisms and the applications received under the Right to Information Act, 2005 are also being made available online by the central government as well as many state governments. Transactions in public sector banks, post offices, bill payment facilities of water, power, telecom utilities are also turning online bringing people relief from the perennial problems such as queuing up at the counters or taking leave from the offices for completing such assignments.

In the field of transport also, the internet based platforms created by the government are playing a major role. The advance railway reservation system maintained by the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) books on average four to five lakh tickets every day. On 19th March, 2014, a record 5.80 lakh railway tickets were booked through IRCTC in a single day. The government run carriers, Air India as well as many road transport corporations of the state governments have e-ticketing services, which have provided great relief to the passengers.

The Digital India Campaign

The central government, in July 2015, has launched the 'Digital India' campaign which aims at providing the basic services to the citizens through the information technology enabled platforms and also enhance the use of such platforms for official functioning to eliminate age old lacunae connected to government functioning such as red tape, corruption, too much paper work etc.

The 'Digital India' programme has three broad visions - Infrastructure as a Utility to Every Citizen, Governance & Services on Demand and Digital Empowerment of Citizens. The programme has identified nine 'pillars' on which its activities will be based. These are - broadband highways, e-governance, electronics manufacturing, universal access to phones, e-kranti (electronic delivery of services), IT for jobs, public internet access programme, information for all, early harvest programmes.

The programme has many ambitious targets such as taking broadband connectivity to over 2,50,000 village panchayats, online public grievance redressal, workflow automation, e-education, e-healthcare, automation in judicial procedures, job creation etc. the programme intends to spend about a hundred thousand crores on the implementation of the existing schemes and another 13,000 crores for new schemes. Many existing digital media related schemes have also been incorporated into the umbrella programme called 'Digital India'. (Digital India document, 2015)

"Government of India launched National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) in 2006. 31 Mission Mode Projects covering various domains were initiated. Despite the successful implementation of many e-Governance projects across the country, e-Governance as a whole has not been able to make the desired impact and fulfil all its objectives.

It has been felt that a lot more thrust is required to ensure e-Governance in the country promote inclusive growth that covers electronic services, products, devices and job opportunities. Moreover, electronic manufacturing in the country needs to be strengthened.

In order to transform the entire ecosystem of public services through the use of information technology, the Government of India has launched the Digital India programme with the vision to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy." (www.digitalindia.gov.in, 2015)

The above mentioned campaign is an ambitious initiative taken by the Government of India and if implemented successfully, will bring in much awaited reforms and improvement in the government service delivery mechanism in the Indian public sector which suffers from perennial problems such as rampant corruption, inefficiency and lack of accountability.

Covering the launch event of the Digital India Week on 1st July, 2015, Ravi Sharma, the correspondent of The Times of India reported, "The programme aims to make all citizens digitally literate and bring internet and e-governance to all sections of the society.

The vision of Digital India programme also aims at inclusive growth in areas of electronic services, products, manufacturing and job opportunities etc."

On the same programme, Hindustan Times wrote, "The Digital India project, a campaign promise of the BJP, includes broadband connectivity in all panchayats, wi-fi in all schools and universities and public wi-fi hotspots in all important cities by 2019.

It will be deployed in delivering services in areas like health, education, agriculture and banking."

In the past also, a number of similar initiatives have been taken but they have failed to become very successful often due to implementation related loopholes. Many state governments have also launched similar programmes to automate the process of service delivery through the digital platforms. But barring a few programmes here and there, these projects have largely failed to reach out to the target audience as effectively as these should have.

However, even as the government machinery struggles to implement the digital solutions to professionalize the functioning of the government departments and undertakings, the Prime Minister's office seems to be leading by example. The PMO is using new media very effectively as a public relations medium and reaching out to millions of people every day. The Twitter and Facebook accounts of the Prime Minister share photographs of the activities of his office every day and the response of the followers is also huge depicting the success and popularity of the initiative.

While the Facebook page of the Prime Minister's office has a whopping nine million 'likes', the Twitter handle has over seven million followers and has already sent over five thousand Tweets so far (as on 24th July, 2015). The controversial aspects of the government's functioning are generally avoided but the Prime Minister does use these platforms to convey a lot of his vision, ideas and opinions on a range of issues. Social media users also tag the Twitter handle regarding a lot of issues facing the country which gives the Prime Minister's office some idea about the mood of the nation on important events as well as issues.

In addition to the general websites of the government of India and specifically the Prime Minister's office, a new website called www.mygov.in was launched in 2014 solely with the purpose of enhancing the engagement of the public with the government. On this website, the visitors can register and then send complaints, grievances, and suggestions on the issues facing the country. As on 24th July, 2015, the website had over one million registered members. The website had over one lakh thirty thousand submissions and over five lakh comments, which clearly indicates its massive reach.

The Prime Minister is also using social media very effectively by encouraging people to participate in various campaigns and post on a range of topics with specific hash tags. This helps the Prime Minister to gauge the popularity of his schemes and policies and also raises awareness about a range of socially relevant issues.

For example, in June, 2015, the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi stressed on the importance of education and opportunities for the girl children and encouraged fathers to post their photographs with their daughters with the hash tag #SelfieWithDaughter, during his monthly radio address called 'Mann ki baat'. The campaign, inspired by a similar campaign launched in a village in Haryana to promote gender equality, has since

trended on social media in a major way. The Prime Minister has also promised to retweet the best photographs and messages accompanying them.

The social media campaign has been launched to promote the programme 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', which is oriented towards the promotion of the education of the girl children and prevention of the age old menace called female infanticide.

On the lines of the Prime Minister's office, many other senior ministers of the central government have also started social media accounts for their ministries. For example, the Ministry of Railways also has a dedicated official Facebook page, with more than three lakh fifty thousand 'likes'. The page also regularly updates information about the various initiatives taken by the ministry with photographs and videos.

Public Relations is about communicating effectively with the people and reaching out to them to convey relevant messages and listening to their complaints and suggestions. On these counts, the social media outreach efforts of the Prime Minister is indeed praiseworthy. His tweets and posts are often compiled into news by the mainstream media and whenever any citizen is directly benefitted by communicating on these forums, the same gets tremendous media coverage and increases the goodwill of the government. Therefore, even if the Prime Minister is not communicating with the mainstream traditional media regularly, he is in a position to maintain contact with the people he represents.

However, barring these exceptions, among the top level of governance, the overall scenario, vis a vis the use of new media in government functioning remains low. A lot of activities which should have been digitized and taken to the people through online media have not been done and work is still being done manually which is time taking and promotes inefficiency.

Drawbacks in new media usage by the Public Relations machineries of the Indian Public Sector

The following are the major lacunae which could be noticed in new media usage by the government departments and public sector undertakings. The drawbacks pointed here would be about the use of new media in the government's communication machinery primarily since this study pertains to that.

- **Lack of adequate presence on the virtual world:** Internet today is probably the easiest medium to reach out to the people with important messages and information. It's been discussed how, the top functionaries of the government of India such as the Prime Minister are reaching out to the people through the effective use of the internet. However, most unfortunately, the same cannot be said about most of the government establishments across the country, especially those belonging to the state governments.

In many cases, crucial public services such as the public distribution system, health facilities etc do not have any internet presence as a result even if a citizen wishes to get information about them through the internet, he cannot get any and has to resort to the archaic practice of visiting that particular office and seeking the information from an official in person. Policing is another such sector where the presence of new media is insignificant all over the country. As an exception, in case of the Delhi Traffic Police, the internet based platforms such as websites, social media, mobile internet apps etc are being widely used but in most state police forces such facilities are not available. For general policing issues, such as filing of First Information Reports, checking of complaint status etc most state police forces do not have any online mechanism.

The various awareness campaigns about social issues, government schemes etc are also primarily through print advertisements, print and electronic media coverage etc and not through the new media platforms.

- **Inadequate and poor quality web content:** As per the central government policy, all government run establishments must have their own websites and all relevant information must be shared through the websites with the citizens. The National Informatics Centre (NIC) hosts these websites on their server. However, in many cases, it is found that these websites are designed in a bland manner which doesn't attract the visitors.

The websites are not updated regularly and many crucial sections are left with the 'under construction' tag for days, which is in sharp contrast to the websites of the private sector which are attractive, dynamic and reviewed regularly for timely updations. While it is mandatory for all government of India websites to have Hindi sections, but these sections are often not updated regularly leaving the visitors to the Hindi section in confusion and disarray.

A lot of websites also focus a lot on elaborating on the details of the concerned ministers and top bureaucrats which is of very little interest to the visitors. The original message or information which is sought to be communicated is often pushed to the background as priorities get misplaced.

The public relations practitioners of the government agencies also do not use these platforms effectively for reaching out to the media. While in websites of organisations such as the Press Information Bureau and the directorates of information and publicity in the states do update their press releases on their websites, these sites are not very fast in updating them. The sites are mostly not professionally designed and

other possible inclusions such as video sharing, photo sharing are not available. Media queries also cannot be made through these websites as these are not interactive in nature.

- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Another major drawback plaguing the proliferation of internet based functioning and facilities in the government sector is the poor infrastructure of internet all over the country. Most of the web enabled services from problems such as poor bandwidth, unreliable servers etc.

Most of these websites are designed using the outdated HTML and hosted on lethargic servers. They are best suited for use on the internet explorer while many more efficient platforms have already arrived on the scene, but these websites have not been able to upgrade according to the changing environment. The designers on occasions, seem like amateur newcomers.

The internet also fails to reach the rural areas and smaller towns easily because the infrastructure in place there is grossly inadequate. Many foreign visitors to India often complain about the slow internet connections that they encounter especially in the smaller centres.

The Digital India programme does aim to address these issues. However, there have been many such programmes promoting e-governance in the past and it is to be seen how this new ambitious initiative helps the government in reaching the citizens more effectively covering larger populations.

- **Inadequate social media interactions:** The social media interactions of the Prime Minister's office in itself is the biggest case study of how the public relations strategies of the government should be reoriented using social media. The social media outreach of the Prime Minister has been so effective that negative criticism on mainstream media has also been offset to a large extent by his popularity on Facebook and Twitter since these platforms also reflect the public perception and mood now.

However, the same cannot be said about most of the government run organisations. Most of them do not have any social media interaction which makes them inaccessible to a lot of potential stakeholders. For example, important public service arms of the government such as the telecom service providers – Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited (MTNL) do not have any social media presence.

Penetration of internet in India

The penetration of the internet has increased manifold in India in the last few years. Today, India is the fastest growing internet market in the world backed by a large geographical area and a burgeoning population. It is estimated that by the year 2018, India could have as many as 550 million internet users, whereas in the year 2001, there were only seven million internet users in the entire country. In terms of business also, today the internet is one of the major contributors to the nation's economy, with India being only the third country in the world to have over five internet companies valued at over US\$ 1 billion. (www.yourstory.com, 2015)

“In 2013, the Internet contributed USD 60 billion or 2.7 per cent of India's GDP – larger than the contribution of healthcare (2.5 per cent) and military (2.5 per cent), but less than agriculture (14 per cent). By 2020, the Internet is estimated to grow over 4 per cent of India's GDP. E-commerce will cross USD 17 billion in 2018 and eight million SMEs (out of 13 million SMEs); 200 million individuals will transact online.” (www.yourstory.com, 2015)

“India Internet Contribution to GDP stands 6th among major developing and developed countries, with UK being the leading one. The availability of data-enabled devices has grown at a staggering rate and data plans are considerably cheaper than before, but still India lags behind other countries with regards to the penetration of Internet.” (www.iamwire.com, 2015)

In the rural areas also, the number of internet users is increasing rapidly providing the government with a wonderful opportunity to use the internet based tools in all kinds of social welfare measures and schemes. “The number of internet users in rural areas will touch 210 million by 2018, aiding India's internet user base to cross 500 million by 2018.

The Internet class of 2018 will be more rural, older, more gender-equal, more mobile, and more vernacular than their counterparts of today. Those aged at least 25 will account for 54 percent of the total number of netizens in urban India by 2018, up from 40 percent in 2013. Rural users, as a percentage of the Internet population, will rise from 29 percent in 2013 to between 40 and 50 percent in 2018. This sector will open up significant growth opportunities for manufacturers and service providers alike, which can leverage the wider, targeted and more cost-optimal online channels effectively to cater to an increasingly Internet savvy customer base in the villages.”(www.iamwire.com, 2015)

The internet has also emerged as one of the largest employment generators in the country, which is indirectly boosting the Indian economy tremendously. "The 'Internet' sector already employs around 4-5 lakh people and is a key avenue for job creation. It is estimated that the Internet economy will create nearly 15-20 lakh job opportunities by 2018." (www.iamwire.com, 2015)

As mentioned earlier, the Digital India campaign is also trying to take internet to the rural areas very aggressively. If the government's plans are properly implemented, more than 2,50,000 Indian villages could have broadband access in the years to come.

Given the internet's all pervasive presence in our lives today and the utility of the new media tools to effectively communicate with the people, it would be very beneficial if these tools are effectively utilized by the government run establishments in their public relations functioning.

Potential of new media as a public relations tool in the Indian public sector

The following points outline the tremendous potential that new media has as a tool of public relations for the Indian public sector:

- **Reaching a wider audience instantly:** For the government, the timely communication of its welfare policies to the people is of paramount importance. Presently, the government run establishments communicate the information about their policies and schemes to the people through the conventional schemes of communication such as 'press releases, statements, advertisements etc. For the publication of the advertisements, both print as well as hoardings, facilitated by organisations such as the Directorate of Audio Visual Publicity (DAVP), tremendous amount of public money is spent.

In such a scenario, the effective use of new media such as a well-designed website, social media presence can be very useful in reaching out to the people directly. With a potent new media campaign, there is no requirement to continuously approach the mainstream media houses for coverage of news, nor is there the requirement to spend crores of public money in print and display advertisements.

With new media, the response of the people is also instant. Based on the feedback of the people, government policies and schemes can be redesigned and redrawn. Generally the government spends a lot of money also on getting the feedback of the citizens on their policies. On a lot of occasions, the feedback reports are compiled by officials without actually gauging the situation on the ground leading to the formulation of incorrect policies.

There can be an argument that internet and the use of social media have not percolated down to the lower strata of the country yet. Only a minuscule portion of the population are using these media. However, in the earlier chapters it has been illustrated that internet is penetrating very fast across the country and India today is the fastest growing market for social media sites like Facebook and Twitter in the world. The government is also committed to take internet to the villages. Coupled with higher literacy rates and computer awareness, new media certainly can have a massive influence on the people.

Moreover, the people who are currently using new media tools regularly are from the elite and middle classes of the society. They are the opinion makers and when they respond to the government schemes, policies and activities as a whole, the rest of the country also gets influenced. The traditional media also takes cue and reports about them.

In addition, the greatest benefit of using new media is that it is low cost and does not involve huge sums on creation and publicity of content. In 2015, the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi tremendously increased their budget on publicity leading to large scale criticism from the people of the national capital. Such situations can be easily avoided by evolving effective new media campaigns and taking them to the people.

- **As a brand and image building tool:** The process of building of a brand or image is one of the most important activities of the public relations mechanism of any organization. Much like the private sector, a lot of government run establishments and schemes introduced by them also require brand and image building, so that the public immediately recognizes the concerned brand. This applies both for the departments, public sector undertakings as well as the schemes run by them.

For example, for the success of the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan', a scheme to promote cleanliness and hygiene in the country, the familiarization of the campaign brand is extremely important since this will help the citizens identify with the with the cause and then make it a success. New media can be very effective in establishing such brands as large scale visibility round the clock can be easily ensured at very nominal costs.

The social media presence of the Delhi Traffic Police and the University of Delhi have also helped them to be established as reliable brands. The continuous posts and tweets of the Delhi Traffic Police has helped them in establishing a brand image that is efficient and people friendly.

- **Offset criticism by mainstream media:** On innumerable occasions, the government run departments and public sector establishments face criticism and negative reporting from the mainstream print and audio visual media, often on genuine issues. However, the efforts to counter such reporting through clarifications or rejoinders in case of erroneous reporting by the media houses largely go unreported. To counter such situations, new media presence can be very helpful. The organisations can simply post those clarifications on the website as well as social media and that would help in offsetting the criticism in the newspapers and television news channels.

For example, the Delhi Traffic Police often gets a lot of flak in the city's newspapers for traffic snarls. But after the introduction of their new media channels, the force has been able to communicate information about traffic snarls more effectively to the people on a real time basis.

IV. Findings and Conclusion

From the study, it could be found that the current scenario of new media usage by the public relations departments of the public sector establishments in India is quite nominal. The media strategies of these organisations do not involve the use of the social media and not many messages are conveyed directly to the people through the use of social media barring a few exceptions.

In many cases, the websites of government organisations are poorly designed without adequate content and scope for real time dissemination of information. Most of the public relations establishments also do not have the manpower to deal with issues pertaining to new media, contrary to the trends in the private sector where there are dedicated professionals handling new media platforms.

At the same time, it must be said, that new media holds tremendous potential in reaching the people with the information or message of the government. Effective new media strategies would help the governments, both at the central and provincial levels to reach out to the people more transparently in a shorter span of time. They would also be able to gauge their opinion and feedback more easily, which would help them to frame their schemes and policies in the coming years.

References

- [1]. Socha, B. and Eber-Schmid, B. (2012), What is New Media, <http://www.newmedia.org/what-is-new-media.html>, accessed on 21.06.2015 at 03 Hrs.
- [2]. FAD Research (2006), Changing Media, Changing Roles: New Media Comes of Age, pp 4.
- [3]. Larabie, C. (2011), A Reflection on the Role of New Media – From Peer-to-Peer to Protest, The McMaster Journal of Communication 2011, Volume 7, Issue 1, pp 2-3.
- [4]. McAllister, S. and Taylor, M. (2007) Community college web sites as tools for fostering dialogue: Public Relations Review [Electronic version], pp. 230–232.
- [5]. Hoggatt, L (1999), New Media Technology, School of Mass Communication and Journalism, San Jose State University, pp 1.
- [6]. Smith, B (2011), Why Social Media is the New Public Relations, FixCourse Newsletter, pp 3.
- [7]. Bowman, S and Willis, C. (2003) We Media: American Press Institute, pp 8.
- [8]. Purcell, K. (ed) (2010) Understanding the Participatory News Consumer: Pew Research Center, pp 19.
- [9]. <http://india.gov.in/e-governance/national-e-governance-plan>, accessed on 23.07.2015 at 1830 hrs.
- [10]. Digital India booklet (2015), pp 1.
- [11]. www.digitalindia.gov.in/content/about-programme, accessed on 24.07.2015 at 1245 hrs.
- [12]. <http://yourstory.com/2015/02/internet-india-2018/>, accessed on 23.07.2015 at 1735 hrs.
- [13]. <http://www.iamwire.com/2015/01/rise-internet-penetration-changing-face-digital-india/108808>, accessed on 23.07.2015 at 1810 hrs.

*The author is working as Manager, Corporate Communications in Delhi Metro Rail Corporation Limited, New Delhi, India. He is also a PhD Research Scholar with the Department of Mass Communication, Assam University, Silchar, India.