

# The Role of Social Media in Influencing Governing Bodies and Citizen Participation in Society

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On February 2, 2011, Adbusters, a Canadian media organization posted a blog titled 'A Million Man March on Wall Street', inspired by the Egyptian protests against Hosni Mubarak, the former dictator of the country. Unsatisfied with the way the government of the U.S. dealt with the big corporate houses during the 2008 global crisis, which led to the triggering of the worst recession in the American history since 1929 (Amadeo, 2017), and the resulting high rate of unemployment, the blog encouraged its readers to hold a peaceful protest against the top layer<sup>1</sup> in the Wall Street to show the seriousness of increasing disparity in distribution of wealth. This later led to the famous September 2017 'Occupy Wall Street' protests.

The above mentioned incident shows us how it took just one blog to inspire millions of people to raise their voices in matters of similar interests. People managed to arrange a massive movement to show their displeasure to their government and made sure that their voices were being heard. This also shows us how much power social media has in reaching out to the people.

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<sup>1</sup>The corporate world and the wealthy, often also known as the '1% that control one-third of America's total wealth'

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The number of people connected to the internet has grown from millions to billions ever since the internet was introduced in the early 1990s (Internet World Stats). During the same period, social media has become a part and parcel of our day to day lives, and involves every type of individual – the general public, celebrities, various types of organizations, and governments. This, however, raises an important question for the governments of various countries: How does the massive usage of social media affect their country's interests, and how should they respond to it?

As the internet becomes wider and denser, more people are participating in it, which leads to an availability of opportunities for them to speak their mind on public platforms and take collective action. As we saw from the Wall Street example, social media has increased the freedom of expression to a large extent and helped connect a simple idea with a large number of people with similar thoughts.

### **THE RISE OF 'SOCIAL MEDIA'**

'Social media', in general terms, can be referred to as "web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate, and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination. These tools become 'social' in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another." (Bohler-Muller & van der Merwe, 2011). Social media, though initially invented for casual socializing between people, now serves as an important platform for the government in order to know what their people want from them.

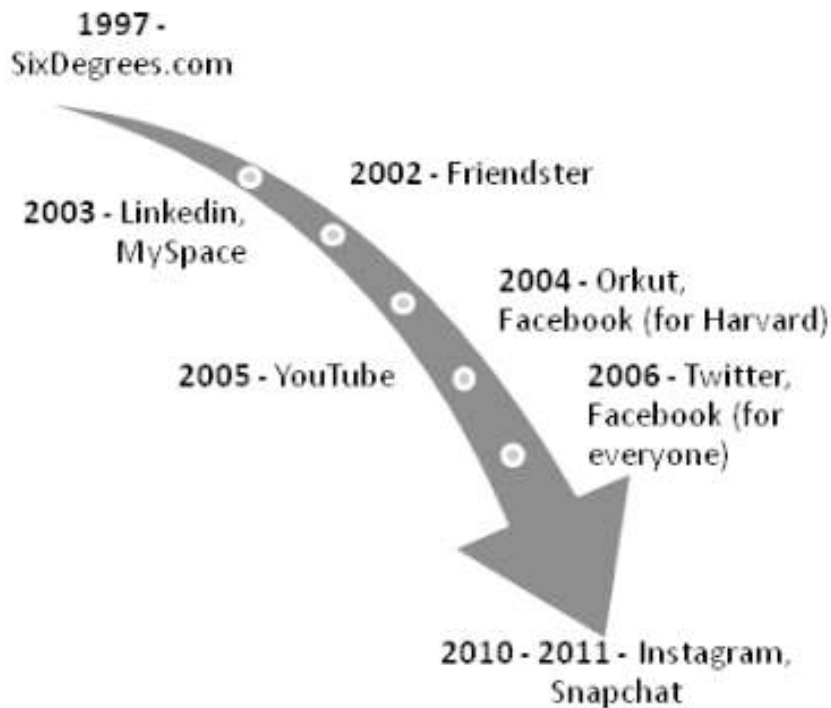
If we have to simply define social media, it is a service that has an ability to 'bring people together'. However, this definition is too broad and can also include outdated services like the telegram. The terminology is not that clear as some describe social networks as social media (Bohler-Muller & van der Merwe, 2011).

However, in modern terms, social media is something that has the following characteristics, which was uncommon in previous services (Obar & Wildman, 2015):

- **Social Media Platforms are Web 2.0 Internet-based applications.** Web 2.0 is the current state of online technology and is greatly used for interactive activities as compared to its older version, the World Wide Web (www).
- **User-generated content is what keeps social media running.** The video one uploads on YouTube, the tweets one posts on Twitter, the photos one uploads on Instagram, etc. are examples of user-generated content.

- **Users create service-specific profiles for the platform that are designed and maintained by respective social media organizations.** The user profile of a person is one of the most important things in social media, without which one can't generate content or connect with other users. Wikipedia, however, is an exception to this rule as it allows basic editing to listed articles, even if a person is not registered with the website.

**Social Media facilitates the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups.** However, one can argue that this facility was available even in technologies like telephones that allowed the user to develop and maintain connections. Hence, this aspect remains controversial, suggesting that there is still some level of indistinctness in the definition of social media. On the other hand, this also gives us a chance to expand our definitions from time to time as new sets of technologies enter the market.



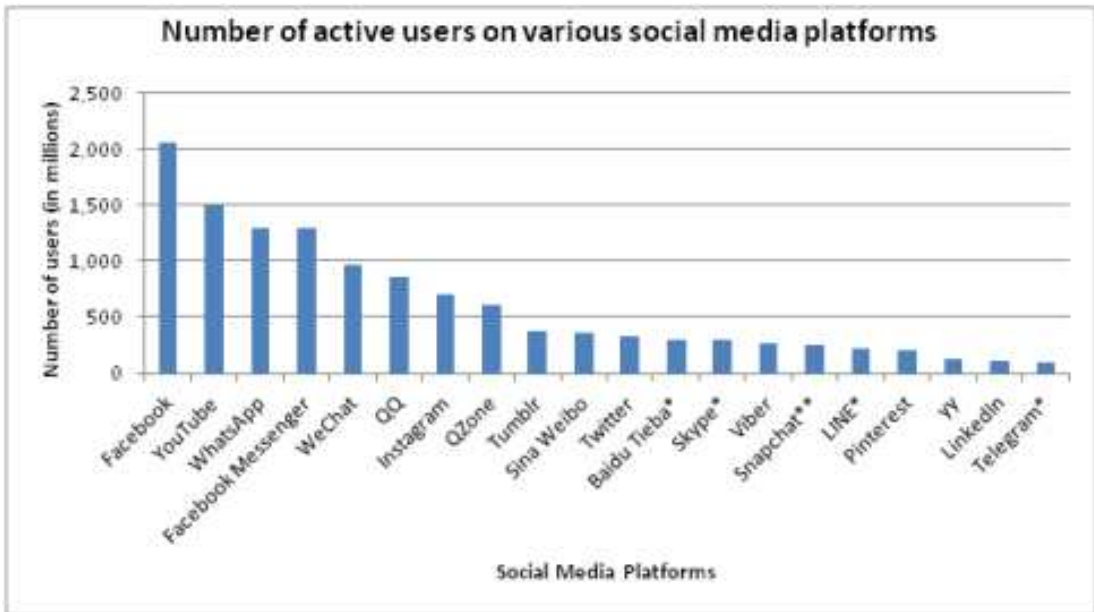
**Figure 1: Launch dates of major social network sites**

(Source: Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Sandbox Networks, Inc., publishing as Infoplease, 2017)

The history of social media can be traced back to 1994, when the concept of ‘chat rooms’ was born in the form of ‘The Palace’. The website allowed users to chat on various graphical chat servers, which they termed as ‘palaces’. Each user had a virtual avatar that denoted his or her presence in the server. Modern examples of this can be seen in the form of ‘virtual worlds’ like IMVU and Second Life.

However, the first trace of social media, in its modern definition, was found in the form of a website named SixDegrees.com in 1997 (Hendricks, 2013) that allowed users to create their profiles and send messages to their added contacts. Although SixDegrees managed to attract millions of people to join, the aura didn’t last long, and in 2001, they finally had to shut their business down. SixDegrees was clearly way ahead of its time and thus struggled to remain in the market. However, SixDegrees’ concept was carried forward by Friendster, which was launched in 2002. It was created to compete with Match.com, a leading online dating website of that time. Friendster, however, mainly focused on connecting mutual friends, or friends-of-friends, based on the assumption that they would make better romantic partners than strangers. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Friendster didn’t last long in the market either, despite its popularity, due to its inefficiency in handling high amounts of traffic, and increasing numbers of fake profiles. Around the same time, Myspace was getting more and more popular, especially among the youth (History Cooperative). This website was especially popular with independent rock bands, which were earlier ineligible for Friendster as they didn’t qualify for their profiles (1webdesigner , 2016). This also led to a massive infusion of young users who wanted to connect with their favourite bands. The number of teenagers using MySpace increased so much that they changed their user policy to allow minors to create profiles, too. However, this also gave rise to safety issues like possibilities of having sexual predators on their website, who actively prey on minors. This led to its decline, along with the growing popularity of Facebook, which was launched in 2004. Initially, it was restricted to only the Harvard campus. Facebook later went on to support other schools, too, but the users had to have university email IDs in order to register on it. However, as its popularity grew, signing up became open for all, and today it has the largest user database in the world (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Around this time, Orkut was also started by Google and became one of the most visited websites in Brazil and India in 2008 (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, due to controversies and problems involving fake profiles and hate groups against minorities, Orkut failed to become as popular as Facebook. In fact, issues in some countries were so severe that it led to State censorship of the website. For example, Orkut was very popular in Iran. However, it is now a banned site thanks to the website breaching the issues of Islamic ethics on dating and match-making (Ireland, 2013).





**Figure 2: Number of active users on various social media platforms, as on 21st September, 2017 (Source: Statista.com)**

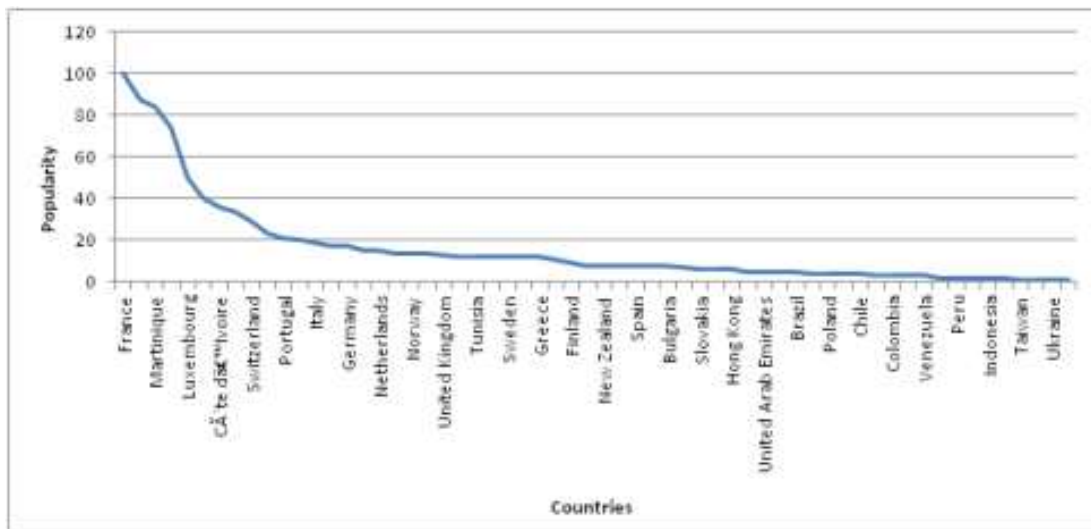
\* Platforms have not published updated user figures in the past 12 months; figures may be out of date and less reliable. \*\*Snapchat does not publish monthly active user data, the figure used here was reported by Business Insider in June 2016, based on daily active users. (Statista.com)

## SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR MASS COMMUNICATION

Before we analyse how social media affects the governance of a society, it is important to know how social media has become an effective tool for mass communication over the years. Any information now is easily accessible to people through this medium, thanks to the busier schedules of people today and their demand for shorter sized information. However, what is worth noticing is the speed at which any information is available to people. A classic example of this can be found in the 2013 article on CNN<sup>2</sup> titled 'The Power of One Wrong Tweet'. According to the article, a false tweet claimed that there had been certain explosions at the White House and the President was critically injured. Within few minutes, it had almost 3000 retweets (Fifty Acres, 2015). Although this shows how, sometimes, short news can be unreliable as it has not been thoroughly researched, what is more important to see is how fast the news can spread among people.

<sup>2</sup> The power of one wrong tweet by Heather Kelly, April 24, 2013. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/23/tech/social-media/tweet-ripple-effect/index.html>)

Figure 3: The graph above shows how the trend for 'Je Suis Charlie' in various other countries. A figure of '100' shows maximum popularity of the topic, whereas a '0' would mean that the topic was less than 1% as popular as the peak. (Source: Google Trends, 16th November, 2017) Another important factor that comes into the picture is the 24x7 availability of social media. This has enabled everyone to express their opinion publically. Compared to the past, when expressing an opinion was a privilege due to a lack of desirable platforms, social media has turned that privilege into a right. Moreover, with the number of participants growing day by day, it has become easier to have an effective conversation at a global level. What happens in the USA is available to a person residing in India within a few seconds, and vice versa. For example, take the case of the Charlie Hebdo shootings in France. Charlie Hebdo is a satirical weekly newspaper and is completely secular and left-wing in nature. It also publishes articles and cartoons that mock religions across the world. The shootings took place in 2015 due to two terrorists, reported to be from the Yemen branch of the infamous Al Qaeda, who later stated that they were avenging the mockery made out of Prophet Mohammed in one of Charlie's cartoons (BBC News, 2015).

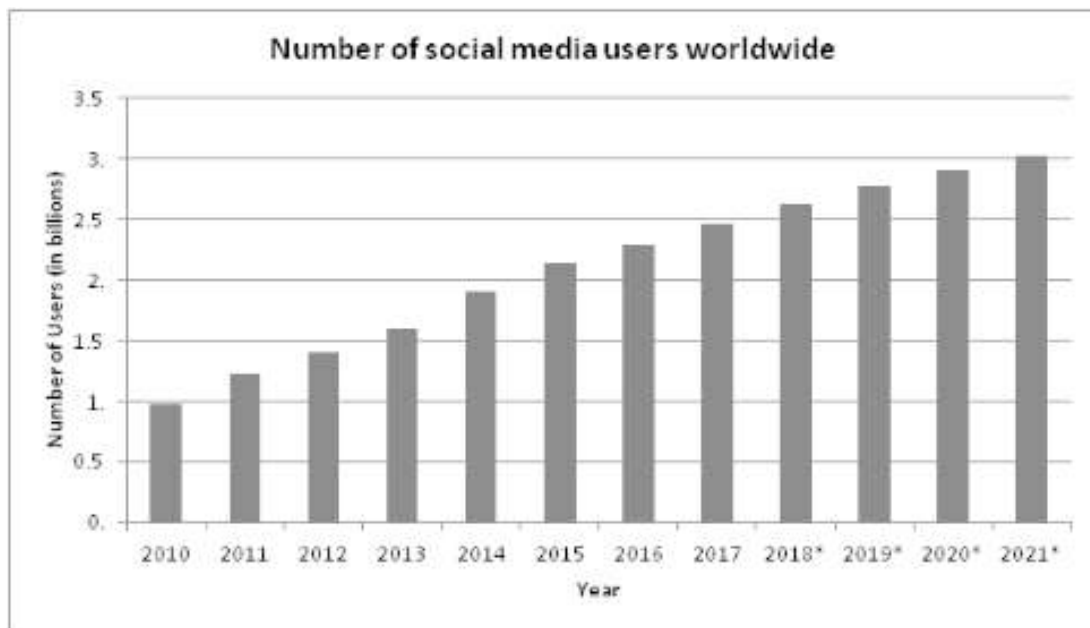


**Figure 3: The graph above shows how the trend for 'Je Suis Charlie' in various other countries. A figure of '100' shows maximum popularity of the topic, whereas a '0' would mean that the topic was less than 1% as popular as the peak. (Source: Google Trends, 16th November, 2017)**

Within minutes of the incident, #jesuischarlie ('I am Charlie' in French) started trending on various social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and even Instagram. Given here is the chart of the countries that have searched for the hashtag or used it, and notice how it is not just limited to France, or Europe as a whole. Seeing this kind of global support, the world leaders of many countries met in France to perform a march to show their support for the victims. They were joined by 3.7 million people in paying the tribute. This incident is one of the numerous cases that show us the power of social media in not only spreading news at a much faster rate than before, but also giving a voice to the people who earlier struggled to find such platforms.

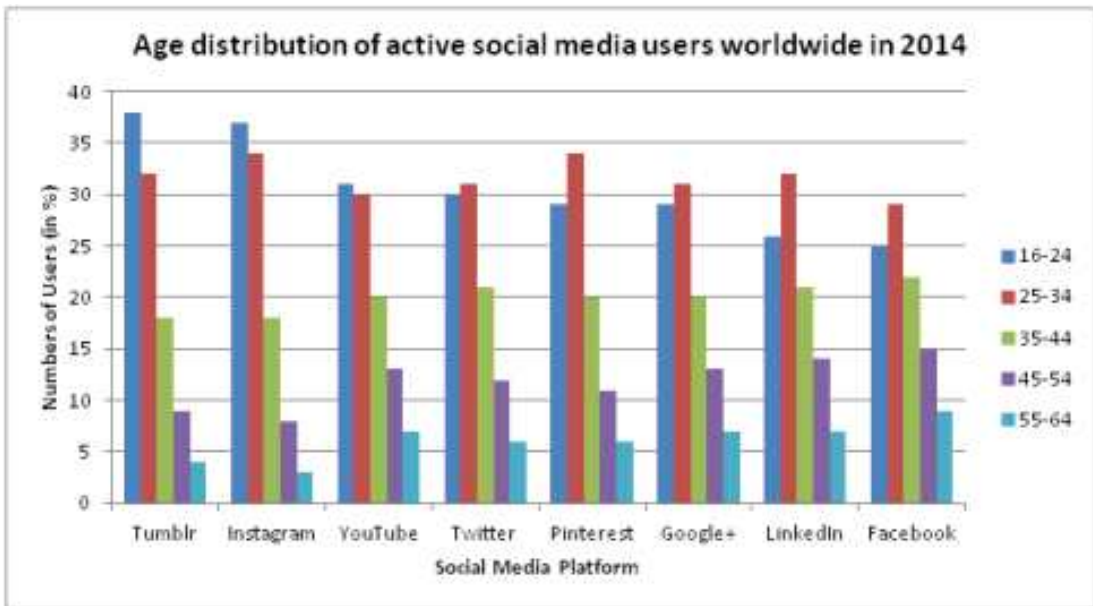
### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ROLE IN GOVERNANCE OF THE SOCIETY**

Users of social media have grown massively since 2010. Around 86% of 18–29 year olds use social media every day, and 72% of adults and 87% of teens use text messaging regularly (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). This increase in social media usage has led to the expansion of its usability towards addressing national priorities; not just using them for entertainment or corporate purposes (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012).



**Figure 3: Number of social media users worldwide (Source: Statista.com) (Statista.com)**

\*Forecast Internet users who use a social networking site via any device at least once per month.



**Figure 4: Age distribution of active social media users worldwide in 2014, by platform (Source: Statista.com). All figures are in percentage. (Statista.com)**

In fact, using social media not only provides the government greater exposure to the society, it can also help in involving people in various decision making processes. Some opportunities that social media can provide the government are as follows (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012):

- Democratic participation and engagement. Using social media technologies to engage the public with the government, fostering participatory dialogues, and providing a voice in discussions of policy development and implementation can be effective in various ways.
- Co-production. Governments and the public can develop, design, and deliver government services to improve service quality, delivery, and responsiveness.
- Crowdsourcing solutions and innovations. Seeking innovation through public knowledge and talent to develop innovative solutions into large-scale societal issues is something that the government and public services should look into.

Former President of the United States, Barack Obama, was known for his active usage of social media during his presidential campaign. Closer home, the current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, is popular for not only effectively using social media but also promoting his campaigns for social benefits via such channels. Even the Minister of External Affairs,

Sushma Swaraj, is well known for helping distressed Indians abroad through Twitter. Same can be said for the Twitter handle of the Ministry of Railways that have effectively eradicated (Sinha, 2017) a lot of issues of their passengers through tweets. In fact it is possible to find active participation of almost all the world leaders on social media today, simply because of the influence social media has in the general public lives, and its characteristic of connecting numerous people at once.

To further understand how social media can affect and benefit both, the governing bodies and the citizens, three cases have been discussed, and each one of them display totally different ways of using social media.

## **CASE DISCUSSIONS**

### **METHODS AND DATA**

The main aim of the following case studies is to provide a deep understanding of how social media is being used by governance bodies and the general public, and how successful they have been in bringing a change in the society. The studies have mostly been done empirically. The following research techniques have been used to carry out the analysis of the case studies:

<b>Research Techniques</b>	<b>Data</b>
Analysis of relevant documents and websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Newspaper and magazine reports</li> <li>- Court documents (wherever relevant)</li> <li>- Social media handles and pages</li> <li>- Other papers or documents previously written on the same case studies.</li> </ul>
Secondary analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Quantitative or qualitative studies of the impact social media had on the mentioned cases.</li> </ul>

Please note that there have been limitations in acquiring data for cases that took place before the emergence of popular social networking sites, mainly Facebook and Twitter. Hence, graphical data for the same could not be provided. However, a thorough analysis based on the available text documents and other reports has been carried out and discussed.

## MAIN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main questions that have been answered via the case studies have been mentioned in the following table. This is done in order to set thematic guidelines for each of the cases and hence is not an inclusive checklist.

Research Dimension	Questions
Description of the incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What was the background of the incident or the persons related to it?</li><li>- How did the incident occur?</li></ul>
Catalyst in the incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- How did social media get involved in these incidents and how did it affect them?</li></ul>
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- What changes did the usage of social media for such purposes bring in the society?</li><li>- How different was the usage of social media from one case study to another?</li></ul>

## THE TWITTER ACCOUNT OF THE MUMBAI POLICE

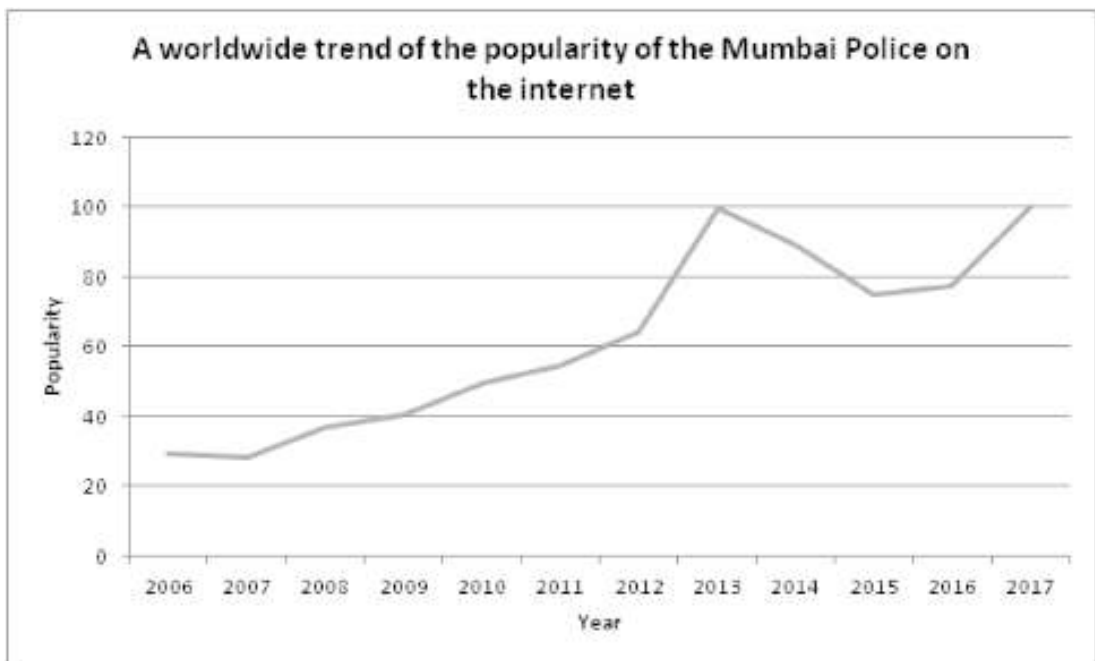
On January 27th, 2016, Mumbai Police posted a tweet (see figure 5) that garnered around 2100 retweets, along with hundreds of memes and jokes (Mengle, 2016). As a part of the police's drug awareness campaign, this struck a chord with many people as not only did it have people chuckling, but it also carried the message in a short yet efficient way.

People often associate the police force with strictness and a certain level of ruthlessness. Hence, when the Mumbai Police started tweeting witty one-liners, it was the last thing that was expected out of them, even though the Bangalore Police has participated in the same game before. This definitely helped in enhancing their popularity not only across the city, but throughout the country, too.

Since its Twitter debut in 2015, the Mumbai Police has managed to gather numerous followers, with a current count of 3.95 million (as on 19th November, 2017). Also, around the same time as the 2016 post mentioned earlier, the Mumbai Police's social media team launched the 'Chat with CP' initiative, which was the first of its kind in the country. Their presence on Twitter is not only limited to posting witty puns and humorous posts.



**Figure 5: Tweet by the CP of Mumbai Police for drug awareness (Source: Twitter.com, 2016) (Twitter.com, 2016)**



**Figure 6: A worldwide trend of the popularity of the Mumbai Police on the internet. Notice how the trend line has been going upwards since 2015, the year in which the Mumbai Police started its Twitter account. The only time it reached a high of popularity before this was in 2013, when Mumbai was hit by one of the worst rains in more than 10 years and the police force won accolades for their quick reactions. A figure of '100' shows maximum popularity of the topic, whereas a '0' would mean that the topic was less than 1% as popular as at the peak (Source: Google Trends, 19th November, 2017). (Google Trends)**

The team also has a serious job of keeping tracks of complaints that are filed via Twitter, and posting prompt replies to them. This pressure is immense as Twitter is a real-time application. The team is usually instructed to not reply to the complaint until the action has been taken. Also, there is now a possibility of a tweet to help complaints in getting converted into FIRs (Times News Network, 2016).

Another recent example that can be cited is that of Maharashtra *Bandh*<sup>3</sup> that took place on 3rd January, 2018. The protestors belonging to the Dalit caste alleged that the state government failed to stop clashes between the right wing group and the Dalits, who had been commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Bhima Koregaon battle in Pune.

The Bhima Koregaon battle plays an important role in the Dalit history as it marked the triumph of the Dalits (then part of the British army) against the Peshwa of the Maratha Kingdom, under whose rule the former suffered great discrimination (Gopinath, 2018). The bandh came as a big surprise for the Police. They, however, tactfully handled the entire case, and that, too, without any violence. Around eight constables were assigned to manage the twitter account, under the supervision of a sub-inspector; the Police was able to circulate information about road blockages and other information related to the protests, easily among Mumbai residents. What was more fascinating was the fact that this communication went both ways, with the residents also providing information on the areas where protests had gotten more violent. This enabled the Police to send their men and vehicles immediately to those areas and bring the situation under control. With such prompt measures taken, the Mumbai Police officers were lauded for handling such a crisis efficiently, unlike in other areas of the State where the police had to resort to violent methods of controlling the protestors (Bhatt, 2018).

How did going online turn out for the Mumbai Police? Not only did they gain immense popularity among the public in general, they also managed to bring in a certain level of transparency in the entire report filing system due to the real-time nature of Twitter. Also, its popularity inspired other police departments from Delhi and Kolkata to follow suit.

## **THE IMPEACHMENT TRIAL OF JOSEPH ESTRADA**

This case takes a divergence from the definition of social media as we know it today, and gives us a glimpse of one of the earliest forms digital communication — text messages, or the SMS, as it is popularly known.

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<sup>3</sup> A Hindi term for a protest that is usually political in nature





**Figure 7: Few tweets from the Mumbai Police’s twitter account. The usage of puns related to newly released movies like ‘Secret Superstar’ and ‘Befikre’, and internationally acclaimed TV show ‘Stranger Things’ managed to gain a lot of attention among youth. (Source: Twitter.com) (Twitter.com)**

Joseph Estrada was the President of the Philippines from 1998 to 2001. Usually, presidents in the Philippines serve a term of 6 years. However, in October 2000, Estrada faced corruption charges from his colleagues. This led to the House of Representatives<sup>4</sup> filing an impeachment case against him in November of the same year, and the trial finally took place in January 2001. Even though there were some hard facts and key evidences that were enough to prove him guilty, the loyalists of Estrada in the Congress voted to not open the envelope that allegedly contained the evidence documents simply because it was not a part of the impeachment complaint.

This was the first time that the Filipino public witnessed an elected president facing an impeachment with full media coverage. This meant that the public were also aware of the Congress setting aside the key evidences against Estrada. Hence, in less than 2 hours after the decision was announced, angry Filipinos gathered at Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), a popular place in Manila, to protest the possibility of their corrupt president not facing charges for his wrongdoings. The protests were mainly arranged by forwarding text messages that read “Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk” (Shirky, 2011). The crowd of protestors quickly grew ten-fold within the next few days and formed a group of millions of people that eventually caused a blockage in the city of Manila (Shirky, 2011).

The ability of the people to create such a widespread protest, that too with the help of a text message, alarmed the legislators so much that they stepped back on their decision and allowed the evidence to be presented. By January 20th, 2001, Estrada was removed from his post. This event, also, was marked as a first in the Filipino history, where social media helped force out a President.

Unlike the previous one, this case shows the power of social media as a tool to raise a political revolution. Due to increased transparency of flow of information and widespread connectivity between individuals through social media, politics today is no longer the way it used to be. Social media has led to more and more involvement of people from various strata of the society, who not only have differences in their social environment, but also different mentalities. However, when it comes to corrupt activities being blatantly committed by the rich and the powerful, these people feel helpless. Social media, in a way, is a boon for them as now they can publicly raise their voices and inspire others to join them, too. Another example along the same lines is that of the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ that shook the political stability of the entire Northern African region, because people decided they no longer wanted

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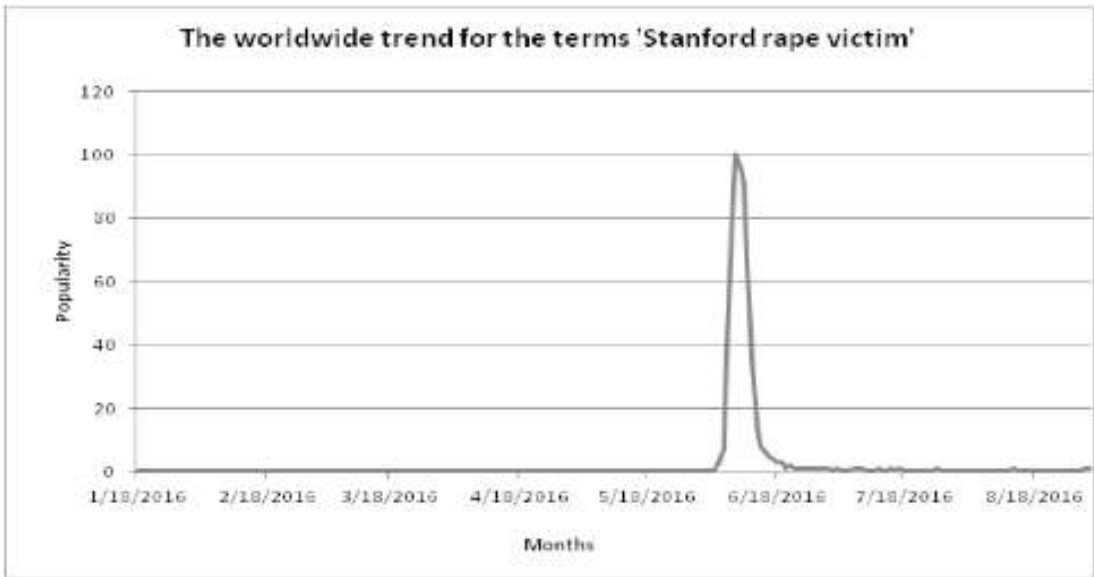
<sup>4</sup> Lower house of the Congress of the Philippines

to be ruled by corrupt dictators and used social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to spread their message. However, unlike the case of the Philippines, the Arab Spring led to further instability in the region and the rise of terror groups like ISIS. This, however, was mainly due to the non-availability of a replacement for their now removed dictators, and the public mistrusting the ISIS to bring them freedom (Brown, Guskin, & Mitchell, 2012).

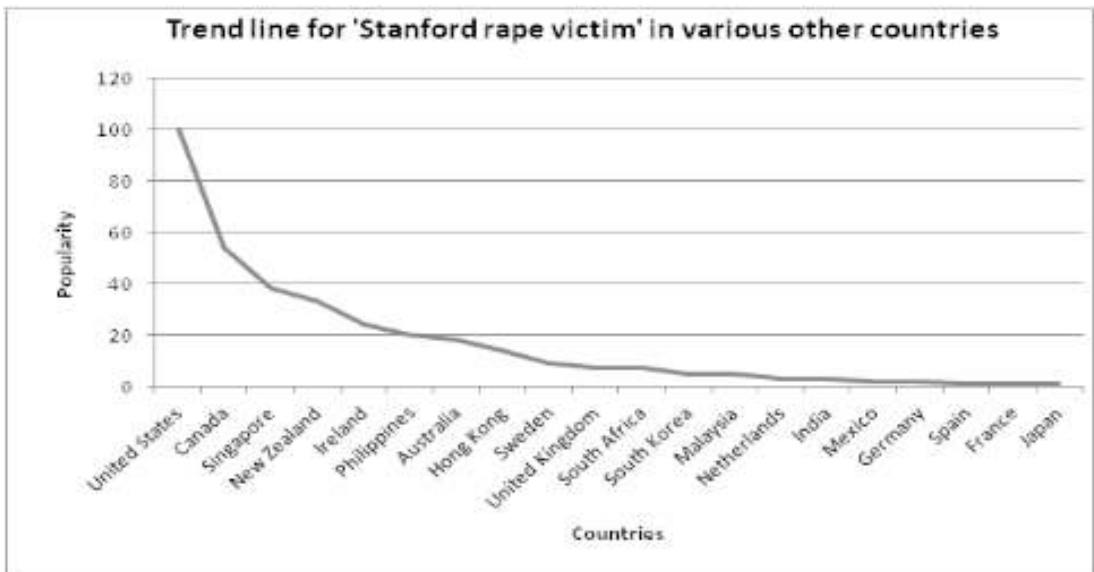
### **PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA V. BROCK ALLEN TURNER, 2015**

Brock Turner was a student at Stanford University who was convicted for three sexual assaults, the most notable of them being the rape of a 23 year old intoxicated woman behind a dumpster. The victim and the assaulter were found by two other Stanford students, who were riding their bikes along the same route where the incident was taking place on 18th January, 2016. One of the students managed to identify Turner as he ran away from the scene.

The incident first came into the knowledge of the public when a letter, written by the victim to Turner was posted by a popular news site Buzzfeed on 3rd June, 2016. At that time, Turner, who should have faced 14 years of rigorous imprisonment in the state prison, was given just a six-month sentence. The judge justified his decision by stating that Turner was a star athlete of the university's swimming team, and any harsher punishment would have had a severe impact on his future career. Around the same time, Turner's father also wrote a letter to the judge, stating how Turner's future should not be ruined by "20 minutes of action"



**Figure 8: The worldwide trend for the terms 'Stanford rape victim', given in a month-wise format. Notice how there was absolutely no knowledge among the public regarding the incident before the victim's letter surfaced on the internet on 3rd June, 2016. A figure of '100' shows maximum popularity of the topic, whereas a '0' would mean that the topic was less than 1% as popular as it was at the peak (Source: Google Trends, 20th November, 2017). (Google Trends)**



**Figure 9: The graph above shows the trend line for the terms 'Stanford rape victim' in various other countries. This trend is very much in tune with the hashtags that were used by internet users to show their support for the victim, and it wasn't limited to just the United States (Source: Google Trends, 20th November, 2017)). (Google Trends)**

This resulted in an eruption of massive fury among internet users, who clearly sympathized with the victim. The people not only shared the letter written by her; online campaigns were launched that asked the judge to reconsider his decision. This petition acquired over 500,000 signatures (Li, 2016). Media houses like CNN, and even satire news sites like the Onion joined forces with the angry protestors and produced content to help the woman get justice. This content was shared massively on social media, leading to heavy discussions on Facebook and Twitter. Hashtags like #BrockTurner and #Stanfordrapevictim became worldwide phenomena.

Although Turner was released before he could finish his 6-month sentence, the public outrage prompted the California State Legislature to pass two bills that would change the state law on sexual assault. Both bills were approved by the legislature and finally, on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2016, they became law. The imprisonment for assaulters, who commit a crime against those who are unable to defend themselves due to intoxication, was decided to be “three, six or eight years” (Justia).<sup>5</sup>

As of December 2017, Turner had filed an appeal for a retrial on the grounds of unfair trial and untrue statements made during his previous trial. Even though he served only 3 months out of the original 6-month sentence (he was given an early release due to his ‘good behaviour’ during the imprisonment), he is now a registered sex offender in the state of Ohio, his native place.

This case shows us how powerful social media is. Not only did it bring such a heinous act into the public domain, it also managed to bring a change in the law structure, which would definitely urge any future assaulters to think twice before committing a crime. Also, it gives the public a hope that the government is listening to them and will take all the necessary measures that it can in order to provide them with a safe environment. But, most of all, it gave a voice to the victim to tell her story to the world. Survivors of sexual crimes usually do not come forward to report their cases, mostly due to the so-called ‘shame’ connected to it, or the fear of the fact that no one might believe them, which is again connected to victim shaming (Weiss, 2010). Social media not only gives them a chance to tell their stories, but also provides anonymity if the victim demands so. Even in this case, the victim was called ‘Emily Doe’ throughout the time this case was in the limelight and till date no one knows her real identity.

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<sup>5</sup> 2015 California Code, Penal Code, PART 1 - Of Crimes and Punishments, Title 9 - Of Crimes Against the Person Involving Sexual Assault, And Crimes Against Public Decency And Good Morals, Chapter 5 - Bigamy, Incest, and the Crime Against Nature, Section 289 (e)

## CONCLUSION

Through a thorough analysis of the cases, we can see that social media is no longer a tool for mere socializing. It is indeed a good thing that the public bodies are now realizing how powerful social media can be in spreading messages to a large number of people at the same time, in an effective manner. Hence, it can be concluded that social media does play a vital role not only in boosting public participation, but also in serving as a caution to the governing bodies to govern their people in a just and effective manner. Social media has played a major role in keeping people aware of what is happening around them constantly, and hence, it has enabled people to become watchdogs for the government. As for the governments, they now have a chance to understand their people better, due to the transparency social media provides. This can help them in framing better policies for their people and, in turn, in making the society more peaceful.

Through the cases, one can see how much social media affects the lives of general people. The case of the Mumbai Police shows how willing people are to participate and help governing institutions in maintaining peace in the society if given a platform to do so. Social media has made it easier to connect citizens and governing bodies. Also, through the Joseph Estrada case and the Brock Turner case, it can be seen that people are now more empowered than before when it comes to keeping their government in check. Through these cases, it can be seen how the involvement of the people can bring favourable changes in maintaining law and order in the society and, in severe cases, topple the government that made the people lose confidence in it. Social media facilitates people to be helping hands and watchdogs for the government. Hence, it is important for governments and public bodies to be active on social media platforms as this is currently the fastest and the most efficient way to reach out to people. More and more public bodies should take up social media usage and try and understand its possibilities, for the ways in which social media can be used by them are limitless. Moreover, the opportunity provided by social media is just too valuable to be missed by anyone, let alone the government and public bodies.

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