

“ACTION WILL BE TAKEN”: DELHI TRAFFIC POLICE@FB

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ABSTRACT

We examine the use of social networking by the Delhi Traffic Police and find that open online exchanges represent a new communicative paradigm in eGovernance. By showing patterns in citizen comments and bureaucrat responses, we argue that the Delhi Police case is an instructive example for the evolution of eGovernance in various parts of the developing world where the legacy means of communication between official channels and the general public are strained by complex and inaccessible red tape.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Developing Regions

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Facebook, Police, Social Networking, Traffic, eGovernance

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of bureaucracy with the expansion of social media and eGovernance has been a significant part of discussions in the ICTD world. Negative perceptions of the interface with state agencies has traditionally been a major concern in citizens' interaction with government and many agencies have started developing online presences with a view to changing that. Traffic Police in various cities of India have initiated facebook pages which have over time become active grievance redressal mechanisms for the citizenry.

Such outward facing state service sites build on the fundamental idea of transparency and participatory mechanisms, which have been studied and confirmed as having important positive outcomes by scholarship on good governance [1]. Putnam has shown variance in governance related to social networks, specifically that networks can pressurize public institutions to perform.

While several studies have shown the use of social media as a potentially beneficial tool for openness and transparency in developing world [3], the importance of the longevity of such projects and the legacy of discursive exchange with the government is particularly important. In many parts of the developing world, there is thus this added element of a deeply negative perception of the state and the lack of institutional history of direct communication with the government. In this paper, we discuss the evolution of Delhi Traffic Police's Official page and the impact of its responsiveness on the participation.

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2. BACKGROUND

India is a house to world's largest bureaucracy. The government employs 18.7 million people at the state and central level.¹ Indian bureaucracy has been frequently criticized for red-tapism and lack of transparency. From among the agencies, the police in India have been found by studies to be perceived as highly corrupt [4]. In part to deal with a common perception of the police as citizen-unfriendly, the Traffic Police in many cities and states have adopted social media (specifically Facebook) to interact with the citizens, serve as a public relations tool and provide general information.² Some key statistics for four metropolitan cities are presented in Table 1. Delhi leads the lot with more likes than the sum of other three cities. We chose to analyse data from Delhi, primarily because of its usage. While we do not go into the reasons of that, these could be factors such as the relative high use of road traffic in commuting in Delhi, compared to cities like Mumbai and Kolkata which rely more on suburban rail services.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

Delhi Traffic Police was the one of the first public institutions in India to start an official Facebook page. It began as an experiment for announcements, but it quickly picked up a significant following. Within a month, it had more than 5000 'likes' and in what was a more unplanned development, people had started posting their grievances on their page. Interestingly, rather than ignore this, the administrators started at first redirecting people to other sources, but as the grievances and comments grew, they started responding directly to each comment (Fig 1).

This is a relatively new paradigm for state agencies in India, because the sense of largely unsupervised, unstructured content on a forum technically 'owned' by the government is very usual. This was a new world for a government organization in India. Not only did the actual channel of communication change, even the content of communications evolved.

In Fig 1, use of word "ATTN" to address a user indicates a fairly traditional and bureaucratic mode of communication. But with time we find that the 'voice' changed significantly (Fig 2) as they started using '@' and instead of replying individually to every complaint; they updated their status with action reports for multiple complaints together.

Table 1. Statistics for Facebook pages of different cities

Traffic Police	Created on	Likes
Delhi	04/30/2010	138,974
Chennai	07/18/2010	34,345
Kolkata	09/09/2010	23,423
Bangalore	04/10/2011	46,481

¹ www.wakeupcall.org/administration_in_india

/world_class_governance.php downloaded on 15 October 2012.

² http://lighthouseinsights.in/a-list-of-10-indian-city-traffic-police-on-facebook.html downloaded on 15 October 2012.

