
Empowering Expression: New Media as Tools for Social Change

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Abstract

New Media has evolved as democratic means of communication. The most commonly used forms of new media are social media platforms. Although, there are high concerns for authenticity and source affiliation of the content available on social media, as it has enabled everyone to be a prod-user. Anyone with just minimum resources can become publisher online. The social media makes these individual voices more effective by collaborative participation through its various platforms & their interactive features. Any content generated on social media gets viral within seconds. Many of the social issues and movements have gained importance via discussion on social media. This research article discusses in detail about the role of social media i.e. People's media in collaborating voices for change. In this, a few of major movements supported by social media in India's context have been discussed. The social media has immense opportunities yet to be explored. Though just like two sides of a coin, social media has a negative side too.

Keywords: New Media, Social Change, Social Media, People's voices.

Introduction

In today's era, the new media has empowered individuals by providing unprecedented platforms for free expression. Writers, Activists and common people strengthened their capabilities and network through Internet usage in the earlier years that eventually played crucial role in empowering worldwide and mobilizing for societal shifts. (Ghannam, 2012). Social change refers to any change aiming to make a better world and a better society for others and self. Internet primarily started as a military communication medium named as ARPANET. Growing ICT's, cutting prices of computer technology, and growth of user-friendly software has developed Internet as a mass medium. Anyone with just minimum facilities can participate on the web. The emergence of Web 2.0 has further expanded the powers of this new media by empowering society through bestowing with social media.

Through traditional media, the individual voices were not often heard but social media has given platforms to publicize every individual's voice. Each individual is now not less than a producer in oneself. Users post user-generated content on different social media platforms as per their different purposes. The content varies from selfies to on spot news/events coverage. This individual

generated content gets networked participation as per the interactive features of the platform on which the content is shared.

In India the government is also taking initiative to connect every nook and corner of the society from villages to towns, cities and rest of the world through campaign like Digital India Campaign. The online communication mediums are more effective as in terms of speed, cost and interactivity. The cases like Nirbhaya and anti-corruption movement highlight the new media's role in bringing social change. The present research article aims to highlight the role and function of new media in bringing the change through collaborative participation. This paper attempts to explore the process of change as being facilitated by new media. For this, a few major movements led by social media & cases where social media played crucial role in bringing change, have been discussed. The case selection process was random. The researcher searched direct on Google with key words: social media for social change/ social media led social movements in India. The results of the first page were considered. The search was done on February 10, 2016. Then further, these cases are discussed in details with available relevant research studies.

New Media as Tools for Social Change

Any change is brought by collaborative public support to some constructive thoughts for development. This support is gained mainly by communication. In the present times, social media, the very important form of new media right to be called people's media can be utilized effectively for bringing social change. In social media individuals can create group of liked minded ones. A group can be official or informal. In these groups, updates and messages can be easily exchanged and participated in real time. As participating online is much easier than participating in meetings, workshops or rallies, agitation or any such way of participating in social movements. Moreover, the speed of information flow, connectivity beyond geographical considerations leads to widespread collaboration, support and participation.

Arab revolution is considered the earliest example of social media's role in bringing change. The Arab revolution emphasize the use of social media facilitated collaborative sense-making that molded leaderless revolution which only in eighteen days accomplished "what was impossible for years". The movement started with creating a Facebook Page titled *We are all Khaled Said* to raise voice and showcase the ruthlessness of Egypt Government and their officers for killing the blogger who condemned the Mubarak regime via his blog.

FB page got viral on social media. The purpose of online expressions was to publicly express grievances against corrupt government and their unfair practices. The most important aim of Arab protests was that their president, Hosni Mubarak, should resign. Online communities craft their agendas via content creation, sharing, and retweeting, thus developing a hierarchy within the

Twitter world and considered to have stronger online influence (Ghannam, 2012). For example, in September 2011, the top trending hashtags in Arab region were #bahrain #egypt #syria, etc.

New Media as Tools for Social Change in specific reference to India

In a nationwide survey conducted by Indiabiz News & Research Services, out of 1200 Indian youth aging between 18 to 35 years from within the major cities, 76 percent believed that social media empowers them to bring transformation to the world. The survey found that on social media youth primarily engage to connect with peers and collect information, but youth also felt that they almost equally influence social change, politics and policy making. Various researches have concluded the average age of Indian social media users in between 15-34 years. The social media usage among Indians was first marked during the Mumbai attacks in 2008, when most of the information about the attacks spread among Indians and across world through Twitter and Flickr.

According to OSC observation, around three months after the Mumbai attacks, 4500 videos, mostly news clips related to attacks, were posted through YouTube. The second mass usage of social media in India was seen in May 2009 during national elections. During these elections, online voter registration started. The ongoing protests in Kashmir valley over civilian killings and criticism over the preparations of Commonwealth games in Delhi too got viral through social media (OSC, 2010).

The recent years after arise of social media, has witnessed many Civil Movements in which the social media played crucial role. From the beginning, the social issues are solved with movements through public support. Many a movement have made historic achievements and marked in the history of India. A few of them are: Swadeshi movement (1905), Chipko Movement 1973, Satyagrah Save Silent Valley Movement (1973), Jungle Bachao Andolan (1980), and Narmada Bachao Andolan 1985 and a few more.

Though, one similarity in these movements was that leaders led them. In today's time too, the issues are solved with the help of mass movements but the process is changed now. The role of leader is altogether changed. Today we are living in networked society. Where the origin can't be clear but idea spreads and collects participation from many. Let us have a brief of how new media and its various forms have contributed for collaborating voices for bringing change by enabling everyone with a platform for free expression. Three Cases are mainly referred in the present Research Article: Anti-Corruption Movement, The 2012 Delhi Gang Rape (Nirbhaya), Indian General Election 2014.

Anti-Corruption Movement

In the year 2011, in the month of April, Social activist Anna Hazare sat on hunger strike at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi for passing Jan Lokpal Bill at Parliament that aimed to remove corruption. Huge number of people across the country supported Anna's Movement against corruption. The movement also led to the resignation of then Agriculture minister from the team of ministers that were assigned for reviewing the draft Lokpal bill.

Various reports and studies found that the movement gained such a huge participation because of best management of the movement through social media. The users themselves participated and forwarded the anti-corruption messages to various social media platforms making it viral. Through social media the movement attracted world attention too.

In a study by Aatish Parashar titled An Analysis of New Media's Role in Mass movements, the researcher found that the social media was overloaded with messages and write-ups showcasing support for fight against corruption and Hazare's plea to pass Lokpal bill. On an average there were around hundred FB pages to support his campaign.

The common users were uploading the self-made rare videos and bytes. Popular hashtags on Twitter for supporting Anna Hazare led movement were: #isupportannahazare, #kiranbedi, #DelhiPolice, and #janlokal. People were keenly following the updates. SMS and missed calls also played a major role in collecting public support. Mass media also used updates posted on social media. The study found that mobile phone were used as an intimate medium for accessing and spreading the information.

Facebook tool "poll" was also used extensively for garnering more public opinion. Celebrities like Anupum Kher, Farhan Akhtar, Rakesh Junjunwala and IbnLivetweets, "AlargerdebateisrequiredfortheBill, #JanLokpal through Twitter fostered the campaign.

One important aspect of Anna Hazare movement was that the Anna team did not create the Facebook pages, rather common man created such pages on Facebook. The survey resulted that seventy eight percent people were mobilized for active participation while sixty four percent people participated in online spread of information. Another significant highlight was 74% believed new media is an effective medium for the success of mass movement. Mass media provides information to the audiences but social media provides a ready platform to express their concern about the movement.

The 2012 Delhi Gang Rape (Nirbhaya)

In December 2012, Delhi witnessed the most inhuman crime where a 23 years old college-going girl was gang-raped in a private bus. The media gave pseudonym to the girl as "Nirbhaya" (fearless). Earlier also many such crimes against women have happened in India but this incident saw one of the angriest reactions from citizens. Different areas of the country witnessed protests and this created a stir on the social media platforms too. To show anger many a people put their

display picture as black dot. An online petition was also circulated which got signature by thousands of people. Due to such heavy movement both in real world and virtual worlds, Government announced women safety measures.

Amit Kumar in the study titled Role of social media in mass movement- A study of Delhi Gang-rape explored that 70% of surveyed people actively participated in the movement because of social media and 54% people only spread the information via online platforms. The whole protest had no specified leader, all the citizens raised voices against such heinous crime and new media provided them apt platforms to let their voices being heard and supported. Huge participation via online mediums highlighted the role of new media and its impact on the masses, especially the young generations.

The popular trending term on web during this protest were “Delhi gang rape”, “gang-rape victim” etc. Twitter was whole fled with Nirbhaya or Damini case update and popular hash tags were: #RashtrapatiBhavan, and #RaisainaHill. Trending Facebook groups were: ‘Gang raped in Delhi’ “Must Read” For Damini’, etc.

Through online mediums people were asking authorities and lawmakers to take action. Ex-journalist Namita Bhandare initiated online petition “the President, CJI: Stop the Rape Now!”. It received signature from 65,000 people. Also, a Facebook group asked for a 24 hours "Aurat Bandh". Facebook organized an event too "Enough is Enough". Everyone expressed their solidarity through various platforms of new media. All these actions and public voice through social media created a pressure on political leaders and government. And all this led to immediate actions from the judiciary and Government to prevent such incidents.

Indian General Election 2014

2014 General elections created a history in using social media for garnering huge voter participation in elections. Considering the significant contribution of social media in US presidential elections, Indian political parties also used social media tools to attract and motivate youth voters. BJP (Bhartiya Janata Party) under leadership of Sh. Narendra Modi used all social media platforms for inducing more and more voters to vote. The result was proved by the remarkable number of voters in the history of Indian elections. Social media increased awareness of voting and updates regarding voting dates, booths etc. Even on Facebook, people themselves used the Facebook option “I Voted” and various other political messages were also communicated among social networks.

In a study by Basu, D. and Misra, K. titled “BJP’ demographic dividend in the 2014 general elections” The study results that BJP won General Elections in 2014 and evolved as a single party with majority. BJP’s extraordinary poll results depended significantly on captivating the youth, especially the first-time voters aged in age group of 18 to 23 years. The generation ‘Y’ are the

prominent users of social media. Earlier too Mr. Arvind Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi party got public support mainly through social media platforms as being highlighted during the Anti-Corruption movement. According to IAMAI report, political parties are spending 2 to 5% of their total budget on enhancing their online presence.

In a study by self (2016) “**Exploring the dynamics of user-generated voting-related content on Facebook**” the results show that majority of the surveyed respondents were first time voters. More than 75% respondents agreed that they were influenced by voting-related contents on Facebook. The user-generated voting related content on Facebook motivated and reminded them to vote.

Recent Cases

The above discussed are just a few of the movements supported by the social media, though the list is very large. The recent cases trending on social media are: Rohtak Girls, Jasleen and Satvinder, and still in discussion cases of Rohith Vemula and Jawaharlal Nehru University student case etc. The social media due to its so free nature has led to many crisis situations too. As in case of Rohtak girls. It was story of two girls who posted a video on social media in which they were beating a boy because of eve teasing. This video got viral on social media. But the different views led the case for further inquiries. When the depth investigations were made, the truth came out as a fraud. Those girls made and uploaded this video as a trick to get famous. But mass media efforts let the culprits punished by the court and saved the innocent.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The above discussed cases justify the significance of new media in bringing change for the betterment of society. The new media provides people with platforms to freely express their concern. Especially, the social media is becoming a crucial constituent in collaborating individual voices for bringing social change. Social media has facilitated change in all spheres whether it being a corruption issue, an issue about women safety or mobilizing support for elections. The collaborative spirit of social media works very impressively and within moments creates huge widespread communication as well as support.

One more feature of such movements through social media is that these online movements don't have a particular leader. Rather they just spread and while spreading collect support and participation as much as is possible. As found by Kumar and Parishar 75% of youth believes new media is a powerful tool for fostering the success of mass movement. “Media has been considered as the watchdog of the society and now new media is acting as “watchdog of the watchdogs”. (Bala, 2014).

But just like two sides of a coin social media has demerits too. Social media can quickly spread information and create huge awareness but it is difficult to assess what role social media plays in motivating people to action. The content created on social media is without the essential features

of media publishing i.e. gatekeeping. Thus, there is no fact checking, source affiliation or content guiding rules. Leading to anything online at any time. Despite the advances in freedom of expression enabled through new media; activists, individuals, journalists, and bloggers continue to face serious dangers because of their online expression and engagements. The other factors like digital divide and reach, less participation from the aged section of the society due to technological barriers also hinders the social media usage in far areas for supporting protest and movements for bringing social change. Social media is utilizing the best participation of the youth section but the experienced section is less active in these platforms so sometimes the controlling, guiding wisdom is not used appropriately.

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