A Perspective
Digital Communication and Media Inclusion

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Abstract

Internet has broken the media stereotype of conventional news media. In the age of Internet, common people have experienced the joy of freedom of speech and expression in both democracies and totalitarian governments. The news consumers are already using interactive technologies to have global conversation on local issues. Digital media is hoped to fill the participation gap that bothered the society in the past. Participatory culture is a tool of empowerment through gateways of information. Participatory culture is a stepping-stone for media inclusion. Media exclusion starts with denial of access owing to economic and social factors, unequal news coverage, depriving right to be informed and discrimination in prioritizing news. Nevertheless, democratization of new media that has changed the way the news is distributed and consumed over Internet in postmodern age protects business interests and political interests.

Keywords: Participatory culture, Media inclusion, Democratization, Public opinion

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INTRODUCTION

Internet is the king of digital media. Popularly called the fifth estate, it has generated significant interest changing the dynamics of human communication. Political consequences of Internet are significant. Internet is recognized as a channel of expressing public opinion. The participatory approach reflects the emergence of alternative media to challenge the conventional political institutions, wisdom and ideologies. Throughout the history, mass media have grown as agents of political communication

influencing political and cultural beliefs. Media were established with an agenda to participate and challenge the political regimes in public interest in most of the cultures throughout the history.

The rapid expansion of Internet in India has influenced the tech savvy youth and middleclass people to be more participatory in the political process through civil society activities. Considerable increase in the involvement of youth and educated women in demonstrations, sending SMS, signing online petitions, writing blogs, tweets, forwarding mail and expressing their comments and opinions in online news media on issues of social importance cannot be overlooked as it illustrates the inclusivity of interactive media. The inclusion attribute of Internet is a measure of political empowerment of ordinary people.

Table -1
Internet Penetration in India Overtook USA

Sl. No.	Country	Internet Users (2016)	Penetration (% of Population)	Population
1	China	721,434,547	52.2 %	1,382,323,332
2	India	462,124,989	34.8 %	1,326,801,576
3	United States	286,942,362	88.5 %	324,118,787

Source: *Internet Live Stats* (www.InternetLiveStats.com)

The unprecedented expansion of mass media raised the issue of public discourse in media and the presence of public perspective in news and views. It was Walter Lippmann who coined the phrase, 'manufacture of consent'. In democracy, he said 'the opinion does not spontaneously come from the public. Every leader is in some degree a propagandist. The official decides himself more and more consciously what facts in what guise he should allow the public to know. So, the leader manipulates information.' (Lippmann Walter, 1922).

DEMOCRATIZATION OF MEDIA

It is a well-established fact that media have been portraying elitist opinion and the large part of readership is never involved in the churning of views,

opinions and point of view in the media. The issue of public perspective as framed by the media is central to the presence of disparity between public opinion and media opinion.

For ages, traditional media projected public opinion evolved without the consent or involvement of public. Readers, listeners, and viewers of news media are taken for granted and media portrayed the opinion without public dialogue. Today, the online media has forced the traditional media to create a platform for public discourse for news stories in their virtual editions. Jürgen Habermas, argues that 'a truly legitimate opinion is not a sum of all opinions, but rather the result after their deliberation', (Habermas, 2006). The reader or citizen's perspective in news that was missing in the traditional news media has made Internet news media more participatory and inclusive. Internet media can establish democratic space and pluralism in information production, distribution and consumption. Internet is against the principles of 'manufacture of consent' and on the contrary, it generates and distributes opinions of varying shades facilitating inclusion stimulating political participation and public opinion influencing the process of decision-making.

Internet has broken the media stereotype of conventional news media. The new media reach is increasing in India with 5 to 8 % annual growth increase in the readership of digital edition of newspapers. In India there are more than 82,000 newspapers and has registered a growth rate of 8% and is attributed to language press. Perhaps *Dainik Jagran*, a Hindi newspaper has highest readership than top English dailies like Times of India and Hindustan Times. Nevertheless, newspaper readership in India has not gone digital and Internet users have not patronized online editions of big daily newspapers. Indian print media has not followed the global trend and continues to be primary source of hard news. Online edition of newspapers with innumerable promotion links fails to give news in a conventional format consequently discouraging digital reading and readers do not get the experience of newspaper reading.

However, newspapers continue to be the primary source of news in India unlike USA where Internet is the primary source of news. India still

has low Internet penetration with 462.12 million, which is 34.8 % penetration in population. With Urban Internet Subscribers constituting 67% and Rural Internet Subscribers 33 % of the total Internet, reach in India. Thanks to mobile Internet it is showing signs of improvement.

In the age of Internet, common people have experienced the joy of freedom of speech and expression in both democracies and totalitarian governments. The experience of getting heard/ read / noticed gave visibility to the voice of the voiceless in societies where dictatorial regimes had oppressed the freedom of speech and expression of common man for ages. In democracies too, the perception of news and views changed adding different shades of perspectives. Social media changed the social norms, broke the media stereotype, and gave an impetus to journalism. Journalism across the globe was able to capture its lost sheen due to social media's entry into news. Journalism is not going to die but media are crucial in distribution and consumption of news. Many have predicted the end of newspapers but print continues to be a major source of information for all media. It has speculated that print may have to compete with its own digital edition of the paper in the years to come. People are going to read news either in print or digital edition but they are going to call the shots by choosing the device as well as the content.

The news consumers are already using interactive technologies to have global conversation on local issues. The media saw the emergence of a new brand of news consumer, who consumed news from converged media of choice and who could not be described as a listener, reader, viewer or browser because he converged different consumption patterns. The recent trends show most of the conventional newspapers including New York Times using the opportunity to launch new social media feed like Twitter to provide access to breaking news with editors to live tweeting stories establishing the migration of news to social media. Today Twitter and Facebook have been recognized as tools of news and major sources of news. Twitter is a valuable 24x7 source for news breaks, tool to follow newsworthy people and organization and is a gold mine for getting story ideas and to have continuous

dialogue with users. The analysis of Tweets will establish the mood of the public, pulse of the community and the degree of public opinion on issues of public concern. Perhaps, New York Times now has over 1.4 million digital-only subscriptions against its print circulation of 5 .9 lakh (0.59 million) and twice as many readers on the micro blogging service than its most popular print edition. The Sunday paper of New York Times has a print circulation of 1.1 million but its followers on Twitter have crossed 4 million. Consequently, circulation of a newspaper has become complex with the facility of print and digital editions accessed by wide range of devices by news consumers.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Digital media is hoped to fill the participation gap that bothered the society in the past. It has facilitated participatory culture that has brought down the walls between peoples, government, and institutions. In this culture, there is free flow of information with low gatekeepers. Participatory culture is a tool of empowerment through gateways of information. This culture gives people an identity and a sense of belongingness and makes them feel important as the content shared by them receives attention in public domain. The whole community of new media users feels connected and derives psychological satisfaction of being heard and seen.

Participation is a potential tool to generate public opinion. The potential benefits of sharing information facilitate knowledge gain empowering the citizenry in the long run. It shapes thoughts, ideas, skills, and personality breaking the stereotype of monoculture institutions like schools, universities, and government. The best part of the participation is people realize their right to ask questions and gather courage to give opinion, comments, and ideas. Media shape perception of the world in traditional and conventional media. The difference with new media is they shape perception of the world with the participation of the people recognizing the common man's perspective on public issues. The concept of public interest assumes real meaning with the participatory culture.

Index of Participatory Culture consists of opening social media accounts,

active on Facebook, Tweets, Retweets, posting likes, participating in opinion polls, having Faviourites, personal Playlist, active YouTube users by uploading or downloading or viewing content or Searching information, Blogging, forwarding mails, small group networking, messaging and participating in civic engagement.

Participatory culture is a stepping-stone for media inclusion. Media inclusion refers to creating equal opportunities to access media content and to enable people to participate or engage in civil and political events. Participation is fundamental to the process of inclusion as it provides an individual space in "Public Sphere" (Habermas,2006) to deliberate on issues of public interest and to form public opinion. Participation means civic and political engagements. Civic participation involves behavior aimed at resolving problems of the community (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins & Delli-Carpini, 2006). Political participation both offline and online refers to behavior seeking to influence government action and policymaking (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Democratization of media is a prerequisite for media inclusion. Despite the information revolution and advances in communication technology, the writings in the mainstream media do not speak or reflect the mind of the masses. Media looks disconnected with the masses by giving more space for the opinion of politicians, bureaucrats or journalists. Media exclusion is the result of lack of public participation in public discourse. Inequities seen in the news coverage deprive the marginalized class to participate in news process. Media inclusion is about creating opportunities, recognizing their existence, using language of acceptance, and bridging the void between media and the masses. Increase in the quantitative and qualitative production of media content of deprived classes in news columns will facilitate their integration and visibility in the mainstream media.

MEDIA INCLUSION

Media exclusion starts with denial of access owing to economic and social factors, unequal news coverage, depriving right to be informed and discrimination in prioritizing news. This theoretical framework will however

not work with the market controlled mainstream media compelling one to ponder over the potentialities of new media in establishing media inclusion. The new media have already provided platform for people irrespective of demographic variants to engage themselves in valuable political and civil activities and integrate with the process of development and decision-making. It is in this perspective, the debate on new media and media inclusion assumes importance.

Index of Media Inclusion consists of media reach and access; freedom of expression; opportunities for democratic debates; space for different layers of voice - divergent views, opinions and comments; diversity in media content; nondiscrimination in media coverage; space for opinion of women, *Dalits* and Minorities; Television discussion panels that are representative of the general public; Free from editorial, management and ownership control;

The reach of new media underlines higher degree of inclusion. In India there are 683.1 million mobile phone users and 462.12 million Internet users, which is comparatively overwhelming than total newspaper readership of 405 million and total TV households of 175 million 62% penetration of House Holds (869 TV Channels) with 658 million TV audience, (243 FM Radio Stations) Number of Community Radio Stations licensed (GOPA signed) are 237 of which 191 are Operational Community Radio Stations. India, therefore has vibrant media perhaps has high degree of freedom in the entire South Asia region. Indian Judiciary has struck down section 66(A) of Information technology Act (2000) that criminalized dissemination on the Internet of objectionable information. Though India overtook USA to become the second largest consumer of Internet after China, it still lags behind USA in terms of Internet speed, which is very low and lacks infrastructure to establish digital connectivity. India's Internet growth is attributed to increase in mobile penetration in 2016.

The enormous influence wielded by mass media compelled intolerant political regimes to control media in the guise of ethics, culture, communal harmony, security, and war. History is replete with instances of political regimes who believed in government control of mass media as media are

presumed to be the new power centre in the society.

Governments in democracies flaunting liberal media policy too want to control social media in the guise of ethics and privacy. Facebook has been banned in China since 2009. Media control is a greater threat to new media. There is increase in the attacks on Journalists and bloggers by intolerant religious groups. Kashmir is proving to be a difficult terrain for journalists due to frequent ban on media and government considers region as sensitive due to unrest and attacks across the Indo-Pak border. According to a Report, 'Internet and digital freedom in India slipped in 2016 from 2015, even as the number of Internet shutdowns by States and digital related arrests continued to rise' (Report 2016). The report says that as many as 17 people were arrested for sharing content on WhatsApp and over 40 requests were made by the rgovernemtn to Twitter for removal of objectionable content in 2015. Facebook removed over 30,000 pieces of content based on requests between 2014-15. The increased censorship of social media sites is serious obstacle in media inclusion.

However, the sheer ability of Internet to reach ordinary citizens has weakened the role of gatekeepers of traditional media as anybody and everybody can produce, distribute, and share information facilitating diversity in political communication enhancing the level of media inclusion. Nevertheless, democratization of new media that has changed the way the news is distributed and consumed over Internet in postmodern age protects business interests and political interests. The desperation of Google or Facebook to enter China is more a business proposition than to reach public in public interest. China has stepped up surveillance measures where its citizens are required to give real name authentication for tech companies in 2016 to check fake social media accounts citing reasons of cyber terrorism and social stability. China's censorship has targeted 'WeChat' social messaging app by blocking messages containing sensitive terms. China cannot do this alone without the help of tech firms. Business interests has compelled firms like Alibaba which is E-commerce giant and 'WeChat' owned Tencent Holdings to oblige the Chinese government.

There is considerable growth in digital media advertising and mobile advertising benefitting technology companies like Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Twitter than news media. Newspaper continues to lose readership and suffers from decline in advertising revenue. The sustainability of media against this digital growth is compelling print and television to resort to unethical means. Unfortunately, it is feared that the malaise of traditional media propounding business interest over journalistic interest and sacrificing public discourse eventually may pose threat to the emergence of Internet news media as the people's media. Digital journalism is promoting business interest of digital revenue juggernauts like Facebook and Twitter than serving the cause of journalism. Digital media has enlarged media landscape reaching a big audience but has reduced journalism where opinion outweighs facts.

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