

**SMARTPHONES, CONVERGENCE AND REACHING OUT:  
CASE STUDY OF RURAL BENGAL**

by

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**Abstract:** *The paper delves into the phenomenon of media convergence that has led to immense change in the manner in which news gets disseminated among the people of the society. After exploring the topic of media convergence in detail, the paper discusses about the link between media convergence and use of social media by people. The social media platform has become the best place for reaching out to the people as it provides utmost exposure transcending cultural and geographical boundaries. The paper then discusses about a field work that has been conducted in the district of Purulia in West Bengal, India. The respondents of the survey conducted went on to opine that they use their smartphones to use the internet and get access to the news. They mostly get the news via their participation in the social media platform. An analysis of the data collected during the survey has been presented in detail. Moreover, the issues related to the use of the internet have also been explored in the course of the paper.*

**Keywords:** *smartphones, rural population, media convergence, social media, use of internet in rural Bengal.*

## **Introduction**

The domain of mass communication has grown rapidly over the last few decades. The entire globe has come within the reach of the media industry since the advancement in technology gained impetus. One should reckon that media plays a major role in dissemination of knowledge about the world and society to the common people. This process of message dissemination can surely be termed to be an empowering one indeed as the common people have the opportunity to remain updated about the events and occurrences from across the entire society. Traditionally, newspapers, radio, and television had dominated the domain of mass communication for many years on the trot. However, with the technological boom and the advent of the internet, the dynamics among the various forms of media have come to be influenced massively. One should delve into the interrelations among the various forms of mass communication in the era of the omnipotence and omniscience of the internet.

While the society is characterized by distinctions in class, education, and culture, the digital platform that is created by the reach of the internet in all the corners of the world goes on to undermine the existent distinctions. Thus, one requires exploring the concept of convergence in the modern era when the various forms of media have come to be interlinked with one another. Media is a powerful force in the society, and it has the potential to impact human lives in a major way. The impact of this convergence on the common people of the society also needs to be explored. The benefits and negative effects (if any) with regard to the audience would lead to a better understanding of this phenomenon of convergence in the domain of mass communication. For the proper understanding of the intricacies of the matter, the related concepts have to be clear first. As such, an in-depth analytic comprehensive stand can be reached via proper theoretical approach and case study of common people in a relevant socio-cultural region.

### **What is Convergence?**

The technological boom has come to influence the entire globe in this era of development. The present century has come to witness exponential advancement in the domain of media and communication as well. This advancement and growth can surely be attributed to globalization that influences the entire world and people in the present times. The barriers of geographical distance as well as time have been undermined in the modern times through the massive intervention of new media and technology. It is intriguing to note that the domain of mass communication and media has grown at par with the phenomenon of globalization. The cultural differences and social distinctions have come to be neutralized by much extent, while the various forms of media too have come to converge with one another, making way for a paramount reach among the common people across the entire world. Now, one needs to reckon the notion of media convergence to comprehend the dynamics of the media industry in the society-cultural domain of human existence.

Difficulty and disagreement can be traced when it comes to the question of ascertaining the notion of media convergence. A number of theorists have opined that media convergence refers to the coming together of two or more mediums. However, certain other theorists have resolved to delve deeper into the matter to further explore what exactly are coming together to converge with one another. The enormous flow of content across the various mediums of communication can surely be seen as an example of media convergence. The audience too plays a crucial role in ascertaining the creation and distribution of the content that is disseminated through the various mediums of mass communication. As such, it becomes imperative to explore the phenomenon of media convergence on the basis of social and technological changes in the human society. Now, one should not view media convergence as the process of displacement of old forms of communication with new ones, but rather examine the newly formed connection and cooperation among the media forms that were previously not connected to one another. Thus, it can be said that convergence is the process of blurring the definitive boundaries that separated the various platforms of mass communication. The various platforms have been intertwined in the modern era to form a larger digital form of mass communication that has huge outreach among the people of the human world.

However, one needs to delve deep into the issues related to media convergence to ascertain if the recent developments in the domain of mass communication are helpful for the society as well as the industry itself. One needs to ponder if media convergence poses challenges to the consumers or the media producers, more than presenting them with opportunities. The study also should aim at delving into the aspect of participation gap that is closely linked with media convergence. The concept of participation gap entails that while the audience of the world has been encouraged by media convergence to participate in the process of mass communication, they require extended access to the technological devices and modern technology. Also, the common people need to be familiar with the various new forms of media. The people also require development specific skills to be able to receive the messages that are disseminated via the digital platform of mass communication. As such, it can be surmised that certain segments of the society would arguably be unable to participate in the process of communication in the new media culture, and thereby remain neglected in comparison to the larger mass of the human world. Thus, it can be said that media converge in itself is a complicated thing that requires proper understanding and research for the purpose of defining the key impacts of the phenomenon on the society and the people. The study and research have become quite important in the modern times as convergence has come to influence all the parts of the globe with the massive digitization and inclusiveness of various sections of the communities in the process of communication.

### **Social Media as a Tool for Media Convergence**

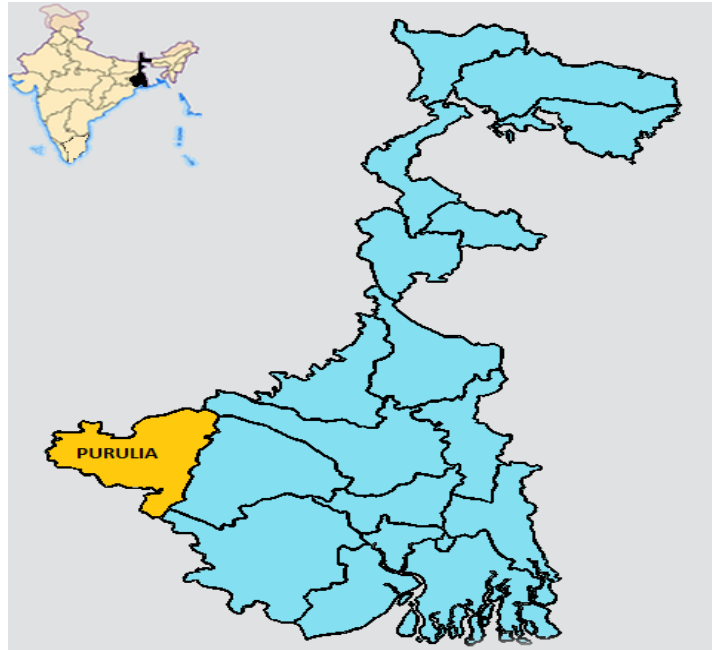
One needs to understand that social media has become an omnipotent force in the modern era. The people from across the society have started establishing their presence on the social media platforms. This serves to supplement the process of communication, while the people get access to the entire world. Social media not only provides entertainment and a functional medium of

communication, but also makes way for dissemination of news among the people of the world without any major hassle at all. Social media can be accessed via a number of technological devices including smartphones, tablets, and computers. Thus, accessing social media has come to be a commonplace thing for the general masses. As such, there is need for delving into the link between the usage of social media and the scope of media convergence in the modern times of mass communication. An introspective view would prove to be highly beneficial for understanding the dynamics between social media, convergence, and the common people of the society.

News dissemination has been revolutionized in the modern era of mass communication owing to the omnipresence of social media. People from various sections of the society might have access to social media via the technological devices mentioned. As such, it becomes extremely easy for media houses from across the globe to undermine all the barriers of time and geography since the news can be sent to the larger masses in the wink of an eye via these powerful mediated communication platforms that have common people as users. For instance, one can take the example of Facebook or Twitter that are currently used by most of the media houses including television, digital, and print media to reach out to the masses. Thus, one can understand that the popular forms of media too have come to utilize the reach of the social media platforms to grow their popularity and readership at an exponential rate. It is intriguing to take a note of the fact that literacy is not a precondition for using social media. As such, the reach of the news grows even more as people from various rungs of the society can have access to the messages that are shared on such communication platforms. Moreover, the process of news dissemination can be controlled easily via the preset protocols and regulations of the social media platforms. Thus, a new avenue has been opened for the media houses as well as the common people. On one hand the media houses can reach the people easily, and on the other hand, the common people too are benefitted by the news that reaches them via the social media platforms.

### **Survey in Purulia, West Bengal**

For the purpose of understanding the impact of media convergence on the common people of the society, a sample size of 200 people was chosen in the district of Purulia in the state of West Bengal, India. The primary aim of this contextual survey was to decipher the intricacies of the dynamics of the various forms of media in the era of digitization, and the reaction of the common people to the messages that are disseminated to them via the digital platform. The sample size comprised of people who live in various blocks of the contextual districts, for the purpose of facilitating a proper understanding of how social media and the internet have become beneficial for the purpose of media convergence. Selecting the people from different blocks also ensured that the reach of social media or the internet could be properly gauged for the purpose of better understanding regarding the issue at hand. The 200 people were chosen from various villages of the blocks, thereby bringing into consideration a massive region spanning across about 6,259 km<sup>2</sup>.



*Map of Purulia district in West Bengal*

The survey was conducted during a field work in the contextual region. The participants in the survey were asked specific questions that pertain to the topic in context. These people were

asked to answer those questions comprehensively, and the entire data that was collected from the region was then analyzed closely for understanding the various factors. Questions regarding their usage of social media, manner of accessing news, impact of accessing news, devices or technologies used for accessing media content, and so on were asked to every participant. As such, the study aimed to delve deep into the correlation between social media and media convergence, while also taking into account the related issues. The following part of the paper would discuss the results of the survey and provide an analysis for the same, thereby making way for a proper understanding of effects of convergence of media on the lives of common people.

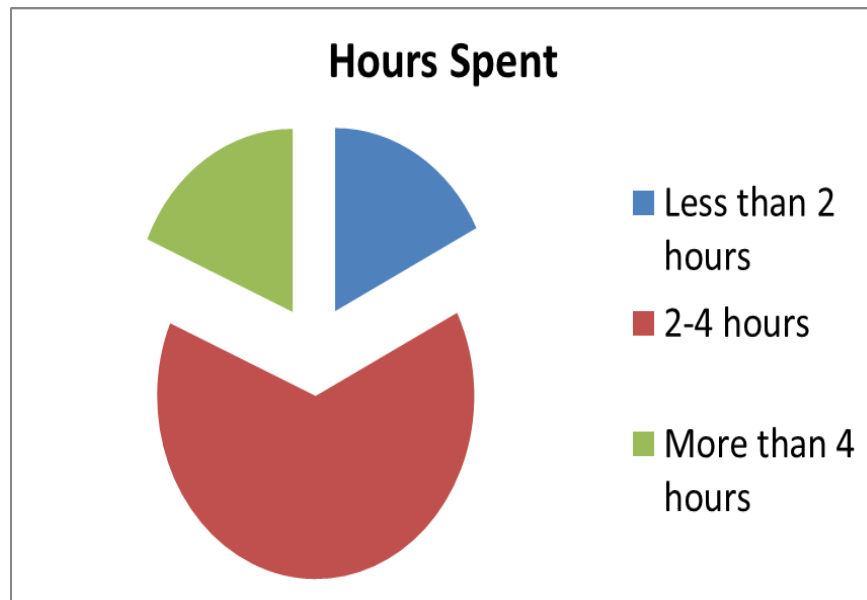
It needs to be reckoned in this context that India as a nation is rapidly treading toward digitization. The union government and the various state governments are committed toward digitizing major services over the next few years. As such, it becomes highly required for the common people of the country to have digital literacy with immediacy so that they can cope with the process of digitization and have access to all the needed services that are provided by the government of the country. In such a scenario, the access to internet and the proper use of the technological devices become all the more important for the common people of India. Also, it has to be remembered that the society of the nation is characterized by economic class distinctions. While the people belonging to the upper and the middle classes of the Indian society might be economically well off and educated enough to use various technological devices, the people coming from the lower economic rung of the society have limited access to such devices, or the internet.

As such, the inclusiveness of these people becomes all the more vital for ensuring the process of holistic development of the Indian society. A view of the lives and activities of the rural population of West Bengal can be taken as a microcosmic one that represents the condition of the rural population of the country. Far from the development and advancement of the urban areas of the country, the people who have been surveyed for the purpose of the study live in rural areas and have to face a number of hardships for making the ends meet. As such, they can surely work as a valid sample that represents the challenges and pros related to the process of digitization and media convergence in this era of technological boom in the form of smartphones or tabs.

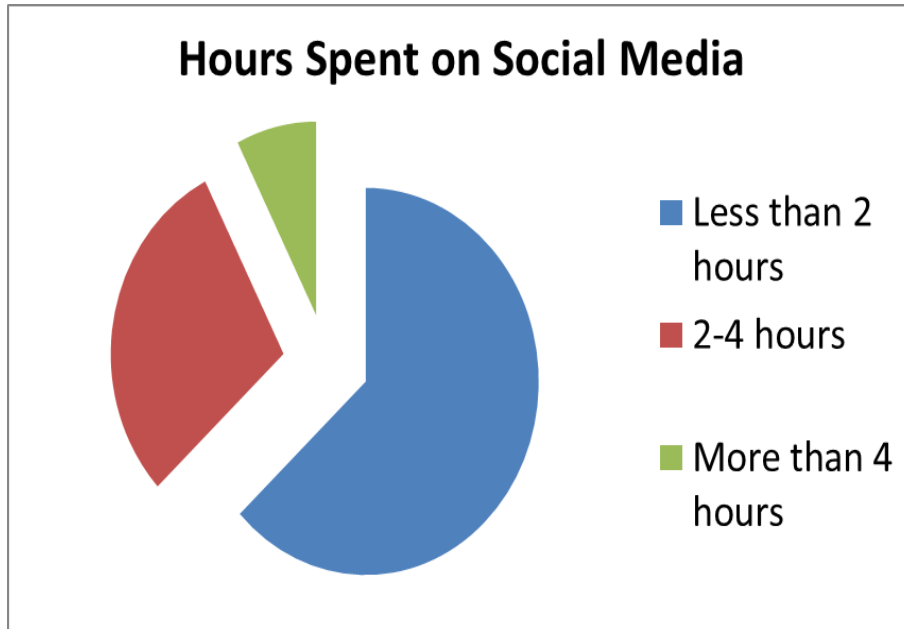
Some findings of the survey have been presented for reference. It needs to be noted that each person was posed with all the questions. The data was then collated and analyzed for reaching a conclusive idea about the effect of media convergence and its link with social media usage. The sample was divided into two categories based on their gender, while the age group ranged between eighteen to twenty five years. The population is entirely rural in nature, and almost all of them are only able to read and write in Bengali language. They use the social media platforms in Bengali language for comprehending the various functions that are present on the interface of the platforms. Every person was interviewed individually, and their response was noted down for analysis. The respondents were also requested to show how they use social media for accessing the news so that their competence in the matter could be gauged. The following graphical

representations present some of the data that was collected during the field work in Purulia's different villages.

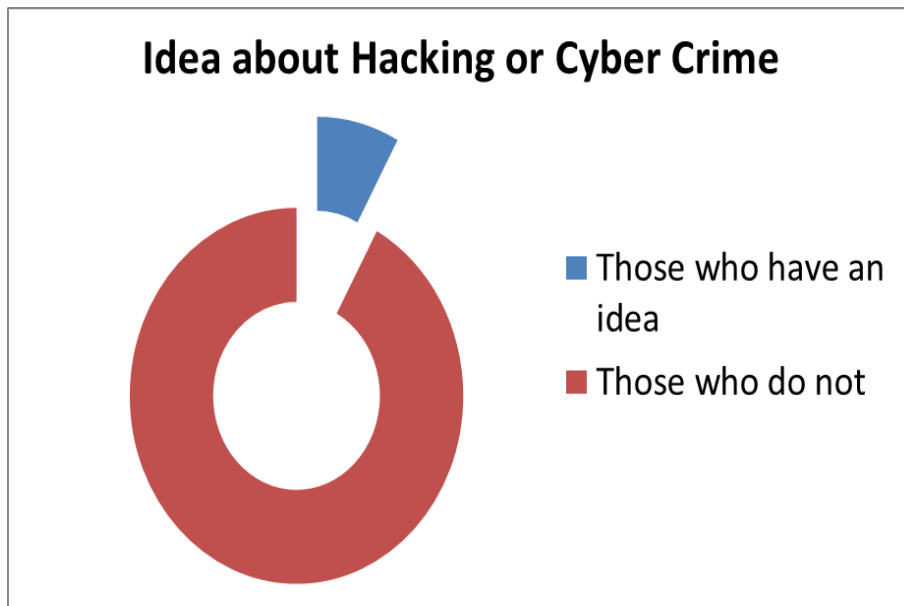
*Hours spent on the internet:*



*Hours spent on social media:*



*Idea about hacking or cyber-crime:*





## **Smartphones as Technological Device**

As found in the district of Purulia, West Bengal, the common people access the internet on their smartphones. Owing to the digital revolution that has come about in the country of India, the price of smartphones have dropped considerably making the common man able enough to afford it. Smartphones are easily available in the market in the rural regions of the nation. These smartphones are equipped to receive 3G or 4G internet speed, thereby facilitating the process of using the internet with much ease. In comparison to the other technological devices like computers or tablets, smartphones come handy as well as cheap. As such, smartphones are used by the most number of people across the country not just for telephonic purposes, but also for accessing the internet with ease. Moreover, the massive drop in the price of data packs in the recent years all over the country has further facilitated the process of using smartphones for accessing the internet. Now, one can comprehend that since the people access the internet on the smartphones, they also use social media on the devices.

## **Social Media Usage in Purulia and Convergence**

One of the most intriguing aspects of the survey conducted is that the common people who were questioned about their use of the cellphone opined that they used the device mostly to access social media. They are accustomed with the use of Facebook, while they also use other social media apps like Whatsapp, Viber, WeChat, and so on. Thus, one can very well understand that these people have come to know about the basics of using social media due to the availability of smartphones. They opined that the cheap internet recharges that are available in the present are quite affordable for them. However, the area being quite less developed, only 2G services are available, and that too from certain specific mobile service providers of the country. Nonetheless, these rural people have found might interest in using this new platform, and they are extremely intrigued by the multifarious use of the cellphone that they could use previously only for texting or making and receiving telephonic calls. Hence, the positive impact of globalization and digitization could be felt with conversing with the people and seeing their use of social media and the internet via the smartphones. Even the people are very pleased to have the access to news and other information from the rest of the world at their fingertips.

The people who were surveyed opined that they shared their devices with others who did not have access to such a device. Thus, an ambiance of cooperation prevails among these rural people for whom this exposure to the world of technology is a breath of fresh air even while the rest of the globe revels in more advanced technological discoveries like the advent of 3D technology, video calls, and augmented reality. These people who were surveyed went on to express how they used their social media profiles to access the news from around the state and the country. It has to be reckoned in this context that most of the people here do not have access to newspapers or television owing to the problems in connectivity with the neighboring regions of the state. While some owned radios, the smartphones provided them with maximum exposure and data about the occurrences in the world around. The people here have come to feel

connected to the rest of the community owing to the use of social media. They use the profiles to access the videos posted by certain local news channels, articles posted by newspaper websites, or news portals for the required information about the occurrences that would have hardly reached their ears otherwise. As such, one can comprehend how social media has become a major tool for news dissemination not just in the urban areas of the society, but also the rural regions of the country where many basic needs of a developing society are yet to reach the people.

### **Convergence in Media Facilitated by the Internet**

Another major understanding from the study is that media convergence in the present era has been facilitated by the omniscience of the internet. The various forms of media have come to establish their presence and popularity on the internet. Since the internet is accessible from cheaply priced devices like the smartphone or the tablet, it becomes easier for the people of the society to have access to the news materials that are published on the internet. As such, a media house that was previously strictly involved in publishing newspaper runs a website that updates the people with an e-paper version of the newspaper that gets printed for the masses. Moreover, the website might also publish news articles as separate pages on the domain. The same scenario applies for other forms of media as well. The massive rise in the number of news portals in the present times is a telltale sign of the omnipotence and reach of the internet among the common people of the society.

The manner in which the rural population of the district of Purulia access the news materials via the use of the internet proves how the process of converge of media has been successful due to the provision of the internet. Also, the internet can reach distant places where a news channel or newspaper might not be able to reach the people using the other forms of media. While the websites operated by the media houses can be accessed directly, it is easier for the common people to access the content published by various media houses if the content is shared on the social media platforms. As such, the process of convergence of media has come to get assimilated closely with the social media platforms in the present era of omniscience of social media among the population of the country. Social media simply enhances the possibility of reaching out to more people within a short span of time. The media houses have engaged in creating pages or profiles in the popular social media sites. These profiles or pages are used to post regular updates about the occurrences across the country or the world. The user of the social media platform simply has to subscribe or like the page or profiles of the media houses to get regular updates. It needs to be mentioned in this context that the media houses have also come up to publish their own mobile apps that provide the users with regular updates on their cellphones about the news. However, the rural mass of the country might take more time to get accustomed with all the ways of getting access to the news through their smartphones.

## **Privacy Concern**

What raises the concern about the use of smartphones for accessing the internet and social media by the rural mass is the fact that these people have no idea whatsoever about the privacy issues that encompass the use of social media or other websites. While the convergence of media has raised the use of the internet by the rural people of the society, they are yet to become aware of the cyber threats that lurk in the virtual domain of existence. The people in the rural region access the news articles and videos via the use of social media platforms. Indeed, this is a ground-breaking advancement in the domain of mass communication as the regions where even electricity has reached just a few years back have been reached by the media houses via their presence on social media. The use of social media, however, brings new challenges as the common people who were surveyed did not have any idea whatsoever about the privacy issues that can haunt them in the virtual domain of existence.

The people are not aware of the cyber threats that their social media profiles might be exposed to. Many of the people do not even understand how the social media profiles give them the opportunity to at least customize the privacy of the data or post that they would share on the social networking site. Thus, it becomes imperative that these people are made aware of the various threats that lurk in the virtual world. While accessing news portals, news channels, or newspaper sites can disseminate a lot of relevant information to the people of the rural areas, they need to be made aware about the proper way in which social media should be used to access or use the data of the news sites. Indeed, media convergence has led to a massive change in the information sharing process, but the people who have been only recently exposed to the use of the internet and social media via their smartphones have to be well-equipped before long so that no hassles come up in the future while using the devices or the technology to access the media.

## **Conclusion**

It would be apt to end by saying that convergence of media has paved the way for a sea of change in the process of news dissemination in the entire world. Smartphones have come up as very vital devices through which the common people can access the news. The survey that was carried out in Purulia can be seen as a microcosmic example of the scenario existent in the country of India with regard to reach of media houses among the rural population after the convergence and boom of technology. The rural people of Purulia have access to smartphones and the internet, and it can be said that the same picture can be taken to be true in the case of other rural areas of the country as well. Thus, one should recognize the massive scope of the internet in disseminating news among common people of the country via social media that is accessed through cellphones at a very low expenditure. The access to the internet is also facilitated by the rapid digitization process that has also triggered the wane in expenditure of using mobile services in the country. The social media platforms are used by the rural mass to access the news. However, there is lack of awareness among the common people of the rural region about the various intricacies related to the use of internet. Moreover, the lack of education

poses a hindrance in making them comprehend the threats that lurk in the virtual domain of the internet. As such, while the convergence of media has facilitated the dissemination of news to remote areas of the country of India, the rural masses have to be empowered and educated with proper training in use of the technological devices.

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