

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIAL MOBILIZATION (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SHAHBAG AND HOKKOLOROB MOVEMENTS)

by
Aakash Shaw
University Research Fellow
Department of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Calcutta
Email:

Abstract: *The present study tries to comprehend the concept of social media and its role in progressive social change in the context of the uprisings at Shahbag square in Bangladesh and Hokkolorob movement in Jadavpur in India, which will provide a new insights in understanding new social movements. In the last decade the country has witnessed a series of development in communication technologies influencing the generations especially the youth. Presently the country is riding high on new social media which has led to a new array of opportunities and with its enormous potentiality, it tries to bridge the gap created by the traditional media. The transformations of social movements with respect to trends in communication involving the user-generated content voluntarily within social circles. However studying the dynamic changes in the process of campaigning and organizing these movements which strives to change the social structure thus changing the social reality as a whole.*

Keywords: *social media, social movements, communication technologies, structure, campaign and realities.*

Introduction

In the age of information and technology where the drastic development in the communication systems is continuously transforming information society to knowledge society. One of the major contributors of this change is the advent of Social media with the dawn of new millennium. Marshall McLuhan's idea of global village has become a reality in the contemporary times with the advent of social media and user friendly apps and has mitigated constraints of time and distance. It has been a boon for humanity to be united at, cultural, emotional, intellectual and economic levels, by exchanging and sharing a global pool of information resources. The emergence of new digital communication technology providing social platform for the global

media consumers to voice their thoughts and ideas in terms of literal as well as audio- visual representation. With the advent of new middle class acting as the key actors in several new social movements which has shifted its focus from the economic concerns to specific changes in public policies including lifestyle, social structure and culture.

What is Social Media?

Social media has become an essential part of our lives as a vital tool of different kinds of communication which is equipped with the ability to air ideas, share views, mould opinion, connecting individuals and society as whole. Social media refers to the means of interactions through web based technology among people in which they create and exchange information, ideas and opinions in virtual communities and networks (Ahlqvist, & Halonen, 2008). Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0”, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010). Furthermore, the availability of social media on mobile phones and web-based technologies gave an easy access to an interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, discuss, co-create and modify user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals (Kietzmann, & Hermkens, 2011)

It has replaced the real world connections with its virtual world to a great extent that people not only share their personal experiences of different explorations but also freely discuss sensitive issues through social media. Indian youth spends a considerable amount of energy and time on social media and are getting addicted to it due to its accessibility through android cell phones and simplistic processes associated with its operations. The youth finds social media or rather the social networking sites a good means of conversing with their friends, family or strangers and also an attractive mode of creating their individual space in the social realities. But the important question arise that do the users know how to handle sharing of information in the virtual space? And also do they realize the severity of exchanging sensitive information and opinions via social media?

Factors contributing to the increasing growth of use of Social Media in India

The explosive growth of the Internet over the past decade has almost certainly changed the profile of the “computer addict” (Brenner, 1997; Young, 1996b). With its convenient communication options and the World Wide Web, the Internet also opened new interactive spheres like several social networking sites with drastic technological advancements that has contributed immensely towards connecting people from different regions of society, sharing abundant information in all areas of interest.

It is pertinent to ask the question, why the Indian economy, which is considered to be a developing one, experiencing tremendous growth in this sector? And why the users of social media are gradually increasing in India. Herein lies the factors:

- **Easy accessibility :** The availability of social networking sites via mobile apps has led to an immense growth in the use of social media which has not only facilitated in accessing social platforms but has also induced the users to share significant information continuously through it. The instant messaging feature helps in rapid exchange of ideas and opinions literally as well as audio-visually.
- **Rich environment for user generated content:** The information space which was created with the help of social networking tools were mainly user generated. The social media content ranged from pictures, music, video, contacts, locations information, chat transcripts and other information.
- **Inexpensive media:** The advent of social networking sites was a boon to the internet users where one can instantly share messages, ideas, opinions and information economically. According to AC Nielson's The Social Media Report 2012 assesses that, "More people are using smart phones and tablets to access social mediaWith more connectivity, consumers have more freedom to use social media wherever and whenever they want."
- **Commonality of like interests :** Social networks allows users to choose the individuals who have matching likes and dislikes and thus connecting with them to share ideas and common interests through virtual platform, joining common interests groups and communities.
- **Global connectivity:** Social networks offers the fastest way to connect to people across the globe. In additions to the popular Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, LinkedIn, WhatsApp there are several other social networking communities that are dedicated to allow users so that they can connect over internet.
- **Non-expert interventions:** These virtual social networks throws open a wide platform for not only knowledgeable users sharing ideas but also inducing individuals to frame their opinions and share their views and beliefs of common interests.

Beyond space – a platform for social mobilization and protest

With the progression of society and a huge jump in technology, the steady rise of information and communication technology in the last decade has provided a democratic tool in the hands of the people. The arrival of social media like Facebook and Twitter has transformed the communication process and one of the distinguishing feature of social media that mobilize thoughts, further to contributing towards social movement, is the concept of 'beyond space'. Thus drawing similarity with the concept of public sphere put forward by Habermas has undergone not only a literal but also a structural change. After it was considered as an output of modernism backed by a class of social elites, it apparently emphasize on re-interpretations of the obsolete technological determinism approach. Due to its virtual feature, the cultural dimension of

communication has further intensified. In fact today, the entire scope of interaction taking place on social media has an essential global character, with inputs from people from all over the globe.

With the extensive use of social networks, digital activism has entered into a new age, gradually emerging its practices in accordance to the evolving demands of the growing users. The advent of Web 2.0 has significantly geared up the gradual trends of Web 1.0 that included e-mails, blogs, chat messenger and other discussion forums. The prominent factor which determine the rapid use of internet by users in general and especially the conflicting voices appeared to be the differences between the internet generations. The significant features that demarcates the Web 2.0 generation from its predecessors are as follows; instantaneous feedback, user generated content, faster approach, self- sharing and collaborative roles with a new participatory platforms culminating alternative views shaping mass opinions and social views as a whole

The arrival of social media as a communicative global forum, giving priority to identity-sharing and the freedom of expression, thus giving birth to new order of social and communicative realities, with the above-mentioned features which increases the technological potential of socialmedia. Thus, social media on one hand becomes a platform for the interface between people having similar views in the virtual sphere and on the other hand, it is also a powerful tool to influence public opinion and government policymaking. However, the advancement in technology has transformed the space in the public sphere as described by Habermas. Therefore, it is essential to understand the impact of this prospective dimensions of social media which gives rise to social movements.

Social media provides the opportunity for lateral communication without any influence of the hierarchical system, which informs mainstream media about social movements thus intensifying the influences and contributing more towards the continuity of campaigns during and after the movements. The revolutionary potential of modern communication technologies which deliberates the current social movements across the globe, such as "Arab Spring" , "Occupy Wall Street", "Shahbag movement" and the "hokkolorob".

It should be borne in mind that social media not only reshapes the forms of social movements and oppositions, but also introduces resistance culture. As mentioned above, the instant sharing feature of social networking sites helps people communicate, understand prospective views and organize within social circles drawing individual views as comments to certain wall posts or topics of discussions. The collective actions resolves to creates events and advertise the virtual protests to a global platforms without time and space constraints, further formingsocial movements with or without political identities, thus creating alternative dimensions in social realities.

A study of Contemporary Social Media Movements:

Shahbag movement

Shahbag movement began in February 2013 at Shahbag Square, Dhaka (Bangladesh). The movement arose following demands for capital punishment for Abdul Quader Mollah, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment as well as for others convicted of war crimes by the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh. The International Crimes Tribunal had sentenced Mollah to life in prison after he was convicted on five of six counts of war crimes.^{[7][8]} Later demands included banning the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami party from politics including election and a boycott of institutions supporting (or affiliated with) the party.

Mollah's sentence was considered as too lenient by the protesters when the heinousness of his crime was taken into account. The protesters called for additional protests by resorting to the method of online activism taking the help of social media. Social media provided a common platform for several bloggers and online activists, who were not only made aware of the movement, but they also exchanged their views with the protesters. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) welcomed the Shahbag protest, but warned the government not to make political mileage from a movement that started for demanding capital punishment for war criminals. A counter-protest was launched by Jamaat-e-Islami as its leaders comprised the majority of those who were identified for trial. The counter-protest questioned the validity of the tribunal and the protest movement.

Five students of North South University were arrested during the protest. On 27 February, 2013 Delwar Hossain Sayeedi of war crimes was convicted by the tribunal and was sentenced to death. There were violent clashes between police and protesting Jamaat followers. It has been estimated that about 60 people were killed in the confrontation, majority of which were the activists of Jamaat-Shibir activists while others were local police and civilians.

Hokkolorob movement

Hashtag movements have been redefining and impacting politics in significant ways in contemporary times. Mobilization of masses has been the singular common factor in movements ranging from the Arab Spring to Canada's Maple Spring, the student movements in Chile and Venezuela, Shahbag in Bangladesh and the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong. #Hokkolorob (let there be clamour) is one of the largest hashtag movements in India which involved over sixty thousand people in more than one hundred countries. It started in September 2014 as a series of Jadavpur University students' protests against the problematic handling of a reported case of sexual molestation on campus on 28 August 2014, and against the subsequent police attack on peacefully agitating students, quickly went viral and erupted into a massive movement. The student protests spiralled into '#hokkolorob' within exactly three days and it took on the dimensions of a global protest. On September 18, more than 400 of the 600 teachers of Jadavpur

University walked in silent unison across the campus. Students found themselves lining up in a veritable guard of honour right across the campus at this show of solidarity. It was the quietest day ever at J.U., and in that quietude was forged a unique bond between teachers and students based on a memory of values shared in the classroom and their translation that day into shared commitments in struggle.

On September 20, an estimated hundred thousand people marched under the banner of ‘#hokkolorob’ in Kolkata, in spite of a massive downpour. Students, reputed intellectuals, cultural stars, and ordinary citizens of Kolkata had come from right across the state and country to join them. On September 25, J.U. alumni and other students spearheaded actual demonstrations in cities across India, and in one hundred countries across the world, in the #hokkolorob global protest. The movement spread like wildfire via social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and specially on the backs of hashtags such as #Students Against Campus Violence and #hokkolorob, with just this latter earning 56,745 ‘likes’. In fact, according to Keyhole, a hashtag tracking tool, #hokkolorob alone had a reach of 342,130 users in the week the VC resigned.²

However, Hashtag movements should be differentiated from both the ‘slacktivism’ and ‘clicktivism’ of the digital media. While the similarity among all lies in dissemination of information and generation of awareness, but #hokkolorob, for example, was clearly not a case of ‘slacktivism’, with gizmo bound individuals sitting in isolation clicking a petition or two a day as self-satisfying ‘feel good’ measures, irrespective of the political effect of the action. But, it was not limited to internet organizing of real life protests, or participation through on-line parody and satire as is the case with ‘clicktivism’ as this was still a real life, flesh and blood phenomenon, sustained by the euphoria of shared identification and collective action on the field; it was a movement in which activists put their futures into some jeopardy in terms of the possible loss of an academic year and the possibility of being marked for future reprisals, and a struggle in which they risked the physical hazards of further police atrocities and put their very lives on the line in the final fast unto death.

A new lesson in political culture – about the potential of on-line creativity for the forging of real life political solidarities was taught by #hokkolorob. The use of digital media had radically transformed on-line individuals from passive receivers into active shapers of content, from observers of activism into activists themselves. As Alterman emphasizes in his 2011 essay, ‘The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted’: ‘...among the most important roles of social media is one that has been little commented upon: the way in which they allowed a large number of people to see themselves as activists because they were creating content’.The outcome was palpable in the passionate investments of the creative activists who formed the bedrock of the movement.

Conclusion

Social networking sites allow the users to send several messages in seconds not only to an individual but also to a group of individuals at the same time. Thus it is significant to analyse the degree of its influence on political and social transformations. Exploring Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in Pittsburgh, Mattoni (2012) argues that, besides the conflicts on campsites, the activists sometimes cannot discuss issues with each other on Facebook, which shows the intra-group hierarchies on the online platform, which escalated the passions. Another characteristics of social media is its inability to regulate messages, thereby spreading the discourse of “rage” gradually which further gets established in several social movements and also increases the political polarization. Gulum Sener asks a pertinent question in ‘Social Media as a Field of Social Struggle’- “How could we interpret the social media-generated opinions concerning social movements? It is presumably too early to introduce certain predictions about this daily-changed and user-generated media. Indeed, social media is all about what we share. Whether it should be used as a means of revolutions or a radical social transformation is subjected to further studies. A revolution is generally depended upon people's will rather than communication tools. Social media would be helpful only citizens find it necessary in social transformations.”

References

- Atton, C. (2001). *Alternative media*. London: Sage.
- Atton, C. (2003). Reshaping social movement media for a new millennium. *Social Movement Studies*, 2(1), 3–13.
- De Jong, W., Shaw, M., & Stammers, N. (Eds.). (2005). *Global activism, global media*. London: Pluto Press.
- Diani, M., & McAdam, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Social movements and networks: Relational approaches to collective action*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Downing, J. D. H. (1984) *Radical media: The political experience of alternative communication*, Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Downing, J. D. H., & Brooten, L. (2007). ICTs and political movements. In R. Mansell & R. Silverstone (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of information and communication technologies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT press
- Siegelau, S., & Mattelart, A. (Eds.). (1983) *Communication and class struggle* (Vol. 2). New York: International General.
- Fisher, D. R., Stanley, K., Berman, D., & Neff, G. (2005). How do organizations matter? Mobilization and support for participants at five globalization protests.
- Seib, P. M. (2008). *The Al Jazeera effect: How the new global media are reshaping world politics*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books.

- Andrews, Kenneth T. (1997). "The Impacts of Social Movements on the Political Process: A Study of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Electoral Politics in Mississippi." *American Sociological Review* 62:800-19.
- Gamson, William. (1990). *The Strategy of Social Protest*. 2d ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth
- McAdam, Doug and David Snow. (1997). *Social Movements*. Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury.
- Sener, Gulum. (2014). Social Media as a Field of Struggle. Special issue – 2, *Journal of Media Critics*.