Media, Technology and Protest: An Indian Experience

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Abstract

Internet and social media has revolutionised many things in the societies across the globe. It has used both positively and negatively, but the impact is much powerful than the traditional electronic media. The paper discusses how media with rise of technological tools made social communication more powerful and networked. In India internet became a great alternative media platform to raise civil society voice against oppression. Internet or Social media is a double-edged sword, it has also able to spread effective rumours, fake news and hatred. This paper is an attempt to examine the relation between protest and social movement with communication technologies in India.

Keywords: Social media, Lynching, fake news, protest, Media, Internet, cyber protest

Introduction

Technology has been one of the important intruders in our everyday life. The social movements traditionally on streets are now visible on internet-based digital mediums. It is important to theorize various aspects of cyber protests. In India we need to understand the dynamics of both online and offline new social movements. The process of communication, ecosystem and synthesis of this new social protest needed to be decoded by studying various case studies in India.

The paper deals only with the case studies from India. The terminology used may vary like cyber protest, social media protest, social activism, digital protest, etc. The paper focuses specifically on social media and other forms of Media in general.

Variety of Protests

There are variety of protests in the present society, but the context and references here mostly focus on the social protests which have used social media in the past decade. The protest is operationalized as "the voluntary public gathering both virtually (social media) as well on streets to voice for the rights, justice, equality and dignity, etc., against state or institutions, or individuals who belong to local or global". Protest shared through social media has global reach and personalized approach. According to J Van Laer, 2009, "The Internet is not only said to greatly facilitate mobilisation and participation in traditional forms of protest, such as national street demonstrations, but also to give these protests a more transnational character by effectively and rapidly diffusing communication and mobilisation efforts."

Media and Protest in India

The internet-based digital media has become a dynamic communication space for all kinds of protests. But historically this trend is not unique to this digital media. During the freedom struggle print media and other alternative media were used for propagating the freedom struggle. For example, Gandhi, Gokhale, Anni Besant, Ambedkar, etc.

Later one of the milestone is the video cassette news magazines. To name a few 'News Track', Observer, Eyewitness etc. One can remember anti-Mandal agitations in 1990. As quoted by New York Times Jan-1,1991 "Information-hungry Indians, annoyed by the failures of state-run broadcasting networks, are turning in droves to private-enterprise "alternative television" news on videotape" (Crossettee, 1991).

Every media technology witnessed the protest as their favourite subject of focus point. But what we're lacking is multiple versions of reality. The internet-based digital media gave the freedom to some exploit the opportunity to use the medium for the protest engagement.

The use of alternative media for the protest has been there from a long time. As the time and technology changes the way it works or updates. The change is not just technology but also the whole ecology of protest mechanism. Some of the observations about the nature of protest mechanics are:

- ❖ **Protest has become dynamic:** It is difficult to control the protest path as in the digital domain it will move across the geographies and cultures. The message is shared, downloaded, forwarded and discusses. Sometimes these messages will be altered, re-interpreted by adding some improvisation. But these alterations of the message have no guarantee that it will go well with the context and culture or carry the same spirit it was initiated. The protest will swell in many directions. Generally, it doesn't have a single leader. Here every user is a leader of their own kind. If we talk in terms of WhatsApp, leaders will become group admins, but there is no guarantee that they will be leading the group. They have least control over the group dynamics.

- ❖ **Multi-sourcing of the content:** It is interesting to see that variety of perspectives will be built with the help of user-contributed content from variety of sources. This adds to the empathy of the context and move forward. As the movement furthers the more refined stories with better narration will accelerate the protest. For example, a photo story will emerge to relive a memory in the case of Rohit Vemula. The other example is a multimedia story to depict the solidarity or audiovisual material of the updated protest activities in different places will be make the movement more fierce and mobile public in large scales.

- ❖ **Co-creation of the content:** The Joint Action Committees work better with these networked movements. Scholars and sympathizers from all over the world will be part of the various strategies, statements, campaigns and creation of the content for it. Translations happen for better communication.

- ❖ **Voluntary networking/sharing:** The network increases not just with the friends and peer groups but also like-minded people who respond to the protest calls and participate and do their contribution. Sharing is an instant opportunity that netizens will be used mostly to campaign across the platforms. In any social media sharing option is given to share the text and audio-visual content on any other digital platforms including emails. The online newspapers, video content can be shared and increases the understanding and focus on the subject of protest.
- ❖ **Feedback on feedback:** Feedback on digital platforms are in the form of comments. These comments have no limit or control. Due the unlimited cloud space, users are able to continue the discussion to any length. There are exceptions like Snapchat, Sarahah applications which make the user see the content to restricted time. In Sarahah user can also comment anonymously.

Local Content with Global Access

The social media disproved that protests are generally heard if they are made in the centre. Protests in the periphery can be heard from local uploads. The protest over suicide deaths in an agricultural college in Andhra Pradesh reached audience outside the southern states (The Hindu, 2015).

- ❖ **Media sourcing of content from the online media platforms:** In this process the users and media depends on each other for content sourcing. Users share the media content available in various platforms and formats, in the same way media also takes the update from the ongoing discussions that takes place on the social media platform.

- ❖ **Propaganda redefined:** Propaganda theory has been redefined ever since the public is will connected actively with the internet through social media. The messages may be intended for positive or negative purpose it will impact the audience. The negative impacts are evident through the Muzaffarnagar riots, mob lynching incidents, Trilokpur riots and other parts of India. The social media mobile applications like WhatsApp is blamed too for fuelling the negative impact among the audience. But one needs to understand that media has been always powerful, but one who uses needs a thought on how it can be used with more social responsibility.

  On the other side the Rohit Vemula movement, Solidarity for Rape victims, social messages and campaigns from government and various organization immensely helped people to know different side of politics and connect with each other.

- ❖ **Magic Multiplier:** The messages expressed or uploaded on social media depending on the context and relevance they will be further shared and forwarded which ultimately multiplies. It does not apply to all the messages.

Uncontrollable

Messages and content is uncontrollable. Only way the government has been adopting is to cut off the internet facilities. Most importantly the telephone communication of all kinds. It

has been evident in Kashmir many times (McCarthy, 2017). But it cannot be the solution always, government has to find alternative ways.

❖ **Archive, Memory & Erase:** Due to its nature of storage and networked digital space every message can be stored, retrieved and replaced, whenever is required. It is a process of creating a collaborative social history. In case the messages have short duration storage then it will affect the memory and it will affect the sustenance of the movement. As there is no usual practice for users to download and store, erasing the archival content of the protest will affect the public memory also. The popular historians and scholars often do not find comments and content on social media as part of the historical material.

Communication Model on Protest to Revolution

According to Sujatha (2014) the last decade witnessed that the digital platforms have emerged as a key tool for conducting, organizing and expressing dissent on a large scale. Below is the model depicting the complex communication process to understand the relation between the media, technology and protest in the Indian society. The model differ the arguments provided by Habermas, who described public sphere as a homogeneous space. According to Poster (2014) critiquing Hebermas says "This model, I contend, is systematically denied in the arenas of electronic politics'.
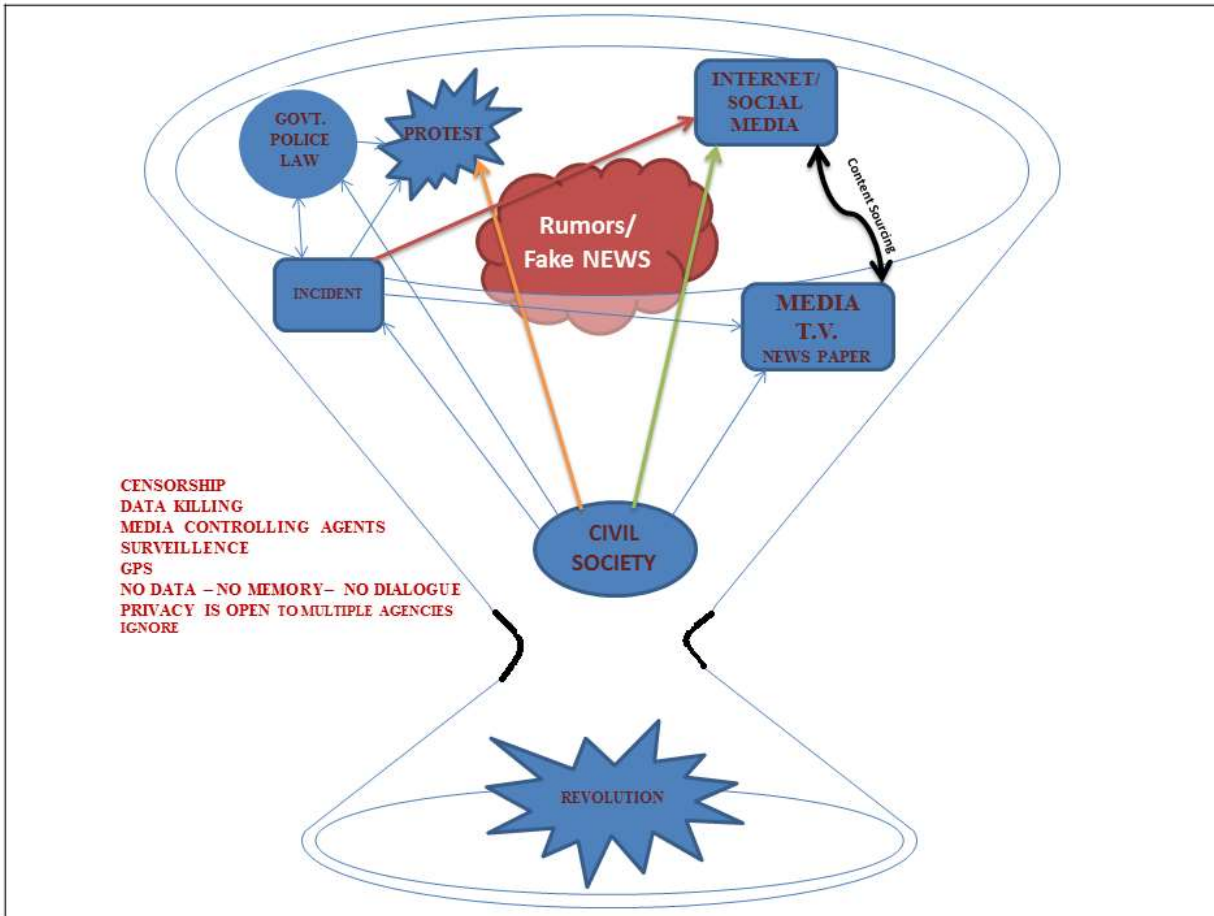
Title of the Model: ***Media, Technology and Protest in Society©***

The model was developed for talk delivered to the Indian Information Service (IIS) group A officers training at Indian Institute of Mass Communication in 2016. Later the model is updated with new elements like 'rumours and fake news' in 2018. The model explains how the Indian government has been handling the protests by the public on various events in the society. Incident can be an issue which needs a public voice to ascertain for justice, is published on the social media where public and media has access to it. This will make the protest viral. On the other hand, government also taken note of it and make arrangements for reducing the impact. But the government was unable to take measure for the flash mob lynching incidents, which are largely circulated on WhatsApp. Now after the series of incidents in Muzaffar Nagar, Trilokpuri, Maharashtra, Tripura and other part of India, government and social media companies like WhatsApp has tightened the rules of using social media. The measures include the awareness messages and campaigns on the newspapers by the WhatsApp and government of India.

In addition to the above rumours and fake news brings chaos and drive the peoples power into wrong directions. It is important for both the organisations and government to curb the menace of rumours and fake news. As the paucity of time and unverifiable media content from the huge messaging communities from Internet it will be challenge for the public to verify the authenticity of the content. But the incidents have brought more awareness and government

tightening the cyber laws and Information Technology cases orienting civil society at large to understand the reputation of the powerful social media usage.

In this process as-as a part of controlling law and order government disconnect public from internet and telephone services. Snooping on the online activities of the activist or individual, tracking the accounts, phone using variety of technologies like Global Positioning Systems (GPS). Governments has been increasing the investments in installing and maintenance of the Surveillance mechanisms on cyber activities of the common public. Surveillance is the new meaning of good and safe governance. Government even can block the comments, web pages or kill the data to stop the flow of communication. Once the date is killed or erased from the cloud memory it can affect the sustenance of the movement. Cyber laws in India are still emerging with the various incidents of different nature which needs an update on the laws. Government servants are totally put under the fear of losing jobs to comment against government or voicing opinions on any social protest.

The above model may not apply to all sorts of protests, not every protest could turn to a mass movement. Not every similar event in the same city, for example Delhi may not bring solidarity. Every movement may not come out of digital platforms to take out a march on street. But the protests and 2014 elections proved that youth India has power to influence politics and social movements. The average age of internet users is obscure in India.

Movements Becoming Revolution

There are very few protests which will become mass movements and become revolution. Jasmine revolution, peoples against state in Egypt, Rohit Vemula and Nirbhaya movements in India too are some of the examples. The existing social, economic, political and media environments influence the uprising of these mass movements.

Inclusive Online Space Becomes a Basic Human Right

Online and digital media are strengthening their potential every day in individual as well as the larger society. The power of social media tested for various purposes. The early users got the benefits of networking for relationships and creative engagements. Unfortunately, or naturally, the existing social bias and hegemonic ideologies started creeping into the new media in India.

Social media brought many together for a protest for betterment. On the other side there is an increase in the Black propaganda also. Misinformation about a community brought riots, killed an innocent, clashes between two castes and many more. The Dadri beef incident, sub caste movement, university student protests have brought the ugly power of social media.
The hatred on the caste and communal basis giving challenge to the existing media freedom and general democratic values. The pleasure of virtual democracy is dimming among various communities as the online mediums are heavily under state surveillance and censorship. These platforms, rather than increase the hope, they become another challenge for marginalized. The access and new ways of defence to keep the voices heard needs access. Here in this networked societies digitally oppressed communities needs tools and strategies to empower them.

The archaic media policies are not giving any scope for asserting the rights of individual freedom online. It is important to create a free and inclusive space online. Digital dreams in 'digital India' requires understanding of the exclusion in a broader way. Self-respect in the digital space is important. The fear of being online is increasing every day among youth, women and other marginalized. It is important to fight for a free and fair space and right to access the digital space. It is for the greater human interest. Now access to these online spaces become a basic human right.

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