

## **NEW MEDIA & SOCIAL NETWORKS: A CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

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### **Abstract**

New media and new communication technologies exert tremendous influence and have brought varied social, political and cultural changes around the globe. New Media has created a new communication environment in the cyberspace where social networks can be formed and mobilized to bring democratic transitions. The participatory social media provides an open platform where the users can address important issues and have their voices heard thereby bringing changes in the society. This new public sphere possesses the potential to shape the public discourse and opinions. Further, New Media are viewed as instruments of social change and are utilized as platforms to organize mass protests and mass movements, accelerating the process of transforming societies. Socio-political discourse, debate, and discussion continue in public forums of social media, thus making a responsible use of the virtual and

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vibrant cyberspace. In fact, hashtags have become powerful tools in the cyberspace to start digital movements, spearhead protests and propel social change. Today, hashtags rule the Internet and garner a huge following, providing increased support for causes. This way, the digital revolution fuels the real world revolution. There develops hype on the social media platforms which acts as a contributory factor in putting pressure on the authorities and challenge the status quo. The social media influence events in the society which ushers a transformation. India has witnessed many such incidents which reiterate that the New Media can bring democratic revolutions. This paper, therefore, tries to explore how the contemporary New Media and social networks act as a new public sphere to mobilize and unite people to effect societal change. It also sheds light on how the trending hashtags call for action in this digital age.

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## **1. Introduction**

“Social media have generated new communicational practices, providing novel patterns of interaction and forms of expression that stimulate wide civic participation, and hence contribute to new dynamics of social change and public mobilisation, fuelling revolts and bringing about political transformation”

(Bardici, 2012, as cited in Bascallao-Pino, 2014).

The New Media has connected the world as a global society, ‘empowering human’ (Jugun, 2018) and providing a sphere where they can communicate transcending the barriers of time and space. The wake of social media has, in fact, reshaped the communication process, offering freedom, openness and horizontality. With the widespread use of new media technologies, the social media’s power to shape power relations has increased. The democratic potential of social media is also highlighted with its evolution. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, blogs and wikis, have given rise to a networked citizen-centric platform. Moreover, the use of smartphones has facilitated the access to social media and thus accelerated its use.

In Habermas’ (1989) concept of the public sphere, ‘public’ means “open for all” and the public sphere is that society which can get engaged in “critical public debate”. Fuchs (2013) applied Habermas’ idea of the public sphere in our modern day life where social media represent the new public sphere. Social media offers a public space for real-time communication through online debates, discussions and discourses without any biases. The democratic and participatory New Media is viewed as a new potential public sphere providing the possibilities of newer forms of public discourse (Singh & Thakur, 2013).

Media is viewed as a powerful instrument in influencing people into certain modes of belief and understanding within society. In the modern society, the cyberspace acts as a development facilitator, information disseminator and an agent of change. The communication structure of social media fosters social movements, and widens the horizon and space for social change, resulting in amplified physical mobilization (Singh & Thakur, 2013). Social media has eventually become the newest medium to mobilize broader public interest in social movements. In the present time, the prominence of social media has been witnessed in several protest movements. Activists have heavily used the social media to circulate ideas and voice opinions on the virtual platform. Movements, protests and campaigns emerge and spread through social media. It aids in mass mobilization on a massive scale. Today, any networked individual can be a social activist and spread their words and views across borders. Further, social media support and promote these views and ideas by hashtag campaigns, offering new possibilities and pathways so as to communicate social change. Hashtags today act as powerful tools to start digital movements, spearhead protests and propel social change (THE QUINT, 2018). Basically, the

functionality of the new medium is used to mobilize public engagement. This results in the formulation of policies. Wallis & Given (2016) highlights that civil society groups use the functionality of social media “for collectivity and connectivity; to campaign and create a narrative; and, to catalyze mobilization and influence policy.”

## **2. New Media and Online Activism**

The social networking sites, indeed, provide space for global communication. It offers a public sphere where activists can engage in socio-political discourses and generate support for their causes, eventually emerging as a significant platform to bring social justice and social change. It has actually become the hub of civil activities, for example, citizen participation as well as protest organization. Civil society organizations use the social media platforms to voice their opinion and engage in online campaigns to mobilize action. The easy accessibility and global reach of the social media creates a transnational network of dialogue and solidarity among the masses both in the online and offline world (Chadha & Harlow, 2015).

Wallis & Given (2016) asserts that new media is a consistent major mechanism for organizing, mobilizing and amplifying public protest. This form of protest, Edwards, et al. describe as digital activism (Wallis & Given, 2016), which involves the use of online platforms mainly social media like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, blogosphere and others to communicate messages and information to diversified audiences. Online activism is “an organized public effort, making a collective claim(s) on a target authority(s), in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media.” It impacts the real world political frameworks through the empowered voices of the online communities. Online activism can be of three categories, as divided by Sandor Vegh in ‘Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice’ (as cited in Ahmed, 2016)

- i. “Awareness and/or Advocacy, where the Internet is used to disseminate alternative news and information
- ii. Organization and/or Mobilization, which calls for offline action
- iii. Action and/or Reaction meaning online attacks that can be committed by hackers.”

In most of the cases, online activism successfully does the first of the three categories by raising mass awareness, which is utmost essential for a social movement to succeed. Social activism

gains a new strength through social media. The social media platforms facilitate communication, enhance social interactions and increase public participation in social movements (Majek, 2017). In this way, activists get opportunities through the new media and digital technologies to mobilize and organize the masses in order to challenge the status quo.

### **3. Use of Social Media in Social Movements**

Social media shapes the perceptions and opinions of people which influence their decision-making process. Educating, organizing and exchanging cultural products of movements as well as building a coalition (N, 2016), all happen globally over the virtual network. It offers an open space for socio-political discourses and connects with other like-minded people from all over the world to unite for an issue or cause. This ignites a feeling of oneness among the masses which forms the basis of social movements. A collective identity binds them together in such movements. Some researchers take it as a form of community involvement and therefore, as Mcleod, et al (1996) states, view it as a vehicle for social change.

A sequence of notable movements over the cyberspace spelled hope for social networking sites mediated social change (Jugun, 2018). The New Media triggered the political reformation in the Arab world. As Singh & Thakur (2013) writes, “The Arab revolt amplifies how online social networks facilitated by social media have become a key ingredient of public movement.” The Arab world uprising was followed by political uprisings in Spain, Israel and Greece (Singh & Thakur, 2013). All these social movements inspired the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011. Basically, the Occupy Wall Street movement (2011) and Arab Spring mobilization sowed the seeds how the online space could be used as a public sphere for social activism. Social media played a central role in these social movements, “especially for the global democracy movement that is unfolding” (Fulya Sen, 2012, as cited in Singh & Thakur, 2013).

The new media possess the power to help citizens in changing the regimes that govern them (Singh & Thakur, 2013). Obama’s online campaign in the 2008 and 2012 general elections demonstrates such a successful social media activism. Social media also played a significant role

in the 2014 Indian Assembly Elections and hugely contributed in the landslide win of Shri Narendra Modi. He extensively used the cyberspace in order to connect with the citizens and garner people's support. Digital media was effectively used to deliver his message to the potential voters. "Janta Maaf Nahi Karege", "Ache Din Anne Wale Hai", "Har Har Modi Ghar Ghar Modi", "Ab Ki Baar Modi Sarkar and such other catchy slogans were doing the rounds in social media. The huge number of likes, shares, comments, re-tweets and followers revealed the huge support he had from the netizens. Even in Trump's Presidential election campaign in 2016, the global computer network played a significant role with trendy slogans like "Make America Great Again". Utilization of social media in politics, in a way, has brought a significant change in the conventional ways of organizing social movements.

Social movements, from hundreds of years, continue to be the drivers of social change and paradigm shifts. Today, the development of social media facilitates the movements and accelerates the process by gaining widespread support from the networked individuals and thereby acts as agents of change. In online social movements, most of the protests and rallies are organized through the social networking site Facebook. This virtual platform is a uniting and constructive tool (Prokhorov, 2012) which connects activists from varied groups and communities. These like-minded people communicate in the popular paradigm and can form online groups, which eventually develop to be a force in the society (Singh, 2014). Social media initiates a process which can integrate prowess at different levels in the process of actualizing the desired outcome.

The anti-corruption movement, India Against Corruption led by social activist Anna Hazare, made extensive use of the social media platform to mobilize the citizens. The movement was initiated in the year 2011 with an intention to put a pressure on the government to enact the Jan Lokpal Bill. The networked citizens expressed their opinions and concerns and directly got engaged to fight against corruption. Hundreds of Facebook pages received over 2000,000 likes within a few days of the campaign. #JantarMantar, #corruption, #AnnaHazare trended on Twitter at that time. The reach and availability of digital technologies aided in continuous mobilization as well as enhancement of the support base and made this campaign a global phenomenon.

The power of the citizens was again reflected through the social media after the Delhi gang-rape of a 23-year old woman in the year 2012. This case fostered nation-wide outrage and made the whole nation behold the power of the masses. The networked citizens criticized the perils of the legal system. Eventually, new stringent laws and harsher punishment were introduced in the country for violent crimes against women. Nirbhaya's incident mobilized the people to join hands which eventually sparked the change in Indian society. This and many such incidents echo how the social media protests can compel the government to bring legal and policy changes, acting as an agent of change.

Another biggest online protest was to protect network neutrality in India. It is a principle by which Internet service providers must be allowed to access all applications and contents irrespective of the source and that the users should have access to all websites at same speed and cost. Social networks were heavily used to make the networked citizens aware of this matter. The medium further asked the netizens to put forward their views and suggestions as a response to this consultative policy making invitation. The use of the virtual platform provided a structured method of contemplation and interchange of feedback and recommendation.

#### **4. Hashtag Trends and Call for Action**

Social media influences the way activists form and shape today's social movements. Even the tweets and hashtag give references to social changes. Hashtags allow the networked citizens to raise awareness and show solidarity for cause or events to achieve online and hashtag activism (Ahmed, 2016). Activism in social media translates discourses into action, which is its most significant aspect. Hashtags allow the networked citizens to join the online protests very effortlessly. More and more users join a conversation resulting in the hashtag trends. The hashtags permit easy classification of the posts, enabling the viewers to be updated with the happenings (Jugun, 2018). In the digital age, the most mentioned hashtags and the most retweeted tweets show the relationship between social media and collective action. This tiny act of putting a tag to a tweet possesses the potential to trigger responses and quick action from the authority (Lau, 2017, as cited in Jugun, 2018).

Several hashtags have ruled the Internet in recent times. #MeToo was a worldwide movement in the wake of sexual harassment where the hashtag was shared 4.3 million times all over the world.

#NotInMyName was a protest by Indian citizens against the lynching of Muslims and Dalits. The lynching of a 16-year-old Junaid Khan by a mob in Haryana initiated the protests. Filmmaker Saba Dewan was the first to call the protest, which soon spread to other Indian cities. A silent rally was organized in which social media played a great role in voicing the views of netizens. After holding pan-India protests, the next day Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi tweeted that “no person in this nation has the right to take the law in his or her own hands.”

Jallikattu is a traditional sport in Tamil Nadu that is practiced during Pongal. Claiming that bulls were tortured during the sport, animal welfare activists raised their voice using #Jallikattu. The controversy took the shape of huge protests through social media. Protestors further called for a silent protest in Marina Beach, Chennai which was soon followed by worldwide protests.

#ShutdownJNU, #Rio2016, #KashmirUnrest, #UriAttack, #surgicalstrikes, #IromSharmila, #demonetization are some other incidents that have ruled the cyberspace and dominated the social media news feeds in recent times. The posts in social networking sites regarding these and such other incidents reflect the views and opinion of people from across the country and the world.

The use of hashtags has given a distinguished identity to each movement, enabling the users to connect with the movements of activism. Often times, influencers amplify the messages of Twitter hashtags, making it viral (Ahmed, 2016). It adds visibility of collective actions. By providing increased virtual visibility of issues, social media shifts the balance of power to the masses (Gaitho, 2017). A collective consciousness is raised among the masses which contribute to forming massive social movements.

In this era of New Media technologies and social networks, it is evident that social media is used to organize protests and mass movements on various contemporary issues, but the question persists, do they really help effect change. Hashtags certainly raise awareness but it is actually



not clear if hashtag activism brings any real change. Several researchers have said that online activism can bring no effect on the real world. While there is no certainty regarding concrete results, it is also clear that the social media has developed to be a public sphere for activism, signifying solidarity and sharing information (Ahmed, 2016). Social media provides the ease with which users can engage in socio-political campaigns, which many say only limits the users to Clicktivism (White, 2010) and slacktivism (Morozov, 2009) instead of producing real change in the framework. But this is still a matter of debate if social media movements and activism can directly bring a change in the society. However, Bascallao-Pino (2014) in his study added that participants know that “hashtags are ephemeral and that it would be very good if people moved into the streets instead of protesting only on social networks” (De Mauleon, 2012, as cited in Bascallao-Pino, 2014).

## 5. Conclusion

The cyberspace today is an integral part of our lives and eventually, it has developed to be a true reflection of the popular sentiments (Sujatha, 2016). At different times, the trending hashtags in the popular paradigm give shape to the Indian life. “Revolutions have been triggered and campaigns have been won” (Halila) even before the advent of social media. However, social media and the use of hashtag accelerate the process and give extensive coverage to the mass movements. From enhancing political campaigns to pressurizing the authorities so as to bring legal and policy changes, the social networks does it all. The cyberspace is mainly used to create visibility and emotionally mobilize the netizens in times of major collective action. Social media activism may not be sufficient but it can indeed act as a necessary condition in order to create structural social change. To have the desired impact, people have to move beyond online collective action and develop long-term organizational dynamics via assemblies and meetings (Bacallao-Pino, 2014) in addition to being connected to organizers and resources so that they can bring a ‘real’ change. While online social movements witnessed in the recent times reiterate and reaffirm the power of social media in “signifying solidarity, raising awareness, and rapidly spreading information across the globe” (Ahmed, 2016), thereby bringing positive changes in the society.

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