Disruption in the Indian public sphere: Public discourse and Digitization

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Abstract

Rise of digital media and the convergence of mass media have introduced the concept of digital public sphere. Scholars are trying to establish a theoretical framework for this alternative of the pre-existing public sphere. After 2011, the Indian subcontinent witnessed exponential growth in digital media. Media convergence has displaced the traditional mediums of communication with digital platforms. Public sphere shifted from physical world to digital space. It has motivated the decision makers to infuse the political debates and discussions here. However, 'post-truth politics' and fake news phenomena are creating a hallowed digital public sphere, where the discourse is similar to a mediated communication. People are participating but differing views are sidelined and only one popular ideology is being promoted. This leaves no or little scope for a healthy debate. The political economy in media is constructing biased public opinion. Common domains have pre-justified arguments with no rational thoughts. The deconstruction of the media text indicates that the dichotomy of media lies between the misinformation and its balance. The real orchestrators behind this are the political actors. And public discourse is just a way to deviate the whole debate from real issues to the mediated ones.

Keywords: public discourse, digital space, post truth, participatory communication,

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Introduction

The Indian subcontinent is always known for its distinct public sphere. Amartya Sen once said that Indians are the most argumentative people in the world. When internet was revolutionized all over the world, there was a clear emergence of a new dimension. Search engines such as Google came into existence and the world entered into 21st century. This new world was ready to become more techno friendly and adaptable to the coming age revolution. In India, mobile phones and internet started gaining popularity during early 2000. This popularity has paved the path for change in the public discourse.

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed emergence of social media platforms like Facebook and Orkut. This phenomenon has influenced the thought process of people. Now, the habermasseian model of public sphere is shifting from physical world to the digital world. This is one major change that needs to be discussed.

The studies which took place in Greece and Egypt, indicates that now people are discussing their ideology and thoughts openly on digital space. The amount of information available on the internet is very huge and it is heterogeneous in nature. So, it might be influential to a particular group of society but does not affect other groups. In political communication, earlier there were opinion leaders who were responsible for disseminating the message to the mass. In the theory of two step flow of communication, the message is constructed by the mass media but delivered to the masses by the opinion leaders (Katz, Elihu; Lazarsfeld, Paul Felix, 1955).

The rise of mass media revolutionized political communication. From late 1960s to the early 1990s, TV and radio were the most popular mediums. These mediums were omnipresent and created a regular and persisting framework through which and within which other political actors operate (Sparrow, 2006, p.150). Later on, this convergence has created a bigger opportunity and the internet became the key role player. The already existed public sphere is now changing its shape and is shifting into the digital world. Social media, blogging are some of the new tools that have created countless opportunities to raise the voices in a democracy. Still, some of the scholars believe that digital media is unable to communicate across the difference as society is divided into various stratas and each has its own characteristics (Waisbord, 2016,p. 2). So, in a democracy like India, where the reach of digital media is very distinctive in nature, people's opinions also vary because of the social structure. There are another phenomena which make digital media dubious and arise questions is fake news and post truth. The political communication strategy is now a market oriented planning which also capsules the penetration of 'mediated messages' to the mass with the help of fake news (Quandt,2012).

So, now this digital public sphere is disrupting the already existing public sphere because of political biases, polarization of thoughts and by creating binary thinking among people (Prior, 2013). In a democracy, the distant voices are as important as that of mainstream. Cyber pessimists are always skeptical about the role of digital media in a democracy. However, digital media is actually fulfilling the information void that is being created by the political parties. The economic means are also playing their roles and this is a form of 'economic storytelling' (Montgomerie, 2016). These discourses are breaking the ideologies and creating connected ideas with the help of digital media and later on also appear in the mainline press/media. We have to consider the fact that growth of digital media is shaping the public discourse (Batorski & Grzywińska, 2018; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Digital media is also

responsible for the emergence of 'post-truth politics' (Hopkin & Rosamond, 2017), because of which the citizens and politicians start thinking in emotionally and not rationally which is in every manner dangerous for democracy.

Objectives:

The emergence of internet and social media has changed public sphere in many ways. This resulted in change in public discourse tremendously. Political parties are spending huge sums of money on their communication, but what they are actually creating is a populist approach. This disruption forms objectives of this study.

1. Public sphere is the place where social and political issues have been discussed for ages. However, with the popularity of digital world, these discussions started taking place more on digital platforms rather in small groups in neighbourhood. We will try to analyse if these virtual discussions are impactful or not. Are these based on facts and figures or just dysfunctional communication and not logic oriented?

2. The political actors are mainly responsible for initiating discussions in public spheres- digitally or on ground. We would analyze if there is any long term effect of these digitally induced discussions or these are short lived and eventually vanish from people's mind.

Habermassien model of public sphere and political communication:

In the late 18th century, there were some elite and upper class groups who were the part of decision making and represented the social community. They had developed their own 'private sphere' (Habermas, Jürgen, 1989), which was just opposite of the public sphere. The Indian concept of public sphere can be found in the village chaupaal or beetle shop and tea

stall at the corner of the road. These places are the hot spot of public gatherings and discussions over politics. In Varanasi, a renowned Indian city, it is a quite popular saying that the prime minister of India is elected at the tea stall of Banaras (Varanasi). The same concept had been also developed during the Roman Empire or could be found in the literature of medieval Europe when political and social discussion used to take place in the roman senate and peoples' gatherings in market. Habermas said that public sphere is a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens.(Habermas, Jürgen, 1989). It infers that public sphere is the space confined in our neighbourhood where the matters of common interests of relevance are discussed based on some standardized criteria.

However, these neighbourhoods have changed dynamically with time and virtual space is relatively more active nowadays. Habermas criticized the role of mass media in public domain. According to his opinion, mass media is relatively biased in its news selection, especially the commercial mass media. They are more influenced by the business and political power groups. mass media can be considered as a medium which is influenced by power blocks in a way of profiteering by controlling the information flow. Due to this the voices of subalterns are often neglected. The civil society would be marginalized and the democratic process of decision and policy making will be controlled by the power blocks only. Scholars are acquainted with this phenomenon and it leads to the rise of individualism. It also serves the purpose of cyber pessimists (Oates, 2008), who believe that the growth of cyberspace and discussions on it leads to the marginalization of the poor and digitally inactive citizens. This digital divide is a main concern of cyber pessimists around the world. The developing nations and their democratic institutions are suffering because of this.

The Indian idea of public sphere and political opinion making:

Indians are one of the most politically active citizens across the world, but their activeness is only focused around their personal gains. They are not very well versed with the fact that this activism leads the way to a greater politically active society. The understanding of democracy for Indian citizens is limited to casting their vote and raising their civil concern before authorities. Though, the idea of open public debate exists in the villages and town areas of the country; the fundamental problem is the leaders and policy makers do not actively participate. The social structure of India is also responsible for creation of several public domains, which are entirely different in nature, but are politically very active. The caste system of Indian civil society has created a caste-based-discussion-forum where a selective group of people of a particular caste take part, basis which a common thought process evolves. And other members of the same caste are supposed to follow the idea, irrespective of having their own idea or belief system. Several times these members are unaware or are indifferent to the happenings, but they follow the pattern because their friends, or family, or relatives are doing it. It ultimately results in creation of a collective public domain.

Now, the social differences among these castes lead to the rise of the 'super caste' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1960; Michelutti 2007) which are pluralistic in nature and have developed as a conglomerate power. These socio-political domains lead the discourse and set the narrative in the society.

In Indian context, public domains such as marketplaces or Bazaars, panchayat etc. are prominent places of informal gatherings where people exchange information, discuss and form views & opinions. These discussions act as the fundamental formation for shaping of public opinion. These deliberations set up the narratives. The same kind of phenomenon used to exist as coffee house culture in Europe and America. However, the emergence of digital media has changed the pattern of discussions over there. This idea was also borrowed in India but bloated out as coffee houses transformed into family restaurants.

In nutshell, public space is one very important factor responsible for opinion formation. Government orders, decisions, local issues, election campaigns, and politics- all of these are a part of the discourse, whether this discourse is taking place in a public domain or in private like in the drawing room of a person.

The idea of the Habermassian model of the public sphere can be seen in a very prominent way in Indian context. However, lack of cognitive intelligence poses a threat to it. As present day public discourse is quite influenced by mass media which is always criticized by Habermas because it is a hindrance in creating an inclusive public sphere (Habermas's (1996).

The digital space: Intervention of online media in public sphere

In the early 90s, internet came into existence and gained popularity across the world. Within a decade, the rise of search engines like Google and services from yahoo had created an online information society. They had broken the boundaries of culture and brought knowledge at one single platform. Internet has become the primary source of answer to any question. The advantages of internet based public sphere are often discussed by "net-enthusiast" (Dahlberg, 1998, p. 70). They argued about the prevalent faulty practices like gatekeeping in corporate mass media and control over free information flow; because of which a lot of voices might remain unheard by the democratic institutions.

Online media enables these views and opinions to be published. Digital space is known for user to user interaction and this can be used to communicate with the masses (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). This simply empowers those who are marginalized but want to be a part of the mainstream society.

In India, the issues of farmers, migrant workers, scheduled tribes etc. hardly find space and time in the mainline mass media. There are people who are working tirelessly to bring these

issues forefront but no one cares. And then, online media/digital space enters into the scene. It gives them freedom to those who seek to post their views and advocate the issues of subalterns. Digital media is also known for its open and free access to information. Information and knowledge are the key factors in any public debate and it enables individuals to put their point of view in a very strong way supported by the facts and figures.

Another argument to contrast this is the presence of digital divide in democracy. Cyber pessimists have always argued about this. Active participation of people is considered as a fundamental tool to strengthen democracy. There are several social groups which are not well versed with digital media. These people do not know how to use online platforms and search for the information available on digital space. This makes them unable to raise their concern in the digital space, hence they are sidelined from the decision making process.

The digital space and online media are based on technological algorithms. There might be a question of how valid these online debates and discussions are (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). They may take place in a controlled environment and among like minded peoples which is quite common in digital space. We usually connect with those who possess the same ideology and thinking as ours. This is a dangerous situation which can make these political and social debates invalid as there will not be proper representation of different opinions. The search engines and social media platforms are also responsible for this as they filter information and show only those kind of posts/opinions that we liked earlier by tracing our digital footprints. This snatches our opportunity away to get to see and understand different set of opinions that are contrary to what we liked or interested in. Creation of a filter bubble is such a thing (Pariser, 2011). These activities are few serious issues pointed out by the scholars. Diversification in discourse is a key factor; otherwise it is null and void. People might feel they are interacting with others but this works as a digital echo chamber where the counter views and opinions are not presented (Sunstein, 2001, 2009). In fact, it creates a 'false sense

of empowerment' (Papacharissi, 2002: 16f.). We have to understand the rationality of the content available on the digital and mainstream media platforms.

Deconstruction of media text: the digital and mainstream mass media

The media text and its deconstruction by people is also one very important factor to consider. Post truth and rise of fake news has been creating a false sense of information among people. The mass media which has corporate and political pressure creates a binary that leads people to mediated communication governed by them only. Mass media treats people as an audience and there is no active and direct feedback on the content. In an ideal situation, it is believed that mass media will inform, educate and empower people but the reality is entirely different from the notion. The political and economical powers control the organizational setup of media, thus they set the agenda for the discussions. It hampers individual's thoughts and the views in opposition are discouraged.

To examine the text that includes news videos, reports, and other information provided by the mass media, one must understand the concept of framing. Framing is a process in which the media broadcast is categorized in thematic presentations. Mass media creates a sense among the audience that they are also a part of the information flow and are engaged in the communication process. It chooses words which are more relative to the general public. And often misinterpret them to fuel their own agenda which is quite a new phenomenon. For instance, in India, major media houses are involved in creating false interpretation of words such as nationalism, socialism, communist, liberal, secular etc. This interpretation is actually constructed in such a way that the words have become a part of the populist political discussions. Political leaders and tools such as social media have made the interpretations legitimate. Now, they are often used by the public and the discourses are misquoted and less

logic oriented. Few people are even using these words as slangs and derogatory remarks for others. This is how mass media legitimise its own interpretation and construction.

Online space or digital space is considered to be an information hub. However, its authenticity is unchecked. The source of information usually remains anonymous to the common people. They are often unaware about the fact that this information could be wrong or misleading. Digital media has given rise to post truth and fake news phenomenon. The falsification of information in such a way that it appears to be true is the most common thing on social media platforms. Political communication which used to be dependent on the traditional mass media has taken a 180 degree shift. Digital media has brought it to the front seat with more control. Now, leaders can directly communicate with the society, without journalistic intervention, through their digital handles.

On one hand digital media gives people the liberty to communicate with each other and on the other it is also creating an environment of false sense of liberalization. The assessment of reality is required and the need of alternate media can't be ignored. The deconstruction of media text is dominated by the large and powerful media houses, political parties, and institutions. The political economy also plays a vital role. The big corporate houses are funding and lobbying through digital media in favour of their choice of political party. The last Presidential election of the USA is the latest example of this trend. This election can be classified as the "Deconstructed digital intervention through the media in mainstream politics".

Political movement and digital sphere:

There are several researches available where scholars have studied the impact of social media in political revolution in Arab countries. 'Jasmine revolution' is known for the fight against fascism with the help of Facebook and Twitter. This is happening all across the world. People

get to know about the wrongdoings via social media platforms, they start following and supporting the activists and this leads to creation of mass movement. Apart from the political movements, several social movements with the help of hashtags have been started. The famous #MeToo movement is one such example where women across the world took the social media and told their stories how they were mistreated and abused by the powerful.

The process of communication comprises of several elements among which 'source' is of utmost importance. Source is the place/person from where the information generates or originates. It can be controlled. Several scholars have discussed the different socio political and economical means to control the source as well as the information.

The internet, which is a widely accepted source of information, is based on networked communication and creates networked public spheres. It influences the democratic process owing to its reach. Polarization and populist discourses are easy to create with the help of digital media. Now the question is, are these factors really motivating citizens to involve in an ongoing process of political opinion making. In India, during 2011, the Anna movement was established with the help of digital media. It was just like the Egyptian revolution but a silent and peaceful protest across the country. There were hundreds of pages on Facebook about the movement, lakhs and lakhs of people were discussing and tweeting about this. This movement was special in several ways as no other social and political movement gained popularity in a very short span of time. It was the impact of this movement that then ruling party lost the general election of 2014. The digital media had set up the narrative and influenced people across country. In that election, digital media came parallel to the mainstream media and played a very vital role. The same phenomenon was repeated in Delhi state assembly election in 2015.

This has given momentum to digital media to function as an influencer where political parties directly or indirectly hold the chain of command in their hands.

The 'Occupy Wall Street' movement was also a politically motivated social movement that made headlines across the world. In 2019, the demand for democracy in Hongkong was also infused because of discussions and debates on digital space. This infers that one can use digital space to create chaos too.

In democracy, the need for participation is a mandatory element. However, in recent times, a few incidents tormented the image of internet as a tool of participatory communication. Edward Snowden's revelation and Cambridge analytica scandal has put the authenticity of the internet in jeopardy. The rise of right wing politics all around the world and effect of crony capitalism on democratic procedures is also a big threat. These populist approaches are making their way in people's mind and people are blindly following them. The need for rationalism and logic in discourse is dominated by mere fake facts and slogans. This implies citizens-in-delusion who do not think rationally and are nothing but voters for the political parties. The political movements are rather losing their credibility because of delusional people who have forgotten to analyze a situation and simply follow a trend for the sake of doing it. As we know for a movement to be successful, it must have an agenda as well as some directive principles and leader/leaders who understand the masses. In digital sphere, there is no uniformity of thoughts. People connect only because their opinion on that agenda matches with the cause. There is no filter or check point of participants. These can lead to chaos. The best example of this is the revolution in Egypt that was initially successful but failed to achieve the very goal which was to establish democracy.

Conclusion

In this era of data mining, the discourse about the pre-existing public sphere as defined by Habermas and the present scenario of digital public sphere is somehow correlated. The Habermassian model depends on the very thought that the discussion in the public sphere is

free from 'mediated communication'. However, it is a very idealist situation; far-fetched from reality. The political and social understanding of an individual is differs from one another. People can easily be manipulated as evident on digital platforms. Empirical research findings conducted by many scholars support these facts.

The concept of public discourse is very important because it helps in formation of opinion. Since the digital space is taking over the physical space, people are actively participating in online discussion forums, voicing their views on social media, writing open letters on an issue, posting photos and videos of incidents. They are free from 'journalistic intervention'. These actions collectively pave the path for the formation of public opinion.

Digital media platforms do influence people. Hence, playing a key role in shaping their opinion about a particular issue. Debates on the digital platforms certainly make an impact on people's mind. However, the rationality of any discussion on digital media is still doubtable as there may or may not be equal participation of people having entirely different views.

The biggest threat to this digital space is 'post-truth politics' and fake news. They are political propaganda and political parties are using it for their advantage. In a democracy, the discourse should be based on facts and people should have equal opportunity to raise their questions. Making 'trolling' a tool to suppress opposition's views diminishes the democratic structure of a society. In that case our democracy will become authoritative in nature.

The populist approach of political communication is the result of digital media as 'mediatization' of information has already taken place. The validation of misinformation is being done with the help of the media. Scholars across the world have been criticizing this phenomenon.

The digitally induced discussions are formatting the public opinion in favour of these political actors who are popularizing this approach of communication. The post truth politics makes a long term impact and remain a main influencing factor in the democratic institution.

The political economy in media and its interrelation with the public opinion making process is a dominating factor in political communication. The western world i.e. Europe and the USA are technologically far more advanced and literate than the Asian and African countries. Digital divide and media convergence are also affecting the political communication and public sphere in these countries. The socio economic strata and literacy should be considerable factors as in developing countries like India or Bangladesh, people easily believe on anything circulated to them through social media platforms rather taking time to fact check. This poses question for credibility of these information that ultimately leads to a situation where people easily forget the information received online over a period of time.

We need to focus to understand the interrelation among polarization, politics and public sphere. Polarization has taken place in the public sphere because of politically induced discourses which lead to radical thinking. The political actors are taking advantage of this polarization, thus bending the dimension of thought process of a society. Digital space is also helping them. As cyber pessimist have suggested that the digital media has given rise to the echo chamber and the objectivity and diversity of the online debate is questionable.

It is also observed that earlier people used to debate on the social media platforms without any prejudice but now they are debating and discussing things with their own preconceived notion. However, this does not mean that people have a pre decided political opinion. But they do start following a certain idea/ideology/leader with obedience and compliance (normative behaviour). For a democratic institution it's a very critical situation because the participation and responsibility of people as citizens will be affected.

There is no iota of doubt that the present Indian public sphere is highly influenced by the online communication trends. This implies that the patterns of discourses are shifting to the digital space. However, the wider impact of political debates on social media platforms is yet to be fathomed. This also opens a discussion about the scope of participatory democracy and

the relevance of its elements including equal opportunities to everyone, differences of opinion and a lot more.

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