

Revisiting New Media and the Cyber Public Sphere of Kerala

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Abstract

Today, we live amidst a digital, new media revolution. The new media have triggered revolution of a different genre in the country. Every technology with its own capabilities in terms of sound, image and live interaction has played a key role in transforming the media while replacing or subliming with the invention of newer or other media. The emergence of the internet has offered a digital platform that enables to interact with all the communication features – print, sound and videos. Social networking platforms such as Facebook and Google, blogs and microblogs like Twitter, content communities such as YouTube, collaborative content creation projects such as Wikipedia enhance the communication possibilities of people. Globally, the Arab Spring and Anna Hazare movement emerged victorious by dint of new social media like Twitter and Facebook. New media serve as the greatest manifestation of democratized media culture. The street campaigns of civil societies, anti-war campaigns etc. create a rhetorical public sphere according to Gerald Hauser. Truly, new media far surpasses any traditional media in terms of accountability and social vigilance.

Key words

New Media, Public Sphere, Social Media, Cyber Public Sphere.

Today the global mediascape is abuzz with a digital, new/social media revolution. Social Media is the most influential and unparalleled tool to share information, connect people across cultures and formulate opinions. The great debate kickstarted by Marshal McLuhan and Reymond Williams in the 60s and 70s focused on the role of technology and sociology in defining the cultural dynamics of media. Theodore Adorno and Walter Benjamin too have debated in 1940s about the democratization of culture industry. McLuhan vociferously opined that technology rather than sociology determined the cultural politics of media. This technological determinism faced the music of media critics. But Williams firmly believed in social constructionism rather than technology. But traversing through print, audio, visual media and reaching new media in the 1980s, the discourses on technology and social dynamics have become more relevant. But it seems paradoxical that a section of the new media which is an offshoot of technological revolution itself is termed as social media. Modern media can be categorized into traditional, industrial and mass media where as new media comprise computer-assisted media and the digital versions of modern media. The cultural politics of new media can be analysed only in the backdrop of

globalization, post-communist world order, extension of internet and other social, economical and technological factors.

A study conducted in Britain in 2002 revealed that as an edutainment medium, internet has acquired the third position behind television and radio. Meanwhile, newspaper and news magazine have been subjugated to fourth and fifth positions. Internet singlehandedly executes the functions performed by newspaper, television and radio. Truly, each traditional medium absorbs the user-friendly facets of internet and survives by virtue of it. With the advent of Facebook in 2004, the dimensions of social media have entered a new phase in its existence. In a span of 10 years, the number of Facebook members reached 155 crores. Consequently, popularity of online media has outwitted print media. The online media coupled with social media have jointly created a new political public sphere which defined the cultural contours of the first decades of 21st century. Truly, the new media have carved the cultural history of that quarter century punctuated by post-modernism, globalization and post-cold war world order. Generally, the 'new' concept in new media has been defined by two factors. On the one hand, it restructures the mass media character of modern media. New media communication is not at all a linear communication process involving one sender and so many receivers. Secondly, unlike modern media, new media have got its own social telecasting methods. Multimediality, hypertextuality, interactivity, convergence, immediacy, digitization and virtuality are its characteristic features.

The technological leaps in the field of communication, turning points in medical science, nuclear science etc., blog literature which proclaimed the death of a literary editor, online media which silenced the print media, electronic book-newspaper publishing, fully automated digitization, the unexplored realms of knowledge - experiences unraveled by research, the cyber underworld which defeats the world through religious fundamentalism to pornography etc comprise the prospects and dimensions of new media. Social networking sites form another parallel media sphere. Social media are computer-mediated tools which allow people to create, share or exchange information, career interests, ideas, pictures and videos in networks and virtual communities. Close on the heels of the technological revolution, the true democratization of media culture takes place in new media. Though modern media have been basically capitalistic and market-oriented, new media are cost-effective and extensive unlike legacy media like newspapers, magazines, books, radio, music and television. Several media studies have analysed the democratized media culture opened up by internet. Internet has revamped the traditional media, outwitted the space-time-geo-political limitations, overwhelmed the establishment sanctions and curtain-raised the media possibilities of participation and intervention. New Media brought forth a shift from modernity to post-modernity. New media effected a thorough replacement in the West of an industrial age of manufacturing by a 'post-industrial' age of information. It's a term which encapsulates broad cultural resonance rather than a narrow technical or specialist application. New media enhances the dissolving of national boundaries in terms of trade, corporate organization, customs and cultures, identities and beliefs.

According to media researchers, the greatest social impact of new media is the creation of a global political ambience for a liberal democracy. Stalwarts like Russel Newman defines new media in this backdrop. 'New media enables the democratization of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content through computer technology' (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, 322). This is nothing but the new media politics which is synonymous with cyber democracy, digital democracy, electronic democracy, participatory democracy etc. Douglas Kelner opines that new media have manufactured a post-modern democratic public sphere. Several new media researchers expostulate the varied and new dimensions of citizenship and formulate the possibilities of democratic consciousness unfurled by new media. Howard Rheingold argues that new media

challenges the governments which put the traditional media in fetters and executes citizen-oriented democracy (James Curran, 2006 : 278). Manuel Castells terms the post-modern new media world as 'network society' and argues for the social vigilance of new media rather than the dereliction of modern mass media which thrive on entertainment. This society has been 'structured in its dominant functions and processes around networks' (Castells 2000: 133). Castells believes that "it is open source, free posting, decentralized broadcasting, serendipitous interaction, purpose-oriented communication and shared creation that find their expression on the internet." The initial euphoria in the 1990s of those who saw the internet as a qualitatively different and egalitarian type of journalism , media, culture and politics faded. Frank Beacham who praised internet as a public sphere outside corporate or government control in early 1995 started lamenting the next year witnessing the plight of internet. Internet shifted 'from being a participatory medium that serves the interests of the public to being a broadcast medium where corporates deliver market-oriented information. Interactivity has been reduced to little more than sales transactions and email'. Even 'Fortune' magazine regrets about the objectives of internet. 'It's a far, far cry from the cherished vision of the internet as a public network involving the free exchange of ideas.' But we can never undermine the positive underpinnings of internet.

Edward S Herman and Robert McChesney have waged criticism against the monopolization of multinational media conglomerates like Google, Yahoo etc. Much criticism has been leveled against the various repercussions of internet. Ziauddin Sardar argues that in the West, the newest region to be colonized is cyberspace. Another major criticism in 2015 has been the issue of Facebook colonizing digital spaces. This happened after the controversy over net neutrality. Peter Golding enumerates three factors as enhancing the popularity of internet media. Enhanced democracy, empowerment of citizenry through information and through the availability of educational gadgets and improved communication among world populace. Golding blatantly blurts out that internet has changed the global village into digital market. He also believes that the economic discretions will gradually give way to cultural and political upheavals (Paul Morris, 2003, 809). Nonetheless, he brings forth a relevant proposition regarding new media. The question reveals that whether new media constructs electronic democracy or cyber individualism. It's a known fact that television had skyrocketed the hopes of tele-democracy. Golding also reminisces the changes accrued by the election process and politics through television campaigning which had evolved as an electronic referendum. In the domestic realm too, internet has been relevant for civil society. In India, a small tech-savvy intelligentsia used internet to record and debate the social issues of the time. Internet activism has been revealed in the online news portal, Tehelka, which conducted a series of sting operations in 2001 that exposed corruption in defence deals. As a consequence, the government launched extensive raids into the affairs of Tehelka, followed by legal procedures. Meanwhile, the mushrooming of cybercafés happened in the nooks and corners of India which helped the accessing of global pornography industry spurred by the internet. An internet law was passed in 2000 which instituted penalties for spreading or viewing pornography in India.

Peter Golding is also wary about the challenges faced by cyber democracy. Representational democratic institutions like trade unions, social groups, political parties, pressure groups etc face threats in the era of digital democracy. In such situations, representational democratic institutions will disappear resulting in a kind of mob/crowd democracy. The citizen-rebellions kickstarted globally by social media also face the same kind of criticism. New media institutions assert only the kind of democracy formed after digital literacy. Consequently, an individualistic political culture gets formulated. Digital divide is a concept which evolved out of the social experiences of new media. It has been in the mid-90s that Bill Gates prophesied the advent of an information super highway which

had been instigated by the dramatic overhaul created by Gutenberg through his printing machine. Gates envisioned this knowledge gateway as the regal highway of a new world order. But cyber society has been categorized into the private – public sectors who pay ransom to the information super highway owners, information hardware manufacturers, information software owners and information customers. But the civil society comprises people who are given entry into the information super highway and those who are denied permission into the information super highway.

Print and the early electronic media have disseminated communication as a linear progression from the sender to the receiver while television made it two dimensional. But new media have transformed the communication into the interactive mode. The primary structure of new media itself is interactive and the same message could be channelized to any number of receivers. Internet has even undermined television and emerged as a powerful mass medium with fantastic dimensions. In 1998 Matt Drudge had posted a message in his website. It has been regarding the unholy affair between Bill Clinton and an employee in White House and how 'Newsweek' had denied the publishing of the report. But the magazine retorted that it has been in search of more factual data. But the post sent by Drudge had shaken the global news world for two years. Truly, internet still intimidates the global news world. Internet has dramatically reduced the popularity of newspapers and emerges as the prominent medium for entertainment, knowledge and information. With the advent of broadband connectivity, internet enhances the news value of issues and events by sound and videos instead of still pictures. But the lion's share of the news in the internet does'nt consider news sources, authenticity of news, factuality of news, believability, privacy etc. But globally, it reigns supreme as a prominent news medium.

Genesis of Public Sphere

The most popular theory in the backdrop of social analytics is the theoretical construct 'public sphere' propounded by the German philosopher and social scientist Jurgan Habermas. Public sphere discussions got animated in the post-renaissance European capitalist societies. As a political analysis, it also triggered the social experiences created by print-oriented modernism. Habermas had explained the genesis of public sphere by explaining 'reason' as the foundation of wisdom and 'critical debate' as the base of democracy. In 1956, Habermas joined Frankfurt University as a researcher. But after having difference of opinion with the renowned Marxist thinker Max Hokheimer left the place. Meanwhile Habermas had submitted his doctoral thesis in the same university titled 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society'. But as Hokheimer has been staunchly against the opinions and standpoints of Habermas, he could'nt get his doctorate. Later he submitted the thesis in Marburg University where he applied for the post of Professor. The thesis created ripples in the academic circles of Germany in 1962 when it was published in book form. Nevertheless, Theodore Adorno invited Habermas to Frankfurt University in 1964 to take up the vacancy of Hokheimer and he adorned the academic chair till 1993. In 1989, Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence had translated the book into English and it became the cynosure of academic intelligentsia. Today the history, literature, media, sociology, political studies following the Marxist, post-Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, post-colonial stylistics cannot but depend on Habermasian public sphere. Habermas had meticulously initiated the discussions regarding the creation of public sphere in the 17th and 18th centuries in Germany, France and Britain. They had built up their public sphere based on several social echelons pertaining to sociology, history, politics, government laws, religion, philosophy, media, literacy movement, literature, economic structure etc.

Certain media critics argue that the new democratic culture mistaken as the creation of new media is actually the product of new journalism (David Hesmondhalgh, 2008). By weakening governments and by upholding civil rights, New Journalism had initiated consistent efforts to ensure people's participation in the democratic process. Television had ably supported this venture. Jeff Peary had named this tendency as 'critical professionalism'. If Watergate - Vietnam controversies and the media upsurges in Europe and Latin America can be viewed as a continuum of new media, political analysis as done by social networking sites would become easier today. The television news by questioning and challenging the power of governments has formulated a 'political-receiver society' which could be more creatively addressed by new media. Today, the new media have been eked out as the most vibrant genre of media activism. The Euro-American neo-liberal economic policies coupled with the Afro-Asian supremacy have made this a reality.

Miklos N Szilagyí had observed that 'the information revolution will change the political system automatically. The commercialization of computer networks will create a situation when everyone will be connected to everyone else with the ease of using a telephone today. In this environment, ideas will be exchanged free of charge and with the speed of light.' He opines that representative democracy will be collapsed and will be replaced by democracy of the information age. This new democratic politics created by cyber media has been termed as 'cyberspace democracy' by Ziauddin Sardar. Sardar observes that this situation is a byproduct of individualism and dissipation. Social Media web 2.0 has formed after the first wave of websites which exclusively provided information alone. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Henlin have defined Social media as 'a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. Social media comprise the rare communication spheres formulated by individuals to communicate their ideas and messages based on their interactive possibilities. Through technological, social and cultural revolutions, social media define the contemporary world order. It re-explores the world consciousness irrespective of national and regional boundaries.

Public Sphere of Kerala

The active participation of new/social media in the public sphere of Kerala deserves special mention. It's difficult to comprehend the public sphere without studying the politics and prospects of new media. The invention of printing and the monopolization of visual media have influenced the public sphere. It's high time we re-snatched the Kerala public sphere from the octopus-grip of media imperialism. Individual blogs, interactive media fraternity groups like Facebook, online journals which exerts influence on the political and cultural realms, news portals run by newspapers, news channels or independent agencies serve as the four broad spheres which recapitulates the politics of new media interventions of Malayalees. In the 21st century, new media complements the social, political thoughts and critical interventions purported through the print and visual media. Individual blogs which regularly problematizes the Malayalee life, individual and collective posts, comments, sharing etc in Facebook which creates political repercussions, those who unravel their varied life experiences, contemporary and academic interventions in the socio - political spheres, socially relevant civic campaigns etc serve as a cross - section of post-modern Kerala's cultural and political milieu. The increased presence of youth and women, the empowerment of dalit and subaltern societies, the anti-communal and secular attitudes, participatory democratic consciousness, the ever-vigilant social defence etc enhance the possibilities of the formation of a civil society in Kerala. The public sphere here on the one hand repletes with the multivocality of new media politics and on the other hand teems with religious and ideological fundamentalism and anti-dalit tendencies.

The online portals of mainstream newspapers like Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, Madhyamam and other dailies, news channels of Asianet, Reporter etc, independent news portals, cultural journals, Facebook pages of Free Thinkers, Right Thinkers, Krishibhoomi etc enrich the online, social media sphere of Kerala. The presence and influence of independent new media are more relevant than the new media interventions of print and electronic media. The reach of the new media editorials, features, articles, interviews, discussions, debates, columns, literary compositions etc is unimaginable. But the influence and power of the new media far surpasses the clout of print media. The continuous social media interventions of Sri Thomas Issac and Sri V T Balram (whatever be the topic) create repercussions in Legislative Assembly, in the top echelons of political parties, in the civic society and also in electoral politics. They along with other social media writers get thousands of likes, comments, shares and followers. New media have also ably popularized strikes like 'nilppu samaram', 'chumbana samaram' and other regional and national revolts. The Facebook page 'Munnar' had intervened culturally and ecologically in the social consciousness of Kerala. These interventions have been discussed even in the National Green Tribunal. The basic change effected by this technological media revolution is that Malayalee had become an indispensable part of the networked global society. The geographical boundaries and distances have become irrelevant as most of the popular new media writers are not residing in Kerala. Writers like Anand, Arundhati, Murali Thummarukudy, T T Sreekumar, Murali Vettathu, Dayal Karunakaran etc are examples. But they actively intervene in the public sphere of Kerala. New Media has a crucial role in the creation of a democratic, secular and cultural public sphere in the world.

The Habermasian concept of political public sphere exhibits the underpinnings visible from early missionary journalism to later political journalism. Based on the journalistic responsibilities of Swadeshabhmani Ramakrishna Pillai, Dr K N Panikker had initiated discussions on the formulation of a Malayalee public sphere. The most relevant social impact of political journalism gets manifested in public opinion according to Habermas. Swadeshabhmani tops the list of journalists who had been successful in creating this social impact. Even in the 19th century, Kerala had newspaper owners and journalists who sincerely proclaimed the responsibilities of newspapers in the formation and execution of public opinion. The interests of Devji Bhimji, the newspaper owner and Kandathil Varughese Mappilai, the newspaper editor in starting Kerala Mithram, in 1881 have been to wipe out the anomalies taking place in the Justice Depts of Kochi. The criticism leveled by G P Pillai through newspapers against the government has elevated him as the Father of Political Rebellions. The splendid trail of journalists from Chengalath Kunhirama Menon to Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and a host of other editors who led the National Movement have created a political public sphere which resurrected the ideals of modernism, democratic consciousness and nationalism in Kerala. The public sphere of Kerala comprises the communicative sphere punctuated by secularism, democracy, science, nationalism etc. Women and Dalits always constitute the subaltern public sphere. Here, the world of ideas and the societal representations have resulted in the formation of a peculiar public sphere. Nancy Frazer had employed the term 'subaltern counter public' to denote these downtrodden groups.

Habermas himself has enumerated the places of public discussions in Europe as saloons, coffee houses, clubs etc. Likewise in Kerala, barber shops, tea shops, reading rooms, factories etc served as places to form public opinion based on newspaper reading. Also, during the 1970s, drama halls, fine arts halls, cinema theatres etc have created a popular, democratic, cultural and modern public sphere. Today, the world and the public sphere have become wider with television talk shows, news discussions, blog debates, Facebook - Twitter campaigns etc. The possibilities of this post-modern public sphere demand serious analyses and debates.

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