

The Contested Space of Free Expressions in Cyber Media

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Abstract

Cyberspace has been emerged as a game changer in mass communication with its inherent strengths of hypertextuality and interactivity. It has been celebrated as 'new media' that can redefine and reshape forms of free expressions, democracy and politics. Several global incidents pointed at the revolutionary ways in which cyberspace can influence modern democratic discourses and even social transformations. However a cautious approach is imperative to understand this medium better as it is also vulnerable to ideological hegemony, capital interests and structures of power. Since most of the 'user generated content' is addressing to emotional self of the receivers often it dilutes the principles of rationality and benevolence. This paper is an attempt to discern the strengths and weaknesses of cyber media with the help of an exploratory enquiry of internet content and theoretical structures put forth so far.

Keywords

Cyber Space, New Media, Democratisation, Free Expression

Introduction

The characteristics and features of communication in cyber media have been debated and raised many questions on its ability to provide space for individual expressions, facilitate democratisation of public sphere and trigger collective public actions. Experiences of 'We are the 99%' uprising, 'Jasmine revolution' and 'Nirbhaya Movement' have demonstrated the power of instant information exchange through cyber space and asserted its significance in the readings of politics, economics and culture in 21st century. Since then, 'new media' has been celebrated as the catalytic agent that transformed the set agendas of traditional and elite media institutions into organic, dynamic and transparent elements in the democratic exchange of information. The prominent notion of disappearance of hidden spaces of vested interests and the increasing chances of public scrutiny has been perceived as the bonus points of digital media.

However, several instances have pointed at the pitfalls in these propositions. The hate campaigns rampant in social networking sites, unscrupulous use of the internet platforms to spread communalism, religious fanaticism, tarnishing of images of individuals, smuggling of sexism and racism in public discourses etc. have exponentially grown in internet. Powerful people have been using digital media to unilateral mass communication

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and thereby evading pertinent questions. The language has become abusive and intolerant to a great extent. In this context, it is important to look at how the inherent qualities of cyber media have been used to subvert the intended goals of democratization and free expression.

Internet: What is being Exchanged Freely?

The insurmountable amount of 'information' that has been exchanged through cyber media and the inability to process such large volumes of 'data' has paved the way for a sort of inaction or passivity among its consumers quite often. It doesn't mean that the exchanges of information have no role in further actions or thoughts. The word 'information' is always being associated with money, power and control. The controller or regulator of information can invade spaces of democracy, plurality and individual freedom if he/she desires to. In fact attempts of invasions were made on many occasions. Net neutrality as proposed by the founder of Facebook is nothing but expansion of the consumer base that is willing to share their personal self in a public domain. The social networking sites are actually sharing random thoughts of 'visible masses' and shaping up tailor made content which evokes emotional-not rational- responses and thereby reduce the public discourses to a chaotic absurdity. Information should not be distorted in this way. It is expected to attribute something worthwhile to individual lives, provide a sense of empowerment and freedom and initiate meaningful dialogues which ensure the progress and modernity. But, cyberspace has been instrumental in the near collapse of such aspirations and manufactures an illusory world where everyone has a notion of freedom.

The story of Kanhaiya Kumar, A JNU student who was framed as 'anti national' based on a video showing him sloganeering not in the best interests of the country is an eye opener in this regard. Later it was found that the video which was widely circulated in the web was carefully edited and packaged with a malicious intention to paint him as anti national. However, it also to be noted that Kanhaiya became an instant celebrity and motivating figure for millions who oppose the dominant right wing ideology. Several instances can be cited to show intolerant attitudes of people with vested interests using internet to spread lies and misinformation. Internet has truly become a platform for free exchanges not only information, but misinformation, lies and hatred. Its strengths of hypertextuality and multimediality have amplified these free exchanges. The never-ending journey from original text to hypertexts has created a labyrinth in which 'source' of the message has disappeared. The multimediality offered by the internet texts has dislocated the receivers from their ambience and made the text more complex to comprehend.

Challenges of Credibility

Information has become synonymous with 'interpretation' in the digital media world. All messages are being accompanied by its responses in the form of likes, shares, comments and other signs of expressions. These accompaniments can not only modify but alter the original content. It is not to be perceived as a bad practice as it opens up scope for more guarded presentations and accuracy of the messages. But it is not an everyday practice. Cyber armies can mute responses by bombarding misinformation as responses and derail the communication process itself. Sometimes interpretations are being presented as legitimate information and the speed with which it traverses through cyberspace does not allow a pause and relook on the content. This can invite chaos and catastrophe. Hence 'trust' and 'credibility' has become paramount in a meaningful information exchange process. How this can be ensured remains a question at large in the present context.

The Ecology of Message Formulation in Cyber Media

Carl Jung, in his psychoanalytic theory, has proposed that individual existence is based on rational and emotional responses. Rationality is manifested in thinking and feeling whereas emotional and irrational self is guided by intuitions and sensations. In the digital media context, the responses are more in line with the latter part of Jung's explanations. The knee jerk reactions found disproportionate spaces in networked communication. Indignation, anger, hatred, lust and hyper reactions found place in such discourses. These factors have diluted the democratic space in cyber media and the consequences of encountering such bullish treatment dither the users from meaningful engagement with the media and its messages. However, the ecology is compelling enough to attract them to media as they are also more prone to sensations and intuitions.

The Rise of Individualism

In conventional terms, society is regarded as a living organism and media as nutrients to ensure the healthy growth of mankind. The collective sense of society has gradually become obsolete in cyberspaces, a term coined by William Gibson in his novel 'Neuromancer'. Cyberspace paved the way for libertarian utopianism (Naughton, 2012). It often discarded archaic social norms and practices and detested mechanic discipline. It sought freedom and free expressions and engaged the digital 'immigrants' (Prensky, 2001) with vehemence. It created networks rather than collectives; networks which required synergy in thoughts and allowed personal choices. All these have contributed to the rise of individualism in cyber space and not necessarily in actual life. Any efforts to curb the advantages of individualism were seen as an intrusion to liberty. That is the reason why US government's effort to control cyberspace through 'Communications decency act (1996)' was meted out with the following sharp rebuke by John Perry Barlow. He wrote: 'Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it. . . you cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions.'

Although many found it uncomfortable, individualism and its manifestations in cyberspace is imperative in the globalised environment since the preservation of older values and beliefs have become increasingly challenging and cumbersome. The rise of individualism and the chaos associated with it may create a social ecology in which questions are allowed and answers are welcomed.

The curious case of 'Dinkoism' (Dinka religion) in social media is an intriguing example for the individual manifestations in social media. Dinkoism is an absurdist humour by a group of youngsters from Kerala through Facebook as a reaction to religious fanaticism, cultural hegemony and moral policing. The name was inspired from a character in one of Kerala's children's magazine and the group severely ridiculed the hypocrisy of political parties, social leaders and the corrupt cultural norms. This platform has created a space for free thinking individuals who despise the inhumane and profit driven social system. So long as the credibility of the proponents of this idea is not questioned, it gets more and more acceptance. However, the 'Kiss of Love' campaign initiated in social networking sites has given a different experience. Many intellectuals, feminists and liberals associated with this movement and countered the moral policing of another section who tried to impose their values of kiss and hugs in society through violent means. However, the kingpin of the movement lost his credibility when he was involved in sex racket police case. His motive of the campaign was questioned and the idea was under shadows.

Individualistic assertions in cyberspace are easy to launch. However, the sustenance of such assertions depends on the future course of actions and events and nobody will get enough time to explain his/her position in a dicey environment.

Democratisation and Cyber Space

The global events mentioned in the beginning of this paper have opened up avenues to celebrate cyberspace as a democratising agent in socio political scenario. The heroic deeds of Wael Ghonim through his Facebook activism of triggering Egyptian revolution in 2010 and Salam Pax, an independent blogger from Baghdad who illuminated the realities of both Saddam Hussein regime and subsequent US invasion were cited as the social change an individual can bring in through cyber space. It is true that aspirations of democracy have been growing ever since the networking of like-minded people. And social networking sites are the instruments of such networking. However, the gradual occupation of powerful elites in the cyber space has raised fresh questions on its ability of democratisation and social engagement. Lack of trained and honest 'gatekeepers' in cyber media have given an opportunity for them to connect to the masses in their own terms and in their own frames of reality.

The 2014 general elections in India was marked with cyber warfare and careful interventions by the right wing political arms in the internet platforms and it paid huge dividends in the form of whopping majority. Effective use of cyber space evaded questions and became instrumental in attributing a cult status to the 'PM in waiting'. Narendra Modi himself resorted to tweets than press conferences or sound bytes and shied away from confronting traditional media. Since then he never addressed a press conference and used Twitter and Radio for his mass engagement. The success of this strategy was apparent and the bandwagon effect was pronounced in the actions of other political leaders as well. This phenomenon can also be viewed as a de-democratisation of media discourses. In sum, social or other cyber media is not immune to the hegemonic influence of powerful elites who have control over society and its polity.

Alvin Toffler, in his book, 'The Third Wave' (1980) wrote;

'The mass audience seems to disappear, apparently being replaced by individual media users. In the post industrial society the power is shifting from the producers of message to the audience/consumers'.

He coined a term 'demassification' to depict this power shift and the idea of collective of anonymous, heterogeneous individuals who were loosely bound with a common goal- mass- has been replaced and a new form of networked individuals emerged. Does this strengthen the free expressions and democracy? Yes, it does, if the source is not caught or thrown into oblivion in the labyrinth of networks and if the source can withstand the fierce counter currents of feedback in an honest, factual and rational atmosphere.

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