Civil Society and Public Sphere in the time of Social Media: From Rational youth to Emotional Youths.

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Abstract

As the popularity of social media has increased rapidly in the past few years, this platform, which was first known for mere socializing purposes among friends, has now become an important element of public sphere creating an influential ground for the public to discuss and put forth their opinions particularly on the matter of governance. The core issue to this is that, in social media one has no boundaries to their opinion and hence, emotions tend to erode their capability of rational arguments. In recent years, even the educated youths of the country have been doing the same, initiating debates and discussions based on emotions and not on rationality. This research paper takes Facebook as a virtual ethnographic field and aims to understand and analyze this issue that disrupts with the quality of the public sphere.

Introduction

The unrestricted domain of social media has given voice to some fearless ideas, opinions and interests of political issue by the society, which can thereby become a force to reckon with for civil society movements. Although, in contemporary democratic India, citizens have the right to freedom of speech and expression under the article 19 (1) (a) of constitution, which facilitates flow of emotion, expression and opinion from one individual to another, but it is no doubt that this can also have a negative impact if the ideas are not articulated rationally.

The concept of public sphere has a wide understanding. In terms of sociological approach to the study, it is important as to analyze the role of public sphere in correlation to cultural behavior and political behavior. This correlation is what we strive to understand with the help of data collected from Facebook. With the development of Facebook as a communication technology, the conceptual understanding of public sphere and public opinion needs to be reevaluated. Communication in this digital field needs to be explored. It has never been this easy for the masses to join together to form their opinion and make them public as it is now during the times of social media but along with this political freedom, the public should be educated and civilized, in a way that they are socially aware to discus events that are related to the public's interest.

To locate the study, this paper takes the theory of *Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989) and emphasizes on its relevance in new media. Furthermore, several selected literature work which

uses social media particularly Facebook as their ground for data collection will be reviewed. This will highlight the significance of the field of social media and make way for our objective in understanding the shift from rational participants to emotional participants.

The Relevance of Public Sphere

The importance of internet has taken the understanding of public sphere to a new level, one which needs to be understood in a form of synergy. With the coming up of institutions like new media eg. Youtube, Facebook and many more, all of these elements are emerging as a major medium of expression and are of utmost relevance to the field of public sphere. In the past few years even the important people in the field of politics can be seen taking these elements of new media into their perception.

Habermas's (1974, 1989) work and ideas has been taken significantly for understanding the idea of Public *Sphere*. To understand the concept of civil society and public sphere, one needs to understand the situation in which these concepts were born. To begin with, during the feudal era, the very meaning of public and private was absent. During those times, the king was the public and the private. The concept of public was born during the 18th century, where there was a new space created and that space was used for public dialogue, specifically engagement between people of high reputation on the issues which were important for the polity of the state. This is where coffee houses played a very important role. This without deliberation, automatically accelerated the very idea of 'modern', including the modern nation state, civil society, political concepts like secularism, and so on, which gave birth to public debates and discussions. This further led to the emergence of 'common': a common interest or a common matter.

The idea of Public sphere as a part of social life is a space where citizens can discuss and exchange their view on the matter of common interest or a common matter which is of common good, this then leads to the formation of Public opinion which can further incite political actions. Earlier it was geographical spaces, as mentioned for example: The coffee house but now gradually with the innovation of new technology and new media, especially social media, things have changed. Now we have new domains where these discussions are taking place and it is important for the state to understand and analyse these discussions as to understand the opinion of the people, the opinion of the masses. These opinions are extremely important for any democratic state as these are the channels for communication between the civil society and the state. This sphere first started forming roots in the history with the emergence of media like pamphlets and newspapers, which first started merely to regulate the news among the people and later went on to dealing with public opinions.

The significant change was the emergence of bourgeoisie in Europe; these were the middle class people who had the time and education to engage in the political social debate. They began to use these newspapers to critique and forward the needs of the bourgeois society to the state. Whereas, In the Indian context, the significance of news media grew as a process of anti-colonial struggle but gradually got into the realm of capital production. Hence, we can see how this sphere is

always evolving and so it is very important to understand the dynamics of this theory, especially when it comes to it being applied on a democratic nation (Habermas 1974: 52).

The important element to be understood in this theory of public sphere is that the public does not only make their opinions known but also generates important political debates, giving it so much of power that it becomes an important element of democracy. This is how the state can understand the minds of the people and reformulate their policies. The very success of this public opinion depends on the autonomy of the Public Sphere. No one in power including the state should be able dominate or control it (Habermas 1989: 178). Along with this the extent of the access to the public sphere i.e. an equal excess to the public sphere is also a factor of its success. For any given reason, if a caste or class are not able to excess the public sphere and put forth their opinions than the opinion of the society as a whole will not be successfully reflected. Hence, how much space is given to a particular sector in the public sphere can very much define the very nature of the public sphere.

One of the very important elements for the success of Public Sphere which is also significant for understanding for our research paper is that of the 'quality' of the public sphere. This depends on how people who are participating are articulating their debates. It should ideally be on a rationally worked out arguments. In the world of internet and social media, majority of the people are able to access the public sphere and make their opinions public, this can unfortunately have a negative impact on the quality of the public sphere. Social media allows you to have emotionally inclined opinion and often when the debates are formed on emotions; it becomes personal to the individual and can easily lead way to abuse and violence and decline a person's rational capacity. On the other hand, many a times a rationally articulated argument may also be conceived in a wrong manner due to one's personal view. This is what our research paper strives to analyse, keeping the educated youth as the focus as these are the new voters in a universal franchise democratic country like India, who are going to define the very political culture of India for the coming few decades.

Literature Review and Research Gap

To understand the correlation between social media and how it has been used as a source of methodology in this era where virtual communication plays a significant role. There are several literature work related to this issue and we have analysed few selected work where we highlight the use of social media as a ground for data collection, making it a virtual ethnographic field. The following work comprises of original research on the usage and power of social media in social revolutions, political campaigns, electoral marketing and other political activities all over the world.

The world has been digitally divided so there is presence of politics parties online reaping the benefits of social media for example, internet in general and social media in particular facilitate better interaction, communication between politicians and common people. However, it is more like information are being passed from politicians to general public and not the other way round.

Simultaneously, the competition between political parties has also been increased because now even the smaller political organizations with the help of social media can highlight their presence among the public and enables citizens to get a better knowledge of their political agendas as well as political engagement which might lead to maximum number of people stepping out to vote for respective political parties. Social media like television, facebook, twitter and radios are being used by these political groups to promote their campaign by making political based advertisements.

One of the first systematic or comparative studies on online political parties was run in the Europe in the year 2009 where they compared the presence of parliaments and political parties online across all European member countries (Lucia 2012). The report focus on how these political parties made use of their websites. In order to address this investigation, six evaluating indicators were created: user friendliness, present of networking tools, information provision, bilateral activity, multilateral activity and parties' potential of mobilization. Conclusion was that all these political parties used websites mainly for spreading information about their agendas, activities and other claims. Nevertheless, this analysis is supposed to be pretty different from the contemporary scenario as social media has become more powerful and more accessible to everyone in today's world.

To understand the impact of social media all around, it is important that we remember the fact that it has a wide outreach. To understand this, we look into a study that takes a survey of 200 students from the University of Narowal, Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019). This study investigates how online political activities impact political efficacy and real-life political participation and sheds light on the relationship between political activities and political awareness among university students in rural Pakistan.

This study uses quantitative survey method and with the help of a questionnaire consisting of close ended questions analysis has been done. In this study, online activities were used as the independent variable, and political efficacy and real participation were the dependent variable. The results of the study determined that online media has a significant influence on university students. It creates political efficacy among all the respondents. The selected sample of university students actively use online media and were better informed about government happenings. The usage of Facebook was found to be a common platform used to communicate with politicians and local candidates, thus making social media play an important role in political efficacy and real participation even in the rural areas. The results particularly show that Pakistan's rural youth, especially students, are very active on social media platforms to participate online and offline in protests and rallies.

To look at another aspect of Social media in creating communities and campaigns we look at the Albanian research which focuses on the formation of virtual communities and virtual communications with the help of social media which in turn helps with the discussion or debates held against a political action or a certain problematic decision (Cela 2015). This particular

research talks about the well-spread news about the dismantling of the chemical weapons of Syria which took place in Albania causing a strong reaction in the public opinion. Taking the help of facebook, a community organized a campaign which in turn was joined by a large number of people. The facebook page aimed at dismantling of the chemical weapons in Albania by organizing protests. As a result this opinion reached the higher level of acceptance from a wide class of society. The government was forced to reject this project due to the strong opposition from the public opinion in order to refuse the request made from the American government to dismantle these weapons in the Albanian territory. The official profile of the Albanian prime minister on facebook was full of comments and criticism which were related to this matter that forced the prime minister to pay a bigger attention to clarify the users on the facebook than the ones who spoke in the television.

Taking this example the research tries to link a connection between the social media and E-public discussions which serves as an alternative public sphere where the public opinion is shaped, having direct impact on their behavior in non virtual reality. A continuous increase was seen in the social network users while simultaneous decline in number of newspaper users concluding the new emerging era of information communication.

Another interesting work to look at is a Hong Kong based study that examines the role of social media during the Umbrella Movement that lasted from September to December 2014. The research was done using random sampling method, where 1011 respondents went through telephonic interviews before the end of the Umbrella Movement.

This protest began on the evening of 28 September 2014, when police fired tear gas to clear the crowds that assembled around Hong Kong Island's Admiralty. However, this intervention prompted many more people to come out in support of the students' protest against the decision of the Chinese central government to put obstacles in the way of blocking the election of democrats as Chief Executive of Hong Kong chief executive in the scheduled 2017 universal suffrage. This grew into a 79 day popular uprising known around the world as the Umbrella Revolution. International reports named it the Umbrella Revolution, as the protesters used only umbrellas and soaked towels to shield themselves from the pepper spray and tear gas from the police.

The findings found that social media in the protest movement had grown into an insurgent public sphere. Data showed that acquiring political news through social media was positively linked to supporting the Umbrella Movement and adversely affected by the satisfaction and confidence of existing political authorities, including the Government of the Special Administrative Area of Hong Kong, including the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government, the Hong Kong police, and the Chinese central government.

This resistance was a leaderless movement as every participant was equal, no hierarchy or common ideology was adhered to. Bennett (2012) called this phenomenon "do-it-yourself" politics, as he observed the new form of collective action "displayed openness to individual-level

innovation aided by clear avoidance of formal organization, leaders, collective identification, divisive ideology, or hierarchy" (Bennett 2012: 30).

The final conclusions of the study were, first, social media enables the autonomous construction of social networks controlled and guided by their users (Castells, 2012). Second, interpersonal discussion on public issues enhances political participation (McLeod et al., 1999). Third, social media not only help to activate latent ties that may be crucial to the mobilization of networked publics, but also enables expression and information sharing that liberates the individual and the collective imagination (Papacharissi, 2014).

Along with these perspectives of social media, one that is a key factor for our research paper is how social media has become a ubiquitous medium for discussing moral ideas along with the political ideas. Moral emotions are the key reasons for the spread of moral and political ideas in online social networks. Moral emotional language is known to increase diffusion more strongly within liberal and conservative networks and less between them. People are exposed to moral and political ideas through social networks, expanding models of Social influence and group popularization as people become increasingly immersed in social media networks. Emotion has been very important in the social transmission of moral ideas.

Social Media has changed the course of numerous political events. We further look into a research that was conducted in accordance with the New York University (Brady et al., 2017) which found that morally outraged tweets tend to be widely retweeted within their political spheres. This research also studied several tweets about controversial political topics like gun control, climate change and same sex marriage and they found that time and again moral emotional language had a significant impact on how far a message spread.

The available literature work that has been analyzed highlights the use of facebook as a common ground for data collection. Although it seems to understand the users and the platform from a general aspect but it lacks in understanding the users on a personal level. It seems to analyze a profile on the basis of mere numbers and forgets that every profile accounts for an individual with personal views and opinions and emotions which play a major role in the formation of the public sphere in this era of new media. Therefore, this research paper strives to understand the intentions of the people and so it qualitatively analyzes the data in both rational and emotional perspective. This will make us understand what is beyond those numbers and give us a clear insight on the roots of how everything surfaces on the public sphere created by social media.

Statement of the Problem and Research Question

This research paper is an attempt to look at how rational discussion in public sphere in the time of social media is getting eroded with emotional matters thus distorting the very base of rationality. The study takes Facebook as our source of data collection to analyze how rational based discussions are getting changed into emotional based discussion among the educated youth and .The central questions which we aim to answer with this paper are as follows:

➢ Can the people on Facebook constitute as civil society?
➢ If it does so, are the discussions which are carried on Facebook approached in a rational way?
➢ Are the educated youth supporting a particular ideology or political party due to their development agenda or their emotional message?

The answers will be qualitatively assed by understanding whether the post shared for political parties by the students has positive or negative emotional or non-emotional political messages that might influence citizen's emotions toward them. Whether these emotions affect any of the politically relevant outcomes and whether the effects differ for citizens with varying political ideologies. All of these queries and more in-depth qualitative analysis will be done with the data collected by the group members and the final conclusion will be drawn according to the outcome of the research study.

Methodology

For this research paper, we will be using social media in order to analyse the connection between the rational and emotional discussions taking place in the online platform. Our focus is to analyse and understand how the youth are engaged in the political debate through the use of social media and how the rational based discussions are changing to emotional based discussions.

This paper will be using qualitative method of analysis as it will be required to evaluate people's view and understanding on the political issue that we will be focusing on. For the sample, we will be considering 50 educated youths ranging from ages 18 to 25. All the samples will be randomly selected amongst our friends studying in Delhi University. The required data will be collected online through Facebook. This data will comprise of their recent written and pictorial posts and views concerning the present political scenario of the country. We have targeted university students as they are the new voters and they will be defining the very political culture of India for the coming few decades.

The data collected will be evaluated and analysed to answer the research questions mentioned earlier. This will be done thoroughly by explanations using a Q&A format and photographic images to interpret their political arguments. This will lead us to the conclusion of whether the students are increasingly participating in emotional over rational discussions and debates.

Report Outline

This report has been divided in five Sections. The first one being Introduction, as the word implies, it introduces us to the keywords of this research paper which is social media, public sphere and public opinion. It further points out the problem that this research paper is based upon. The Second section, The Theoretical framework highlights the theory of Public Sphere Propounded by Jurgen Habermas (1989), which acts as a base of our research paper. His extensive work on public sphere helps us understand the dynamics of this idea with the help of historical timeline. The Third Section, The literature review analyses certain case studies done

with a similar idea of public sphere and social media as a source for data collection. This further helps us to locate the research gap which this paper aims to put forth, which is the lack of personal and emotional perspective while dealing with data's collected through social media. The fourth section, the Question and Objective states the fundamental questions which our paper strives to answer and put forth our objective and our purpose in doing so. The fifth section is the methodology which describes our process of virtual data collection through Facebook and the individuals that will be observed for the purpose of this research paper.

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