NEW MEDIA AS THE NEW TOOL OF DEMOCRACY

ANURAG SAHU[*]

ABSTRACT

Public opinion is the fundamental of democracy. Now it's the new media which controls public opinion. So, whoever controls the new media controls the country. Democracy has been proved as the best form of administration in the world and the mass communication media are the connective tissues of democracy. They are the principal means through which citizens and their elective representatives communicate in their reciprocal efforts to inform and influence. New media is playing a potential and innovative role in democratic politics. Defining the role of new media in democracy now requires hard thought and formulations. Old assumptions on the traditional forms of mass communication are no longer enough to explain the complexities. An important obstacle to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the new media and democratic political process has long been the lack of an integrated research agenda. Compartmentalization and fragmentation have resulted not only from the scattering of scholars among different academic disciplines that rarely interact with one another, but also from a puzzling and seemingly unnecessary bifurcation into distinct schools of analysis. Do the social media really change political attitude and behavior or do the political parties reinforce them? Do they differ in their political impact? Are all individuals equally susceptible to new media influence? These are among micro level questions in today's time. A second and contrasting tendency has been for scholars to be more distinctively macro in focus. Studying the structure of media systems and how these systems affect politics. Among the systematic characteristics, we usually examine the pattern of government regulations, media ownership pattern, programme content, audience structure and viewership details. This paper is an attempt to make a micro analysis of the relationship of new media and democracy and its impact on Indian election system.

KEYWORDS: New media, Democracy, Social Media.

INTRODUCTION

The country is controlled by laws; laws are controlled by politicians. Politicians are controlled by voters; the voters are controlled by public opinion. And today the public opinion is controlled by new media. So, whoever controls the new media controls the country. Today the same finger tip continues its power in operating the Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) as well as in shaping democracy.

[*]Assistant Professor, Sambad School of Media and Culture, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Correspondence E-mail Id: editor@eurekajournals.com

Historically, the media were born as organs of the people against feudal oppression. In Europe, they played a major role in transforming a feudal society into a modern one. Everyone is aware of the role of the print media played in preparing the people for, and during, the American and French Revolutions, as also in Britain. The only medium at that time was print, and writers such as Russeau, Voltire, Thomas Paine, Junious and John Wilkes used it in the fight against feudalism and despotism. We know about the stir created by Thomas Paine's pamphlet Common Sense during the American Revolution, and by Junious' letters during the reign of the despotic George III in England. The media has been a powerful tool in the hands of the people, whoever controls the power. They could not express themselves through the established organs of power, which were in the hands of feudal and despotic rulers. Hence the people had to create organs that would serve them.

Democracy has been proved as the best form of administration in the world and the mass communication media are the connective tissues of democracy. They are the principal means through which citizens and their elective representatives communicate in their reciprocal efforts to inform and influence. Today we see a drastic change in the form and impact of media in human life. Today, the traditional or mainstream media is empowered by its supplement form of existence, which we call as New Media.

Innovations in technology, particularly in digital media, increasingly are changing the way people use Media, Entertainment & Information (MEI) services. More than this, the very fabric of daily life is being altered. People are interacting and connecting with each other in different ways. Their sensibilities and psychologies are changing. Blurring boundaries between private and professional lives and the hunger for immediate information are driving online connection time. Trust in individuals' relationship with digital media has become an increasingly prominent issue. In some ways, new generations are leading the evolution in changing behaviour, but in others, older generations are "catching up" surprisingly quickly. The greater use of digital media today is changing people's everyday lives and the way they connect and collaborate in the broader societal context, at work and in civil society. The power of social media is virtually untameable. The advent of social media has shrunk the world to what Marshall McLuhan once termed as 'global village".

Today we realize the existence and importance of new media in every aspect of our life and the study of social and political science are no exception to it. New media is playing a potential and innovative role in democratic politics. Defining the role of new media in democracy now requires hard thought and formulations. Old assumptions on the traditional forms of mass communication are no longer enough to explain, what is happening is so many societies, all saying they are democratic, but carrying out their social compact different ways. Whilst no longer "new" as communication technologies, the World Wide Web and its concomitant array of social media platforms, such as Face book, Wikipedia, Youtube and Twitter continue to stimulate our collective imaginations for strengthening democracy and/or fears of oppression through surveillance. It is hardly more than a platitude to say that the new media plays an important role in the political process. As because freedom of speech and expression has been thought a necessary safeguard in a democratic society, the responsibility of new media became more complex and critical. Each election year renders these truths more self-evident. The increased importance of the social media in the political process brings out an ambiguity in its role. The first wave of enthusiasm for internet-based vision of digital democracy was largely predicted up on the desire to produce virtual public spheres. Democratic governance was contended and can be significantly improved through the open and

equal deliberation between citizens, representatives and policy makers afforded by the new information and communications technologies. The wide-spread use of the Internet for social networking, blogging, and video-sharing has an elective affinity with participatory democracy. This emerging sense has been fuelled by the world wide adoption of social media platforms by politicians, political activists and citizens as a means to engage organize and communicate their views. Further support for the democratizing capacity of this new generation of networked media technologies have been provided by its use for opposition and protest in the Middle East during the spring 2011.

Traditionally, the mass media has been conceived as an observer-ideally, a neutral observer of the political scene. On this view, the media is part of the political process but it stands outside. But events of the last few decades have demonstrated the inadequacy of this view. The media, particularly the new media is one of the primary actor on the political scene, capable of making or breaking political careers and issues. Despite so many setbacks, digital democracy is fresh wave of technological optimism which has more recently accompanied the advent of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, wikis and blogosphere. The distinctiveness of this second generation of Internet democracy is the displacement of the public sphere model with that of a networked citizen centered perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political space. The openness of social media platforms facilitates the individual potential that becomes the source of new innovations and ideas in democratic practices. The "interactive" possibilities of social web practices are leading to different kinds of representations and construction of truth. The construction of truth will probably follow two modes; the "Truth" as propagated as fact by

corporate media and political parties, another truth is the idea that emerges from sociability of new pathways of sharing knowledge. The desire and longing for truth expressed by public demands for media accountability in tension with the co-existing recognition of the slipperiness of meaning and mortality.

In general we come across so many optimistic claims for political benefits of social networking, which are in sharp contrast to much of the mainstream academic discourse surrounding the prospects for digital governance. We find more pessimistic accounts of the disengagement of citizens, particularly young ones with democratic politics. Poor voters' turnout, declining membership of political parties and negative opinion polls about representatives are trottoted out with monotonous regularity as indicators of the poor health of the democracy. Moreover, this is not the first time we heard utopian claims for digital democracy that later had to be revised or even rejected. Perhaps imbued as we are with a view that demographic politics is sleazy, corrupt and self-serving. We should not be surprised if some commentators are apt to seek the perceived empowering functionality of social media as a means to facilitate stronger versions of democracy.

An important obstacle to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the new media and democratic political process has long been the lack of an integrated research agenda. Compartmentalization and fragmentation have resulted not only from the scattering of scholars among different academic disciplines (mainly Sociology, Political Science, Social Psychology and Communication) that rarely interact with one another, but also from a puzzling and seemingly unnecessary bifurcation into distinct schools of analysis. One scholarly approach has been for media analysts to adopt a micro perspective in their focus on the questions of how, in what ways the new media matters. They have restricted themselves to investigations of the individual-

level effects of political communications, usually during election campaigns. Do the social media really change political attitude and behavior or do the political parties reinforce them? Do they differ in their political impact? Are all individuals equally susceptible to new media influence? These are among micro level questions in today's time. A second and contrasting tendency has been for scholars to be more distinctively macro in focus. Studying the structure of media systems and how these systems affect politics. Among the systematic characteristics, we usually examine the pattern of government regulations, media ownership pattern, programme content, audience structure and viewership details. Some scholars have employed this approach in the study of media communication in non democratic regimes, while others have sought to draw interference about how the structural characteristics of the media system affect the distribution of political power in democracies or to bemoan the normative implications of the allegedly "liberal", "conservative" or "capitalist" bias of the mainstream media.

Very few researches have been made on the macro and micro prospective to examine the reciprocal relationship between new media and politics of democracy and democratization. As a result, our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of this relationship are underdeveloped. "Being social" off course is an old idea. The social networks which people were familiar with before the wired networks arrived were aggregating in a town square, going door to door to spread message in a neighborhood, trumpet to gather a group, public meetings for fixing a problem or a town hall to discuss leadership. Today the approach to campaign in any election, campaign any social cause or seeking opinions has similarly moved to new platforms. Digital strategies are central to planning political rallies and elections. Party manifestoes are no longer conspiracies of a coterie but laid bare in public eye. Canvassing

demands a party's interactive presence on social platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Pinrest, Youtube, Google plus and others. The public, once the outsiders, are now privy to a party's thought process. There is very little room to bungle up as every enunciation is analyzed and commented upon. Politics today isn't just about getting elected. It's also about getting socially elected. We have moved beyond just the traditional rallies, tents, hoardings, naarabazi, boom box that surrounded every election. The people's promise, their social endorsement is what parties jostle for. Politicians are aware that they now must gratify people in both real and virtual worlds. Social media connects people, gets them talking and sharing; allows campaigners to know the voters, target specific audience, splice demographics, mobilize support and urge to participate. When some of these people, otherwise part of the audience, get actively engaged in political debates, they become a great tool to spread the word and influence opinions. Irrespective of campaigning and hash tag wars, the real impact of technology has been in sensitizing and popularizing voter registration among the youth. Politicians who are on social media have a better connection to their potential or existing audience than those who are'nt. Social media grants the power to bring about change. Social media grants the power to lead, to follow. Indeed it carries the seed of change. There is no doubt that the new media has become a pervasive force of impact and influence. It is changing the world's way of consuming information.

Creation and maintenance of a favorable image is an essential function of public relations and social media is emerging as an important weapon in this image management armoury. The social media environment provides an opportunity to reach out to a variety of public in a more intimate and interactive way especially in the case of political image management. Social media accounts of celebrities serve as a medium to blur the

boundaries between the public and private spheres of their lives and content posted on these accounts also serves as a credible source of information for mass media. Number of advantages that social media offers to the practice of public relations include ; highly targeted approach, filters to reach out to influencers, embedded promotional message in content, innovative ways to reach out to mainstream media and public, accurate evolution and many more. One of the prime advantages of social media is also its viral nature. Posts, tweets, images and content generated by an individual is shared across the globe in short span of time that increases the reach of the message manifold and alongside lends credibility to the content that is generated by an individual but promoted by number of influencers and publics.

What India is witnessing today, the United States had already seen it 5 years ago, when Barack Obama stood against the formidable power and combined charm of the Clinton and own. Obama's team adopted social media and data analytics, analyzed social media barometers and crafted ideas to appropriate media from Face book to twitter to public forums in 2012. Its amazing how social media made icons of new bies, produced new election experts, announced candidature, declared poll results, exposed politicians and even brought many down.

People of India struggled hard for representative's form of democracy during independence movement. Only a very small fraction of the adult population was granted voting right due to unreasonable qualifications laid down by the British Government. Therefore, demand for enfranchisement of every adult person in the country was raised from time to time during freedom struggle.

The election in India is a humungous exercise and often referred to as the "greatest show on earth" not merely because of the scale, size and diversity of the whole exercise but because of the vibrant volatility of the Indian democracy. In India people are the propelling force, the fuel of India's electoral democracy. Among all other elections in India, Parliamentary Election or General Election is a grand stage in the fulfillment of the ideal democracy outlined in the Indian constitution.

Now-a-days, Election is not only to cast one's vote, but is also known as an exercise of faith for the Indian citizen. People's loyalty towards the democratic framework of India has equally enhanced and deepened with every successive election. It is the singular way through which the Indian voter can fully realize the value of their vote and the power of the ballot. The attitude of the voters towards the election is also changing with the time. The voters of first general election in 1952 were very simple compared to the voters of 2019, who are far more politically aware and alert. The political system of India has also undergone some dramatic changes in the long journey of India. Each of the 16 general elections has been special, though some are more significant than others. The first election was obviously a landmark one-a leap in the dark for a country that many western commentators were convinced would rapidly disintegrate. Nineteen Seventy seven election (1977) was a historic election as well-aftermath of the emergency, which restored public confidence in democracy and was a resounding rejection of creeping dictatorship. Today we are on the threshold of our Seventeenth general election.

The last few years have showcased the power of social media through the widespread exchange between people of India about causes, issues, debates and politics. It has had the effect of extracting the political bone in every citizen. It is given every Twitter handle and Face book user the power of opinion and expression. The rising interest of Indians in social media got politicians sitting up and taking notice because a majority of those on Twitter, Face book and other streams are people below the age of 35 years. Engaging with this demographic will be central to any

political strategy in the country. Seeing these trends, political parties have been forced to raise their social media skills to join the digital spree. In August 2013, Congress had organized its first formal effort towards such "Social upliftment" and gathered its state and national leaders under one roof to understand and strategize the social media voice. BJP and other political parties were also organized such social media upliftment workshops in the national capital as well as at other parts of the country to make their party workers aware of the digital avenues for campaigning. Political parties are slowly learning the nuances of the social media game. The hash tags are planned. The speeches are integrated for Tweets. Politicians realize that the public is now actively a part of the political mindshare or seeking it. A phone user with a camera is a journalist and any Twitter is a sort of a self proclaimed editor. Social media is changing politics as we have seen through ages. New columnists have emerged and writing has become the bastion of one and ll. Social media sets the narrative in two ways ; one, because there are no intermediaries and everyone has an equal chance to broadcast and influence, it allows for dissemination of all kinds of views without one single person or a group of people controlling the narrative.

REFERENCES

[1]. Edited by Bruns Axel, Gunn Enil, Skogebo Eli, Larsson olof Aders and Christensen Christian, 2016 Companion to Social media and Politics.

[2]. Edited by Axford Barrie and Huggins Richard, 2001, New Media and Politics, Sage Publication.

[3]. Highfield Tim, 2016, Social Media and Everyday Politics.

[4]. Edited by Jekins Henry and Thorburn, 2004, Democracy and media.

[5]. Routledge Research in Political Communication, 2004.

[6]. Sardesai Rajdeep, 2014, The Election that changed India.