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# Political Movements and Changing Media Environments

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In the last few decades the media has played a vital role in liberating colonized nations and those under autocratic forms of governance. The oppression of the state leads to the creation of alternative forms of representation; the literature that comes out of the oppressive regimes not only highlights the facts that exist in society but also encourages the people to participate in the resistance. The printing press of Gutenberg was put into use by the revolutionaries in the French revolution, giving a new role and direction to the media. The various political and social movements that happened after the Indian independence in various parts of the country have indeed helped the growth of media, specially the non-Hindi and English print media during the emergency period. Today the political and social movements are once again increasingly vulnerable to the political, religious and corporate groups. People continue to resist the oppression of the state and express their concerns from alternative sites of media, especially with the New Media. However, we are again entering a phase in human history when knowledge and information are in the process of being monopolized.

*Keywords*: Non-Hindi; Non-English; New Media; Public Sphere; Media Ecology; Media Environments

## Introduction

Political movements are inevitably shaped by media. Today societies depend on media more than ever before; especially, the impact of political or social movements wrests on the momentum that media is able to generate locally and globally. The success of the movement is measured by public participation and the wide publicity it acquires through media. The symbiotic relation that exists between the political movements and media is not new; the two have been evolving and growing stronger with mutual support. The political movements with their distinctive ideologies have changed the notion of media in the course of history (printing press to Facebook, from Johannes Gutenberg to Mark Zuckerberg). In the last few decades particularly, the media has played a major role in liberating nations that were once colonized and also those reeling under autocratic regimes. The oppression by the state has always given birth to new and ingenious forms of response by the people; for instance, the literature of the oppressed not only highlights the facts of society, but also encourages people to participate and resist the domination. Literature can also enlighten the common public on various issues thereby generating mass awareness and finally leading to mass movements. Literature that is critical about the state and the functioning of its institutions is suppressed around the world and being branded as anti-national.

It is said that a nation's tolerance can be measured by analyzing the freedom of its press. But with the emergence of new technologies, especially in media, governments are finding it increasingly hard to exercise control over it. The boom in information technology has opened the floodgates in so far as the immediate access to a wide range of audience is concerned. The option for the publication of literature is wide open: books, for instance, need not be printed any more to strike an immediate chord with a large number of people; it is enough to release the information on the web. However, this openness of media has come under the scrutiny of the stringent laws adopted by some countries. Once the information is in the public domain neither the government, nor the public can afford to ignore the issues. Many political and social movements were largely unknown to the rest of the world a few decades back; with the increased connectivity among the world citizens aided by the latest communication tools, no event goes unnoticed.

In this environment of ever growing connectivity among the world citizens, political and social movements no longer die a silent death. It is said that the French revolution sustained itself by relying on the explosive growth of media (press), a phenomenon that is visible even today in many parts of the world. The printing press of Gutenberg was put to use by the revolutionaries during the French revolution, giving a new role and direction to the media. This idea of using the printing press has not stopped with one nation; indeed it was an inspiration for many such revolutions that followed in Europe. Education and media that were once exclusive to the elites, were put to the service of the masses by the French revolution. This use of media and its support was visible in all the revolutions and social movements that soon followed the French revolution. The media, especially the print and the pictorial representations of events (Picture Journalism), including the satirical caricatures, gained popularity during these movements and thereafter. Today things have changed; print is gradually being replaced by the New Media (Internet) that is put to use by the revolutionaries around the world. The New Media played a major role in the Arab spring, where people used texting and audio/video

clips to garner massive support to overthrow an autocratic government in the Middle East.

India first witnessed the power of print media on January 29, 1780 when James Augustus Hickey published the newspaper called *Bengal Gazette.* Hickey was sent to jail for questioning and defying the East India Company's role, and the atrocities committed by enacting draconian laws. Hickey's act motivated many Indians to question the hegemony of British rule.

In this period of over two centuries of the existence of the print media, the nation engaged with new ideas that helped in the spread of the ideals of a democratic society. Raja Ram Mohan Roy highlighted the plight of women and other issues in his magazines like *Brahmonical* and *Sambad Kaumudi*. In the twentieth century, Gandhi put forward his ideas through the *Young India* and *Harijan.* Social thinkers and freedom fighters carried forward the Indian struggle for independence and the socialist ideas and social movements played a vital role in the emergence of the nation. In the post-colonial phase, the media was put to use for purposes of nation building exercise. There is no doubt that the changes brought about by the media have unified the Indian nation, making it the largest democracy in the world.

## Importance of Oral Communication

Oral communication in India has always been very powerful. Of course, the hold and power of oral communication was on full display during the freedom struggle and many other movements that followed. Although the literacy rate was very low during the freedom struggle, the important role played by the media in the circulation of information by what now seems to be the "limited" impact of print media among the masses is notable. For those who were illiterate, the messages and information sent by couriers was read loud by the few educated people. The common masses were made aware and educated about their basic rights and the importance of participation in the freedom struggle. The oral communication educated and helped the masses to actively participate in these movements; people were made to be fully aware of the issues there were fighting for.

Even today the literacy rates in India are low; one may still wonder how the social and political movements continue to hog the limelight in states like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. Especially the tribal movements in the mineral rich states have grown in strength; the movements for land rights and forest rights in many parts of central India have been successful. If one examines the illiteracy rate (officially the average figures stands at 35% in these states; however, unofficial sources claim that the figure is much higher (2011 Census). Thus, even today oral communication is one of the most preferred means of communicating ideas and information. Verbal communication has always been more influential than non-verbal communication, especially in multilingual states like India. Apart from illiteracy, many tribal movements are forced to rely on oral communication as some of these linguistic communities do not have any written form of language.

Political and social movements help in the growth of the media (including the oral forms of media) to expand and also to improve their popularity and circulation among the people. In the Indian context, such movements have given birth to the regional language newspapers (non-Hindi and non-English) and

at the same time has played a vital role in the social and political transformation. The non-Hindi and English print media saw a surge during the emergency period in India. It has been argued by Robin Jeffrey (1987) that:

"Involvement in great social and political campaigns, or other exciting events, during the freedom struggle fuelled newspaper growth and circulation and built up the credibility and image of particular publications. Literacy, basic communications and adequate technology are essential to the development of a daily newspaper culture. But momentous events provide the link between these developments and politics—the link that seems to send circulations shooting upwards" (Jeffrey, 1987: p. 608).

The Jai Prakash Narayan movement, the Mandal commission, Ayodhya movement, Assam agitation in Assam, the Telangana movement, and the latest Anna Hazara anti-corruption movements have indeed helped in the tremendous growth of media, (Print, Radio, Television, New media). The movements not only helped the verbal communication but also revived the non-verbal communication (Traditional media); movements like Telangana have helped to revive (Janapada kala, Oggu kadha, Burra katha) the traditional way of narrating stories through songs and dances. These forms have become prominent and pose an alternative to the mainstream media. The various media formats used by the people involved in the movements reflect the aspirations and angst of people. The growth of media has helped in assertion of community identities and cultures; this trend is particularly visible in the regional media. The dominance and monopoly of Hindi and English daily newspapers over the media is being challenged locally. There are many reasons for growth in popularity of the non-Hindi and non-English dallies. Firstly, it has to do with the growth of literacy and easy understanding of the regional language that people speak (mother tongue). Secondly, it is related to a sense of pride in one's own language. Thirdly, there has been an accusation of biased reporting by some national papers and also misinterpreting the facts and even of completely ignoring the issues. As literacy rates started increasing, people have become more interested in local news; the regional language newspapers started to fulfill the needs of the people by introducing the regional and local editions.

The growth of the regional media has ensured a wider reach for the media in general considering the vastness of the country and its multilingual set up. The regional media has helped to fill up the gaps in building what seems to be an elusive pan Indian view for the media. People get to look at the different versions of the same story from different perspectives. Talking about the institute theory, Habermas refers to refudalization; he traces its origin to the 19th century and this refudalization, according to him, has transformed the public sphere:

"The transformation involved private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state. On the other hand, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere".

What we see today is the nexus between the politician, businessmen and the media, that has crept into the editor's room long back, and was clearly visible in India from the period of early-1990, when India's most trusted newspapers deviated from their goal for revenue generation through advertisements (Sumir, 2010: p. 27) Today we can see the nexus operating

more overtly; some media houses are inclined in favor of select political parties. The changed trend is clearly visible in the news reporting and articles carried out by the media houses. The common men has no option left, but speak out openly through other forms of media, and choose alternative forms to give expression to their sense of being marginalized in the so-called "mainstream" media. The Indian media is today caught in the currents and cross-currents of "legitimate information". Who speaks for whom and how representative that media is to convey the legitimate aspirations for people have become questions of immediate relevance. The dynamics of media in India is thus intricately and intimately linked to issues of identity politics.

Even the alternative media chosen by people and groups are been closely watched by the political and government agencies. The expressive behavior of communities is manifested in the form of songs, literature, art, and films. This expressive behavior as projected in the media have helped in putting forward people's ideas, ideologies and arguments on various issues concerning the day-to-day lives of people. Governments across the world ban groups and individuals who speak their mind and express their opinion on issues and events that have an immediate relevance to their lived experiences. We are witnessing an increasing trend in suppressing the freedom of expression by political, religious and other groups including the corporate houses. In the wake of suppressing the movements people have taken the advantage of social media, which is increasingly becoming popular among the citizens who have found in it an alternative media to express their opinions on various issues.

## Citizen's Participation and News from the Common Man

Today the information comes in from multiple directions; we are now called information overloaded societies or Infosocieties. The information in the form of texts, images, music and video is not limited and confined to one particular region, but for everyone around the world. The citizens in the infosocieties have the option of rejecting the information but not ignoring it. The information overloaded societies is an offshoot of globalization. Marshal McLuhan had predicted that the introduction of communication tools would turn the world into a global village (McLuhan, 1964).

Communication tools are playing a vital role in carrying the information from one-to-one and one-to many, as and when the events happen around the world. Professional reporters of news agencies, who are in the forefront of reporting the latest news, are today increasingly replaced by non-professionals and individuals. Majority of the news and events are reported by professionally untrained citizens, who are playing a vital role in placing the issues and events before the global community. In one of the essays written by Roy Greenslade (2010) titled "*This Way To The Egress*" in the Outlookindia Magazine, he foresees the end of top-down journalism, that tell people what they should read, see, and hear to be replaced by bottom-up journalism. In this new form of journalism, the audience plays an active role in news-gathering. The monopoly over information by news agencies is being seriously challenged by the new communication tools, especially with the coming of the new media platforms. I feel that this changing trend in dissemination of information has a powerful impact on society. The New Media has given scope to the rise of citizen's journalism wherein the

individuals are able to put forward their own stories, which are otherwise ignored and go unnoticed. With the new technologies available for citizens, there is no easy suppression of information. Earlier the editor of a publishing house or the channel head had the choice of suppressing a report or issue, (Sir Evans, 2010: p. 156) and not publishing it in newspapers, tabloids, and magazines or television channels. Today the reporters as well as the ordinary citizens have the choice to publish the same information for the rest of the world to read/watch with the help of New Media (Internet) and draw the attention of the general public to an issue or event. We are witnessing an increase in reporting of information and many issues and events are posted on various websites or personal blogs, including on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. People have the choice of posting the information that may help millions of others; numerous accounts of anomalies are exposed by individuals.

Talking about the tools Marshal McLuhan said, "We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us" (Mcluhan, 1964). The various media tools that the people are using have become part of our life; these tools are put to use for magnifying the issues relating to society. The public sphere (Habermas) is more visible and effective in the virtual environments than in public places. People are connected to each other by communication tools, and are in continuous engagement with information; information is circulated and shared within the community, and some times, also with the global community. One post/message by an individual on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube or any other platform can bring about a radical change and unite millions for a cause.

### One Billion Rising

The call given by the women's organization for the one billion rising has indeed helped millions of people to come out of their homes. This is particularly notable in the subcontinent where women in large numbers protested against the atrocities on women around the world. The website had millions of hits and especially, many women have joined the organization. When one opens the website it reads

"One in three women on the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime. One billion women violated is an atrocity. One billion women dancing is a revolution" (One-billion-rising).

This message was endorsed by many noted celebrities, including Anoushka Shankar daughter of legendary singer Ravi Shankar, playing a vital role in creating awareness through their blogs and tweets on various social networking sites. In India people have received the messages and reciprocated with action on streets culminating in peaceful protests against the brutal gang rape of a medical student in Delhi.

### The Gano Jagaran Mancha (Bangladesh)

Many social and non-governmental organizations, including the social and political movements across the world are increasingly using the New Media to connect and make people aware of many events and issues especially using media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Orkut. The Gano Jagaran Mancha also known as the "Mass awakening platform" that started in Bangladesh turned out to be the largest revolution till date in Bangladesh; in this, the people demanded the death sentence for the war criminals of the 1971 Bangladesh liberation. The informa-

tion was shared through the social networking sites like it happened in the spring revolution (Arab spring). Thousands occupied the center of Shahbagh Square (Bangladesh); the participation of the people from all walks of life has indeed helped to give momentum to the ongoing movement.

Many atrocities that are committed on various social and political leaders are always suppressed by the state: these are also ignored by the mainstream media, as many of the publication houses are associated with political parties and governments. But with the latest media technologies (smart phones) in the hands of the common man, people are able to interact and update and post what is happening at ground zero, including images. The images that are released into the media environment are not confined to one region but are carried and circulated throughout the world; the reactions and repercussions depend upon the content of the information released. The Arab spring in the Middle East was successful because of many such media tools and technologies in the hands of the common citizens.

## Freedom of Speech

The increasing control over the media by corporate and political organizations is clearly visible. The passive consumption of news is now challenged with the rise of the media tools, specially the Internet, where people are slowly but steadily becoming active participants and consumers. Political parties and governments are keenly watching the new developments happening through New Media. There is a continuous and visible/invisible war that transpires within the media environments, as one set of media tools are controlled by corporations and governments, the other by the individuals themselves, where things are accessed and opinions are aired and shared freely. In the last few years the balance is slowly but steadily tilting in the favor of individuals and New Media (Internet). Slow and steady but radical changes are taking place with the use of New Media platforms that are giving a voice to the voiceless.

The freedom that we are enjoying today by sharing the information about issues and events is controlled by big organizations. Possibility is that, this freedom may come to an end very soon and people have to search for or generate other alternatives; the acquisition of free service providing companies by Multi-National Companies is on the rise. The free platforms that are been used by millions of citizens across the world for airing their views and opinions are being sold to these media corporate giants. The future would be more challenging as we are again faced with the same situation that we were faced with at one point of time in history when knowledge and information was in the hands of a select few. Today, monopoly over knowledge and information once again threatens to be limited to few who control and dictate.

## Conclusion

Today the growth and consumption of media is most visible in the internet environment; the public sphere is more vocal and active in this environment, according to Douglas Kellner (2013) who arguing in Habermas, the *Public Sphere*, *and Democracy*: *A Critical Intervention* says.

The public sphere keeps on changing or shifts with the rise of new social movements, technologies and with the creation of new public spaces.

In the last few centuries we have seen this happening; technologies have been put to use to achieve larger goals. Media

tools have transformed the society more than any other tool, by disseminating the knowledge required, with the introduction of the Guttenberg press, Telephone, Radio, Cinema, Television, Mobile phones and now the computers (internet). These have all played a vital role in transforming the societies with the information that is freely accessed and shared at the level of local and global communities. Each new tool that has been added to society has created a deep impact. People participating in social and political movements on the streets to the silent voting that shapes the global opinion on the Internet have created new public spheres and promises a lot for the future. The internet has thus given new directions and changed the functioning of social and political movements around the world. Media environments are constantly undergoing change to take new forms and shapes in the fast growing media landscape. Vinton Cerf (2013), Google's chief internet evangelist and father of the Internet worries about the internet freedom, foresees a threat from governments in various countries and also from major private organizations. This is particularly true in the case of countries where the dictatorial regimes are functional. In the past few decades the internet has given freedom and liberty to many citizens around the world. The media and communication tools have empowered and have given more power to the individuals than organizations. The communication tools have made a lot of differences to the knowledge production and sharing among the universal community. With an increasing connectivity among the universal citizens, the pain and joy is shared not just by few individuals or groups, but by majority of the people around the world. Internet provides and acts as one of the single largest platform in helping and supporting individuals, groups, organizations and nations. With the integration of various media tools the mass political and social movements are thus growing in strength around the world. It is not just the social and political movements but also the movements for greater cause of humanity, many organizations around the world are being helped by millions of people who lend their support either in cash or kind. We see this happening with most of the humanitarian and other social organizations; we have also seen how media tools can be used for collaborating with each other and exchanging information through various media platforms for the execution of the works, and we are also aware of how different media environments are coordinating with each other in the digital world and creating a new world.

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