Making Visible: Transgenders in Social Media

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ABSTRACT: The Internet and mobile technology are some of the most important ingredients changing the way news content are created and disseminated today. This paper analyses the impact of social media on transgender individuals. A study was conducted regarding the usage of social media among transgender individuals residing in Kerala. For this, the transgender individuals residing in Thiruvanthapuram were interviewed. An enquiry was done on the social networking sites' role in consciousness raising on 'transgender'. The study uses YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp and virtual communities to represent all social media outlets. The 'identity work' which happens in the online media is also looked at. An attempt was made to examine how the power and ideology works in the traditional media.

This survey is based on a qualitative analysis permitting respondents to go into detail about their experiences in regard to some questions. More than looking at the number of transgenders who had been affected in particular ways by the media, the study focussed on the nature of their experiences. The study included their responses in the qualitative parts of the survey because this helps to give a more rounded picture of how media representations impact transgender people's lives.

Introduction

Recently, the Supreme court of India has recognized the members of the transgender community as the 'third gender', along with the male and female. These developments in India has opened up a space for the analysis of the gender identities regarding, the non-binary. At this point, it is important to look into the role of the social media, as this New Media has helped immensely in shaping the gender identity. A promising development has been done by the most popular social media namely, Facebook.

"When you come to Facebook to connect with the people, causes, and organizations you care about, we want you to feel comfortable being your true, authentic self. An important part of this is the expression of gender, especially when it extends beyond the definitions of just "male" or female." So today, we're proud to offer a new custom gender option to help you better express your own identity on Facebook."

This is the message of Facebook, as the social networking giant updated its list of gender options for its users. The social media plays an immense role in making the members of the transgender community 'visible' to the public. The work of Dorothy Kidd in "The Global movement to transform communications" recognized the part played by social media in democratizing communications. It challenges the top-down or vertical nature of traditional media and allows a more reciprocal communications between ordinary citizens (Kidd 2002).

The Internet and mobile technology are some of the most important ingredients changing the way news content are created and disseminated today (Serafeim 44). The theory of the public sphere, developed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1981), emphasizes the role of communication in public opinion. He argues that the public sphere is 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed', neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, as a necessary requirement for a well-functioning democracy. Nowadays, trangender activists are live in social media to make the public know about the struggles they endure. For that, they narrate their true-life stories of hardships and isolation to the public. It offered them a space for self-presentation. The fast spread of the content of social media made their visibility at an international level. It even resulted in the formation of transgender organizations like *Sangama* and *Sahodaran*.

The news content is easily portable due to cell phones and personalized as Internet users have customized profiles on topics that is of particular interest to them. It has also become participatory at the same time as users have contributed to the creation of news, comments, or its dissemination through Facebook and Twitter (Serafeim 2012).This increased freedom and technology that social media offered to the members of the transgender community gave voice to their demand for equal rights.

The society often fails to understand the transgender-self of the individual and equate them as 'homosexual' although gender identity and sexuality are unrelated. These people develop a misconception of the transgender community based upon traditional media portrayals. For instance, two years back when Manaveeyam Veedhi, Trivandrum opened a space for transgender individuals for gaining acceptance, strength and unity through various programmes, majority of the print media reported the event only as a ''transgender cultural programme''. Only few newspapers reported the event truly which was specially meant to empower transgender individuals. In this scenario, the space and help offered by the social media to showcase their life filled with struggle is immense. The advent of the social media brought a platform of 'visibility' through various social networks like Facebook, Youtube, WatsApp, Virtual Communities etc. The transgender individuals are provided an array for 'identity work' while portraying their plight to the world. The 'online' medium increases the proximity of the transgender individuals with the public spaces which once remained strange for them. As a result of this their path has been made smoother and many have gained courage to approach the 'Offline' world for gaining education and job.

During the early period there were not many books about transgenders available to the public. There were no television shows or magazine articles from which individuals could know about gender variance. The shift away from text-based knowledge acquisition towards computer-mediated interrogation was one of the several aspects of the Internet that has benefited the transgender community. (Shapiro 2). With the rise of the Internet, many national transgender organizations came up to inform, educate and support transgender individuals. Much of the introductory work that had been managed by these real- life organizations is now done online. Many online organizations now actively works in uniting and empowering the transgender individuals who lead an isolated and fragmented life. The advent of Internet has revolutionized the transgender movement in two fundamental ways. First, the Internet has allowed transgender people to connect with one another more easily. This is a special privilege for those who live in geographically isolated places. Second, these new communities have given individuals ways to experiment with defining their gender.

THE VISIBILITY OF TRANSGENDERS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to find out more about the access the transgenders had to the social media, enquiry was done on their use of the internet. Majority of them were not active members of the social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn etc. This affected the way in which many people receive news, for instance when links to particular items are passed around among groups of friends. A larger number of them reported that they had access only to the basic terrestrial television channels. Some of them were not even able to make a comment on the influence of the social media on their lives due to their illiteracy.

 A transman from Thiruvananthapuram who currently works in the *Sangama* organization in Bangalore, finds no interest in the social media and fear them to be " discriminatory, uninformed or transphobic". A transwoman of a famous channel show fame, feels frustrated in using Facebook as the users' comments on her profile pictures are undesirable. In addition to this, her poor knowledge in English language denied her from becoming an active member of the online transgender community organizations. But at the same time, another transgender have a positive attitude towards television channels which has offered her a space to showcase her talents.

These responses make one suspect that transgender people are less likely to feel welcome within the social media. The transgenders in Thiruvananthapuram belong to different socio-cultural backgrounds. Those with a financially sound background and effective secondary education found social media as a solace. Such people solved their queries with the help of the Internet. It even helped them to stay connected to the like-minded while sitting in their home. Transgenders who had access to the social media never felt isolation to much when compared to those who are never online. Another educated transwoman from Thrissur identifies the social media as "pleasant and valuable" as it helps her in the transgender activism. Also as an active member of the Facebook she has both positive and negative comments regarding the representation of transgenders.

The survey reveals that a greater part of the transgenders from Thiruvananthapuram deliberately avoid the use of social media. They consider such arenas as mostly transphobic. A transman from Thiruvananthapuram, all the more doesn't like to reveal his identity to the public through the social media as he feels afraid of getting ridiculed. For the majority of transgenders in Kerala, the social media becomes a space which is transphobic in nature.

The survey made one realise that, a very few of them identified the social media as their primary source of news. The transgenders were also asked questions about their representation in the social media. The best part of them felt that, the social media portrayals were either inaccurate or highly inaccurate. Such a group are hopeful to see their correct representation in a hetero-normative society which moves forward with its own ideologies and principles.

Most of them who responded to this part of the survey said that, on the whole, they felt representations of transgender people in the social media are negative or very negative, with just a few considering them positive. They brought out the importance of positive impact of the social media representations which helped them to deal with their own uncertainties and talk to others about being transgender. Those transgender individuals with sound educational background felt that the social media coverage of transgender issues has an inherently positive aspect because it raises their visibility in a global level and provides a space to interact with the society which they have found difficulty to achieve in the offline world. Such transgender individuals accounts about the debate which happens within and outside the trans communities as a positive experience. They give special emphasis of the social media which provides a starting point for discussing transgender issues and correcting misunderstandings. But at the same time the negative representations of them on the social media made them feel angry, unhappy, excluded and frightened. It even made them feel bad about the society.

 At the same time few responded that, they were not bothered by the representations. The main reason given for these strong feelings was the perceived damage done by the social media to the reputation of trans people among the general public. Also significant was the feeling that trans people were being labelled as social outsiders. "Negative experiences can be so much damaging," said one respondent.

Majority of them were dissatisfied with the humorous representation attributed to them in the movies. In movies, transgendered people do not appear often enough in day-to-day roles. They are portrayed in the same stereotyped way as those of minority race were in the 1950s. While some stated that before and while undergoing their difficult period of gender identity uncertainty, they found watching the positive documentaries and films extremely helpful. This activity made them realise that they weren't the only person in the world who experienced the same feeling.

Many blamed some media institutions for providing a platform for the expression of transphobic hatred. Some, frequently expressed concern about inaccuracy, poor research and inappropriate use of language in both broadcast and print media. Most of them suggested that reporters and programme-makers did not care how they portrayed trans people, and that they did not seem to have had any training in relation to transgender issues. They seemed to consider newspapers to be the biggest source of problematic material.

Several respondents expressed a sense of hopelessness and frustration, of inability to challenge negative coverage. Some reported that they had complained numerous times without even receiving responses. Many felt that the negative media coverage made transphobia more acceptable in wider society. Some respondents who considered themselves strong and self-reliant noted that negative media items made them concerned for others who might be more easily distressed by them.

The verbal abuse they encountered in the social media was often described as being aggressive, with the implication that some of the respondents felt they might be in physical danger from their abusers. It also frequently involved sexual references, such as demands to see genitals. Though this is the case, they are still hopeful of the social media which can offer wide framework public discussions on issues regarding them on a global level.

Majority of the respondents reported serious ongoing family problems or complete family breakdown which they linked directly to their negative portrayal in the media. They noted that their families express worry about them after seeing media items about trans people. The reasons for this are not made explicit but seem likely to refer either to the representation of trans people as victims or to the expectation of negative public attitudes toward trans people.

Most of the respondents say that they would like to see more accurate representations of transgender people in the media. This suggests that the problem is not the existence of such representations but their inaccurate, ridiculous or sensationalist nature. A positive way for the media to move forward in respect of this data would be to try and develop more realistic, rounded portrayals of transgender people in contexts that allow them to be seen as ordinary - as fully human.

This study makes it clear that transgender people are deeply dissatisfied with the way they are portrayed by the media. It shows that there is an endemic problem with negative and inaccurate representations, and that this leads to considerable real life suffering on the part of transgender people who encounter these representations. It also strongly suggests that such representations inspire at least some of the verbal and physical abuse that transgender people experience in their day to day lives, and that they can be a significant factor in family breakdown. This representation impedes the entry of transgenders of Thiruvananthapuram into the social media. Thus, they miss much of the opportunities that can be attained with the help of the social media, which is visible in the case of transgender individuals in North America. It is plain from this study that action needs to be taken to address widespread prejudice against transgender people within the media, and to tackle a perceived lack of accountability. This approach would be in line with other measures recently taken to protect transgender people from discrimination.

PRIMARY TEXT

 *Name Changed. Personal Interview.14 June 2016

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