

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CHANGING PUBLIC SPHERE –THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER

Asmita Dubey

PhD Scholar(SRF)

Department Of Sociology

Jamia Millia Islamia New Delhi India

Abstract : The public sphere is a common world that gathers us together and yet our falling over one another. In public sphere humans organise around specific interests as social groups. It is thus, not just a site of fruitful communication and orderly representation of interests; rather an arena where notions of social justice and social order are elaborated. However, modern society is based on structures of accumulation and on separation of rules within different realms involving conflicts of interests resulting into social struggles. Public sphere acts as an interface that connects people of different cultural milieu. Nowadays, social media has become the key term in Mass and Communication studies and public discourse for characterising platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Blogspot, Vlog and Tumblr. The question now arises where is public sphere today? What mediates between individuals and society? Public sphere today is on social media, it is where opinions are formed, deliberation happens, there we simply recreate bubbles of peers-ignoring inequalities of status as in Nancy Frazers' term we have "bracketed the inequality of status". This paper would thus critically analyse the emergence of new cultural and political actors in this sphere comprising of Facebook, Twitter and blogs. The role of the concept of Social media for understanding public sphere critically. Social media has thus carved out distant public spaces by becoming largely disembedded from traditional institutions.

IndexTerms - Public sphere, social media, bourgeoisie, electronic democracy, twitter .

INTRODUCTION

Jürgen Habermas published his critical analysis of public sphere in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* in 1962. The work describes the rise and fall of public sphere during 19th and 20th century. According to Habermas, the origin and thereafter development of press is based on the commercialisation of the participation of the masses in the public sphere. The public sphere in his work "is a social space for the rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons who allowed arguments and not their status determine decisions". In medieval times opinions were controlled by the nobles and rulers which did not make much differentiation between public and private and people had little liberties to discuss ideas and form opinions. Directed against the absolute will of monarchs, the bourgeois public sphere emerged in the 18th century as a neutral social space independent of the public authority and made up of private people gathering together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state"(Calhoun, 1992: 1, 21) Habermas goes on to explain and critically analyse how this public sphere which at first rose as liberal discussion of needs of society fell at the hands of commercialisation with advent of press. He has describe three stages of this whole process.

Rise and fall of bourgeois public sphere

The first stage wherein it was politically motivated a profitable investment. This was soon followed by editorial homogenisation of smaller papers. The publicist autonomy of the editor also declined. The last stage was commercialisation of press where methods were invented to maximise the profit from press like advertisements became a major component. The rise of bourgeois public sphere was in opposition to the monarchs, who had very little concern for public issues. Habermas has explained how something which was born out of concern for public cause was later exploited for commercialisation. He has correlated this to the stages of press. With the commercialisation of opinion of the public sphere, the fall of public sphere was imminent.

Habermas' public sphere in social media

Habermas' concept of public sphere was not physical like a meeting in coffee shop but an abstract idea whose main focus was critical debate about public issues. Many critics argue whether public sphere as expressed by Habermas actually existed at that time as it consisted of only bourgeois class which were almost always rich and educated males and doesn't contain any representation from majority of other sections of society like women, lower castes, workers, slaves etc. So the opinion thus formed would be very biased and incomplete. So let us decide some conditions on the basis of which we can classify something as public sphere. The first condition is disregard to status, bourgeois class came together without giving importance to their status. This way influence of rank is absent and arguments can be best presented. The idea of public sphere correlates to a public forum independent from authority of the ruling class which in earlier times were monarch and at present, in most of the countries is a government elected by people representing a form of democracy. The second condition for an institution to be a public sphere is it should have a social concern, a willingness of common concern. Bourgeois class came together to discuss about public issues. Before establishment of public sphere power was concentrated into hands of monarchs and religious institution which had more private targets than social concerns. Third condition should be general representation. It should have representation from all sections of society or at least maximum participation. There should not be any

restriction on opinion and freedom to form opinion is a necessity. Even when the first public spheres developed as specific groups of people, it was ever conscious of being part of a larger part and acting as a representative group of that larger public. The potential of it being a publicist body was evident as its discussions did not merely remain internal but could be directed to the outside world (Habermas, 1989: 37). If we assume social media as public sphere and compare it to bourgeois public sphere, social media as a public sphere has far more representation from different sections of societies. Let us now weigh the prospect of social media being public sphere in terms of the three conditions we have established. People on social media have no concern for their status. Each one gets an equal voice whether it be a rich upper class powerful citizen or a poor wage earner. One may argue that powerful people get more following on social media but we see many common people having huge following. Not only this many a time arguments of some obscure person becomes a sensation. On social media, people do present social concern. People have come together to solve many public issues. This as we will see later is one of the very important structural transformation of social media as public sphere and the ease and efficiency with which it is being done is very unique to social media. And the last condition of liberty and inclusiveness, ever since social media came into picture, in most parts of the world people have full liberty to present their arguments. Although the freedom is not absolute and we have seen many instances of restrictions even in the most liberal places, yet in general people from all sections have equal opportunity to form the part. Again inclusiveness is not complete even in social media as there are places which don't have access to internet, there are people who still don't take it in a positive way and avoid using it to present arguments.

It is important to note that here 'public' refers to the form and not a particular content or place of communication: the public sphere comes into existence whenever people engage in argumentation over problematized validity claims (Dahlberg, 2007: 49). With few limitations, what we see here is Habermas' concept of public sphere can be applied to social media.

Structural transformation of social media as public sphere

As Habermas described the transformation of press into three stages, we can study the transformation of social media albeit the stages would be different as there is no bourgeois class on social media in strict sense and every one with an access to internet gets an equal voice. The first stage is the *connectivity stage*. Here people merely connected to each other and the participation of masses was limited to pleasantries and no actual arguments or ideas were shared. Next came *sharing* where people started sharing their ideas, situations, feelings. Although the sharing had begun but there was no discussion over public issues so social media was still not a public sphere. But third stage, which I call it as stage of *democratic participation* saw greater participation of masses into public domain through social media. There was a wave of awareness and more and more people presented ideas in support of the government or against. However in contrary to what we saw for press, in social media we have a fourth stage where people started to use it for benefit of public and this was not restricted to monetary benefits, but more inclined towards social cause. The dedication and efficiency with which this has been done is unique and is on a gigantic scale. We have seen this at many occasions like the Chennai floods of 2015. After the failure of government machinery, people took to social media to help one another fight this adverse scenario. Not only people of Chennai but people of other cities as well came along to help without seeking any benefit what so ever. This, final stage of transformation where unrestricted expression of arguments over social media to contribute to a public cause, in fact is the ideal expression of public sphere which Habermas wanted to convey but which was not seen in bourgeois public sphere.

Some statistics to show inclusiveness and liberty of social media

- As of July 2020, total worldwide population is 7.8 billion.
- The internet has 4.57 billion users.
- There are 3.6 billion active social media users rise of 1.3 billion users as compared to July 2015.
- 91% of retail brands use 2 or more social media channels.
 - Social media users have risen by 176 million in the last year.
 - 1 million new active mobile social users are added every day. That's 12 each second.
 - Facebook Messenger and Whatsapp handle 60 billion messages a day.
 - On WordPress alone, 56 million blog posts are published every month.
 - A 2011 study by AOL/Nielsen showed that 27 million pieces of content were shared every day. The top 3 content marketing tactics are blogging (65%); social media (64%); and case studies (64%).

These stats are just the tip of the iceberg. If we see the whole picture, we will realise the widespread participation of people, which is only possible when we have minimal restrictions, people from almost all strata contribute without any consciousness of status.

A Case Study for Transformation of Social Media as an ideal public sphere

Let me now present a case study where we will see how transformation of social media has given us a glimpse of an ideal public sphere. This new media has allowed dialogue between politicians and active citizens and thus it has provided an arena where public discourse can take place and public opinion, as its function, can be formed (McQuail,2005:150-151). “The net seems to provide a way around the practical problems posed by democracy, what ever its form; citizens can exercise Their vote, deliberate on public policy or participate directly” (Street,2001 :217-218). Our Minister of External Affairs Sushma Swaraj has been making the headlines in last couple of years for helping people via Twitter in real time. A look down the memory lane reveals that in addition to being increasingly active, India’s ministers are also becoming more reachable using social media. This interaction is very healthy for democracy where you can directly interact with the people we have chosen to form policies for us. The advocates of the so-called ‘*electronic democracy*’ (Street,2001:214) argue that the Internet may either improve the existing Form of democracy or revive the ancient form of direct democracy. Internet may offer solutions for the problems that have been obstructing Political participation–“time, size, knowledge and access”. The Internet has overcome the boundaries of time and space and it is no longer necessary for citizens to be physically present to contribute to a discussion. Here are few incidents when ministers took cognizance of the matter on social media and extended full support to the public. It can be judged from the fact alone that @PMOIndia has logged 1.61M followers in less than a month since Modi became PM.

This direct interaction has not only made the process very fast in real time but very efficient. It also reduces corruption. However like any other institution it may have few drawbacks. People may misuse this opportunity by presenting trivial problems thus wasting time and effort of many. Recently in news was a celebrity from a national entertainment channel presenting his private problem and involving Indian PM in a discouraging manner. Some would argue democracy allows it, but if we are focusing on social media as a public sphere then incidents like this make us question whether such a transformation is healthy for public sphere or its just making it as just another public forum.

Perils Of Ideal Public Sphere

As it is well known that the ideal does not exist nor is it understood. When you understand this and when you don't pursue this 'becoming', then fear ceases and you face 'what is'. Similarly, the face of ideal public sphere also does not exists.

Slowly Governments all around the globe are trying to curb the freedom on social media platforms because of the fear that these voices from individuals can lead to something bigger that they may find hard to handle in future. For instance, in Iran in an unprecedented move hundreds of thousands of people lead a movement on twitter against the decision to give death penalty to three Iranian youngsters. Because of this movement more than 50 lakh tweets were done which led the Supreme Court to take back the decision to convict the youngsters. Even in India, social media sites will have to reveal the identity of its users if asked to do so by the Government. However, this has instigated fear among the citizens regarding breach of their privacy.

The decision of the Government holds validity with regard to circulation of fake news but here again the question arises on how far the checks and balances will be looked at by the government, and Government will utilise the data for its own benefit. According to the Marxist theory of ownership and control of mass media, the ruling class imposes its ideology on the general public in such a way that they tend to believe that its true! Miliband (1973) argued, the role of the media is to shape how people think about the world they live in.

It has been seen that if you as an ordinary person target a powerful person or a politician on any social media then you are likely going to be penalised for it. One can easily find that there have such multiple instances in India throughout.

In 2012, there were four such major instances. Ambikesh Mahapatra and Subrata Sengupta of Jadavpur University were put behind bars just for circulating cartoons against the West Bengal Chief Minister. Mayank Mohan Sharma and K V J Rao, members of the Air India cabin crew were arrested for posting jokes on then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. A businessman from Puducherry was arrested for posting offensive messages which targeted P. Chidambaram’s son. Also, two girls from Mumbai were arrested for posting a question on Facebook.¹ In this last case, the charges were struck down by the court which were under section 295(a) of Indian Penal Code and Section 66A of IT Act.

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The arrests have continued since then. To quote a recent arrest around five people were arrested in a span of three days when journalist Prashant Kanojia was taken into custody for sharing a video in which a woman is seen speaking to reporters about Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

To know whether a post on Facebook (popular social media website) will land a person in jail or not, firstly we need to understand what can lead to such circumstances. In the Information and Technology Act, 2000, Section 66A lays down the provision for punishment upon sending offensive messages via communication service. This section is stated as:

Any person who sends, by means of a computer resource or a communication device, –

(a) any information that is grossly offensive or has menacing character; or

(b) any information which he knows to be false, but for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred or ill will, persistently by making use of such computer resource or a communication device;

¹ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/arrested-over-a-facebook-status-7-times-people-landed-in-jail-for-posts-against-politicians/story-ON1jukoStfV6T8aYcJEVGJ.html>

(c) any electronic mail or electronic mail message for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience or to deceive or to mislead the addressee or recipient about the origin of such messages shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and with fine.

So these provisions basically state that if any information is posted by a person about others which results in harming such person by offending him, criminally intimidating him or defaming such person or any other consequence of the post shall be punished under the said section. However, in few cases it has been seen that the Court has removed charges as Section 66A and article 19(freedom of expression) were contradicting each other.

J&K police FIR against users who accessed social media through VPN published by The Hindu on February 18 2020. Its been ages since Kashmiri's are surviving without internet. Another case happened recently wherein a serving IAS Officer received a show cause notice for his tweet. In his tweet on April 27, 2020 Mohammad Mohsin wrote "More than 300 Tablighi heroes are donating their plasma to serve the country in New Delhi only. What about it? Godi Media? They will not show you the works of humanity done by these heroes." However, the show cause notice stated that , "The adverse coverage this tweet has got in the media has been taken note of seriously by the Government, given the serious nature of COVID -19 and the sensitivities involved".

CONCLUSION

If people lack ways of communicating over time and space a "public sphere" is impossible. This public sphere is once again reviving through social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Vlog, etc).After the newspaper revolution, the process of digitisation has played a major role in creating the conditions for an expanded public sphere-becoming more close to people's homes and hearts. The broadening of ideas and political agendas take place through them. According to many scholars, social media is accused of promoting communal attitudes and practices through some twitter handlers ,etc. However, a free-speech public sphere should be open to whatever comes up; where political discussion is not the focus but develops alongside and from within other topics of conversation including daily life activities. However, the different forms of evolving social media enable discussions and debates in different forms and with different affordances , they continue to reproof our notion of the "public sphere".

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