

Social Media Vs Anti-Social Media: An Enquiry into the Post-Truth Mediascape

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Abstract

The digital revolution with its internet, smart phones, social networking and a myriad of other wonderful gadgets have brought forth unprecedented changes in the mediascape. Ralph Waldo Emerson even in the mid-1800s has accurately echoed our modern dilemma, 'This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it.' Internet has brought forth instant access to a wealth of information anywhere in the world from our computers. Social Media like Facebook have opened up numerous portals for social interaction. Email is much more speedy and effective than mailing letters. People can purchase anything from anywhere in the world using online shopping. Instant global communication is available with Facebook, Skype, smart phones etc. This is a great advantage for friends and families scattered around the world. Nonetheless, the digital world is a double-edged sword. The unplugged and carefree lives of our children have been in shambles. Today they are continuously plugged in to an assortment of digital gadgets that demand attention which make them fall into the category of 'indoor generation'. Moreover social media with its anti-social tentacles have captured the youth into its octopus-grip. Fake messages get circulated in social media prompting people to harm others. Within two months 24 people got murdered in 11 states. During 1857, at the time of the First War of Independence soldiers have been intimidated by spreading rumours like the cartridges of the Enfield Rifles have been coated with the fat from pigs and cows. Today its magnitude had increased manifold as it takes place through the global communication system called Social Media. My paper tries to portray the advantages and disadvantages of social media in this post-truth era.

(Key words: mediascape, post-truth society, social media, anti-social media)

Researches worldwide highlight the gigantic clout enjoyed by social media. The Pearson Foundation has recently released a research white paper titled 'The Digital World of Young Children: Emergent Literacy.' The study unraveled the effects of digital media on young children's learning and was presented at the Consortium for School Networking International Symposium, 2010 in Washington DC. The authors Jay Blanchard and Terry Moore pertain to Arizona State University. Their research explored the latest findings regarding young children's excessive dependence on mobile media. The influence of social media had begun to influence people negatively. The imprudent and unscrupulous use of social media tends to unleash anti-

social activities and riots in society. Nonetheless, the 'social' dimensions of social media cannot be dismissed. Seven years before in 2012, the world had witnessed the prowess of social media when Nirbhaya has been brutally raped and how the Indian youth had taken up cudgels against the culprits. Banking on the possibilities and potentialities, they organized protests in Delhi and in many parts within the country. Under the initiative of Anna Hazare too, India had witnessed the social media campaigns for a corruption-free Lokpal Bill. This literally shocked the ruling party as well as the political leadership. Recently in Katwa, when that eight-year old has been mass raped, a call for hartal initiated through social media became controversial in Kerala. Hitherto, the repercussions had not been appeased completely. Investigative agencies attribute the origin to certain specific groups hell-bent on disturbing the communal harmony and social fabric of the society. Incidents of such dimensions will hamper the image of social media which came as a boon for democracy in the Information Technology era. Paying heed to the fake messages propagating in social media, in two months, the mob had murdered 24 persons in 11 states. In July 1, a mob comprising 3500 had beaten to death five persons in Dhule in Maharashtra. They cordoned the area and didn't even allow the police to enter. Their intention has been to burn the dead bodies. They argued that they killed people as they came to kidnap children. A folk group pertaining to the Nath Gosawi community were the hapless victims of mob violence. Within hours, in Malgaon, six kms from Dhule, police had rescued a family comprising five members including a two-year old kid from the angry mob. In Aurangabad, the mob killed three persons and in Gurgaon they killed one person. The 'anti-social' facet of social media is the villain in all these cases.

Viral Rumours

In metropolitan cities like Bengaluru and Ahmedabad too, mob trials and murders have taken place. Not only do adivasis but also educated people get murdered in the malady. During last June, in Karbianglong in Assam, an angry mob comprising 200 people had beaten to death Neelolpal Das who is an audio engineer and his friend and businessman Abhijith Nath. Rumours had been doing the rounds in social media regarding the arrival of people from Bihar entering Assam and Nagaland boundaries. This intimidated the populace and they attacked people who had come to watch the Kangtilangsoh waterfall in Guwahati. Similar incident took place in Tamil Nadu also. On May 9, a 55 year old woman named Rukmini got killed in Thiruvannamalai district in Athimoor. The mishap occurred when they gave a chocolate to a child on the wayside while enquiring the route to their destination. Mishaps of similar nature occurred in Pulicat near Chennai too. Kidnapping of children had been cited as the common reason behind all these murders. Months before, such fake messages disturbed the Kerala populace also. But here everything had been under police control. Fake Whatsapp messages do all the harm. In the backdrop of such untoward incidents, police had scrutinized all videos in social media. It was later discovered that an awareness video in Pakistan where a kidnapping scene of the child is included is the villain. This video has been carefully edited and propagated as if it is a genuine one.

Sharing Fake Messages

Murdering people in the name of videos had been a grave phenomenon. Government is unable to curtail such tragedies. The spate of such incidents raises some questions regarding social security. Social Media has great power to influence people. Most of the messages in social media are of the warning nature. They add videos, pictures, graphics etc to give credibility to the message. Most of the people have some similarities with Indian races and the places range from Pakistan to Syria. Recent violent incidents propagate in Whatsapp and Facebook as pictures or videos. Though the truth has been unraveled, in many cases fake messages still appear with headlines and descriptions. Receivers without checking the veracity of such messages, send it to others which enhances its harmful impact. Cyber investigation team is handicapped to initiate any action in this regard. The 'End to End Encryption' system brought forth by whatsapp had made the investigation all the more difficult. The source of the message cannot be traced due to this system. The acceptability enjoyed by social media in the public sphere too has worsened the situation. Even though such messages can be controlled in Facebook, experts opine that it would be difficult in the case of Whatsapp. In 1857, during the Sepoy Mutiny better known as the First War of Indian Independence, one of the immediate reasons has been regarding the covering of the cartridges of Enfield Rifle using either pig's fat or cow's fat. This has been a historically documented incident. This has been only a rumour doing the rounds at that time. Some others express their thoughts through the social media which sometimes become viral. Kerala had witnessed such incidents during the outbreak of Nipah virus. People with vested interests too employ social media for achieving their ends. In 2012, Bengaluru city got stunned following a rumour of similar nature.

Bengaluru Model

In 2012, attack on social media has been unleashed targeting people from north-eastern states. Problems emanated when messages on Facebook and whatsapp urging north-easterners to quit South India after Id-ul-Fitr or else will be attacked evoked panic and fear. 30,000 people had fled from Bengaluru in three days following this warning. People hailing from north-eastern states had been running helter-skelter in the railway station. Law and order had been totally thrown to winds. Hotels were devoid of employees. Literally, government and the police remained dumbfounded after this incident. Roots of this false propaganda have been later found out. Forty out of 76 websites which propagated fake messages were from Pakistan. To contain the situation, government had to block 250 websites and 30 twitter accounts. Banking on the turbulence in Myanmar and Assam, the cyber groups in Pakistan and sleeper cells in India had created the imbroglio. India had conveyed its moral indignation to Pakistan. This served as an eye-opener regarding social media's potential in creating anarchy in the country.

Riot in Muzaffarnagar

In 2013, the riot which occurred in Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh has been discussed as the one which happened due to social media engineering. Two years before, a video released in Pakistan which portrayed two individuals being beaten to death by an angry mob has been the reason for the exodus of many people and the losing of lives of more than 50 people. In the village of Kawal, a Muslim youth misbehaved to a woman hailing from the Jat community. The young man was murdered within days. Two brothers of the woman were behind the murder. They got murdered the very next day. Following the incident the video of the mob killing two people got propagated in whatsapp and social media which intensified the riot. Authorities tried to convince people regarding this fake video and announced one lakh prize money for the perpetrators of the fake video. Samajwadi Party and BJP blamed each other as a political gimmick for the forthcoming election. Amidst the political trial and turmoil, the reasons for the riot had been pushed into oblivion.

Warnings during Nipah

Not only Kerala, the whole country has been shaken by the Nipah virus scare. Social media has been replete with fake warnings and fake remedies to come out of the impasse. In the beginning, social media attributed the source as labourers from neighbouring states. Whatsapp messages at frequent intervals propagated vigilant information as zones like Aluva, Perumbavoor, Kothamangalam, Muvattupuzha etc are teemed with Bengalis. The exodus has been averted as later on the source was pointed as bats. Another fake message circulated that nipah virus has not been seen in bats and in National Institute of Virology, Pune, it had been diagnosed in hens. They prepared a fake document which appears genuine as if it is from the health authorities revealing that Nipah virus spreads through hens. Finally chicken traders waged a complaint with the police and the culprits were booked. Fake messages regarding magical cures also got circulated through social media. The situation got worsened as people shared the forwarded fake messages adding their own crafty ideas.

Supreme Court for Law

On July 19, Supreme Court issued an order to curb mob murders through law. In the judgement based on petitions to prevent mass murders in the name of cow, the Bench headed by Justice Deepak Misra revealed it. The court had strictly warned the Centre-State governments to prevent mass violence in the name of cow. Supreme Court pointed out that the government machinery failed in curbing violence and will never allow anyone to tamper with law. The court opined that in democracy such violence cannot be tolerated. Law and Order comes under the portfolio of state governments. Supreme Court had also suggested state governments to formulate new law for preventing violence of such nature and had enquired them to reveal their standpoint.

Social Media Rumours

Rumours spread like wild fire in social media and create ripples in society. In 2016, people entered the streets in Delhi hearing the rumour that there is salt scarcity. Government too had responded to it thinking it as true. Again inside the new Rs 2000 note, it was said that a nano chip with GPS is embedded and people believed it as genuine news and not something to be thrown to the winds. The greatest attraction is that nobody controls social media and there is no editor at the helm of affairs. Jasmine Revolution which toppled the dictators of East Asian countries became a reality because of this facet of social media. Close on the heels, in Delhi Anna Hazare could threaten the Centre with his Corruption Free Lokpal strike. The emergence of Mr Arvind Kejriwal as the Chief Minister of Delhi is also due to the impact of social media. It is high time we understood the harmful dimension of social media as we are the power centres of it. The national dailies appeared on July 3rd with an advertisement of whatsapp as situations turn topsy-turvy for them. Whatsapp had suggested never to forward messages which seem to lack credibility.

Created for Connection

The digital social media phenomena have a great impact on us. Though technology enhances extended relationships, it disconnects us from our intimate relationships. Certain technological connections like texting, tweeting, emailing, posting etc can be controlled. They allow us to edit, delete, retouch and revamp what we say and how we appear. Real conversations appear to be messy, complicated, time consuming and unpredictable. As people get entangled in the labyrinthine social media connections, setting up a 'smart phone moratorium' is the need of the hour. Overuse of social media fosters the growth of Narcissism, which unravels itself in their 'selfie' culture. Excessive media connections are to be blamed for this. Overexposure to social media would make one averse to others. It facilitates focusing on oneself and imagining himself/herself as the centre of the universe. Three sources reveal the growth of narcissistic tendencies: the dramatic growth in the use of social media, changes appearing in the disposition of the youth and the changes taking place in our culture. "The Narcissism Epidemic" jointly authored by W Keith Campbell and Jean Twenge bears testimony of this malady.

More From Technology Less From Each Other

Today, people expect more from technology and less from each other. Sherry Turkle, Massachusetts Institute of Technology social psychologist, states: 'Overwhelmed by the volume and velocity of our lives, we turn to technology to help us find time. But technology makes us busier than ever, and ever more in search of retreat. Gradually, we come to see our online life as life itself.' New generation consider texting more comfortable than talking and having real relationships. They feel texting safer than telling someone face to face what you feel. In today's digital world, laying the foundation of healthy connections and relationships is the need of the hour.

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