

Available online at <http://www.ijims.com>

ISSN: 2348 – 0343

Citizen Activism and Internet Campaigns :A study of Mediation

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Abstract

Digital media and public sphere acquired a permanent place on research agendas and in the intellectual inquiry in the last two decades as it has made a mark in bridging the gap between state and citizen, thus helped to create public sphere. The paper deals with the argument on how Internet media provides a counter public realm in the global south like India and continues to play the role of creating middle class and upper middle class public sphere. This paper also attempts to theorise how such Internet campaigns play or might play a major role in either forging or mediating the formation of civil society. The first part of the paper elaborates the role of media campaigns in creating a space for dialogue and the second part deals with the limitations of internet to form a common frame of reference in a third world country like India.

Key words: Internet, Social media, public sphere, social movements, activism

Article

Media is considered an active stakeholder of civil society, for forming opinions. It disseminates messages to the broader audience to increase participation and promote accountability. Internet, being an alternative media, has made a mark in bridging the gap between state and citizen and has helped to create public sphere. It allows informed people to discuss social problems and lay the groundwork for more peaceful change in their countries. Internet creates a space for dialogue and debate, for citizens and hence advocates for participatory democracy. Thus, it helps to facilitate Habermas' concept of public spheres which emphasises on participation of individuals - "private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas et al., 1964:49).

Digital revolution led to the active involvement of Internet especially social media in creating democratic space globally in the last two decades. This has widened the field for researchers to think seriously whether Internet can foster the necessary condition for social change. Many social movements like *Slutwalks*, *UkUncut*, *Occupy*, *Arab Spring*, have occurred during the last twenty years seeking social, political, and economic change around the world "from Iceland to Tunisia and later on in many Arab countries. The motives were diverse of those social movements. In the west, the movements were against financial crisis, and in Arab countries it was combination of food crisis and rejection of dictatorial regime" (Castle, 2012). All these movements were facilitated by Internet and wireless communication to have a global outreach.

Internet is the only medium which can collect and disseminate information faster and cheaper than any used ever before (Drissel, 2013). The tools which are widely used by the digital activists are online petitions, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, blogs. A person can diffuse information with a single click, within a second, to thousands of people, some of who will spark online discussions on that particular issue and further movement of the issue. Peter Tatchell termed this activity as "Clicktivism" (Hill, 2013: 9) Thus, Internet has helped to reshape mass communication to "mass self communication" because it can reach to masses at the same time "the production of the message is autonomously decided by the sender, the designation of the receiver is self-directed and the retrieval of messages from the networks of communication is self-selected. Mass self-communication is based on horizontal networks of interactive communication that, by and large, are difficult to control by governments or corporations" (Castells, 2012:7).

This is an attempt to critically examine the role of social media campaigns relating to civil society issues and to theorise how such campaigns play or might play an important role in either forging or mediating the formation of civil society in a developing country like India. The researcher has tried to explore the consequent implications of Internet campaigns in creating a space for dialogue and debate, thus promoting the growth of civil society. The author examined the activities of social media campaigns in order to probe their role in forging a 'common frame of reference' undercutting diverse identity categories, which is a pre-condition for the growth of a civil society. The researcher intends to theorise how social media with global appeal, constructs a national imaginary much like the print media's consolidation of a specific national identity in 18th century Europe (Anderson, 1983/1991). That is why it is crucial to understand the dynamics of Internet campaigns and how they can either help in forging civil society or mediate along with political society between the civil society and the state. It is also necessary to critically examine how they construct the notions of civil society, of relevant issues and of citizenship; how does Internet play a role in social revolution in the Indian context? What are the inclusions and exclusions? Who do they address and who is left out? What points of view do they privilege?

The data used in this paper includes the author's experience of participating in Internet campaigns like the 'Greenpeace campaign', 'Free Binayak Sen' campaign. Based on the experience, this paper has tried to understand the role of the social media in representing and facilitating dialogue and mobilisation on public issues and citizens' problems. The primary data used in this paper is derived from the study "Electronic media and Public Issues: A Study of Mediation" which was conducted by the author for her M.Phil. dissertation. Drawing from the unstructured interviews and discussion with students, academicians, NGO director from Mumbai, the paper also aspires to sketch out how these campaigns are helpful in raising citizens' voices and also in mobilising opinion around important issues that are sometimes not handled by mainstream media. There are some social campaigns which have been entirely virtual and there are others which have been started in social and political spaces in the 'real' world and have used the Internet as a tool for extending their reach, along with other methods. The author has done thematic analysis of the primary data.

Internet's Role in Creating a Democratic Space

In this segment, the author examines the role of Internet campaigns in facilitating participatory democracy through online campaigns in different social networking sites. Through different social movements, citizens contest the established power in different times worldwide till today and they take the help of any form of communication mechanism: "rumours, sermons, pamphlets, and manifestos, spread from person to person, from the pulpit, from the press, or by whatever means of communication were available" (Castells 2012: 15). As mass media is controlled by governments and media corporations, in the recent decades, Internet played a crucial role in organising those social movements. Howard Rheingold, an influential member of an early Internet community called 'The Well,' published a book in 1993 entitled, *Virtual Communities*, arguing that 'virtual communities could help citizens revitalise democracy, or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse' (cited in Thornton, 2010:127).

Digital media especially Internet played a crucial part in different social movements from the early 1990s. Zapatista Army of National Liberation is commonly referred to as Zapatista and Internet was used for the first time to disseminate the goals online of the protesters in 1994. Gradually, with technological improvements, Internet became one of the important tools for mobilising and organising demonstrations and became a source of news for journalists. During the war between Iraq and U.S., it was difficult for journalists to access news from the spot. So, they got information from online 'blogs' – a short form of weblog, an online diary. In the next few years, the social networking sites – Facebook and Twitter were introduced. But the key moment of cyber activism

was started with the introduction of the video-sharing site known as YouTube in 2005. Tunisia and Egypt are the most prominent examples of using youtube, Twitter and Facebook to organise demonstrations. In both cases, the recorded videos of the protests were widely disseminated to gather more public support to join on the street. They are successful examples where the Internet was effectively used to force the autocratic regime to end tyranny.

In India, cyberactivism started with campaigns like Green Peace in India, Save Tiger, Pink Chaddi Campaign, Jessica Lal Campaign, Free Binayak Sen Campaign. Almost all, the campaigns started around 2008 and 2009. Although online campaigns started late in India than they did in the western world, here too they played a significant role in mobilising public opinion. In most cases, they were not successful but they greatly increased awareness among citizens. 'Pink Chaddi Campaign' was organised to protest against Pramod Muthalik's derogatory comments on couples celebrating Valentines day in a pub in Mangalore. The campaign encouraged people to send pink underwear to Muthalik's office. Later, the Facebook page of the group was hacked into by the opponent who renamed the page. 'Fight for Jessica Lal' aimed at supporting the demand for a fresh trial in the Jessica Lal Murder case. Eventually the Internet campaign together with the NDTV Initiative and cell phone messages supporting the NDTV campaign the accused Manu Sharma was held guilty. 'India Against Corruption' campaign is one of the biggest movements in India, against corruption, led by the famous social activist Anna Hazare. Thousands of people gathered, marched and rallied in the capital, Delhi, as well as different parts of India. Social media played a major role to organise, communicate and raise awareness. The Facebook page of the campaign, India Against Corruption, has currently around 1.4 million supporters and 43, 087 people put their opinions on the page regularly. The campaign is even supported by many U.S. and European citizens through signing online petitions. '50 Million Missing' is another global campaign to end the ongoing female genocide in India. It was founded by author and gender activist, Rita Banerji in 2006.

With the continuation of above-mentioned social media campaigns, the participants of this study also pointed out that the voices of common men and women are being heard more through blogs than mainstream media. Internet advocates freedom of speech among citizens through creating the space for citizens to debate and discuss issues freely as there is no issue of Ownership and control. In India and elsewhere, citizens have questioned the established powers, with the help of different social media and thus created a space for participatory democracy. Digital media helps the democratization process as much as cable television when it was introduced in the 1960s, it was meant to 'improve education, prevent crime and urban decay, break down social isolation, help people to communicate and enhance democracy' (Surman cited in Thronton, 2010: 128). One of the participants, the Executive Director of an NGO, who is actively involved in Internet campaigns is very much affirmative with the outcome of Internet campaigns. She thinks that the Internet can play a very important role to enable participation and intervention in the process of development by citizens. She says: Internet is democratizing many things- information; you can get news which you can't get in mainstream media. Secondly, democratization of information and who creates the information- earlier journalists were able to write but now everybody has blogs and gets their voice heard; now millions of voices are booming around the world. So it's completely changed that boundary between creators of the information and users of the information. You can comment on articles. There are millions of ways one can benefit from the information and especially in the countries which have censorship; people can get information on websites which they can't get otherwise.

Social media has been actively used by dissident groups in countries, like China, where there are kerbs by the state on the freedom of the press. Internet and social media counter the established power in those countries.

According to a student: In a country like China where media can't give absolute coverage, the Internet helps to run campaigns like the Free Tibet campaign, etc.

Apart from social networking sites, YouTube is one of the most important video-sharing websites. News with visual footage has much more impact than just reading it in a blog or in a publication website. As already mentioned that Tunisia and Egypt are the most prior examples of using YouTube as a tool to propagate the agenda of their social activism. A participant, student, who was also inspired to engage himself in different movement after seeing the demonstrations of the protests worldwide in YouTube. He said: In Internet people can watch the videos for many times in YouTube or any other site. Suppose in 'Free Tibet Campaign', people are watching those videos and seeing those videos, a lot of people are getting inspiration to fight back for the cause.

One student said that they achieved partial success in the campaign against the experimentation on monkeys at All India Institute of Medical Science in Delhi. She opined: ...for animal experimentation yes, the government has said to stop animal experimentation.

The great advantage that Internet has is that any citizen with Internet access can use that space in a flexible manner, whether to initiate campaigns or to participate in them. Unlike with any other media the agenda is set by the host/user, which has its own point of view. An issue of ownership and control does not come into play. It is a principle in journalism that the person who is owner of a media has the right to control the content. J. Herbert Altschull's 'second law of journalism' says, "the contents of the media always reflect the interests of those who finance them" (McQuail, 2005:226). So, it is not possible for average citizens to use television to get their voices heard. This point was emphasised by a student: Internet is more flexible in a way because there is not the factor of ownership and control.

Academicians concurred with the student, pointing out that the Internet permits greater freedom of expression and a diversity of voices: In the Internet media there is no barrier, people can create their own news. But through Internet media we can write our own comments against political parties. So in that way we can tell that the Internet is a developing medium.

In just hours people can send hundreds of thousands of messages to political leaders telling them to save a crucial summit on climate change, hold hundreds of rallies across the world calling for action to prevent genocide, or donate hundreds of thousands of euros, dollars and yens to support non-violent protest in Burma. 'In less than three years, we've grown to over 3.5 million members, and have begun to make a real impact on global politics. The Economist writes that Avaaz is poised to deliver "a deafening wake up call" to world leaders, the Indian Express welcomes "the biggest web campaigner across the world" and Nobel Prize winner Al Gore says "Avaaz is inspiring, and has already begun to make a difference' (TheStreet.com) In this respect, an executive director of a NGO who is trying to start two Internet campaigns discussed her idea about how Internet campaigns work: Here it is completely decentralised because one person sends to the next ten people and those ten people send it to another ten. So some people are reading it, some people are participating, signing into on line petition, some people are getting the information but not active. The kind of campaigns what we have seen have changed fundamentally from offline campaigns which are done by political movement or social movements- these were very centralised campaigns, there is always one nerve centre. These are seeded by somebody, but they then spread to many. So everybody becomes a part of the campaign plays the role of spreading it. So similarly even when the "'Pink Chaddi' Campaign" started, the person who has started it she does not call herself the leader of the campaign she also called herself the seeder.

Limitations and Drawbacks of Internet Campaigns

In the last segment, the paper explores the drawbacks and limitations of Internet in democratisation. From the analysis, the author has pointed out that there are participants who join in the campaigns without any intention to impact on the issue for which they are signing the online petition. They sometimes sign the petition due to peer pressure. Internet media has the advantage of the absence of ownership and control, but there are problems like low penetration Internet rate, lack of access to computers, language issues in a developing country like India. In India where Internet penetration rate is very low, and English is the primary language used on the Internet and these are seen as one of the major limitations according to participants to achieve participatory democracy. Moreover, Indian political parties have chosen Internet as a medium for political campaign to advocate their political agenda and make bias public opinion.

It is clear from the analysis that the Internet alone cannot instigate a movement or bring about social change. It may be an effective medium or tool for social movements to disseminate information most quickly and widely. It is true that people from different countries can follow the activities of a movement by a single click. Even they can take part by signing online petitions, but that does not encourage or motivate a person to hit the streets. The famous activist and author, Simon Hill, argues that activists ignore at their peril the myriad tools the Internet age affords—but they will still need to take to the streets to bring about change (Hill:2013). He further says, ‘The Internet has not been the cause of this wave of activism. The economic crisis, accompanied by a range of individual historical and cultural factors, has much greater claim to that title. But it would be wrong to suggest that the Internet has not affected it’ (Hill 2013:136). Student said: I feel about Internet campaigns- they can spread information but can’t motivate people so much that they will go out on the street and will do something. I think a meeting, a speech, rally, drama which are more physical are more effective.

Participants who took part in Internet campaigns do not have much hope for the outcome of those campaigns. Most of the respondents had participated in more than one campaign though they did not have high expectations about what the campaigns could achieve. They thought that these campaigns can only spread information but may not lead to any successful outcome. Student: It makes the community more aware in terms of the issues; it publicises and sensitises people on the issue. In terms of outcome I don’t know, maybe it depends on the people who have initiated the process.

Jonathan Heawood, director of the Sigrid Raising Thrust for promoting human rights rightly pointed out, “there are millions of people who sign online petitions, but take no further action” (Hill13:13). A student opined: When I signed up for the campaign against child sexual abuse in South Africa I signed up to show only support, but later on I don’t know what was the outcome of those campaigns. I don’t know how many cases they have solved and how many cases they could stop.

Most of the campaigns don’t last for a long time. The hosts of those campaigns don’t pay much attention to continue the campaigns further and disseminate their activities regarding the campaigns. If the participants of those campaigns do not get many updates on the regular activities on the issue, they lose interest. That is why, maybe a significant contributing factor in those campaigns that are not successful. Academician said: I noted down the features of the Internet campaigns and most of the campaigns are for short duration. Whether they achieve their target or not but they end the campaign within two or three months.

Evgeny Morozov, writer and researcher, argued that cyber-centrism leads people to cyber-utopianism, “failing to anticipate how authoritarian governments would respond to the Internet, cyber-utopians did not predict how useful it would prove for propaganda purposes, how masterfully dictators would learn to use it for surveillance, and how sophisticated modern systems of Internet censorship would become” (Morozov 2011: XIV). Internet

does not have the issue of ownership, control, political economy, regulation of mainstream mass media. But any autocratic regime or powerful institutions can also use the Internet for their complex strategies. Evgeny Morozov, writer and researcher, wrote about the recent emergence of the Internet to foster the propaganda of the autocratic regime. In his writing, he mentioned that some states have paid bloggers to write regime-friendly ideological comments. He sketched out the strategy of China's Internet control through propaganda and gave the example of 'netizen investigators' (Morozov 2011:118). He says, "...authoritarian governments from Russia to Iran and from China to Azerbaijan are busy turning the Internet into SpInternet—a Web with little censorship but lots of spin and propaganda—which reinforces their ideological supremacy" (Morozov 2011: 117). Student said, Yes, India is also witnessing the Internet surveillance which is against freedom of speech. For example, in the Palghar Facebook Case, two girls were illegally arrested for writing on Facebook against a forced strike and later the Facebook account was hacked, and the post was deleted by the opponent. An academician had a similar thought: There are political campaigns from different political parties in the 2014 election. Each political party is spreading their ideology and sometimes they are circulating derogatory messages against the opposition. This is a pure act of propaganda.

Many hope that the rise of the Internet in different spheres of public life and its interactive characteristics can make a state more democratic. When talking about the role of the Internet in building participation in civil society issues, education, social background, gender and age are very important determinant factors: Profession is another determining aspect to participate in a particular category of campaign. Some people who have a specific area of interest participate in campaigns related to this field. Scientist said, ... I have signed about climate; global warming and the other is about deforestation or protecting the tiger- mainly environmental ones...

Regarding this a student said, Internet only a selective number of people access it and so called elites who access Internet, and they raise their voices and they put their opinion online. Also, a limited no of people read it.

Technology is also not uniformly diffused across the population. The term, 'digital divide' is used to indicate people who have the opportunity to access the Internet technology and can effectively utilise that, and those does not have it. The term 'digital divide' depends on various factors like economy, rural-urban, educated- uneducated, language, gender, age, etc. Also, the richer countries tend to have number of Internet users than the poorer countries. According to Internet World Stat report, China has a maximum number of Internet users followed by United States and India. Though India holds the third position and has 137 million Internet users with 11.4% penetration rate in 2012 (Internetworldstats.com). ComScore report says that 75 percentage Internet users are under the age of 35 (comscore.com). Though eleven percent of citizens use the Internet in India, all of them don't participate in Internet campaigns. According to a student accessibility, is the major problem of the Internet: Internet is confined only to youth.

In India, English is a language still considered to be an elite language and meant to indicate a particular class who are economically and politically empowered according to traditional Marxist ideology (Wright, 1982). They can afford to go to English medium schools and learnt the language as their first or second language. This is not a new phenomenon rather it started from the Thomas Babington Macaulay's time. Macaulay's famous minutes says "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (Macaulay cited Hasnain and Chaudhary, 2010: 1). Afterwards, great Indian nationalists like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru were elite of the society and opted for English education. Gradually, it became an elite culture to be educated in English language. Even after sixty-five years of independence, English is still a language for the economic and social elite class in society. The Executive Director of an NGO mentioned that participants of

Internet campaigns belong to a particular class, which restricts the possibilities of a wide cross section of citizens participating. Access to the Internet is easier for people who speak English, for people who have access to computers, for people who are literate, and mainly the people who are in urban areas because of the Internet speeds and connections. So automatically a certain class of people go to the Internet and those are the people who participate online campaigns...

According to one student, class bias also is an important factor in Internet campaigns. He said: Most of the cases only high profile cases are taken up. It will be Binayak Sen or Jessica Lal campaign. I am saying that how many times you have heard about Internet campaigns on a person who died in floods in some parts of Guwahati or somewhere.

Conclusion

With the help of the Internet, campaigns are facilitated in two ways: a few campaigns are getting started in cyberspace and then becoming offline campaigns like the 'Pink Chaddi' campaign; on the other hand, the anti-BT Brinjal began on the ground level and then it used the Internet for greater mobilisation where within weeks, thousands of signatures, letters and e-mails are being sent to a particular authority. Horizontal information sharing and knowledge dissemination and the possibility of a dialogue on issues in cyberspace are helping to advance human rights and democracy and creating a space for civil society.

There are many initiatives taken by different organisations to widen the reach of ICTs (Information and Communication Technology) both in rural India as well as among urban underprivileged groups. Lawrence (2010) Liang, in his essay on "Access Beyond Developmentalism: Technology and the Intellectual life of Poor", talked about the *Cybermohalla*, one of the three media labs that have been set up in different working class colonies where young people meet, engage in conversations and write about their neighbourhood, technology, media, culture and life in the city.

This paper evaluates the role of the Internet in creating a space for dialogue and debate, thus promoting a role in forging a 'common frame of reference' undercutting diverse identity categories. The lack of centralised control of the content makes it possible for users to access material of their choice, rather than be dependent on centralised news gathering. Also in the case of the Internet, there is no issue of ownership and control the main drawback to it being used as a tool for promoting civil society is that by and large, only educated, urban people can utilise the Internet to raise their voices in a developing country like India. Apart from that, in the case of Internet campaigns, there is no follow-up and after a certain point of time no one cares for those campaigns. It is not possible for one medium alone to bring justice, as in the case of the Jessica Lal that the television media (Fight for Jessica Lal by NDTV) through their Short Message Service (SMS) campaign, and also Internet campaign and candle light vigils helped to get justice. After analysing the primary data and statistics of Internet users in India, one can hardly say that Internet campaigns are moving towards achieving participatory democracy in the Indian context.

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