

A Sociological Study of 'Social Media'

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Gaurav Shah*

Correspondence Email: gaurav@smsvaranasi.com

Abstract

Social Media no longer remains an entertainment media of communication. From past many years, it has become a serious communication platform carrying long-term ramifications. In the domain of social media, Twitter has become the wrestling ground for contentions result in name calling and invectives are hurled at each other. There had been various studies on the big data that is the content uploaded on the social media, tweets in particular. But there has been a considerable gap in the study of the sociological factors behind the content uploaded. This paper analyses the historicity of social media and Twitter in particular and also the sociological factors behind the growth of social networking sites. The examples taken in the paper are mostly from 2012 to 2014.

KEYWORDS: *Social Media, Twitter, Journalists, Tweets, Re-tweets*

Introduction

According to, Manuel Castels, "Throughout history communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counter-power, of domination and social change. This is because the fundamental battle being fought in society is the battle over the minds of the people. The way people think determines the fate of norms and values on which societies are constructed." (Castells, 2007) The capacity to influence people's mind has made mass media the social 'space' where power is decided. Castells, further argue that there is a "direct link between politics, media politics, the politics of scandal, and the crisis of political legitimacy in a global perspective." To counter that "development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new

form of communication, mass self-communication- self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many." He says that "we are in a new communication realm whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive." Social media is that platform of interactivity.

According to Kaplan and Haenlein, "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan&Haenlein, 2010). Dhiraj Murthy broadly refers social media to "the many relatively inexpensive and widely accessible electronic tools

*Assistant Professor , Mass Communication, School of Management Sciences, Varanasi

that enable anyone to publish and access information, collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships” (Murthy, 2013).

Twitter Overview

One of the main component of social media sites, Twitter is often understood as a derivative or miniature version of the regular blog – i.e. a microblog (Larsson & Moe, 2010). It could be said that a microblog is a platform in which users share short messages, links to other websites, images or videos. Normally a message on a microblog is written by one person (may represent an organization) and read by a number ranging from zero to hundreds of thousands of people, which in this context are called followers (Camara, 2012). As with other microblogging services, users regularly update their status, but in this case the message is limited to a length of only 140 characters. These peculiar messages of limited size are called tweets.

Though restricted, to 140 characters, Twitter has simple yet powerful methods of connecting tweets to larger themes, specific people and groups. Tweets can be categorized by a “hashtag.” Any word (s) preceded by a hash sign “#” are used in Twitter to note a subject, event or association. Hashtags are an integral part of Twitter's ability to link the conversations of strangers together (Murthy, 2013). This use of the # sign allows users to search the Twittersphere for specific topics of interest and to follow threads of discussion related to those topics (Larsson & Moe, 2010). For example, in case of social movements like 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, tweets used # occupywallstreet and #ows. This brought many people in a kind of larger conversations resembling a stream, composed of a polyphony of voices all chiming in (Murthy, 2013). Those subjects that for a certain period of time have a very high number of updates, Twitter catalogues them as trending

topics (TT) (Camara, 2012).

To allow for conversations, the @ sign is used as a marker of addressivity. For example, posting a message including @USERNAME indicates that the message is intended for or somehow relevant to a specific user. Retweets (RT) refer to the practice of resending a tweet posted by another user (Larsson & Moe, 2010).

History Of Twitter

Twitter was launched on March 21, 2006 and the first tweet on the site, “just setting up my twttr” (24 characters) was by Jack Dorsey, the creator of Twitter (Murthy, 2013). Twitter was born with the idea that users could write small messages about their daily lives, hence the question that appeared to each user at logon 'What are you doing?' However, over time users have converted Twitter into a powerful tool for disseminating information (Camara, 2012).

Twitter refers to one of the largest and most popular social media websites. According to the statistics from Twitter, Inc., Twitter has 284 million monthly active users and 500 million tweets are sent per day. Twitter is the eighth most popular website in the world and seventh in the United States. India is the third largest user of twitter in the world. These data can be found with a greater level of detail in the Twitter section of the Alexa website.

Singularity Of Twitter

Announcement of Airstrikes (Wagstaff, 2014) in Islamic State of Iraq and Syria by U.S. on twitter, (August 8, 2014) and announcement of victory of Barack Obama's re-election (Hermida, 2014) as president of United States (November 6, 2012) on Twitter is emblematic of how the service has become part of the media landscape since it was launched in March 2006 in San Francisco.

According to Dhiraj Murthy, Twitter, unlike previous modes of communication-stretching back to a letter carried by ship and more recently email-is that it is near instantaneous, multiplex, globalized, socially networked, and public (Murthy,2013).

Many associate social networking sites with social media. However, the boundaries that differentiate both are often blurry. Social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn facilitate users maintaining a “public or semi-public profile within a bounded system” and through which they can 'articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection.', whereas social media is mainly conceived of as a medium wherein “ordinary” people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists) can publish user-generated “news”/updates (in a broadly defined sense).

Additionally, social media's emphasis is not as 'bounded' to communities of friends as social network sites are. Rather, social media is a publishing -oriented medium and the “social” part of social media refers to its distinction from 'traditional” media.

Twitter being one of the leading social media sites invites many views and opinions regarding its uniqueness and difference from other social mediums. Dhiraj, describing Twitter as communal news space, argues that in comparison with social networking sites like Facebook “Twitter is a *public space* with anyone able to see, respond, or forward (“retweet”) messages. On Twitter, users can break news, comment on larger political issues, local concerns, and fads-all publicly.” For example, if a user has 100 Twitter followers and posts a message that gets re-tweeted by someone with 300 followers the message will likely reach close to 400 people (although some people may be duplicates appearing on both lists). If that message then gets re-tweeted by others, the

audience increases exponentially (Crymble, 2014). This is in distinction to Facebook's friend focused environment where individuals have more limited access to the Facebook profiles of others. Unlike other social network sites, users of Twitter can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages(Murthy, 2013). Non-reciprocal connections encourage the reading of tweets beyond one's personal and professional networks (Krishnamurthy,2014).

However, some scholars like Karen Ross and Tobias Burger are critical of Twitter, finding it to be a medium that requires instant response to the tweets, hence more liked by political “junkies” and journalists whereas Facebook attracts more diverse community (Ross&Burger, 2014). Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe, agree that majority of high-end users of Twitter, are established journalists or bloggers but the most conspicuous groups consists of anonymous users. According to them “the very fact that one can build a profile and make an impact in public political discussion under pseudonyms is a rather novel phenomenon – that seems to set online media apart from traditional mass media channels” (Larsson &Moe,2011).

Social Media Vs Mainstream Media

During Assam riots, 2012, mainstream media (print and electronic media) was heavily criticized for not being serious in their coverage of the riots which some of the tweets endorses. For example, one of the tweets posted on August 11, 2013 say “Dear Media - for 10yrs you kept telling us "If govt really wants, no riot can ever happen". But stayed mum when Assam burnt, now” while one posted on February 23, 2013 was even more critical of mainstream media, “Oldest Profession is far more dignified than our #SoldOut Media. Selective reporting on Riots - Assam, Bengal, AP, Maharashtra Not a news”.

Electronic media bore the brunt of attack more than the print media which the following tweets posted respectively on August 7 and August 9, 2012 suggests, "Nearly 5 lakhs (more than 4 times of Godhra riots) displaced from homes. No Rajdeep, Barkha reporting LIVE from Assam." And "Look at the excuses - we do not discuss 1984 as there was no TV then, unlike 2002. What about 2012 Assam? - oh TV is there but no OB vans!". Similarly, Geeta Seshu picks apart traditional media for its failure refuting the propaganda spread through social media that led to mass exodus of northeastern people from southern states to Assam (Seshu, 2012).

On the contrary social media was praised for its vigilance over the issue as the following tweet posted on July 25, 2012, shows "The mainstream media's slow response to the Assam riots created an information vacuum that the social media networks, with all their faults, filled to capacity." Democratic and hierarchical-free nature of social media challenges the journalistic pattern of mainstream media. According to Alfred Hermida (Hermida, 2012) "Social media question the individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism, subverting journalism's claim to a monopoly on the provision of everyday public knowledge. Digital media technologies such as Twitter facilitate the instant, online dissemination and reception of short fragments of information from sources outside the formal structures of Journalism." Hermida further enunciates that "The attributes of social media-participation, openness, conversation, community and connectivity- are largely at odds with the one-way, asymmetric model of communication that characterized media in the twentieth century." He further compares social media with mainstream media quoting other scholars:

Journalists seek to represent current events by creating products with a fixed order and hierarchy. Twitter, by comparison, provides a medium for a mix of news and information

without an established order. Twitter and other social media platforms are shared media spaces that chafe against what Zelizer describes as "the meanings, symbols and symbolic systems, ideologies, rituals, and conventions by which journalists maintain their cultural authority as spokespeople for events in the public domain". The tensions are symptomatic of the transition of journalism not just to a digital, but also to a networked environment.

Endorsing the thoughts of Hermida and linking politics with social media, Karen Ross and Tobias Burger are of the view that "A large part of the attraction of Facebook (and Twitter and blogs for that matter) is the unmediated and mostly unmoderated nature of the communication between politician and citizen, which is crucial for smaller parties who are otherwise marginalised by mainstream media and who welcome the more direct form of address provided by social media" (Ross&Burger, 2014).

According to Stefania Vicaria, social media has the 'potential of easing the delivery of alternative representations of social contention.' Elaborating further, she says that The leading argument here is that actors from outside the traditional news media system can now cover protest issues neglected by the mainstream media and easily reach expanded audiences. From this perspective, the characteristics of the Internet infrastructure – in terms of access and availability – can enhance the emergence of new platforms for deliberative democracy, that is, new spaces for public reasoning around social contention (Vicari, 2013).

Adding to Stefania's view, Brian E. Weeks and R. Lance Holbert explicitly discuss about social media's advantage over traditional media:

The traditional mass communication experience is a one-way, top-down, sender-driven, time-

specific activity; news seekers are mere consumers who receive only the information provided by news organizations, have little choice over content, and for the most part consume content at a time that is predetermined. In addition, sharing content (e.g., cutting an article out of the newspaper for a friend) or controlling the time of consumption (e.g., recording a program on a DVR) are somewhat onerous acts with traditional mass media. With social media, however, users maintain much more control over their information environment. Consumers can actively participate by selecting the content they wish to consume at a time that is convenient to them, and also quickly disseminate news to numerous others. The ease with which social media news consumers can share information with others sets it apart from the traditional mass communication experience (Weeks & Lance, 2013).

However, many times social media helps traditional media by providing them important information at times and places when there is no availability of any correspondent of mainstream media at that time of place respectively. The same gets endorsed by Simon Cottle, in context of Arab Spring (Markham, 2014) as he says:

New social media and mainstream media often appear to have performed in tandem, with social media variously acting as a watchdog of state controlled national media, alerting international news media to growing opposition and dissent events and providing raw images of these for wider dissemination. International news media, in turn, including Al Jazeera, have distributed the flood of disturbing scenes and reports of the uprisings now easily accessed via Google's YouTube and boomeranged them back into the countries concerned. Mainstream newspapers and news broadcasters in their online variants also increasingly incorporate direct links to these new social media, effectively acting as a portal to their updating communication flows and near

live-streaming of images direct from the protests themselves (Cottle, 2011).

Twitter And News Reporting

Zizi Papacharissi & Maria de Fatima Oliveira, quoting 'Grusin' and 'Farhi' are of the view that potential of Twitter works best in "premediated situations where the story is changing so quickly that TV or print media do not have the time to develop a fully sourced story. Examples of such situations include disasters, accidents, riots, and political events." (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012). Claudette G. Artwick, finds Twitter to be a 'game changer' for newsrooms, with 'the power to connect reporters and sources, as well as readers, like never before.' (Artwick, 2013). Some scholars like Suzanne Lysak, Michael Cremedas, and John Wolf, find Twitter to have an upper hand over mainstream media by saying that "Twitter has beaten traditional mainstream news outlets on several recent breaking international stories. Not only has Twitter provided coverage faster,

It has also given participants and observers the opportunity to share their experiences with each other (Lysak & Wolf, 2012). Also twitter with its ease and advanced technology enables reporters to tweet their request to find an all-important interview that will put a "human face" on their story and for that reporters don't have to leave their desks.

Cory L. Armstrong and Fangfang Gao finds Twitter to be the newest tool in journalist's arsenal. They find that "Twitter is a good place to preview and publish work, update breaking news, communicate with other journalists, reach news sources, and to find more story ideas. Twitter is one such tool with speed and brevity that are ideal for pushing out scoops and breaking news to readers" (Armstrong & Gao, 2010).

Social media gives journalists an opportunity to

share their opinions with public which otherwise is difficult to do in mainstream journalistic practices. Relating to the same thought, Steve Paulussen & Raymond A. Harder, opine that while news organization see social media as a platform to market their news content, individual journalists use social media to talk about what they are working on, share opinions and ideas or for live-blogging (Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Seeing it as another area of potential study, Lysak questions prospect of the same. He asks "is social media a platform where traditionally neutral journalists will be more free to offer a recommendation or take a side, based on what they have learned through their research and reporting?" (Lysak & Wolf, 2012).

Conclusion

We have seen in the article that social media has traversed a long path in quick time. A medium that was popular for sharing fun moments has suddenly become a screen for serious moments. Twitter in particular has become an important tool of expression and story sharing for major stakeholders of the society and in that particularly journalists and politicians see Twitter or social media as the medium that makes them feel influential and empowered. A news report without pre and post tweets is impossible to think. Uploading of static and dynamic visuals has further increased the relevance and importance of social media. Social media's sociological connotations are still in nascent stage and this article will certainly provide a promising ground for serious researchers in the coming future.

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