Digital Media - Changing the landscape of mass communication and journalism

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Abstract

The research article deals with new practices in digital media and their impact on traditional print media. It deliberates in detail, the use of digital media at various levels of communication, beginning from personal communication to community and mass communication. It gives a detailed analysis of impact of digital media in news gathering, news production, advertising and news circulation. A detailed note has also been added about the use of social media as a new technological tool for mass communication. The emerging trends in digital media have been exemplified and dealt with in-depth to bring the discussion to a conclusive end.

Keywords : Digital media, mass communication, journalism, online media, communication technology

Introduction

Technological innovations have often brought about a paradigm shift in the way mass information is disseminated, consumed and used in the history of mankind. After the invention of the movable-type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century and the broadcast media in the 20th century, digital media in recent times has brought about phenomenal changes in mass communication. While some of the rules of mass communication have remained intact, there are others which are born out of the new technological innovation. The new media is not only setting up new parameters of inter-personal communication but is reinforcing new consumption pattern at various levels of mass communication and journalism. Be it personal, group, social or even national - it has touched every level of modern life in one way or the other.

The great communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's popular saying that 'the Medium is the Message' has once again proved to be pertinent in the digital context. While the message (content) remains the heart and soul of any communication, it is the medium which is the body or physical entity which makes the communication possible. However, the scope of democratization of the message and its reach is manifold in the digital communication than it was previously thought. The digital media has also made the feedback process a two-way highway in which the messenger and the receiver are inextricably linked in the digital context.

Material and Methods

The research article has followed a qualitative approach in collecting the required data and in analyzing the prevalent trends and practices in the digital media. It has also set out to compare and contrast the new technology as a means of mass communication with the traditional media and its impact at various levels of mass communication and news production. As the data and information on digital media keeps changing and affect the annual figures, the paper as a practice has tried to take the annual figure as the basis for analyzing and reaching a conclusion. Most of the materials have been accessed online and links for the same have been provided at the end of the article.

Before we discuss the impact of digital media on journalism and mass communication, it calls for an adequate understanding of what digital media constitutes. The term is often compared with analog media, which means it's merely a technological term that lays stress on the shift or rather new pattern of technological innovation. For mass communication, the term holds a different meaning. It's often compared with the traditional print media like newspaper and magazines. But in a way it could be argued that even print media can be considered digital as it uses the digital printing press to print newspapers and magazines. The argument however, carries an element of fallacy and in all probability is erroneous. The term 'digital media' should be strictly used in cases where the receiver receives the message in digital format like on their computer screens or mobile phones using internet or telecom network. The case of television as a digital media was earlier ambiguous but with the digitization and Direct to home (DTH) becoming a reality, it has now found its place in the digital sphere.

But if we don't use the term 'digital media' loosely then we realize that digital media like computer networks, Internet or mobile have yet another characteristic that television doesn't have. It is the process of receiving 'feedback' which is a two way highway establishing a direct link between stimuli and response between the sender and the receiver of the message. The element of direct and prompt feedback between these two elements is a prominent feature of digital media. The term is generally used by technological experts only for storage and transmission of the data but for the mass communication, it goes a step ahead and lays more emphasis on the transmission of the message than on its mere storage.

Digital media is not merely a technological tool but a technology in itself which has enabled users to access information and data faster and across the globe without any barriers. Earlier, this was not possible with the traditional media which was limited by its physical constraints. Another feature which contrasts digital media with the traditional media is the format of the content which could be in the form of text, visuals, video, animation, graphics or short films available in digital media. It has provided a rich tapestry of information and at times, in real time. An event happening in Chicago could be viewed by a person sitting in Jaipur in real time via television broadcast through internet access. Likewise,

some of the website portals have been able to bring convergence of these entire formats on a single page giving it a worldwide access without any strings attached.

Discussion

Digital media is the medium for the masses, thanks to its cost effectiveness, reach and easy accessibility; it has become ubiquitous and is made available across the globe. As a result, there is hardly any sphere on which it has not left its impact. Business and commerce, education, entertainment and medical sciences have been its greatest beneficiaries. The other benefit of digital media has been that it gives easy access to information to which there is now no premium attached. It has empowered the masses when it comes to accessing information and knowledge. The year 2002 was the beginning of the digital era when more information was available in the digital format than in the traditional 'hard copy' format. Most of the digital information was made available online through web pages in the public domain. The democratization of information has opened floodgate of opportunities for all and sundry with no demarcation of age, gender, caste, creed, colour or nationality. There has been hardly any technological innovation in the history of mankind which has played so enabling and democratizing role as the digital media.

As the invention of printing heralded Renaissance in Europe, digital media has heralded an era of globalization and democratization of information across the globe. Countries like China where the freedom of press is under the watchful eyes of the communist government, has not remained untouched by the digital phenomenon. China today ranks number one in the internet usage followed by the USA and India. According to The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) the number of Internet subscribers in India stood at 164.81 million as on March 31, 2013. This speaks volumes about the new digital era and the enabling role it has been playing in the recent times. The very concept of globalization and the pace of Indian economic liberalization received fresh impetus with the growth of digital media. Although, there have been few empirical studies to bring forth the exact statistics, it has been rightfully debated that easy access to information has had an indirect bearing on the policies enumerated by the various governments both in India and abroad.

There is yet another facet of digital media which has been explored only marginally in recent times in the nation-building and in times of national crisis. The digital media played a varied role in Spring Revolution in countries like Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Algeria, Syria and other countries in spreading the dissatisfaction with the existing regime. While protesters used it to spread their message of unrest, the government used it to curb the fire from spreading to other sections of the society. As a tool, digital media found new adherents from various strata of the societies and in varying degree. While most of these protests were unstructured and lacked a real time unifying factors, digital media was found to have played a role of messenger and served as an intellectual platform to discuss the national issues.

In India, digital media played a major role and was a major source of mass communication in some of the recent mass protests. The Anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare, the Delhi December 16 gang-rape case in which a medical intern was brutally gang-raped and ultimately died, gathered mass public protest and social media was an effective tool for organizing public demonstrations all across the country. Social media like Facebook and Twitter turned out to be a major source of information dissemination and in creating public opinion on such issues. So much so that a blog written by a law-intern about her sexual harassment by a former Supreme Court judge AK Ganguly proved so fatal that the latter had to resign as chairman of the West Bengal Human Rights Commission.

While some of these were positive examples of the usage of social media in fighting against injustice and social malaise, there were other events in which digital media, especially the social media, played a negative role. One such incidence was flight of North eastern people living in Bangalore triggered by SMS and Internet rumours. According to media reports, some 15,000 people from the North-East living in Bangalore fled the city on August 15 and 16, 2013 fearing a hate campaign against them. The rumour spread like wildfire. Jnanpith awardee U.R. Ananthamurthy called the exodus 'horrible' saying that the situation was created using Internet and the electronic media. "If the electronic media says there is a fear, it becomes a fear," he said. Digital media is, thus, a powerful and influential medium of information dissemination, but one whose veracity and fallacy should be examined before being accepted at face value.

Digital Media and Societal Change

This brings us to yet another facet which has been equally impacted by the digital media, our legal system. Earlier, there were virtually no law which took into account digital offenses like cyber crime, cyber terrorism, personal identity theft, hacking, Internet stalking and defamation, etc. Now, there are rules and the Indian Penal Code (IPC) provisions which make such offenses a serious crime punishable under the court of law. There have been numerous incidences when First Information Report (FIR) was filed against the perpetrators of such crime. According to government figures, there were some 2,876 cases of cyber crime registered in the year 2012 under the Information Technology (IT) Act, which was 61 per cent higher than the preceding year.

To overcome the menace of cyber crime, government has been building technical infrastructure and cyber police stations for registration and investigation of cyber crime. Most of such offenses relate either to economic fraud or obscene content posted on the website or circulated through mobile telephony. Norton cyber-crime report 2012 found that 42 million people became the victim to cyber-crime in one year, suffering approximately $8 billion in direct financial losses. During the last one decade India has witnessed several cases of cyber crime, which included Pune BPO-Scam, Gurgaon BPO-Scam and Bangalore BPO-Scam to name a few. These were mostly related to data security and economic offices.

A turning point in the freedom of expression and expression of personal views on social media came to light in November 2012 and triggered a nationwide outcry. The case was related to two Mumbai girls Shaheen Dhada and Renu Shrinivas who were arrested for their Facebook post questioning the shutdown in the city for Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray's funeral. Police arrested both of them under section 505(2) (statements creating or promoting enmity, hatred or ill-will between classes). The incident shook the nation and there were protests by eminent people against the harsh punishment for the innocuous post on the social media. The incident also highlighted the misuse of legal provisions for vested interests.

These are some of the stray and individual incidences of digital media being used to spread rumour and fear psychosis in the minds of certain section of people. A similar case was also witnessed in Muzaffarnagar riots in UP in which a Youtube video was blamed for fuelling communal clashes in the city. It was alleged that the Muzaffarnagar riots were fuelled by YouTube videos, Facebook comments and tweets. One video shot in Pakistan, showed two brothers being killed in Sialkot by a mob belonging to other community and was widely circulated among the people. The truth behind the incident has yet to be verified as is often the case with other similar cases. But it did reflect the perception of the masses about the new age media and its role in spreading rumours.

The digital media is not only taken seriously but has impacted people's lives in varied measures. It has the ability to incite communal clashes and soothe frayed nerves as well. It has provided succor to the needy and has helped people come together in a way no other medium has been able to do it in the recent times. There are numerous incidences where people were able to establish old relations, across the borders and search for people who were either presumed dead or had gone missing.

The digital media has brought communities together and has also helped much better inter-governmental understanding through public opinion. The governments on its part too has been trying to make the best use of the medium but unfortunately such incidences are few and far in between. While e-governance has become the catch word in recent times, the implementation of public welfare schemes using digital media has been painfully slow. Using it as a tool of mass communication, governments have yet to exploit its massive reach and appeal.

The government of India formulated its National e-Governance Plan (NeGP) based on Singapore's One Programme. The project was based on the recommendations of the second Administrative Reforms Commission and is meant to provide necessary information and services to people using digital media. The massive network of electronic facilities is expected to spread over major parts of the country and is being monitored by Ministry of Communications and Information Technology. However, critics have been of the opinion that the implementation of such programmes has been considerably slow and has often deprived the illiterate masses from availing the facilities.

The silver lining of the programme nonetheless has been the wide range of services that it has set out to provide and the huge database of the information it

has been able generate. The database could be effectively used by all the government departments and the states as well as the Central government. It will also reduce the cost and the delay in implementation of new welfare schemes and programmes.

Providing Better Connectivity

The benefits of digital media for mass communication have been realized to a large extent but its true impact still remains to allow information to percolate down to the base of the societal pyramid. The government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have yet to learn to connect to the masses using the new technology. While state governments like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have initiated e-governance effectively, other states have yet to harness the true benefits of the new technology. One of the main emphases of the state governments has been to transcribe its old revenue and land records electronically but there are other sectors like education, health which have far more potential and need to be digitally connected. As digital media impacts masses on a daily-basis, digitization of such services is sure to benefit a large section of society.

While social and welfare schemes have started benefiting from the digital technology, there are other sectors of governance and public welfare which have been rapidly riding upwards on the waves of the new technology. A case in point the anti-corruption helpline launched by Arvind Kejriwal-led *Aam Admi Party* government in Delhi. The helpline used digital media to launch a crusade against corruption in the government agencies. From hidden cameras to mobile camera to online, it has been using new technology to gather information about such malpractices and initiate actions against the erring officials.

According to a media report, the helpline number which was functional from 8 am to 10 pm received over 23,000 calls within two days of its launch. While most helpline calls were petty, there were others which were of serious nature and led to action against the corrupt officials. The helpline empowered the common man with electronic weapons to fight against corruption and not to give bribes for getting their work completed by the government offices. There were other incidences when people video-recorded the act of officials receiving bribes and presented the case for action before the anti-corruption panel. As the anti-corruption initiative of Delhi government is still at an early stage, it's hard to predict its long term impact and efficacy. But to make any such initiative a success, it involves political and social will and the digital technology was simply an instrument to that effect.

The use of digital media, especially social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly being used by political parties and political leaders to further their interests and cause. As part of their online campaign, social media has become an election campaigning platform to reach out to young voters. Twitter is being increasing used by political leaders to air their views on various subjects. Some leaders use it as an announcing platform for breaking news and

instead of holding press conferences, prefer to save time and resources by announcing new schemes on social media.

Social Media and its Impact

It was Congress leader Shashi Tharoor who was the pioneer in the use of social media and he used it quite effectively to reach out to public and media persons. However, his controversial comment that he would travel "cattle class" in solidarity with "holy cows" was not taken kindly and was widely disapproved by the Congress party and its leaders. Another controversial tweet, this time by Robert Vadra, son-in-law of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, about Aam Admi Party calling it a 'Mango party' was widely disapproved. This goes to show that while social media is a great platform of propaganda, it can also be dangerous and fatal if not used carefully and responsibly. It can make and break the image of the person and lead to unacceptability and condemnation of their tweets, comments and posts.

Among the new breed of social media evangelists, BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been using digital media vigorously to reach out to youngsters. Congress leader Digvijay Singh is yet another political leader who has been using it vigorously. In fact, at one point of time, social media had almost become a battle ground for Digvijay Singh and Narendra Modi to counter and refute each other's statements. It seemed as if both the leaders were fighting a pitched battle to attract voters attention on social media. And this could be very well true as millions of people have been following their tweets and hailing and flaying their comments and debates. Congress leader Kapil Sibal and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal too have been using social media but sparingly to air their views and opinions. It could very well be said that digital media is not only about connecting people but also about fighting ideological battle at the personal and social levels.

Another group of people who use social media aggressively is Bollywood stars and the Indian film industry. Starting from film promos to individualized news and the news of actors, social media has become a hot favorite place for breaking such news. If a star says something controversial on social media, it instantly becomes news and is followed by newspapers and TV news channels alike. This adds to its authenticity and is considered as if coming from the horse's mouth. It is this reason that most media persons and other people follow these personalities on social media. As a result, there also exists a race between the film stars to have as many followers on social media as they can garner. More followers apparently equals more popularity. In fact, some of the actors have dedicated persons who manage their social media and augment the number of their followers. Actor Amitabh Bachchan has been posting news about his films and life on social media from time to time and has the maximum number of followers, Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan are other Bollywood actors who have a huge following on *Twitter*.

While social media is an economical tool to reach out to masses, it has its limitations too. It is more an urban and youth phenomenon. It is said that it has further pushed the illiterate and rural masses to the fringes and has alienated them from the mainstream. The phenomenon called the 'digital divide' is one of the main outcomes of the age of digital media. While the government, NGOs and educational institutions have been aggressively trying to bridge the gap between the haves and have-nots of digital knowledge, there still remains much to be achieved. Apart from digital divide, the new technology has also brought forth demographic inequalities. While India's population at the end of 2012 was 1.23 billion, up from 1.03 billion in 2010, the number of Internet users in the same period increased from 69.2 million to 116.18 million, which is just 9.6% of the total population. The statistics prove that a large part of rural and urban areas still remain out of the reach of IT revolution.

While social media has been an open platform for political leaders, campaigners and other people to exchange ideas and opinions, it's the field of journalism which has been profoundly impacted by the digital media. As the primary role of journalism is 'to inform, educate, entertain and create opinion', the digital media has played this role quite effectively. It has had a global impact as the news and information can now be circulated all across the globe in real time and at a lower cost. An Indian living in Ohio in US can know as much about his town's real time happening as the person in India. The globalization of news and information has obliterated the physical limitation of newspaper and magazine's circulation. The shift from 'hard copy' to 'soft copy' news has brought a paradigm shift in not only accessing the information but also in the business model of the media houses. While people still prefer reading their morning newspaper with a cup of tea or coffee, the habit has been gradually shifting among the younger population. For today's youth, Internet has become a one-stop source for all information. It is projected that in times to come, Internet would be playing an enabling role for a larger section of the country's youth.

According to a report published by IRIS Knowledge Foundation in collaboration with UN-HABITAT, by 2020 India is set to become the world's youngest country with 64 per cent of its population in the working age group. As a result, the information accessing habit of youth will have a direct bearing on the digital media. It will also open fresh avenues of growth and will have more readers/consumers for the digital media. The new technology has been showing steady growth in its revenue generation during the last one decade. According to a report jointly published by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and IMRB International, the country's online advertising was expected to reach Rs 2,938 crore by March 2014. Comprising search, display, mobile, social media, email and video advertising, it had grown 29 per cent year-on-year to Rs 2,260 crore by March, 2013. With youth occupying a major share as the consumers and digital media showing exponential growth, the two factors are sure to bring a tectonic shift from the traditional media.

The impact of digital media has been more profound in the field of journalism, especially the print media. As both serve as the source of information and news, there has been stiff competition to garner larger share of readership and

viewership by both. In the initial stages of IT revolution, digital media merely served as a tool to showcase the rich content of the print media. This picture however, changed over the time as news providers and entrepreneurs realized the independent nature of digital media and its positioning as the creator of news and content. Now, there are numerous digital platforms in the form of websites and digital feeds which work independently, irrespective of a print backup, to provide digital news to readers. While most media houses have a digital platform to gain access to digital readers, it is the new entrants who are bringing in innovative ideas to reach out to the masses. Digital media has impacted almost all aspects of traditional media including news gathering, production, circulation, advertising and readership.

News gathering, production and circulation

With the coming of digital media, content creation and news gathering are no more the prerogative of traditional media alone. Now, news websites have their own reporters, stringers and correspondents who continuously provide minute-by-minute update of news by being physically present at the events venue. Equipped with video camera, digital camera and Internet enabled mobiles, they instantly provide news to their operating offices which are immediately uploaded or made live on the websites. Some of the more enterprising reports are given the facilities to upload the news content from the very sites of the events, thus making the news accessible across the globe instantly. The role of reporters and correspondents of new age media has further expanded and they are now playing the role of one-man show of an event.

Earlier, reporters and correspondents were often accompanied by a photographer or video camera man who used to provide their feeds separately to their head office. Now, a single person does all the multi-tasking for the digital media. An innovative approach towards news gathering was adopted by a new concept of 'Citizen Journalist'. News channels like CNN-IBN have a special programme where news feeds by citizens are broadcast through the programme. Here, a citizen who has news to share plays the role of a reporter on the spot to report an event or analyze a particular incident. As running a media operation has become an expensive affair, it is almost impossible for media houses to appoint reporters at every part of the country. It is here that the role of an active citizen as a reporter has come to play a significant role in news gathering. It is as a result of 'Citizen Journalist' or Community Journalist or Civic Journalist that many of the local scams and discrepancies in the government agencies have been brought to light.

South Korea was among the earliest nations to have realized the importance of the idea of the citizen journalist and to have harnessed the potential of the citizen as a source of news gathering. A very successful model was created by OhmyNews of South Korean online news website by Oh Yeon Ho in 2000. With the concept of "Every Citizen is a Reporter", almost 80 per cent of the website news is generated by common man. The website has been receiving over 225 news feeds and articles every day from its 70,000 citizen journalists across the

globe. The website has a massive readership both for the local as well as international news and has been doing fairly good business. Although, the concept has yet to make a massive impact on Indian journalism, several online operations have been trying to rope in people from various parts of the country to report news for them.

Some of the critics of digital media journalism have often raised the question of the authenticity of the news and reports obtained in these ways. However, as it's humanly impossible to verify all the news, it is presumed that some information is better than no information, even if it remains to be verified. Sometimes, the very basic information provided by digital media work as a trigger for the mainstream media to authenticate and verify it before reporting it in the mainstream media. Another feature that has been noticed in recent times is about the dissemination of information and news to wider audiences. Once a report or news comes in the mainstream media, reporters and media houses do not rest there. They further take a step forward by disseminating the news to a wider audience through social media like *Facebook* and *Twitter* through regular feeds.

Eco-friendly and Cost-effective

The digital media has not only brought the cost of news gathering to a minimum but has also made the process of news production a cost-effective proposition. While in the traditional print media producing a newspaper involved newsprint, printing, ink and whole gambit of printing technology which came at a massive cost, digital media doesn't call for any such infrastructure. To make the news and information reach mass communities, one simply needs a website or mobile app and server facilities where the content is hosted and then disseminated to larger audience across the globe. While there is no variation in the news content and formats in which it is disseminated, the difference lies in the new technology. The digital media is also more eco-friendly as it does not need newsprint which necessitates the cutting of trees.

However, the change in technology has brought some new challenges as it has cut down on manpower resources massively. While running a medium size newspaper involved some 500 people, the digital media is now capable of doing the same with as less manpower as 50. This is one reason that some of the media houses have either scaled down or closed down their offline operations and have stopped printing news magazines and newspapers. The phenomenon is more popular in the developed countries like the US and the European nations. Some of these media houses have been looking for buyers to overcome the financial liabilities in the vogue of digital media.

According to Paper Cuts, which tracks the US media industry, more than 166 newspapers have closed down or stopped publishing their print editions since 2008 and as a result over 35,000 media personnel lost their jobs since March 2007. Some of the media houses which saw their untimely demise during this phase include The Rocky Mountain News, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the Tucson

Citizen – Arizona's oldest newspaper. Another casualty was the loss of, after nearly 280 years in print, the world's oldest newspaper Lloyd's List which stopped printing in favor of a digital format. The famous Newsweek put out its last print issue on December 31, 2012, and moved to an all-digital format for the sake of people preferring reading magazines and newspapers on iPad and other digital devices like the *Nook*, *Kindle*, *Google Play* and the *Zinio* digital newsstand.

Other areas that have changed the landscape of traditional media are advertising and circulation. While the concept of circulation has become redundant for digital media, advertising has shown a considerable swing towards digital media in recent times. As pointed earlier, the country's online advertising was expected to reach Rs 2,938 crore by March 2014, which is a significant growth if one looks at the short time span during which digital media has made its presence and impact felt. If the success of social media and e-commerce sites for booking air tickets, railway tickets, movie tickets and for buying products online are any indication, the very concept of business and product sourcing is changing drastically. To make this happen, companies and advertising agencies have become heavily dependent on online advertising. Products like mobile phones, gadgets, ticketing, matrimonial which once dominated the newspapers pages are now finding a place of pride on news websites which attract maximum eyeballs. For online advertisers, there is a considerable benefit as they can be conveniently redirected to the object of their interest, unlike a newspaper or TV new channels. Also, the consumers can directly get in touch with the company making the product or engage in online conversation with customer care for authentic details of the products.

Result and Conclusion

According to communication theorists, monumental change in the digital media has occurred at the receiving end of the message - that is the readers and the news consumers. Unlike in the traditional media, where the feedback was more a delayed process, the digital media offers instant feedback facility. The readers can instantly react to a news story or information and express their views. Sometimes, the news provider and the media houses have no option but to cater to the readers' liking even if it means compromising with the basic tenets of journalism. The proliferation of Page 3 infotainment content, gossip, raunchy and sleazy news on the news websites are examples of such practices which have compelled the media houses to cater to a section of the reader. Nonetheless, these news websites have been doing the yeoman's service by providing breaking news, current information and intellectual discussion to readers in real time and at the lowest and most affordable price. With the coming of digital media, it's the users, readers and general populace which have benefited the most than the traditional media houses.

A remarkable success story of the digital media in the recent times has been the rise and dominance of *The Huffington Post*. This website, which offers news, blogs and covers politics, business, entertainment, and technology, etc, has no offline print edition. Launched on May 9, 2005, The Huffington Post became the

first commercially successful digital media enterprise to win a Pulitzer Prize and has been on a climbing curve ever since. The success of *The Huffington* Post also proves that now more and more people prefer digital media than the traditional print media, especially in the developed countries where computer and Internet penetration is very high. In India, there has been no such success story as *The Huffington Post* largely because of dismal Internet access in the larger part of the country. But if one looks at the holistic picture and the growth trajectory of digital media in the country, it's only a matter of a decade or so when readership is expected to take a huge leap into the digital space.

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