

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKING THROUGH THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract

The scholars in the field of mass communication and sociology have examined the evolving role of mass in media in a society from the classical theoretical perspectives of functionalism, social interactionism, and conflict theory. Each of these sociological perspectives has reflected strong relevance in the media theories that evolved since the beginning of functionalist traditions in mass media studies by Harold Laswell and Paul Lazarsfeld in the first half of 20th century. What is interesting is that with the advancement in mass media technology and the emergence of digital media technology, these theoretical perspectives of sociology have reinvigorated their relevance over the period of time. These social theories continue to remain relevant in current times of advanced digital media communications, especially social media networking. This study moves beyond the sociology of traditional mass media and will discuss the relevance of above theoretical perspective in the present context of rapid internet-mediated human interactions viz a viz social media networking.

Keywords: Social Media, Mass Media; Surveillance, Correlation, Transmission, Entertainment, Mobilization.

Introduction

Media plays a central role in mediation and transmission of culture, opinion, and information in the current era of the high media-saturated world. The mass media's relevance in a society has been fundamentally studied under the three sociological perspectives of functionalist theory (Laswell, 1948; 1960, Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948), conflict theory (Chomsky, 2002; Gramsci, 1971; McLuhan, 1994), and symbolic interactionism (Blummer, 1969; Spencer, 1991). The sociologists since early twentieth century took a keen interest in understanding the relevance of media as an integral institution in a society. The scientific research in media studies began with administrative research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld (1948) that initiated the era of the functionalist approach to studying mass media's role in society.

The functionalists like Talcott Parsons (1991) recognized media effective tendencies to play an effective integral role in adaptation, integration and reinforces moral order in the society. The conflict theory that finds its roots in Marxist ideals of power, domination and class conflict perceive media as agency employed by the dominant class that controls the production of media content and used it to impose and promote desired culture and ideology in a society (Herman & Chomsky, 2010). The conflict theorists argue that mass media reflects and projects elitist views undermining the majority working class, the passive audience. The third and final sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism has developed mainly from the cultural studies of Sociology during 1980's and 1990's. The prominent Interactionist theorists like George H. Mead and Herbert Blummer argued that the audience interpret the media content themselves and derive their own meaning from the content they receive (Blummer, 1980). The Interactionist approach to mass media considers audience as active and responsive while engaging with the media content. This study will try to move beyond the sociology of traditional mass media and will try to discuss the relevance of above theoretical perspective in social media networking in the present context of rapid internet-mediated human interactions.

Functionalist approach to Social media

The functionalism is one of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology which envisages that society as an organism in which each integral part functions towards the stability the society (Durkheim, 1893). The functionalist approach to understanding the social phenomenon originated from Emile Durkheim, a pioneer in the field of sociology and social order. The theory was later developed by eminent theorists like Talcott Parsons (1991), Herbert Spencer (1971) and Robert K. Merton (1996). The functionalist theory of sociology explicates on the phenomenon as how the constituent interdependent social institutions of the society perform their individual assigned functions necessary for the existence and progress of the society.

Mass media being one of the primary social institutions in a society has also been understood from the functionalist approach of the sociology. Harold Laswell (1948) was one the first communication theorist to develop the framework for media functionalism in his seminal paper in 1948, titled "*The structure and function of communication in society*" in which he identified main functions that mass media performs in a society. The American sociologist Charles D. Wright (1960) contributed to the theory of media functionalism by explicating on the 'entertaining' role of media in the society through comics, films, and entertainment programmes. There are five main functions of mass media in classical functionalist approach to mass media; surveillance, correlation, transmission, entertainment, mobilization.

In the parlance of social media functionalism, the idea how technological driven social networks contribute towards the smooth functioning of a society by facilitating instant human interactions, cultural transmission and a source of leisure. The social media networks help develop connections among the members, thereby contributing towards the integration in a social order.

The classical functionalist theory of mass media proposes manifest and latent functions of media in a society first propounded by Robert K. Merton (1968). This functional approach can be extended to the operational involvement with social networking sites. The obvious manifest functions of social media are based on idealist norms of communication like; connections with family, friends, and other acquaintances. The manifest functions of *Facebook* are that it allows users to interact and share posts, photos, and videos with friends and help build connections with likeminded people available on the network. The latent functions of social media include a large amount of information and interactions being used by the law enforcement department to devise policies and keep a check on unlawful online activities. Moreover, the social media users can reconnect with lost offline relationships and friends which recognises the latent functions of social media.

Latent function

The latent functions of social media can be understood from the fact that the governments and law enforcement agencies across the globe engage in tapping the information on social media networks to prevent crime, track suspects and sabotage the anti-state political mobilizations. The recent years witnessed crucial issues of mobilization (for example online protests during Arab Spring), hate speech, provocative viral videos across social networking sites. The security and law enforcement agencies often respond by monitoring the social media content online in order to neutralize the negative or provoking posts and comments.

Cyber policing in India

Under the aegis of NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Companies), the Mumbai Police Department in 2013 developed the first media lab in India to monitor the flow of information and interactions on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

(*Mumbai Police goes social to know public mood*, 2013). In 2016, the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) proposed that a National Media Analytics Centre (NMAC) be created to keep the monitor and analyze round-the-clock blogs, web portals of TV channels and newspapers, and social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *YouTube* (Ranjan, 2016). According to the proposal, NMAC through its advanced software would classify the tone of social media posts (pictures, text and videos) into three categories; positive, negative and neutral. The DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) in 2016 through its advanced lab, Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR) developed NETRA ((Network Traffic Analysis), a monitoring software for the Intelligence agencies of the country to intercept, analyse and filter the social interactions through internet (Sinha, 2017). In the times when there are consistent debates going on in India regarding the issue of government surveillance and right to privacy, the security agencies are persistently making effective use of social media networks to monitor online interactions and user activity. In August 2017, amid heightened controversy on the issue of privacy and government surveillance in the country, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court unanimously passed the historical verdict, validating the “Right to Privacy” as a fundamental right under *Article 21* of the Indian Constitution (Mahapatra and Choudhary, 2017).

Social media dysfunctions;

In the classical functionalist perspective of media, the media theorists like Merton (1968) found it complicated to have a linear understanding of ideal media functions and argued that the media processes across communications channels exhibit strong tendencies of dysfunctions that might be counterproductive to social order. The functions of media might be good for one group but at the same time might have dysfunctions for another group (audience) in the society or the content might be read in an antagonizing meaning and interpretation by the other users. According to Merton, dysfunctions are those consequences of media content that lead to instability and ultimately change in a society.

One of the primary manifest dysfunctions of Social media is the issue of authenticity of user accounts and the content produced. In 2012, *Facebook* reported having a total of 8.7 fake accounts amounting to a total of 83.09 million fake users. Moreover, the issue of privacy has emerged as a manifest dysfunction of social media websites because, the content (photos, videos, posts) you put is public and can further be used by other users with their own projections and intentions. The Social media abuse by pretentious dissemination of information on social media sites for political reasons, to provoke and advocate an opinion is seen as a latent dysfunction of social media. Latent dysfunctions of social media have been a crucial issue in wake of wide internet penetration and extension of Social media sites. The users don't have control over the further usage of uploaded content by the other users. Moreover, taking advantage of the social media platform, anonymous users indulge in cyberstalking, cyber-bullying, and threats to other users.

The critical evaluation from a functionalist perspective, the Social media exhibits an important yet controversial role in contemporary social order. The Social media is believed of accelerating the process of globalization and making the human civilization more connected. The social media like *Facebook* involves consistent cultural transmission through enormous round the clock interactions across the globe. Social media played a phenomenal role in mediating the dissent and mobilization during Arab Spring in the Middle East. However, the issues of cyber-crime, provocation and clandestine sabotage using surveillance and censorship are some primary functionalist disadvantages of social media networks.

Economic function

As of January 2017, there were 2.789 billion global social media users with a growth rate of 21 percent from 2016 adding a total of 282 million social media users between 2016-2017 (Chaffey, 2017). The rapid proliferation of social media in last one decade have had a strong impact on online business via digital marketing and digital advertising through social networking sites especially *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, and *Google*.

The social media networks facilitate advanced platforms for small and big businesses to target and attract their prospective consumers, more effectively. The instantaneous and rapid dissemination of content and wider reach of social media websites across the globe has tremendously helped the companies to locate and reach out to their customers. One of the important commercial function of social media websites is that it helps the companies to effectively locate and learn about their potential audience by availing the personal details from the website profiles like gender, age, language, region, and interests. The shift from expensive traditional advertising to relatively cheaper and wider digital advertising through social media has revolutionized the whole idea of marketing business globally which has attracted small and big business to switch over to social media websites for the promotion of their products and services. The promotion of business through social media helps companies build a useful relationship with their prospective customers by availing the methods of advanced targeting options like; Interest targeting, behavioral targeting, custom targeting, look-alike targeting.

The conflict theory and Social media

The sociological perspective of conflict theory is interested in understanding the role of individual's or institutional power and control over mass media and its influence on the content being disseminated. The central argument of the theory is that the individuals who control media might manipulate the media message for their interest and the individual with lesser or limited control over media content are likely to face criticism and exclusion. The modern mass media have been attributed to the tools of social *control* (Sullivan 2007). The theory of conflict in mass media evolved with the issue of media productions being controlled by a corporation who execute their agenda with the help of their control and power over the content being disseminated through media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). The advertisements sold with regular media content serve the purpose of business houses and are targeted to influence a certain class of the society. The core idea of media conflict theory is the idea of *haves* and *have-nots* among the media audience which leads to the conflict.

The theoretical perspective of conflict theory finds a significant relevance in social media networking. The conflict theorists in mass media believe that the social media as a medium of communication constitute both advantaged and disadvantaged people and groups and the fundamental difference between them reflects in social media usage, control and influence as users. The important issues like control of websites, ownership, and economic benefits in the form of advertising are fundamental in the parlance of conflict in social media. The privileged entities on social media include those who own networking sites thereby controlling it, those who advertise through social media (advertisers), marketers and employers (who work in the services). On the other hand, the disadvantaged users and groups are those common social media users (consumers) who avail the social media services as a way to communicate and interact with friends or express themselves but doesn't have much control over the execution and the economics involved. The common social media users post the content swiftly and with wider reach through social media, yet they don't control the content. The plethora of online advertisements on *Facebook* news feed often

against the desirability of a social media users is a typical example of a conflict where the users are forcibly exposed to the content that serves the marketing economics of the website.

The issue of privacy is one of the major forms of conflict in social media networking. For example, the Social media website *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* in their terms and conditions ask their users to agree to their legal property laws which extend their intellectual rights to the content generated by the users. Besides this, the social media networks have unbridled control over the privacy and security of the profiles and often approached by security and law enforcement agencies for private details of the users. The concept of 'Panoptic surveillance' originally propounded by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by Michael Foucault (1977) finds an increasing relevance in today's advanced communication on social media networks where the human interactions and activities are consistently monitored through clandestine surveillance by authorities and agencies on the pretext of security and law enforcement. In 2013, Edward Snowden, a former contractor for CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), made shocking revelations about secret surveillance (Maass, 2013). The report was carried by *Washington Post* and *Guardian* in which he revealed that American NSA (National Security Agency) tapped nine Internet firms including social networking sites *Facebook* and *Yahoo* to track the online interaction and content in the infamous surveillance project named *Prism* (Maass, 2013). The global surveillance projects while violating the fundamental rights of privacy reflect on the larger theoretical issue of conflict in the social media communications on the basis of power, domination, political interests, and coercion.

The extra-judicial method of blocking or restricting information flow on social media networks in the form of censorship also reflects on the relevance of conflict theory in social media. Some governments, especially in Asia in recent years have been reported for restricting freedom of speech or access to information, blocking social media websites or shutting down Internet services as whole to prevent online mobilization during protests. During Arab spring in the middle east, the social media played a crucial role in mobilizing anti-regime protesters which earned it the name of 'Twitter revolution' (Gustin, 2011). The governments in Egypt, Libya and Syria imposed complete shutdown of Internet services to prevent protesters from accessing social media which was emerging as a primary source for them to express dissent Gerbaudo (2012). The state control over censoring and blocking public interactions over social media to prevent mobilization and restrict online protests of citizens reflects on the sociological perspective of conflict theory in communication.

There is also the issue of visibility and influence in engaging with people on social networking sites. The users with higher status and large followership like politicians, celebrities, and businessmen have larger reach and influence through their content while as users with lower economic status and profile remain invisible on social media sites. The social media contributes towards legitimizing the power of opinion formation and influence with resourceful users like celebrities which is in conflict with the common users who just continue to remain passive.

The debate on Net neutrality in recent years has been one of the crucial issues regarding the control of the flow of information across social media networks. In February 2016, in response to the protest by net neutrality activists, TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) ruled against *Facebook's Free Basics Plan* in India which is an important instance of the issue of conflict of accessibility on social media networks (*The Indian Express*, 2016). The TRAI claimed that since the majority of Indian population still lack basic internet access, allowing service providers to define the nature of access would be equivalent to letting TSPs shape the users' internet experience' (*Quartz India*, 2016). TRAI opposed the initiative by calling it 'risky' as according to it

the perceptions of the users would be developed exclusively for the selected content being offered through this plan.

The hegemonic approach of traditional media through *gatekeeping* that works on the cultural diversity of a society by imposing the domination and manipulation by powerful race, gender and religion over disadvantaged classes have been replaced by social media. The gatekeeping tendency in information distribution has been weakened by the emergence of social media networking that provides users an unbridled access to media content to a large extent and free flow of information irrespective of their cultural identities. The users have the liberty of reporting and blocking inappropriate and undesirable behavior or content that they feel violates social norms.

The Social media and perspective of Interactionism

The concept of symbolic interactionism is a sociological concept that explains how people interpret the meanings attached to words and symbols that they come across in a social setting. The theory is mainly attributed to the works of Herbert Blummer in 1969 but the concepts of symbolic interactionism were earlier developed by George H Mead (1972) and Max Weber (1978). The interactionist perspective of mass media argues that mass media content influences the individual's way of perceiving themselves, other individuals and the society. Media shapes the characteristics of an issue for the audience as they derive the meaning from such interpretations. For example, the representation of women in media according to interactionist perspective is always presented with a pre-defined symbolic meaning attached to it; we see women as victims in serials, women with highly sexualized projections in advertisements or music videos. In interactionist paradigm, the mass media sets the parameters of social acceptance by mediating and deciding about the symbols that represent issues for audience consumption.

Social media networking exhibits a significant relevance of interactionist perspective of sociology. People derive their own symbolic meaning of the content (text, photos, cartoon, videos) posted by other users, the meaning that the author of the content might not intend to communicate. The interactionist scholars of media sociology are interested in understanding how social media users are engaged in self-awareness and how they communicate the symbols publicly and in private messages with their friends. The social media networking conveys symbolic interactionism in which users get the meaning of an issue by how actions (posts) are reflected from the reactions (comments, likes, dislikes) of others. The interactionist approach of social media is based on self-identity in which users seek as how others view our expressions and actions while communicating. Moreover, it's the nature of reaction from other users that help us to validate, endorse or change that identity.

The concept of social construction in social media networking also stems from the larger theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. Over the social networking sites like *Facebook*, the business companies promote their products and services and the users intentionally or unintentionally consume such advertisement. The people intentionally access social media for connecting with friends, share their views but the social media giants like *Facebook* have now turned into big markets for online business and product promotions for companies. The *Facebook* users with an intention of only objectively reading the advertisement may decide to buy the product. This is a kind of interactionism where the transmission of meaning and symbolic interpretations happen constantly. The book, "*Symbolic Interaction and New Social Media*" by Johns, Chen & Terlip (2014), is an interesting which covers the relationships between social media and the social interactions. The authors concluded that social media interactions which they called 'second life' play a crucial role in constructing the meanings of the social and political process in contemporary

times. It focuses on how social media constructed the images of political players during the Arab spring and technological formats (online medium) in shaping up the meanings of political and social issues.

The concept of self-presentation put forward by Erving Goffman (2006) finds a significant relevance in social media interactions. The social networking site *Facebook* is an important example of understanding self-presentation where the users have the control over how they present themselves and the other users derive symbolic meaning from that representation. The identity of *Facebook* users leads to the construction of “social self” wherein individuals fit themselves in a social order which recognizes *Facebook*'s role as a social community on the patterns understood by the interactionist theorists of sociology.

The relevance of technology in the process of communicating via social media networks is in itself an essential reflection of symbolic interactionism. Our economic status is reflected by the technology and tools we can afford and use. The users with high-end gadgets and devices are perceived economically sound while the ones who can avail low or normal services and technology indicate the opposite. This is an interesting distinction of symbolism in the parlance of social media where the technology itself has a symbolic meaning in society. In ‘technophobic’ approach of Neo-Luddism which insists on the promotion of more natural communities perceive that technology symbolizes deviation and harm while as ‘technophiles’ on the other hand believe that communication aided with new technologies (social media), symbolizes advancement, progress, and sophistication in human to human interactions.

Conclusion

The social media has transcended beyond any existing human network and evolved as a dominant discourse of social interactions surpassing all the forms of traditional media communication. The dominance of social media is powered by the rapid penetration of internet across human populace connecting billions of people who engage in an enormous amount of interactions and data transfer. The Facebook's total monthly users reached a unanimous mark of 2 billion users in June 2017, turning the community bigger than the largest country in the world (Forbes, 2017). From the functionalist perspective, the social media's role stands contested between functions and dysfunctions. The social media has proved instrumental in connecting millions of people across the globe, an instant source of news and engaging people throughout the world through interactions and cultural transmission. However, the dysfunctions are equally disadvantageous as social media platforms are being used for propaganda, hate speech and cybercrimes like cyberbullying, threats and stalking. The issue of fake and anonymous accounts is another issue that raises the questions about the authenticity of users on social networks. The social media is being accessed by security agencies to conduct clandestine surveillance on the users without their prior knowledge which is in violation of their ‘right to privacy’. From the interactionist perspective, the social media gives liberty for active and liberal engagement of users with the content they upload or consume on social media. In the parlance of conflict, the issue of corporate control through advertisements supports the classical argument of power domination in communication processes. The social media is emerging as a heaven for marketing companies and digital advertising with instant, cheap and wider reach for selling products. The bombardment of such online advertisements while boosting the revenue of social media sites impose advertisement on passive users who have no option other than reading such advertisements intentionally or unintentionally.

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