MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

The role of communication and mass media in the process of social change are one of the central areas of debates and deliberations in media studies. The present paper intends to discuss the role of mass media in transforming society. Mass media educates and informs people about varied contemporary issues so as to shape their opinion. It gives voice to the voiceless focusing on their concerns and worries, thereby contributing towards the process of change in society. The emergence of social media has also provided a public sphere where users can exchange ideas and emotions regarding issues of importance. There are also instances where social media has extensively been used for encouraging the youths for voter turnout, thus causing a transformation in society (Supli, 2013). Towards the implementation of good governance, the role of mass media and especially social media cannot be undermined. This study tries to assess the role of mass media including social media in the process of social transformation.

Keywords: *Mass Media, Social Change, Social Media, Social Movements, Transformation.*

Introduction

Mass media is a means of communication that is used to reach heterogeneous groups of people scattered over large areas simultaneously. Newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet, all are the platforms of mass media. Mass Media aids in socialization and caters to our information and entertainment needs. From influencing public opinion to determining political agenda, mass media also has various other functions like acting as a link between government and the public and most importantly, acting as a watchdog of the government. Further, mass media affects the socio-cultural life of society and brings changes in the attitudes and behaviours of people. Through its news and views, mass media shapes and moulds public opinion towards various contemporary issues.

Media conveys information for the betterment of the community. That information has the power to build and to destroy. Thus free and adequate information is imperative in the process of development of a society. Researchers Ojenike, Odugbemi & Ojenike (2016) asserts that free and adequate information is a means of bringing desired social change.

Communication plays a very significant role in social transformation and social change. Effective communication, therefore, can only set the path to change in society. To bring

awareness at different levels of society, effective communication must take place between media and society. In recent times, the emphasis is given to participatory communication and horizontal communication like community media and stakeholder consultation. This creates a space where people can communicate, share ideas, define development and thus give meaning to their citizenship. Through such spaces, people can reshape their boundaries and redefine social and cultural norms. Participatory communication basically possesses the potential to contribute to sustainable change at various levels of society. This contributes to transformation in society. In developing countries like India, mass media plays a vital role by catering to the socio-economic needs of wider groups of people. Awatade (2016) asserts that mass media can accelerate growth rate if it is used properly and even awaken people for sustainable development. This study, therefore tries to assess the role of mass media including social media in the process of social transformation.

Media and Social Transformation

Initially, the print media with its printed words in newspapers, magazines, and journals could trigger the change in attitude and approach of individuals. As electronic media was introduced, with its numerous broadcasts and telecasts, it also significantly changed the thoughts and outlook of major sections of the society. Change not only occurred in the beliefs and values, trends and styles, but also in the contents of social structure. Even today, media is the driving agent of such change in the society.

In this digital era, Internet and World Wide Web, smartphones and digital television, and such other information and communication technologies are gradually opening new ways of transforming not only our ways of communication but also our ways of living and learning.

Social media has mitigated the constraints of time and space and made McLuhan's idea of 'global village' a reality. The development of information and communication technologies is transforming almost every sector. As the new communication technologies are developing the society, they render significant influence on the people especially the youth. The developments in the communication systems are gradually changing the information society to a knowledge-based society. The evolution of social media in this digital era is playing a prime role in accelerating this change.

The mass media has gradually become an inevitable part of our lives acting as a bridge in the process of transition from a traditional society to modern society. Mcquail thus, rightly referred to media as an engine of change. Some of the major roles it plays in society are:

- It expands the horizons of thoughts.

- It can focus people's attention to what is important and raise awareness

- It raises community aspirations by delivering the latest trends (Paul, Singh, & John, 2013).

Further, the mass media supports and contributes towards social change by aiding in providing information, making decision and as educators. Without the presence of media, people cannot get quick and accurate information. Mass media delivers information in the form of discussions, so as to deliver the information of community leaders and convey important issues in a clear manner. Furthermore, media as educators increase public knowledge about varied issues and events. This can alter the social orientation of people. Media has power over an individual's sensibilities and thus with its content and coverage can raise people's consciousness. It is the media's effort that the young generations today have discarded various age-old taboos and inhibitions. It makes and moulds the very fabric of society. Media can thus be referred to as an agent of most transformations.

In the process of social transformation, mass media thus plays a central role by influenceing as well as promoting new standards. Forsberg (2006) states that media, in the process of raising awareness can motivate social development and social change by "promoting both individual and communal interests in a society". It is the media, which with its content and coverage can promote development by involving people in the process of social change. It can transform Indian society by "developing it as an information community which means rich in information and advanced in technology" (Awatade, 2016).

However, media must be free and independent and disseminate information to people which is a pre-requisite for debates and discussions that give shape to their opinion. As citizens get access to information, they can hold the government accountable. This improves transparency and contributes to the development of the nation. Researchers Ojenike, Odugbemi & Ojenike (2016) pointed out that a report in the year 2007 highlighted how the information by media empowers citizens to "determine their own change and development path". Media can improve governance and bring a positive change by monitoring the activities of the authorities and by making people aware of corrupt activities. Corruption needs to be eliminated from every sphere so as to increase the rate of productive activities and mass media has a significant role to play in this regard. Researchers Ojenike, Odugbemi & Ojenike (2016) found in their study that if the power of media is harnessed in an appropriate manner, it can impact governance by exposing corruption in public and private sector, impact economy by monitoring various economic policy development process, and impact socially by disseminating information to citizens and making them sensitized towards the rights and obligations to society (Ojenike, Odugbemi, & Ojenike, 2016). Only a free and independent media can do so and can contribute towards the betterment of society.

Mass media plays a positive role in society by giving people the opportunity to voice their opinion. The media which reaches out to masses of people and makes the voices of the vulnerable heard can create informed citizens who can form their own opinion and make informed decisions for the country's progress. The advent of social media has in fact given users a platform to voice their concerns in literal as well as in audio-visual means.

Social Movements and Social Change

The emergence and evolution of social networking sites has provided a democratic device (Shaw, 2016) to users worldwide. In addition to changing the process of communication, social media also organizes people to form social movements. Social media has therefore become a tool for social change. Social change is the change in a society that is brought about by social movements and also by several external factors. Technological innovations or environmental shifts are among such external factors. Two major forces that drive social change are collective behaviour and social movements. The recent years have witnessed many such social movements that have made a great impact and all such movements were born and organized over social media.

The evolution of the internet and social media has geared up the trend of social movements. Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Nirbhaya case, Hokkolorob, anti-corruption movement are all well-known examples of social movements. Such social movements are organized groups who work and strive to achieve a common goal. They mostly aim at bringing or resisting change. Contemporary social movements thus attempt to create social change on a global scale.

Sociological Perspective

The social movements can be looked at from three sociological perspectives.

  i. Functionalist perspective: It generally focuses on why does social movements develop, why do these continue to exist and also the social purposes they serve.
 ii. Critical perspective: it focuses on the creation as well as the reproduction of inequality. This perspective sees an inherent conflict in social relations and that conflict drives social change.
iii. Symbolic interaction perspective: It talks about the day to day interaction of social movements, the meanings that people attach to involvement in such movements and the individual experiences of social change.

Initially, social movements start as people are activated. The very first stage is the preliminary one where people get awareness about issues and only with a click they can make thousands of other followers informed and get them thinking about the issue or cause.

Thereafter, leaders appear who continue to mobilize people and social media makes this whole process faster.

The interactions happening on social media have a global character having inputs from people worldwide. In fact, many top news stories are originated from social media. People now have intense discussions and deliberations on political issues in social media which have widespread implications. The virtual platform is also being used in effectively utilizing human resources in various voluntary activities. People show support towards initiatives taken by individuals with their time and resources.

The sharing feature of social media allows people to share content numerous times across space, wherein individuals post their views as comments forming threads of comments in wall posts. This collective action resolves to initiate virtual protests and create events, thereby forming mass social movements. This forms various other aspects of social realities.

Conclusion

Mass media and especially social media exert tremendous influence on social transformations. Media, as vehicles of socio-cultural change shapes the cultural patterns of a society and determines people's behaviour. In this phase of transformation in society, the youth have a big role to play. Media, as the fourth pillar of democracy, has the core responsibility of building public opinion and social media is such a platform which connects the youth of the nation and allows them to voice their ideas and opinions. This is certainly a welcoming sign if such resources are utilized in a positive way. However, many challenges lie in the process of ushering in social change or transforming society which needs to be addressed. Though the number of socio-economic development programs is no less in number, they can bring change only with their faster implementation. Thus, if the power of media is properly harnessed, the future perspectives of media can be more progressive thereby promoting sustainable rural development (Awatade, 2016).

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