

Engaged Democracy: Political Media Literacy and Information and Communication Technology

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I. INTRODUCTION

The most recent Cambridge Analytica case indicates that psychological manipulation, entrapment techniques and fake news campaigns can jeopardize democracy and the healthy functioning of a political system. It also shows how technology giants can use profiles of citizens to change public opinion in favour of one or the other political party. Therefore digital literacy is needed so citizens may remain informed about how their preferences are being used by various organizations.

Literacy is changing with the widespread introduction of ICT, research establish that the literacy associated with the new media, especially the internet, differs significantly from that of print and audiovisual media. Crucially it is the relationship among textuality, competence and power that sets those who see literacy as democratizing, empowering of ordinary people against those who see it as elitist, divisive, a source of inequality. Today's anxieties over the digital divide merely represent the latest steps in a long standing struggle between critical and enlightenment positions whose outcome will influence who will have the power to benefit from information and communication in a technologically-mediated twenty-first century.

II. OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Digital literacy represents a person's ability to perform tasks effectively in a digital environment, with the term 'digital' meaning information represented in numeric form and primarily for use by a computer. Literacy includes the ability to read and interpret media (text, sound, images, et. al), to reproduce data and images through digital manipulation, and to evaluate and apply new knowledge gained from digital environments. According to Gilster (1997) the most critical of these is the ability to make educated judgements about what we find online.

Visual literacy, referred to at times as visual competencies, emerges from seeing and integrating sensory experiences. Focused on sorting and interpreting, sometimes simultaneously, visible actions and symbols, a visually literate person is able to communicate information in a variety of forms, to appreciate the masterworks of visual communication (Chauvin, 2003). Visually literate individuals have a sense of design, the creative ability to create, amend, reproduce images, digital or not, in a mutable way.

As a component of a broader symbolic system that creates and distributes social knowledge about politics, the media is related to the construction and quality of citizenship in an extremely complex fashion, a fact that has generated endless academic debates. While fake news and disinformation are being used to shape and polarize opinion, it has also triggered violence in many instances. In India alone, in 2018, at least 25 people were lynched in separate incidents, triggered by online rumours (Sen & Murali, 2019). The presence of fake news and the threats it poses have led to a slew of measures to curb it. These can be broadly classified into three headings- the first involves steps taken by the state to regulate digital and social media. The second is self-regulation and governance measures taken by technology and platform companies. The third is the initiatives taken by civil society and users of social media.

The study seeks to find the solutions to regulate digital media and disinformation as these will remain contentious issues. These have repercussions for democracy and its effective functioning. These can shape the popular perceptions and attitudes people form about a government and shape global opinion about a nation. Governments or individuals with an agenda spread disinformation and the media platforms become the medium to amplify the false news. At the same time, people have cognitive biases that make them vulnerable to believing false information, and the availability of social media at their fingertips only amplifies the negative effects of these biases.

Conceptual Framework:

The main concepts around which the study will be based are 'technological determinism' and 'public opinion theory'. The technologically-determinist view is a technology-led theory of social change. According to technological determinists, particular technical developments, communications technologies or media, or, most broadly, technology in general are the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. Technological determinists interpret technology in general and communications technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even the future. They say that technologies such as writing or print or television or the computer 'changed society'. In its most extreme form, the entire form of society is seen as being determined by technology: new technologies transform society at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals. Some of the key theorists in this are Daniel Chandler, Marshall McLuhan and Andrew Freenberg. Some call Karl Marx the first technological determinist.

Public opinion theory, on the other hand, is closely related with publics and public sphere. Early (normative-political) public opinion theories maybe defined as 'substantive', in contrast to what Francis G. Wilson named 'adjective theories', which consider the concept of the public as correlative to opinion (the term 'public is used as an adjective to describe the specificity or quality of an 'opinion'). The question of social control became one of the central issues in psychological and sociological theories of public opinion (Lippmann, 2017). Early theorizations were focused on the relation between the public and the government, whereas in the nineteenth century the relation between the public and the mass became central, control over the ruling authorities by the public (majority) as the fundamental principle was 'replaced' by the principle of the majority tolerance (the mass) of minority (representative government). Some of the key theorists in this field are Walter Lippmann, Valdemar O. Key, Benjamin Ginsberg, James Beniger and John Zaller.

Research Questions

Some important questions the paper seeks to answer are:

- What are ways to measure political awareness of citizens?
- How does technology play a role in making 'informed citizens'?
- What is the appropriate 'digital literacy level' of citizens?
- Is regulation, 'freedom' of digital media or media literacy a remedy for a nation?

III. METHODOLOGY

The paper studies secondary resources and other literature to ascertain the findings and discusses the various aspects of having an informed political citizenry. Politically aware citizens can be an asset to any nation. Digital literacy possibly provides answers to having citizens desirous of a vibrant democracy. Various literature on media literacy is studied to find answers to research questions posed by the study.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Political awareness of citizens

Television infiltrates our lives, guiding about how to wear, how to interact and how to communicate and it can go a long way in determining the political awareness of citizens. A UNDP report says:

The role of television in Pakistan is extremely important as illiteracy is a major obstacle to information and awareness. Recent studies show that TV is watched by almost 50 million people. An increasing number of women, urban and rural, now have access to television. Due to the limited scope of the print media to the audio-visual media becomes the most influential agent in the country (UNDP, 1996).

This is just the case of Pakistan. But the same is true for other nations. India, too, has a large viewership which shows that a large number of people are educated by the television medium. Media is helping democracies and promoting globalization. The institution of politics is one field which works for the welfare of people and is concerned with government and other related issues of government, elections, vote, etc. In most of the world's countries, national power of politics and authority are allocated to various individuals and groups through politics, usually by means of compromises between conflicting interests. Through politics, governments are elected or appointed, or in some cases, created by armed forces. Governments have the power to make, interpret, and enforce the rules and decisions that determine how to run the countries (Ahmed, 2010). In the present era, it has been seen that mass media has put spirit and encouraged people in electing government according to their own choice (*ibid*). In this way, people can change the wrongful decision of government officials (*ibid*). So mass media is the source of influencing people to participate in politics and this is the only source of creating awareness in citizens that how to improve and run our political system.

Technology for information

Any concept of media literacy must be founded on a working definition of literacy more generally. As Harvey Graff demonstrates in his valuable historical study, the concept of literacy bears decidedly political significance in complex ways, not only in terms of issues pertaining to citizens' ability to acquire "useful knowledge", that is, instrumentally, but also through the relationship between literacy and political judgement and action (Graff, 1991). Literacy was profoundly important for the circulation of political ideas in the decades just before the French revolution (Calabrese, 2003). Literacy also divided the bourgeoisie from the lower classes, which became a social issue that led to state intervention. For example, in mid-nineteenth century Britain, a state-supported literacy movement emerged that was, according to Graff, "derived from the need for social order and morality in a time of unprecedented social and economic transformation. Education was a Victorian obsession (Graff, 1991).

Today the term media literacy is most commonly used in the fields of media and communication studies, and in education. It can range from dealing with concerns about how children are being affected in their television viewing habits to issues regarding the teaching of computers in the school. A media-literate person might be one who has ability to use the local cable access center's video equipment to produce a documentary on local environmental issues, or one who has the capacity to provide an insightful and rigorous analysis of the prioritization of political issues in a network newscast. Teaching technological skills is, in this sense, roughly equivalent to imparting political understanding (Calabrese, 2003).

Since the time that Walter Lippmann published his classic book, *Public Opinion*, there has been fundamental disagreement between intellectuals and political leaders about what role citizens can and should play in public debate and political decision making. Walter (1922) argued that the 'omni-competent citizen' is a myth and that public debate should be left to more level-headed experts of various kinds. Dewey (1927), on the other hand, aimed to depict the average citizen as one whose civic competence is worthy of cultivation and trust rather than of suspicion and underestimation. In Dewey's view, the ability to participate as listener and speaker in public debate, both literally and figuratively, is essential to competent citizenship. This unsettled debate poses fundamental issues about educational policy, media policy and the connection between the two.

Digital literacy levels

The increasing emphasis on understanding the connections between physical and virtual environments created and facilitated by media has led to a renewed focus on the context of media use in the digital age, a point made repeatedly by Gerbaudo in his book on contemporary activism, *Tweets and the Streets* (2012). This emphasis becomes more concrete if we consider the example from the beginning of this chapter, that of the chemical spill in West Virginia and the citizens there unable to know for certain if the water coming out of their faucets was dangerous. Imagine young parents at home, smelling strong fumes coming from the water they are about to use to give their newborn a bath, and not knowing, based on what they're being told by authorities, whether or not it is safe. And so they turn to an online community. There, this family quickly connects with others nearby who share similar fears and concerns; they find curated text messages that have been gathered and posted as well as the most recent updates on the situation, as citizens share any and all information they may have, and use those same channels to reach out to politicians, law enforcement, and government officials. In this situation, agency that was at first denied to affected citizens through institutional inaction is reclaimed through mobilization and organization facilitated by social networks built around shared concerns. So, while the time we spend in virtual spaces may have become a key component of our everyday lives (Castells, 2010), the concept of mediated communities presented in this book addresses the need to develop a concept of collective identity and action that values both the opportunities afforded to us through digital connections but also recognizes that these opportunities continue to be realized and acted upon in real and physical environments. Only by joining the two can we better conceptualize the meaning of communal belonging in the digital age, as well as find a theoretical space between the techno-utopian approach sometimes taken as well as the techno-pessimist stance adopted by authors like Morozov (2012) or Gladwell (2010).

The increasing reliance on social networks for daily information and communication needs offers new opportunities to understand how young people engage in daily life beyond the traditional confines of physical space. Notions of community, which were traditionally rooted in the physical and spatial connections that brought individuals together are increasingly adopting networked attributes and inhabiting virtual spaces. These new conceptualizations of networked communities can offer opportunities for new decentralized collaboration and sharing of knowledge, information, ideas, and culture. Further, these networks engage people in a basic human instinct, one that Shirky (2010) believes is reincarnated through social media: "We want to be connected to one another, a desire that the social surrogate of television deflects, but one that our use of social media actually engages" (p. 14). Mediated platforms that allow for the engagement of individuals in spaces of shared interest provide increasing opportunities for active engagement in communities large and small. Gordon and de Souza e Silva (2011) explore the impact of social and mobile technologies on participation in the public sphere,

asking how hyperlocal blogs, participatory apps, and civic networks are altering notions of who participates and from what space. Benkler (2005) notes that media spaces have transformed what participation means in the public sphere: The Internet allows individuals to abandon the idea of the public sphere as primarily constructed of finished statements uttered by a small set of actors socially understood to be “the media” (whether state owned or commercial) and separated from society, and to move toward a set of social practices that see individuals as participating in a debate. Statements in the public sphere can now be seen as invitations for a conversation, not as finished goods. (p. 180) The networks that support these new avenues for dialog are inherently peer based and facilitated by communities themselves, not by top-down organizational entities.1 This connectivity, outlined in detail by Christakis and Fowler (2011) in their book *Connected*, can bring back the collaborative ecosystem that was mitigated by the anti-social structure of television (Shirky, 2010). Christakis and Fowler write that networks “help make the whole of humanity much greater than the sum of its parts, and the invention of new ways to connect promises to increase our power to achieve what nature has foreordained” (p. 286).

In an abundant media age, when young people around the world are spending more time with media, mobile technologies, and social networks, media literacy is about active engagement. In *Mediactive*, Gillmor (2010) captures this ecosystem, by welcoming us “to the era of radically democratized and decentralized creation and distribution, where almost anyone can publish and find almost anything that others have published” (p. xv). Media literacy, in this context, is about making sense of a messy, complex, and fast-paced media world. It is about critical analysis of content, of course, but increasingly about navigating peer-to-peer spaces at the point where news and entertainment, the personal and public, meet. This necessarily involves basic competencies in critique, analysis, and evaluation. It also must incorporate those notions of voice, belonging, participation and value that have come to define active participation in digital spaces.

Media literacy’s support of directional engagement begins with the pedagogy of access. Access must come to be seen as a fundamental human right in digital culture: without access, there is no opportunity to participate. As a media literacy construct, access entails access to the content and spaces needed to engage in civic and community life, and the technologies that help facilitate such spaces (Shumow, 2015). Media literate individuals who know not only how to share but where and to what effect will be better prepared to participate in causes large and small. This brings us to the main finding- is media literacy the way out or is regulation or freedom of media the answer to engaging democracy through media.

Media literacy, freedom or regulation

It may be observed how media has fared in globally. Argentina’s media system has undergone significant changes during the last three decades. The consolidation of the democratic system, the professionalization of journalism, the technological changes and the growing impact of the media on the public sphere are all phenomena that have contributed to reshaping the media landscape in the country. The media landscape in Argentina has changed significantly in recent years. The emergence of an increasing concentration of the media institutions during the last twenty years, as well as a combative relationship between the traditional media companies and the new actors emerging from the telecommunications arena, have been the primary focus of the communication debate. Additionally, the consolidation of big media groups has led to deep confrontations and a turbulent relationship among many of the media actors, political powers and interest groups that shape Argentine society. Interestingly, the process of concentration, which has modified the media landscape, hasn’t necessarily affected the credibility of journalists or the media in the eyes of the public. According to public polling data, the media are still one of the relatively more reliable actors in Argentinian society, after NGOs and the Catholic Church. During the 1990s, the mainstream media were used regularly as a conduit for public and private demands. Because the Judiciary was partially under the control of the Executive branch, citizens preferred to use the media to make their demands visible. This process began to transform the role of media, as many citizens came to consider them more reliable than institutions like the justice system or the police. In many cases, criminals preferred to go to TV stations and wait there for the police rather than be caught by public officials. Thus media has a credible role to play in the country.

Worldwide, it is easy to find examples where the Information Age is rapidly displacing traditional media with new forms of social interaction and distribution of content. The emergence of social media and the logic of these new platforms generate new ways to organize communities and to promote unfettered interactions among people and citizens. As such, social media is in many ways transforming the connections between citizenship, the political sphere and media performance.

In Kenya, it is much similar. In 2005, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) conducted a survey to assess the information needs of Kenyans, the sources of information they relied on, the quality and extent of media coverage and citizens’ feelings about Kenyan media more generally. The survey revealed that Kenyan people have a great need for news that covers events taking place in their country. However, the survey also found that most of the rural populace had limited access to media outlets, particularly television and print media. Radio is

the most widely accessed media in Kenya, and it was noted that vernacular and Swahili radio stations had much wider audiences than those that confined their broadcasts to English. An important trend to emerge from the rise of Internet penetration has been the growing number of Kenyan bloggers, both at home and abroad. In response to this growth, the Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE) was formed in 2012. Created with the goal of enhancing professionalism among bloggers as their influence continues to expand, the association held its inaugural BAKE Blog Awards on May 2, 2012, during which 14 categories of practitioners were recognized. However, a BAKE Technical and Online Freedom Workshop, held later the same year, noted the weak understanding of blogging regulations. This is an important finding as grassroots and citizen journalism continue to gain strength in Kenya with more Kenyans gaining regular access to the Web. At the same time, Kenyans living abroad are also very active on the Internet, with political postings forming a virtual space of often-vitriolic interaction.

Thus it is argued that media offers platforms to freely express one's ideas into the society and keeping democracy alive. There should be freedom of media and not regulation of press as that would be tantamount to shutting out democracy. The increasing penetration of mobile use and social networking is having a profound impact on news consumption, especially among young people. The recent past has seen young people cease to rely solely on the mainstream media for news regarding elections and politics. Instead, they log in to social media to gain access to what, in their view, is a more 'authentic and objective' picture of what's happening in the political sphere. The proliferation of bloggers independent and daring enough to report on stories that the mainstream media won't touch made a tremendous contribution during the 2013 general elections in Kenya, for example. It is noteworthy to look into dimensions of social media usage in elections and voting patterns and campaigning.

V. CONCLUSION

The rise of digital media and communication as an essential social component of modernity and the resulting changes in politics, communities, cultures, and economies is not a new phenomenon; in many ways, it is an extension of a process that has been playing out for millennia. However, in the face of these rapid societal shifts, there have been multiple calls for a better understanding of the reconfiguration of the meaning of community and collective identity in the digital age, with the resulting connections to empowerment, civic engagement and democracy.

It is argued that media literacy as a connector of sorts, facilitates the diverse and vibrant use of social media for personal and public uses, in ways that are transparent, directionally civic, and outwardly engaged. Engaging young people in such digital spaces must be couched in a sense of relevance to issues that matter to them, and that are integrated with their core social motivations for engaging in networks of interest. Scholars have long advocated for engagement in daily civic life to be situated in the context of community, the public, and social capital. In digital culture, these attributes are still core to community vibrancy but must be re-imagined in large, semi anonymous, and diverse spaces in the ecosystem of the Web's networks. Access, agency and belonging are three ways in which we can reconceptualize the point of engagement in mediated spaces to offer more relatable and relevant civic participation for communities increasingly functioning in mediated spaces.

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