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### **New media and mediation: Perspectives on convergence and Identity politics**

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#### **Abstract**

The advent of new media in India especially the social media has changed the entire dynamics. Technology which was earlier limited to select developed countries or rich, became easily available and accessible to everyone. The ease of availability and quicker adaptation to technologies has led to various debates. There has been frequent difference of opinion between the tech companies and the state regarding its role and function in the democracies. Issues concerning identity politics, virtualization, and emergence of newer issues are discussed frequently. This article raises some pertinent questions regarding its existentialist concerns and focuses on the issues.

**Keywords:** New media, convergence, virtual spaces, identity politics, new media policy

#### **Introduction**

New media has gained currency in recent years in India, not just as a term that defines media content, forms and products but also as practices that challenge lawmakers as well as policy decisions (Derné 2008) <sup>[1]</sup>. New media exerts a substantial dynamism in the realms of individual lives and contemporary culture. New media has been growing exponentially in a technologically enabled society, not just as a means of social exchange, but also as a medium of social change. The varied manifest forms of new media are observed in instances of internet-enabled activities like blogs and social networks, economic and business applications, off-shoot journalism and novel ways of extending the reach of traditional media such as newspapers and television. Apart from these usages, new media has become prominent as a contrived space of political action, both state and non-state. The Indian state perceives new media and its forms as an entity to be regulated by legal mechanisms like the IT Act (2000), whereas, non-state actors constantly remind us about the 'freedom of expression' as the ideological basis of such forms. Statist ideologies become pertinent for new media with examples like 'Aadhaar' (UIDAI) enabled services in India, indicative of the reconstruction of citizens as globalized consumers by a neoliberal state. Political and social movements facilitated by the access of and to ICT enabled services and applications draw attention to the political function of new media. There has been a phenomenal growth in business and economic application of new media platforms, from online retail to new media enabled business models. The creative potential of new media is ever expanding and artists, filmmakers and archivists in India have started exploring this in their creative expressions. As much as these forms pose challenges for policy makers in India, they also point out towards the need to theorise and critically engage with the proliferation and adoption of new media in India.

#### **Convergence of Technologies and Users**

The advent of new-media in India is of recent origin and is intricately linked to the emergence of information technology in urban spaces of the country. The transformation of urban India from the 1990s, grappling with "digital modernity", into Information Technology (IT) driven globalized nation of the post 2000s, presents a scenario that has necessitated a serious study of how new-media manifests and enables the cultural situation of contemporary India. In a short span of two decades 'new media' has become both an instrument for social, educational and political change, as well as a terrain of contestations over free speech, regulation, surveillance and activism.

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These issues are in many ways inseparable from the usage, proliferation and innovative application of new media forms in everyday circumstances. Thus, as much as new media has enabled instantaneous news, opinions, videos, and cinematic forms of communication, it has also expanded the corporatization of media houses effectively bringing down barriers between older forms of communication and IT enabled new media. In order to address a plethora of critical issues that emanate from the inextricability of new media forms and practices in contemporary India, this paper is necessitate. Prior to that, it is pertinent to give a theoretical and critical aspect of new media in India.

One of the first problems is that of defining new media for the Indian context. In a prognostic sense, Lev Manovich's seminal insight that the new media is a "convergence of computing and media technologies" (Manovich 2001: 44) <sup>[9]</sup> aptly describes the harnessing of computing platforms and technologies by the inflating media industry in India. The most visible of new media usages, like distributing election identity cards electronically, inducing self-learning by the use of graphics-enabled 'white-boards', sharing of news instantly via platforms like twitter and Facebook, etc. is essentially new media, as these present the convergence of the logic of computing with the visuality of the media. However, considering that computing technologies do not function outside 'applications' or programs aimed at the lay person towards a personalised experience, the new media situation in India has a prelude. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when computers, color television and the video cassette industries were established, there emerged what Ravi Sundaram (2009) <sup>[14]</sup> has termed as a 'digital modernity'. A key characteristic of this modernity was the adoption of computer software technologies, very rapidly, as a 'pirate subculture'. Thus a number of software applications, including the Windows operating system, became available in pirated versions. Piggybacking on the cheaply available software, the printing industry saw a definitive shift from hand-composing print blocks to the Desk Top Publishing (DTP) workflows. The newspapers, which according to Manovich's observation, distribute content on paper, were being designed in a new visual language defined by the creative usage of computer softwares like CorelDraw and PageMaker. With the adoption of the doctrine of automation in various sectors, including manufacturing, accounting, restaurants etc., the era of digital modernity represented a nation eager to adopt technological processes that would break the old relationships between media content and its communicative transaction. The new media, for India, on the other hand, emerged with the advent of Internet in 1995, when the state-run Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL) began selling commercial plans for individual users. If the 1980s scenario presents the 'new' media as a technological modernity for India, the 1990s suggests that the emergence of a 'networked society' would be an essential characteristic of new media practices.

Thus we can differentiate between two definitions of the new media. One derived from Manovich's convergence insight, where older media forms interacted with new digital technology. The second accords primacy to the scenario of networked computing defining the processes of communication, thus being instrumental in transforming older forms of media fundamentally redesigned to reflect digital characteristics. It points towards the inevitable march

of societies towards a networked reality, where products, practices and culture are reshaped by the quick delivery mechanisms of new media. This second definition of new media, as a network of platforms, applications, devices and individual users, is an ecological one. It suggests a different type of convergence – that of the corporate usage and developmentalist goals of a welfare state. As suggested by Henry Jenkins: new media is "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (Jenkins 2006:2) <sup>[7]</sup>.

An important feature of the Indian new media scenario is that it combines the commercial exploitation of new media technologies and their application for varied development purposes. While communication technology itself has been a hallmark of capitalist nations; in countries like India the aim has been to bring these technologies to marginalized segments of the society (Mazzarella 2010) <sup>[10]</sup>. Technology usage in turn is shaped by the socioeconomic location of the user, especially in regards to gender, class and caste (Gajjala 2003) <sup>[3]</sup>. The potential of new media technologies to subvert social stratifications and associated divides has inspired much public debate, which is often carried out on the Internet, giving rise to an online public sphere (Larry 2010) <sup>[2]</sup>. As elucidated in this paper, the tension surrounding new media technologies as a meeting place of the old and the new in India is paramount.

As pointed out above, the new media scenario can be divided into two halves in India -the pre 2000 era and the post 2000 era. The pre-2000 era dealt with the politics of digital modernity where the digital turn destabilized existing relationships of media producers and new market of consumers. With the Indian Government actively pursuing the policy of economic liberalization, access to World Wide Web (www) implied a reaffirmation that the nation was on the path to progress. Thus, it opened up doors for IT-enabled education and an explosion of jobs in the fledgling software industry. The access to Internet was not widespread during the pre-2000 years. It was restricted to the domains of journalism, few educational institutes and the commercial corporate entities (Grondeau 2007) <sup>[4]</sup>. The state was also reluctant to open up the internet access amongst the population fearing the free-flow of content without a regulatory mechanism (Kaushik& Singh 2004) <sup>[8]</sup>. Thus, it started giving access through its own telecom wing-the Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL). The dial-up networks were the prized possession of very few elites in the private domain. The speed of the internet varied between 256-512 kbps. And the private players were nowhere in the scene.

Post 2000 started with much-hyped Y2K problem and bandwidth access in India. Spectrum allocation, digital monitoring and broadband started making way to the Indian households by the end of the first decade of 2000. Many private players jumped into the fray to occupy the share of spectrum that they could. Thus, came the era of high speed internet in many platforms and avenues. Access to broadband was a major step towards utilizing the internet for social networking sites, chats and sharing of photos. The state's agenda to harness this high-speed communication platform for developmental purposes was emphasized with policy-makers incorporating rural connectivity in the laws and regulations of the telecom sector.

### **Virtual Spaces: Interactivity and Identity**

The new media in India that this paper elaborates on is largely of the post-2000 scene. The reason for such a demarcation of new media practices is the proliferation of internet-enabled services, products, applications, governance, connectivity, and cultures. The Indian case of new media can be said to exclusively contingent on the availability of the internet. As much as this aligns with the global trend of engaging users through hyperlinked content and richer visual experience, there have also been unique and innovative usages of the new media. One of these is the emergence of virtual spaces through blogs, social networking sites, and text messages (Papacharissi 2002) <sup>[11]</sup>. It became the prominent mode of communication amongst individuals, while the importance of mainstream media and their influence as information carriers and persuaders continue. Mediated messages that once were circulated through mainstream mass media systems have found additional space which is now unmediated yet controlled by an individual, and has the potential to hold an entire community to ransom (Vaidhyanathan 2005) <sup>[16]</sup>. With the mainstream media fighting against imposition of external regulation in a bid to not lose their freedom of speech and expression, the cyber media seems to have a fairly easy time against such restrictions (Shariff 2008) <sup>[12]</sup>. With growing influence of technology on communication, cyber space allows for individuals to create and construct information that can be devastating and criminal with no fear of recriminations or recognition (Papacharissi 2002) <sup>[11]</sup>. This flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences has created a totally new culture and a potentially dangerous new media event, which is bereft of any self-regulation (Thussu 2006) <sup>[15]</sup>. The inherent nature of media to trigger enormous reactions in a society has received a push with the speed of new media in the dissemination of information, be it positive or negative.

The question of identities vis-à-vis virtual spaces has been a point of considerable debate in the discussions of new media, specifically in the Internet era. In the case of India, virtual spaces seem to break-down existing hierarchies of social structuring, with the promise of greater freedom of expression without the danger of the law's long hand prosecuting the individual user. As internet usage has expanded in India, the debates have shifted focus from identities in virtual spaces to virtual or digital identities. With virtual spaces, identities of individuals could be expressed as aliases, virtual avatars, or nicknames, a convention of social networking still very popular. This enabled an explosion of blogging from India, and about India. Similarly this was a rage with urban youths using the now shutdown social networking site orkut.com. However, with the state's security agencies pointing out that such an unbridled usage of virtual identities could fuel nefarious activities like terrorist attacks, the Government of India steadily brought in policies so as to encourage users to use their legitimate identities online. The possibility of a virtual space, which is more democratic than the governed by political system, has been the hallmark of new media usage in India. However, the deeper connection is missed by many users: the idea of convergence of the digital with media content defines the forms of new media, its usage is defined by the creators of these convergent platforms, devices and

networks. Hence, thinking about the new media through frameworks such as instant messaging, online social networking, file-sharing systems, etc. has been to ignore the fundamental construct: that the networked society presents a glossed-over version of a capitalist system, where new media is an instrument of consumption rather than of social change. In eulogizing the freeing of identity constructs from those of social, national or regional referents, therefore lies the danger of legitimizing a regime of corporatized entities, in turn, handing them the power to decide the fate of our digital world. The virtual space, therefore, and consequently virtual identities are overt manifestations of the new media. This paper concentrates on issues that emanate from use of new media for diverse expressions of identity in the context of a virtual space. The paper also argues in favor of engaging with social media. We opine that it is of critical importance and can be a great opportunity for enterprising businesses to be able to deal with consumers more effectively, ultimately to increase revenues; business ventures need a greater level of communication practices. Web based communication channels are useful in this context to be able to communicate on the global platform.

### **Practices and Culture**

India's advancement towards a complex network society has created an ecosystem of the new media. These are evident as certain common practices shared across regions, communities and social groups. The purpose of highlighting this readily visible aspect of new media is to draw out the connection between specific practices and the shaping of contemporary society in India. As highlighted above, the dual reality of a profit-oriented media delivery and the goal of social change underscore these practices. The shared practices that can be thought of are: a) community organization, b) new media and the state, c) new media and user experience.

#### **a) Community Organization: Identity Politics**

Virtualization of the social sphere in India is marked by the deployment of open-sourced technological platforms for community development. This has taken myriad forms with state, non-state and corporate entities investing resources for connecting specific communities with the digital world. The very nature of internet has delved into "the nature of online self-representations of 'internet savvy- citizen-generated' media outlets in India, and the strategies used to showcase their achievements to the world." Community centric media initiatives have worked within traditional mediatic forms like the radio or participatory videos. There are many case studies in India that elaborate on the discursive aspect of new media is highlighted. That the new media enabled platforms envisage an interactive relationship of media content generators and readers, often defined by the reader's limitations and expectations. This forms the basis of exploring the idea of citizen-generated media. The significance of this is that "community-created media projects document the cultures, customs, attitudes, and challenges faced by people living in a particular area". While community media has been an activist-centric application of new media products, the possibilities of how this sustains to generate newer forms of communitarian spaces – both virtual and real – is the central focus. Considering the content of websites as a discourse evolving over a period of time amongst a community, the new media

platform acquires a social convergence function. Thus going beyond interrogating the usage of new media in community radio or video practices, Sosale's (2015) <sup>[13]</sup> study brings into focus the implication of new media for community organization.

When media forms are deployed or utilized for the purposes of community development – generally regarded as communication for development (C4D) – one of the most important factors is enabling participatory usage of the media platforms. In India there are many insightful discussions of communicative ecologies that facilitate participatory communication presents another facet of convergence that this chapter concentrates on. Deriving from Hearn and Foth's (2007) <sup>[5]</sup> elaboration of Communicative Ecologies, Watkins (2015) <sup>[17]</sup> identifies the need to recognize the significance of older forms of mediatic communication when newer technologies arrive. "Communicative ecologies recognise that any 'new' socio-technical system that develops as a result of a communication initiative is necessarily interconnected with existing social and technical systems and structures". While this might seem a reality in the Indian scenario, often the focus on new-media technologies to enable participatory communication ignores the prospect of working within an ecological framework. "Ecology refers to all spaces – physical, digital and hybrid – within which regular interpersonal communication takes place and the socially organised ways in which the ecology supports participation and engagement". The goal of C4D has, down the decades, evolved from simply using existing media for extending developmental projects, to the unique ways in which community organization is enabled due to novel applications of socio-technological systems and products. The convergence of new media platforms with individuals and groups, as they seek out ways to utilize technical resources for social change is a thematic that resonates with diverse and often marginal new media practices in India. Watkin's (2015) <sup>[17]</sup> elaboration is an apt perspectivation of instances of new media uses to think about the new media in India as a product of the ecological context. Thus, new media, C4D and community organization are not inherently unlinked, independent spheres of activities; rather they are inextricable processes of the contemporary, emphasizing the primacy of the convergent reality of new media in India.

Social networking sites on the other hand enable a unique form of socialising that can become a space of active communitarian exchanges among marginalised communities. Such kinds of activism has assumed significance in urban India, the use of new media to disseminate information, form bonding, exchange ideas, opinions etc. poses an interesting case of community organization. New media is significant in constructing a theoretical argument about new imagined/virtual communities enabled by the new media.

### **b) New Media and the State**

The liberalization of Indian economy is the trigger of the technological upheaval of Indian society in the last two decades. Not only did it help in expanding new sectors of the economy, it also initiated the state's ambivalent engagement with new media. At various points since the 1980s, the Indian government has had to deal with a legacy of strict controls over communication and internal security. But, since the 1990s as market forces have become more

dominant with consumers (citizens) gradually preferring delivery of information and services via online portals, the state has responded by undertaking massive changes through initiatives like e-governance, e-banking, digitization of defence, police and postal sectors, etc. However, the state's investment into extending its schemes and services has had another face, that of the state as the policymaker for the fundamental transactional nature of the new media.

States forays into creation of 'smart cities' or 'e-enabled learning platforms that are examples on how the state advocates for wider use of IT driven initiatives. Such initiatives posit themselves within the history of electronic modernity in India. It is interesting not only in the sense that it addresses the digital divide in India and attempts to merge this digital divide. It is interesting because it recognizes individual as 'smart' being capable of use a new technology without formal training. But the question arises in this regard is that if there is any scope of Digitally Networked Action (DNA) in such a kind of self-learning environment. Such initiatives address the notion of citizen participation and the digital interactive initiatives of the Government in India. The exponential growth of big data analytics, and its increasing utilisation in government policy, is premised on many things, including growth in IT infrastructure, the digital inclusion of those hitherto excluded by poverty, and an overarching colonisation of the analog universe by the digital. As for Smart Cities, it is a scheme to ensure that every citizen is part of the digital grid at all times, so that she/he secretes a non-stop data trail from birth to death. This data trail, or big data would be continuously captured and processed for optimal value extraction (read monetisation) (The Hindu 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Policy studies of new media in India have centered on three important issues. First, in the debates on the right to free speech and expression against the state enabling certain restrictions. While the debates have pointed out that the state can overreach its restrictive role of a protector of citizen's online life; the reality has been far too complicated. Numerous events of the state arresting and prosecuting citizens for 'defamatory' messages on social networking sites have been reported in the recent past. Clearly, the convergence of good policy to induce free and fair practices of new media has been felt by both activist groups as well as advocates of policy frameworks. However, this issue is far from dead and requires an exclusively sustained engagement – both from the academia and from lawmakers.

The second issue is that of the state's adoption of the new media ecosystem towards instituting e-governance, transparency, faster flow of information and delivery of various welfare schemes. Here prevalent business practices are replicated in the public sector, often as outsourcing contracts to the private industry. In India, such kinds of investments have also to be matched by a change in public spending policy. As such, often new media platforms and services lag a generation behind the market suggesting that the state's enthusiasm to bring about a digital modernity in the public sector is half-baked. However, the state as a consumer of new media services, and as the policy-making-authority, overlaps and seems to stagnate the drive towards making governance accessible to the common citizens. This kind of convergence, for the new media, is a constant space of negotiation – of policy changes to institute adoption of new media, of state investment to be made accountable, of hiring exceptional models and personnel to build suitable

platforms, and most importantly to steer the citizen towards accepting mediatic governance of the state.

The third and perhaps the most intricate issue, is that of policy making itself. This on the one hand requires a wide variety of research data and on the other a deft negotiation of ideological positions. The media in India is of a mixed kind, where older modes of communication co-exist with newer forms. As such, the print and publishing industry is largely governed by the Press Act and the Press Council of India (PCI). The cable television and telephone sectors, including cellular services, broadband and IPTV, come under the regulatory framework of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI). The cinema has a separate Censor Certification Board, and various Film Chambers of Commerce formulate industry strategies of film exhibition. Thus, while new media has technologically, brought about a convergence of these distinct practices of print journalism, mobile telephony, Internet, television and films, for the state they are still separate entities. Designing a policy that would address the new media therefore has been a peace-meal approach, where the state is seen to reactively address, through law, problematic situations ensuing from the usage of new media platforms.

### c) New Media and User Experience

The era of mass self-communication through social media and text messages has become prominent mode of communication amongst individuals, while the importance of mainstream media and their influence as information carriers and persuaders continue. Mediated messages that once were circulated through mainstream mass media systems have found additional space which is now unmediated yet controlled by an individual, and has the potential to hold an entire community to ransom. With the mainstream media fighting against imposition of external regulation in a bid to not lose their freedom of speech and expression, the cyber media seems to have a fairly easy time against such restrictions. With growing influence of technology on communication, cyber space allows for individuals to create and construct information that can be devastating and criminal with no fear of recriminations or recognition.

### Critical New Media Studies

The primary aim of this paper is to bring together diverse, yet thematically relevant issues that are relevant in India, towards fulfilling a much felt void of studying new media practices, policies and culture in India. Considering the diverseness of Indian subcontinent and the analytical thrust, we believe that this paper would open up a new avenue for critical new media studies in India. The necessity for such a framework of academic inquiry is felt equally by all, and is also reflected in the constantly evolving scenario of new media in India. Towards this approach we wish forward two propositions that would hopefully be useful for future researches of new media.

Firstly, our approach to situating new media has been through the actual manifest realities of how users, state, communities and corporate industry enable and in turn proliferate existing technology. While according primacy to the usage, rather than the producer, our focus has been to approach new media in India as a product of the cultural economy of the contemporary. At the peril of alienating

many dominant tendencies of thinking about new media as a monolithic structure that users make use of, the approach here, has been to critically situate the moments, interactions, and exchanges arising out of new media as convergences. The interesting thing about such convergences is that distinguishing boundaries of older media forms are merged or erased to give rise to newer forms, deriving their identities from users and practitioners of new media. The fundamental ways in which new media is framed here, therefore, considers it as an intricate part of the emerging cultural scenario of post-liberalised India. This differs significantly from perceiving new media as just a means of communication or as an extension of mass communication models. Our approach thus has been to think of new media as product of the computing technology industry, whose convergence with media forms is a new sphere of cultural activity where the user is the determinant of newer ways of popularizing communication.

Secondly, we need to think of new media beyond the 'connective tendency'. Thus researches that pointedly investigate topics such as new media and development, new media and gender etc. emphasize that they are attempting to connect developmental or gender studies aspects with new media, perhaps to unravel a specific practice prevalent in society. We believe that such connections seem to distort the fundamental convergent characteristic of new media. The new media, in its user-friendly applications, technologies, and usage, is evidently inseparable from our everydayness. As such it requires a critical consideration that concentrates on how it is becoming instrumental in transforming societies like India. This, we believe cannot be initiated unless the new media is approached as an object of inquiry with its singular set of problematic and characteristics. While new media may very well initiate discourses of and about cinema, gender, development, policy etc. one needs to understand that such discourses have a tendency to transfer from the textual or academic sphere and onto social networking sites. In thinking about new media embodying a convergent materiality, the proposition here is to approach new media as enabling a unique interconnectedness whose social significance weighs much more than the naturalization of what corporates like Google, Facebook or Twitter would want us to believe. Another aspect of this approach is of making the new media relevant for policy decisions, law enforcement, and equal access. Policy, as has been pointed out, is often disconnected and reactive to new media in India. To generate a constructive policy, policymakers must adopt a different perspective towards new media. Instead of viewing it in abstracted technological platforms, policymakers would benefit from understanding that new media usage is the domain that needs unfettered access, while technology corporates must be open to providing services that do not profit from unduly taxing the consumer-user.

We already have a bizarre scenario in several developing countries (including India) - a scenario that is somehow no longer perceived as bizarre - where people don't have toilets (an amenity with tremendous public health consequences) but own cell phones, and their mobile data is being captured for 'actionable information' (The Hindu 2015) <sup>[6]</sup>. While evidence-based policy-making may be good for business and the tech industry, it is only politics-driven policy-making that can make a positive difference to people's lives.

### New media and Development Debate

Does New Media drive development of any country? It is able to redraw the lines of social inequality in any society? Does access to technology like internet make a person more empowered? Did India leapfrog into the league of developed nations? These are some of the pertinent questions that need to be raised in the current scenario, where the Government is aiming at 'digital India'. The development index has definitely surged ahead. But for the social inequality matrix, it has made the citizen more burdened by the cost of 'owning' technology such as smart phones. Plain Old Telephone System (POTS) has got integrated with other forms of stand-alone media platforms and has got converged into one form-smart phone. Smart phones are exorbitant. But, Indians are mortgaging their incomes (through EMIs) to own such exorbitant forms of new media. India and the world have a long way to go, till we are able to separate the 'new media' from the old forms of social inequalities and deprivation.

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