

AGENDA SETTING IN SOCIAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF ITS APPLICATION

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Abstract:- The power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. While today's news and information continues to flow through traditional media channels directly to consumers, timely events and issues are increasingly reaching out the world through social networking sites. From international stories such as protests in the Middle East and natural disasters in Japan, to breaking news in cities across America, and also in case of Lok Pal movement, Nirbhaya case in India, the social media has garnered widespread attention for its role in newsgathering, dissemination, and consumption. More importantly, the social media has started to set the agenda for the mainstream media also. This has given a space to deconstruct the popular theory of agenda setting in media that Max Mc Comb and Donald Shaw developed in early 1940 to explain how media influence and affects the perceptions of the masses. In present day news gathering, mainstream media has also started to follow the blogs and twitters of celebrities and politicians for breaking news. The use of social media in the Lok Pal and Nirbhaya case has given a shape of national movement to both the issues where mainstream media had to give extensive coverage. It is apparent that news media, particularly the social media has minimized the monopoly of mainstream media in terms of information gathering, processing and dissemination. There it has ushered in a new era in the world of media. Surprisingly, mainstream media is trying to cope with the social in the changing media scenario. Information is getting democratized and going to be even more of this sort in the days to come. This makes the communication experts to relook the agenda setting theory which used to be applicable for print and broadcasting media for many decades. With the advent of new media, the generalization of agenda setting in media has been restricted. Based on its convergence model of communication, social media gives freedom of information dissemination barring the gate-keeping concept used in mainstream media. This paper is an attempt to relook the agenda setting theory and its applicability in social media, in particular.

Key Words :- Social Media, New Media, Agenda Setting, Mainstream Media.

Introduction

The technological advancement in communication has made the news easier and effective through round the clock media. Besides, the technological revolution has made the information reach and share in the best quicker possibility across the world through the social media. In the present day scenario, events and issues are increasingly reaching the world through social networking sites. From international stories such as protests in the Middle East and natural disasters in Japan and breaking news in cities across America, to national issue like Lokpal or Damini or any political issues, social media has garnered

widespread attention for its role in newsgathering, dissemination, and consumption. Social media originates in the newsroom, board room, and living room—and are sent by Twitter, Face books and blog users, from celebrities to common man. In addition to their own text, users include links to web content from news media, bloggers, entertainers, retailers, politicians, and more (Garahan, 2011; Guskin, 2011). And once in the social media sphere, messages and links posted by one party are easily responded by another which lead to a fast feedback process unlike in news channels and other mass media. How does this flow of news and information on Twitter relate to what the public deems as the

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significant issues and events of the day? More than four decades, research have provided empirical evidence showing that the news media set the public agenda (Coleman et al. 2009). But in the social media era, is this still the case? With news and information spreading very fast, who sets the agenda on social media? This study is an attempt to answer the questions by examining some issues widely discussed in social media by the users and how that has set the people's agenda for a socio-political change in various countries recently. If social media has been instrumental in setting the public agendas, then one can conclude that the public sets the agenda for themselves in social media.

Agenda Setting: A Brief Overview

Traditionally, agenda setting theory explores the relationship the news media has on the perceived salience of key political issues. But it is important to note that the transfer of salience between media and the public should not be limited to a single aspect of the mass communication process. McCombs and Shaw empirically tested this theory during the 1972 presidential campaign between Helms and Hunt. They wanted to try and show that the media has the ability to influence what issues people think, about even if it doesn't tell people what to think of those particular issues. This study tested the hypothesized voting behavior of people in a specific region of North Carolina. The study used television commercials, television news, and telephone survey of registered voters. McCombs and Shaw, believe that the “transfer of salience from both news and advertising to the public mind can be demonstrated” (Ghorpade, 1986). The first step in the model shows that advertising salience contributes to salience in the public mind. The second part of the model depicts a relationship from the salience in the public mind to the behavioral outcome. This part of the model was determined by looking for possible associations between the voters' agenda and the advertising of the particular candidate. In

conclusion, this study was devised as a test of the agenda-setting component of advertising. It is important to note that this theory needs to be continually tested to enhance its validity.

Agenda-setting theory as developed by Prof. Maxwell McCombs and Prof. Donald Shaw in their Chapel Hill study (1968), mass media sets the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues. In studying the way political campaigns were covered in the media, Shaw and McCombs found that the main effect of the news media was to set an agenda, i.e. to tell people what not to think, but what to think about as opposed to persuasion or attitude change. Agenda setting is usually referred to as a function of mass media and not a theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to Ghorparde, “agenda setting is a relational concept that specifies a transfer of salience from agenda primers (media) to agenda adopters (consumers)” (1986). Agenda setting research has shown that there is a correlation between what the media deems important and salience in the public mind. In simpler terms, agenda setting claims that what the media finds important will eventually be mirrored in what people think are important. It is important to note that the notion of agenda setting is positive association between the media and the audience. From agenda setting stems the formation of public opinions and the distribution of pros and cons of a particular issue (Rogers & Dearing: 1988). The notion of agenda setting relies on the transfer of issues from the media to the public. The theory explains the correlation between the rate at which media cover a story and the extent to which people think that this story is important. This correlation has been shown to occur repeatedly. Agenda-setting is believed to occur because the press must be selective in reporting the news. News outlets act as gatekeepers of information and make choices about what to report and what not. What the public know and care about at any given time is mostly a by-product of media-gate keeping.

The agenda-setting function is a 3 part-process:

1. Media Agenda - issues discussed in the media
2. Public Agenda- issues discussed and personally relevant to the public
3. Policy Agenda- issues that policy makers consider important

Social Media : An Overview

Social media, a group of internet-based applications facilitating the creation and sharing of messages, pictures, and videos by Internet users, continues to be a growing phenomenon. The popularity of online profile sites such as Friendster, My space, and Six Degrees has given way to a new wave of social media. Face book, initially designed for access by users with college (.edu) e-mail addresses when launched in 2004, opened to the general public and, as of early December 2011, had more than 800 million users worldwide. Twitter, launched in March 2006, announced on its fifth anniversary that it hosted more than 140 million tweets a day and more than 1 billion a week. Through social media, people are connected to each other around the globe in a way never experienced before. More than 10 percent of the world's 7 billion people are connected by Face book alone. Many more non-Face book account holders have profiles on Twitter, Google+, or one of many other global social media sites. (Bong et al 2013)

Social networking sites allow users to share their own discourses. Anything from opinions, news, thoughts and musings are now shared on three of the Internet's most trafficked websites: Twitter, Face book and MySpace. The newest and fastest growing of the three, Twitter, now has 17 million users and counting (Edison Research, 2010). Twitter puts a new emphasis on social networking and openness (Miller, 2010). By default, it shares, indexes and search optimizes all of the content users post to their accounts. The result is a mass amount of publically available discourse. Fifty million

Tweets are broadcasted daily. As Twitter begins to attract wider demographics, Tweets can be thought of as representation of what the public is saying. Many companies and politicians have begun to use Twitter as a search engine of public opinion.

Recent Agenda in Social Media:

A World Overview

In 2011, the world witnessed a revolutionary uprising in the Middle East, from Tunisia, to Egypt, to Syria and beyond. Startling images captured by civilians on the scene were viewed by people around the world, courtesy of distribution via Face book, Twitter, YouTube, and even mainstream media. There can be no doubt that information and communication technologies, in particular burgeoning social media, played a part in the upheavals. But, questions continue to dog political theorists and social scientists – just how much of a role did the different media play and which one in which country provided the biggest impact? Here it is argued that social media has played invariably a greater role in mobilizing people for a socio-economic cause across the world. Few recent important incidents would discuss for a better understanding of the social media. Besides, this will also unfold how people have set the agenda for themselves using the social media.

The first widely recognized use of social media as a tool of political revolution occurred in Moldova in 2009. Activists used Facebook, social network sites and Twitter to organize protests and bring attention to the political unrest in the former Soviet Republic. While protesting against the general elections, activists were gathered in huge numbers in front of the government offices. This showed the power of social media in terms of disseminating the information and also setting the agenda for a common cause. “Word had been spreading rapidly via Twitter and other online networking services. The official media carried no coverage,

but accounts, pictures, and video of the rally were appearing in real time on Twitter and YouTube” (Mungiu: 2012). Although the protestors failed to prompt a change of leadership or a new election, they could succeed in getting the world attention through the digital activism in the country. (Amin: 2012).

In June 2009, Neda Agha-Soltan and some friends headed to the center of Tehran, Iran, to join an anti-government protest following the disputed presidential election. Stuck in traffic, she got out of the car. Agha Soltan was shot and died. Video of her death was captured on a cell phone. The links to the video posted on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, the amateur clip eventually harnessed the attention of the mainstream media, grabbing headlines on CNN and in the 'New York Times. Subsequent of the death of Agha-Soltan, she became a symbol for the Iranian anti-government movement where online social media became instrumental for internationalize the issue. (Amin). Although, this social media campaign was not widespread in Iran due to government censorship, it could gain attention in international news because of social media.

Tunisia's Jasmine revolution is another illustration of social media. In December 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi was denied to work as a street vendor to support his family who subsequently set fire to himself. The scenes of his self-immolation captured by passers-by and posted on YouTube as well as those of the mass protests that followed his funeral, quickly circulated in Tunisia and beyond (Safranek: 2012). On January 11th protests reached the centre of the capital city Tunis, and Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali responded by ordering the army and imposing a night-time curfew. The next day, tens of thousands took to the streets in Sfax, Tunisia's second city. On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali fled the country, ousted by a spontaneous populous uprising. “Tunisia's population of 10 million people, known for their

high levels of education and civic pride, became the first people in the Arab world to take to the streets and oust a leader“(Chrisafis : 2012). The protests, nicknamed the “Jasmine revolution,” led to the installation of a coalition government following elections.

The recent Egyptian famous populous uprising has witnessed the optimal use of social media for socio-political change in the country. Khaled Said, an Egyptian businessman died after being beaten by police, who had videotaped themselves taking confiscated marijuana. Hoping to draw attention to police corruption, he copied that video and posted it to YouTube. Ghonim, a Google executive created a Face book page called 'We Are all Khaled Said.' It featured horrific photos, shot with a cell phone in the morgue, of Said's face. That visual evidence undermined the official explanations of his death. The Facebook page attracted some 500,000 members. Protestors flooded Cairo's Tahrir Square under the watchful eye of a military that was loath to turn on citizens. To thwart the protestors, the government sought to block access to Facebook and Twitter and severely restrict access to the Internet. The strategy failed because the insurgents, with help from supporters around the world, were able to subvert the censorship. Also, Internet restrictions negatively affected companies' and the government's ability to do business. Under increasing domestic and international pressure, longtime Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak resigned February 11, 2011, following 18 days of protests (Safranek: 2012).

Recent Agenda in Social Media:

Indian experience

In his previous study “lokpal and the Role of Media in Propping up Anti Corruption Movement in India”, the author has concluded that “the massive use of social media in Lok Pal movement is a trend setter and can be seen as a successful experimentation for good cause. People can use social media content to gauge the

status of a movement and to identify the goals it seeks to attain. It is true that the movement which was initiated by the social media geared up the main stream media. Main stream media did not have any alternative as the visual popularity of the movement has given a sharp rise in TRP rating of the issue and main stream media had to depend on it because of its revenue generation.” (Mohapatra: 2013)

For a successful social movement to be popularized through social media it requires large parts of the population must have access to the Internet and people must be able to use the Internet and social media freely. And the same has been witnessed by the non-governmental research organization, Freedom House that scores the Internet in India as —mostly free in its 2011 Freedom of the Net evaluation (Freedom House: 2011). India established the Internet Technology Act in 2000, and a 2008 amendment gave the government authority to block websites and Internet content, as well as outlaw offensive or inflammatory content. As a result, in the first six months of 2011, the Indian government requested 358 removals from Google, mostly from Orkut and YouTube, the majority for content criticizing the government (Mohapatra 2013). Although the social media is an urban centric, it has contributed in many ways. First it helped in spreading the message in many forms to many people. Secondly, it compelled the mainstream media to focus on the issue also.

It's not just visible on the ground... the protest for justice in the Delhi gang rape case is intensifying online as well. Citizens across India started expressing their anger and sorrow over the death of the Delhi gang rape victim, named as 'Damini' or 'Nirbhaya', on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. 'The Black Dot of Shame' campaign has gained momentum. The agitation over online social media platforms intensified greatly after the Delhi Police isolated key areas like India Gate in a bid to prevent protesters from gathering and voicing their anger.

After the gruesome incidence, many Facebook users changed their display picture to a black dot to symbolically represent 'shame on government's inability to protect the women of the country'. According to 'The Black Dot of Shame' Facebook page, “India mourns the Brave One... Salute to the Brave Girl. We will always remember your Pain, Struggle and Courage. You taught us how to fight back for our Rights and Justice. May our Hero rest in peace, and may God give her family strength. We will not rest until we have our country back in our hands.” (Mohapatra 2013)

This is for the first time perhaps, the Indians used social media for a social movement. A huge support for India Against Corruption (IAC) and Anna Hazare, indicated on Facebook by—likes on posts. In the first four days of its existence, IAC had 116,000 fans on its community Facebook page (IAC, Facebook Page: 2012). People created many other Facebook pages, and individual social media users debated, posted states, and uploaded videos and photos throughout the movement. Social media analyst Gaurav Mishra estimates that the total online support for the movement was around 1.5 million people (Kurup: 2011). Facebook hosts multiple Anna Hazare-related pages in English and Hindi, with tens of thousands of followers and supporters. The official IAC Facebook page had more than 500,000 followers as of February 7, 2012. Users can follow and access information about the anticorruption movement through applications from smart phones and other mobile devices. The IAC smart phone application has as many as 50,000 users. The organization used all these outlets to publish photos of Anna Hazare fasting, pro-*Lokpal* rallies, and examples of corruption. During this social media onslaught, Hazare gained support from other prominent Indian activists, as well as the general populace. Agenda setting has systematically sought to document the effects of mass media on the audience's cognitions. By virtue of creating a

shared, national pseudo-environment, mass media fulfil the important function of building a public consensus on the important issues of the day. Agenda setting has systematically sought to document the effects of mass media on the audience's cognitions. By virtue of creating a shared, national pseudo-environment, mass media fulfil the important function of building a public consensus on the important issues of the day (Galily et al. 2012).

Brosius and Wiemann (1996) argued that agenda setting could be understood as two step flow, with opinion leaders in public who served as personal mediator between media and personal agendas. This would seem to be an adequate description of the actions of the filter style blogger who chooses stories to link to and what comments to make about those stories. Bloggers are still constrained by the agenda(s) set by the sources they read, but they are also free to reshape that agenda by choosing which stories to link to, and what comments to make about those stories. Brosius and Wiemann further argued that when the mainstream media covers an issue, interpersonal communication often reinforces the media messages; however, interpersonal communication actually sets the agenda “when the discussions deal with issues that have received little coverage in the media.” If the blogging phenomenon were viewed as a form of hybrid between interpersonal and mass communication, then it would seem that the blogging community could define the parameters of discussion on those issues that the mainstream media avoids. The previous cited all the recent examples served as an alternative to the discussions and reactions against the political and social wrong practices. As a result, such blogs has set the agenda for their readership on certain topics since other media did not assume that role. Similar the case is with other social networking sites.

Conclusion

The communication system of the present

society was based on mass media, largely television, radio and the printing press. Such technologies allow for the mass distribution of a one-way message from one-to-many. The widespread diffusion of the Internet, mobile communication, digital media and a variety of social software tools throughout the world has transformed the communication system into interactive horizontal networks that connect the local and global. New forms of social media, such as SMS, blogs, social networking sites, podcasts and wikis, cater to the flow of messages from many-to-many. They have provided alternative mediums for citizen communication and participatory journalism. Social media has been used as a tool to support development outcomes (access to markets, financial services and employment; accountability and transparency; service delivery; and protection of human rights) and to push for social change and transformation. Unlike the traditional news media, the use of social media has given freedom to the users to set the agenda for the public through their faster feedback response. The same has been experimented in many countries including the recent experimentation of Nirbhaya and Lok pal case in India.

McCombs & Shaw have rightly experimented the influence of mass media on the mass which set the agendas in the society. However, the agendas were decided and selected by the gatekeepers which subsequently responded by the masses. With the advent of new media and its technology, this principles and practices have become restricted and people have started exercising their priorities and agendas through the social media. It is social media which gave them the freedom of selecting and disseminating the information for setting a common public agenda. This further empowers the users of social media for self gate keeping and set a popular common public agenda in the society. The recent political uprisings and change of governments in west Asia and two major

events in India are the best illustration of paradigm shift in agenda setting theory in media. One more argument can also be concluded that social media has become a major source of news gathering these days for mainstream media. Information on Blogs, Twitter and Facebook by the celebrity has become breaking news which makes the news worthiness of any lead stories. Even, these days all social networking sites have

proved out to be the news gathering source. Breaking news has become a regular phenomenon these days. With the advent of new media, the generalization of agenda setting in media has been restricted. Based on its convergence model of communication, social media gives freedom of information dissemination barring the gate-keeping concept used in mainstream media.

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