

Post Broadcast Society and Intermedia Agenda Setting: An Analysis of India's Major Newspapers and SNS

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ABSTRACT

The avowed practice of assessing public mood and setting the tone of public discussion through newspaper or television prime hours got disrupted with the intrusion of social media into media scape in the first decade of 21st century. The adoption of social media for expression of collective anger unsettled the appercart of autocratic rule in the middle east and the ripples of Jasmine revolution cascaded into anti-corruption movement in New Delhi in 2011. It has been quite a tempestuous decade for social media in terms of consolidating its grip on collective imagination. In the west, it has already become a norm to relegate conventional media to the backburner, yielding the temple of public discussion to social media. It was important to explore how far the SNS have taken hold of public imagination in Indian non-metro urban locations. This work sought to fathom the capability of SNS vis-à-vis newspapers in terms of agenda setting in the peripheral locations of India's northeast. It was found that at least in the context of Indian small towns, social networking sites like Facebook is yet to evolve as the match winner in terms of setting the agenda of public discussion.

Key words- Agenda setters, SNS, media scape, demassified, news salience

Introduction:

In 2006, Time magazine person of the year was "You". Their contention was that "You" made Facebook into a small country and "You" have dominated the online conversation. "You" did everything. This celebration of "You" also gave birth to an unexpected and unsuspected consequence (Hess, 2010). This demassified "You" are now the agenda-setter. With the retribalisation of human society (McLuhan, 1964) in terms of the use of medium for consumption of information, the news media took it upon itself the responsibility of deciding what people should think about in their regular lives. The ability of the news media to divert public opinion in a post-broadcast society (Silajit Guha, 2012) in a particular direction to build up public opinion on given issues has been proved beyond doubt. An extensive content analysis by McCombs and Shaw in 1972 was able to prove that, "Through their routine structuring of social and political reality, the news media influence the agenda of public issues around which political campaigns and voter decisions are organized" (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: 4). The initial offering by Shaw and McCombs had mostly dwelt on media's ability to exploit the reigning hegemonistic society to create a public consensus on a given political spectacle. In a free and democratic society, media have usually tried to perform the 'status conferral function' (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948, 2004: 233) in accordance with the political economy of either the media on the whole or the more powerful media cartels. In an

effort to create public opinion on certain issues, media have also helped to 'raise the level of political interest among the general public above the threshold sufficient to assure reasonable learning about issues and candidates' (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: p. 11).

The initial agenda setting theory had postulated that depending on certain factors like frequency of news publication, framing of the news item or the degree of conflict present in the news item and likes, a news item can take up to four months to be converted into an agenda. In a study about agenda setting lag times in electronic bulletin boards, Wanta (1994) wrote "If the news media influence the perceived importance of issues held by the public, perhaps Internet users will take the agenda setting one step further." In the study by Wanta (ibid), she also maintained that traditional news agenda setters were influencing the users of the electronic bulletin boards. If the media can manage to access interest and keep a watch on the commentaries on most important issues that they report in nearly real-time, then the voices they hear in no times are the voices of those who frequent online community. "However, the leading voices coming from the Internet provide a public opinion barometer from which the mass media may measure the political or cultural climates" (Hess, 2010). In recent times, it has been observed that a combined effort of mass as well as social media have been able to register an issue as an agenda in public. There is another work by Kushin (2000), which has also tried to explore the agenda setting relationship between the official website of *New York Times* and *Twitter*. In the study titled '*Tweeting the issues in the age of social media? Inter-media agenda setting between the New York Times and Twitter*' (2010), the researchers tried to find out the relative influence of Twitter on New York Times and vice-versa. In this digital era, many scholars question agenda setting role of conventional news media and social networking sites are having a direct impact on the agenda of the news media. Kushin in his study analysed the influence of Twitter on the news agenda of the New York Times.

One of the hypotheses assume that a "bi-directional inter-media agenda setting" exists between the New York Times and Twitter "both over the course of a single day and between days." Kushin(ibid)conducted "two content analyses"- one extensively examined the content of the website of the New York Times while the another content analysis was done to examine the posts updated on Twitter. In order to assess the hypothesized relationships, Kushin used cross-lagged panels with the Rozelle-Campbell Baseline.

The findings of the study revealed a lack of inter-media agenda setting existing between the online publication of New York Times and Twitter "for both the within-day and between-day panels." It has been found that even for specific issues like economy, military, national security and terrorism, there is an absence of intermedia agenda setting. Moreover, the results also pointed out that "the nature of the relationship between the two media under study is one of subtle influence." The researcher in the findings said that the results "raise additional issues about the agenda setting role of conventional news media extending this argument to the social media environment." domain in no time.

The agenda setting theory has also been able to find a way into the realm of research in disciplines such as cognitive psychology, political science, sociology, and public policy. The researchers of these disciplines have tried to look at the theory through a different lens with the use of differing technologies. As cited by Hess (2010), Takeshita (2006) divided salience into two-part definition with separate applications. The first part of the definition matches the idea of perceived importance and the second part corresponds to the concept of accessibility (Takeshita, 2006, p. 279). Hess (2010) argues that accessibility is often used in the context of cognitive psychology and refers to a subject to recall a fact and place importance on the ability to access that fact. The social networks have socio-psychological dimensions as the users praxis has attitudinal and behavioural variables to investigate. Invariably, the agenda setting function has a strong leaning on political and economic connotations camouflaged under the rubric of ideology and idealism. In a society fast moving to adopt techno-culture on one hand while at the same time millions of its citizens are deprived even of basic necessities on the other will definitely provide platform to debate the type of agenda the social networks can offer. The recent event across the globe, be it Egypt or India, prompt communication researchers to revisit the earlier theoretical notions and redefine them, if needed upon scrutiny. The turf war between corporate media and micro media for audience and their opinion management is turning into a theoretical minefield. The study tries to explore the duality of public perception of the power of conventional media vis-à-vis new media in terms of public opinion management.

The Internet has been able to provide this avenue. Social networking sites have been able to truly usher in the 'info-sphere' (Toffler, 1995), the people have been empowered to transgress the power of images and get involved in a borderless communication without being inhibited by any determined political economy of media. The online medium is not a tool to disseminate information; rather, it is a tool to Communicate (Hess, 2010). Some scholars argue that within online discussion Internet communication is an excellent portal for debate among persons of varied opinions and beliefs. The Internet gives an opportunity to its users to participate in a discussion. Holt (2004, p.14) says, "The ability of the Internet to unite those of disparate backgrounds has great potential for fostering debate and discussion of issues in the civic arena. In many cases, differences of opinion about, for example, political issues arise from lack of familiarity with the perspectives of other people." It was Brundidge (2006) who claimed that online political discussion does serve to expose participants to non-likeminded partners. There have been certain allegations about social networking sites as being to elitist but mass media are no less.

The main objective of the study is to assess the role of social network sites in positioning the different agendas in a post broadcast society vis-à-vis mass media on a representative plane in India. The researcher has formulated the following research questions to understand the objective in proper context.

RQ 1- What, if any, is the level of intermedia reaction on any issue by the SNS users?

RQ 2- What is the role of newspapers when the social media sets an agenda?

RQ 3- What is the level of public awareness on a given issue when both newspapers and social media try to create public opinion in India?

Method applied: The researchers have employed content analysis of select news items from the select newspapers of the country as well as the most popular social networking site Facebook. The newspapers chosen for the purpose are Guwahati editions of *The Times of India* and *The Telegraph*. Newspapers have been scanned quantitatively for the purpose of counting the number of news items, which were followed by or referred to in social media discussions while the angularities of some of the published news items has been analysed qualitatively. Bernard Berelson (1952) defined content analysis as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and qualitative description of manifest content of communications.” The content analysis is generally used to determine the presence of certain words, concepts, themes, items within a story or group of stories or any other texts or group of texts and to measure this presence in objective manner. Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular social networking sites in today’s time. Various researches involving newspapers and Twitter have been done in the past, but the research on the power of Facebook in setting the agenda has not been conducted that many. So, the researchers have chosen Facebook for the study.

Reliability test of *The Times of India* in the case of the number of salient issues:

Inter-coder reliability for the study was made by following the Holsti (1969) method. The computation was performed using a calculator. The result of the study showed an agreement of 0.75 on the total number of international stories.

Manual calculation of Holsti’s reliability co-efficient:

The total number of salient issues was done as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Holsti's reliability} &= 2M \div N1 + N2 \\ &= 2 \times 3 \div 4 + 4 \\ &= 0.75\end{aligned}$$

M represents the total number of coding events about whose categories the two coders agreed upon. N1 represents the total number of coding decisions by the first coder and N2 represents the total number of coding decisions by the second coder (Wimmer & Dominick 1997:128; Ding & Hu 1999:102). Inter-coder reliability was established at .75. The figure represents very high agreement on number of salient issues using Holsti’s index.

Reliability test of *The Telegraph* in case of the number of salient issues

Inter-coder reliability for the study was made by following the Holsti method. The computation was performed using a calculator. The result of the study showed an agreement of 0.66 on the total number of international stories.

Manual calculation of Holsti’s reliability co-efficient.

The total number of salient issues was done as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Holsti's reliability} &= 2M \div N1 + N2 \\ &= 2 \times 2 \div 3 + 3 \\ &= 0.66\end{aligned}$$

M’ represents the total number of coding events about whose categories the two coders agreed upon. N1 represents the total number of coding decisions by the first coder and N2

represents the total number of coding decisions by the second coder (Wimmer & Dominick 1997:128; Ding & Hu 1999:102). Inter-coder reliability was established at .75. The figure represents very high agreement on number of salient issues using Holsti's index.

Findings:

The first research question was posed to find out the level of intermedia reaction, if any, exists on any issue by the SNS users. As the web-editions of both *The Times of India* and *The Telegraph* do not have any tool through which one could analyse how many users have either seen it or shared it, so no such intermedia relation existed on any issue by the Facebook users. Unlike YouTube, Facebook and Twitter which have a tool through which one could easily understand the importance of an item, free versions of these web-editions of these two newspaper lack such facilities.

The second research question asked to find out the role of newspapers when the social media sets an agenda. There are fifteen such stories, which were first reported in Facebook pages of different personalities and then these were published in the newspapers on the following days. On the other hand, there are sixteen stories which were posted in Facebook pages having the news values but were not published in either of the two newspapers.

The first research question tried to find out the role of newspapers when the social media sets an agenda. There are fifteen such stories, which were first reported in Facebook pages of different personalities and then these were published in the newspapers on the following days. On the other hand, there are sixteen stories which were posted in Facebook pages having the news values but were not published in either of the two newspapers.

The survey conducted for the purpose of the study revealed that the frequency of reading newspapers everyday is more than the frequency of using Facebook. The survey included both the subscribers of newspapers and the social networking site Facebook. It is very significant to say that in the town like Silchar, newspaper still has more preference over Facebook. 81.3 % respondent said that they read newspapers everyday and 18.6% say that they read newspaper once in a week. On the other hand, 72.4 % respondents use Facebook everyday and 27.6% use Facebook once in a week. Among the selected items, only 6.2% respondents observe that they don't follow either of them, while rest of the respondents follow either of the political leaders or all of them or some of them.

The last research question was posed to find out the level of awareness of the people on the salient issues. It can be said that both newspaper and social media have the ability to influence public opinion yet. On majority of the salient issues, more than 80% people are aware of it. In a city like Silchar, where there have been a lot of problems in getting national newspapers and the penetration of Internet is also very slow compared to other places, even though it is very significant that people are highly exposed to media. The degree of level of awareness also appears to be high.

During the timeframe and with the media analyzed here, it is evident that the public agenda—as manifest in likes and shares on social networking sites—has not yet come to drastically alter agendas of conventional media in a regularly predictive manner. While the distance from editors and journalists as gatekeepers of news and information flows to the public has clearly diminished with the popularization of social media, it seems the potential for SNSs to

directly shape media agendas does exist but only sporadically and on certain topics. Considering that different online media platforms, from blogs to various forms of social media—in this case Facebook—allow for certain affordances and restrictions, it is reasonable to find that each platform demonstrated differential intermedia agenda setting potential.

Concluding Remarks:

With the increasing popularity of social networking sites, the political parties as well as the political leaders are extensively availing themselves of the benefit of such sites. The dynamics of election campaign has changed with the arrival of the social networking sites. Today every political leader in the world has the presence in social media. Be it USA or India, the politicians have accounts or pages on the social networking sites. Despite the emergence of the social networking sites like Twitter, Facebook remains to be the most popular. The research conducted by the Pew Research Internet Project in US found that as of September 2013, 71% of online adults use Facebook, 18% of online adults use Twitter, 22% use LinkedIn and 21% use Pinterest. The online adults include the persons of more than 18 years of age. This finding showed the popularity of Facebook. This popularity of Facebook has prompted the political leaders of different countries in general and India in particular to have a presence on this popular site. From Narendra Modi to Dr. Manmohan Singh, all most all the top brass of a political party in India have a page on Facebook where the leader concerned uploads photographs, updates posts on various issues, shares video, audio, newspapers cuttings, blogs, among others. The most significant feature in Facebook is that if an individual likes a particular page of a political leader, then he/she keeps on getting the information about the posts updated or photographs, videos uploaded on the page. The users get information about all sorts of activities going on in the page and therefore a Facebook user always remain in touch with the outer world. In November 2010, Pew Research Internet Project conducted a survey among the social networking site users to study the “people’s overall social networks and how use of these technologies is related to trust, tolerance, social support, community, and political engagement.” This research has found that “Facebook users are much more politically engaged than most people” (2010). Besides, the study inferred that “Facebook revives ‘dormant’ relationship.”

The users of the Facebook also consider it as a viable medium to always be in touch with political discourse. A survey conducted for a period from January 20-February 19, 2012 by the Pew Research Internet Project revealed that “36% of social networking site users find social networking sites ‘very important’ or ‘somewhat important’ to them in keeping up with political news, 26% users find the sites “very important” or “somewhat important” to them in recruiting people to get involved in political issues that matter to them. The same survey came with another fact that constant use of social networking site may have an impact on the user’s political views. As the survey found that “25% of social networking site users say they have become more active in a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on the sites and 16% of social networking site users say they have changed their views about a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on the sites.” This finding shows why the

political leaders have today become more obsessed with social networking site. If a person is constantly exposed to media he/she would definitely start believing what has been shown. Now, the people especially in India remain online for hours. As a result, they always remain in touch with political updates which could sometimes change their mind and they might switchover their loyalty from a party to another. This is one of the reasons for which the political parties are now laying stress on continuously updating posts and opinion on various issues in their respective social networking site pages especially in Facebook.

The survey conducted for the purpose of the study also found that around 72.4% read newspapers 'everyday'. 23.4% of total respondents say that they follow the Facebook pages of Arvind Kejriwal, Narendra Modi, Arun Jaitley, Dr. Manmohan Singh and Indian National Congress. 17.9% follow the Facebook pages of Arvind Kejriwal, Narendra Modi and Arun Jaitley. 34.5 % say that they only follow the Facebook pages of Arvind Kejriwal and Narendra Modi. Only 6.2% respondents do not follow any one of the national political leader. This showed that even the people living in a suburb area like Silchar are connected with national political leaders. And of course the social networking sites like Facebook will rule the roost in the days to come.

Realising the growing popularity of Facebook and how the people are extensively using it, the Facebook authorities have launched a new app named 'Paper' which would be like a newspaper where a user would get different information about the different happenings in the world, different opinion pieces on varied issues, among others. This app will also enable the users to share their thought and opinion. In the last few years, social media play the role of catalyst to organise different movements across the globe. For that instance, social media was behind the Egyptian uprising in 2011 (Tim Eatan 2013). In Shahbhag movement in Bangladesh, social media have been used extensively. The use of social media to organise a movement was first seen in India in Anna Hazare's movement against corruption. The team Anna availed themselves of the benefit of the social networking sites to the fullest, resulting in a small movement turned out to be a national issue. The people in large numbers came out to the streets in different regions and towns of the country in support of the cause.

Besides, several news stories are first broken via social media. Hudson River plane crash was first reported via Twitter, the announcement of the royal wedding in Britain was first made via Twitter, protesters killed in Bahrain via YouTube, Whitney Houston's death via Twitter and so on. In fact, the death of Osama bin Laden was first reported via Twitter when a neighbour tweeted about the Osama bin Laden raid and broke one of the biggest news stories of the decade. In the days to come, the newspapers might face threat of being extinct. However, digital illiteracy still remains a prime issue in the country like India. Many argue that lack of knowledge about English language, a major section of people in India might face trouble while using the social networking site. Although this argument cannot be discarded straightway, but nowadays the people update their status and comments on social networking site in other languages like Bengali, Hindi. So, the language cannot be always barrier for the people to get the information via social networking site. The census in 2011 in India revealed

that though half of all Indians do not have a toilet at home, but over a half own a telephone (The Hindu, New Delhi, March 4, 2012).

The rapid advancement in communication technology has also somehow strengthened the meaning of democracy where every individual has the equal right to share his or her feelings, opinions and views. From the various recent incidents, it could be inferred that the social media has the potential to initiate a change in the form of governance by replacing the authoritarian governance with democratic governance. The definition of journalism is also changing with the passage of time. A new type of journalistic organisation is emerging. The examples like 'Storyful' and 'Demotrix' have shown how the new forms of media platform are emerging. *Storyful* uses the power of social networks to create cooperative and useful journalism while *Demotrix* shares and sells pictures of news events. The professional journalists have been forced to learn the nuances of blogging and social media. It is interesting to mention that even the mainstream media are keeping an eye on the social media as it has become a news source for them. Therefore, in the coming days the Facebook might emerge out as the replacement of newspapers. The politicians now prefer social media over mainstream media to express their happiness, resentment, anguish, protest, among others.

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