

OPPORTUNITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION IN NORTH EAST INDIA

by

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ABSTRACT

The media today has well and truly spread its wings. From being limited to the whims of a few individuals, it has come a long way to become a means of social participation. While the fourth estate has been in order for a long while, it seems to have realized its true potential and purpose in the new millennium only in the true spirit of democracy as envisaged by Abraham Lincoln's of being an institution 'of the people, by the people and for the people'. This has been facilitated by the advent of the social media. Social media, with its immediate and amplified reach, has transformed the way people interact with each other. This is significant because information and social awareness have emerged as important factors of human empowerment. Though Agartala, India's northeastern state of Tripura achieved the first position in literacy with 94.65 per cent, beating Kerala, according to 2011 census, the use of social media in the Northeast came into prominence in less than ideal circumstances and there is no outstanding positive example of social media usage in the region to counter negative issues. The present study aims to focus on the use of social media as a tool for development communication in the Northeast region of the country.

Key Words: social media, development, communication, awareness, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Development is conceived as 'dynamic' in the service of the 'progress'. The progressive change is described as alterations in awareness, motivation and participation of the individuals. From a social point of view, development refers to the change in the social structure or in the functions performed by different groups and units within it. It is a process of innovation where one learns from the experiences of others and assimilates what is considered useful through a process of selection. Development is 'growth' oriented all time. There have been several paradigms of development, each of which had a slightly different notion of what development is. In the 1950s and 1960s the development theorists and practitioners stressed and visualized that development can be achieved by modernization via industrialization and urbanization though the two exemplars of this model viewed modernization differently. Lerner(1958) stressed on individual modernization while Rogers(1960) stressed on modernization at the social system level.

The international development theorists in the second and the third development decades argued and practiced that development implies commitment to social goals as well as to multifaceted interrelated set of economic, social, political and cultural variables. Development includes the improvement of quality of life. The focus of development has always been 'growth'.

Communication perspective on Development

In the context of development, the fundamental purpose of human communication is to understand the reality in order to achieve goals and select other subsequent goals. Thus, understanding mutual understanding is fundamental to the process of communication itself. A circular communication is necessary at all levels with several loops of feedback and feed-forward to arrive at mutual understanding. Communication

for development is basically about three strategies: from the perspectives of Marxist historians such as Edward Thompson(1963), communication for development is, first and foremost, a struggle to rescue the development discourse from the perspectives of the under classes by building their consciousness and knowledge of development. Second, from a post-colonial theoretical perspective, communication for development engages in a Gramscian war of position against the orientalist, technologically deterministic, fatalistic and modernist discourses of development that are authored off-site. Third, from Marxist perspectives, communication for development is in itself an advocacy that works towards the transformation of the political economy of development itself in order to allow a greater number of people achieve what Quebral (2002) describes as greater socio-economic equality and individual potential.

Defining Development Communication

When we refer to development communication, it is about such communication that can be used for development. It is about using communication to bring change or improve the way of living of the citizen of the country. Nora Quebral (1975) defined development communication as “the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth and makes possible greater economic and social equality and larger fulfillment of human potential”. Everett M. Rogers, an influential scholar defined development communication as “the uses to which communication is put in order to further development. Such applications are intended to either further develop in a general way, such as by increasing the level of the mass media exposure among the nations citizens, in order to create a favourable climate for development, or to support a specific definite program or project”, Roger’s definition essentially emphasizes the creation of climate for development which includes physical and psychological climate.

Development communication through dissemination of information plays a key role in bringing about a social change among the receivers. Primarily, development communication performs two key functions: transforming roles as it seeks social changes for a higher quality of life, socializing role as it seeks to maintain some of the established values of the society. These roles expedite the process of development. The purposive and positive nature of development communication enhances the ability of contemporary society to usher in an environment of change and progress.

Significantly, communication as a process facilitates in making people understand their environment. Majority of people in the third world countries are illiterate and may not be aware of the benefits of literacy and hence they need to be educated about the positive effects of literacy.

Approaches to Media, Communication and Development

The 9th United Nations Roundtable on communication for development spelt out thirteen approaches. These approaches were: a) extension/diffusion of innovations, b) network development and documentation c) ICTs for development d) social marketing e) edutainment f) health communication g) social mobilization h) information, education and communication i) institution building j) knowledge, attitudes and practices k) development support communication l) HIV AIDS community approach m) community participation. Recently, however, the common approach to communication for development has settled on four main approaches namely: a) behaviour change communication b) communication for social change c) communication for advocacy d) an enabling media and communication environment (Lennie and Tacchi, 2011).

Media development starts from the assumption that the media have an important role in the state as they hold those powers accountable and provide citizens with

information that they need to actively participate in the political sphere. Only an independent and free media system can achieve this. At the level of media for development, ICT for development implies the generation and use of content via internet, mobile phones or computers within development contexts.

The term media, communication and development has evolved from the concepts of development communication or communication for development.

Introduction to Social Media

Wikipedia, in 2006, defined social media as “Social Media is the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is a shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people and peers.” (Frakes, 2010) Wikipedia, in 2010, expanded the definition a bit, “Social media is a media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media uses Internet and web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). It supports the democratization of knowledge and information, transforming people from content consumers into content producers. (Frakes, 2010) In 2014, Wikipedia defines the term as “Social media is the interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.” Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

Furthermore, social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. They introduce substantial and

pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals. Social media differ from traditional or industrial media in many ways, including quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence.

Components of Social Media

Frakes (2010) mentions that social media can be said to have three components:

- a) Concept (art, information, or meme);
- b) Media (physical, electronic, or verbal);
- c) Social interface (intimate, direct, community engagement, social viral, electronic broadcast or syndication, or other physical media such as print).

The Rise of the Social Network

Blogs emerged out of the online diaries of the mid 1990s. In 1999, the first commercial blogging services – Blogger and Live Journal – were launched. Blogs started making serious inroads in 2002 and rapidly rose in popularity over the next few years. At the heart of the blog explosion was the convergence of a number of technical phenomena. Simplified web publishing tools were a real trigger. Writing a blog became as easy as composing and sending an email message. Similarly, mass adoption of affordable broadband Internet access at home made creating and managing websites easier than ever. At the same time, consumer electronics including PCs and laptops fell in price making computing so easy. While technology may have sparked the blog revolution, technology has never been the driving force behind online social interaction. From BBSs to chat rooms, forums, and blogs, human nature is at the heart of creating and building online communities. From the very beginning of computer networking, the Web has been a place for social interaction. That's why we call it social media. Blogs, social networks like Facebook, and microblogging platforms like Twitter are simply technologies that foster communication, sharing and collaboration. These social media

tools fit into a bucket of technologies sometimes called Web 2.0, a term we often come across. Although online interaction is nothing new, these highly networked technologies make massive, global online communication accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Even more profound, they add a participatory element to online communication. Blogs and social networks invite participation. With a click of a button they turn audiences into creators and strangers into friends. (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010)

Classification of Social Media

Social media technologies take on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, social networks, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. Technologies include blogging, picture-sharing, Blogs, wall-posting, music-sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Social network aggregation can integrate many of the platforms in use. By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure), Kaplan and Haenlein created a classification scheme in their Business Horizons (2010) article, with seven different types of social media: 1. collaborative projects (for example, Wikipedia) 2. blogs and microblogs (for example, Twitter) 3. Social news networking sites (for example, Digg and Leakernet) 4. content communities (for example, YouTube and DailyMotion) 5. social networking sites (for example, Facebook) 6. virtual game-worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft) 7. virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) However, the boundaries between the different types have become increasingly blurred.

The North-East region and its uniqueness

The north-eastern region of India or the north-east (NE), as it is popularly known,

comprises of eight states namely, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Among the north-eastern states, Sikkim became an Indian protectorate in the year 1947 and a full state in 1975. The “Siliguri” corridor of West Bengal connects the north eastern region with the rest of India. More than 2000 km of boundary of this region is shared with other countries, which include Nepal, China, Bhutan, Burma and Bangladesh. With a population of 31.2 million in the year 2011, Assam is the biggest state in the north-eastern region, while the rest of the states are much smaller in terms of population size. Assam is followed by Tripura with a population of 3.7 million, whereas Sikkim has the lowest population of 0.6 million. It is interesting to observe that apart from Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland, the other six north-eastern states have sex ratios that are considerably higher than all India average. In terms of geographical spread of areas, Arunachal Pradesh is the largest among the eight states. Apart from geographical location, this region is different from the rest of the country because of many other characteristics, of which a few important ones are as follows:

Challenges and opportunities

Nearly 35% of the population in Northeast India is below the poverty line as compared to the national average of 26.1%. The landlocked Northeast region of India remains isolated from the rest of the country and has not been able to attract investors or produce skilled labour and entrepreneurial resources, though most states have literacy rates at or above national average. Especially in the Northeast, ICTs have the power to change the very landscape of the region, stop the exodus of the youth to other parts of the country and catapult the region into a strong economic force. With a strong English speaking, intelligent, young population, North East is very well positioned to take advantage of these new technologies in our education system. Sikkim has an area of only 7096 sq kms and a population of half a million. Its rugged topography acts as a

formidable barrier towards providing telecommunication connectivity. Remote areas of Sikkim also experience long spells of power outage.

When using social media for marketing products, social media could be easily utilized to create cost effective strategies and campaigns that can create viral results. In July 2012, violence in the Indian state of Assam broke out with riots between indigenous Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims. The first incident was reported to have taken place on 20 July 2012. As of 8 August 2012, 77 people had died and over 400,000 people were taking shelter in 270 relief camps, after being displaced from almost 400 villages. The violence and exodus of thousands of people from Northeast India reportedly led to a series of incessant protests in Assam, at multiple locations, during the months of August–September. The protesters' main demand was expeditious detection and deportation of illegal infiltrators from Assam. On 15 September 2012, at a convention of non-political tribal groups, organisations representing Bodo, Dimasa, Tiwa, Deuri, Karbi, Garo, Rabha, Sonowal, Kacharis and other tribal communities decided to form a coordination committee for the cause. The tribal leaders said that illegal immigration has threatened the existence, right to land and resources to all indigenous people of the entire state, and it was not limited to Bodoland alone. The violence in 2012 followed ethnic tensions between the indigenous Bodo people and Bengalispeaking Muslims. While the Muslim community state that they are descendants of East Bengali Muslims brought to Assam during the British Raj, local communities allege that the Muslim population has increased, boosted by refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan prior to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 and by subsequent illegal migrants from Bangladesh. By the mid-1970s, increased competition for livelihood, land and political power led to frequent incidents of violence, including the Nellie massacre after the controversial 1983 state elections, which left nearly 3,000 dead, and other large scale clashes. These incidents resulted in resentment directed at India's central government, not only from Bodos, Rabhas,

Tiwas, and other indigenous tribes-people for failing to prevent illegal migration, but also from the indigenous Assamese Muslim community for failing to protect the rights of minorities. In 1998, Srinivas Kumar Sinha, who then was governor of Assam, had sent a report to the then Indian President, KR Narayanan, explaining about the problems that the unchecked illegal immigration of Bangladeshis would bring to the integrity of India. In that report, he had highlighted the history that Assam was first claimed by Pakistan during 1947 and then by Bangladesh, due to its rich natural resources. The report raised worries about what might happen if the illegal immigrants gain majority and ask for secession from India. He also cited the "Greater Bangladesh project" which might entice the immigrants to merge those regions of Assam with Bangladesh. —The rapid growth of international Islamic fundamentalism may provide the driving force for this demand. The loss of lower Assam will sever the entire North-East from the rest of India and the rich natural resources of that region will be lost to the nation.

Ethnic tensions between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims escalated into a riot in Kokrajhar on 20 July 2012, when unidentified miscreants killed four Bodo youths at Joypur. This was followed by retaliatory attacks on local Muslims killing two and injuring several of them on the morning of 21 July 2012.

Infrastructure and access

The Arunachal Pradesh state government has set up 200 CSCs (Common Services Centres) in the state. CSCs are one of the key pillars of e-governance and play a vital role in the service delivery channel. Online Inner Line Permit (ILP), Automation of State Library (RFID enabled), and e-Samaj (project for department of Women and Child Welfare) have been implemented, according to the Department of Information Technology, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.

ICTs help bring the markets closer, and can provide information on prices and input supplies from business hubs far and near. This also plays an important role in the agro-processing industry and in the development of handlooms and handicrafts by accessing the latest designs and marketing of the products. The CSCs are also important hubs for Village-Level Entrepreneurs (VLEs) to test and launch local B2C services. Business correspondents for various banks can also work in tandem with others offering AADHAAR cards and NREGA job cards. There are around 5,000 CSCs functional in Northeast India, and have great potential to become a 'game changer' in the Northeast states. Entrepreneurship driven by the VLEs and supported by continuous capacity building and training has the power to undertake dramatic changes in rural governance and business landscape of the region.

Exposure to New Media in North-East India

There are estimated to be more than one million mobile users, 0.1 million internet users, and 0.1 million social media users today in the region. Ideated and conceived in 2010, the e-Northeast Award platform was designed to scout, promote, recognize, and inspire best ICT practices in Northeast India. ICTs are being leveraged by many of the two million NGOs and community organizations, 0.5 million and more schools, more than 500 panchayats with much more scope for innovation and scale.

The educational attainment pattern is found to be slightly different in urban areas of the north-eastern states. Percentage of non-literates in population of 10 year olds and over is the lowest in Mizoram (4.3%), followed by Manipur (5.3%). Even though, share of literates in total urban population is highest in Mizoram, most of them had their attainments up to higher secondary level only. Mizoram has the lowest share of graduates compared to the other states in the north-east region. The shares of graduates and post-graduates are found to be considerably higher in urban Manipur relative to their counterparts in the other states - about one fifth of the urban population of 10 year

olds and over, are graduates and around 24 percent have completed higher secondary school. In fact, Manipur is the only state in NE that has a higher share of urban post-graduates than the all India average for urban population.

Unlike the traditional forms of media and information, the internet is relatively new in India and so has a much lower penetration. Therefore, access to internet in the country is limited. Only 3.7 percent literate youth in India have reported that they access internet. The percentage of youth accessing internet in Assam is around 4.1 percent, followed by 3.2 percent each in Tripura and Nagaland. However, the other five north-eastern states have much lower levels of internet access. Of all the internet users in the country, 31 percent (19% rural, 35% urban) accessed on a daily basis, 41 percent (31% rural, 43% urban) accessed once or twice a week and 28 percent with less frequency. Only 23 percent (23% rural, 24.2% urban) youth internet users in Assam and still lower 16 percent (0% rural, 29.3% urban) users in other NE states access the internet on a daily basis, the percentage of daily users in the rest of the states (34%) being slightly higher than the all India average. On the other hand, the infrequent user percentages are overwhelmingly higher in Assam and other NE states as compared to the rest of the states in the country [Table 1 & 2].

Table 1(a): Distribution of literate youth internet users (%) according to frequency of exposure (Rural)							
State	Daily	Twice a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Once a month	Infrequent/Rare	Total
Assam	23.0	8.5	1.1	9.8	7.8	49.7	100.0
Other North-Eastern States	0.0	0.0	6.5	0.0	12.0	81.5	100.0
Maharashtra	3.4	29.0	65.3	0.0	2.3	0.0	100.0
Bihar	17.5	48.5	0.0	14.4	7.9	11.7	100.0
Rest of the States	20.6	9.8	19.8	31.1	9.8	8.9	100.0
All India	19.4	11.9	19.0	26.8	9.4	13.6	100.0
Source: NYRS (2009), NCAER							

Table 2(b): Distribution of literate youth internet users (%) according to frequency of exposure (Urban)							
State	Daily	Twice a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Once a month	Infrequent/Rare	Total
Assam	24.2	15.1	16.2	1.6	16.3	26.7	100.0
Other North-Eastern States	29.3	22.7	15.6	4.4	5.8	22.3	100.0
Maharashtra	23.0	11.4	40.9	14.1	8.1	2.4	100.0
Bihar	32.9	19.1	20.6	6.2	9.2	12.0	100.0
Rest of the States	38.1	19.4	22.1	7.3	5.1	8.0	100.0
All India	34.6	17.7	25.8	8.6	6.0	7.3	100.0
Source: NYRS (2009), NCAER							

CONCLUSION

Communication can be effective not only when adopted to induce change in awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, but also as a tool to build trust, share knowledge and explore options enhancing the overall results and sustainability of development initiatives.

Interestingly, there is no one outstanding positive example of social media usage in the Northeast to counter the negative issues of the region. There is therefore no case study with which analysis can be conducted on the sphere of social media. There has been no concerted effort by the state governments of the region to capture the momentum and level of engagement that social media provides, although it stands to reason that they are of course aware of it. The same is also true of civilian appropriation of these platforms. The reach of telecommunications and level of connectivity across the region is limited, especially in comparison to the rest of India, perhaps barring only Jammu and Kashmir.

It is hoped that in time, northeast state governments will act upon maintaining an

active public image and there will be noticeable increase in civil society engagement through social media. This media provides innovative opportunities for political actors, political institutions and the public to interact with one another. Through social sharing, social media users in the Northeast region of our country will have the opportunity to broadcast their opinion.

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