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ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE: A CASE STUDY OF HOKKOLOROB

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Abstract: *Social media is often hailed as more liberating, as a sort of alternative to mainstream electronic media. Several social movements, from the Occupy Wall Street to Arab Spring to student movements in India like Hokkolorob have been called the hashtag movements for their extensive usage of social media. However, it is also important to understand the ethical dimensions of such practices. From a case study of social media engagement of Hokkolorob participants, it emerged that the stress on civility takes a backseat. Instead, ethics is conceptualized in its oppositional content, in terms of radical antagonism towards the status quo, including but not limited to patriarchal values. This oppositional politics finds expression through aggressive language as a means of subversion and transgression.*

***Keywords**: Social media, ethics, alternative media, social networking, student protest, Hokkolorob*

Introduction

The emergence of social media has seen with it the rise of ideas of social media enabled public sphere. Several researchers like Papacharissi (2004) have explored the effectiveness of social media in the context of protests. Nancy Fraser's notion of counter-publics with the characteristic feature of multiplicity and pluralism, informs an understanding of a counter-hegemonic world with multiple interests. The Arab Spring and other protests like Occupy Wall Street have brought to the fore how in the way new communicative dimensions are being added. Much of these new dimensions relate to the creation of a virtual self, which using the formulation of global information flows, transcend national boundaries. Identities which already exist in "reality" are not only being amplified but are also being modified, while new ones are also being shaped through discursive practices on the internet.

A closely related theme to that of social media enabled public sphere is that of alternative media. Should social media be considered alternative media? Distributed ownership, greater user generated content and greater interactivity in meaning making processes in case of new media, in particular social media, results in an overlap of the definitions of new media and alternative media. In an age of convergence when the gap between public and the private are falling apart, various ethical considerations are also emerging fast.

As Stephen J Ward (2010) has argued, for greater democratization of the profession, media should become participatory. It is interesting to note how the earliest codes of ethics had developed in tandem with a rise of professionalism in journalism. Today, we see a reversal of sorts, with de-professionalization being the name of the game with a spike in citizen journalism. Almost anyone and everyone with a smart phone is a potential journalist today. Mainstream journalists also have to cope with tons of information sources.

In the age of "content is King", news is everywhere. From sites like Scoop Whoop to Quartz, news can be sourced from a wider array of sources than ever before. After all, anything that can go viral and has an element of novelty in it, can be called news. From a commercial perspective, the more sensational, the more "news" worthy it will be. But this cannot merely be understood from the rise of oligopolistic ownership patterns. Mainstream journalism and the traditional or "legacy" media are facing greater competition than ever before from the newly formed media outlets as well as social media.

The more puritans among journalists and commentators will usually frown at the prospect of having to rely on social media for news sourcing. Lippmann and Laswell and other mass society theorists strongly believed that the masses are not intelligent enough to decide for themselves. This elitist view is shared by those who believe that formal gate-keeping by professionals is necessary.

The ethical concern remains a major issue for alternative media as well. What remains disputed is how regulation or imposition of ethical guidelines can be possible in case of such alternative media. These are questions which need to be addressed by an informed and enlightened public sphere instead of being left to a few power elites, corporate bosses or bureaucrats. At least, the democratic participant model as suggested by Mcquail would seem to give that impression.

Literature Review:

Social Media and activism: The internet, particularly social media has been viewed as a possible tool of political awareness, discourse and opinion formation and indeed as a catalyst for movements for social change (Schmidt, 2013; Shirky, 2009; Shirky, 2011). Others are far more critical and even dismissive of social media's potential for the same (Morozov, 2011). Theorists like Manuel Castells have placed enormous emphasis on the emergence of new modes of networking (like "mass self communication" referring to the ability of a single user generating content that can potentially reach the masses) using the internet and the power these networks possess to counter the existing status quo (Castells, 2009). However, Castells has been criticized by some scholars as being too optimistic about the power of the internet (Dijk, 2012). Still others feel there are reasons to be both optimistic and careful about social media's potentials for social change (Joyce, 2010; Gerbaudo, 2012). While some (Gruzd, 2011) have used Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Community to explain networking on Twitter, others have tried to study democratic media activism using the lens of social movement theory (Carroll and Hackett, 2006). The latter have explored democratic media activism through the lens of two forms of social movement theory – Resource Mobilization Theory (people brought together by shared interests) and New Social Movement Theory (where collective identity formation plays the central role). Challenging techno-determinism, Hill and Hughes concluded that 'people will mold (sic) the internet to fit traditional politics" (Hill and Hughes, 1998). Robert McChesney also argues that existing power relations in society tend to get reproduced on the internet (McChesney, 2008). That said, as Dipankar Sinha argues in his article, there is a growing need for finding a genuinely democratic and participatory form of communicative platform, given that both mass media and the state suffer from legitimacy crisis (Sinha, 1997). This has particular relevance to the critical questions that Kovacs raises regarding the future of scholarship of digital media activism in India (Kovacs, 2010).

Are users of social media mere "slackers" or are they seriously committed to social and political issues? "Slackers" in internet parlance are defined as those who do little more than just clicking or changing display pictures etc (Goldsborough, 2011). However, sometimes these efforts do help to raise donations or some petitions can help free journalists, as had happened in North Korea once. Based on the number of views of a video, one can actually help increase donations for a cause as has been demonstrated before. The author therefore concludes that by clever online strategies, it is possible to even make slackers contribute positively to social causes.

Some like Malcolm Gladwell are, however, particularly caustic regarding the efficacy of social media in the context of social change (Gladwell, 2011). According to hm, unlike real world activism like civil rights protests in US in 1960's, online activism is with "Weak ties" which does not distribute roles or responsibilities as it is "non hierarchical". Here people avoid high risk activism. The author argues that you cannot achieve complicated tasks when everyone has an equal say- that networks cannot have discipline and strategy. He takes a dig at social media evangelists like Clay Shirky: "What happens next is more of the same. A networked, weak-tie world is good at things like helping Wall Streeters get phones back from teen-age girls." By giving this example, Gladwell is suggesting that social media can be useful for "small things" like finding a lost phone, but not for matters of more political significance.

Clay Shirky, one of the most prominent social media evangelists, argues strongly in favor of social media as a site for conversation and not just passive reception of information (Shirky, 2011). The author gives examples of downfall of Philippine President Joseph Estrada, ‘communist’ downfall in Moldova and ouster of Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznaras ones that were possible toa great extent because of new media. He says that demise of erstwhile Stalinist regimes in Poland or Czechoslovakia was possible because of the presence of strong civil society movements like Solidarity and Charter 77 civic movement. Shirky refers to the “cute cat theory of digital activism” – that it is more difficult for regimes to censor broad platforms that are also used for sharing non-political stuff like cat videos but which can also be potentially used for political activism, than to censor those which are specifically political in nature. This reflects the “conservative’s dilemma”. This means that authoritarian regimes find themselves in a spot of bother if civil society is strengthened (for instance, through increased "access to conversation") in a situation where their deceptive explanations of events stand in direct contrast with the views of the public.

Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer stress on the concept that “politics comes first”. (Wolfsfeld et al, 2013) In other words, instead of thinking that political upheavals follow media practices, it is the other way round. They argue that this was the case with Arab Spring too, where discussion about the upsurge on social media did not precede but rather followed the rise in the number of protests on ground. By making this argument, the authors joined the ranks of other commentators on the Arab Spring who treated generalizations like “Twitter revolution” with skepticism and thought that the credit ascribed to the social media was exaggerated. For their analysis, they mostly consider political grievances as the main reason for dissent. They refer to other works which have shown that many of the Arab countries had governments that could not fill up the gap between the actual level of democracy and the expected level of the people. Segev et al go on to find some lacunae in the literature that posed the debate on the role of social media in Arab Spring from two extreme positions – “cyberenthusiasts”, who stressed on the low cost, speedy and effective communication offered by social media to help activists adopt alternative strategies, and “cyberskeptics” who thought that instead of empowering people in these low democracy environments, internet tools created a false sense of powerfulness and discouraged the politically motivated to take to the streets for protesting. The two lacunae, according to the authors, in the aforementioned literature, are that very few political variables have been included during such analyses. For instance, the political environment would dictate the *ability* that people would have to access social media (where there’s too much censorship and control, they wouldn’t be able to access social media so much) and secondly, political scenario will also affect the motivation that people have to take to the streets (even if people have relatively easy access to social media, they may not be angry enough to agree to endure the costs of collective political action. Yet another problem with the literature in question as per the authors is that there is lack of systematic comparative studies. Instead, Wolfsfeld et al would like to put their study flatly in the category of *contextualism*, who employ comparative studies to understand how various political, social and economic contexts have shaped the role of social media in the protests.

To explain the role of social media in political conflicts, the authors use two main principles, both of which are rooted in Wolfsfeld's "political contest model". As has already been alluded to earlier, this model considers that *politics should analytically come first*, followed by media (whether new or traditional). There is the principle of "cumulative inequality" which states that in places where there is a lack of democracy and people need access to media tools the most, are often where they have the greatest difficulty accessing or using such media. On the other hand, in rich or more democratic countries, people may not be all that keen to participate in protests despite having far better access to social media. This shows that there is a "negative correlation between the level of communication technology in a country and the level of protest." The second principle, that *politics should come first chronologically*, is also generally used for analyzing the behavior of journalists in traditional media sector. The crux of this principle can be summed up as PMP (politics-media-politics) – i.e. first there has to be a spurt of a certain political activity, which will then be covered by media, which will further encourage more people to join the bandwagon. The authors argue the same can be applied to social media users.

Neha Kumar says that most studies on Information Communication Technology (ICT) overlook the pleasure seeking activities of ICT usage which too can be indirectly empowering (Kumar, 2014). She say that ICT's role is not to be seen just for virtuous purposes but poor and marginalized often use social media for expressing intimacy, pleasure etc, which can be empowering too. Her study focuses on "marginal populations as *beings for themselves"* - investigating how leisure-driven use of Facebook results in development-friendly outcomes. Jeffrey presents the daily condition of educated, unemployed young men in North India, where he describes them as "waiting" (Jeffrey, 2010). In this state of waiting, they are drawn toward opportunities that allow them to "acquire skills, fashion new cultural styles, and mobilize politically". Kumar points out three layers of engagement with mobile phone based Facebook usage - aspirations, avenues, and agency. Her study group included mostly teenagers in the "waiting" stage who develop aspirations to learn new things (say how to book rail tickets online), then find avenues through *jugaad* or learning ways to negotiate unfamiliar internet and finally through subjective usage, develop a certain degree of knowledge, in the process becoming independent agents of change of their own lives.

Rajesh Kumar in his 2014 study (Kumar, 2014) quotes Eric Schmidt et al in The New Digital Age who says internet is "world's largest ungoverned space" (Schmidt and Cohen, 2013). He points out that information cascades that help build confidence about movement's success, increasing cost of repression of movement by authorities are among the advantages of social media's potential. He carried out a survey among 200 college students in Dehra Dun, where internet penetration is high as per the authors. The author uses three models to check for three hypotheses using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method – whether people get information about civil society movements from social media, whether social media motivates to participate in them and finally whether people engage themselves in discussions on social media which give enough dialogic cues for digital activism. They found only the third hypothesis to hold true but marginally. The author also points out that over 70 per cent believe information from social media about civil society movements (CSM) can be trusted to a limited extent. Also, television rather than social media is still the main media source for CSM. Over 50 per cent people believed that social media can have a positive impact on CSM. The authors finally suggest that social media is yet to emerge as a facilitator for movements.

A similar research showed through “content analysis of online group pages coupled with a survey of high-level Facebook users”, “that online groups that are facilitated through SNS platforms perform many similar functions to the offline groups (Feezell et al. 2009). Online political groups are effective in increasing offline political participation, but appear to fall short of increasing levels of political knowledge.”

Jose Marichal instructs us that we should think of most political activity on Facebook less as intentional efforts to promote social and political change and more as a *discursive performance* designed to express a political identity (Marichal, 2013). Perhaps what is most valuable about Facebook as a political medium is not its mobilizing potential, but the spaces it provides users to *present and manage (collective) identity* on SNS sites. He puts forward a theory of *expressive political performance that is maintained, he argues, through the use of four sets of signifiers (expressivity, identity, signifiers and text length).* The author analyzes 250 groups out of 550 marked political and shows how the four different dimensions manifested in the group descriptions. This included mere expression of a political viewpoint, call for action online and offline, pithiness for support or opposition, signifiers like expletives and capitalization to show anger etc.

Sebastián Valenzuela uses statistical analyses to find the role played by social media in fueling the 2012 protests in Chile (Valenzuela, 2013). His study showed that while social media was not the primary source of news, it definitely played the role of a catalyst in terms of motivating people to join protests as well as helping in organizing and mobilizing protests at the ground level.

In their 2012 paper, Harindranathand Khorana presents their case study of the Twitter handle of the India Against Corruption movement when it was at its peak (Khorana, 2012). Through textual analysis of selective tweets, the authors try to place the movement and the use of a medium that is out of reach of the vast majority within the theoretical paradigm of “civil” and “political” society, as problematized by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 2006). They argue that the movement was possibly a strengthening of middle class hegemony through its appropriation of the “Gandhian” trope by using Anna Hazare. The authors argue that the elite educated civil society, frustrated with the corruption of the government, used Twitter effectively to emphasize their moral superiority over the elected representatives.

In their article, Chadha and Harlow try to understand the perceptions that Indian activists hold about the efficacy of social networking sites (SNS) in helping social movements (Chadha and

Harlow, 2015). Since there was no master list of activists available, they used snowballing and convenience sampling to arrive at a list of activists, mostly urban. They analyzed their sample of 92 respondents and concluded that most activists seem to believe that while SNSs can help social movements, they need to be complemented by offline organizational strategies. This observation resonates with the findings of the present research as well.

Peter Van Aelst and StefaanWalgrave in a volume on understanding the role of cyberprotests uses the quantitative content analysis of 17 websites which are dedicated to anti-globalization (Aelst and Walgrave, 2006). The study mainly focused on three aspects of the websites: what informational aspect they laid stress on (like environment, labor, participative democracy etc.); whether the sites had content that motivated users to take part in some action and finally whether the sites engaged in networking with other sites and organizations dealing with similar issues.

Civility and Online Discourse

While there is agreement that some extent of civility helps foster an environment favorable for democracy, there is also some reservation about over-emphasis on civility. This is because civility is often reduced to formalities like "good behavior", "appropriate conduct" and the like. This can be exclusionary for those sections of the public who do not have the access to social capital or resources necessary for such behavioral practices. The exclusion of sections of the public from discourse forming processes can then be argued to be against the very promises of democracy. There is then a possible terrain of tension between the concepts of civility and democracy.

Dahlgren points out some important dimensions of civic engagement over the internet. (Dahlgren, 2009) One of these is “interspatiality”. He first explains how the concept of “space” as opposed to “place” helps explain the political dimensions of social agency in our everyday practices. In case of internet, the “hypertext link structure” that allows the user to move freely between various communicative spaces, is one of the primary mechanisms of experiencing interspatiality. But he also cautions us against overgeneralizing the outreach of internet’s democratizing capabilities. For while it is true that the internet offers many opportunities to create user generated content, add to, remix and significantly alter existing texts and maintain a high degree of individuality that perhaps no other communicative medium or space allows, it still is a fact that the “old” media are hardly disappearing, as internet users still continue to use phone calling or texting regularly. If one has to investigate the democratic potential of a discourse, the extent of civility and politeness in it will certainly have to be looked into. Zizi Papacharissi, in a study of conversation in online political newsgroups, found that there is reason to be optimistic about the democratic potentials of the internet, in particular by serving as a site of public sphere. (Papacharissi, 2004) The messages posted in the newsgroups were found mostly to be civil, and more heated exchanges were fostered by the online medium because of the absence of face to face communication, which seemed to “promote Lyotard’s vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy”. But just like satire, civility and politeness are also categories that are difficult to define.

Papacharissi’s paper discusses at length about the various schools of thought on the same. Is civility reducible to politeness, as in a certain courteous kind of behavior? The author argues that it is not so, and that civility is actually a show of respect for the “collective traditions of democracy”. However, if by civility participants in a conversation also include politeness or formal etiquettes, the promises of democratic exchange through robust and heated discussion may be lost. In other words, how we conceptualize civility in discourse is what will determine whether we are setting the right kind of standards for measuring democratic potentials. By relying too much on courteous, formal etiquettes, civility may in fact become a hindrance to democracy. Thus one can be rude but civil at the same time. Papacharissi points out the four theoretical approaches towards politeness as summarized by Fraser. First of all, there is the “social-norm” view which says that people try to uphold certain standards of etiquettes during conversation, not following which will be considered rude. Secondly, there is the “conversational-maxim view”, which says the aim of people engaging in conversation is primarily to maximize the efficiency of communication. This may result in smooth exchanges but some voices may be suppressed in the process to ensure efficiency. The third approach makes use of Goffman’s theory of “face” (Goffman, 1967). By face, Goffman meant that the positive social values that a person associates with oneself based on social attributes. While positive face is more closely linked to politeness of behavior, negative face will typically be associated with rudeness. The fourth way of conceptualizing politeness is through the “conversational-contract view”. According to this view, the participants of a discussion will enter into the process with their previously held understandings and interpretations of a set of rights and obligations, which may be formally imposed by social institutions or informally decided upon through previous interaction. It is the adherence of these terms and conditions of all discussants that will be considered “polite” in this case. The paper also highlights research works that have shown that when the standards of politeness are stringently adhered to, democracy is not furthered but instead hindered. Specifically, some works have shown that when people keep politeness as their top priority, they tend to agree more without expressing their disagreement at all. Even Goffman has tended to highlight the importance of “uninhibited interaction”.

When speaking of civility, Habermas’s notion of public sphere necessarily comes up (Habermas, 1991). In such a public sphere, civility would mean courteous turn taking, allowing the space for others to talk. However, too much insistence on “well mannered behavior” can actually lead to marginalization of the social classes which do not have that a certain kind of education that the elite propertied classes have, as was pointed out by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990). Thus, for the sake of individuality and uniqueness, it is imperative that the standards of politeness be not imposed and scope for “counter publics” be kept. Drawing upon the work of other researchers, Papacharissi also remarks that this “imperfect” discourse may indeed be better than a “sanitized” one. One need not classify an exchange as uncivil just because there are some bad manners involved; it will not be harmful for democracy unless there is an attack on the social group to which the conversant belongs. Civility is “positive face” insofar as it points to the democratic identity of an individual; incivility, as negative face, will then amount to attacking or stereotyping social groups or denying people personal freedoms.

In case of cyberspace, the author observes that online anonymity allows the real world boundaries to collapse, thus paving way for a more open and free communication (Dahlgren, 2009). Examples cited by the author include the online forum named PeaceNet for discussing peace related issues and which had participants from over 70 countries; the computer mediated communication (CMC) during the 1992 US presidential election campaigns that allowed voters the chance to engage in critical discussions and the site soc.culture.India which fostered political discourse among Indians spread all over the world. The paper says that online discussion is marked by its unruly character, which is why, continuing with the arguments so far given, it has more potential for serving democracy. This is in line with the observations of Hacker and van Dijk for whom public sphere should allow space for conflict that settle for accord (Dijk, 2000). The internet also reduces the risks of compromise during virtual conversation because identities are “fluid”. When it comes to the question of civility in online discourse, most scholarly attention is generally devoted to what is called “flaming”. Opinions of scholars seem to be divided on the impact of flaming on the democratic potential of internet mediated communication. While some have found that cohesiveness of online communities are threatened and participants may be intimated enough not to join conversation because of flaming, others opine that while aggressiveness may be a feature of online discourse, it still values democracy on the whole – by showing respect for free speech and allowing a space for diverse views to be expressed.

Political Humour

Political humor has been a subject of critical scrutiny by scholars for a while now. While some works have studied the historical evolution and application of political humor, others throw light on instances where political humor has been resorted to for challenging authoritarian governments or for giving expression to various contentious subjectivities.

It has been pointed out that making fun of politicians is hardly a new thing, nor has it been considered a bad thing to do historically (Rose, 2001). Rose says this practice of mocking politicians dates back to the inventors of modern democratic politics, the British, making fun of the practitioners. Amber Day discusses “the satiric documentary, the parodic news show, and ironic, media-savvy activism” in America as examples of public discourse that counter the dominant mainstream “serious”, “rational” and “straight” news and current affairs programs (Day, 2011).

Aswin Punathambekar contends that the use of satire in “digital India” is not peripheral to Indian politics; rather he would like to place the newly discovered popular mode of engagement “at the very heart of our political culture” (Punathambekar, 2015). He observes that with the introduction of digital tools and platforms like Youtube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, there has been a profound transformation in the way media content is generated and consumed, which has a cascading effect also on the everyday political engagement. The author also emphasizes on the predominantly middle class background of such content creators, curators and distributors of the new age. The resulting communication inevitably reflects the “anxieties and aspirations” of this middle class. The point that Punathambekar (2015) keeps stressing on is that the convergence of politics and entertainment, which has happened at a time of “Oprahfication, Tabloidization, McDonaldization”, must be analyzed by focusing on emergent trends of media culture, including intertextuality. This middle class activism must therefore not be seen only through the dominant lens of looking at middle class activism – which sees it as “corporate-minded” and hence having certain predefined limitations. It is the transformation of “spatial and temporal ties” between everyday life and politics that needs to be grasped fully.

Mohamed El Marzouki proposes that the emergence of the internet as an alternative cultural platform allows for more participatory communication including counter-hegemonic discourses (Marzouki, 2015). He delves specifically into satirical and political videos on Youtube made by citizens as part of “participatory cultural production in the context of post-protest Morocco”. Marzouki contends that together with the advent of the internet, it was the Arab Spring and the examples it set of popular discontent, including through the internet that acted as a watershed in the evolution of the Moroccan cultural production space. The article refers to two theoretical approaches towards political satire. The first one says that political satire becomes a vehicle for counter publics to be formed, for dissenting voices to be expressed. The other one suggests that it is during times of political turmoil and distress, when the representative institutions lose legitimacy, that people tend to take recourse to satire as a means of venting their disapproval of the status quo.

Social Media Ethics from User Perspective: A case Study:

It is the nature of usage of media that makes it radical. Even a mainstream film can be used to discuss politics in a progressive manner. The use of social media for social protests has been studied extensively. When it comes to characterizing social media usage for mass protests, there is a tendency to either valorize or demonize. However, research has shown that complex discursive practices emerge even in the case of so-called progressive movements.

Hokkolorob was a movement that started in early September of 2014 against the inaction of the VC of Jadavpur University, Kolkata after allegations of sexual harassment of a female student by male students of the university inside the campus premises. The student protesters had claimed that the VC had not followed due procedures to initiate investigation into the incident. The protesters claimed that even the internal complaints committee for gender harassment had been extremely insensitive towards the victim. The movement reached its heights and the hashtag-cum-slogan Hokkolorob became its signifier after a big “maharally” on 20th September in the heart of Kolkata, in which the main demand raised was the removal of the then VC of Jadavpur University. This outpour of anger was possibly triggered by visual imagery of students and activists being beaten up by police inside the campus on the night of 16th September. During a study on active participants of this movement, it was found that activists had different and often conflicting perceptions of what constitutes the ethical in social media. In this study, three Facebook pages, run by participants of the movement, were studied. They were titled Hokkolorob, Students against Campus Violence and Hokkolorob (in Bengali). Much of the humor used during the movement was inspired or informed by popular culture. We know how during the last days of the Durga Puja festival, a commonly used phrase is “asche bochor abar hobe”, a way in which people express their desire for the season of festivity to return the next year (also coincides with mythology that Goddess Durga returns every year after going back to her in-law’s). The protesters seamlessly moved between this mythology-inspired festive slogan and a political slogan: “VC tumi khoma pabena/Asche bocchor aar hobena” (VC you won’t be forgiven/You will not be around next year).

The flow between the online and offline universe of protests was reinforced by posting pictures of graffiti or other art work done inside the campus on the pages and profiles. For instance, a picture of a trash can inviting the VC to go inside it (implying that is his rightful place) is such an example of not just political humor but also the attempt to connect the “real” and the “virtual”. The Bangla Hokkolorob page had a graphic picture showing the VC on the shoulder of a cop with accompanying poem taunting the VC. The post had 330 likes. In this context, it may be remembered that anger at the VC for calling in the police had fueled the protests significantly. Viewed in that light, the fond and affectionate “bonding” depicted between the VC and the police must be seen as a reflection of that anger among the Kolorobis against the VC for disturbing the sanctity of the university space by calling in police forces who do not belong there. This latter point has also been repeatedly brought up through Facebook posts like this one:

“Chatro mere rashtro prem/VC ke janai shame shame” (Cozying up to the state by beating up students, shame on this VC)

As has been pointed out earlier, there was a constant attempt by the pages on Hokkolorob to counter certain MSM reports. For instance, some MSM reports had claimed that the students who were protesting outside VC’s office were carrying weapons. The Bangla Hokkolorob page, for instance, uploaded a picture that mocked this claim, by showing a few musical instruments and captioning it with the following: “the dangerous weapons carried by the JU students”. Other variants of the same message that basically wanted to convey that all that the students had with them were musical instruments and no weapons as was being claimed by sections of the media or the administration. Under one of these pictures, one student protester commented:

“police pele jhapte dhore/gaan sonabo bisri sure” (If the police confronts us, we will simply hug and sing songs in a coarse voice to them)

It is possible to identify a certain political stance behind this sarcastic remark. Its aim is to not only reinforce the point that the Kolorobis don’t resort to violence during their protests, but also to show that they are not afraid of the violent force that the police represents. By suggesting they will sing coarsely, it also shows that they are keen to express their strong disaffection towards the police but without compromising their resolve of sticking to non-violent means of protest. Also noticeable is the use of the phrase “jhapte dhore” (which translates into hug tightly). It appears from the phrase that they wanted to irritate, tease and ridicule the police. The symbolic and real might of the police, the physical and psychological threat they are meant to represent, from the point of view of protesters who have had a bitter experience with the police, is being challenged and conceptually nullified in a comic manner, by means of irreverence and audacity. Several Facebook posts were made during the months of September and October that appealed to everyone supporting the movement to maintain this peaceful approach of protest.

There are a few aspects emergent from this widely liked and shared picture that gave a call for the “mahamichil” (or mega rally) on 20th September, 2014. It is as if the “mega rally” will sing a song (“tomai gaan shonabo”) to the police. Two obvious things are evident from this picture – that those who were giving a call for the rally were expecting a big turnout and secondly, that they were also expecting resistance in some form from the police, which is clear from the visual representation of the state’s forces in its riot gear. Once again, as pointed out earlier, the claim of the state as the legitimate authority to use coercive force is being challenged, not through counter violence, but through songs, which are portrayed not as merely a cultural tool of mobilizing or garnering support but as a weapon. To reiterate a point already made, this picture bolsters the image that even though the Hokkolorobis are adopting non-violent means, they are confident of overpowering the state forces. This apparently light hearted tongue-in-cheek image carries a combative political undercurrent. The police are meant to be respected and feared; however, by constructing this visual imagery of singing songs to the police, a mockery is being made of the established order.

Bangla Hokkolorob shared a news link about the JU VC’s alleged plagiarism. This apparently gave more ammunition to the protesters against the VC. They called him “tuklibaaj”, a Bengali word meaning “cheat”. There were also graphic pictures that made fun of the VC over the plagiarism accusation. It is worthwhile noting the attempt at subversion, that of challenging the status quo through use of such language like “tuklibaaj”. The expected “VC-student” relationship is a hierarchical one, where the VC is supposed to be respected by the students. Here, through use of ridicule, that hierarchical status quo is being questioned as students make no efforts to remain respectful towards their VC. It could either mean that they had stopped considering him the VC, so it may be more context-specific than systemic, but it is also possible that they had challenged the very structural hierarchy itself, even though it is difficult to establish.

Yet another example of the VC being the target of political humor was a picture post containing the following message:

“VC tumi boddo sick, hudhud eshe bhashie nik” (VC you are very sick, let the Hoopoe bird flush you away)

Variants of such ad hominem attacks at the VC were quite widespread in several Facebook posts of Kolorobis. In fact, one of them became so popular that it became a slogan during the rallies, as verified from a video shared on the social networking site:

“VC tumi dushtu lok/Tomar mathai ukun hok” (VC you are a very naughty person, May you get lice in your hair)

Neither of these personally directed remarks seems to contain any definite political content. However, as pointed out earlier, they were part of the ambiance, the dynamics that the movement had generated and whose focal point had become the VC. Therefore, it can be hypothesized, that anything out of the box or extraordinary automatically caught on and became viral as long as it attacked the VC in some way. Kavita Panjabi had talked a great deal about the “new language of protest” (Panjabi, 2015).

There was often quite a lot of profanity in the Facebook posts by Kolorobis, especially directed at the VC. However, some were also directed at political persons who were most relevant to the movement. For instance, the then education minister of the state was referred to as “ashikha mantri” (shikha means education and ashikha, uneducated; here the implication is that the minister is promoting bad education because of him maligning the movement by saying that the “movement was getting support from abroad because of BJP’s conspiracy”). Other words used to describe the minister included “insane”. As Rose (2001), Papacharissi (2004) and Amber Day (2011) have pointed out; political humor often breaks the boundaries of civility and it is this lack of civility which itself becomes a political tool to fight power inequalities.

Some of the comments had a humorous tone with a political content. For instance, one comment, in order to make fun of the ruling party, showed the image of a political leader of the ruling party often associated with criminal activity, used as a meme, in which the text was:

“Chup kore ja, nahole boma marbo”. (Keep quiet or else I will bomb you) The violence that was associated with the powers that be has been mocked here. But it has to be contextualized even further, since it came at a juncture when the government was facing flak for its intolerance towards any sort of criticism. In fact, this critique was succinctly expressed through the use of the chief minister’s face with the Bengali word “chup” (shut up) to refer to the culture of silencing dissent. Violence and suppression of dissidence have been closely associated in the example given above, thereby making a case for deliberative democracy.

Yet another tongue-in-cheek FB post that went viral was: “Kaape Kaape/JU r VC Kaape” (JU VC shakes in fear).

Inspired by a popular song, this remark was part of the overall intention of the relentless online campaign against the VC. There is a clear continuity in the form of personal attacks on the VC, who had no “backbone” according to the protestors. This post then needs to be understood in the light that an image of the VC was being constructed as not only a vile person (a plagiarist, anti-student, political puppet of the ruling party etc.) but also one “without backbone” and who is basically a coward who “shakes in fear” of the students. To bolster this image, dark humor therefore appeared like a favored approach among the Kolorobis.

During the initial days of the movement, one of the first videos to go viral was of some of the protesters singing a song near Aurobindo Bhavan, the main administrative building of JU which served as the epicenter of “occupation”. One of the sentences of the song’s lyrics went thus:
“VC hishi kore haat dhoe na” (VC does not wash his hands after urinating).

Once more, it is quite evident that scatological humor, which as Rose has described in his essay formed the bedrock of political humor historically, was being used to denigrate the VC’s personhood. This tone was set at a very early stage of the movement itself and should be also seen in the larger context of JU’s student politics, which has predominantly seen the student body as one mass which is in an antagonistic relation with the administration. This dichotomy, whether real or imagined, is sharpened through such technologies of insult as a political tool. Evidently, such insult does not even need to be rooted in political ideology, which we have seen earlier as well. On the other hand, it is quite clear that this ad hominem attack fueled the process of building an image of the VC as a “dirty” person, someone not worthy of respect. Besides, the point of irreverence made earlier can be reiterated. Parents often rebuke their children if the latter don’t wash their hands properly or otherwise ignore concerns of hygiene. There is a hierarchical relationship at work here, where the parents consider themselves to be more knowledgeable because of age, experience and so on. Interestingly, the VC is being “rebuked”, albeit through humor, by students who are younger. This may be seen as a deliberate act of irreverence (denial or rejection of statutory authority) and role reversal. Even though the VC is supposed to be the guardian of the students, through this and other similar interventions that challenge authority of the VC, a reversal of positions in the hierarchical relationship is being attempted (and perhaps even effected).

A particular link titled “How To Protest Like A Bhadralok or The Ruling Party’s Guide To Student Protests” was shared on one of the pages. This was by the same collective referred to above. The article had been viewed 1030 times at the time of writing thisthesis. Basically the article targeted the kind of responses that was coming from representatives of the incumbent government regarding Hokkolorob. “Don’t be vocal about institutional oppression”, “Don’t be rude to the target of your protest”, “Don’t step outside gender roles” are some of the sermons that the article mocked. They even used the swastika symbol beside each diktat, apparently linking it with the concept of fascism. The ruling party’s stress on discipline and upholding gender roles was severely attacked. For instance, one of the sermons ridiculed read “Protests are not the right place for everyone. For example, if you’re a girl GO HOME.” The article also made a reference to the picture of a protester in underwear mentioned earlier, saying

“If you’re a performance artist, please remember that we are bigoted and do not understand performance art (or any art, for that matter) very well, so we will probably just snap a picture of you looking ridiculous and use it for shock value among the masses. After all, my morals are waaaay better than *your* morals.”

Clearly, this was a case of counter publics being created, by situating their discourse within the larger public debate of morality and in direct opposition to the standards set by the powers that be. There was also the attempt to establish claim over public space, by sarcastically referring to the government’s argument that students cannot occupy “whatever space they want”. Besides, with “When my police hit you, you take it like a good student” the article tries to push the message that the government was being very authoritarian in its approach.

Another example of an attempt to bend the established gender norms can be located in the #AmioX[1] uproar. An artist's collective wrote a piece on a protest that took place after ABP scandalized a movement that was going on in Presidency (once again calling for the VC’s resignation) by referring to (in their language) a “vulgar” and “obscene” act of a male protester wearing a brassiere. The posts of Facebook tried to negate this negative narrative by providing the missing context. The protester in question had actually carried out a performance a little while earlier in a demonstration/rally against the appointment of Gajendra Chauhan as FTII chief, which involved a symbolic disrobing (he had his whole body taped and had an underwear underneath). At the end of the FTII related protest, he had joined the agitation in Presidency in the same outfit. A discourse emerged surrounding this issue among different sections of the society after media portrayed the act of wearing a bra by a male protester as "indecent".

There were prominent gender dimensions to this discourse – for instance, the *Students against Campus Violence* page said “Gender may be 'performative', but the fallout which comes from overstepping gender roles is very real. We condemn this cowardly act by the State. Share to spread the news” followed by the hashtag. Then there were others whose main concern was that the media was trying to divert attention away from the “real issue”, i.e. the ongoing agitation in Presidency and its legitimacy. An article in the Journal of Telecommunication and Broadcasting Law voiced similar concerns: “With the bevy of protests against educational institutions that have occurred in recent times, the downside has been that modes of protest have overshadowed the cause." One of the friends of X pointed out in a Facebook post that by wearing a woman's lingerie X was “obfuscating the conventional paradigms of morality and obscenity” by experimenting with nudity in performative art.

There was, however, a section of the student activists who did not want to get into the gender dimensions of the debate but rather kept bashing the media for creating diversion. Incidentally, some intellectual-activists had also voiced their reservations about this mode of protest, terming it as unnecessary at best. This seemed to be a strategic move to not lose the support of those who were supportive of the core movement but did not condone the act of a male protester wearing a bra (or “kissing for love”). Clearly, the discourse was divided sharply along political and moral lines. While it is difficult to ascertain what the “real” ideology of any of the contending political tendencies is with regard to say, bending of gender roles (in this case, through the act of “cross dressing”), it appears that the numerically stronger group was afraid to lose the mainstream support base and hence stuck to a “moderate” approach with regard to gender, while those groups that were more marginalized in terms of voice in the movement as well as in terms of support base, chose to be more “radical” in their rhetoric. Here therefore we see a complex kaleidoscope of gender positionalities and contested understandings of the gendered body. There is a clash between these divergent streams in their attempt to become the dominant voice of the movement.

Interestingly though, whenever the MSM carried out what was perceived by the Kolorobis as positive representation of the movement, there was no reluctance in sharing those links on the page. For instance, the link to a report which spoke of the rising popularity of a Facebook page on Hokkolorob was shared. It is clear then that the critique of the MSM was not necessarily based on any rigid principle – it was just a circumstancial rejection, given the negative reporting by MSM early on. Seen in another way, the alternative reporting through social media may have been part of the reason why the MSM shifted their stance towards the movement (although political and economic imperatives would have played a role).

Conclusion:

From the case study discussed above, it is clear that users of social media create new ethical standards in an ever changing and dynamic social milieu. Moreover, dimensions of an alternative media emerge in the discursive construction of social media as a viable anti-thesis of the mainstream media or MSM. As discussed earlier, it is the nature of the usage that makes it so. Posts containing profanity challenge the mainstream order of discourse and hence make a corporate owned platform like Facebook a makeshift alternative media. Patriarchy and bureaucratic power have been challenged in course of such user activity. In other words, what may otherwise be considered as unethical or profane, have become tools of resistance and modes of political transgression.

Notes:

1. X stands for the name of a protestor.

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