Online Communities as a Form of Public Sphere:

Assessing the Role of Women in Online Communities

Abstract

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and YouTube have swiftly transformed the way people enter into discussions, by allowing for plurality of thoughts and voices. It has also given a space to women unlike any other conventional media. Online communities, campaigns and hashtags have given women around the world a platform, where they raise their issues and actively participate in discourse around the same. They enable women in building communities transcending spatial and geographical bounds. This change in media landscape has allowed for an alternate public sphere where participation is open for all. Use of social media by women has helped mobilise attention and talk around the communities formed by them, addressing their causes and take them to a wider public base. This paper attempts to study how certain women have used the social media platforms to build communities and direct attention towards some of these causes and galvanize action online as well as offline.

Keywords: *online communities, public sphere, alternate public sphere, women, social media, hashtags*

Introduction

Social media has been around for more than two decades now, with people spending most of their time surfing through the various websites, pages and communities formed online. These communities offer an opportunity to people to come together and share common goals and interests. In doing so, they give them a sense of belonging (in a virtual space). The members of these communities may or may not be very well acquainted but have no inhibitions in sharing their thoughts and opinions with each other. Social media tools and platforms offer a space for discourse on various topics such as politics, sports, entertainment, etc. Traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio did offer topics for discourse but not the space. Now, the successor of these traditional media, the new media, can be seen extending the role of media, i.e., getting people together to discuss things, albeit without space and time constraints through the platform of social media.

It is also believed that social media cater to and engage a broader set of population and therefore are also representative of those voices which often go unheard offline. Social media are also seen as being more gender-neutral as a platform as they allow for an alternate space for women of various colours and caste to come together and voice their opinion which was hitherto restricted to a limited space.

Social media as public sphere

The concept of public sphere, as given by Jurgen Habermas in *Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article* (1964), is one in which private citizens engage in discussions at public places. While these discussions are free from any coercive constraints, they generally are meant to share opinions and decide matters of common good. 'Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion, that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to

publish their opinions- about matters of general interest'(Habermas 1964). He further argues that such type of communications require certain medium to be transmitted and thereby influence those who receive it. Newspapers, magazines, television and radio are considered to be such mediums, as being the facilitator of public sphere. Leaving media aside, the actual confines of the public sphere have been considered to be salons, coffee houses and other such places of public gathering where the topics for discussions came from these traditional media outlets itself. If we were to draw comparisons here, the concept of virtual communities seems very similar to the concept of public sphere. Both are communities of purpose and involve human interaction to form a discourse on topics the members themselves consider important. The difference is in the medium, one is real the other is virtual. Does that account for any further changes? Can the medium itself decide the course of discussion? Does the medium also ensure greater participation or is it still restricted? These are some of the questions that this paper attempts to answer.

Internet does not offer any guarantee for freedom of online expression to all, it is more of an illusion than a fact that it acts as a public sphere (Pavlik 1994; Williams and Pavlik 1994; Williams 1994). It does not stand in stark contrast to the bourgeois public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth century as the technology is exclusive and elitist (Papacharissi 2002). Tracing the genesis of public sphere in Habermas' work titled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a category of Burgeois Society* (1962), one can note that the concept emerged in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe as a result of growing capitalism and also as a result of dissent from the aristocratic rule. It was free from authoritative constraints in the sense that private people gathered to discuss issues of public importance and therefore form public opinion. However, a very prominent thing to note in Habermas' model of public sphere is that only men gathered and formed opinion on

political and civil issues. Women were nowhere in the picture. Internet seems to offer a similar platform. It offers space for public discourse in terms of virtual communities, chat groups, social media pages, etc. However, it does allow multiple voices to come together unlike in the traditional public sphere.   But, will it be fair to say that Internet is a level playing field for men and women, without leaving out either of them? 'If the Internet is, or were to become, a public sphere in Habermas' model, it would have to offer a public space or arena for people to debate issues in order to influence civil society and the state; moreover, the public discourse formed in response to such debate will have been "legitimized" by the scrutiny and challenge of other citizens and stake holders in the debate' (Ward 1997). It is yet to be seen if women are equal stakeholders here.

Online communities and participation

Online community can be understood as a voluntary group of users who actively partake in computer mediated interaction. The coming of new media technology and Web 2.0 specifically, has greatly altered the way we communicate. User generated content which was enabled by web 2.0 has allowed for greater participation from general public. The web content changed from its static form to a more dynamic one. It promotes exchanging of ideas and opinions which are not necessarily only political in nature. Interaction between humans of various backgrounds has been facilitated to a new level. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube have made it possible for people to create content by themselves, engage in conversations anonymously, give their opinions on various issues and share interests with each other. The most common communities are communities of purpose because they are formed for a purpose and constantly work on fulfilling them. These communities have been flourishing on web spaces where virtual interactions happen frequently. Unicef.org (Storchi 2015) defines online communities as:

- Peer-to-peer collaborative networks.

- Engaged in asking and answering questions, exchanging knowledge, developing expertise, and solving problems.

- Driven by willing participation of members.

- Focused on learning and creating 'actionable knowledge' for achievement of development objectives.

- Cooperative across geographical locations.

- Collaborative in their use of tools and technologies.

- Both formal and informal, and members can interact online or in person

Furthermore, researches conducted on online community and participation reveal why individuals participate in communities online. There are various reasons why people are attracted to online communities some of which highlight the professional gains an individual could make being a part of them, such as receiving advice from experts (Lampel and Bhalla 2007), a peek into the beliefs and opinions of others (Herring 1996), an enhancement in their reputation (Lakhani and von Hippel 2003), a better professional status (Hall and Graham 2004, Lerner and Tirole 2002) and network building (Christensen and Raynor 2003). Other set of reasons involve a sense of personal growth which people experience by being a part of such communities in terms of developing a positive self-image (Constant et al. 1994), enhanced confidence and belief in one's own knowledge (Wasko and Faraj 2000).

For some people, these online communities bring a sense of camaraderie by allowing them to help build a community (e.g. Blanchard and Markus 2004). When people contribute to collective goals it gives them a sense of empathy as well (Preece 1999; Preece and Ghozati 1998).These factors act as motivations

for people to willingly be a part of online communities(Wasko and Faraj 2000).

Gender representation in online communities

A paper titled *Gender Issues in Online communities* (J. King 2000) offers the following information on gender issues prevalent in online communities:

> The information available on gender issues in online communications can be divided into two major theories. The first theory maintains that online communication is more equal, that women (and possibly other marginalized groups) are able to participate and complete thoughts, in effect 'softening social barriers' (Shapiro 1999). One man, responding to a survey on gender issues, wrote, 'Women get heard more because they can finish a thought without being interrupted. In addition, men tend to deal with the content of what women say rather than dismissing it because it comes from a woman' (We 1993). The second theory is that online interaction is merely a reflection of real world conversation where men dominate. Men introduce more new topics, ignore topics introduced by women, and provide most of the traffic in a mixed-gender environment (Herring 1993 and Herring 1994). Herring cites research that 'men (and to a lesser degree, women) perceive women as talking more than men at a time when women actually talk only 30% of the time' (Herring 1993).

Going by the first theory, it's a pleasant situation for women much different to the Habermas' concept of public sphere where women had no voice or were not even considered a part of the public sphere. Here, not only do women get to decide their

issues but they also get to talk about them. However, the second theory cannot be negated either. Online traffic refers to the amount of data sent and received by the visitors of a website, or in this case, online communities. Men introducing new topics and leading the discussions could get the attention diverted to their issues and their interests which is not very different from what has been practiced by traditional media so far.

Women at the helm of community building

The role and representation of women on social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, especially in communities formed here is liberating to an extent. Social media has helped women gather a community of people who help them further their cause. Few social media personalities, women in particular, are being studied here to understand how social media has facilitated the same.The study takes into consideration Lilly Singh, Emma Watson and Zoe Elizabeth Sugg and their use of social media platforms for community building and community engagement.

Lilly Singh, a Canadian YouTuber of Indian descent,creates content for her channel named 'IisuperwomanII'. She has an average of 14 million subscribers on YouTube and 7.9 million Instagram followers and the number is only likely to increase overtime. She makes comedy videos, sketches, rants and motivational talks. She has another channel on YouTube called 'Superwoman vlogs' with an average of 2.6 million followers on which she only uploads daily vlogs, i.e, a snippet of her daily life. She started her main channel in October 2010 and logging channel in December 2011. She has also authored a book called *How to be a Bawse-A Guide to Conquering Life* (Singh 2017). Though she gained popularity through her comedy videos, she uses her stardom to talk about girl power and promotes the idea of 'girl love' through her posts on Instagram. In one of her interviews with Flare magazine, when the interviewer Ashani

Jodha asks her why she thinks her voice should be heard against racism, Singh replied, 'Everyone's voice should be heard when it comes to racial barriers. I started YouTube because I didn't see anyone else like me doing it. I was the first South Asian female to do comedy videos on YouTube. But at the same time, all races face their barriers and I've learned through YouTube, if it's not race, it will be sexism, if it's not sexism, it will be homophobia. It will always be something and all voices should be heard.' In one of her attempts to further the cause of women upliftment and use the power of her social media presence, she introduced the #GirlLove challenge in 2016. Through this challenge other women were encouraged to make a Tweet, Facebook status or Instagram post to compliment another woman using the #GirlLove. All the revenue raised from the video was to be donated to the Malala Fund, which again supports girl education throughout the world. The idea was to let women support other women and not do to each other what patriarchy has been doing to them for ages. Her realization of how impairing trolls, mean comments and judgemental attitudes can be online lead her to become an advocate of self-awareness and use social media as a tool for spreading the message to her followers.

Emma Watson does not owe her immense popularity to social media but it has definitely given her a platform to become more vociferous about women development issues. Take for instance her #HeForShe campaign which she raised as a UN Women goodwill ambassador. In her speech at a special event for the HeForShe campaign at United Nation's Headquarters , New York, on 20 September 2014, she stated, 'This is the first campaign of its kind at the UN: we want to try and galvanize as many men and boys as possible to be advocates for gender equality. And we don't just want to talk about it, but make sure it is tangible.' The campaign calls out to men to be an equal partner in the fight for gender equality. It lays the belief that gender equality is not an isolated issue against men. It requires

participation from men in order to achieve gender equality in its true sense and to not let it be a women-only issue.

The campaign was not meant exclusively for social media or any community per se but social media accelerated its reach and impact. Emma Watson's aforementioned speech went viral in no time and helped garner immense support in favour of the campaign. Ogilvy PR, the one behind the media effort of the campaign believes the campaign owes its success to social media. 'Social media really drove it,' said Jen Risi, MD of Ogilvy Media Influence and North American head of media relations for the firm (in an article in Adweek digital, 25 September 2014). Not to forget, it took a woman (Watson) and her magnanimous social media following to draw attention to the cause (Watson has 28.6 million followers on Twitter alone). The campaign was originally launched in March 2014 but had failed to create the desired impact until Watson stepped in. Her speech at the event has 2.6 million views on YouTube (and counting). It also garnered extensive media coverage. Prior to her speech the campaign tweets count was in tens of thousands, but later the tweet count reached 1.1 million from 7,50,000 different users.

Zoe Elizabeth Sugg, best known by her YouTube name 'Zoella', is an English fashion and beauty vlogger, YouTuber and author. She was ranked number one in a list of most influential influencers based on their social reach and average engagement across social platforms, along with their cultural, political and social influence by Fizziology, a social media research website in association with Heat magazine.She has a following of 12 million subscribers on her main YouTube channel (and counting), 'Zoella', on which she first posted in 2009. She came up with another YouTube channel which she named 'MoreZoella', in November 2012, and has a following of 4.5 million subscribers there. Her Instagram following too is quite huge, with 10.6 million people following her. She also receives a following of 13.1 million on Twitter. Her debut novel, *Girl*

Online (Sugg November 2014), was also very well received by her audience and it broke the record for highest first week sales of a first time novelist, selling more than 78,000 copies in the first week of its release.

Sugg has used these platforms to her advantage and created a brand out of her identity. She has been able to engage with such a large audience base and keep them constantly connected to her content. Her followers (mostly girls) are both emotionally and financially invested in her brand and lifestyle. It is clear that she is making money out of it but she does use her reach to influence action around other causes as well. Back in 2012, Sugg posted a video on her YouTube channel (Zoella) where she opened up about her anxiety and depression issues and has been speaking about it ever since on various occasions. According to a writer, Lane Allen, on www.medium.com, a platform for bloggers and writers,

> In Sugg's most recent social media campaign she asked her followers who were sending her birthday wishes, to also send money to Mind Charity as her birthday wish. Mind Charity is a UK based charity focused on helping people with mental health issues. Sugg expressed her personal story, in a recent vlog posted on her birthday, saying how the charity helped her in her youth to understand her anxiety issues. This is a classic example of Zoella's genuineness on social media, not only does she pull in her viewers through the use of a personal story that many struggle to talk about, but she calls for action. Zoe has a great ability to do this with her viewers, without doing things like giveaways, which often lead to temporary followers who are greedy for a MacBook. Her way of getting her followers invested in her story, her lifestyle and her content

> gives her the ability to have great influence over them. It's why her beauty and life style lines are so successful, along with her trilogy of novels.

As can be seen from the above examples, these social media personalities began by engaging people with their content, thereby building a community person by person, wherein each person joined willingly out of their own choice and interest. That's a basic premise for these online communities which are communities of interest and at times communities of purpose. The availability of social media platforms and the use of hashtags to make one's content more easily visible has contributed to the rise of women on the web. Hashtags are denoted by the sign '#' to attribute a classification to that word. They have multiple uses on social media, such as, finding related content/events, bringing like-minded people together, organising and curating topics and also identifying movements that are trending.As was evident in the #HeForShe campaign, the hashtag helped the campaign reach to a wider audience and build a community around it, acommunity of people who were willing to talk on the topic. Emma Watson's popularity can be held responsible for garnering talk around the topic, and the hashtag emerging from her social media account was bound to create a stir. In Lilly Singh's case, she began her YouTube journey by building a community and as she gained more and more subscribers over the years (growing a stronger community), she started making use of the platform to talk about various issue, #GirlLove being one of them. The same stands true for Zoe Sugg as well. Although her channel is a fashion and lifestyle one and she has created a brand out of it which she uses to create and sell a variety of products, she also does use the platform to raise issues on mental health and generate talk on the same.

Apart from these three examples, there are various other women on the web who use the social media platform toraise

issues and also to participate in discourse. This brings us to a point raised earlier in this paper that online communities are merely a reflection of offline spaces where men dominate the talk, give topics for discussion and also carry those discussions forward. While men do enjoy a similar social presence online and there are various channels lead by as well as dedicated to men, but the same is true for women. In fact, social media is more representative of the broader population as compared to traditional media. In the same sense, social media has enabled a broader public sphere. In a research conducted by Pew Research Centre earlier in 2018, regarding percentage of U.S. adults who use social media platform more, it was found that women are leading the graph. 74% women use Facebook more as against 62% men, 39% women use Instagram more as against 30% men, both the gender groups use LinkedIn equally with 25% each, and 24% women use Twitter more than 23% men. However, it was stated in the survey that the use of YouTube is made more by men- 75% as compared to women-72% but the difference is not so stark. Therefore, it can be said that while women are involved in community building online, they are also involved in community engagement.

Conclusion

The study illustrates that social media is more inclusive of the two genders as against being heavily dominated by men. The topics for discussion offered in the traditional public sphere were different from the ones offered in social media as a public sphere. It is safe to say that social media has made a transition from traditional public sphere whereas the public sphere in Habermas' model called for individuals (men) to come together and discuss issues of societal relevance as deemed important by the media and through that discussion influence political action, the discourse online involves various topics which are not necessarily given by any media outlet. In fact, people are free to create a space for raising issues that they deem important and

which have a lesser chance to be taken up by traditional media.A case in point is, Michelle Obama making use of Instagram (in support of When We All Vote campaign) to reach out to 'women of colour', to persuade them to vote, through a post which read, 'women of colour know how to get things done for our families, our communities, and our country. When we use our voices, people listen. When we lead, people follow. And when we do it together, there's no telling what we can accomplish' (Michelle Obama, Instagram post, 11 September 2018).

On assessing the participation of women in such communities it was found that not only do women offer topics to be discussed but lead the discussion as well. The fact that some social media platforms are used more by women than men can also be taken to say that there are more women in online communities than men, especially in the ones built by women (#GirlLove being an example). Emphasis again is on the point that social media are more representative of women than any other traditional media.

Social media tools have allowed for the creation of an alternate public sphere which is more inclusive and gender-neutral. Women have used this concept to challenge misogyny and enter into social and political debates. Even though women do not figure in offline social spaces a lot, their contribution to social discourse online cannot be overlooked. As communities tend to bring like-minded people together, women who share similar perspectives and opinions on a particular matter tend to actively come together to engage in discussions and debates, which then, leads to a greater acknowledgement of the persisting issues, thereby generating talks on possible solutions. Creating awareness is one step towards it. Social media then, offer an alternate public sphere in the form of online communities, as an addition to and extension of offline discourse and help support the cause of women emancipation.

However, online communities have much more to offer as an equalizing platform. Their full potential hasn't been reached yet because online action does not always translate into offline action. Technology is a part of a culture and as such is bound to be influenced by that culture. Therefore, it is likely to be subjected to patriarchal and stereotypical gender representations as is present in offline spaces. What is then required is active and informed participation of women in these communities to reach the desired goal.

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