Research Article/ Social Media

The Role of Social Media in Redefining Public Discourse in Nepal: A Political Perspective

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the evolving landscape of the public sphere in the 21st century. Within the realms of media and communication studies, as well as public discourse. The term 'social media' has become ubiquitous, encompassing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Wordpress, Blogspot, Weibo, Pinterest, Foursquare, and Tumblr. The purpose of this paper is to understand how the concept of the public sphere contributes to a critical understanding of present society, advocating for an interpretation rooted in day to day activities of Nepalese people. For this information posted by 130 people from Facebook, and twitter have been collected from 31 July 5 September 2024 covering the common people, students, journalists, politicians and women. The perspective of Habermas is in favor of a political-economic foundation. The argument posits that a nuanced comprehension of Habermas' original concept necessitates an immanent critical approach that scrutinizes the intersections of culture, media, and political economics, while also acknowledging power relations. The study establishes a theoretical framework for public service media, serving as the groundwork for identifying three areas of contention between the contemporary social media landscape and the realms of the state, the economy, and civil society. In conclusion, the article asserts that overcoming the situation at present requires a political stance to strengthen the people's voices. It advocates for a transformation of social media and the internet into commons-based and public service media, thereby transcending existing limitations.

Keywords: E-participation, habermas, public sphere, social media, technology

Introduction

At present, people are a part of the social media phenomena because of its super-expansionist network potential. Media as the part of the public sphere is significant for information and communication which ensures the access about events

happening. Jürgen Habermas (1991) stresses that if something is public it is "open to all" (p. 1). The public sphere can become a part of "critical public debate" (p. 52). People believed that there would not be another revolution that had the same influence on global society as the internet revolution, but social media propelled growth into a new era. For considerations of the public sphere in modern age, Habermas' influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991) serves its basic concept and foundation. Habermas' argument situates it in the context of current discussions about the media and public sphere. People began to use social media and build a new sort of network society from all over the world and from all socio-economic classes. Despite social media's influence on our daily lives, there is still much confusion among us regarding the appropriate role of social media in the larger scheme of things. It must be placed within a contextual framework that encompasses ideas like the mass media and public sphere. Regarding the notion of the public sphere, it is important to emphasize that it has long been central to both political discourse and communication studies. The literature of Habermas provides a comprehensive definition of the public sphere, which is described as a social space where public opinion may be created (Habermas *et al*., 1964). It is also defined as a section of daily life where people congregate and talk about issues that arise. A conversation about the modern social media's transformational impact might make more sense with this little conceptual map. Has the public sphere and mass media's issues and limitations been resolved by social media? One of the primary inquiries in communication studies may be this one.

Discussions on the internet, social media, and public sphere frequently highlight the revolutionary potential of emerging technology. Yochai Benkler emphasizes the rise of a networked public sphere state that people can reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation (2006) because it is easy to communicate effectively into the public sphere. Every person has the ability to modify their connection to the public domain through using the modern communication network. They are no longer required to be customers or obedient bystanders. They might become main subjects and creators. The internet democratizes in this way (Benkler 2006, p. 272). According to Zizi Papacharissi citizen-consumers are participating in and expressing "dissent with a public agenda [...] by expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group" (2009, p. 244). He further refers to as the virtual sphere 2.0, and Manuel Castells emphasizes the uniqueness of this domain, saying that "building protocols of communication between different communication processes is the first step in the construction of the new public sphere in the network society" (Castells 2009, p. 125). Jean Burgess and Joshua Green state, "YouTube serves as a platform for interactions with cultural diversity and the formation of political listening across belief systems and identities, making it a cultural public sphere (2009, p. 77).

To grasp the terms we discuss, it is necessary to define the terms social media, mainstream media, and public sphere. The term "mass media" refers to

a kind of media that may reach a sizable audience (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). It is clear that traditional media, like radio and television, constitute a component of mass media. However, a number of publications, like the New World Encyclopedia, consider the internet and other modern communication technologies to be a component of mass media as well. Conversely, computer-based technologies that support the development and exchange of ideas and information might be characterized as social media (Obar & Steven, 2015). In order to make this report significant, the ideas of common people, students, and women of different fields, journalists and politicians are incorporated. This paper, thus, explores why and how social media play roles to redefine the public opinion in the twenty first century especially in the context of Nepal?

Review of Literature

Currently, individuals are integral participants in the social media phenomenon due to its expansive network potential. Despite earlier beliefs that no revolution would match the global impact of the internet, social media has ushered in a new era of growth. In the contemporary exploration of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas' influential work, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," provides a fundamental concept and foundation. Habermas' ideas are particularly relevant to ongoing discussions about the media and the public sphere. Christian Fuchs (2014) claims that political movements and protests have created public spheres of political communication in self-managed manner, resulting in revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and other countries in 2011. These protests used

the tactic of making space public and political, taking place during a common societal crisis. Public spheres have been formed as resisting publics throughout class society history.

As people worldwide, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, began utilizing social media, a novel network society emerged. Despite its pervasive influence on daily life, confusion persists regarding the appropriate role of social media within the broader context. This confusion necessitates placing social media within a conceptual framework that encompasses mass media and the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere has long been pivotal in both political discourse and communication studies. Habermas' literature offers a comprehensive definition, describing it as a social space where public opinion is formed (Habermas *et al.,* p. 1964). It is also depicted as a segment of daily life where people gather to discuss emerging issues. This conceptual map serves as a foundation for understanding the transformative impact of modern social media on the public sphere and mass media.

A key question in communication studies revolves around whether social media has addressed the issues and limitations of the public sphere and mass media. Discussions often underscore the revolutionary potential of emerging technology. Yochai Benkler highlights the rise of a networked public sphere, allowing individuals to transition from passive readers and listeners to active speakers and participants in conversations (2006, p. 213). Social media enables people to modify their connection to the public domain, transforming them from consumers to active contributors,

thereby democratizing the internet (Benkler 2006, p. 272). Zizi Papacharissi emphasizes the role of citizen-consumers in expressing dissent with a public agenda through various online platforms (2009, p. 244). This evolving virtual sphere 2.0, as described by Papacharissi and the unique communication protocols highlighted by Manuel Castells, exemplify the construction of the new public sphere in the network society (Castells 2009, p. 125).

In pre-modern civilization, Jürgen Habermas (1991) and Hannah Arendt (1958) observed that the private sphere encompassed both family and economic domains. However, with the advent of the capitalist economy and the modern state, these domains, though interconnected, became largely perceived as independent entities. The economy, rooted in commodity production and wage labor, gradually dissociated itself from the family, establishing a distinct sector within contemporary society. The home then became a medium through which the economy and reproductive labor intersected. The transition of housekeeping from the private household to the public sphere altered the meaning of terms and their relevance to individuals' lives, blurring the traditional boundaries between private and political life (Arendt, 1958, p. 38). Habermas (1991) asserts that whatever is in the public domain should be "open to all," serving the purpose of fostering "critical public debate" among society's members (p. 1, 52). For universal access to knowledge, communication, and the public realm, media becomes a necessity. The logic of the public sphere, according to Habermas, should remain unaffected by political and economic power, emphasizing its independence from corporate ownership and official censorship.

The concept of a private public sphere, previously divided between family intimacy and private ownership in the economy, evolved with the emergence of expansive commodity markets. The economy shifted from being confined to individual households to becoming organized on a larger scale. Habermas (1989) views the contemporary economy as a publically relevant private sphere, evolving into political economics. Caporaso and Levine (1992) describe this shift as a transformation into a discipline that scrutinizes the creation, distribution, and consumption of products, along with the ethical considerations of the relationship between the state and the economy. The question arises as to how the public sphere, often associated with civil society, interrelates with other spheres in contemporary society. Habermas (2006) emphasizes the public sphere as an intermediate sphere, mediating between economics, the state, and the realm of family and intimacy. He describes it as a warning system with sensors sensitive throughout society, functioning as a sort of interface between separate yet interconnected spheres in modern civilization. Politics, where collective choices are made, is distinguished from the economic sphere, which involves the creation of use values (Fuchs, 2008). The World Wide Web is viewed as an open and fluid space enabling instantaneous communication, fostering the development of new communities that overcome social strife. From the perspective of Third Way politics, virtual technologies provide community as a service that can be integrated into electronic homes, promoting openness, mutualism, and trust while dismantling walls between identities. The goal is to encourage direct relationships in the in-person community as a reference point for a more open and cooperative society.

Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue that platforms like YouTube serve as cultural public spheres, fostering interactions

across diverse beliefs and identities (2009, p. 77). Raymond Williams (1977) claims against cultural idealism and for cultural materialism, arguing that media, including information media, enable the creation, co-creation, diffusion, and interpretation of symbols, making meaning of the world. Christian Fuchs (2014) states that the capitalist media and companies produce public information to make profit from selling audiences and content. Public media are funded by the state and provide political, educational, and entertainment information. Civil society media are part of the public sphere and are economically related to the state. They often challenge governments and corporations, rejecting for-profit and commercial logic, and are run, owned, and controlled by citizens as common projects. Rishikesh Dahal (2023) quotes that the World Economic Forum from 2006 to 2016, indicates about the decline of traditional media. India experienced a 60% increase in newspaper circulation, compared to the UK's 12% decrease. In 2015-16, circulation reached 612,385,810 copies, while in 2020-21, it reached 386,648,237 copies in all languages. Mass media refers to media that can reach a substantial audience, including traditional forms like radio and television, as well as modern communication technologies like the internet (New World Encyclopedia, 2017). Social media, on the other hand, encompasses computer-based technologies facilitating the exchange of ideas and information (Obar & Steven, 2015). To comprehend these discussions, it is crucial to define terms such as social media, mainstream media, and the public sphere.

Research Methods

This article follows a qualitative method to analyze the public discourse posted in facebook and twitter only. It utilizes that the social media users as primary source of collecting data. It includes only the content posted by the social media users of different sectors. It examines the current state of social media and its role to redefine the public opinion in the twenty first in Nepal. It focuses on social media's dominance over traditional media platforms like newspapers, radio, and television. Media plays a crucial role in establishing new thing among the mass audience. Media contributes to the emergence and amplification of issues. Conventional models suggest mainstream media influences public agendas by leading attention to certain issues.

To investigate the research question, mentioned above, this study undertakes media content analysis. For this, the qualitative research method uses a systematic procedure (Frey, 2018) to analyze media content as public discourse in twenty first century. For this, the researcher has observed the information posted in Twitter and Facebook for five days i.e. 31 July to 5 August, 2014. It has covered the information 30 common people, 30 students, 25 women of different fields, 20 journalists and 25 politicians. It includes only the contents of 130 informants. It is based on random process and availability of required information drawn from the social media sources. It has restructured the contents focusing on public awareness, economic condition to improve the life of people, and political situation of Nepal.

Findings and Discussion

The public domain has been thoroughly studied by a wide range of academic disciplines, including the political sciences, sociology, public policy, and communication sciences. It persuades people to behave in the public interest, and it is essential for democracy to run it smoothly. The advent of social media and progressions in communication technology have profoundly transformed our perception of the public sphere and public discourse. It shows that the about 95 respondents are aware of the issues mentioned above like public awareness, economic condition to improve the life of people, and political situation of Nepal. Most of them have focused on political problem, 51 people have expressed their ideas to create public awareness which is about 39.23 percent. The created web communication in the social media has shown the new reality if it comes to digital communication. The use of technological developments has enabled the people living in Nepal to express higher-level communication in the public discourse which shows a public bond between the senders and recipients of the message. In addition, 19 people which is 14.61 percent have expressed about their concern about the political shift of 5 August which has ousted the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Social media users, at present, tend to examine issues from cultural, political, and social standpoints, and contending the crucial dimensions of Nepali politics and economic system. About 37 people which is 28.46 percent have opposed the recently formed government of Nepal and tend to compare the situation of Nepal with Bangladesh. Besides, about 23 people which is 17.69 percent have expressed about the worst economic policy of the government that has created a gap between rich and poor people.

Social media has given a space to express their ideas about the ongoing situation of Nepal, and encouraged social network users to stay in close proximity to other participants in the communication process. 93 people out of 130 users of Facebook and twitters are satisfied with the content that they post or read posted by others creates a space to comprehend the situation of Nepal. It shows that about 71.53 percent social media users believe that social media explore the ideas to redefine the public opinion in the twenty first century especially in the context of Nepal. The association between the social media users and the public sphere often revolves around the transformative impact of defining new space for the people. Fuch (2008 and 2014) state that the use of new technology has been useful to redefine the public sphere in in new context.

This concept is intricately connected with media and technology, tracing its roots from the inclusion of commentary and opinions in newspapers in the United Kingdom to the contemporary dominance of social media in the communication technology revolution (McNair, 2009; Boyd, 2011). The public sphere, also known as the public space, represents the arena for discussions encompassing a wide range of public interests and the development of critical perspectives on governmental actions. Yasseri, Gildersleve, and David (2022) highlight both the advantages and disadvantages of social media, emphasizing increased political engagement, ease of collective action, real-time information dissemination, and democratization of information

exchange, while also acknowledging challenges like polarized discourse, misinformation, and manipulation of public opinion. About 77 social media users which is 59.23 express it is useful for learning education, and women's movement whereas 53 people which is 40.79 percent express its disadvantages as it creates unnecessary situation. The digital era has brought about significant changes and challenges to the public sphere in developed democracies, prompting discussions on the evolving nature of public discourse (Fuchs, 2021; Cohen *et al.,* 2021). The relationship between the public sphere and the state underwent significant changes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, marked by increased state intervention as a result of social and economic expansion and industrialization (Rajagopal, 2006; Calhoun, 2019). The internet's development prompted a reevaluation of the public sphere and public opinion, leading to the introduction of the concept of the networked public sphere, where online interactions impact public opinion.

The cybersecurity space, or cyberspace, has become a new public arena, fostering conversations that encourage the sharing of novel ideas and viewpoints (Papacharissi, 2002). Social media platforms like facebook, and twitter, have played a crucial role in enabling people to engage and exchange ideas at unprecedented levels. The concept of e-participation, encompassing e-information, e-consulting, and e-decision, is emphasized in the context of the digital era, creating new opportunities for governments to communicate with citizens through various online channels (Pereira, Rocha, & Popli, 2012). The development

of social capital is closely linked to involvement in the public domain, where a high degree of participation generates more social capital, contributing to enhanced e-participation (Johannessen, 2013). The intersection of social media with the public sphere is examined through the lens of Habermasian theory, emphasizing the need to consider political-economic foundations for analyzing the public sphere in the context of proprietary markets. The importance of citizens' political activity is highlighted, particularly in situations where commercial interests take precedence but do not lead to privatization (Staab & Thiel 2022).

Social media's connection to the networked public realm is expressed through the concept of e-participation, emphasizing the various forms of engagement enabled by digital platforms. The internet, as a new public space, facilitates conversations that encourage the sharing of novel concepts and viewpoints. However, it is essential to recognize the difficulty in measuring social capital, as the credibility of institutions or individuals involved in the evaluation is often tied to the measurement. The relationship between social capital and public involvement is emphasized, where a high degree of participation contributes to increased social capital and e-participation.

Conclusion and Limitations

The emergence of social media platforms initially led to optimistic predictions about the democratization of information and public discourse. However, the trajectory of advances in social media has taken unexpected turns, with platforms growing in size and self-commercialization. The influx of

social media has altered the traditional conception of the public realm and mass media, with political players exerting significant control over information dissemination. The internet's social media revolution has disrupted the old information order, allowing individuals to become information providers and participate in communities with vast resources. However, this disruption has led to the emergence of a new order with new algorithms, introducing a different form of filtering. The dynamics of social media have reshaped the traditional structures of mainstream media and prompted a reevaluation of the public sphere in the digital age.

Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as a space where private citizens collectively engaged in reasoned debate to challenge the authority of the state, particularly in the context of resisting dictatorial regimes, leading to the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. However, the publics formed by the internet, akin to global communities, appear isolated from one another. The question arises as to whether a growing public consciousness, rooted in the lifeworld, can effectively traverse systematically differentiated contexts or if systemic processes have severed their connections to political communication-generated contexts. Despite social media not imposing the same limitations as mass media on its viewers, it can be seen as an additional means of imposing constraints. In essence, the political-economic dynamics underlying social media platforms share similarities with traditional media, echoing Fuchs' perspective on powerful economic players and motivations driving super-structural ideas on social media. The efficacy of social media's influence on political circumstances is a significant concern. While some argue that social media can truly bring about political change, the impact is varied. In Nepal, social media has played a significant role, bringing about substantial changes and create public awareness. Despite its potential for change compared to mainstream media, social media remainSSs part of the established system as long as states and corporations retain control over technology and science. In essence, social media disrupted the traditional mass media paradigm, altering knowledge and power dynamics. The involvement of numerous individuals in this transformative process necessitates a comprehensive examination of the public domain. While political and economic players and relationships adapted to the changing times brought about by social media, challenges akin to those faced by mass media persist. In summary, social media has instigated a significant shift in the traditional paradigm, but its impact is nuanced and shaped by the complex interplay of various factors

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