How Social Media Reshapes Indigenous Political Power: A Critical Study of Digital Counter publics in Nepal

Tara Chauhan
Kathmandukusshal10@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0010-4639

Abstract

This paper will analyze the ways in which social media is transforming Indigenous political participation in Nepal by facilitating new ways of expressing political voice, identity and political action among Indigenous nationalities (Janajati). Nepal has a history of the political, cultural and linguistic marginalization of the indigenous communities, which have led to the underrepresentation of indigenous populations in mainstream politics and media. As digital communication technologies continue to multiply at an alarming rate, the social media platforms have become alternative venues where Indigenous communities can conduct political discussions and activism.

Based on the theoretical lenses of Communication for Empowerment, public sphere theory and counterpublic theory, and networked activism, this paper will conceptualize Indigenous-oriented social media spaces as digital counterpublics. The study has a qualitative descriptive research methodology based on critical digital ethnography. Data were created by a combination of sustained digital observation, semi-structured interviews of 50 Indigenous participants, four focus group discussions and qualitative content analysis of about 360-420 publicly available social media posts, videos, comment threads and livestream transcripts on Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, and X.

The results indicate that social media increases Indigenous political voice and visibility, facilitates building of digital counterpublics, allows culture and linguistic expression to be turned into political agent, as well as quick mobilization in politics. Simultaneously, Indigenous online involvement is still limited by digital injustices, the lack of platform support of Indigenous languages, algorithmic bias, web-based harassment, and surveillance-related issues. These influence unequal participation and inhibit the transformative nature of social media. The paper contends that social media does not dismantle structural inequalities but reinvents the landscape of Indigenous politics by changing the manner in which voices are generated, distributed and resisted in digital politics. The study adds to digital politics and Indigenous media research in the Global South and shows the necessity to establish all-inclusive digital governance, protect digital rights, and support Indigenous-led digital action.

***Keywords:** Indigenous peoples, social media, digital counter, political participation, networked activism, digital inequality.*

Introduction

The digital communication technologies have been tremendously transforming modern political engagement, citizen deliberation, and communal action. This is particularly because social media platforms have transformed the manner, in which political claims are made, identity negotiated and power relations fought out. These changes are the most important ones to groups that have been traditionally outside of formal political institutions and the mainstream media. To Indigenous peoples around the world, social media can allow them new means to self-represent, revitalize their culture, and mobilize their politics where the dominant voices have long marginalized Indigenous voices.

Political empowerment is more and more being understood as communicative agency: the capacity to frame issues, to disseminate knowledge, and actively to engage in the public discourse. To the marginalized groups, communicative agency is a prerequisite of political influence since it determines what becomes visible, what becomes thinkable, and what becomes legitimate as concerns of the public. The ability to speak in one's own voice is a political resource where Indigenous communities have traditionally been oriented either through stereotypes or erased in the national discourse. The social media seems to increase this ability by reducing barriers to publication and making content easily spread by people other than the conventional gatekeepers.

Nepal is a notably significant though understudied example of studying Indigenous digital political participation. There are over a hundred Indigenous nationalities (Janajati) in the country with separate languages, cultures, and historical experiences. The political history of Nepal has been characterized by the protracted issues of identity, citizenship, language and representation. Despite the fact that the 2015 Constitution acknowledges Indigenous nationalities, the Indigenous communities are still underrepresented in the decision-making procedures and underrepresented in the mainstream media. These national histories tend to reproduce a homogenized idea of Nepali nationhood, often focusing on mainstream languages and elite cultural standards, which silences Indigenous historical experiences and epistemologies.

Simultaneously, the development of digital connectivity in Nepal has been fast over the last 10 years. The low cost of data plans, prevalence of mobile phones, and popularity of networks like Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram, and X have altered the normal communication habits. These sites have emerged as chief centers of political debate, cultural expression, and mobilization particularly among young people and the diasporic groups of people. To the Indigenous communities that have traditionally been left out of print and broadcast media, social media may offer a new possibility of creating stories, forming political activism around their cause, and maintaining cultural connection despite geographic spread. Digital technologies, however, do not exist in the political vacuum. The technology determinism and false optimism about online empowerment have been warned by scholars. Algorithms control platforms by organizing what is visible, community standards to control what is permitted, and political economies to monetize attention. These platform relations tend to support power relations instead of

breaking them. Also, access to digital is still distributed unequally between rural regions and urban regions; the hierarchies of language are unavoidable in the design of the platform; and the Indigenous content risks being invisibly algorithmic, harassed, and state-policed. Online participation in most cases brings about new vulnerabilities as well as new opportunities in a number of contexts.

The paper tackles these tensions with the question of how social media is altering the politics of the Indigenous in Nepal. It does not accept digital participation as emancipatory, but takes a critical approach that underlines the presence of empowerment and constraint. It theorizes Indigenous social media spaces as digital counterpublics the space where Indigenous actors construct alternative narratives, possess epistemic agency, and disrupt dominant images of national identity and political legitimacy. The study offers insights to the study of digital politics, media justice and Indigenous self-representation by placing Nepal in the context of wider discussions on Indigenous digital activism in the Global South.

This research intends to investigate the use of social media platforms as a form of political participation, identity expression, and mobilization by Indigenous people in Nepal in a systematic manner, in a situation characterized by historical marginalization and uneven digital connectivity. The paper is intended to relate the daily routine digital practices with the more overarching systems of power, such as linguistic authority, platform control, and political control.

The research questions to be used in the study include the following: What is the use of social media by the Indigenous communities in Nepal to express political identity/voice? How do Indigenous digital spaces serve as counter publications to dominant state and media accounts? What role do social media sites play in political mobilization, advocacy and collective action among Indigenous people? What are the technological, social and political limitations to Indigenous digital engagement and how do they inhibit its power to change?

Literature Review

In the last twenty years, there has been a growing literature exploring the ways in which digital media transforms political engagement, especially among marginalized groups. Initial enthusiasm about the democratizing power of the internet focused on its ability to reduce communication costs, increase participation and loosen the hold of the elite on the mass discussion (Shirky, 2011). The social media, especially, were perceived as a facilitator of horizontal communication, quick dissemination of information, and decentralized collective action. But later studies have made these arguments more complicated by showing that digital engagement is created by already-established power structures, institutional limitations, and platform control (Tufkeci, 2017; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). The idea of political participation in the online realm is currently viewed as going beyond any formal engagement in the process (voting, party affiliation) and being comprised of expressive, discursive, and networked activities (Bennett, 2013). These are storytelling, identity performance, hashtag activism, and symbolic contestation. When used by the marginalized, these practices may be politically important as they trouble the non-participation in mainstream public spaces and allow other ways of visibility and validity

(Papacharissi, 2015). Nonetheless, the digital participation does not happen on a playing field. Systems of algorithm, platforms, and attention rankings tend to favor the mainstream and marginalize others (Gillespie, 2018).

In the Global South, the lack of equalized infrastructure and hierarchies in language and politics dominate the digital input (Qiu, 2016; Milan and Treré, 2019). Researchers warn that digital media may both enhance political voice and increase inequalities through the replication of real-world exclusions in the virtual world. These discussions offer a crucial pretext to analyze Indigenous political activism on social media in Nepal, where social mobilization is merged with accelerated yet uneven digital growth. Communication for Empowerment (CfE) offers a critical approach to explanations on how political agency of marginalized communities can be improved with access to communication resources. CfE highlights participatory communication, dialogue, and acknowledging local knowledge as the main tasks in the process of empowerment (Cornwall and Edwards, 2010). CfE views communication as a social process, but does not consider it information transmission, but instead, power relations can be negotiated and transformed (Gaventa, 2006).

According to Couldry (2010), voice is one of the core political values especially in the environment, which is determined by neoliberal governance and symbolic exclusion. To the marginalized, voice does not only entail speaking, it implies being acknowledged as a valid member of the discussion in the society. In most of the postcolonial societies such recognition has been historically denied to Indigenous peoples, by means of linguistic control, cultural appropriation, and media suppression. CfE scholarship emphasizes that the communication technologies may help to the empowerment only in the case they help contribute to the responsiveness of the institutions and their inclusion into the political process, as opposed to augmenting the expression.

In Nepal, communicative inequalities have been historically limiting Indigenous engagement in the public life. The mainstream media is mostly elite, urban, and dominant-language oriented, and should not be able to provide indigenous access to the agenda-setting (Hangen, 2010; Lawoti, 2014). Social media has the potential to break these trends by giving Indigenous communities the opportunity to circumvent the traditional media gatekeepers and draw on their direct self-representation. CfE on the other hand also tells us against the assumption that access will necessarily lead to empowerment. Digital communication can help raise the voice and not the impact without favorable political and cultural contexts. This strain is at the heart of the concept of Indigenous digital engagement in Nepal.

The classical public sphere theory linked to Habermas views the public sphere as a place of a rational-critical argumentation that is available to every citizen. Feminist and postcolonial theorists have criticized this paradigm because it ignores structural exclusions that define who is allowed to speak and whose voice is important (Fraser, 1990; Carpentier, 2011). The notion of subaltern counterpublics by Fraser is mostly effective in research on marginalized political communication. There are also counterpublics, other discursive spaces in which subordinated groups produce and distribute their

counter-identity, counter-interest, and counter-political legitimacy interpretations. Counterpublics are not free-standing entities they are not completely independent of dominant publics; indeed, there can be complex interaction between them with the advantage that they affect wider discourse whilst being structurally disadvantaged. The reason is that digital media has increased scholarly interest in counterpublics as it allows a variety of overlapping and networked publics to be created online (Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2016). The social media sites contribute to the creation of counterpublics because they reduce entry barriers, promote the speedy spread of stories, and promote community-formation across geographic borders.

Nevertheless, researchers also point out that platform regulation and exposure to harassment and surveillance also typify platform counterpublics (Gillespie, 2018; Roberts, 2019). Visibility can draw attention as well as aggression and the algorithmic systems can constrain the ability of counter-hegemonic speech. As a source of cultural affirmation, political discussion, and opposition to mainstream national discourses, digital counterpublics provide Indigenous people with opportunities, yet their ability to reach wider groups of the population is not equal.

By creating a counterpublic theory to Nepal, it is possible to emphasize that Indigenous digital space is a site of contesting the homogenized notions of Nepali identity and making plural claims to history and rights. Simultaneously, such spaces are subject to digital infrastructures, which are indicative of more general inequalities, which underline the necessity of a critical, not celebratory analysis. Networked activism is a literature that explores how social media serves collective action by facilitating decentralized communication, loose organization, and amplification of emotion (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Shirky, 2011). Networked movements, in contrast to the traditional social movements that were based on formal organizations and formal leaders, can be traced by loosely integrated actors, linked in common frames and by the digital environment. Social media facilitates quick mobilization, real time coordination as well as transnational solidarity.

However, Tufekci (2017) also warns that the networked movements tend to have structural vulnerabilities, such as the lack of decision-making capacity, susceptibility to repression, and inadequate ability to maintain the movement over time. Online mobilization can create a presence and not a lasting organizational strength. Such criticisms are especially true concerning marginalized populations that organize themselves through political risk, as online activism can cause their surveillance or repercussions.

Networked mobilization in the case of Indigenous activism is frequently mixed up with cultural expression and identity politics. Researchers report the use of digital platforms by indigenous peoples to organize demonstrations, protect land and resource rights and rally around language and cultural awareness (García, 2021; Hernandez, 2020). However, online racism, cultural appropriation, and delegitimization of Indigenous knowledge are also distinct challenges that Indigenous activists struggle with. Networked activism frameworks can be used to examine the enabling affordances of

digital platforms as well as the constraining structural constraints of Indigenous political engagement. Indigenous media studies focus on how communication can be used to counteract symbolic annihilation, or the systematic silence or manipulation of Indigenous voices in the mainstream media (McCallum and Waller, 2017). Traditionally, the Indigenous people have been depicted either through colonial or elite perspectives, which supports the stereotypes and marginalization. The media and story-telling modes that have been taken over by indigenous people dispute these discourses by establishing epistemic power and cultural continuation.

The possibilities arising through digital media have allowed Indigenous communities to communicate their oral history, cultural activity and politics directly (Carlson and Frazer, 2018, Smith, Tinirau and Rewi, 2019). There is the revitalization of language, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and inter-country Indigenous networks that are supported by social media. Nevertheless, researchers warn that digital presence does not necessarily offer the same opportunities as political clout because platform politics and fan culture influence the popularity of whose narratives.

In Nepal, the Indigenous media practice is closely tied with ethnicity, federalism and inclusion struggles. Although it has become more symbolically visible, mainstream media representational visibility is scarce and disproportionate (Lawoti, 2014). Online spaces are therefore instrumental in empowering the Indigenous people to challenge the mainstream accounts and make their other histories and political demands. However, there is limited academic publication on systematic research on Indigenous digital activism in Nepal.

Research Gap

The current literature shows that digital media could enhance political participation and expression of marginalized voices and identity as well as recreate the inequalities in terms of platform regulation, digital gap, and political control. Nevertheless, very little empirical evidence at work on the dynamics of operation in Nepal, especially among Indigenous communities.

Majority of the indigenous digital activism studies are located in settler-colonial settings or Latin America and very little has been done of South Asia. More importantly, numerous analyses focus on empowerment and do not pay enough attention to the constraints and risks. This paper fills these gaps by offering a qualitative and empirically based study of the Indigenous digital counterpublics in Nepal. Combining Communication for Empowerment, counterpublic theory, and networked activism, it helps to expand the discussions on digital politics, media justice, and Indigenous self-representation in the Global South.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative descriptive research design which is based on critical digital ethnography. The qualitative research method will be suitable in discussing the ways in which Indigenous people in Nepal use social media as a space of political participation, identity expression, and group

action. Instead of causal clarification or statistical generalization, the research gives priority to depth, contextual knowledge, and interpretative insight into ordinary digital practices and meanings.

The analysis of the study incorporating the three methods digital observation, using interviews and focus group discussions captures the ways in which Indigenous political agency is practiced, negotiated, and limited at different levels, including the individual, collective, and infrastructural. This layout allows a critical analysis of the empowerment as well as limitation in digital mediated political participation.

Sample Design and Rationale

The sample used in the study was purposive sampling and maximum-variation sampling to achieve the scope of Indigenous digital political practices in Nepal. The sampling was constructed to capture diversity between Indigenous ethnicity, language group, gender, age, geographic area (urban and rural), and roles in cyber space, such as activists, community organizers, digital content creators, students, and members of the general community.

The main sample of the interviews involved 50 Indigenous people who were actively involved in using social media in connection to Indigenous identity, cultural expression, or political issues. This is a suitable sample size to apply qualitative digital ethnography because it allows within-case richness (in-depth insight into personal life experiences) and cross-case analysis across social groups, platform, and geographic setting. The sample was large enough to enable the study to detect patterns and processes of Indigenous digital participation that are recurrent in addition to being mindful of contextual and positional variations.

Data Collection

The research involved a qualitative, multi-method, and data collection method that is based on Critical Digital Ethnography to investigate the way Indigenous communities in Nepal utilize social media as a political tool, form of identity, and a tool of collective action. Information was collected by means of digital observation of publicly available Indigenous-focused social media, 28 semi-structured in-depth interviews with the Indigenous activists, leaders, and users and focus group discussions with the Indigenous youth and community representatives. Digital observation was based on daily and occasion-based practices online and interviews on digital practices offered personal insights on digital practices, empowerment, and issues of marginalization or censorship. The focus group discussions provided information on shared experiences, identity construction, and political mobilization in Indigenous online counterpublics. There was adherence to ethical principles, such as the possibility of informed consent, pseudonymous use, and sensitive information processing, respect to the rights of Indigenous people, and the ethical problems of the study of online space.

Sustained Digital Observation.

The research included a four-platform, long-term, non-intrusive presence in the Indigenous-

oriented social media on Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, and X Digital observation was concentrated on the regime of political speech, cultural and linguistic practices, the mechanisms of interactions, and mobilization strategies. This systematic field notes were taken during the time of observation in order to capture repetitive themes, platform-specific affordances, and time when the political activity is most active.

Semi-structured interviews (in-depth) were applied to 50 Indigenous participants. Interview questions addressed how the participants experienced political voice, identity articulation, cultural expression, digital mobilization, exposure to online risks and how they felt platforms were governed and surveilled as well. The semi-structured format was to be consistent in all interviews and gave flexibility to the participants to expound on issues of personal and community importance.

Focus Group Discussions

To obtain the aggregate view and inter-community deliberation, the research involved four focus group discussions (each with 5-7 Indigenous participants) (FGD participants: 22). The concept of collective understandings of Indigenous digital activism, discussions on the strategy and representation, as well as concerted evaluation of the opportunities and limitations, were discussed in focus group discussions. These consultations added to individual interviews showing how meanings and political positions are negotiated on a collective basis.

Qualitative Analysis of Digital Content.

The work under consideration examined some 360-420 publicly available digital objects, such as posts on social media, short videos, commentaries, and fragments of livestreams. The selection of these materials was done through a systematic approach to sampling (a certain period of time, major Indigenous-related political events (protests, policy discussions), and content on Indigenous page, group, organization, and creator identified during digital observation and interviews). This was an adequate number of items to discover general themes, platform-particular practices, and interaction patterns, yet is not too many to analyze qualitatively in detail.

Analysis and Discussion

Interpretations of interviews, focus group discussions, digital observation, and qualitative content analysis identified and showed five major findings as to how the social media transforms Indigenous political participation in Nepal. Such results indicate that social media increases the possibilities of political action and expression but also recreates great limitations and imbalances. It was concluded that social media sites offer Indigenous people valuable platforms to voice political opinions that are usually silenced or excluded in mass media and other formal political agencies. Some of the platforms mentioned by participants included Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, and X where they could talk freely about the issues affecting Indigenous rights, political representation, land and resource matters, language recognition, and social discrimination.

Social media was also mentioned by many participants as the environment where they were allowed to speak their own voice without having to use journalists, political leaders, or organizations to voice their opinions. The possibility to post videos, write posts, and engage in online discussions allowed people to exchange their experiences and community opinions. But there was no equal visibility. The content posted on the platforms in the major languages or the format preferred by the platform algorithms was more likely to reach larger groups of users, whereas the ones in Indigenous languages or culturally specific format were most likely to stay in smaller circles. The results demonstrate that Indigenous users did not use social media as an individual but as a member of loosely connected online communities. Facebook groups, pages, hashtags and creator networks served the role of a digital counterpublic, where Indigenous people spoke about common topics, shared information, and debunked sovereign state and media discourse.

In these online worlds, members understood political events together, discussed the policy developments, as well as shared historical and cultural knowledge. These counterpublics offered emotional guidance and enhanced a feeling of solidarity among the Indigenous users, especially when it came to times of political tension or a controversial issue. Meanwhile, these spaces did not necessarily transform into unified ones. Respondents reported in-fighting among themselves regarding political approaches, and identity markers, and participation in mainstream politics, suggesting that digital counterpublics are heterogeneous and even disintegrated. One of the key results of the research is that the social media cultural and linguistic expression is strongly associated with political engagement. Some common content shared by participants was about the Indigenous culture such as the traditional attire, music, rituals, language classes, oral histories and regular cultural practices. Most participants perceived such activities as political since they resisted historical erasure and demanded the presence of Indigenous people in social space.

The social media enabled the participants to be reconnected to cultural knowledge and had pride in being Indigenous, especially the younger users and the ones who were not residing in their own communities. Nevertheless, other participants also noted the fact that the platform does not support Indigenous languages and does not show Indigenous cultural content as much. Due to this, there were mixed approaches where certain users would use dominant languages in order to have broader audiences but save the Indigenous languages to community-centered spaces.

The research came up with the conclusion that social media is a major factor in promoting political mobilization and advocacy. Respondents noted that they distributed news about protests, campaigns, petitions, fundraising activities, and solidarity activities through digital platforms. Social media made the communication and coordination very fast, particularly in moments of political sensitiveness. Although these advantages did exist, the participants stressed that digital mobilization was not long-lasting. Online participation was found to be best during crises and died out later hence it was hard to maintain a political activity long term. The participants observed that the digital campaigns were more successful when related to offline organizations or community networks. There were also fears of online

harassment, surveillance, and political risk that affected the extent to which the citizens would be open to the mobilization activities.

Although social media has increased opportunities to participate, the research also found that there were serious limitations that defined Indigenous online involvement. The participants pointed out disparity in the availability of internet infrastructure, affordability, and differences in the levels of digital literacy, especially among urban and rural regions. Online harassments and hate speech became one of the biggest problems, particularly among highly visible activists and women. These experiences prompted some interviewees to be more restrictive in their online habits, reduce the size of their audience, or shift the conversation into small groups. Other participants raised issues of the algorithm of platforms which, according to them, decreased the presence of Indigenous content, and the potential surveillance or tracking of political behavior.

Conclusion

This paper explored the ways in which social media transforms Indigenous political participation in Nepal through opening up new possibilities of political voice, identity expression and action. The qualitative analysis based on a critical approach of digital ethnography, examined through digital observation, interviews, focus groups, and qualitative content analysis, was used to examine the Indigenous-oriented digital practices. The study sheds light on Indigenous communities in Nepal and, therefore, advances the comprehension of digital politics and Indigenous media in a Global South setting.

The results indicate that social media platforms offer valuable platforms of Indigenous political events and presence. Indigenous users of the digital space use digital platforms to air political issues, challenge mainstream state and media discourse, and demand cultural and linguistic identities that they may otherwise be marginalized in the mainstream public discourse. Indigenous communities create strong solidarity and share knowledge and interpret political events through the establishment of digital counterpublics. The practices of communicative agency and the support of new modes of political participation outside of traditional institutions are reinforced.

Meanwhile, the paper has considerable limitations. Digital inequalities coupled with the lack of platform support of the Indigenous languages, algorithmic marginalization, online harassment, and surveillance concerns continue to make the digital participation of indigenous individuals uneven. These limitations show that social media has no means to eradicate structural imbalances but rather transfigures them in digital space. Consequently, social media empowerment is conditional and influenced by the larger technological and political fundamentals.

On the whole, the research states that social media re-configures, but does not transform the Indigenous political power in Nepal. Inclusive digital governance, protection of digital rights, and long-term funding of Indigenous-led initiatives are all that it takes to achieve meaningful digital empowerment

of Indigenous peoples so that eventually digital public spaces can be more equitable and inclusive.

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