

Social Media: Is it a Tool of Emancipation or a means for Harassment for Migrants?

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Abstract

Recent incidents of lynching and killing 'outsiders' under various mysterious circumstances has one thing common for digital media and migrants: social media is the thread weaving toxic rumours which hurt migrants, who are labelled with the term 'outsiders.'

Sometimes it is refugees. Sometimes it is internally displaced-within a city or across states. But all their fate is no different. The Pew Research Center calls global migration as one of the most "significant demographic trend" happening today. As per United Nation's International Migration Report 2017, international migration is on the rise. From 173 million in 2000, 220 million in 2010, it has gone up to 258 million in 2017. War and internal strife in the Middle East is the single largest contributor for the global trend. But the same applies to Asian and South East Asian countries where the perennial issues of Bangladeshi migration, Rohingya migration from Myanmar, Afghan refugee issues, Sri Lankan Tamils migration in making Asia as no exception.

But nation states aren't the single most issue for the migrant issue. Because, people migrating within a country are also persecuted as 'outsiders.' Is the social media building bridges or destroying them?

With 20 crore Indians using WhatsApp on a daily basis, it is becoming a parallel medium of spreading messages for the masses. But Mooer's Law put forth by Calvin Mooer's in 1959 is proving to be true in the digital era. He proposed that, "An information retrieval system will tend not to be used whenever it is more painful and troublesome for a customer to have information than for him not to have it." Roger Summit, founder, Dialogue Information Services reinterprets for the era of social media: "information will be used in direct proportion to how easy it is to obtain". This provides the answer to why people tend to believe in rumours spread by WhatsApp, without checking the veracity.

Why two migrant labourers were thrashed as child kidnappers in Chennai? Why a migrant labourer from Uttar Pradesh was lynched in Tripura, suspecting her of child lifting? Since 10 May 2018 there have been 20 incidents of lynch killings, all motivated by rumours spread through social media. At the same time mobile devices act as a tool of communication and culture for migrants. Chandrahasan, Founder and Chairman of OfERR, an organisation working for rehabilitation of Sri Lankan refugees in their homeland says that social media plays a key role in uniting refugee children who were born and brought up in Tamil Nadu, without having a glimpse of their native land. "Their WhatsApp video calls showing lush greenery of the Sri Lanka is one of the key pushing points in re-integration with their home land" he says. The boom in mobile connectivity is bridging the gap between the migrants and their loved ones especially since 97% of migrants are men leaving behind their family in their homeland in search of better earning.

The paper looks at how digital media and specifically social media could be a tool for emancipation at the same time a tool for harassment.

Keywords: Fake news, Migration, Lynch killings, Social media

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Introduction: The problem

"I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended. It was used to convey public messages but we know that the ultra-nationalist Buddhists have their own Facebooks and are really inciting a lot of violence and a lot of hatred against the Rohingya or other ethnic minorities."

- Yanghee Lee, Investigator, UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar

Marzuki Darusman, Chairman of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar has the following words: "It (Facebook) has ... substantively contributed to the level of acrimony and dissension and conflict, if you will, within the public. Hate speech is certainly of course a part of that. As far as the Myanmar situation is concerned, social media is Facebook, and Facebook is social media."

Is social media the demon? Especially when it comes to the vulnerable sections like the migrants? It's a big question that is haunting scholars, activists and policy makers alike. Never-the-less, the number of people accessing social media platforms across the globe is rising. Out of the World population of 7.5 billion, 4 billion have internet access. Among the users, 3.2 billion use social media on a monthly basis. 2.9 billion of them are active users. And 1 million of them are very new to using social media. Who are they? What are they up to? What are their real intentions? How much of them indulge in the activity called sharing/forwarding fake news? The findings are going to be critical for vulnerable sections like migrants.



Because, the impact of the viral video shared through WhatsApp on alleged child kidnappers (see the screen grab shown above) had an impact all over the country. Since 10 May 2018 there have been 20 incidents of lynch killings, all motivated by rumours spread through social media on alleged child kidnappers. Innocent people asking for directions, patting the cheek of children, trying to protect children from getting hit by a vehicle were misconstrued as child kidnappers. They were killed by mobs that beat them to death. In most cases, the victims were migrants,

people who aren't native to that particular locality who are usually termed as 'outsiders' by locals.

A WhatsApp message in Gujarati translated reads thus: "Kutch Police has issued a notification. Till date, whichever incidents of child abduction have happened are regretful. Now, a gang of 250 to 300 people from outside has entered Kutch. So our appeal to everyone is that take care of your children and especially during the night don't leave them alone, we are trying to find them out" along with a video purportedly showing abduction of kids. The details and videos were proved to be fake by AltNews later.

Similar messages with minor changes appeared and re-appeared in various places of India with ease. But the video remained the same in most places. In some places such messages were accompanied with pictures of the 'child kidnapping gang' arrested. The messages later turned cryptic. "Child kidnapping in Tamilnadu in 300 people this people be careful people language speaking Hindi..." (sentence with the same syntax as shared in the social media) is one such message spread in Tamil Nadu with some old and unrelated photographs. The physical appearance of a photo or video in the social media posts were construed as evidence of veracity of the information shared. There was widespread panic among people in all parts of India.

The impact is devastating. Since 10 May 2018 there have been 20 incidents of lynch killings connecting with fake child kidnapping, all motivated by rumours spread through social media. There has been 27 such killings reported in the last year alone, with the case of panic over 'child kidnapping.' From 'cow vigilantes,' panic about 'North Indian burglars' which spread in Tamil Nadu to mobs acting against 'child kidnapping,' the digital media is weaving a toxic web of lies, fake news and half-truths which many gullible new age 'citizen journalists' take as fact.

It is obvious. Digital media is creating a chasm. Of digital natives and digital illiterates. Even the 1 million fresh users of Social Media are vulnerable to this handicap. In an era of citizen journalism, where every individual can create or share news or what they consider is news (however original or fake it is, whether it could be called a news or not), media education or lack of it is the new handicap. There have been technological interventions regulating social media or fresh ones in the line-up, new ones being forced by the powers of the land. WhatsApp has introduced a new icon on top of its messages dividing between messages originated in the digital tool (a mobile phone, computer, tablet etc) and those forwarded from others. But there is no way of checking the origin of those messages, enabling others to trace those who spread toxic rumours. Indian Government is now putting pressure on WhatsApp to create a feature which would help identify the source of the messages, so that they can trace the origin and the culprit.

The Origins of Fake News

Fact checking media organisation Alt News found that the alleged video on 'child kidnapping' which went viral leading to the killing of scores to be fake. It was found that it originated from Pakistan. NGO Roshni Helpline has shot the 'awareness video.' It is not an actual kidnapping, as alleged in the WhatsApp sharings. Rather it is an awareness video created to show the seriousness of child kidnapping, which allegedly used to be rampant in Karachi at that time. The awareness video made in 2016 came back to haunt people from various parts of India in 2018. Many of the pictures which showed alleged pictures of "child kidnappers" arrested and "hundreds of others in the prowl" were also found to be fake. Either the source of mug shots of criminals arrested wasn't available or proved to be old, unrelated pictures (not connected with kidnapping at all).

Superintendent of Vellore Police, Pagalavan, had to order public announcement in the Vellore district to alleviate the panic. The police personnel criss crossed 57 police stations, 700 villages to announce that such WhatsApp videos, messages about 'child kidnappers' were fake. Hyderabad police had to issue public awareness notices to combat such fake news and resultant panic.

But social media and their applications are used for a wide range of purposes beyond fake news. The case of Chennai police nabbing a history sheeter using face recognition social media tool is just one example. As reported in the 19th August 2018 Chennai edition of Times of India daily, Chennai cops had used FaceTagr App to recognise and arrest the history sheeter during a routine vehicle check. According to the Police, the person identified as Hariharan is one of the picture profiles kept in the records of State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB). They are said to have 25,000 to 1 lakh picture profiles.

But identity is the bigger issue or crisis a migrant has to face. The tag of an 'outsider,' makes revealing of his/her real identity a real threat. Instead, they becoming faceless, identity less population on whom identities are being stamped as per the wishes and inclinations of locals. The recent tag is that of a child lifter. A migrant with less or no knowledge of the local language makes him the most vulnerable. Appearing different in external appearance is also one factor determining 'outsiders' as seen in the case of engineers working with Google killed suspecting them of child kidnapping in the outskirts of Hyderabad.

Two migrant labourers who were toiling to build state of the art Metro Rail networks in Chennai were beaten up mistaking them as child lifters. Their act of allegedly stopping a child trying to cross a busy road was said to be provocation. The migrants later voiced that they knew the kid from the locality they lived in and they tried to save the child being hit by speeding vehicles.

With unverified viral videos shared through WhatsApp allegedly showing child kidnappers, panic had spread to the length and breadth of the country. There were incidents of killing and lynching people accusing them of child lifting, reported from all over India. There were incidents reported from far off places from Tripura in the North East, Maharashtra's Dhule where five people were beaten to death, one person killed at Murki in Karnataka's Bidar district allegedly after he offered chocolate he brought home from Qatar, a 40 year old lynched in Chhattisgarh's Sarguja, the incidents cover all the parts of the country. How a single WhatsApp message or video or picture generated mysteriously can impact the mindset over the length and breadth of a country is shocking. But this is not the first case. When there were a spate of robberies in Tamil Nadu, including a sensational one on an Automatic Teller Machine (ATM), there were wide spread lynching in Tamil Nadu, fearing alleged thieves from 'North India.' In one particular incident a migrant labourer was beaten up in Chennai alleging that he was a 'thief from North India.' Later he was found to be a migrant labourer from Odisha.

Findings

A focus group discussion done with the NGOs, activists working among migrants, had the following findings:

Mobile helps in catharsis or justice

Migrants, especially labourers working outside their place of origin, fear seizure of passport or other identifying documents and the mobile phone as the biggest threat they face.

Mobile is the only connection they have with the outer World when it comes to house maids working in the gulf, since they live along with their employer in their house premises. Even for others it is a means of getting in touch with their near and dear ones, especially in times of emergencies. Migrant labourers spend a significant sum of their earning in recharging their mobiles. So much so that many pre-paid mobile recharge centres have separate section for migrant labourers. In case of emergencies they use mobile to seek help from the outer World or at least to seek an agony aunt, to share their tragedy.

Mobile as a tool of vice

Among inter-state migrant workers in India, 97 are male. They leave their family in their place of origin. They return back according to seasons of employment. Sometimes they go back in the season of sowing or harvest or in-between, whenever they usually get job opportunities in their place of origin. In the case of certain sectors which offer job only during certain periods of time, they go back when they don't have any more job.

Even though mobile communication keeps them in touch with their loved ones, it also acts as a tool of vice. NGOs who work among migrant labourers point out flesh trade among the migrant labourers which usually follow the trend: a migrant labourer brings in a woman along with. She serves as a sex worker among the migrant labourer community. Mobile is used to share pornographic content to seek business. It is used as a tool to attract business. A single or a few sex workers service the whole community. While, it serves the physiological, biological needs of the migrant labourer community living away from their family for long durations, it also creates a health hazard. Any unsafe practices among the community and sex worker runs the risk of the entire migrant labourer community vulnerable to transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, including the families living far off.

Social Media which enables cultural connect

Children of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who were born in the soil they took refuge, don't have a connect with their motherland like their parents. Chandrahasan, Founder and Chairman of OfERR, an organisation working for rehabilitation of Sri Lankan refugees in their homeland says that social media plays a key role in uniting refugee children to their homeland who were born and brought up in Tamil Nadu, without having a glimpse of their native soil. "Their WhatsApp video calls showing lush greenery of the Sri Lanka is one of the key pushing points in re-integration with their home land" he says. The boom in mobile connectivity is bridging the gap between the migrants and their home land.

Stories of Sri Lankan refugees who have gone back to their mother land becomes an inducement for others to follow, who had fear of persecution in their home land. Since most refugees want to return to their motherland, once the strife (religious, ethic, linguistic or economical) are over, they use digital connectivity to ensure return of normalcy before taking the decision.

Conclusion

"Immigrants come into the U.S. as outsiders. They become insiders when their differences no longer affect the ways they interact with others" says Michael Jones-Correa, a professor of government at Cornell University.

This puts IEC (Information-Education-Communication) model of assimilating migrants with the local population very critical. Dr. Gopalkrishna Siwakoti, President, International Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development, is an active proponent of this model. Only such initiatives can help remove the tag of outsiders on migrants, which is the single biggest contributor for attacks against them, even though trigger may be the rumour mongering social media posts. The case of shared

social media posts showing Germans holding 'we welcome migrants' leading to an increased migration inflow in the country, to ensure they enter its land before the policy is changed (which ultimately did happen) shows the plight of migrants landing in an unwelcome place. But German Chancellor Angela Merkel is now in trouble after the initial euphoria, which makes migrants more insecure.

But it is undisputed that migrants contribute more to the economy than the benefits they enjoy in the place of migration. According to the report titled "People on the move: Global Migration's Impact and Opportunity," migrants contributed \$6.7 trillion or 9.4% of global GDP in 2015. If they had remained in their place of origin they would have contributed \$3 trillion less than the figure, the report says. Migration, which has always remained as one the tenets of life forms on Earth in search of better prospects and safety, has increased in the information era due to better connectivity leading to what Marshal McLuhan calls a global village. Within a period of 50 thousand years mankind had occupied all parts of the World except Antarctica, mainly through migration. Today it is hastened by the globalization induced by digital media connectivity. Interstate migrants who come in search of job now use their mobile as the 'middle man' to get jobs in the place of migration. Previous migrants provide them about opportunities, risks in the new land of opportunities.

Pioneering media scholar Marshal McLuhan's visionary thoughts on understanding media, particularly possibilities of automation, computer mediation (he even predicted changes induced by internet which hadn't been invented when he wrote Understanding Media), are helping us understand New Media better. If media is an extension of man, it is bound to have all the frailties of mankind in the mediums in which he deals with. If media is the sensory extension of mankind, the rational, irrational, mystic, all are going to be manifested in it. In the era of user generated content and participatory approach to media, only media education for all is going to be solution.

The study of computer assisting reporting covering the riots of 1954 in New York is an eye opener. It proved that literate and illiterate were equally affected in the riots. Today, we stand in the information era. We see rumours spread on alleged child kidnappers on the prowl. We see victims who are 'outsiders.' But the 'outsiders' aren't just from the lower strata of the society. A Google engineer is killed in the outskirts of Hyderabad suspecting him of child kidnapper. We are better placed to solve the problem than 1954.

In the meanwhile attempts by Governments to hold control over the affairs of social media runs a bigger risk of censorship and political control over the platform. Leaving them under self-regulation of social media behemoths

isn't also going to help. Instead independent fact checking capabilities have to be increased to fill loop holes in the credibility aspect of social media, especially in the wake of fake news and toxic rumours which are leading to killing innocent lives.

This brings us to the question of relevance of modern education and its focus on specialization. Today's education was created to supply manpower and resources for the industrial revolution. It was an era of mechanical reproduction. We today stand in an era of Big Data, Artificial Intelligence, Bots, 3D printing which McLuhan started to term as electric age. "Mechanical speed-ups, however radical in their reshaping of personal social life, still were allowed to happen sequentially... That is not the case with electric speed up. The acquiring of new basic knowledge and skill... is the most common needs and harrowing facts of electric technology." He was more specifically talking about needs of the senior executives to learn new basic knowledge and skill to survive in the electric era. He was talking about challenges of skilling, re-skilling, and unskilling of the "senior executives or big wheels" who face the danger of being thrown out since they were getting outdated. But the same principle applies to the new comers to the electric age, who don't know basic aspects about the medium, which results in believing all that are shown to them through a Facebook post or WhatsApp sharing as true. When "mechanical standardisation and specialism" which are now old virtues in the words of McLuhan, we need a new education set-up, which has to educate people from all walks of life, from schooling itself, aspects of understanding digital media, so that they can empower themselves better in handling fake news. Mooer's Law also specifies that only when you make it easy for the users to verify facts (we have to remember that unlike a mainstream media professional, a citizen journalist doesn't has any guidance or support of a learned editorial).

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..." Charles Dickens was talking about the ambience of the industrial revolution, resultant urbanisation and its ills. Humanity was extending its hands and legs with the mechanical age. Now they are extending their central nervous system (McLuhan). And Charles Dickens is more right about the situation we are facing on this transformation phase too. The painful transformation is taking a toll, which is more severe and tragic for vulnerable sections like migrants. Like the chimney sweepers, the dark legacy of this transformational phase is hurting the migrants. The response by humanity and communication as a domain is going to be the deciding factor in cleaning up the act.

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