

ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 33

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 18

print issue 33

June 2023



Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Department of Cultural Affairs

Government of Kerala-India

June 2023

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2023 ജൂൺ

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

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Ishal Paithrkam

ISSN: 2582-550X

Peer-Reviewed

UGC Listed

Quarterly

Bilingual

Issue: 33

Online issue: 18

June: 2023

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Editor

Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Publisher

Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

Kondotty, 673638

Ph: 0483-2711432

പ്രസാധകർ

മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ

മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി

കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638

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Theorising the Digital Public Sphere: An Analytical Study of the Possibilities and Challenges of Digital Counterpublics

Dr. Najeeb. P.M

Public debates and discussions are mandatory for the proper conduct of democracy and the space where such public debates take place is called public sphere. Traditionally, meeting places in villages or urban squares, markets, cafes, salons or table societies functioned as public sphere. With the advent of newspapers, radio and television; mass media assumed the role of public sphere. One big problem with the conventional public sphere is that it did not include society as a whole, a majority of people like women, sexual minorities, Dalits, racial, linguistic and religious minorities, differently abled individuals etc. were excluded from it. This situation slightly changed with the emergence of digital public sphere. Many socially marginalised people got representation in the public sphere. But the digital public sphere has its own inherent challenges like, state surveillance, misinformation, cyber bullying and digital divide. Progressive societies need to solve those problems collectively. Societies around the world should also work towards establishing an alternative digital public sphere which is not controlled by private tech giants.

Key words: counterpublics, digital commons, digital divide, digital public sphere, manipulation of public opinion, surveillance

This paper examines the concept of digital public sphere as a significant socio-political platform which enables people to participate

in the process of public debate and opinion formation. Digital public sphere is understood in this context as an informal and oppositional public sphere which is represented by people. Such a public sphere is situated against the formal public spheres of power and authority which is determined by the state or government. The paper questions the very idea of 'public' in 'digital public sphere' and also examines the potential of new media in creating a counter public sphere which accommodates the marginalised sections of society. The paper looks into the possibilities offered by digital technology for the construction of a more equitable society, and it also studies the challenges and roadblocks faced by the same. How digital public sphere failed to offer a potential liberation to the socially disenfranchised people and how it failed to function as an authentic counter public sphere is also analysed. However, the thrust of the paper is to illustrate how the weaker sections of society benefit from the digital public sphere.

The digital revolution which started towards the end of the previous century has radically influenced human life and significantly altered it. The quantum leap which happened in the field of digital technology has inaugurated the fourth industrial revolution which “represents a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to each other” (“World Economic Forum”, 2021). New digital technology offered by tech giants like Amazon, Google, Facebook or Apple have already redefined the way social life is structured. Ongoing experiments and developments in the fields of artificial intelligence, robotics, block chain and Internet of Things (IoT) are further expected to bring more changes in the way we live. The new digital universe comprises a wide variety of products and services which range from mobile phones to driverless cars. As digital technology has rewired the hardware of human life (like the way humans work, learn, indulge in entertainment, communicate etc) it has reconfigured the software of our society as well (like how we interact, group and regroup, organize, protest, present ourselves as digital selves through social media etc). One of the most significant contributions of digital technology is in the establishment of a digital public sphere. This paper focuses on the evolution of a new digital public sphere and how it empowered the marginalised and weaker sections of the society.

Before going straight away into the discussion of digital public sphere, a brief analysis of the concept of public sphere is imperative as it would offer a historical understanding of the term. Public sphere is commonly understood as “the space where citizens come together to freely engage in dialogue and debate on issues which matter to their lives, and through that debate aim to influence government policy and bring about social change” (Haider et al., 2011, p12). The fundamental purpose of public sphere is to enable the public have access to discussions and deliberations on issues concerning the common public and eventually involve in the process of forming public opinion.

Public sphere can be a physical space like a public hall where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. It can also be a communicative infrastructure through which citizens send and receive information and opinions (“The Public Sphere”). The public discussions and debates eventually lead to the formation of public opinions which may influence the decision making process of the State. Originally, the public sphere was a physical place where people held public meetings but with the advent of communication technologies, mass media and social media, the term has acquired newer meanings and dimensions and the character of public sphere has evolved from that of physical space to that of virtual infrastructure.

Ancient Greek city states provide one of the oldest examples of public spheres, namely the agora (market place) where citizens directly participated in discussions and the public life/bios politikos (Habermas, 1991, p3). During the feudal years of European monarchies, the royal court was the public sphere and only the king determined and defined what was public (“The Public Sphere”). The 17th and 18th centuries witnessed the emergence of a different kind of public sphere, namely the English coffee houses, the French salons and the German table societies (“The Public Sphere”). Aristocrats and the members of the middle class gathered in such places and engaged in discussions of arts and politics. Later, with the advent of newspapers, the category of public sphere evolved into something which crossed spatial boundaries. Technically, this is what later evolved

into the contemporary understanding of the public sphere. Taking a sidestep, Benedict Anderson's argument that newspapers contributed to the formation of imagined communities can also be useful here to understand how a spatially separated public is converged by means of mass media.

The idea of public sphere was examined in detail by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, in order to explain the structure of dialogue between the state and its citizens. According to Habermas, the public sphere is a domain where public opinion can be formed (Habermas, 1974, p1). It is an ideal space which is open to all where individuals form a collective public. It is a formation of private individuals joining their hands together in order to bring a public issue into the attention of the State. The general public domain is ideally constituted as an oppositional force to the State. But the irony is that the State also is in the public domain because the State came into position as a public power after the legitimate process of elections and supposedly functioning on the basis of a generally and publicly approved constitution. However the government is not part of the informal public sphere, rather it is situated as a counter part of public sphere. In other words, the public sphere is a key to the formation of public opinion which has the power to negotiate with the state in the decision making process. The public sphere, in that sense, is a process of "mediating between society and the state" (Kampourakis, 2016).

The word 'public' in public sphere is quite problematic as the 18th century model of public sphere as illustrated by Habermas does not include a certain section of the society; it is not an all-inclusive public sphere. Socially disenfranchised groups like women, children, non-white people, sexual minorities etc. were not part of it. The Habermasian model of public sphere was criticised as a bourgeois public sphere because it was constituted by the bourgeoisie white male individuals of 18th century Europe. During that period, the term 'public' was understood as the representation of authority through a lord. In other words, during the feudal times, only the aristocratic class had the power and authority to represent the rest of the people in the royal court. As per the feudal custom, it was a lord who represented the public in the royal court. The emerging class of new rich people were

not represented in the government and their voices were not heard in the court. This was against the interests of the upcoming bourgeoisie class and they managed to collect public opinion against the aristocratic domination. They collected public opinions in order to get representation in the government/state and influence the decision making process. Eventually, a public sphere was formed as a platform for opinion building, negotiation and pressurising the authorities.

A large majority of the people remained outside the so called public sphere and the process of opinion formation. Take the case of women's suffrage as an example. It took years' of struggles and continuous demands for the modern democratic countries to extend voting rights to women, that too during the first quarter of the 20th century. It is in this context that the idea of oppositional public sphere or counter public becomes significant.

The main criticism against the Habermasian idea of public sphere is that it did not include a larger section of people in the society. Critics of Habermas offered better versions of public spheres which are better phrased as counter publicspheres. Nancy Fraser argues that the bourgeois public sphere was "constituted by a number of significant exclusions" (Fraser, 1992, p113) and it discriminated against women and other historically marginalised groups. The network of clubs and other public access avenues were not accessible to every public alike (Fraser, 1992, p114). Rather, such places were "the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" and preparing to assert their fitness to govern" (Fraser, 1992, p114). She identifies that "the members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics" (Fraser, 1992, p123). As a response to this omission, she proposes the idea of subaltern counterpublics which operate parallel to the mainstream public sphere. Such parallel publics are envisaged as discursive spaces "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1992, p123). Evoking Spivak's "subaltern" and Rita Felski's "counterpublic", Fraser

proposes that “counterpublics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant publics and that their existence better promotes the ideal of participatory parity” (Kampourakis, 2016). She refuted the claim that there is an all-inclusive universal public sphere. Instead she argued for a subaltern counterpublic or counterpublics where the marginalised and excluded social groups can work together.

An alternative version of the Habermasian idea of public sphere was offered by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge also. They were arguing to include the proletariats and the working class in the category of the public. In their 1972 collaborated work entitled, *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* Kluge and Negt pointed out that the Habermasian public sphere ignored the existence of other public spheres and reflected and protected the specific interests of the bourgeoisie” (Sandhu, 2007, p63). Habermas, according to Kluge and Negt has documented the historical fact that, although the public sphere was theoretically open to anyone, it was in practice restricted to those who owned property. As Habermas puts it, “only property-owning private people were admitted to a public engaged in critical political debate” (Sandhu, 2007, p63). Kluge and Negt are of the opinion that, though Habermas records the history of the formation of the public sphere, he fails to establish its economic foundations (Sandhu, 2007, p63). Kluge and Negt argue for the establishment of an oppositional public sphere which is a type of public sphere that is “changing and expanding, increasing the possibilities for a public articulation of experience” (Kluge, 1981, p211). Kluge argued for the proper distribution of information as the backbone of oppositional public sphere. Establishing a line of communication by carrying one piece of information from one place to another, the oppositional public sphere can expand the scope of existing public sphere (Kluge, 1981, p212).

Ideas like oppositional public spheres or counter publics have helped the concept of public sphere to evolve as a more accessible concept which is more democratic and fluid in nature. It is to this category of oppositional and counter publics that digital public fits in as a ground breaking and radical phenomenon. The emergence of the digital public sphere is a revolutionary milestone in the history of hu-

man interaction and opinion formation because digital media technology turned the existing hierarchical/vertical order of mass media upside down. As explained earlier, the fourth industrial revolution made the availability of digital technology incredibly low-cost and popular thus enabling the economically and socially weaker sections of the society access newer technologies at cheaper prices.

Digital public sphere is constituted by a variety of online platforms like social networking sites, blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms etc. where every participating individual can relate to each other on a peer-to-peer basis. The open ended nature of the interaction between the participants and the non-hierarchical model of information-sharing are central to the function of digital public sphere. In fact, it was the disenfranchised sections of the society who benefited most from the popularization and democratization of technology.

As the digital public sphere evolved as a powerful social presence, more people from the subaltern sections like women, sexual minorities, non-white people, Dalits, aboriginals, racial, linguistic and religious minorities got access to hitherto exclusive public realms and 'virtual' social life. The marginalised people became more visible in the new digital public sphere and started actively involving in politics. The MeToo Movement, online platforms for LGBTQ communities, numerous social media communities for differently-abled people or other minorities are examples of how the digital media gives more visibility to such people.

Human rights and environmental activists like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg received better media visibility and attention mainly due to the fact that they use the digital public sphere for advocating their causes. Online political movements like Arab Spring, BlackLivesMatter (BLM), Citizen Journalism and MoJo (Mobile Journalism) are other examples which illustrate the impact of digital public sphere on socio-political topography.

A 2016 survey initiated by Women in Parliaments Global Forum, Facebook and the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy of the Harvard Kennedy School studied the social media participation of female parliamentarians from around 107 countries. The study found that more than 85 percent of participants are active

users of social media, especially during the campaign period (“Social media”). However, women are still underrepresented when it comes to digital careers. For instance a UN report illustrates the poor representation of women in online journalism (“Visualising”).

The contemporary digital societies are living in a new kind of public sphere which is truly global or even universal in nature (at least in principle). In the 21st century post- capitalist societies, the cyber space has grown beyond national boundaries and a new global public sphere is growing out of it. The internet is bringing in a better understanding of the idea and practice of democracy where organization, discussion, protests, contestation, political struggle and opinion formation are assuming a better and more participatory paradigm.

The digital public sphere is a contested ground which is accessed and controlled by antidemocratic forces and totalitarian states as well. As illustrated above, it is a fact that the weaker sections of the society are empowered by the new digital public sphere. Likewise the individuals who participate in the digital public sphere are exposed to many challenges also. In the coming section, some of the threats and challenges which are part of the digital public sphere are explained.

The primary qualm is regarding the very status of ‘public’ in digital public sphere. How ‘public’ is the digital public sphere? A mere peripheral analysis of the structure of digitally mediated public sphere will reveal the fact that it is not at all public in the authentic sense. The digital devices and networking services which enable digital and social media function are owned by private corporate firms. The major share of the digital capital on a global scale is owned, managed and monopolised by a handful of tech giants like Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon-The Big Four as they are called. The network services are provided by an array of similar private companies. In effect what we call the digital public sphere which is mediated by the internet is actually a collection of devices, infrastructure and network services provided by a host of private conglomerates. Hence the very existence of a digital public sphere is paradoxical in itself, because it is not open to all or is accessible only to those who are willing to abide the rules set by the owners. The ‘public’ in digital public is actually private. As a consequence, the private companies which own and man-

age the digital space are more loyal to the governments than to the public.

The involvement of social media giants in unethical practices like manipulation of public opinion, voter manipulation and election rigging across the globe also is a major threat to the evolution of an unbiased digital public sphere. Facebook- Cambridge Analytica Scandal is a typical example of voter manipulation. The personal data of millions of Facebook users was collected without their consent by British consulting agency Cambridge Analytica to use for political advertising (Meredith, 2018). There are reports from countries like USA and India that social media has manipulated contents in order to influence public opinions.

Manipulation of public opinion, election rigging, misinformation and concealment of information are possible in the digital public sphere. A recent report on global disinformation based on a survey conducted around 70 countries provides a detailed analysis of how governments and political parties employ cyber troops to influence public opinion (“Oxford”).

Key findings of the study include:

- 1 Organized social media manipulation has more than doubled since 2017, with 70 countries using computational propaganda to manipulate public opinion.
- 2 25 countries are working with private companies or strategic communications firms offering a computational propaganda as a service.
- 3 Facebook remains the platform of choice for social media manipulation, with evidence of formally organised campaigns taking place in 56 countries. (“Oxford”).

Samantha Bradshaw, Lead author of the report and Researcher, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford says: “Although social media was once heralded as a force for freedom and democracy, it has increasingly come under scrutiny for its role in amplifying disinformation, inciting violence, and lowering trust in the media and democratic institutions” (“Oxford”). The very concept of post-truth entered into the general debate in the context of misinformation and media manipulation in the age of new media.

The prevailing digital divide is another important factor which slows down the effective growth of the digital public sphere and disrupts the prospect of involving more marginalised sections into the process of democracy. A large number of people, especially in the third world countries are still denied of equal access to the digital world. They are not part of the public debates which take place in the digital public sphere. Progressive societies are supposed to work towards bridging the digital gap and bringing more people to the opinion making domains. In the last couple of years after the Covid-19 outbreak, we have seen how the pandemic deepened the digital divide. A 2020 report of World Economic Forum states how the rapid shift to e-learning prompted by the pandemic has resurfaced long-standing issues of inequality and a digital divide in India (Modi, 2020). Based on recent surveys, the report concludes that fewer than 15% of rural Indian households have internet access (as opposed to 42% urban Indian households). A mere 13% of people surveyed (aged above five) in rural areas — just 8.5% of females — could use the internet (Modi, 2020).

The increased visibility of women, sexual and other minorities in the social media and digital public sphere has triggered digital abusers across the globe. Cyber bullying and cyber intolerance are the third challenge upsetting the smooth functioning of digital public. The cases of ‘slut shaming,’ ‘hate-speech’ and ‘political shaming’ are increasing along with the growing visibility of women, minorities and LGBTQ in the digital space. The disenfranchised sections are the victims of cyber violence and bad experiences in the social media may discourage or even intimidate them. And chances are there that eventually they may shy away from such spaces for fear of being abused. This is a serious threat to the digital public sphere.

What constitutes the biggest threat to the existence of a free and fair digital public sphere is governmental intervention by means of undemocratic controlling measures like draconian cyber rules and stringent cyber surveillance. Paranoid governments across the globe are metamorphosing into the Orwellian Big Brother who secretly watches the citizens. Governments/states from time immemorial had always been sceptical about individuals who are active in the public sphere

because they were actively consolidating public opinion in administrative affairs. Surveillance is often used against people's privacy. Social activists who are associated with civil rights and human rights movements are mostly targeted by governments all over the world. Governments, throughout history, never liked individuals or groups which question them. The emergence of digital technology in fact made the job easier for governmental surveillance because it is easier to track the digital footprints of 'suspicious' individuals. But the surveillance states around the world pose a serious threat to the fearless existence of a digital public sphere. The conflict between ever controlling surveillance states and participants of digital public sphere is detrimental to fulfilling the democratic ideals in progressive societies.

Public sphere is central to the proper functioning of democracy, because public opinions are formed there. There should always be a free and a totally 'public' platform where people can fearlessly express their political views and intervene in the decision making process. In the highly globalised and digitally connected world, the scope of a digital public sphere is actually global. Governments across the world should jointly think of establishing a truly digital commons which is jointly owned and managed by a group of governments, not a conglomerate of private firms as it is today. The establishment of an authentic and truly 'public' digital public sphere is the need of the hour.

What we really need is a digital commons public sphere which functions on a global scale. Such a public sphere is to be envisioned as a community-owned consortium which is involved in the production, distribution and management of a digital commons. It should provide free and easy access to information to the participating communities and should enable the participants to engage in interaction with each other without any undemocratic intervention by authorities. That is how democracies attain maturity.

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