

**Seminar on**  
**Social Networking Media-Current Trends and**  
**Research Challenges**

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As every school girl knows, Wikipedia is part of Social Media. Since the type and characteristics of social media are changing, a Wikipedia article starts by saying that Social media **includes** web-based and mobile technologies used to turn communication into interactive dialogue. Of course, it then goes into complicated definitions of social media which is characterised by creation and exchange of user-generated content.

It defines social networking service as an online service, platform, or site that focuses on building and reflecting of social networks or social relations among people, who, for example, share interests and/or activities.

As you know, social media takes many forms such as user groups, weblogs, microblogging, wikis, photo and video sharing and even link sharing services. By organising a seminar on Social Networking Media here, the Department is focusing on mobile phones with interactive and networking capabilities; Internet based photo sharing, social bookmarking, social networks, twitter, blogs and video sharing.

Many people are on the Web primarily for using social networks and email, if not almost entirely. The benefits they derive vary. If socialising is the purpose, it is fulfilled. But, you will know many of your friends only through the virtual world. Connections are easier to establish but the interaction is devoid of certain charms or propensities of the physical world. Even in a video chat, you may not be able to gauge the body language of the person you are chatting with. There are also limits to flames as well as intimacy.

But, that is with respect to person to person communication only. Social networking media is much more than that. It facilitates online **sharing** of multimedia— articles, photos, videos and what not. This opens up immense possibilities in communication— from personal to professional and from casual to the studied. Its impact is so vast and potential so high, that the traditional media also embraces and make use of it. It takes the shape of mass media because of the sheer number of people you could reach through certain services such as facebook or twitter.

### **Power of SNM**

The power of social networking media in its avatar as mass media is immense. It facilitated the mass uprisings in Arab and a few other countries which came to be called the Arab spring. There have been revolutions in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, civil war in Libya and uprisings and protests in several other countries. It was notable that much of the movement was in form of civil resistance. Social networking media were used for the campaign that involved creating awareness and organising strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies.

They (social networking media) fuelled the Occupy Wall Street agitation last year that spread to other parts of the world. Facebook pages on OWS appeared within days of the protests starting on a call from Adbusters Media Foundation and #OccupyWallStreet started trending, not locally but in other parts of the world. (There was a debate as to why it did not trend in New York or Boston). Trending topics on Twitter has emerged as technological tool to gain attention of large number of people to various developments and issues.

Lately, social networks have also been able to force policy decisions. The withdrawal of Stop Internet Piracy Act and the Protect Intellectual Property Act in the United States is a case in point. Elsewhere, a private foundation was forced to reverse its decision to withdraw support for breast cancer screening at its Planned Parenthood programme. Protests over such issues develop within days because of the reach of the social networking media.

The emergency in India and the election that followed had shown us that inter-personal communication stronger than the traditional mass media. The Congress led by Indira Gandhi was routed though the mass media was gagged, just because people communicated by the word of mouth. The new networking media combines the power of the person to person

communication and that of the mass media in reaching large audiences. The impact is there for everyone to see. It helps further democratization of our polity.

The social media also aids dissemination of information in a variety of ways. It is now possible to have answers to your doubts and questions from experts from online community question answer sites. Many computer programmers keep pace with technology developments and update their skills because of the help they get from questions answer sites dealing with specific topics. Quick knowledge updation thus becomes possible.

### **Music going Viral**

Social media networking has made some phenomenal successes possible. Santhosh Pandit of Kerala shot to fame recently just through negative publicity on YouTube. YouTube clips of his songs attracted an unprecedented number of abusive comments on YouTube which became the basis of his popularity or infamy. He figured among the most popular searches on Google in India. His popularity or infamy was higher among overseas Keralites than in Kerala. People competed to criticise him that some alleged that Pandit had been able to get finance from non-Malayalees by showing the number of comments in Malayalam which his songs had received. The non-Malayalees, it is jocularly said, did not realise that it was all hate messages and criticism.

The songs were from a film, Krishnanum Radhayum, he was producing. The film maker himself had done the story, dialogue, script, direction, music, lyrics, fights, art, costumes and editing besides donning the role of the protagonist. Some said that he was having a record in handling all the departments himself that Guinness Book of records would soon give the credit to him. That is if the publishers took the film seriously. The film broke all notions of cinema. Not being a handsome man or a good actor, he undermined our concepts of hero. It was a sort of caricature of a film, with Pandit lampooning formula-based films. "My film has eight fights and eight songs," Santhosh told an interviewer.

As there was no takers among distributors for the film, Pandit himself rented out theatres and showed the film. The film ran on packed houses for days. It is said that cinema, for the first time, became interactive as Pandit's film was shown. For every word spoken by Pandit and his characters in the film, there was an equal and opposite reaction from the audience, sometimes with

the choicest abuses. The audience shouted and lampooned. Some got so angry that the seats of the theatres suffered the damage. One story has it that some elders had gone to see the film thinking that it was a devotional film. Hearing the vituperative dialogue, they had to run out of the theatres.

Thanks to the social networking media, Sathosh Pandit became a phenomenon. It cannot be said that the film did not entertain. The audience enjoyed the fun of criticizing him for something that normally would not have received much attention. Fans gathered around Santhosh when he went to inaugurate a beauty parlour at Perinthalmanna in Kerala after his film won notoriety. There were rotten eggs and tomatoes too from the crowd. But why worry, it only served to increase the 'popularity' of his songs. Shots of the reception too became a hit on the YouTube with more than a lakh hits.

### ***Kolaveri di***

The song *Kolaveri di* is yet another case of a song that went viral because of the social networking media. It was with a leaked version that the popularity of the song began to surge. There has been nearly five million downloads of the song so far. Though the rendering is pleasing, it lacks any worthwhile lyrics. The lyrics are written in a mixture of English and Tamil which itself is considered to be one of the reasons for the popularity of the song. The singer Dhanush calls it a soup song, meaning the song of a lover who is in the soup, having been ditched by his lover. The ditched lover begins by asking the girl, why this *kolaveri* (murderous rage). It has been criticised of being anti-woman and even racist, though the song would have been the result of spontaneous coinage of lines in English, Tamil and a mixture of both. The mood is a mildly rebellious which probably caught on with the younger generation.

We know many genres of folklore existed before the advent of classical music. They still exist and are popular still. May be the virtual world is now spawning a modern version of folklore. We are probably seeing a folk culture emerging through the social networking media. There is even a remix of Santosh Pandit and *Kolaveri di* song and a classical rendering of *Kolaveri*. The Carnatic fusion has also gone viral on the Internet. It was produced by a group of music lovers, collaborating through social networking media, and posted to soundcloud.com

## **Problems with SNM**

The social networking media is not without its pitfalls. People, especially the youth, spent a lot of time in communicating through social networks. Much of their time is wasted. For instance, statistics provided by Pear Analytics show that 44 per cent of posts on twitter are spam and pointless chatter. Users have to wade through them, wasting a lot of time in the process. In the traditional communication, we never faced such a situation. (Of course, users can limit chatter by carefully choosing followers.)

Similarly, it is almost impossible not to miss soft porn on YouTube. A significant portion of You Tube indeed belongs to this category and is among popular offerings on the site. Though Google provides for a kind of 'community policing' that allows contents to be tagged by users as adult material, it is largely ineffective. The volume of uploads is so large that none could actually keep a tab on them. Still, some kind of proscription doesn't appear to be the answer to the problem. Perhaps the best way to deal with is to view it in shades of grey instead of black and white and advise users accordingly. As we did in ancient times, peers should teach the new generation to see merit in shades of grey rather than trying to banish anything totally. Bans hardly ever work, especially in open societies.

## **Challenge to Governments**

As we saw earlier, social networking media is posing certain challenges to governments. Many governments are finding it difficult to censor things to their liking. There is the fear that the social networking media are being used not only to challenge government and bring about political changes but also to promote communalism and to organise terrorist activities. However, more than security concerns, the real concern of many governments is defeat in the battleground of ideas. Some governments have come forward to engage people through the social networking media. Some have prepared dos and don'ts for government servants when they engage the crowd through such media.

Governments have also started giving information directly to public through online media. This, to some extent threatens the traditional media, on which governments used to rely heavily in the past. So, traditional media in the coming years would have to move more towards analysis of the information provided. Businesses are also coming to rely on online advertising and new ways of communicating with the networked communities. So, traditional

media would have to face the reality that their advertisement revenues may suffer. Transformations in media usage and culture are inevitable. As governments start giving out information directly to the public, transparency improves.

### **SNM promotes democracy**

There is little doubt that the social networking media have aided democratisation of countries and bolster democracy where it existed. Unlike in the past, larger sections of the governed could now easily participate in the democratic debates. In India, the right to freedom of expression under Article 19 of the Constitution is the right of the citizens and not the media. And we know that this often gets translated into the right of the owner of the media. This situation is indeed facing a challenge now. You cannot run an online media these days without some provision for interactivity. With increasing volumes of user response, gate keeping functions of media would diminish for good or bad.

### **Concerns**

The emerging situation indeed give rise to concerns about privacy, libel, hate speech and other objectionable material on the Web. Courts have started insisting that objectionable material should be removed by service providers. Freedom of expression, as we know, is subject to reasonable restrictions and limitations. The debate over the limits of freedom of expression is an ongoing process. I am not going into it. However, the character of the social networking media demands that it should be given some leeway.

### **Behavioural transformations**

Social networking has brought about a phenomenal transformation in social behaviour in respect of building relationships. The new generation nowadays begins their relationships not in the physical world but in the virtual world. And we know that social relationships are fundamental to human behaviour, communal formations and organization as race and nation. How will such fundamental transformations affect communities? Will they help people to transcend limits of religion, race and nationalities? Research could possibly point to answers.

In the past boys and girls met on the dancing floors, festivals and fairs or place of worship or playgrounds or at work places. Now, youth are transcending the biological requirements of falling in love, of mutual attraction caused by sight, smell, voice, behaviour and what not, and

proving that they could fall in love in the virtual world, at times, even without the exchange of photos and videos.

Are such relationships stable? We often say they are not. But there were many unstable relationships in the physical world too. May be a deeper study is needed into the changing profile of relationships, if not in communication, in sociology. Some research has shown that there is a limit to the number of real friendships or inter-personal relations one is capable of. Then, how is the new generation coping with large number of followers, connections or fans?

### **Research challenges**

Research into new technologies is rapidly evolving, covering both the social and technological aspects of social networking media. Security agencies would want research on surveillance of unlawful activities on the Web while business would want to gauge the impact of their advertising and compare it with effectiveness of advertising in traditional media. Users would want research on spam detection and blocking of advertisements. All involved would want trend predictions. However, much about social networking media is unpredictable, not to mention research trends. I leave it to you to discuss what the current challenges in the field are.

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