

Civic Engagement: Examining the Role of Media Literacy in Digital Activism

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Abstract

The contemporary Indian public sphere especially has been testimony to the rise of digital activism as a powerful form of civic participation where citizens can gather around issues such as agrarian distress, gender justice, institutional accountability, and others. Today, in the Indian public sphere, digital activism has become a prominent force for civic engagement, empowering citizens to unite on issues of agrarian distress, gender justice, institutional accountability and beyond. While the increased ownership of smartphones and cheaper mobile data has made the political public sphere more inclusive, they have also made it vulnerable to misinformation, echo-chambers and “click tivism”. The paper is about media literacy’s ability to bridge the divide between the momentary nature of digital engagement and more sustained civic participation. Through the works of Henry Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture and Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy, this paper contends that media literacy skills are an important civic competency required for the robustness of democracy. The paper, by exploring recent cases from India such as the farmers’ protests (2020-2021), the grassroots mobilization of COVID-19 aid networks and student movements like the #MeToo India and the anti-CAA protests, illustrates that media literacy enables individuals to authenticate information, resist disinformation, to coordinate distributed agency and to convert outrage into tangible, real-world action. Through these analyses, movements embedded with media literacy skills proved to be more resistant to misinformation and more effective.

This paper discusses institutional barriers that impede media literacy in India which include the continuing digital divide along with lines of gender, caste and geographies and challenges such as linguistic diversity and political polarization. It also suggests ways of overcoming such obstacles. The paper concludes with proposing a multi-stakeholder model of integrating media literacy education, NGO activity and policy making, essential to the democratic structure in India and in making digital activism a true tool of civil participation and social justice.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Digital Activism, Media Literacy, India, Misinformation, Participatory Democracy

1. Introduction

India's relationship with the state has been irrecoverably changed by the emergence of the digital. With over 800 million internet users and a dominant way of accessing the web through affordable smartphones, India has been one of the largest and most rapidly expanding digital public sphere in the world (IAMAI, 2023). In tandem with this hyperconnectivity is the rise of political expression in its digital manifestation—digital activism. From hash tag activism like #Me Too India to the mobilization of huge protests like those held in 2020-21 during the farmers' movements, digital space have come to be one of the most important sites of citizenship. But the digital space is not without its share of problems. While the digital tool has been used to mobilize citizens on an unprecedented scale, it has also helped spread deep fakes, communal misinformation, and organized trolling. The question of slacktivism, of the extent to which these online low-risk, low-effort digital engagements such as "liking a post or changing a profile picture are used as a substitute for action" is a key contention for activists and scholars alike (Morozov, 2009). In this context, media literacy appears as the key variable, which will turn digital noise into true civic engagement. This paper will answer the following two questions: How media literacy influences the effectiveness of digital activism in India? What methods of promoting media literacy can help promote strong

civic engagement? In this way, it contributes to the expanding body of literature on digital citizenship in the Global South by arguing that in India, literacy now refers to a capacity to discern, to verify, and to organise.

2. Theoretical Framework

To grasp how civic engagement, media literacy and digital activism are intertwined, two theories will be applied in this article: The notion of participatory culture by Henry Jenkins and critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire.

2.1. Participatory Culture and Civic Potential

According to Henry Jenkins, “participatory culture. Has low barriers to artistic and civic involvement...Fans, hobbyists, and citizens are becoming active creators and producers rather than passive consumers” (2006). The citizen journalists and activists on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram have had a direct impact in creating the national discourse on events like the Manipur ethnic violence or Kerala floods. However, Jenkins notes that participation alone may not result in civic outcomes, as such, media literacy enables such participation to develop civic potential by providing tools such as collaboration, network building and critical evaluation.

2.2. Critical Pedagogy and Empowerment

Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed is crucial in the orizing critical literacy as ‘reading the word and the world’. For Freire, ‘education is not a process of acquiring and depositing knowledge in the minds of individuals, but rather one of liberation, aimed at the development of ‘conscientization’ which can be interpreted as acquiring an awareness and then interacting within one’s social reality’. In the internet era critical media literacy implies an engagement with media content, not merely to decode it, but to pose fundamental questions concerning power and structures that support the production of the messages contained in the media. While class, caste and gender hierarchies are already strong sources of disparity in India, critical media literacy aims to

empower the citizens to take direct action against oppression within these digital spaces, demanding a political voice on these platforms.

3. India's digital sphere: strengths and weaknesses

The digital sphere in India is unique; the mass of new internet users from rural and low-income backgrounds began to flow in with Reliance Jio's introduction of mobile internet services in 2016, with a dramatic reduction in the cost of mobile data access.

This democratization of access is however, good and bad: On one hand, this unprecedented access has provided an infrastructure for mass mobile saturation. The 2020-21 farmers' protests in particular were largely mobilized by Punjabi Diaspora networks through Instagram which provided connect and communication with local farmers, and with a well organized media strategy that ensured the successful broadcast of the protests through international media channels, even featuring interviews with rural farmers who clearly articulated their grievances to an international audience (Kaur, 2021) through well organized use of digital tools, implying a high degree of 'grassroots media literacy'. On the other hand, India is one of the country's most vulnerable to disinformation; the spread of forwarded messages on Whatsapp often featuring doctored images and videos leading to riots and mobs (Parthasarathy, 2020), the extensive use of bots by political parties during elections etc have further polluted the internet sphere. India, thus is in a paradox of having tools of massive civic engagement at disposal, but a largely poisoned internet sphere where media literacy can effectively filter the useful out of the vast digital noise.

4. The Mediating Role of Media Literacy

It is argued in this section that media literacy is a mediator between digital activism and substantive civic engagement. This function is explained in three folds, verification, contextualization, and translation.

4.1. Verification: combating fake news

A citizen's capacity to verify source information whether by finding out whether the image in a WhatsApp forwarded message was indeed what it was purported to be, whether the metadata of a video was genuine, or by cross-checking the stated facts with the official version, becomes the most immediate role of media literacy, between a citizen who believes in an online movement that stands on facts and one who believes in a false digital movement. In a world filled with WhatsApp forward messages, this becomes crucial. During COVID 19, for example, the Indian state spray disinfection from the skies and detaining migrant workers, etc, spread through social media sites, where it was fact-checked, as with The Covid SOS India network (volunteer led organization) which tried to find and circulate accurate information about availability of oxygen, beds, plasma donors through its citizen network of digital activists. By becoming a "digital gate-keeper" these citizens mediated between information and its reception and turned online activity into saving civic participation.

4.2. Contextualization: underst and the details

Digital activism and the spread of social movements through it often simplify complex issues into tweet-able tags, making them accessible but failing to build up to deeper, long term civil engagement unless citizens understand the context behind an issue. Media literacy plays this role of giving context through making sure that citizens grasp the social, historical, and legal backdrop behind the issue at hand. In the case of student movements against the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019-2020, which were highly polarized on social media sites (supporters: secular, constitutional; detractors: anti-national), a citizen with high media literacy skills would look beyond memes and short videos, at the detailed legal text of the bill, its historical background regarding Indian citizenship, and the parliamentary debates on the topic. By engaging in this, citizens will find a deeper understanding, that allows them to formulate more informed arguments when writing their

opinions to the media, participating in meetings with elected representatives, or participating in a legal demonstration, rather than just forwarding a tweet.

4.3. Translation: to action from on-line activities

The true measure of civic engagement lies in the effect it has in the real world. Media literacy enables the “translation” of digitally mobilized energy to offline action, as a part of digital activism and mobilization. It refers to citizen skills in digital organization such as using encrypted chats to secure activists, google forms for resource management and mapping software for co-ordination. Feminist and women’s rights groups in India, in fact, rely greatly on media literacy skills as they often use digital platforms after cases such as Nirbhaya (2012) to call for demonstrations and create new reporting networks. A campaign like Pinjra Tod against curfews in hostels for women utilizes digital activism to create support for, and organize protests, alongside on ground action. Its success at engaging in the anti-surveillance, anti-trolling environment was a result of the ability of these activists to use their media literacy skills for a specific goal, and its failure without them might result in online outrage which stays exactly that.

5. Challenges: Barriers to Media Literacy in India

It’s really important to discuss what hinders Media Literacy. We see a lot of structural problems that prevent Media Literacy from being successfully adopted in India:

5.1. The Digital Divide

We have made significant progress in terms of internet accessibility in the country but it is still a divided landscape. How much people can access the internet depends upon the gender, caste, and location. As shown by IAMAI, men were twice as likely to have access to a mobile phone and unrestricted internet than women in rural areas. Marginalised caste groups faced prejudice in the digital space, leading them to self-censor themselves or leave the platform entirely. It would be pointless to focus on the pedagogical use of Media Literacy without taking these disparities into account.

5.2.Linguistic Diversity

India is a country with numerous languages. Although discussions on digital activism oftentake place in English, a large portion of the online population consume their information in vernacular languages such as Tamil, Hindi, Bengali and Marathi. Misinformation on these local languages are often more destructive than its english counterpart because there are less people dedicated to fact checking the news. To truly be impactful, Media Literacy needs to be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

5.3. Political Polarization and Echo Chambers

The nature of how social media platforms work through algorithms have caused a trend of “echo chambers”, that constantly provide its users with the information that reinforces existing views and makes the users immune to counter claims and false facts. In such scenarios, even highly digitally literate individuals may not be able to accept verified information if it conflicts with their political ideology; this is what they term “identity protective cognition”.

5.4. Pathways for Improving Media Literacy

India needs a “multistakeholder” approach toward developing and increasing the reach of Media Literacy programs. This approach needs to incorporate not just schools and civil societies, but the various institutions that the media literacy program is intended to interact with.

5.5. Formals Education Reform

The current system of education in India solely focuses on rote memorization and traditional literacy. However, NEP 2020 brings new opportunities for promoting critical thinking and usage of technology through a “holistic, multidimensional approach to learning”. We must introduce school curricula that train students to “detect fallacies of logic, verify digital sources and understand the algorithms that drive online experiences.” However, media literacy needs to be part of not just a single subject but interwoven into languages, social sciences, computer sciences and many other subjects.

5.6. Civil Society and Grassroots Training

NGOs and local community groups are leading the fight to expand Media Literacy to the ground level. Organisations like the “Digital Empowerment Foundation” and “Internet Saathi” (a Google and Tata Trusts partnership) have trained numerous women in rural areas. These programs, however, need to transcend their “operational” goals and expand towards teaching “critical” skills. The role of the local library and the local radio stations should not be overlooked as these spaces may function as an “information hub”.

5.7. Institutional and Platform Accountability

The problem of Media Literacy cannot be seen as an individual responsibility alone. Social media platforms hold immense responsibility for the amplification of destructive and biased content. The Indian IT Minister has enacted rules about media platforms, but they have also been criticized for possibly overstepping boundaries of free speech and interfering with the democratic process. A careful balance must be struck where platforms are made transparent and take part in collaborative efforts with experts to prevent the spread of fake news without infringing user privacy and free speech.

5.8. Intergenerational and Peer Learning

Within the existing Indian family system, there are ample opportunities for learning between generations. While the young are digitally fluent, they often lack the context and experience to critically analyze information like their elders. By promoting dialogues between members of the household about online safety and critically evaluating news, families can be “resilient community-based defense” mechanisms against misinformation.

6. Case study: The Farmer’s Protest (2020-2021)

To demonstrate the arguments made, the Farmers’ Protest has been chosen as a representative event of a large-scale citizen led social mobilization utilizing the internet to such a significant extent. A movement against three agricultural laws that continued for over a year and a half witnessed

numerous farmers from the older generation (many of them from rural Punjab and Haryana) forming and managing WhatsApp groups and other forms of social media to disseminate information, organize supply chains for food and medical supplies and arrange for meetings (khappanchay at sortraditional village councils). This was happening simultaneously to the social media campaign managed by young people and a network of Indian diasporas on X, Instagram and Facebook.

6.1. The Role of Media Literacy:

- **Detection:** This enabled fact-checkers working under various independent Twitter handles (for example, @FarmsFactCheck) to combat government-funded fake news about protesting farmers burning fields or blocking roads with extreme violence.
- **Translation:** This allowed to translate individual grievances to a language that could be recognized and accepted as an issue of “human rights” globally and gain international support.
- **Resilience:** Although many attempts were made to undermine the farmers and smear their image as “foreign funded” or “Khalistani terrorists,” their support base was relatively untouched and they maintained their composure due to a level of social cohesion fostered by online messaging systems and careful media engagement.

However, there were disadvantages to the extent the platform was utilized. The same platforms used for support, also became a source for the spread of violence and propaganda against the farmers, highlighting the polarized role that the internet could play and the crucial part that Media Literacy played in separating reliable information from state-sanctioned misinformation.

7. Conclusion

The way citizens of India interact with each other and the way civic life operates are being molded and reshaped by technology. The potential for democratic participation and

empowerment offered by digital activism can, however be undermined by the spread of misinformation, a shallow understanding of the political implications of digital activities, and manipulation for individual or state-driven gain. This article proposes Media Literacy as the necessary link between citizen engagement with the internet and long-term participation in civil life. The definition of Media Literacy used here must expand beyond technical skills and include critical thinking, context and understanding of media ethics to encourage proper digital citizenship. If properly implemented, Media Literacy will help to erase the boundaries of gender, language and caste that currently fragment the Indian digital space. It can transform hashtags to food, online conversations to prolonged political struggle, and digital groups into resilient communities. This is the age of digital democracy, and it will be judged by how digitally literate citizens can decipher between truth and lies and translate online engagement to effective and meaningful real-world change. There must be an all-inclusive effort by educators, the government, civil society organizations and media platforms to establish Media Literacy as a priority if we are to truly believe in a democratic future.

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