Social Media and Ethics in Contemporary Age

Introduction by **M Shuaib Mohamed Haneef**

Our sociality is increasingly being shaped and moulded by a new cultural logic of production, distribution and consumption afforded by digital technologies. We confront a new paradigm of collaborative and networked communication through the circuits of social media. Whether it is for individual's expression or for community involvement, the use of digital media has become a product of multiple social contexts. The use and prevalence of social media is a subject that is on the rage. However, the dynamics of social media cannot be ascribed to its use in endemic proportions. Such a reductionistic or a limited approach to capture social media will miss the intricate import and changes they herald. In this context, the use of social media needs to be imbricated in their multiple literacies that transcend traditional skills, ethical challenges and participatory connectedness among users.

Ethical considerations in using social media could spell a breakdown of traditional professional principles and norms of socialisation. Further, the neo-liberal project of the self that engages in social media writing, questioning, trolling, meme-ing, countering governance, producing hate comments etc. is in the production of a self that accentuates agency. Foucault (1982) emphasised on the care of the self, a self that cultivates itself through the production of a free individual engaging with activities that it seeks to pursue. But, is it possible for one to do whatever s/he wants to do and 'be all s/he can be' in social media space? How does the individual, constituted as a neo-liberal subject and mysteriously governed by the power structures, navigate through space?

The agency of the neoliberal subject is a determinant of 'communicative capitalism (Dean, 2004). Flisfeder (2014) has argued that the stockpile of information in social media gives rise to an ethic of 'fully realizing the self'. Further, there is a need to revisit the question of 'liberation' in the context of new developments that we witness in the wake of new technologies. Is the neoliberal subject experiencing liberation or do technologies become new modes of control and surveillance systems perpetrating domination? These are important questions that inflect self and ethicality of the self.

The expanding networks of entertainment intensify digital labour (Fuchs, 2014) and immaterial labour (Hardt & Negri, 2006) under the guise of freedom. Alongside, some of them remain as 'labour class' or 'subjugated class' excluded from the mainstream digital space bringing up the question whether the subaltern can speak.

Further, the rhetoric of mediated communication in social media has touched a new height with the public engaging in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) challenging and contesting the authority. While decentering of authority in social media space is not akin to the lack or absence of authority in it, the ethical challenges are being reframed and recast by users. While

the State seeks to police and discipline the use of social media for fear of receiving backlashes and to proscribe the rising intolerance of the public towards indiscretions committed by the government machinery, the manifestations of desire of the subject guided by affective involvement most often capitulates to and at times strives to overturn the regime of 'biopower'.

Rouvroy (2016) in her articulation on 'algorithmic governmentality' mentioned that soft biopolitics is getting naturalised. Soft biopolitics is less physical unlike hard biopolitics which wields control over individuals. Cheney-Lippold (2018) has stated that hard biopolitics operates on a social level while soft biopolitics engages life on a techno-social level. While the traditional biopolitical control sweeps individuals into a homogenised population stripping of markers of individuality, datafied control breaks individuals apart into parts called dividuals. In the 'algorithmic turn' (Napoli, 2014), data has pervasive powers to control and determine the conduct of the population. The algorithmic control is not exercised over the population or the mass but over dividuals. Dividuals are micro traits culled out of individuals: gender is a dividual as much as age, political affiliation, religion, liking for coffee, activism, crusading for the rights of Dalits, number of children one has to name a few. Our data and the metadata (data about data) that algorithms create by drawing information about what we do in social media and in digital space give rise to constructions of gender, race, wealth, identity etc. The intersection of algorithms and self has emerged as an intriguing academic domain that informs the normative concepts of self, identity, race etc.

The post-human paradigm of mediation is another necessary component in communication studies. From Haraway to Braidotti, the concepts of cyborgian subjectivity and nomadism provide a new materialism to understand subjectivities. Influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, Braidotti (2013) has rescued subjectivity and locates it in the signifying/asignifying practices of 'power' not letting subjectivity disappear in the human-nonhuman relationality. The hybrid notion of the posthuman decentres the human from its pedestal and has given rise to new implications for a hybridised account of epistemology, ontology and ethics that define the ways of being in the world.

The debut issue of Communication and Culture Review captures subjectivity formulations through insightful research articles from multiple perspectives. One of the articles emphasises on the need for deploying the prism of immanent ethics to understand social media communication and rituals within it. The arguments made in most of the articles in the first issue bring out multiplicities in terms of ontologies germane to social media and ethics.

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