



Reviews as Rituals on Social Media: Morality, Ethics and Immanence

Gopalan Ravindran

The complete system, then, consists of the paranoid face or body of the despot-god in the signifying center of the temple; the interpreting priests who continually recharge the signified in the temple, transforming it into signifier; the hysterical crowd of people outside, clumped in tight circles, who jump from one circle to another; the faceless, depressive scapegoat emanating from the center, chosen, treated, and adorned by the priests, cutting across the circles in its headlong flight into the desert. (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987, p-129).

(Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987.)

In a film supplement of a recent issue of a Tamil newspaper, the headline read as “Here There Are No Reviews.” These were the words of a female director of a Tamil film, Krithika Udayanidhi, who is the daughter-in-law of the leader of the opposition party (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam aka DMK) in Tamil Nadu, and the wife of an actor/producer, Udayanidhi. Her film *Kaali*, she felt, had become the victim of uninformed instant reviews on Youtube.

“..Everyone reviewed the film thinking it is a one line story. This was a great disappointment to me. When I was wondering how this mistake could happen, one thing became clear. All those who are doing reviews on Youtube and Internet are keen to attract the viewers quickly by uploading their reviews within half an hour of watching the film. The competition between these reviewers ignores the hard labour put in by directors like me for two years. There is also a comedy being enacted when these reviewers seek to copy each other’s reviews in order to go first in posting. How to consider these as reviews?” (Jayanthan, 2018, p.1).

These words capture the implication of the erasure of conventional reviews as media rituals and the emergence of a new environment caused by instant reviews on social media as media rituals. There are at least three approaches to engage with this changed scenario in which media

rituals and their benefactors and detractors find themselves. One is the conventional and uncritical approach which seeks to understand the shift from modes of institutionalized content creation and delivery to modes of non-institutionalized content creation and delivery aka “user generated content.” The second approach calls for understanding the shift in the political economy of reviews as content in a media economy that is caught between the attractions and pains of the old and new revenue models. The third approach is rooted in critical philosophy and theory and calls for a new vision and practices, on the part of four stake holders – the reviewers, the audience, those who feel aggrieved or elated by the acts of the reviewers and, more importantly, those who caused the birth of templates of social media which allow the proliferation of instant reviews as social media rituals. While the first approach does not lead us anywhere except providing an ephemeral understanding of the issues thrown up by instant social media reviews, the second approach provides the basis for a better working of the third approach. The second approach reveals the shifting sands of conventional media ownership, monopolistic practices in content creation, distribution and circulation and the falsity of the argument against reviews that are non-reviews. In the third approach lies the doorway to the exciting philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari which helps us to rethink rituals on social media in the contexts of morality and ethics.

Rituals have been approached differently by sociologists such as Durkheim, communication scholars like James Carey and philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari and Pierre Bourdieu. Durkheimian rituals have a sociological and functionalist role. James Carey’s notion of communication itself as a ritual mode was more interested in countering the transmission mode of communication. Carey was more interested in uncovering the implications of the act of communication when it diverges from the transmission mode. Deleuze and Guattari advocated a model of rituals which facilitated the rise of immanence and indeterminacy, rather than the Durkheimian order.

In the functionalist approach of Durkheim (1912), rituals are defined as collective practices which seek to keep the distinction between the “sacred” and “profane” in place and, consequently, the social order in the community. In the neo-functionalist approach of Pierre Bourdieu, rituals are sites of legitimacy and consecration. Said Bourdieu (1991, p.117), “In fact, it seems to me that in order to develop the theory of rites of passage any further, one has to ask the questions that this theory does not raise, and in particular those regarding the social function of ritual and the social significance of the boundaries or limits which the ritual allows one to pass over or transgress in a lawful way. ...That is why, rather than describing them as rites of passage, I would prefer to call them rites of consecration, or rites of legitimation, or, quite simply, rites of institution- giving this word the active sense it has, for example, in expressions like ‘institution d’un heritier’ (‘appointing an heir’).” For James Carey (1989/2009, p.15), communication is a ritual and ritual stands in as communication. As rituals embody the collective conscience, for Carey, “in a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith”.

Nick Couldry (2005) explored the dimensions of media rituals while seeking to be “post-Durkheimian and anti-functionalist”. Couldry argued the salience of his purpose as “the approach I take to ‘media rituals’ will be post-Durkheimian and anti-functionalist. These terms require some explanation. To be ‘post-Durkheimian’ is not to abandon Durkheim’s social theory as a reference-point, but to rethink our relation to Durkheim in a radical fashion, by

dropping any assumptions that underlying and motivating ritual is always the achievement of social order. To be 'anti-functionalist' generalizes the first point; it means opposing any form of essentialist thinking about society, not only functionalist accounts of society's workings (and media's role in them) but also the idea that society is essentially disordered and chaotic (indeed it is a rejection of any notion of social order that prevents some postmodern social theorists from seeing how much Durkheim still has to offer in explaining contemporary media rhetorics, once we work outside functionalist assumptions).

While Couldry succeeds in helping us rethink the Durkheimian functionalist model of rituals in the context of the media world, there are fundamental issues with his approach. Firstly, he is trapped in the legacy model of media as a site of dominant effects. Says Couldry (2005): "The media (in this sense) are involved in what I will call 'the myth of the mediated centre': the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speak 'for' that centre. This myth underlies our orientation to television, radio and the press (and increasingly the Internet), and our tendency to regard the massive concentration of symbolic power in those media institutions as legitimate. Symbolic power (if concentrated in this way) is a socially sanctioned 'power of constructing reality' (Bourdieu, 1991, p.166), and the practices I will call 'media rituals' draw upon and, in turn, reinforce the assumed legitimacy of the media's own concentration of symbolic power." He was emphatic that media rituals are access points for the social reality. This approach excludes the fact that social reality and media's symbolic power have probably zillion points of divergence than similarities to point towards any concrete semblance. The valorization of the symbolic power of media continues, in the same mould as the dominant paradigm model of communication, in Couldry's scheme where there is little or no basis.

Secondly, Couldry argues that rituals have to be looked at not as expressions of meanings, but power relations that constitute the media and social reality. He probably considers this as the virtue of the anti-functionalist approach. Meanings of rituals are as much about the power locations of the objects that concern the rituals as about their semantic locations. How to read the power relations constituted by the rituals and the process of ritualization without the meanings of expressions that speak about the power relations? This approach of Couldry assumes mistakenly that Durkheim's functionalist approach was less Foucauldian. Even though, Durkheim did not explicitly theorize power in the mode Foucault theorized, he was making his seminal contribution when he brought alive the locations of what he called as "interdictions" in separating the two entities "sacred" and 'profane". Thirdly, Couldry does not visualize in any manner that the very idea of casting away rituals as "media rituals" denies their existence as "communication rituals" and, consequently, as "socio-cultural and political rituals". Media are only one of the several social institutions and in the age of social media what qualifies as media may not be in conformity with the definitions of legacy media which governs the parameters employed by Couldry. In Couldry's scheme, media are seen as sites of institutionalized symbolic power and performers of rituals are seen as belonging to these institutions, content categories and the people and events (celebrities and live events etc.) that populate them. The lived locations of symbolic power, as constituted by the practices of those who are on the other side, the audience of media, are implicitly seen as less important by Couldry.

Conceptualizing rituals on a plane that incorporates the inadequacies of these approaches is the need of the hour if we wish to get serious about the examination of the rituals that are enacted on social media. More important is the need to rethink social media rituals from the vantage points of critical theories and philosophies.

One pragmatic approach to the conceptualization of rituals locates them more as vehicles that help us to transit between the antithetical points of ethics and morals. This approach also eschews narrow disciplinary or normative orientations. For instance, it is relevant to speak of social media rituals as immanent as they are functional. They are as sociological as they are non-sociological. They are as similar to conventional media rituals as they are to human communication rituals. More importantly, the Deleuzian position that morality is a constraint on freedom and ethicality is a doorway to freedom helps us to reposition rituals as practices that are caught between the worlds of morality and ethicality.

Any cursory glance at the ways in which traditional approaches to journalistic ethics dealt with the ideas of morality and ethicality is rooted in the logic that morality also stands as ethics. For instance, in one of the important works on journalistic ethics, Olen (1988, pp.5-6) says, "Occupational ethics must be shaped by two factors: the wider moral principles of a given society and the aims of the occupation in question." This approach continues its sway in the age of social media and journalistic practices that have become more un-journalistic. There is a need for a clear headed approach that can stay clear of the challenges posed by the traditional approach to media ethics and morals. The way out seems to be in the conceptualization of ethics and morals as done by Spinoza and emulated by Deleuze.

For both Spinoza and Deleuze (1988/2001), there is a sea of difference between morals and ethics. Morality is about the narrowly cast binary responses such as good and bad. Morality is more about the trap we all find ourselves in most situations. This trap is a trap that ensures our servitude to the binary world view of good and bad, right and wrong. There is no escape from this trap, if one does not move towards a framework where being good and bad is only a moral possibility. But becoming good and bad is a sure ethical possibility. Ethics have less to do with morals. They can be as good or bad as immoral. Ethics are about the potential of bodies that are caught up in an affective world to be sites of becomings. The sites of becomings are sites of immanence. There is nothing concrete about their nature as they are not about beings, but about bodies in the process of becomings. For rethinking social media and communication rituals of our age, we must employ the prism of immanent ethics. We will gain a radical and yet pragmatic view of rituals, the process of ritualization, the factors which condition such a process (questions of morality vs ethics) and the perennial issues thrown by the political economy approach (monopoly practices, corporatized ownership and content creation). Daniel Smith (2007, pp.67-68) provides a lucid summation of the Deleuzian notion of immanent ethics. "The fundamental question of ethics is not "What must I do?" (which is the question of morality) but rather "What can I do, what am I capable of doing (which is the proper question of an ethics without morality). Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities? How can I come into active possession of my power? How can I go to the limit of what I "can do"? What an ethics of immanence will criticize, then, is anything that separates a mode of existence from its power of acting—and what separates us from our power of acting are, ultimately, the illusions of transcendence." The person who is trapped in the mode of existence defined by morality is separated from his power of acting. He/she can not raise the question, "What can I do, what am I capable of doing"? When a film maker, like Krithika Udayanidhi, who is an integral part of the corporatized world of film making and is stuck very deep in the world of morality (as she is driven by the question "what must I do" to succeed with my film, monetarily and otherwise), is confronted by the beneficiaries of the same corporatized world of social media, who are driven by the question "What can I do, what am I capable of doing"?, there is an interesting lesson for us in Deleuzian ethics of immanence. Interesting, because it comes with a twist in logic.

While conventional approaches to political economy of communication, as inspired by the marxist approach, would not spare the corporatized worlds of the film makers and the social media, the approach rooted in Deleuzian ethics of immanence would value the power of actions/actors (social media reviewers) and their modes of existence (the social templates which make possible their power of actions/existence). Instant reviews, after all, flow as answers to the ethical questions (“What can I do, what am I capable of doing”?) provided to the users of social media despite the fact that those who own the corporatized social media are still wedded to the question of morality, (“What must I do to maximize my capital through incredible increase in the size of the users”?). It is an ironical world where the world of ethics draws its sustenance from the world of morality. This also calls into question the precondition of ethics of immanence that the mode of existence must not be separated from the power of action/actors. It is not an illusion of transcendence. It is real. It is immanent to the extent that the affects of the users and the men who provide conditions of affects (social media owners) are caught up in a meta becoming where the bodies of the capitalists and their subjects are made invisible to each other in terms of their existential questions and objectives. In our age of social media, morality does not/can not become ethicality. Ethicality springs forth from an insatiable site of institutionalized morality nurtured by global flows of capital, content and users. Instant reviews have not become non-reviews, as pointed out by Krithika Udayanidhi. They are the leit motifs of social media rituals which are growing in strength as sites of immanence. More importantly, they are helping us to expand and critique Deleuzian ethics of immanence.

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