MUTUAL INFLUENCES OF E-GOVERNANCE AND JOURNALISM

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Abstract

The Internet is an open medium with four major features: email, websites, search engines and multi-user domains. All these features should be optimally used for a participatory decision-making. E-governance is a tool for connecting people and sharing information. It will result in improved transparency, speedy information dissemination, higher administrative efficiency and improved public services in sectors such as transportation, power, healthcare and local administration. The transparency resulting out of the interactions would put governments through a high level of scrutiny. Journalism not only benefits from the transparency but also does its traditional job of ensuring transparency in governance in an effort to safeguard democracy. Increased sensitivity to the audience will make media outfits shed their image as being media-centred than audience-centred. You are an e-publisher if you choose to be. The role of the traditional editor as a "gatekeeper" in deciding what goes in calls for redefinition. In a small way, personalised web pages of portals already give the user some choice in determining his/her own news or information content. Thus the editor on the Internet has more of a democratic role. It also implies that the media could become less influential in 'setting the agenda'.

Abstrak

Internet merupakan medium yang bersifat terbuka yang mengandungi empat ciri utama: e-mel, laman web, enjin carian dan domain pelbagai pengguna. Kesemua ciri utama ini sepatutnya digunakan secara optima untuk tujuan penyertaan dalam buat putusan. Ia akan menghasilkan ketelusan penyebaran maklumat yang segera, kecekapan pentadbiran, perkhidmatan awam seperti pengangkutan, kuasa, kesihatan dan pentadbiran tempatan yang lebih baik dan berkesan. Ketelusan yang terhasil dari interaksi akan meletakkan kerajaan di tahap penilaian yang lebih baik. Kewartawanan bukan sahaja mendapat manfaat dari ketelusan malahan dapat meneruskan tugasan tradisinya dalam memastikan tertegaknya demokrasi. Peningkatan sensitiviti kepada khalayak akan mencerminkan media sebagai imej yang menumpukan kepada khalayak lebih daripada media. Sesiapa jua boleh menjadi penerbit di atas talian tetapi tanggungjawab tradisi penyunting sebagai pengampang memerlukan pengistilahan semula. Melalui laman web peribadi, pengguna boleh memilih kandungan berita dan informasi yang ingin disajikan dan

ini menjadikan mereka sebagai penyunting yang mempunyai peranan yang lebih demokratik. Ia juga memberi implikasi bahawa media boleh menjadi kurang berpengaruh dalam penentuan agenda.

Introduction

The right to information envisaged by electronic governance presupposes decentralisation in power structure and decision-making. The Internet is an open medium with four major features: email, websites, search engines and multi-user domains. All these features should be optimally used for a participatory decision-making. E-governance is a tool for connecting people and sharing information. It will result in improved transparency, speedy information dissemination, higher administrative efficiency and improved public services in sectors such as transportation, power, healthcare and local administration. Valid knowledge can only emerge from a situation of open, free and uninterrupted dialogue (Habermas 1994). The transparency resulting out of the interactions would put governments through a high level of scrutiny. Journalism not only benefits from the transparency but also does its traditional job of ensuring transparency in governance in an effort to safeguard democracy. This paper examines journalistic impacts on e-governance and vise versa, particularly in the context of India. The methodology adopted is a short email questionnaire for journalists and a review of an e-group of journalists which served as a focus group for the study.

The Internet has ushered in opportunities for people, particularly advocacy groups, to set the agenda for the media, directly or indirectly – attempting a topsy-turvy on the pattern of the media setting the agenda for people. Ideally, the media should be free from agendas and be unbiased. Any one group should not be allowed to hijack the media. If the media are not democratic, certain sections of society will not have a space in it. Information needs to be circulated in the public sphere so that people can get diverse information, make decisions for themselves, without any one group's agenda alone influencing their decisions. The Internet is more of a platform for interpersonal communication and sharing of ideas. You can be unanimous on the Web too. Even otherwise, it is difficult to check the authenticity of the sender of Internet messages. But the advantage is that you can express your views without fear. On the other hand, the language used in emails and newsgroups is closer to spoken and written word; and that in websites is closer to the simple, direct language of journalism.

Impact of e-governance

At least on paper, the Internet has made citizens conduct business with governments without leaving the comfort of their homes. Anyone, anytime can access information and give feedback. With journalism too creating awareness about information technology, the benefits of the Internet have started percolating. Information technology is often projected as a panacea for every problem. No doubt, it can enhance the capability in every field, but it is not a substitute for economic and technical inputs. The 'virtual world' can at best strive for the betterment of the real world by spreading information. Even a small provision for downloading application forms has helped eliminate the nuisance of middlemen. E-governance when it works can simplify many services but it also isolates those who do not have access to new technologies. This drawback can be overcome if governments install intranet kiosks in public places with staff to help out people not familiar with the technology. Or else, the digital divide would isolate the poor much more than before. At times, even if the infrastructure is in place, because of the lack of enough bandwidth, lack of training, and lack of service support to correct the faults that recur, e-governance remains a fancy term. e-Governance should not only eliminate middlemen but also promote transparency and efficiency. It could help reduce government and journalistic controls over information to a bare minimum, and develop a system that can administer in an efficient manner. This calls for a change in the mindset of the bureaucracy that still carries with it the 'babu' legacy handed down by the British colonial rule. The information sharing that now goes on in cyberspace is increasingly bypassing the traditional journalism's role of gathering, selecting and disseminating (Dahlgren 1997). The impact of the Internet can be felt in the changes taking place in newsrooms as well. The mindset of journalists too is changing – their approach to issues is changing. The interactivity component of the Internet has been an eye-opener to many.

e-Governance basically improves communication between the government and the citizens. Of late, governments have been putting out vast amounts of material on the Internet. A fair number of these would be available in hard copy as well. The material on websites can be accessed anytime. Governments find it helpful to provide information online because of quick communication and reduction in printing and stationery costs. The act of governments themselves communicating directly to citizens challenges the role of the media. One of the traditional roles of the media is to be the major channel of information between the ruler and the ruled. Where the citizen may tap more and more information directly from various Internet sources, the media will be forced to become more accountable. The

multiplicity of information permits the user to arrive at an informed choice.

The bureaucracy often tries to hoard information and does not like transparency. But journalists access whatever little information put on government websites and they use them as inputs for stories. Here is an instance of bureaucratic hurdle. A popular technological university in the public sector in India started an e-governance project some years ago with much fanfare. But it did not take off. The reason being the administrative staff did not want to present details such as project profile and funds allocation on the Net as they feared if they parted with information they would be reduced to faceless workers and academics would ignore them. In governments, bureaucrats are often hesitant to give up their hold over information, which can be a source of power to extract bribe money.

As part of a study, emails for an enquiry were sent to all the district collectors and the Chief Minister of the Tamil Nadu province of India. An email was also sent to the then information technology-savvy Chief Minister of the neighbouring Andhra Pradesh province. Only one district collector and the Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister replied. This proves that the attitude of the bureaucrats towards information technology and e-governance has to change radically (Arulselvan 2003). The situation remains much the same in Tamil Nadu even now. Probably, bureaucrats from Andhra Pradesh would have become Net savvy because of the political will of their then Chief Minister.

Any website that is not current is bound to lack credibility and lose its clients. Many a times, even emails seeking more information or clarification are either unanswered or answered days after sending. But whatever little information available online are accessed by journalists and it goes in as inputs into their reports. Also, journalism can take e-governance to task if is not transparent and vibrant enough.

The present e-governance dishes out information just one-way about government policies using a lot of statistics. The recipient of information is not allowed to have a participatory role. More often than not, even the material provided is of outdated stuff clouded with bureaucratic jargons. Websites of government departments, particularly links in the National Informatics Centre website in India, are quite useful. Journalism is one field that has taken to information technology with ease. So there is much scope for journalists to become Net savvy. Also, the increase in reliance of journalists on government sources only serves the consumer-oriented media environment. In fact, only the material that is of interest to the government is presented in the government website. Instead of independent checking of facts, journalists rely heavily on handouts – in the information age they rely on the press releases

posted on the websites too. Thus the bureaucracy or politicians could skip queries that they might not relish.

Influence of journalism

The influence of journalism in publishing industry is making Internet messages communicative. The inverted pyramid structure of news writing (the most important aspect related first and a story written in the descending order of importance) has gained a new meaning on the Web where the 'visitor' is all the more in a hurry and where the lesser important details can be relegated to hyperlinks. On the other hand, due to download time, eyestrain, and accessing costs, people are in a hurry on the Web; and many a hyperlinked text may not be viewed. But then, the provision of search engines makes it convenient to access various web pages without even going to the home page. Search engines have their own preferences and they may not bring forth the best information you are looking for but they do throw up a series of web pages related to the topic.

Online editors agree that standards should be the same whether publishing online or in print. But online standards are affected negatively by the speed of publishing and the lack of an enough number of online staff. Because many people who work in online operations are not trained journalists, they have little of background in editing, fact-finding and news ethics expected of journalism school graduates (Arrant and Anderson 2001). The reason for the bursting of the dotcom bubble is not just the improper revenue model but also the lack of ability on the part of content providers in providing content in an inverted pyramid structure. Websites had gone in for techno-savvy persons rather than those good at presenting content effectively.

Websites that provide information (apart from news portals) are not necessarily confined to the government. Many private agencies dish out propaganda stuff and false news on the Net. Even the bureaucracy may indulge in sycophancy of the political party in power. To start with the sycophancy is restricted to projecting a photograph of the Chief Minister of the province concerned. Given the fact that government machinery is subject to journalistic scrutiny, governments may not part with information but would refrain from giving false information. Of course, there could be inadvertent and careless errors: for instance, a tourism website gives the distance from a city to a bird sanctuary as 45 km whereas it is actually 80 km. Even print or television journalism cannot claim to be sacrosanct in the market-oriented world. The wall between advertisement and news is breaking down. Everyone does have an agenda suiting his/his corporate or political interests. The question

is whether every group has a fair say in projecting its agenda in news media.

The normative theories such as authoritative theory and development media theory (McQuail 1987) are jointly at work in a developing country like India. While on the one hand e-governance serves as a government propaganda mechanism, on the other it serves as an agent of development. The social responsibility theory is still not the norm in e-governance content despite the opening up of the market. Journalism's tilt towards free press theory and social responsibility theory is bound to influence e-governance – mostly for good, and at times bad since free flow of information does not always mean a balanced and two-way flow.

Websites can host a large collection of data that would never appear in print due to cost factor. On the Internet, the 'information hole' is nearly infinite, and the publisher need not have to worry about the 'shrinking information hole'. The only requirement is that the matter needs to be properly split and links given to subheads so as to be user-friendly. Newspapers too take to the Internet and they publish in full even those reports truncated in print for want of space. The Internet gives the user the option of accessing the material of your choice. Websites, serving diverse interests, have helped to empower people and to check the tyranny of opinion-making.

The Internet promotes increased participation and interactivity. Users' views are generously accommodated since there is no space limitation. Unlike in a newspaper 'Letters to the Editor', feedback need not be restricted to half a page. The lack of such space constraints improves the information content. More detail, more background and more content can be presented.

The Internet has, to a limited extent, the potential of breaking the stranglehold of media barons and journalists on public opinion. Everyone has a tendency to promote his/her vested interests; but a few rise above vested interests and stand up for the larger interest of society. The dominant opinion can be broken more with people communicating directly with each other, discussing different points of view over the Internet, and making informed choices. News media's presence on the Web [news portals] is again no indication of being free from bias. The same agenda that works for the printed copy also exists on the Web. But lack of space in the print version is overcome on the Web. Also, affordability of the Net publishing is relatively high compared to other media. News media would feel the urge to be more people-oriented, with the more and more people of diverse social backgrounds being outspoken over the Net and take to web publishing too. Today anyone with a computer and an Internet link can be a publisher, and can air his/her view. The rise of the Internet has provided us with unlimited information. But this does not mean that all that information is reliable. Anytime is

deadline time on the Internet unlike in other mass media. Because of the fluidity of the medium, information is uploaded on the Net even before it is checked thoroughly. Given the plurality on the Net, news media will have to be more vibrant and sensitive to the issues concerning various sections of society. This redefines and democratises journalism.

Lobbying by people may be done through email, listserv, e-newsletter, discussion board and the like. Again, this role encroaches into the media's traditional role as a window for lobby groups. For instance, the tea estate owners' lobby is better placed to use the media than say a lobby for plantation labourers' interests. A lobby group with influence, power and information skills gets better represented in the media. The new technologies make it possible for citizens themselves to exploit the mechanism of lobbying more effectively. News media have to give up its monopoly over its lobbying role (on behalf of someone), as the Internet has emerged as an alternative media and can be used by the aggrieved group itself.

Models of communication

Let us look at two popular models of communication and see how the Internet communication fits in.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's (1973) agenda-setting model of media effects, argues that the media are highly influential in shaping our perceptions of the world. "The ability to effect cognitive change among individuals is one of the most important aspects of the power of mass communication. The variation in media coverage determines the variations in the importance people attached to the issues. If a newspaper devotes more attention to any issue, the public tend to believe the topic to be more important. The public not only learn about the issues from the media, but also learn how much importance is to be given to such issues. Mass media, mainly news media, are not always successful at telling people what to think, but they are quite successful at telling them what to think about. People with similar media exposure place importance on the same issue, although different people may feel differently about the same issue. Some researchers have criticised this model for oversimplifying the process of media influence.

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence model of public opinion, 1974, examines three communicative factors: the mass media, interpersonal communication and an individual's perception of his/her own standpoint in relation to others in society. She defines public opinion as that "which can be voiced in public without fear of sanctions and upon which action in public can be based ... voicing opposite opinions, or acting in public accordingly, incurs the danger of isolation." Some people may find that the views

losing ground; such people may not openly express deviant opinion and/or change from deviant to dominant opinion, for fear of isolation.
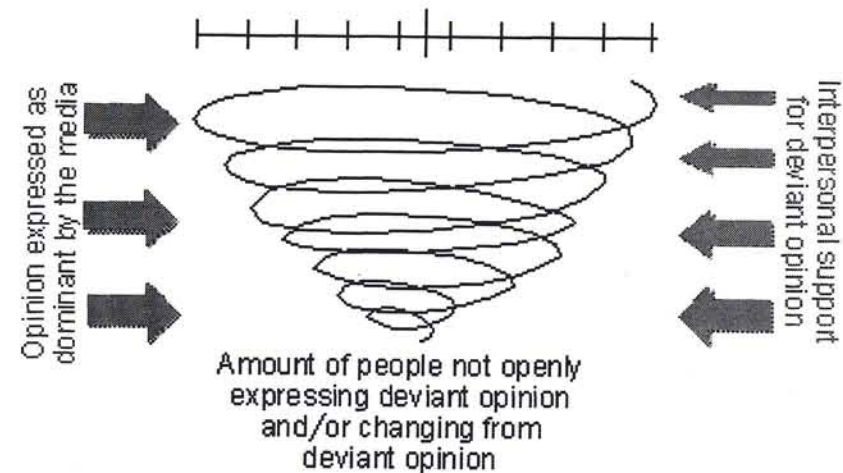
Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence

The 'spiral of silence' demonstrates why people are unwilling to express their opinions (publicly) when they are not believed to be in the majority. The media provide people with the words and phrases they can use to defend a certain point of view. If people find no current, frequently repeated expressions from their point of view, they lapse into silence.

The Internet goes a step further by allowing groups neglected by dominant groups to air their views, at least in anonymity. So the Internet helps to contain the 'spiral of silence' to some extent. What cannot be achieved through inter-personal communication is achieved in passivity through the Internet.

In journalism, it is the print media that sets the agenda for radio and TV shows, and to the Internet to some extent. Television is more effective when it comes to breaking news and visuals. In fact, television has already redefined the print media setting the agenda for the public to a limited extent. When television with its powerful visual impact chooses to cover events which provide good visual impact, print media are also forced to follow suit as the issue is seized in public sphere. For instance, a bride walking away from her wedding ceremony protesting against dowry gets good television coverage. [Dowry is money or goods given by the bride's family to the bridegroom's family as gifts.] Following this, newspapers too go

in for features and news analyses on the dowry issue. In the last decade, the Internet has further modified the concept of news.

Leading to e-democracy

Politics and the media are the two social institutions that have a major impact on governance. Democracy holds leaders accountable to the people, and it allows the free flow of information and ideas. The Internet is set to usher in e-democracy that would influence political parties and news media (journalism). The Internet will change some social institutions and create new ones. For instance, Dalits – the lowest of the castes in India with little clout in politics and the media – have their own websites providing different viewpoints. The websites had been patronised by Dalit professionals who are in well-paid jobs but do not have a place in public sphere. The fact that the Indian government blocked such websites objecting to the deviant views expressed is a different matter. The Internet has the potential to break the stranglehold of media barons and journalists on public opinion. News media would feel the urge to be more people-oriented, with the more and more people of diverse backgrounds being outspoken over the Net. Deviant views expressed by groups with specific interests – such a militant group fighting for a cause – too are picked up by the media.

The online medium has also helped put people directly in touch with those who govern them. A politician invited for a web chat is interviewed by an anonymous public rather than a select crowd in the case of radio or TV (unless, of course, if TV goes in for a crowd selected by statistical sampling methods to represent the anonymous public). A web host does not generally determine questions and answers. He or she normally acts only as a facilitator.

As pointed out, many government departments do not give prompt replies to emails received. But a few elected representatives have realised the need to be interactive over the Net, at least during the election campaign. They could also inform their constituents in a cost effective manner about what they are doing in Parliament or the Assembly, and also get to know about the happenings in the constituency. Thus the Internet offers an easy option for an elected representative to carry on communication with the electorate, even when he or she is out of the constituency.

E-governance helps democratisation by giving freedom to express individual opinions and ideas. It gives chance to everyone to air his/her views. The President of India too has a website through which any citizen can express a wide variety of opinion. An example of web log is that of the *New York Times* for eliciting people's views on the coming American Presidential election campaign. So did web

logs during the last Iraq war and the Asia-Pacific tsunami strike help spread diverse news and views.

As a civil society initiative, the Chennai-based M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation has set up village knowledge centres in rural areas of Pondicherry in South India to provide connectivity to villages through computers. Farmers could get information such as: health (availability of vaccines and medicines in the nearest health centre); relief information (issue of loans, availability of officials); agricultural inputs (the current market price of vegetables and pulses, information on new crop varieties); weather forecast (micro-meteorological information relating to the local area); and surface and groundwater data. Information is provided in the local language, Tamil. This has helped empower marginalised sections.

Thus the Internet can succeed in not only furthering democratising democratic societies but also bringing in democracy to non-democracies. It would emerge as a powerful alternative form of communication that could even set the agenda of politics, governance and mass media. As the use of the Internet widens, social exclusion of the oppressed would decrease. The Internet is the first mass medium wherein even a citizen who is not in the media job too can carry on mass communication.

e-Governance can also help fight corruption. The fact that it brings in a much-needed measure of transparency can act as a check against corruption. Aided by the political and administrative will, e-governance can definitely battle corruption. But the traditional role of the media as a watchdog against corruption will not disappear in a digital democracy.

Electorates can be hooked directly to enable them to vote or voice their opinion on a wide range of issues. Voting online, touch-tone telephones, voice signatures and digital signatures can become real and people can shape opinion from their homes or nearby Internet kiosks. Some countries have already gone in for online referenda to settle specific issues. The first online elections certainly did not work well because only a small percentage of Internet users took part (Machill 2004). Still in a digital democracy where major questions are settled through electronic referenda, the agenda-setting role of the media is reduced. The media may be forced to pay much more heed to the way people think rather than just the way governments act. An academic at the Oxford Internet Institute, Coleman Stephen (2004) conducted an online debate on the validity of e-voting. At the end of the debate his move had been defeated by a single vote to oppose the e-voting practice in England. At least as of now, not all can vote online due to the digital divide mainly because of economic and educational factors.

Regrouping of people on the lines of nationalities has been made possible by the Internet, which in turn influences governance. There is an added interest in governments to be more concerned about the people of same nationality living outside their geographical boundary. Nationalism has thus transcended boundaries. The Indian government's dual citizenship policy is a pointer in this direction. Non-resident Indians have been brought closer not only by the opening up of the market but also by the Internet linkage.

Redefining media

The multimedia nature of the Internet, which offers text, pictures, audio, video, graphics and animation, places it in an advantageous position. The interactive options it offers have altered the very definition of journalism. The old model of one-to-many communication has been taken over by the new many-to-many model where every receiver of information can become information provider as well. It creates a new society where there is a free sharing of information (Inamdar and Balasubramanya 2004). The Internet is expected to increase the two-way communication between governments and citizens radically. There are several ways e-governance (that uses the Internet) could force the media to redefine itself. The Internet could not only pose a challenge to several roles of the media but also bypass a few other roles of the media. The Internet connects citizens together and also connects them to government bypassing the media.

Most traditional media institutions have also taken to online journalism. Newspaper houses and magazines make huge investment in content on the Internet. A good number of news websites have at least a few links to other sites as well – be it government sites with texts of full reports, or archival material outside the website relevant to the story. This gives depth to news coverage. The notion of linking only by internal links has become a thing of the past. News websites are now not averse to external links just like other websites. No more it is thought that by having external links the audience is lost for ever to other websites; now it is widely believed that by giving external linkages a website gains a broad-based audience. This aspect is unique to the Internet and no other media can replicate it.

Increased sensitivity to the audience will make media outfits shed their image as being media-centred than audience-centred. You are an e-publisher if you choose to be. The role of the traditional editor as a "gatekeeper" in deciding what goes in and what is kept out also calls for redefinition. In a small way, personalised web pages of portals already give the user some choice in determining his/her own news or information content. As technologies improve,

the user will have more power to determine. Thus the editor on the Internet has more of a democratic role. It also implies that the media could become less influential in 'setting the agenda'. In future, ordinary people may be able to set the agenda for the media through Internet communication.

Blogs are now popular with journalists and people. For instance, what a journalist cannot say in his or her news reports he or she says it in blogs. Even people in power use blogs to have an informal but effective network of communication. Photographs that will otherwise be censored by the mainstream media may also be posted in blogs. According to Wikipedia, a weblog, which is usually shortened to blog, is a website where regular entries are made (such as in a journal or diary) and presented in reverse chronological order. Blogs often offer commentary or news on a particular subject, such as food, politics, or local news; some function as more personal online diaries. A typical blog combines text, images, and links to other blogs, web pages, and other media related to its topic. Most blogs are primarily textual although many focus on photographs, videos or audio. In fact, traditional media have been risen from slumber with citizen journalism coming of age, mainly with people started blogging their versions of public events and issues.

The Internet has several positive influences, despite digital divide and shallowness in content. It has ushered in "the global village" that Marshall McLuhan had imagined decades ago. Ordinary people can also take to the Internet for personal communication as well as for low-cost instantaneous publication. So disadvantaged groups which otherwise have to be silent too can raise their voice breaking the 'spiral of silence', even through feedback sections of government websites. No more the disadvantaged groups need to give up their views to join the views expressed by the media or go into 'a spiral of silence'.

Although digital divide is sharp, the Internet does touch the lives of ordinary people. Some of the serious implications of the Internet are e-commerce, e-governance and e-learning. While e-commerce has taken off, e-governance and e-learning cannot be far behind. Journalism's intertwining with governance would accelerate the process of e-governance.

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