IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON RURAL INDIA

Ekta Bansal1*

*Corresponding Author: Ekta Bansal ekta.bansal13@gmail.com

The focus of this paper is to delineate the relationship between social media and rural India, how rural development can be improved. Looking at a few instances where social media has benefitted rural development will serve as a positive analysis, whereas there will be a brief analysis of the limitations of media. The aim would also be too broadly define social media, and look at how media, be it any form, has a social responsibility towards the audience it’s reaching. Whereas the instances provided in the paper will serve as a reminder of the marvels of social media, but a growing digital divide with a lack of development of information and communication technology (ICT) has made it redundant for people in rural areas to access internet for the most well known form of social media, Facebook or twitter, etc. The inability of these people to use this platform is a major reason for them to look at NGO’s who can use these platforms or influence other forms of media which are inclined towards social responsibility giving more of a reason to broadly define social media. If and when the ICT is developed further for better connectivity, it is important for the people using these platforms to not get alienated and exploited while still be able to provide a space which caters to rural India; maybe through online grievance portals, etc.

Keywords: Social Media, Social Network Services (SNS), Social Responsibility, Rural Development, Agriculture Journalism, Digital Divide, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT?

The aim of this paper is to focus on the impact of social media on rural India. This paper will also try to define social media, how rural development can be through Social Network Services (SNS) and various platforms that have succeeded on SNS while also looking at the practicality of these services. It is important however to define social media to not restrict the field only to SNS provided through the internet via Facebook, twitter, etc but it also diminishes the work done by many NGO’s which have programs which also utilize the same idea of networking as Facebook or twitter. There also is a need to know the precise definition of social media, as it can also be looked at from a different perspective. The definition of social media has changed over a period of time, has

1 Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi.
broadened and explained by many scholars through various perspectives. Though most of the people, speaking on a majority scale, believe that social media networks is linked heavily with social networking sites, micro blogging, various internet forums etc. This paper will look at the broader aspect of social media networks where its definition isn’t restricted to only a few platforms. Any and every media which has to interact with the public at some level, be it an NGO or radio or television, all of them have a social responsibility. This responsibility is very important in nature as it affects the development of the society by large means. Thus, the media cannot shirk from this social responsibility and thus, making all the prominent media networks as the “social media networks” (Rai & Shahila, 2013). The mass media (radio, television, newspaper and magazines) are indispensable, enabling citizens to have their voices heard and opinions expressed, it is a powerful tool. The essence of media should be to involve the citizens in decisions regarding development plans, and to spread the knowledge of these decisions to various parts.

There is a considerable difference in media among regions and countries, and between cities and rural areas. We hope to focus on the latter. The latter focuses on the fundamental problem with rural India, which is rural development. So the role of media becomes extremely important and key to a lot of citizens in these areas where the benefits of internet have not yet been reaped. But what is rural development? Rural development in general is used to denote the actions and initiatives taken to improve the standard of living in non-Urban neighbourhoods, countryside, and remote villages. These communities can be exemplified with a low ratio of inhabitants to open space. Agricultural activities may be prominent in this case whereas economic activities would relate to the primary sector, production of foodstuffs and raw materials. (Raja, 2011).

After much clarity in the understanding of the two keys terms – Social Media and Rural Development, we can look at the various plays through which both of these terms are linked and also try to follow the nature of their relationship. Differentiation of modern day media and traditional media has been discussed very closely. The paper aims to discuss various fields where social media has affected rural people’s lives and also of the fields where media has been lacking in its role.

**IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

The Indian society is an elaborate society with multi cultures, multi tribes and castes, multi lingual and the disparities between the urban and rural people. Since the birth of independent India, there is no denying the fact that India has grown as a nation and as economy rapidly with major growths from infrastructure to public health care, from communication sector to IT field and much more. But development is not a linear process but a multifaceted system with a complex idea. Even the rural India defies any definition of development. The Indian government has started many initiatives which have tried to encompass the large Indian crowd and while also many UN programs have been put to use in Indian villages. Besides that, many private social networks have taken the initiative like various NGOs, news channels, various web sites etc. But unlike Europe’s systematic Industrial growth, Asia and Africa still remain largely unaffected by the model due to the large size of many nations with no connectivity. India goes through a similar problem.
That’s the reason when rural areas of India still face issues like sanitation, public health care etc., social media finds a relevant place. Diverse social and infrastructural needs must be addressed more or less simultaneously to ensure a nation’s future growth and prosperity. Social media has affected all spheres of rural people’s lives: right from their livelihood to their healthcare, from traditions to social campaigns etc. Time and time again SNS have found a way and have realised their potential to become pioneers in rural development. Many Indian social media networks have committed themselves to provide information to the farmers regarding cultivation as well as animal husbandry especially All India Radio (AIR) which has been committed to rural audience for more than 50 years now. Among the several mass media, newspaper and farm magazine are commonly used. They have a vital role to play in the communication of agricultural information among the literate farmers. Increasing rate of literacy in the country offers new promises and prospects for utilizing print medium as a means of mass communication. Agriculture journalism is a new field in India and is growing rapidly as the food giver of India is becoming literate now (Rai & Shahila, 2013).

Through online public grievance system, development in these parts take place smoothly as the villagers can lodge their complaints on this forum. This initiative has aided rural people a lot. Though it is naive to think that electricity, telephony and connectivity in rural areas will spread if the demand does not grow of these resources. In addition, information networks can become conduits that allow money to flow into the village through new kinds of non-discriminatory and clean industries. Information and communications technologies can also compensate for other kinds of infrastructure limitations. For example, if online work, trade, or payment were to become available for members of a village community, the poor quality of roads to and from that village becomes less of an obstacle to earnings and employment. Finally, and most importantly, if capital were to become more readily available within a village community through such networked systems, it would then be in a better position to finance the basic infrastructure that it needs, including roads, dispensaries, and water and sanitation systems (Rai & Shahila, 2013).

But there has been a critical problem, the problem has been of digital divide. The global digital divide describes the unequal distribution of information and communication technology across nations, commonly described as the “gap between the information haves and have-nots.” The contours of the global digital divide are complex and, although the “digital divide” has become a common political catchphrase, popular discourse has, for the most part, failed to capture all of the dimensions of the divide. (Ali, 2011)

The Internet has transfigured the way most people in the West live. It has become an important part of our economic, political, and social lives, changing the way we purchase commodities, the way we bank, and the way we share exchanges with one another. First, the Internet reduces traditional blockages to trade and industry, allowing small businesses in developing nations to market their products directly to the United States and other developed countries. Second, the informational capacity of the Internet enabled developing countries to move ahead in improving fundamental services. It can allow, with its use, people all across to access information from any part of the world. The only way in India
to reduce this divide is by providing the rural people with adequate information on the internet and its uses explained. But there would be people on the internet looking to cash in for the naïve nature of new internet users. But amongst many limitations, digital divide is said to be only temporary as technology would become redundant in developed nations and the third world countries would be able to produce this technology for cheaper rates, they would also be able to improve their existing technology. These gaps in connectivity is due to the economic disparity of different nations, whereas some nations have tried to improve this connectivity but there are many pressing issues in third world countries, for instance, irregular electricity supply.

The problem then lies with the fact that rural India needs platforms where they could express their grievances, like, online public grievance. Social media can provide this platform where their voices and their culture is protected, looked after. In today’s global economy, where computers and the Internet are so fundamental to production and participation, it is clear that if the right to development is to be taken seriously, that right must encompass the development of information connectivity technology infrastructure and skills.

It is also very important to look at the various platforms which have helped rural India, where there was definite impact made on the lives of the people. These are just examples to clarify the impact.

**GRAMVAANI**

From the digital perspective, India is divided into two very different communities: 70% of rural population vs. 30% of urban population. The latter has access to Google and Facebook; all the rest simply can’t afford 2000 rupees (US$30) for a monthly Internet connection, be it desktop or mobile. Mr. Tandon is the founder of Gram Vaani, an organisation providing social media for rural India; a voice-based social network to connect families and farming communities living in outland villages. (Ghedin, 2013)

According to Mr. Tandon, the 60 thousand Gram Vaani users would never want to pay any money; the social network works by simply dealing numbers and leaving voice messages and listening to the ones left by others. Topics of discussion are the ones relevant to the community: local updates, issues related to agriculture, government announcements, information sharing. But also politics: most of the rural areas are reached by television, therefore political awareness is relatively high.

In this peculiar context, 60 thousand users have a peculiar meaning: it means 60K mobile phone numbers, which means 60K families of 6 or 7 people, now connected to a virtual community. All of this through the mobile phone owned by the head of family.

The Gram Vaani flagship development in Jharkhand, a region in Eastern India, counts over 20K users and more than 2,000 calls every day. It has been pointed out that Gram Vaani has been enabling the farmers’ voice to come out, in their language and local idioms. And there’s something even more important: in the future they will be able to get cheap smartphones – more likely Chinese products like Xiaomi – allowing them to finally reach the internet. At that point the real social media revolution will probably occur.

**SAGLI TURMERIC STORY**

Although many of the Indian villages are deprived of regular supply of electricity and the internet
connectivity is still a farfetched dream for the masses but still there are success stories where Facebook, the famous social networking site has helped to make a difference in lives of rural people. As per a report in The Economic Times dated February 10, 2012, it saved many farmers of Maharashtra’s Sangli district’s farmers from perishing. Due to oversupply of turmeric, prices crashed exorbitantly in the local market.

One of the local farmers used Facebook to connect to other turmeric farmers across the country and discussed the situation and discussed the prices with them. They decided not to participate in the local auction. Using social media, the news spread like a forest fire and 25000 turmeric farmers of Sangli heard of the boycott. The boycott served its purpose as the prices doubled. Earlier, a village sarpanch would sit under a tree and discuss certain issues with villagers before taking a final call. Facebook and Twitter are an extension of this concept.” Farmer bodies are quick to point out the advantages of social media. (Rai & Shahila, 2013)

SNAPDEAL.COM NAGAR

Shivnagar is a village in the northern India. Recently it has changed its name to Snapdeal.com Nagar. There was an interesting and a motivating reason behind it. The website that offers daily discounts, displayed a kind act of social good, by utilizing money for a worthwhile cause. The tiny village was devoid of proper facilities of water and villagers had to walk far as two miles to fetch fresh and clean water. A mere $5,000 from the CEO’s pocket – helped in installing more than 15 hand pumps and changed thousands of life. (Rai & Shahila, 2013). Just like a simple deals and discounts site mustered efforts to get water to doorsteps of villagers in North India, Social Media holds larger promises for the general community as a whole; all that is required is someone who can act like God.

LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIA

The first step to understand the impact – and even more the potential – of social media in India is to acknowledge its limits: 70% of India’s population live in rural areas, with no access to modern Internet infrastructures. Among those who reside in urban areas, over 165M people are active online. A good slice of the pie is on Facebook: around 62 million users populate the American social network – recently becoming the second biggest Facebook-population after the US (Ghedin, 2013). But what happens on the other side of the digital divide? How is social media penetrating the areas where people don’t have PCs and smartphones – yet just telephones, TVs and a strong need for information?

Exploitation and de-alienation are not simply two contrasting interpretations of SNS; rather, Marxist theory encourages us to accommodate them within a single analytical framework. SNS give audience more opportunities for objectification by allowing self-expression, authenticity, and communication and collaboration with others. As the communication and sociability of users are commodified, so does their labour become a source for exploitation? In what follows I consider the dialectics of exploitation and alienation on SNS by taking a closer look at Facebook (Fisher, 2012). De-alienation would occur through the opportunity provided for self-expression, communication with other individuals which is good, which helps people to feel they have control over economic, cultural and social discussions.
The important thing would be for the people not to get alienated and forget about the actual impact that the internet can provide through social media.

CONCLUSION

Social media networks has without a doubt changed the lives of rural people. As far as agriculture is thought of, these have given many opportunities to the farmers and made the process of selling the crop easy through online programs which have resulted in the removal of middlemen. There are many success stories in field of health care as well. Rural politics is the area where social media networks hasn’t reached to the required potential. But there still remains a lot of room for improvement for social networking services as with better technology, the connectivity of these places should improve and provide the economic opportunity to take benefits from the system. Social Media can help provide that, media which cares for a well-integrated society and believes in having social responsibility. Services like Facebook, twitter provide a mass reach, but of a population which can afford to have the required technology to avail the service but can help connect the large population. The requirement is of the necessary technology from which these platforms can be accessed. Once accessed, it is important that social media doesn’t influence the people in a way that alienates them from the real potential of these platforms. The impact can be seen through many examples and these examples are of not just Social media like – Facebook but with the use of internet NGO’s like Gramvaani have flourished, defining social media in a new perspective which is of development and of a social responsibility. The impact in India is yes slow, but it is slowly impacting more and more lives, even the lives of people at Snapdeal.com Nagar.

REFERENCES

8. Seen this link on 29 June http://www.gramvaani.org/
