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Social

COMMUNITY MEDIA & DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

To see how the community media played a role in establishing democracy in different parts of the world in the last one year, a study on different news, current affairs and publications between February-April 2011 was done. From the study it was evident that, community media indeed played a significant role in creating mass public awareness against their respective autocratic rulers and thereby prompting them to overthrow those governments. It was because of the community media that democratic principles are widely disseminated and adopted.

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1. INTRODUCTION

"The global dimension of community media reveals that the struggle to create media systems that are at once relevant and accountable to local communities resonates with desperate peoples across different culture. This realization has stimulated considerable interest in the theory and practice of community media." (Howley Kevin, 2010)

The absences of an accessible public sphere, as a space where the people can come together and participate in inclusive political discussions, give rise to an alternative realm of political debate. With the mainstream media controlled and dominated by commercial interests, the alternative media/ community media provides alternate space. The alternative media provides platforms for political advocacy to democracy activists.

2. OBJECTIVE

1) To see how the community media/ new media play a role in democratic movements
2) To see the effectiveness of community media/new media in creating public opinion.

3. METHOD

Content analysis method was adopted to do the research. During the research, the researchers scanned through various national & international news publications like **The Newsweek, The Time, The Illustrated Weekly of India, The Hitavada** etc., between February-April 2011. From these news sources, the researchers concentrated on news stories related to new media & Democratic activities across the globe. On the basis of the collection news stories related to new media & democracy, the researchers then analysed the contents.

4. DISCUSSION

"Web is our Only Media" says Wael Abbas, Egypt's most famous cyber-dissident who spurred the beginning of the revolution to oust his country's three decade old ruler Hosni Mubarak(a). Abbas and other netizens worked relentlessly in spreading information to other of their genre of the need for overthrowing the dictator which forced them to throng to the Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the mass movement which ultimately forced Mubarak to hand over the reins to the army.

"The aging intelligence officers and party officials of Mubarak's inner circle have adopted a posture that's almost blasé, as if they had seen this all before. In past ….The implication is that Mubarak's coterie doesn't care about the youngsters who sit around making trouble on expensive laptops. But crowd in the streets aren't the only challenge to Mubarak's dictatorship now. …Its manifestoes-even the chants shouted in the face of the cops-have been polished by dozens of anonymous editors on a Google document. "We are Egypt's youth on Internet" they proclaimed…" wrote Babak Dehghanpisheh, Christopher Dickey and Mike Giglio in Newsweek's Feb 07, 2011 issue.

Ever since the popular movements overthrew rules of Tunisia and Egypt, reports on the extensive use of new media by youths in these countries are flooding the media scenario. Everybody is writing on how the youths utilized the new tools at their hand viz. the internet, facebook, tweeter and blogging to the hilt on disseminating information amongst the citizen and consolidated a popular sentiment into a mass movement to overthrow their respective regimes.

Writing in his weekly column 'World View' in The Hitavada, Gwynne Dyer, the renowned media analyst questioned "Why now? Why revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt this year, rather than last year or ten years ago, or never? The protestors now taking to the street daily in Jordan, Yemen, Bahrein, Libya and Algeria are obviously inspired by the successor of those revolutions. But what got the process started? What changed the middle East?… Social Media is one widely touted explanation and the al-Jazeera network's wall-to-wall coverage of the events in Tunisia and Egypt (b)."

Even as we are discussing the happenings in Tunisia and Egypt, winds of change is blowing across the globe i.e. in Italy, Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Algeria. As if taking a cue, pre-democratic demonstrations have also been reported in China also. Though, peoples' aspirations for a democratic government and freedom from autocratic and Communist regimes are the base

factor for these mass movements, it is the new age media which has made this possible to unite people.

"An on-line call for anti-government protests across China on Sunday (Feb 27, 2011) instead brought an emphatic show of force by police determined to deter any buds of the kind of unrest that has shaken the West Asia. Lines of police checked passers-by and warned away foreign photo journalists in downtown Beijing and Shanghai after a US based Chinese website spread calls for Chinese people to emulate the "Jasmine Revolution' sweeping the West Asia and stage gatherings in support of Democratic changes," a Reuter news report with Beijing/Shanghai date-line dated Feb 27, 2011 read (c).

"While the uprising in Egypt caught most observers of the North Africa and West Asia off guard, it did not come out of blue. The seed of this spectacular mobilization had been shown as far back as early 2000s and had been carefully cultivated by activists from across the political spectrum, many of them working on-line via Facebook, Twitter and within the Egyptian blogosphere. Working within these media, activists began to forge a new political language, one that cut across the institutional barriers that had until then polarized Egypt's political terrain… The blogosphere was joined by another powerful media instrument in 2008, i.e. the Facebook. Egyptian facebook activists and bloggers took up and extended the political platform that the Kifaya movement had introduced into Egyptian political life, the same exact platform that has brought millions of Egyptians into the streets these days. Four issues have defined a common morale stance which also include " a demand for the expansion of political freedom and the creation of fair and democratic institutions…," wrote Charles Hirschkind, in his article titled 'The Road to Tahrir (d)' in Economic and Political Weekly.

As we are discussing democracy in reference to the recent happenings in Egypt, Tunisia and other part of Arab world and in the African continent, let's discuss the genesis of democratic institutions and the role of mass media & democratic institutions in facilitating each other's growth.

Historically speaking, the starting of down of machine era and subsequent evolution of a new class in the European society i.e. the middle class or bourgeois class which facilitated the growth of mass media to further their business interest as well as to create a political clout. In the name of 'Freedom of Speech and Expression' which was rare those days under the reign of kings & autocrats, the middle class nurtured the mass media for serving their business and political interests. This strategy ultimately achieved the goal by putting a new system in place which, we today termed as 'democratic institutions.'

The basic edifice of this system was that people have the 'freedom' to elect their representative to rule them, to enact policy for them and above also to safeguard their freedom.

"The Freedom of Speech and Expression is also guarded by first amendment to the US Constitution, which specifically lays-down that this freedom be in no way abridged by laws. ...In the first Amendment the founding fathers gave the free press the protection it must have to fulfill its essential role in our (the US) democracy (e)…"

The first Amendment of the US constitution, which was made in 1791, has since been a guiding force for other democratic countries across the globe.

Modern democracy first appeared in the West only because the West was the first part of the world to develop mass communications. It was a technological advantage and as literacy and technology of mass communications has spread the world, other mass societies begun to adopt this new practice.

However, the Arab society have no previous experience of democracy primarily because it was a Western concept and secondarily because their rulers, most of whom are autocratic, never allowed or let them know what democracy really means to their lives. Obviously it was in their interest to rule to people with iron fist.

For the last several decades, Kings & Emporers, Autocrats, tyrants and generals have been ruling most part of the Arab world. In case of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak the tenure was for three decades where as Maummer Gaddafi of Libya has been ruling the country for near to four decades. The totalitarian rulers were intending to continue as long as they can and then pass on the rein to their kiths & kins. In the meanwhile they were also looting the country's resources to the hilt. In furtherance to these activities, these rulers put a strict vigil on the freedom of the citizen and also undeclared or in some cases declared censor on the media.

But the new media technology has changed the situation altogether. Now what the print or electronic media could not do or report in these countries due to censorship and fear of harassment & arrest, could easily be reported on-line. These media facilitated the communication process and thereby provided a much needed forum to them to discuss their future, future of their country and their future course of action to lead their country to democracy.
"It is harder for authoritarian regimes to survive, because we can circumvent old structures with cell phones and the internet.", says George Clooney, famous Hollywood actor who has turned humanitarian activist in troubled Sudan (f).

China's notoriously controlling censors have sought to stifle the internet, and the Chinese generally can't access much international information from within the country. Despite heavy censorship of the internet, the blogsphere has allowed many different ideas and views to surface that previously were unavailable. Similarly, the incredibly high uptake and response to citizen journalism in South Korea is the result of several features of their society, with one crucial factor being their avid and loyal uptake of mobile & communication technology. Perhaps, the most instrumental factor in their drive to produce their own news is heavy censorship of media content.

The lack of plurality in national media coupled with a history of intense civil rights movement have made South Koreans motivated and dedicated contributors to a new and free media. (Usha M Rodrigues, 2010:115)

This is precisely the reason why commentators have given credit for the public rally of Jan 25, 2011 this year at Tahrir square in Egypt, which ultimately forced Mubarak to quit, to Facebook and other social media.

It is equally pertinent to discuss here the role played by whistleblower website Wikileaks and its founder Julius Assange in redefining the scope of free speech & expression in the changed world. While Assange has claimed credit for the Tunisia, Egyptian revolution by saying that 'the releases cables (by wikileaks) showing former Tunisian president Ben Ali was corrupt gave the army 'the confidence that they needed to attack the ruling political elite (g)."

Besides this, what was more important was the release of millions of secret US cables by the whistleblower website. The release not only brought out the excess done by the US security agencies in Iraq & Afghanistan in name of war on terror but also on the prison on war at Guatomobay.

Assenge also claims that "he's acting in the interest of "justice" and "transparency." "I enjoy helping people who are vulnerable" he was quoted as saying to *Der Spiegel* (h)

The new media has constantly been used by the pro-democracy activists for the last several years. "In 2007, when thousands of Burmese activists defied military orders to stop pro-democracy marches in Rangoon, students came armed with mobile phones to take secret pictures of the event and posted them on the Internet. The Internet and Web applications have removed many barriers to independent publishing. A new wave of open source and collaborative software along with mobile technology and growing awareness of the 'wisdom of crowds' is changing the scope and definition of media (i)."

"Community Media operate in sharp contrast to their corporate counterparts. In terms of financing, community media rely on donations, underwritings and limited advertising, grant funding, in-kind considerations and other non-commercial forms of support. In this way community media are insulated from the direct and indirect influence advertisers exert over media form and content (j).

"In an effort to reduce costs and increase profit margins, mainstream news outlets have 'downsized' newsroom staffs and all but abandoned local news gathering and investigative reporting. In the process news organizations have grown dependent on tabloid journalism, celebrity gossip and paperback new gathering. These steps deteriorated the journalistic standards and values as a result of which public confidence on the profession and news institutions has also gone down. In Contrast, community journalists, often working on shoestring budgets, draw on the talents and inclinations of concerned citizen in an effort to provide local communities with useful, relevant information of the sort that enhances and expands community communication. Doing so, community journalism revitalizes the public sphere and counteracts the apathy, disenfranchisement and depoliticization cultivated by lackluster press conference.

5. RESULTS

From the research it could be concluded that community media provides opportunities and resources for local public to reassert journalism's place in the conversation of democracy.

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