Marshal McLuhan's Technological Determinism Theory in the Arena of Social Media

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Abstract: Marshall McLuhan in 1964 suggested that technologies of mass media make sure culture transmission in a social fabric which ultimately changes man's social behavior. He states "We shape our tools and they in turn shape us". Majority of the researchers in the area of communication speak about the radio and TV as the mediated tools but McLuhan professed a in a different way and added numbers, games and money as mediated tools. With respect to the numbers, he maintained that everyone in a movie theater enjoys the presence of their other counterparts in the hall. The phenomenon gives birth to a mass mind which let the decision makers to create a profile of the audience in the theater. This occurrence, consequently, create homogeneity in the crowed for easy influence. McLuhan added that games are mush like media of interpersonal communication and expansion of human social self. According to him, games "allow for people to simultaneously participate in an activity that is fun and that reflect who they are". To McLuhan money is a tool that facilitates access. It is the tool of money that enables men to take a trip of the world and serve as spreader of information, wisdom and culture. These devices of mass communication according to Marshall McLuhan shape the world into a small global village. Social media platforms are playing mush similar role credited by Marshall McLuhan to number, game, money alongside with traditional mass media of radio and TV. The users of social media utilize very similar features and carry out more or less the same activities that convert them as a homogeneous audience. In the same manner, the profiles of social media users mirror similar features and majority of them guzzle social media platforms to have fun and enjoyment. Social networking media ensure connection of the people of various cultures, religions and boundaries

and allow them enjoy the experience of being members of a single community. Social media platforms have not only transformed the world into a small village but also fashioned every facet of man's social life.

INTRODUCTION

Technological Determinism theory generally refers to the exploration of media's systems and mediated content's cultures in contemporary societies. The theory also takes into account the influences of media on the respective societies. This theoretical approach, however, associates greater role of technology (media) than mediated contents in terms of influencing society. Postman[1] is believed to have refined the philosophy of Technological Determinism by suggesting that media producers and consumers shape cultures. According to Postman, people live in two environments-natural and mediated. Natural environment serve humans with air, water, trees and food, etc. whereas, mediated environment serves individuals with "language, numbers, images, holograms and all of the other symbols, techniques and machinery" that realize humans of their social self.

Application of Technological Determinism theory in this digital age focuses mainly on Social Media (SM), social mediated contents and its effects on human social, economic and political behaviour. This new technology of SM has penetrated deep into human lives. People make use of this technology for social interaction with known and unknown people[2, 3] to increase their social capital[4]. Political campaigns and affiliated endeavors are undertaken[5-7] and selling and buying are made through online technology of SM[8].

Emergence of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in the latter part of 1990s has changed communication behaviour of the people around the world. According to Boyd and Ellison[2], SM spontaneously ensure one to one, one to many and many to many communication in the form of text messaging, photo sharing and video sharing. Innovations in these technologies from time to time have further paved way for advancement and development of communication facilities[9]. This technology has enabled people across borders and cultures to interact and talk to each other with such a speed and convenience that was not even imaginable a couple of decades ago. The mushroom growth of smart phones with attractive applications and interfaces and laptops with advanced specifications and facilities, computer video gaming, television, radio and wireless machines coupled with the integration of these into a single technology has tremendously changed the communication infrastructure. It would not be wrong to call it communication revolution. Interaction of the users with each other, sharing of information and exchange of ideas are the key features of this new digital technology[10].

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM THEORY

The theory of Technological Determinism or Media Ecology was conceived by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. According to this theory, the technology of mass media not only shapes attitudes and behaviour of people but also bring a revolution in the mode of operation of a social system. The theory further proposes that functioning of a social fabric changes accordingly with emergence of every new technology. Basic principle of media ecology theory is that man survival on the globe is molded according to variations in the system of human communications. According to McLuhan growth of technologies of mass communication ensure culture diffusion in a society which in turn helps change human behaviour. Here goes McLuhan famous quote "We shape our tools and they in turn shape us" to fit in the discourse. West and Turner[11] have quoted McLuhan to have stated that "we have a symbolic relationship with mediated technology, we create technology and technology in turn re-creates who we are". The historical perspective of the theory proposes that revolutions in technology from time to time have brought corresponding changes in the societies.

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND SM

McLuhan branded human societies into tribal age, literate age, print age and electronic age. The diffusion of communication technologies helped modernize these societies at least one step forward. People in the tribal age marched towards literate age, literate age was transformed into print age and the print age arena was promoted to the era of electronic communications. The living patterns of the people in their respective age were revolutionized accordingly. If McLuhan's continuum of marching of one stage of society to the next stage of society exist then we, of course, are witnessing another stage commonly termed as digital age. This new technology has brought abrupt changes in human lives. Since, Finnemann[12] proposed that SM has not replaced other types of traditional mass media. Rather it has integrated all other forms of media like "electronic text, the telephone, radio and television". The users of SNSs can read an electronic edition of every newspaper, they can make easy and almost free of cost phone calls, they can listen to each and every radio channel of the world with much ease and convenience and can watch any television channel of their choice. Unlike the mainstream media, SM platforms offer variety of

contents that are contributed by the users themselves. Such contents may include reporting of local events and happenings and comments on various contents that are extracted from traditional mass media and uploaded online.

Traditional mass media allow for the lopsided vertical flow of contents with passive recipients at the other end. Information flow in the traditional media setting is directed from producers of the mediated messages to consumers of the same messages. In traditional mass media systems like radio and television, the users have no other option than to watch and listen to the contents presented by the media management except by changing the channel or switching off the system. The technology of SM, on the other hand, ensures horizontal flow of information with active users at the ultimate end. Information in the SM systems flows from consumers to consumers. The users of social mediated contents are also producers of the online stuff[13]. SM users have liberty to enjoy what and when they want to have and even to share the same with other users of the technology. It is not all over; the user of SM can generate their own contents and share the same with other users[14].

KEY ASSUMPTIONS OF TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM THEORY

Technological Determinism theory frames three assumptions. Firstly, media instill every act in society. Secondly, media shape perceptions and organize human experiences. Thirdly, media link the world.

Firstly, the researchers are made to believe that people cannot shirk media since McLuhan included numbers, games and money alongside the traditional mass media of radio, TV and movies in the domain of media. In connection with the numbers, he proposed that everybody in a movie theater or play field enjoys the feelings of being among the masses. The feelings turn the crowed into a homogeneous mass which is easily shaped. McLuhan noted that games are tools of interpersonal communication and expansion of man's social self. McLuhan furthered that Games "allow for people to simultaneously participate in an activity that is fun and that reflect who they are". McLuhan also proposed that money is tool that facilitates access. According to McLuhan, the money enables humans to go across the planet and perform as spreader of information, wisdom and culture. He resembled money with language that connects miscellaneous segments of population such as formers, plumbers, physicians and engineers. McLuhan proposed that these communication devices convert the world into a global village and influence every aspect of man's life. He believed that society in turn influences technology in the passage to its evolution.

Social media work in much similar way as was attributed by McLuhan with the roles "number, game and money" besides the traditional media of movies, TV and radio. The users of social networking sites employ very similar features and perform almost the same actions that transform them into homogeneous users. Similarly, the profiles of social media activists emulate similar features and majority of the users surf social media platforms to have fun and amusement. Social media bonds together people of different cultures, religions and boundaries and allow them enjoy the feelings of being members of a single community. Social media platforms have not only converted the planet into a small village but also fashioned every facet of man's social life.

Secondly, media shape perceptions and organize human experiences. McLuhan also believed that media are effective tools in shaping perceptions about the world. The powerful mediated messages let people to look at the world with the spectacles of the media. Positive portrayal of an issue, idea, movement or activity not only lead people to see positive aspects of the same but also start debating on the positive aspects of that issue. In the same manner, negative portrayal of an issue let people to watch, listen and read negative contents about the issue and even to start talking about the same negatives at every forum. For instance, media reports about moral breakdown in a society force people to watch contents on child or female kidnapping, drug abuse and the like. People in their day to day talk begin to talk about moral degradation in society. These prevailing circumstances in turn direct individuals to live their lives accordingly and people in the respective society start looking at every stranger with suspicion. The same held true with respect to the use of online digital technologies. Stories on ATM fraud in Pakistan in the month of December 2017 forced top management of National and Private commercial Banks in the country to take precautionary measures with respect to every online business transaction.

Thirdly, media turn the globe into an enormous "political, economic, social and cultural system". McLuhan termed this global inter-connectedness as global village. This assumption of Technological Determinism theory is believed to be McLuhan's prediction of the emergence of social networking websites.

Keeping human needs, requirements and capabilities in mind, producers of the digital technology strived to improve its various features and make it more useful for users of the contemporary world. According to Uricchio[9] all forms of SNSs have their own logic for their use and offer their own reasons and terms and conditions for consumption of the same. Innovations have been made from time to time with respect to the advancement of technology and the varying and increasing demands of the users. The world has been witnessing the introduction of

a different networking site with different features, functions and scope with every passing day. Uricchio[9] noted that "The World Wide Web" was developed after the introduction of the "Mosaic" web browser and the "Pentium chip" was presented a couple of decades ago. Introduction of "networked computers" assisted by broadband cable services, "compression algorithms" and "cheap memory" have contributed a lot in improving the capacity of this technology in terms of memory and speed of transmitting information. Increase in the memory of technology enabled users to store lots of contents that have either been produced by the consumers or found floated online. Similarly, the speed of transmission has been raised to a position where the users can send dozens of terabyte data in a single click of a button.

Prior to the introduction of new digital media, traditional mass media which Uricchio[9] called as "Analogue Media" are meant to spread information without any participation of the consumers of such contents. But in this digital age of information dissemination, the newly introduced SM makes sure participation of the users in the process.

Castells[15] in his book "The Internet Galaxy" states that "technological systems are socially produced and that social production is culturally informed". In other words, initially the culture of the people who developed Information Communication Technology (ICT) greatly influenced the medium. The reason for shaping of the technology was that producers of the technology were actually the users of the same. The technology of internet is continuously changing and giving way to the invention of more sophisticated technologies like SNSs to meet modern market demands. The makeover of the early stage of the technology and the technology of the day in line with its use has been classified by Castells as 'producers as users of the technology' and 'consumers as users of the technology'. The use of internet by the producers as users contributed a lot in the development of the system, whereas, the consumers as users have no direct link with advancement of the digital technology. Their use of internet, however, has contributed to the emergence of new facilities in the system of digital technology[15].

Inspired from the advent of satellite technologies, McLuhan thought of global connectedness of the entire cultures and societies and termed the phenomenon as "global village". His concept of "global village" proved to be a prediction of the role of SM that has shrunk the world far smaller than the village. This interconnectivity of the world through SNSs has now become a reality. The cross cultural transmission of television and radio led McLuhan to call the world as global village where individuals receive information about one another irrespective of geographical boundaries. But this terminology of global village holds very much true when it comes into the arena of SM platforms. The people of different countries, regions and cultures interact with each other and communicate through instant messaging within no time. They can update and inform each other as much instantly as that of face to face settings. Such interconnectedness through SNSs according to Heinrich[16] facilitates the process of globalization in number of ways. SNSs cross space and time limitations and let its users to adapt to a global context, regardless of region, religion, ethnicity, color, race and caste. Beside the fact that the users of SM are very much heterogeneous, they still interact with each other like a single community. It has been recognized that the bonding force of a community is the common interests. The common interest of the users of SM is the 'use of the technology.

CONCLUSION

In the perspective of Technological Determinism theory and in the light of existing research studies it has been assumed that ideologies, human communication behaviour, family relationships, interaction with colleagues, teaching-learning settings, interaction with friends, pastime and means of amusement and participation in socio-political engagements have been changed considerably by the use of this new technology. However, these wonderful innovations are yet to be the climax as Uricchio[9] called it the tip of an iceberg. The world is witnessing only a hint of advancement in technology but still it has effectively contributed to some of the spheres of human lives. However, a few aspects of life are yet to be touched by the technology. In other words, the people have not yet seen the digital technology with full potential and magnitude.

SM is overshadowing the importance of traditional media in terms of their services to society. Given this, some of the scholars have believed that this new media is superseding other form of electronic media like radio and television in their scope, functions and features.

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