

Social Media And Violence – The Dark Side Of The Internet**Shubharaj P. Buwa**

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Abstract

Social media is the most modern and sophisticated means of communication. From the news items that we see in daily newspapers and other channels of information world over, and from the conclusions of different research projects, it is confirmed that social media breeds violence. Social media is difficult to control. It is the product of the Internet. Influence of the social media started increasing roughly after 2010. Governments world over didn't recognise its power in the initial stages. But after a few incidents even governments started exploiting it for their own benefit. Misinformation campaigns were launched by governments in many countries using social media apps. Russia, China and North Korea are prominent examples in this case. India has witnessed many such incidents of social media 'sponsored' violence. WhatsApp limited number of messages that can be forwarded by a person in India, at a time, to just five groups or persons, whereas it has brought down this number from 100 to 20 in other parts of the world. This indicates the seriousness of the situation in India. This paper traces the origin of social media and internet, enumerates different types of social media and discusses the various incidents of violence to prove the statement that social media breeds violence.

Social Media and Violence – The dark side of the Internet**Introduction**

Aristotle defines man as a rational, social and therefore a political animal. Men and women can't lead a lonely life. Communicating with each other is a dire necessity. From ancient times human beings developed different means of communication. Face to face communication was the most basic form. We have heard of pigeons delivering letters and the exiled Yaksha in Kalidas's 'Meghduta' (A cloud messenger), a love poem, asking the monsoon clouds to deliver his message to his love in the Himalayan city of Alka.¹ Today, social media has taken over this role of the cloud. (Technically majority of the social media apps reside in the 'cloud' – a reference to cloud computing and huge servers.) Social media is a powerful messenger, sometimes unwanted and encroaching our privacy – violent in the Gandhian sense – not only physical but mental violence also – tangible and intangible violence.

All corners of the world are well connected. Besides the traditional print media, television and radio services, owned either by the government or private firms, the cinema and theatre, a new form of media has emerged and that is the social media. It has its merits and demerits – advantages and disadvantages. This paper attempts to present and analyse the origin and development of communication systems and media, including particularly the social media, its impact on the society and violence it generates.

Brief history of development of communication systems

Development of the dialects and the languages denotes a very advanced stage in the process of communication. Written word made communication much easier. Weekly markets were one of the media used for exchanging messages amongst themselves by various connected groups. Dhangars, (The Shepherds) a nomadic tribe in Maharashtra, still follow this method. Letters and messages providing information about weddings, newborn babies, illness and suffering, death or for that matter any major or minor event and gossip are exchanged at the weekly markets. Members of the community attending the market act as messengers. It's a free and voluntary service. Members of the Mahar community traditionally acted as the messengers in villages besides performing many other activities. They used to exchange messages of the villagers between nearby villages.ⁱⁱ

The postal service dominated the scene of social communication for centuries together. A complicated postal system evolved and the postman had a status equivalent to the teacher in the Indian villages. Both of them were among the very few literates in the village.ⁱⁱⁱ Next step of invention was the telegraph, invented by Samuel Morse (1791-1872) in 1830s and 1840s. First successful message was sent through the telegraph on 24th May 1844 from Washington to Baltimore in USA – a line from the Bible – “What had God wrought”.^{iv} It revolutionised long distance communication. Electrical signals were transmitted through a connected wire. By 1866 USA was connected to Europe through and undersea cable running through the Atlantic Ocean.

19th century witnessed the development of pneumatic post – which used pressurised air tubes to carry packages from one point to other. Alexander Graham Bell claimed the first patent for the telephone in 1876. In the 1860s the existence of radio waves was detected. Guglielmo Marconi, the Italian inventor, invented radio communication and the first successful radiotelegraph message was sent in 1902.^v Telephone and Radio, still in use, made instantaneous telecommunication a routine.

The emergence of computers in the first half of 20th century and the marriage of computers and communication technology in the second half of 20th century truly revolutionised the communication and media sector. The Internet, which is the basis of development of all social media, was invented and developed in the second half of the 20th century by the Americans. Internet was the product of cold war. It was developed by the Americans to overpower and outwit the Soviet bloc. Initially it was used by the US military and later it was transferred to the academic community and finally it was commercialised. So, war and violence are rooted in the concept of Internet. Brief history of the internet follows.

Brief history of the internet

The internet is a politically inspired technological invention of a recent origin. Americans (USA) invented the Internet. It was a by-product of cold war politics. The cold war between USA and its allies representing liberalism and USSR and its allies representing communism, started approximately in 1945 and lasted till 1991, till the collapse of USSR. It

was basically a competition between the two major ideologies of liberalism and communism to dominate the world. The race began with the Russian revolution that took place in 1917 in feudal Russia under the leadership of Lenin. Private property was banned. Capitalists, Landlords, Industrialists were either killed or forced to surrender. Few succeeded in leaving the country alive.

After Lenin, Stalin captured the surrounding small states and extended the territory of USSR which came into existence in 1922. During the second world war parts of eastern Europe including Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, eastern parts of Germany, Bulgaria were converted to the Communist political system.

Total destruction of capitalism was the declared goal of communist leaders. After Europe communist ideology successfully influenced Asian, South American and some African countries.

During the Korean war Korea was divided two parts – south and north in 1945 – South Korea came under the control of the Americans and hence became a liberal democratic country and North Korea was controlled by the USSR and became a Communist country. China adopted communism in 1949, India was being invited to join the Communist camp. The erstwhile French colonies of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos came under Communist rule by 1975.

USA invented and tested the nuclear bomb during the second world war. For few years after the second world war the USA enjoyed monopoly in the nuclear world. In 1949 the USSR developed its own nuclear bomb ending the monopoly of the US. Besides this the USSR developed its first artificial earth satellite – the Sputnik in 1957 and surprised the Americans. All these events threatened the very existence of the capitalist system and capitalist nations.

America responded by starting to build a sophisticated communication system on the basis of advances made in fields of Computers and Networking – or networked computing. A special agency named Advanced Research Projects Agency was created by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1958. Development of new technologies for the US military was the main task of the agency. ARPA “funded advanced blue-skies research.”^{vi} It purchased a dozen expensive mainframe computers for research institutes and universities having research contracts from the agency. But all these machines were incompatible and could not share resources. So, it was decided to create a network which can be used to share the resources. ARPANET was created. Developing software for the ARPANET proved to be a formidable task. It was set aside and a subnet of minicomputers attached to the mainframe computers was created. (Naughton, 2016, p. 7)

ARPA became DARPA – Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency in 1972^{vii}. “Creating breakthrough technologies for national security”^{viii} is its main slogan. The developments at the agency were a closely guarded secret of USA and “Ever since its establishment on February 7, 1958, ARPA...has been striving to keep that technological superiority in the hands of the United States.”^{ix}

ARPANET, a limited network joining few computers on a military base was created. Later it was successfully extended to cover the whole world, first covering the US defence

establishment, then the US universities, Universities outside US and finally the industries and the commercial world. The common man started reaping its benefits since the 1990s.

“ARPA research played a central role in launching the Information Revolution. The agency developed and furthered much of the conceptual basis for the ARPANET— prototypical communications network launched nearly half a century ago—and invented the digital protocols that gave birth to the Internet.”^x This detailed discussion of the origin of internet was necessary to understand the true nature of social media.

Nature and current status of the Net

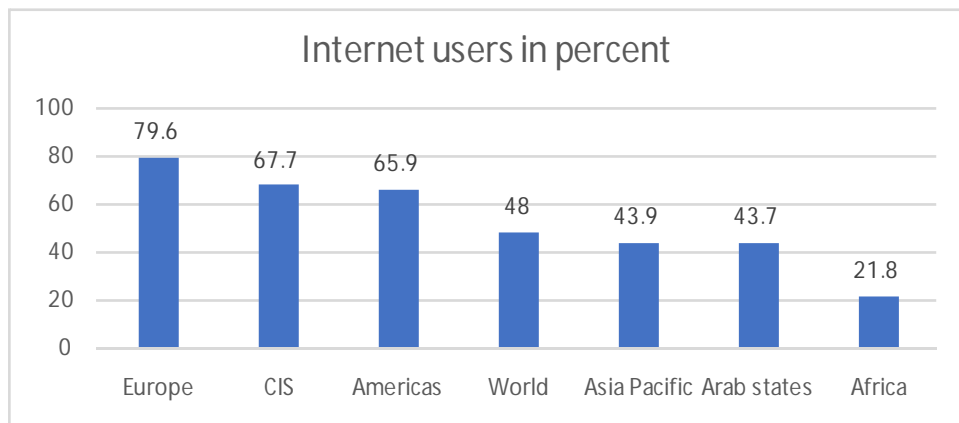
On 29th October 2019 the Internet completed 50 years of existence.^{xi} On this day in 1969 the first ‘packet’ was sent from a computer based in UCLA – University of Columbia, Los Angeles to another computer in Stanford Research Institute, Menlo Park, California. On 1st January 1983 the ARPANET adopted the TCP/IP protocol and since then the building of the Internet started. During the first two decades i.e. the 80s and 90s the use of Internet was limited to technological, academic and research elite^{xii}, now in 2019 it has become a ‘General Purpose Technology’^{xiii} (Electricity and Information technology are the two most important examples of a general-purpose technology without which modern societies could not function. General purpose technologies drastically alter the existing social, political and economic structure of the society.)

Schumpeter’s theory of ‘creative destruction’ can be applied to the Internet as it is both creative and destructive. It has displaced the old economy and displaced those who were inefficient or not ready to or were not willing to adopt the new technology.

The World Wide Web – WWW

Internet and the World Wide Web or The Web are two different things. Internet is the worldwide network of networks of computers connected to each other whereas World Wide Web is a platform – it is^{xiv} an information sharing model. User-friendly applications can be developed on this platform. The Web is the information retrieval service of the Internet. The Web was invented by Tim Berners Lee in 1989. In 1993 the World Wide Web software was put into public domain. It was “conceived and developed to meet the demand for automatic information-sharing between scientists in universities and institutes around the world.”^{xv} The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) founded in 1994 by Tim Berners Lee develops Web Standards in order to utilize the full potential of the Web.

According to International Telecommunication Union data about 3.58 billion people i.e. 48% of the world’s population had internet access up to December 2017.^{xvi}



Source: The State of Broadband – 2017 ITU

https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-s/opb/pol/S-POL-BROADBAND.18-2017-PDF-E.pdf

According to an article published on [Statista.com](https://www.statista.com), as of 2018 there were 3.9 billion (approx. 56% of world population of 7 billion) internet users worldwide. China with 82.9 crore users has the biggest online population, India stands second with 56 crore – about 50% of its population – and USA stands third with about 29 crore internet users – almost 90% of its population. English is the most popular language; second number goes to Chinese and third to Spanish. This is based on 25%, 19% and 7% internet users respectively.^{xvii}

Singapore has the fastest average fixed broadband speed – 197.50 mbps and video accounts for more than 50% of the content downloaded. Watching movies or videos, email, social networking, reading the news and shopping are the most popular activities on the internet. WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in the world and Facebook is the most popular social networking site, with more than 2.4 billion monthly active users. E-Commerce sales account for 10.9% of global retail sales. 64% of global e-commerce traffic was through mobile phones. Privacy, fraud and hacking are the main concerns of internet users. Facebook received 1,10,634 requests from federal law enforcement agencies for user data.^{xviii}

According to an [article published on International Telecommunication Union website](#) the next billion users of internet will come from the developing and least developed countries. They will access the internet through their mobile phones instead of PCs and Laptops as prices of PCs and Laptops are out of their reach. On the mobile phone they prefer voice, images, videos to text. So, this is the new mode of communication for next billion users. Software professionals are concentrating on making apps with a focus on audio, video and images.^{xix} 194 billion mobile apps were downloaded in 2018. This shows the increasing popularity of mobile internet.^{xx}

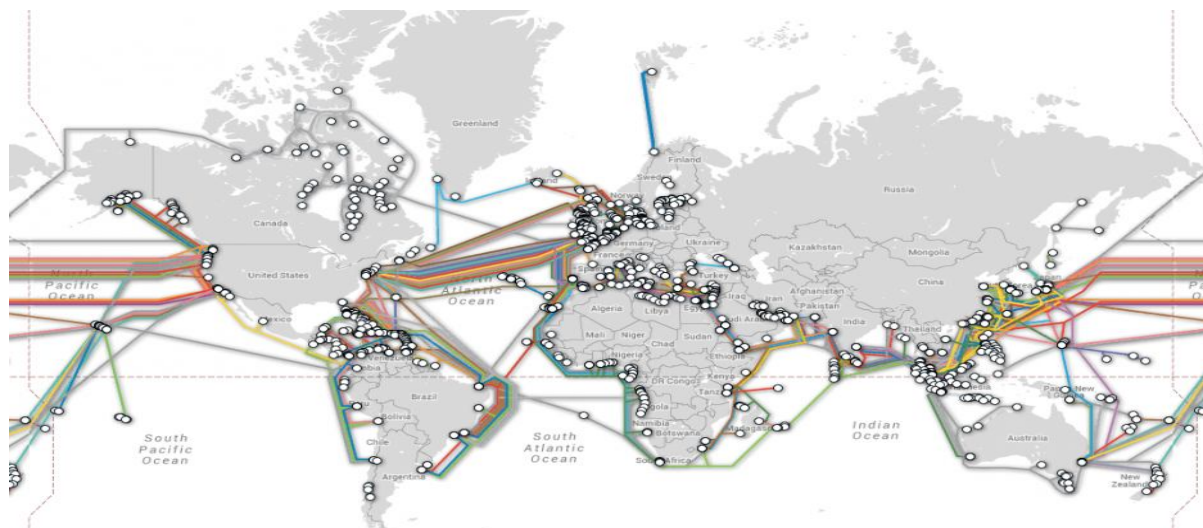


Image showing the submarine cable network covering the entire world.

Image source: - <http://www.submarinecablemap.com/>

Internet has transformed the world. It has introduced a new way of life. Along with the benefits there are problems which are disrupting normal life. Dr. Eric Schmidt, Chairman of Google describes the internet as largest experiment in anarchy. He says ‘The internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy we've ever had’ (Dr Eric Schmidt, executive Chairman of Google, quoted in Taylor (2011)).

What Google says about the Internet while introducing the Google+ project^{xxi} in June 2011 is very significant: -

“Among the most basic of human needs is the need to connect with others. With a smile, a laugh, a whisper or a cheer, we connect with others every single day. Today, the connections between people increasingly happen online. Yet the subtlety and substance of real-world interactions are lost in the rigidity of our online tools. In this basic, human way, online sharing is awkward. Even broken. And we aim to fix it.

We'd like to bring the nuance and richness of real-life sharing to software. We want to make Google better by including you, your relationships, and your interests. And so, begins the Google+ project.”^{xxii}

Different types of social media

Different types of social media can be classified as follows: -^{xxiii}

1. Social networks
 - a. Facebook
 - b. Twitter
 - c. LinkedIn
 - d. WhatsApp
 - e. Telegram – used by the ISIS extensively to organise their campaign because of its secretive features.
 - f. Skype
 - g. Viber

- h. VK – largest network in Russia
 - i. Hike
 - j. Taringa! – popular in South America
 - k. Weibo – popular in China.
 - l. Renren – popular in China.
2. Media sharing networks
 - a. YouTube – generates heavy traffic because of video exchanges and is a cause of concern for many governments.
 - b. Snapchat
 - c. Instagram
 - d. TikTok
 3. Discussion forums
 - a. Reddit
 - b. Quora
 - c. Digg
 4. Bookmarking and content curation networks
 - a. Pinterest
 - b. Flipboard
 5. Consumer review networks
 - a. Yelp
 - b. Zomato
 - c. TripAdvisor
 6. Blogging and publishing networks
 - a. WordPress
 - b. Tumblr
 - c. Medium
 7. Social shopping networks
 - a. Fancy
 - b. Etsy
 8. Interest based networks
 - a. Goodreads
 - b. Last.fm
 9. Sharing economy networks
 - a. Uber
 - b. Airbnb
 - c. TaskRabbit
 10. Anonymous social networks
 - a. Whisper
 - b. Ask.fm
 - c. After School

The young generation today prefers to get their news and information from the social media rather than reading newspapers, magazines, journals or books and encyclopaedias or even watching television or listening to the informative programmes on radio.

Today Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp are most popular social media applications all over the world. China and Russia have their own applications. WeChat is famous in China. VK is famous in Russia.

WhatsApp and 2019 Loksabha elections in India^{xxiv}

A news report in Time magazine elaborately discusses the use and abuse of social media during Indian elections. All political parties have gradually recognised the importance of social media. The BJP is at the forefront with three WhatsApp groups created in each polling station area in India. There are about 9,27, 533 polling stations. Theoretically three groups of 256 members each means 71,23,45,344 people – over 71 crore people – that means over 79% of voters eligible to vote in 2019 elections as there were over 90 crore eligible voters registered. Practically the number may be less because not all groups have maximum number of members and all members in the groups and not equally interested in and affected by the campaign.

It is alleged that all these parties run a campaign of fake news, misinformation and hate messages. Some parties have employed full time activists to create and distribute relevant messages to sections of population. Eligible voters are classified into caste and class and religious groups on the basis of data freely and or commercially available in the market for a throw away price. The market for such data collected from various online sources is huge. This instigates violence.

WhatsApp and lynching in India

There were many incidents of mob violence based on fake WhatsApp messages. In Maharashtra villagers of a certain village constantly received messages about a gang kidnapping children. On one fine day the villagers saw some strangers demanding food in front of a house. One of the members of that group tried to talk to a child. Villagers suspected this group to be a gang of kidnapers and attacked and killed all members of the group. Later it was revealed that these were poor people struggling for survival not at all related with kidnapping or for that matter any other criminal activity.^{xxv}

Many such incidents are reported from various parts of India including Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh and many cities in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Social media and The Arab spring

Many researchers claim that the revolutions in Arab world were better organised with the help of social media. But there are two groups of researchers and their two distinct opinions – some are social media enthusiasts, ready to give all credit for the revolution to social media and on the other hand there are social media skeptics who grossly underrate the importance of social media. Truth lies in between these two extreme points. Social media was a new phenomenon during the Arab Spring. Liberal enthusiasts made use of social media to organise the uprising to some extent. It was possible for them because the governments were not aware of the power and influence of social media at that time. Later on as governments understood the importance, internet was banned making it difficult for the

activists to communicate with each other. Their mobiles and apps lost all the value. Hong Kong incidents highlight this phenomenon.

Social media and demonstrations in Hong Kong^{xxvi}

Continued protests by masses against the government have become a regular feature in Hong Kong. They are campaigning against draconian laws. Lots of social media apps are involved. But this involvement is different from that of 2014 events. Earlier in 2014 activists enthusiastically posted their photographs on social media sites and tried to establish their identities as aggressive activists. Later the Chinese government detected activists on the basis of their social media profiles, filed cases against them and convicted them. Proof was provided by the social media profiles. This time, in 2019, activists learned a lesson and started making anonymous communication. They took extra care to hide their identities. Russian government has helped the Chinese government and become popular with the mainland Chinese people by circulating videos against the Hong Kong activists made by RT, the official television channel, through YouTube.^{xxvii}

Children and social media

Molly Russell, a young UK girl of 14 years committed suicide. Investigations after her death found graphic posts about suicide and self-harm on her Instagram account. Her father criticised the social media in general and particularly Instagram, forcing Instagram to remove harmful content from their site.

Suicides committed by children after participating the 'Blue Whale' online game became a cause of concern in Russia after more than 130 children died as a result of such incidents.

Conclusion

Thus, with the help of above discussion it can be concluded beyond doubt that though social media is a powerful messenger and proved to be useful in many ways, it instigates violence in the form of communal riots, political conflict, mob lynching and suicides by innocent youngsters etc.

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