

Impact of Social Media on Political Socialisation in India

by Lasya Tandon

Submission date: 23-Oct-2019 03:16PM (UTC+0530)

Submission ID: 1198659106

File name: 2.docx (252.5K)

Word count: 39015

Character count: 211668

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL SOCIALISATION IN INDIA

*Dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the award of*

Master of Philosophy

in Political Science

By

Lasya Tandon

Regd. No.: 18SPHL05



**Department of Political Science
School of Social Sciences**

**University of Hyderabad
(P.O.) Central University, Gachibowli
Hyderabad – 500046
Telangana
India**

October, 2019

CERTIFICATE



This is to certify that the following dissertation titled 'Impact of Social Media on Political Socialisation in India' submitted by Ms Lasya Tandon (Regd. No. 18SPHL05) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy in Political Science is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance, and is a plagiarism-free dissertation.

This dissertation has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

Prof Manjari Katju

Supervisor

Head

Department of Political Science

Dean

School of Social Sciences

DECLARATION

I, Lasya Tandon (Regd. No. 18SPHL05), declare that the dissertation titled 'Impact of Social Media on Political Socialisation in India' submitted by me is a bonafide work conducted under the supervision of Prof Manjari Katju and is free from plagiarism. It has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I also agree that this dissertation may be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not exist without the support and guidance of my supervisor, Prof. Manjari Katju. I thank her for sharing both her time and expertise in the subject with me generously. Her sound critiques, attention to detail, and above all endless patience in explaining every aspect of the research process, made the writing of this dissertation a much easier task. To Prof. Arvind Susarla, who kindly agreed to be a member of my RAC committee, I owe a similar debt of gratitude. His comments, feedback, and suggestions played an important role in shaping this study. His views on Castells' network theory in particular gave me much food for thought and left a deep impact on my reading of it as well.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Department of Political Science at the University of Hyderabad for the support I found during my time here. From the classes on research methodology to the constructive feedback provided to me while writing, I am deeply thankful for all the help and support I was given among the faculty here. The comments and advice given by Prof. Sanjay Palshikar and Prof. KK Kailash during the final stages of writing were particularly valuable.

I am also grateful to my former teachers at the Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, particularly Prof. Ashok Acharya and Prof. Sanjeev Kumar HM. It was in their classes that the initial plans for this study were sketched out in the form of term papers, and it was under their guidance that I first began to explore social media and the politics that surround it.

I am also grateful to the librarians of this university for providing not only the resources I needed to complete this work in terms of books, journals, and digital databases, but also a calm environment to work in. My fellow research scholars must also be acknowledged with thanks here for their assistance in both academic matters and the consumption of copious amounts of tea and snacks in the canteen.

My academic journey would not have been possible without the support of my family: my mother, who painstakingly read every word I wrote; my father, whose biggest worry for over a year remained whether I was eating enough in Hyderabad; and my grandmother, one of India's most enthusiastic netizens. I would also like to thank my friends Meghna, Grace, Amit, Siddhartha, Gauri, and Ashmita – all of whom listened to me talk about my dissertation with more patience than I deserved.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introducing the Topic

Social media in today's world is ubiquitous. As of 2019, 4.3 billion people (or 57% of the world's population) are online, and out of these 3.4 billion are active on some form of social media. Moreover, this figure is increasing at a rapid pace as newer technologies race to provide access to more and more individuals. Indeed usage of mobile phones to access social media is up approximately 10% from last year, with 3.26 billion using their devices to sign in to various sites (Newberry 2019).

India in particular has witnessed extraordinary development over the past year. In terms of absolute growth, it added 97,855,011 new users – taking total internet penetration to 41% as of January 2019. As a result 60 million new users signed up for social media sites as well, an increase of 24% (WeAreSocial and Hootsuite 2019).

Such numbers make the necessity of studying social media as a factor in the process of political socialisation obvious given the sheer numbers it now has the power to influence, but it is necessary to understand the complex picture presented by Indian social media in order to see how precisely it operates as one. Even a few examples as given below illustrate this.

To begin with the issue of gender, the Indian internet landscape is far more overwhelmingly male as compared to other nations, and approximately 70% of the total number of Indians utilising social media are men (Bhalla 2018). This has interesting effects on the kind and form of communication that takes place on the medium, hinting at a need for more gendered perspectives to emerge in the research. It also raises the question of whether the results of studies conducted in countries with greater virtual gender balance can be held to be equally applicable in the Indian case.

There are other differences that further accentuate this point as well. On the technical front, internet speeds in the country remain rather disappointing averaging at 26.7 mbps, compared to the global average of 54.3 mbps (WeAreSocial and Hootsuite 2019). While this may have played a role in keeping Indian data prices among the lowest in the world, and therefore rendered Internet access affordable for many who might otherwise have been excluded, this had an impact on the average user's online experience as well. Indian users overall tended to use lighter versions of social media apps developed specifically for mobile users with low data speeds in developing countries rather than the regular versions popular in the US and Europe. Two key issues arising from this are the small yet noticeable differences in these versions, and the greater level of access to user data that they require in order to function. Net neutrality allows for some mitigation of the former in India, by somewhat restricting the ability of corporations to influence what users access unlike in countries such as neighbouring Myanmar where Facebook's Free Basics is currently under fire for stoking communal sentiments (Cooper 2018). As the Myanmar case shows, such technical factors can have grave implications in social terms by influencing user attitudes.

But there are social and cultural factors as well to consider. Despite slow internet speeds, Indians were more likely than counterparts in other countries to watch videos. On video-based platforms such as YouTube, queries such as 'Bollywood movies' as well as Indian content channels are among the worlds' most popular. As journalists and tech outlets have argued, this may be in part due to the country's relatively lower literacy rates (Dixit and Mac 2018). The diverse language traditions of the country, not all of which are easily available in keyboard formats yet may also be a contributing factor.

The most interesting outcome of such users' lack of enthusiasm for text though has been the rising popularity of voice-based commands, with nearly half of all Indian users utilising these (WeAreSocial and Hootsuite 2019). Further, it may also help predict future trends in the ways

in which they prefer to interact online. The recent success of nascent apps such as TikTok among the younger demographic may be seen as further evidence for the argument in favour of more video and sound based apps (Lahiri 2019).

What is even more interesting about TikTok in particular are the government's unsuccessful efforts to ban it. Coming under fire from the courts as the platform that may endanger minors using it, it has nevertheless prevailed in the face of an official ban. The ban merely resulted in its disappearance from app stores, not the devices of those who had already downloaded it. Most such individuals continue to use it, highlighting the unique legal problems of regulating such platforms. Finally, in the face of its ineffectiveness among other reasons, the ban was lifted (Hollister 2019).

But perhaps such problems are inevitable in a country where users spend an average of 2 hours and 32 minutes per day scrolling through social media, as per marketing firm WeAreSocial which specialises in digital PR (WeAreSocial and Hootsuite 2019). Firms such as this abound and target those who wish to influence public opinion via such platforms. Their clients range from brands to celebrities, and of course, political parties. Given the importance of wooing the public for leaders in electoral democracies this seems an obvious and inevitable linkage.

In areas with deeper internet penetration, the consequences of such virtual interactions have already begun to spread into everyday politics. The depositions made by CEOs of tech companies in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections or the journalistic coverage of social media usage in Brexit hint at the growing interest in the issue among the public and policy-makers alike. In India too, pre-poll surveys are now attempting to capture the numbers of people who claim to have received some information about parties and candidates via social media although precise numbers remain difficult to estimate. In part this is because 2019

marks the first general election where such significant numbers of the electorate may be reached online.

However, according to a pre-poll survey conducted by CSDS across 21 states in 2014, 14.8% of respondents used the internet to keep abreast of the news in the months preceding the last general elections (5.5% did so daily, 5.4% sometimes, and 3.9% rarely). This was a fairly high statistic for a country that had barely 18% internet penetration overall at the time. Among the respondents 10% had Facebook accounts and 2.7% used Twitter, supporting the popular perception that these were the most popular social networking sites of the time (CSDS-IBN Survey 2014).

In 2019, in acknowledgment of the significant role that social media had taken on in Indian elections and opinion formation processes, CSDS conducted another pre-poll survey. This focussed exclusively on social media, its user base, and the impact it had on the general elections. Most of its findings were quite similar to the picture painted by the industry and government generated reports cited above. A little over one-third of the electorate was exposed to social media; the user base predominantly consisted of upper-caste urban males, and so on. But this report also enabled the observation of several new facets of usage in the context of the Indian political scenario.

To begin with, it brought out several regional differences. Residents of the northern and southern states were more active on such platforms while the east lagged behind on both usage and access. Further the data confirmed popular perceptions of urban areas being better connected than rural ones, although it did note that usage was rising steadily across the board. This may potentially lead to greater political awareness among them as well, as this was found to be closely related with high social media usage. Indeed four out of five respondents with high levels of exposure were well aware of popular political party slogans, indicating the

ease of disseminating these via the medium. On a related note, voters on social media were also more likely to hold more extreme viewpoints and overall had stronger opinions on major issues than non-users. But from this a clear advantage to the party with greater virtual presence could not be derived. In areas with higher levels of usage, there was a greater diversity of opinions found as well. Moreover, trust in the political news reported on such sites varied among users although three-fourth of them did believe it to some extent with only the remaining minority professing total scepticism or lack of faith in it. This held true across major sites and different usage levels, hinting at just some of the difficulties in assessing impact as social media penetration continues to rapidly expand throughout the country (CSDS Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019).

As such figures and analysis show, the advent of social media has influenced voters, the policy landscape, institutions such as courts, election campaigns, and almost every other facet of Indian democracy in myriad ways. Its impact on not just communication but almost every aspect of the political process is unquestionable. It is this impact that this thesis attempts to explore and understand further. Particular emphasis is laid on the socialisation of the electorate, due to the simple fact of such individuals forming both the majority of the user base of such platforms and in the position of most directly influencing the democratic process as voters.

Research Questions

The sheer number of factors that must be taken into account and the complexity of estimating their impact in the above studies highlight just a few of the concerns that must be taken into account when trying to understand the effects that social media has had on the Indian political landscape in general, and political socialisation in particular. A theoretical base is required

that allows for these divergent factors to be taken together and looked at in a manner that is both comprehensive and yet able to do some justice to the unique nature of the medium itself and the role that it is increasingly playing in the lives of voters.

Through a series of questions the establishment of such a base is made easier by allowing for the clarification of certain key points. They cover three main themes that together provide the theoretical base of this thesis: socialisation, communication, and their convergence in network theory. The first presents the following primary and secondary questions respectively: what is the relationship between social media and socialisation? In what ways and on what aspects of socialisation does it have the highest impact? For the second, these are: as a mode of communication, how does it frame and shape content? What broader relations does it establish with society as a media format? And finally, for the third the questions are: how can communication and socialisation be taken together under a single paradigm with social media? How can such a link be used to explore a particular vision of society?

Objectives of Research

The bulk of this thesis attempts to answer the questions raised above. Its objective is to understand the impact that the emerging technologies of social media have had on political socialisation in India thus far, with a particular emphasis on the manner in which these have altered the nature of political communication itself and the repercussions of this. Through such an understanding, it aims to summarise key studies that may aid this goal and establish a theoretical base through which the trends emerging from such research can be clearly seen. These trends can then provide avenues for further study.

The necessity of building such a base through which to study the Indian scenario is largely due to the gap in existing literature on the topic. This is not to say that there is a paucity of works that deal with the political impact of social media on either socialisation or communication. Many have attempted this task, and indeed their works are frequently cited in the subsequent chapters. However, most works in the field have been and to a large extent continue to be centred on the experiences of North America and Europe. This seeming Western bias may be in some part due to the late arrival and still later adoption of such technologies on a widespread scale in countries of the global South. But as seen above, the numbers of those utilising them have now reached a critical mass in India. The studies conducted in the West do not provide a roadmap for understanding their perspectives to the same extent because their delayed arrival has led to the rise of entirely different forms and practices with regard to usage. For instance, there is the ubiquity of mobile phones rather than computers, laptops, or tablets as the primary points of access for many. Further, cultural and contextual factors can lead to vast differences when it comes to how people make use of particular technologies. As such, while broader arguments can indeed be sometimes drawn from studies conducted all over the world their applicability for the Indian case must be subject to further examination.

There have indeed been such attempts made by Indian scholars over the past decade as the topic of social media has gained prominence. Many of these efforts though have focussed on narrowly defined phenomena, specific campaigns or groups, or particular individuals. While these have indeed illuminated several aspects of the effects such platforms have there still remains much to be uncovered in understanding precisely how socialisation on a broader scale has been affected by these platforms in India. Indeed, this is also the case with political communication, campaigning, opinion-formation, and many of the other themes explored.

Usage must be understood not just in the context of particular cases but as part of a broader set of patterns, connected with a larger global spectrum of effects across various countries.

Further, there are numerous ways in which this usage may be examined. With reference to developing countries such as India, where the market is still largely new to both such technologies as well as the companies behind them and has not yet reached the saturation levels and mature stages through which most Western nations have now passed, quite a few of the studies conducted have explicit or implicit commercial models in mind. Some are even directly sponsored by tech giants and marketing firms hoping to break into the Indian consumer base. Despite their usefulness in understanding usage patterns and mindsets within the consumer base, their utility for examining political effects is limited by the very perspectives they adopt. Others, not directly sponsored or possessing any particular commercial motives, have a more technological bent. Such works tend to focus on factors such as design features and accessibility. For instance, a recent paper on WhatsApp usage in India identifies design choices easier for emergent users to adapt to (Balkrishan et al. 2016). While several such works are referenced throughout this thesis, they are read in the context of socio-political theories in conjunction with other studies that highlight the broader consequences of such features and market preferences. Through such exercises, this thesis aims to enhance the scanty mass of this smaller group that hopes to illuminate the ways in which this medium is changing various aspects of political life in digital societies.

Methodology

This is primarily a descriptive work, relying on the already existing literature in the field for analysis of data as well as exploring the current state of research. As such, it relies almost entirely on secondary sources. These can be further categorised as those consulted for

statistical data, major theoretical and academic works in the field, and news reports. The key primary sources used are social media sites themselves. Both are discussed in some detail below.

To begin with, data regarding social media users and usage (numbers, geographical distribution, etc) has been obtained from a variety of sources ranging from academic works, think-tank research, international organisations, news reports, and government channels. Further, live stats and analytics from various websites that track internet traffic either for research or marketing purposes were also taken into account. While such sites do vary in legitimacy, those consulted here include only those that met certain criteria. Firstly, they listed the methods used by them for the collection of data clearly on their sites. Second, they were cited in industry and academic reports alike as reputable sources. Third, the numbers provided by them were also cross-referenced with the other sources listed. Many of these proved particularly useful on two counts: they provided condensed versions of the progress described in detail in reports through illustrative figures that made the impact of social media clear, and they were able to provide concrete numbers for social media marketing strategies that form such a crucial part of deliberate attempts at mobilisation by political parties and groups. Finally, analytics tools and sites were also utilised in order to gain a better understanding of a variety of factors such as usage patterns, comparative popularity of platforms, growth in follower counts of major political figures, engagement ratios, trending topics, and so on.

A diverse range of sources were also needed to compensate for the weaknesses and biases of each. For instance, industry reports have a vested interest in making social media appear highly influential in order to make the necessity of their digital marketing expertise more urgent, government channels often include slight exaggerations in order to meet targets, and so on. The precise methods of collection used by each also vary with distinct strengths and

flaws. For instance, to compare a single pro and con for two distinct approaches, in surveys people may not always be completely truthful due to a variety of reasons, while in automated processes of data collection such as those used to gather usage statistics the particular codes used may not be completely adequate to the task begin with. At the same time, surveys may provide more extensive data about preferences and motivations even as automated methods may result in the collection of a greater volume of data than others.

There are also various extraneous factors such as the time at which the data is collected that gain a particular importance when the discussion is centred on fast-changing technologies like social media. For instance, take CSDS Lokniti-IBN survey cited above. The options given for social media channels to respondents were based on the particular platforms that were deemed most popular for that particular year even though they may not necessarily be so any more or represent the full range of options available.

Further, given the exponential increase in Internet access taking place in India right now, the figures for users differ drastically even between the two CSDS surveys taken only five years apart. As such, presenting an accurate figure that holds true for any extended period is impossible. Instead, in this study the data used has been largely collected at various points over the last decade. Beyond that, the numbers are difficult to obtain as well as not being particularly useful. The latter is primarily because social media has only reached the critical mass of users and requisite popularity for it to have any impact in this time period, and not before, in India. It is hoped that data gathered across the years would present a more comprehensive picture than any single statistic could indicate. While the latter would certainly have the benefit of simplicity, in this case it might also lead to greater inaccuracy.

In terms of the second category, the literature examined has been gathered after extensive review keeping in mind the specific aims of this study. The fields primarily consulted, as can

be seen in the chapterisation given, are those of political socialisation, communication studies, and network theory. Within the first, theories and studies that focus specifically on opinion-formation and mobilisation have been emphasised. With reference to the latter two, there has been a specific focus on the works of Marshall McLuhan, Manuel Castells, and Jan van Dijk as these deal specifically with the linkages between media and politics with a focus on the kind of instantaneous electronic communication that social media forms part of.

Book reviews and interviews of the above authors have also been used to gain a greater understanding of not only the strengths but the weaknesses of the arguments referenced. Such critiques have been answered, where the authors or other scholars were able to fill in the gaps in the original literature, and acknowledged as limitations where they pointed at legitimate flaws that remain unaddressed.

As the majority of the works consulted above are academic, given the contemporary nature of the issue under discussion, these were not sufficient in order to gain a comprehensive picture of several topics and so journalistic works from newspapers, magazines, and digital news outlets have all been referenced. These proved particularly valuable as case studies of how social media has actually impacted people's political lives thus far in concrete ways through their presentation of various incidents. Investigative pieces such as BuzzFeed News's report on mass panic caused by fake Whatsapp videos further provided interesting glimpses of the unexpected ways in which social media is shaping the news environment.

Think-pieces and columns from across a broad range of media also served to illuminate what industry and PR experts as well as political analysts believe future trends may look like. These are largely predictive exercises based on past data, but they do allow for a better understanding of global forecasts for growth. Such forecasts are also provided by social media companies themselves and illustrate their own plans for growth and the expansion of

user bases. This provides an insight into the financial compulsions that shape such platforms and indeed their behaviour as commercial entities.

Finally, social media sites themselves have been used as primary sources. They provide three distinct kinds of information. For one, most have publicly accessible pages that list out their terms and conditions of usage, information for advertisers, as well as simple forms of mission statements that lay out how they view themselves and their goals. These help in understanding the internal logic of such sites. They also serve to further understanding the commercial motives that drive them, complementing the news reports described above. Second, there are their characteristics as platforms themselves. Without an examination of such sites and their functioning (in terms of layout, basic user experience and ease of access, algorithmic functioning, and so on) it would be impossible to write any thesis centred on their impact. Facebook, for instance, works very differently from Tumblr, and it is only through an exploration of both sites from a user perspective that this can be properly understood. Third, quite a bit of the content under discussion is taken directly from such sites including posts, memes, group activity, and so on. As seen in other academic studies on various facets of social media, scrutinising these forms a major part of assessing the impact that such media has on users that engage directly with its content.

The mode of analysis throughout has mainly taken the form of a discussion of theoretical reviews and debates, followed by concrete illustrations from the Indian context. Wherever feasible, specific cases have been taken up using a combination of the sources highlighted above in order to explore the implications of particular aspects on individual citizens as users as well as the medium itself on a larger socio-political level. In-depth examinations have been conducted using these, and an attempt made to bring out key arguments from the literature scrutinised.

Chapterisation

In order to answer the questions raised earlier, the thesis itself is thematically arranged to address the questions of socialisation, communication, and the resultant network societies of the digital era. Beginning with the next chapter i.e. chapter two, socialisation is first explored as a concept in order to gain a fuller understanding of its history and varied definitions. This allows us to locate the processes of opinion-formation, interaction, and so on that can be observed on popular social media platforms within the base provided by theories of socialisation. Such platforms are then themselves taken under observation, and their development as media channels is explored more closely to bring out various features such as revenue models, content patterns, and so on in order to better understand the manner in which these sites interact with their users. The motivations of the sites themselves play a role in how they engage users, and how users themselves are affected by this in not only their communication but behavioural patterns. Algorithmic determinations in particular play a key role in this as both computational strategies and interactive forces that shape social experiences on such platforms. As such they have a direct effect on both individual users as well as their broader contexts. This gives rise to the question of whether social media should be seen as a tool through which more traditional agents of socialisation work, a venue on which such agents work upon individual actors, or more radically an agent in it that holds the power to socialise people in particular ways.

The theoretical points discussed so far are concretely illustrated through a study of the 2014 Indian general elections. This provides a broad look at the utilisation of social media by various groups over an in-depth look at any particular state or individual although examples from various campaigns are of course taken. Such an overview allows for the general trends

that dominated this particular election cycle to be better understood as well as the impact made by social media deployed on a national scale. Indeed, this particular year was chosen for study specifically because it marked one of the earliest political events in India in which this was said to play a major role.

In such events, social media plays a huge role in the formation of precisely the kind of enduring attitudes that are regarded by scholars as the end product of political socialisation itself. Its impact can further be seen to be rooted in its unique nature as defined by the twin characteristics of interactivity and user-user connections that distinguish from earlier forms of mass communication such as television or radio. In order to fully assess this impact then, it becomes vital to see precisely how its qualities as a communicative medium intertwine with its work as an agent of socialisation. This forms the objective of the third chapter.

The chapter begins with an attempt to provide a basic definition of communication itself and assess its relationship with socialisation. The former task depends to a large extent on the definitions provided by John Fisk (2010) in his seminal work on communication studies. It is important to remember that Fisk's work is primarily being utilised here to gain a general understanding of the field of communication rather than regarded as definitive. His primary merit from the point of view of this study lies in having summarised a broad range of issues in the field of communication in a relatively uncontroversial manner that has been generally accepted by most scholars in the field as providing essentially accurate basic definitions of popular terms. As such this serves as a foundation upon which its links with political life can be further explored.

The rest of the chapter can be seen as divided into two main parts. The first of these focuses on the content that is posted on social media platforms in order to understand precisely how such platforms influence what people choose to communicate and how it is understood by

others. This is done via an exploration of some of the major media effects models and further highlights its impact on both the individuals posting, and those viewing the content they share, as well as the common norms and understandings regarding such communication patterns that prevail on various sites. In order to understand this better, the manner in which individuals manage and present their identities in the virtual world is studied in some detail.

Following this, there is an attempt to look beyond what is being communicated to the nature of the very media channels being used to do so. In much the same vein as the examination of social media's history and functioning in the earlier chapter, social media's ability as a medium of communication to not only disseminate but shape messages is scrutinised. Much of the analysis is derived directly from Marshall McLuhan's work. Although for most part this dealt with television, films, and print media as consistent with the era in which he originally penned it, here it is interpreted in the context of social media in order to analyse the manner in which its influence shapes our worlds.

It is this influence that is then fully fleshed out in the fourth chapter using network theory. For most part, the interpretations put forward by two of its leading proponents – Jan van Dijk and Manuel Castells – are used to understand the basic concepts that underlie it. The focus of all network theories lies in assessing the impact of electronic communications on social, economic, and political lives. As such, they are uniquely well suited to tying together the processes of socialisation and communication discussed earlier and providing clear linkages between them in order to analyse the transformational effects that new media can have on the daily life of individuals as well as the functioning of the political sphere. The ideas of timeless time and the space of flows are used to explore the former. Both serve to further emphasise some of the arguments made in the earlier chapters as well regarding the non-linear nature of the medium and its implications. The latter is mainly discussed in terms of institutional structures and democratic politics. In discussing the shapes that such structures

may take, the boundaries of established networks as well as the activities and influences from pre-network forms are seen. It is against the backdrop of these that some of the particular forms of politics studied through examples here originate. Some of these, such as scandal and reputational politics, have long histories but are fundamentally transformed and take on new meanings when they play out among the networks established by new media forms such as social media. Through these some of the contours of what a digital democracy may look like begin to emerge.

CHAPTER TWO: POLITICAL SOCIALISATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Political Socialisation: Review of Literature

The term ‘political socialisation’ is used to refer to the process through which people gain relatively enduring orientations towards their own political environments as well as political life in general as a result of their interactions with various agents of socialisation such as family, peer networks, mass media, and so on (Merelman 1986, 279). Such orientations can be observed and analysed through patterns of voter behaviour, participation in political groups and events, speeches in favour of particular ideologies, and so on in a variety of ways.

As a concept, political socialisation grew out of the continuities noted by researchers looking for patterns in voter behaviour in the US. Most of the early literature in the field is heavily US-centric, with the two most prominent strands of thought being the Columbia and Michigan schools of voting pattern analyses. The former adopted a more sociological approach, taking a variety of environmental factors into account in its studies; while the latter utilised psychological theories of identification and belonging to a greater extent in their works (Sharlamanov and Jovanoski 2014). At this stage, it was not explicitly socialisation that was being studied but rather certain aspects of it from which the specialised sub-field later emerged. The term ‘political socialisation’ itself was popularised by Herbert Hyman’s landmark 1959 work ‘Political Socialisation: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behaviour’.

Numerous studies on political socialisation were conducted throughout the 1960s and 70s. Certain features marked the works from this early period. There was a focus on socialisation in the pre-adult stages of life, with numerous studies focussing on children’s early experiences. Perhaps as a natural side-effect of this they also tended to regard parents (as well as other authority figures) and schools as the most influential agents of such socialisation. For

example, a frequently occurring theme in several works was the assessing of intergenerational attitudes towards major democratic institutions, with a view towards examining the connections between the perspectives of schoolchildren and their parents. Such works also relied heavily on quantitative methods and modes of analysis.

But it was these very features out of which critiques soon emerged. The assumption that political attitudes could ever be ascribed an 'enduring' nature at all, leave alone after a certain age, was questioned (Marsh 1971). Searing, Wright and Rabinowitz (1976) argued that the impact of impressions formed in childhood had been severely overestimated. As a direct result of their work in this area, a lively debate arose over whether these could still be held to have a disproportionate influence over political action in later life or if individuals continued to learn throughout adulthood in a piecemeal fashion. The idea of early political socialisation as leading to a supposedly stable set of beliefs among adults came under scrutiny and was criticised by many.

As a result, studies from the latter half of the 1970s onwards incorporated newer perspectives such as the 'rational updating' of preferences among voters. Issues of party identification and partisanship emerged as key questions. Neundorff and Smets (Neundorff and Smets 2017, 3), hold that this narrower focus represented a diminishing of the field to a limited set of concerns that ultimately led to a temporary decline of socialisation as a topic of interest among political scientists.

In the 2000s though, political socialisation gained salience as a sub-field once again. Recent literature in the field is marked by a growing discussion on what precisely can be defined as socialisation and what age groups can be regarded as definitive in this regard. One view that has gained some prominence argues for socialisation as a life-long process. Theoretically, works that endorse this perspective often draw on a range of arguments for the plasticity of an

individual's preferences over the long-term to examining the changes in socio-economic factors within the larger society the person inhabits that may alter his or her viewpoints. Socialisation here is still marked to some extent by the retaining 'enduring attitudes' towards certain beliefs; however, these are now regarded as relatively rather than absolutely enduring.

Several such the assumptions from the early period have been modified over the years, rather than discarded altogether. The emphasis on childhood learning has been vindicated to some extent by recent studies, as they acknowledge the profound impact that political events have on people belonging to certain age groups on the cusp of adulthood. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson confirm with their 2002 study that such events have the largest impact on eighteen and nineteen year olds, echoing Jennings and Niemi's 1981 study on what they termed the "most crucially impressionable years" (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002, 164; Jennings and Niemi 2016, 21). The difference is that in the more recent work, while the formative impact upon this age group is acknowledged, it is not regarded as lasting to the same extent due an acknowledgement of the changes that inevitably take place as the individual grows older.

Two perspectives that present significant challenges to this popular view are John Zaller's argument that childhood preferences form inclinations that all subsequent beliefs must confront, and studies under the developmental model that seek to explain certain forms of political socialisation as a matter of habit-formation (Zaller 1992; Górecki 2013). But the former still allows for changes in political belief in later life provided the initial inclinations are successfully overcome while the latter appears more successful at explaining the performance of routine actions of political participation than the specifics of individual opinions and changes in them.

The newer conceptions of political socialisation are also equipped with more flexible explanatory mechanisms, a necessity in the modern age where a diversity of ever-changing peoples and processes interact to shape the idea of socialisation itself. At the same time, they continue to build upon older models and ideas as seen earlier. For instance, newer approaches to the APC dynamics of socialisation that explore the impact of Age, Period, and Cohort continue to provide a fascinating window into how these factors give rise to different generational patterns with reference to socialisation while allowing for the examination of 'basic' assumptions such as the aging stability hypothesis (Neundorf and Smets 2017, 10). Essentially, newer models of political learning are generally better able to accommodate variations than traditional approaches focussing on similar factors.

As such, these models are also better equipped to account for interactions with the environment as an active agent interacting with the individual rather than merely assessing its impact. Moreover, they are marked by a growing awareness of the heterogeneous nature of socialisation among persons of different genders, ethnicities, classes, and so on. Moving away from the tendency of some early studies of reading their results of white, American, middle-class respondents as applicable generally, these works are more careful about clearly outlining key characteristics of the individuals whose social experiences are being studied and the limitations inherent in such analysis.

Such heterogeneity is particularly marked in more recent works, especially those that consider social media. The worldwide reach and indifference to consumer background of most platforms results in a diverse user base that researchers must navigate. For instance, a simple study examining algorithmic functioning on Twitter with the extremely small sample of 25 individuals nonetheless exhibited enormous differences among the backgrounds of the respondents (Bucher 2017).

The Evolution of Social Media

Diverse methods are indeed necessary if scholars are to study the constantly evolving virtual realm. The Internet itself, as well as the sites that comprise it, have undergone several changes over the past few decades. The earlier versions of it, and the sites that populated it, used distinct commercial models from the internet of today and provided a very different experience for users. Indeed in their initial years, with reference to the latter, as the internet was slowly finding its way into mainstream usage interactive sites were not particularly sophisticated. For instance, the top site on the New York Times list of sites to visit in 1995 simply allowed users to consult a digital version of a Magic-8 ball (a popular toy that ‘predicted’ the future for users) (LaFrance 2017). Over time however, along with technical progression came more complicated forms of interaction. A key shift took place when rather than merely allowing users to interact with the sites themselves, sites allowed users to communicate with other users. This marked the beginnings of what we today know as social media, by establishing its hallmark form of digital interaction that is primarily marked by instantaneous user-user communication.

These early sites appealed to users on the basis of content that they provided. Interactive functions on such sites were usually limited. While personal websites and avenues such as GeoCities were options for some, these did not allow for communication in the way later forms did. Advertisers functioned in a manner similar to sponsors. This model was rather reminiscent of dominant media models of the day, such as television advertising, although at the same time it incorporated certain distinct features specific to the medium. Commercial e-shopping sites and early forms of banner ads began to emerge. With the latter in particular, the ad-based revenue models that dominate the internet to this day began to spread.

In their timeline of its origins, Boyd and Ellison (2008) mark out SixDegrees.com (launched in 1997) as the first genuine social media site. SixDegrees allowed users to add friends and family, who were then sent email notifications asking if they too wished to join the site. Assuming they did so, the site allowed users to talk to or post messages on the pages on their first, second, and third degree friends. The entire concept of ‘degrees’ was based on the notion (that had gained a certain level of traction in the pop culture of the day) that all people were essentially six degrees of separation away from each other.

However, this early model did not quite tap into the kind of social networks and networking possibilities that made later sites so popular with users. Livejournal, launched two years later, was more successful in this endeavour. Sites at this time began taking the ad-based revenue models in use further: advertisers were still called upon, but privacy levels decreased in order to attract them although still remained far higher than those provided by their successors. While features like the introduction of paid accounts and features were innovative, the facilitation of user-user interaction remained the key service offered to users as clients.

These were among the first Web 2.0 sites. Another key feature that distinguished them from earlier versions, according to Gainous and Wagner (2014), was the level of personalisation that users could gain by controlling their own online experiences. Indeed, social media can be seen as the pinnacle of this kind of personalisation, although the degree of control maintained by users in the face of algorithmic determination of content displays, paid advertising, and other such features remains debatable.

Ads throughout this period remained a key source of commercial gain. But they were not quite as targeted as they are today, and so generated lower revenues. Not only that, directly asking users for money deterred new people from joining social media sites while still not

making enough revenue to signify in terms of alleviating costs. A solution presented itself in the form of user data.

For most social media sites in Web 2.0, despite being end-users the individuals using these sites were seen not as clients but products. Their attention (and in most case, data collected from them) was sold to advertisers in order to render the site attractive to the latter. This had the dual effect of making social media sites more attractive for average users as well since they could now be made free to use without endangering revenue as well as more financially viable. This added to the mass appeal of such sites, leading to more users subscribing and more advertisers paying sites in order to access them via ads.

Such a model also placed the burden of generating content that would attract people away from sites, and towards users. It is this user-generated content that dominates the social media landscape today. The full impact and implications of this shift towards user-generated content on such sites is still under investigation by researchers. It has not only spawned an internet culture and ecology of its own but also enabled a clash of virtual and physical life that is unprecedented in human society. As we become more and more integrated with such technologies in every aspect of our daily lives, some scholars believe that we may be on the verge of becoming a network society (Wellman 2001; van Dijk 2006; Castells 2010a).

Two further implications of this revenue model must be noted here. First, it enabled the mushrooming of numerous social media sites as investors and advertisers alike flocked to them while the ability to utilise the technologies available for free continued to attract consumers. It was this Web 2.0 stage that was both created by and gave rise to sites like Facebook (launched in 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), and Instagram (2010). Second, it enabled such media to play an increasingly large role in the lives of individuals and how they interacted with one another as well as the larger societies and

networks they belonged to. As such, social media began to play an increasingly large role in the social lives and experiences of individuals.

As noted in the previous section, socialisation is often viewed as a life-long process although the early years of an individual's life remain crucial. It is undoubtedly in the later stages of their lives that many adults of today began to use social media on a regular basis, yet its impact on their social lives cannot be denied. At the same time, it is equally important to remember that as of 2019, there exists an entire demographic of young (mostly first-time) voters who are younger than social media sites themselves and grew up in a world where they have always existed. For them, the impact is two-fold because their encounters with these sites are likely to have taken place in their most impressionable years in terms of idea and identity formation.

Forms of Digital Content

It for this reason that the content users encounter must be examined more closely in order to better understand how it shapes their views. To begin with, the origins of such content must be clearly laid out.

Despite primarily relying on user-generated content to attract and sustain a user base, not all posts that the average user encounters are made by individuals they are acquainted with. Even within the category of what technically qualifies as 'user-generated' content, there are multiple kinds. First, there are those that are usually thought of as the most common variety of user posts – those made by the immediate acquaintances of the user such as friends and family. Secondly, those made by celebrities or popular figures such as those prominent internet personalities who have built followings within particular social media sites. These

can be more accurately seen as team-generated, as they usually involve a group of people (sometimes including PR professionals) that carefully create and manage content to maintain an image for a specific purpose. In case of celebrities, this may be linked to their offline careers, such as is the case for most politicians. For internet personalities, this may involve acquiring sponsorship deals, furthering particular ideologies or ideas, and other such ventures. Thirdly, there are brand and company profiles. These are professionally managed by corporations, with each post carefully made to meet particular engagement targets.

Posts of the first type however cannot be thought of being made entirely by users to express themselves, contrary to the image of such posts sold by social media sites themselves. As a 2012 study revealed, despite limited knowledge of precisely how the algorithms that order content for display on such sites work, most users do exercise an algorithmic imaginary to construct and post their content in ways that would make the algorithm look ‘kindly’ upon it i.e. allow the maximum number of their followers and other users to see it (Bucher 2012).

Such imaginaries have the effect of imposing unspoken guidelines over what is said, and how it is expressed, by whom, and even at what time of the day if it is to be heard by others. Ironically despite the *raison d’être* of such sites ostensibly being open communication, the kind that actually takes place among users on them faces several barriers created by the functioning of the sites themselves.

Added to these unwritten rules are those that are explicitly laid down in the “Terms and Conditions” of service that every user must agree to before they are given access to accounts on the site. These restrictions further limit the modes of expression available to the user. While sites often make the argument, reminiscent of Berlin’s idea of negative liberty, that these terms only limit the options of users so that all users may enjoy a similar freedom to express themselves, in practice they remain arbitrary and often unjust (Berlin 1969). Indeed,

the New York Times published an article in 2017 that featured a quiz which challenged users with a variety of offensive and innocuous statements across the political spectrum to see if they could guess which ones were against Facebook's rules on hate speech. Several comments offensive to historically oppressed peoples ("Poor black people should still sit at the back of the bus") and sexist remarks ("Female sports reporters need to be hit in the head with hockey pucks") were considered acceptable by the site due to technical aspects of their wording. Indeed, as a Facebook spokesperson explained, the manner in which the sentences were constructed precluded their being considered hate speech regardless of the fact that the general thrust of their meanings remained offensive to many (Carlsen and Haque 2017).

Further, a 2011 article for the Brookings Institute by Jeffery Rosen highlighted the growing role played by 'deciders' in determining what content stayed and what was removed from particular social media platforms including giants such as Facebook and YouTube. As an example, he cited the 2006 takedown of an Orkut page by such a 'decider' because it portrayed Shivaji, considered a deity by the Shiv Sena party, negatively. At the same time, another page criticising the party itself was left up. The rationale given was that the former attacked a religion, while the latter merely used free speech to write against a political party. But considering the deification of Shivaji in Maharashtra is itself seen as a political issue by many, this is a debatable logic applied from without by an individual with limited knowledge of the Indian scenario on behalf of a private, foreign company (Rosen 2011). While the perils of human implementation of such rules could be seen here, an attempt to utilise technical fixes such as prohibiting certain keywords and images in order to keep a site's posts compliant with its policies went disastrously wrong for Tumblr in December 2018. The resulting chaos on the site not only proved the impossibility of using automated means of censorship at our current stage of technological evolution (not quite as far removed from the

days of the Scunthorpe problem¹ as we would like to believe) but also caused the platform to lose almost a third of its users while retaining the problematic content they wished to erase (Sung 2019).

Hemmed in by such explicit and implicit restrictions, generating popular content on social media sites remains an exceedingly tricky business. Indeed, for every stranger who enjoys the 15 seconds of fame brought about by going accidentally ‘viral’, there are numerous advertising firms and professionals who are paid heavily to ensure brands do so. Several posts of the second and third type involve such experts. Considering both types are designed to essentially motivate other users to do something (buy a singer’s new song, vote for a particular candidate, and so on) they involve a form of interaction that is fundamentally different from basic user-user communication. Further, these profiles are more often than not backed by the very advertisers who form the site’s primary clients. As such, paid or sponsored posts can surpass the usual algorithmic methods used to curate content for users and be pushed to the very top regardless.

A similar effect is also achieved by another category of content: paid advertisements and sponsored posts. While the latter may be said to sometimes blur unto the second and third categories of user-generated content as well, by and large such content forms an entirely different group with distinctive characteristics. Its primary aim remains to convince users of something, whether it is the superiority of a particular candidate or the necessity of buying a new mattress. It too appears on users’ newsfeeds, before the start of videos, while scrolling through a dashboard, and so on. Such ads have a distinctive advantage over user-generated

¹ The Scunthorpe problem refers to websites, forum posts, chat messages, or other forms of electronic media being blocked by spam or search engine filters due to their contents containing an information string (such as a set of letters in succession like the problematic four-letter word contained in the name of the English town of Scunthorpe) that are deemed objectionable despite the innocuousness of the complete word, image, or message.

content in that they are usually displayed to a targeted audience based on several weighted factors taken into account by complex algorithms (facebook business n.d.).

Further, the users agree to share their data with as well view the content generated by advertisers as their price of admission into social media platforms via the terms and services mentioned earlier. As such, paid advertising ensures that not only people who have voluntarily subscribed to particular beliefs or brands view them, but also those with the highest potential for conversion to their way of thinking simply by using the very data and permissions provided by users themselves.

When it comes to such posts in terms of electoral campaigns, or indeed political issues and ideologies more generally, all kinds of users and content mentioned above can play a part in shaping the average user's ideas. While the legitimacy of the political content seen on social media is often called into question (such as with the phenomenon of 'fake news', for instance), this is a relatively unimportant one from the point of view of socialisation. Even when we consider more conventional agents of socialisation such as the nuclear family, the political opinions and values an individual may acquire from their parents rarely have their basis in clear facts or absolute values. They may not even be clearly aligned with what is best for the family given their particular situation and context. However, the constant exposure to such beliefs within the family setting has a tremendous impact. And once an individual gains an enduring orientation towards certain beliefs, they tend to seek validation and confirmation for those rather than actively challenging their worldviews on a daily basis.

Along similar lines, in the case of social media too, what is important from a socialisation perspective is not the validity or legitimacy of particular claims but the constant exposure to them that an individual receives. This state of constant exposure may be brought about by the genuine popularity of an opinion (among the user's immediate networks at least), the

endorsement of celebrities or influencers, targeted advertising, and so on. The algorithmic ordering of social media feeds ensures that once an individual has expressed an interest in something, they are given plenty of chances to explore it further, obtain validation from others who are already tuned into that particular network of beliefs, or listen to corresponding beliefs that align with that particular worldview.

The Role of Algorithmic Determinations

In order to fully understand how the technological features of social media platforms impact the behaviour of individuals directly, indeed how they mould the very formation of the ‘enduring attitudes’ described above, studying the effect of a particular feature on users may be helpful. As such, algorithms provide a unique window into the manner in which social media acts an agent of socialisation.

Algorithmic sorting and presentation of posts is a feature unique to social media. No other medium provides this level of personalisation in terms of the content immediately made available to users. At the same time, such algorithms are essentially built to serve the commercial interests of the sites deploying them. They may do so in a variety of obvious ways such as the highlighting of sponsored content or more subtly by showing viewers posts that they may not necessarily approve of but show a tendency to interact with in order to keep them engaged on the site for a longer period of time.

The exact formulas and functions behind the algorithms used on the most popular platforms in the world remain industry secrets. The most easily available in the public domain remains EdgeRank, which was used by Facebook in its early days to determine what was displayed on users’ Newsfeeds. Facebook itself has since then moved on to a far more complex version,

involving thousands of ‘weights’ to rank content, but the basis of its approach can be seen in the initial formula (McGee 2013). Considering Facebook was something of a pioneer in this, it may also be reasonable to assume that some insight into the algorithms used by other similar sites are also to some extent inspired by or similar to Facebook’s.

A simplified version of the formula, unveiled by Facebook in 2010 worked as follows:

$$\sum_{\text{edges } e} u_e w_e d_e$$

u_e ~ affinity score between viewing user and edge creator
 w_e ~ weight for this edge type (create, connect, like, tag, ect.)
 d_e ~ time decay factor based on how long ago the edge was created

Source: Birbak and Carlsen 2016

The rank or likelihood of a post being displayed to the viewer was calculated using the three weights seen above. Affinity depended on the link between the person posting and viewing and was not mutual. That is, just because one person who was ranked as being close to the other did not mean that the affinity was necessarily reciprocated. Weight for the edge type depended on the manner in which other users interacted with the post. The more liked, shared, and commented upon it was, the higher it was ranked. Time decay referred to the time that had elapsed since it was initially posted. The ordering thus produced has been criticised as unnecessarily opaque and overly complicated; as well as defended as just and the one of the few viable solutions to ordering the sheer volume of content that is posted online at every given moment by various commentators (McGee 2013; Birbak and Carlsen 2016). However most of them agree that this ranking produces its own ecology of content and its visibility.

Considering social media is itself a communicative medium in which visibility (at its most basic in the form of a profile, in more complex terms with reference to followers or interactions as a collaboratively created identity) holds paramount importance in ensuring

that the message can be effectively disseminated, it is no wonder that most users try in some form or the other to utilise these algorithms to their advantage. Those such as corporations, major political parties, and brands do so using paid, targeted posts and advertisements. Among more ordinary users these attempts often take varied forms, resulting in the creation of what Tiana Bucher terms ‘an algorithmic imaginary’ among them (Bucher 2017, 31).

Bucher’s work on the topic provides fascinating insights into how people view this ordering of their virtual lives on social media platforms by machine-made calculations well beyond their immediate control. The frustrations of an artist struggling to rise to prominence using every trick they believe may influence the algorithm in favour of their newly launched music, the shock of a woman who had recently moved discovering ads for the exact furniture she needed in the location she had only just moved to – as well as many similar cases come together to form a picture of the ways in which algorithms impact not just the online selves of users but have an impact on their offline behaviour as well. For instance, the artist in question desperately attempts to post their works using hashtags that it seems the algorithms are likelier to pick up on, during times of day when it might perhaps have a greater chance of rising to Newsfeed prominence on Facebook, and so on (Bucher 2017, 36).

The imaginaries such practices generate – of what content, hashtags, and so on algorithms might or might not favour, at what times, on what days – can be seen to affect users’ behaviour. Indeed, there are several marketing firms built around attempting to make sense of these seemingly whimsical decisions made by codes beyond most people’s abilities to predict. Various social media PR firms confidently claim to have unlocked some mysterious solution that will propel customers to the very top of these elaborate platform-specific popularity rankings and bring them closer to a cherished ‘viral’ moment.

In the meantime, the average user by and large continues to almost unconsciously make subtle tweaks to their content in hopes of gaining algorithmic approval: a hashtag added, a keyword removed, a sentence phrased a little differently. The content they are posting itself begins to change in accordance with the particular platform they favour.

The social practices prevailing on each given site are thus slowly internalised by users and expressed in their content. Indeed, beyond that they may even begin to affect their notions and ideas of themselves: as Trottier and Lyon's study on Facebook showed, individuals collaboratively assist in the building of identities for one another through their interactions. The attitudes, opinions, and politics of such identities may be directly affected by what they are algorithmically exposed to (Trottier and Lyon 2011).

Indeed, it is this process that is often highlighted under discussions on the creation of echo chambers on such sites. As users with similar perspectives engage with one another, the argument goes, so they are shown more and more content of the same kind until they self-segregate into homogenous groups. The reasons given for these selective groupings vary from confirmation bias to an inability among users to deal with the sheer volume and diversity of content they are confronted with in cyberspace (Sunstein 2001, 7).

However, the influence of algorithms is not quite as complete as several scholars studying echo chambers have themselves discovered. Many dispute their impact in creating homogenous groups, and many hold that interaction among people from different ideological viewpoints continues despite the existence of such groups. There are three primary counter-arguments that can be offered in favour of the latter views.

Firstly, despite the existence of large differences among extremists of all political strands there is a large middle ground that is occupied by those who are willing to engage in discussion. Such users may not constitute the most visible segment of social media sites, but

they are often far likelier than fervent believers of particular ideologies to engage those with different viewpoints (Bright 2018).

Secondly, it may be logically concluded that if algorithms are tuned to show users the content that they most frequently interact with then they may actually be more likely to display posts that users find aggravating or otherwise confrontational. Even within the limited knowledge of algorithmic weights available within the public domain, it is easy to see that comments hold greater weight than likes. They also have the effect of keeping users engaged with the platform for longer spans of time, thereby resulting in greater profit for sites that are essentially selling their members' attention to advertisers. After all, a controversial opinion that a user must actively refute would require more time and energy being spent on the site, than an agreeable post they may simply hit like on and continue. Indeed, several social media sites have been accused of deliberately refusing to censor provocative content in order to retain or grow their user bases. However scholarly analysis and data on this issue remain scanty. Further research is required in order to determine the applicability of this argument on a larger scale.

Third, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that social media constitutes a semi-controlled environment where the individual exercises a limited degree of control over what they see. Posts may be displayed based on the user's past preferences, friend list and the activities of individuals on it, trending topics in the area he/she lives in, and so on. In this manner, neither the algorithms nor the users have total authority over their Newsfeeds. Moreover, simply because individuals see a post or video on their feed does not necessarily mean that they interact with it. At the same time, it must be noted that the entire purpose of algorithmic sorting is to ensure they do so in order to keep them on the platform. The result is often that, as noted in the case of EdgeRank, "EdgeRank is not something that merely acts

upon users from above, but rather that power arises from its interrelationships with users" (Bucher 2012, 1172).

But this relationship nevertheless confers a great deal of power upon algorithms while robbing users of a certain degree of agency in selecting what they are exposed to. Indeed, David Beer explores Scott Lash's 'new new media ontology' that this gives rise to in terms of the new power structures that prevail under this kind of algorithmic selection (Beer 2009; Lash 2007a). The social processes that make up our lives, in his view, are being not just mediated but constituted by such technological factors that shape them. In his work, Beer draws upon the network theory to a large extent as well as Hayle's notion of the cognisphere in which human interaction is increasingly undergirded by a network of technical calculations and machine-made decisions that fundamentally shape them, to conclude that "Where we might once have spoken of 'constitutive' and 'regulative' rules... in a society of pervasive media and ubiquitous coding, at stake is a third type of rule, algorithmic, generative rules'" (Hayles 2006; Lash 2007b, 71).

Are Social Media Sites Tools, Venues, or Agents of Socialisation?

Given this complex scenario it is easy to understand why different individuals even within academia hold distinct, and sometimes even contradictory, views on the nature of social media. Certain perspectives are more prevalent than others. The three discussed below are by no means exhaustive categories but they do nonetheless exemplify certain leading a viewpoint through which social media has been examined.

In a study of the linkages between online and offline political participation, to begin with, researchers examined the behaviour of 1715 college students in Facebook groups. The

researchers regarded the groups themselves as tools that enabled students to pursue various “gratifications” such as “socialising, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information” (Park, Kee, and Valenzuela 2009, 729).

This view of social media and its features as tools enabling more traditional forms of socialisation such as peer networking with all its attendant characteristics to take place via the medium can be found in numerous studies (Jacobsen and Forste 2011; Best, Manktelow, and Taylor 2014; Sherman et al. 2016). The assumption inherent within such a view is that social media merely assists people in following older pathways to socialisation by enabling interaction and communication. The latter is the key purpose served by the technology. Through this, it is held to have changed the way in which the given form of socialisation (for instance, peer networking and school) takes place by. But it is the experience of participants undergoing it that has changed, not the form itself. Individuals are still held to have been affected by their peers or school environment, the difference is that social media has played a role in precisely how this effect has taken place.

Such thinking essentially relegates social media to the role of the messenger rather than the message. It is particularly common among the kind of quantitative studies cited above, although rarely articulated as such. These studies are in many ways reminiscent of earlier works on socialisation, particularly among young adults, and attempt to categorise and classify its impact in statistical terms.

In a similar vein, there are studies that look upon social media as the venue in which already established processes of socialisation are being carried out. It differs slightly from the former view in that these regard social media as the site upon which these processes are being carried out rather than the medium through which they occur. The media ecology constituted by

these sites is explored in greater detail, such as in Ahn's work on the effect of social media on adolescents' social and academic development (Ahn 2011).

Social media then becomes not a driving force of socialisation but rather the location at which individuals interact with such forces. Indeed, in a recent book of the correlation between it and politics the first chapter was entitled "Social Media – the New Dinner Table?" (Gainous and Wagner 2014, 1). Although the book itself does not quite endorse the perspective of social media as a venue for socialisation, the metaphor used is useful for highlighting how for some scholars social media is indeed a new site upon which the processes of socialisation are now playing out as they once did at dinner tables, school yards, and so on. This is not to discount the role that these latter venues still play, but rather to include social media sites as among them as well as having a transformative impact upon them.

However, the discussion in later chapters of Gainous and Wagner's work actually veers closer to the third perspective of social media: as an agent of socialisation in its own right. This is by far the most comprehensive view as it includes every aspect and feature of the medium in its exploration of it as the causative factor in socialisation processes. The latter, as seen earlier, can be here taken to refer to the development of a somewhat enduring attitude, or the process of the development of such attitudes on particular topics of political discussion and social media as the direct cause of it.

In an ethnographic study of digital media during the Ferguson riots (sparked by the killing of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer in 2014), the authors explore racial attitudes and hashtag activism by considering social media an active part of the protests themselves (Bonilla and Rosa 2015). While they do consider these sites as locations where the protests are being held as well, they are not passive locations as in earlier paradigms but

rather played a role in shaping what the protests became and the potential they still hold as outlets for exploring the materiality of the subjugated black body. Such an analysis involved not only acknowledgement of the role of platforms in providing spaces for expression but also a deeper understanding of how the crowd-sourced nature of content on these is both being used and can be used in the future to build upon particular views of race and racialised politics in the United States.

Closer home, an examination of teams of young right-wing Hindu volunteers brought forth an interesting digital practice: of compiling ‘facts’ coloured with an ideological bias as an archival exercise undertaken by those who lacked any formal training or expertise, but nonetheless did not hesitate to utilise their works as evidence against political opponents online (Udupa 2016). This once again involved recognition of the unique manners of linguistics, politics, social networking, and the creation of historical narratives online as seen to a large extent in the previous article discussed above. These are of course part of the reason it may be said to be looking at social media as an agent in its own right. But it goes further and so articulates certain forms of communication, interaction, and propaganda that has emerged through the interplay of the medium and its users, with both shaping as well as exploiting the behaviour of the other. Social media is in this manner seen as an active force in the socialisation process of its users, not only taken to be the messenger but a formative influence on the message itself and well as the form in which it is articulated.

Similar viewpoints can be seen in several studies of phenomena unique to social media. Rumour modelling for digital platforms for instance, puts a set of previously non-existent challenges before programmers and researchers alike that can only be solved through an understanding of the various factors such as forms of legitimacy and interactivity of information distribution on social media sites to name just two. Once again the role of the

medium itself is of utmost importance in the processes taking place on it, going well beyond mere facilitation.

Some of the most prominent works on this view, which elevate it to a well-developed paradigm, may be found in the works of network theorists. While explored in greater detail in Chapter 4, in its simplest form a network society as explained by Manuel Castells in a 2001 interview is "... a society where the key social structures and activities are organized around electronically processed information networks... It's about social networks which process and manage information and are using micro-electronic based technologies" (Castells 2001). The concept of a network society places an emphasis on electronic media as the key factor affecting not just messages but how they are generated, received, and understood as well,

This emphasis is what makes most works that take social media as an agent of socialisation in its own right. As such, it is not limited in its use to understanding particular social or political phenomena taking place on such sites but rather can be used more broadly to understand how processes of understanding and opinion-formation take place. Further, it also provides a window into the ways in which the very manner of political conversation is affected by its virtual incarnation (Udupa 2017). Understanding social media itself, as a form of communication that is fast becoming embedded in the society that we live in is vital if we are to fully grasp the visible impact it is now starting to have on our political lives. It cannot be treated as a passive tool or venue in which users interact but rather as making possible that very interaction in forms that have not been previously seen as well as actively shaping it in both conscious and unconscious ways through its technological and commercial compulsions.

Campaigning for the 2014 Indian General Elections

The 2014 elections have been regarded as the moment that decisively marked the entry of social media into the Indian campaign field by most observers (Dutta 2014) (Ranganathan 2014). By this time roughly 18% of India's population had made its way online (Real Time Statistics Project n.d.). This constituted a significant proportion of the electorate even though not all users were old enough to vote, given the youthful demographics that tend to dominate newer technologies. Moreover, the social media movements and localised hashtag revolutions in the years prior had successfully proved that this was a medium that could be used to engage and motivate people to participate in political activities. International events ranging from Obama's Presidential bids to the Arab Spring further drove this point home.

The former, in particular, bore a resemblance to the Indian elections in that one party was quicker on the uptake when it came to the potential benefits of social media than others. In the 2012 US elections, Barack Obama spent \$47 million on digital campaigning while his opponent Mitt Romney restricted himself to a mere \$5 million. Similarly, by the 2014 Indian elections, Narendra Modi had 12 million fans on Facebook while Rahul Gandhi had a mere 125,000 (Chawla 2019).

This is not to say that Facebook fan followings could serve as predictors in the manner of pre-poll surveys but they were useful for gauging public interest in particular candidates. Indeed the Obama campaign utilised them for this very purpose; and it is quite likely that the Modi campaign imitated it given that several BJP leaders worked to build significant profiles on various platforms before the elections (Carr 2008; Baweja 2014).

The key advantage of social media that was realised by both campaigns lay in its ability to form social networks as well as channelize existing ones in favour of parties. Huge numbers of subscribers, followers or e-mail lists could be mobilised at a fraction of the cost required for door-to-door campaigning. Voters also gained what seemed to be direct access to their

leaders, although the images of authenticity seen on such sites were carefully managed by PR teams behind the scenes to maximise appeal. Further, a combination of these factors led to the growth of a feeling of solidarity among those who believed in a particular candidate lending a sense of community to what was essentially support for a single person.

A 2015 study on new media also showed that in the context of developing societies it was this much networked nature of social media that parties relied upon to spread their messages as far and wide as possible. As such, it was of primary importance that they have a clear and strong message that their followers could share and spread easily, reinforcing key beliefs among one another as well as swaying those who were as yet undecided (Malherbe 2015). Once again, the BJP made great use of this, coining popular hashtags such as #abkibaarmodisarkaar (lit: this time, Modi government) that laid out its central message in a direct yet catchy phrase that could easily be used by party leaders and their followers alike.

While the use of such slogans was hardly unique to social media, the speed and distance over which they can now be shared was. Indeed, in the weeks from the announcement of elections to the day polling ended, 227 million interactions² were made by 29 million users on Facebook about the Indian elections. It is significant that of these, 75 million mentioned Narendra Modi, according to a 2014 TechPresident article (cited in Malherbe 2015). No other politician garnered similar interest on the platform at the time.

It is possible that Modi also benefitted from being an early adopter of the medium. His initial forays into video conferencing with the public via Google Hangouts were so successful they led to the platform crashing (Dinakaran 2018). As mentioned earlier, video and voice-based features tend to be unusually popular with Indian users for a number of reasons. As such videos tend to be among the most successful in the Indian context at establishing connections between leaders and party workers as well as voters. Further they present a unique

² Consisting of comments, likes, shares, and tagged posts.

opportunity for politicians to directly address far greater numbers than traditional rally formats permit, overcoming both geographical and time constraints in a unique manner.

However it must be noted that few leaders outside of the BJP took advantage of these opportunities at this time. As noted earlier, the Congress' digital presence remained quite minimal. Regional parties too remained sceptical about the effectiveness of social media in terms of communicative ability, as they believed the majority of their voters (especially in rural areas) were simply not present on the medium.

However, the electoral efficacy of social media campaigning as seen in this election as well as its growing importance over the next five years highlighted its importance not only as a medium through which large numbers of voters could be accessed but also convinced to vote for a particular party or ideology. The latter hints at the larger role that such platforms are starting to play in political socialisation, especially with reference to reinforcing or even encouraging particular ideologies among voters. On a narrow view, this may be taken as the development of partisan attitudes. But on a broader scale, it may involve a novel approach to political socialisation as the development of relatively enduring attitudes towards political life itself via the technological apparatus provided by social media sites. Further it's potential for the crucial campaigning functions of opinion formation and mobilisation while not fully realised could be now be seen.

Digital Socialisation

As such technologies become part of our daily lives; their impact as active agents in our socialisation processes intensifies and at the same time is rendered invisible by their ubiquity. Studying them remains a complex task. For one, social media presents distinct challenges in

terms of research than those seen in studies on older forms such as television and radio. While these are addressed in more detail in the next chapter, it is sufficient to point out here two of the key issues. First, the level of interaction in terms of user-user communication fostered by them has never been seen before in mass media. The closest equivalent can be held to be the advent of telephones but they largely functioned as connections between individuals rather than providing every individual with ready access to a platform that enables them to address the masses. The latter remained the exclusive domain of mass media such as TV. Further, in such media access was constrained by a variety of factors that kept the majority away from addressing audiences. The transition has essentially been from a model where a small group of individuals addressing the public to one where the majority of the members of the public can address each other on a massive scale.

Second, the spontaneity of social media coupled with the diversity of users has myriad effects on the ways in which communication takes place on it. The consequences of this on political news have been extensively debated in recent years by many news outlets themselves. The spontaneity of the medium tends to foster the quick spread of both information and misinformation. As studies such as Lukasik, Cohn, and Bontcheva's (2015) have shown, the latter in particular can be especially difficult to sift through in crises situations where verification can be difficult and rumours run rampant. While such rumours are hardly a new phenomenon in themselves, social media has accelerated their spread and enhanced their impact more than traditional media, in large part due to the crowd-sourced nature of all content on it.

As such the traditional models followed by socialisation research, while useful for highlighting general trends are ill-equipped for dealing with these new features as well as complexities such as multiple platform usage, technological determination of content displays, and so on. Nevertheless studies are emerging that deal with the various issues that

social media has given rise to in innovative ways. Some of the issues they address with reference to socialisation have been illustrated in the previous sections. The rise of new paradigms and theories that deal with the kind of new media ecology within which social media operates are of course important as are studies that deal with the interactions between technological features and real world events in more concrete terms. However a central question which critics have often raised with reference to the study of digital socialisation patterns, particularly in the context of developing economies such as India has been about the extent to which online socialisation and offline behaviour can be convincingly linked.

Given the statistical highs that usage has reached in India, as well the sheer amount of time and data being spent by individuals on social media sites it would be an anomaly indeed if this did not impact their behaviour in any manner as seen earlier. Further, studies done in other nations provide some clues as to how the two may be linked. In terms of the measurement of indicators, the most popularly used have been political participation rates and ideological affiliations. Both have shown strong correlations with online interactions and social media usage. For example, a US-based study proved that political participation among college students who were active in online civic engagement groups of various kinds was higher than their counterparts who were not part of such groups (Park, Kee, and Valenzuela 2009).

Similarly, the role of social media in shaping ideological affiliations has been widely discussed through echo chambers, right- and left-wing interactions, linguistic patterns, and so on to name just a few (Sunstein 2001; Barberá et al. 2015; Udupa 2017). It is with reference to this latter concern as well as the development of enduring attitudes to key political institutions through opinion-formation that theories of political communication, as seen in the next chapter, provide a framework for further exploration.

CHAPTER THREE: PROCESSES OF COMMUNICATION

The Role of Communication in Socialisation

Given that the *raison d'être* of social media sites is communication, and much of the socialisation taking place on them stems directly and indirectly from the processes and acts of the same, it is vital to examine these processes in greater detail. This is a complex task. As scholars of communication studies themselves admit, communication remains extraordinarily difficult to definitively define despite being something that most of us have an instinctive understanding of.

As John Fisk (2010) explains over an exhaustive review of the contemporary literature, the term has been used to denote and examine a variety of processes ranging from giving speeches to wearing statement jewellery. Beginning with the works of Shannon and Weaver, where it was looked upon as the transmission of messages, Fisk first traces the process school which primarily examines communication as the process of this transfer over the works of scholars such as Gerbner, Lasswell, and Newcomb, among others.

He then explores the semiotic understanding of communication as the generation of meaning through signs, symbols, and codes. He looks at signs and signifiers as seen in the works of scholars like de Saussure. But as he acknowledges, these have little meaning outside of particular cultural and social contexts. As such in the final sections of his work, he explores signification and culture via ideology.

From Fisk's work, it can be summarised that there are primarily two ways of understanding communication: as a process of transmitting messages, and as the generation of meaning.

These are in their turn further influenced by contextual factors ranging from the social to the economic. There can be little doubt that social media represents a change in the context in which communication is largely taking place in the modern era. While Fisk himself remained sceptical of the technologically deterministic theories that heralded a new era of communication altogether as stemming from the advent of new media, it cannot be denied that their impact on both the processes of transmission and generation of meaning have been profound.

As such, their role in shaping attitudes and participation in terms of socialisation too as seen earlier has been formative. In this sense, socialisation and communication are heavily intertwined. For the former gives rise to social, economic, and cultural modes within which systems of communication develop, even as the latter represents a channel via which agents operate to ensure that the ways of thinking and behaviour necessary to their development are propagated.

These have always formed an important part of the study of communication. The nature of such relationships has ranged from being hypothesised as direct and drastic as seen in the earliest ‘magic bullet’ and ‘hypodermic needle’ models of political communication to more nuanced views such as the two-step theory that began to emerge shortly after (Lasswell 2015; Katz, Lazarsfeld, and Roper 2006). It is important to note the role that historical context has always played in the study of communication. Initial theories were based on scenarios such as Nazi propaganda or the then novel technology of film. Changes in the field over the years have owed much to the dominant media and political issues of the day. As David Ryfe (2001) argues, even apparently ahistorical quantitative studies are closely linked to both the times and the culture that they seek to study. Indeed, he calls for the development of a more robust historical imagination among communication scholars.

Such attention to context becomes even more important when socialisation in the age of personalised media is looked at. Such concerns first arose in relation to media such as radio and TV that presented a greater degree of choice to users than older mass media formats. They were also observed to allow, through the choices they provided, for greater expression, reinforcement, and altering of perspectives among the public. Further, discussions on how individuals gained such perspectives via media and then spread these through communication with one another began to take place. For instance, as Lang and Lang (1953)'s study of television showed, TV played a key role in how individuals formed opinions on political events that they did not directly witness and instead experienced through such mass media. Neither of these though can hold a candle to the almost overwhelming number of options that users have access to via the Internet. Newer models in communication studies, several of which are examined in the sections that follow, attempt to capture some part of this complex interaction between individuals and media taking place in the process of understanding today. For the purposes of this study, two divergent modes of analysis shall be seen through which the communication taking place on social media, and resultant political opinion formation, can be better understood. These are explained in some detail in Chapter 1 but essentially focus firstly on how the presentation of content influences understanding and secondly on the significance of the medium. In this manner several of the key components of communication, commonly listed as the sender, receiver, message, and medium, are explored.

Key Media Effects Models

In tracing the evolution of three major models (namely framing, priming, and agenda-setting), Scheufele and Tewskbury begin with a disclaimer: that these are largely inspired by existing theories in other fields. They point out Goffman's work in sociology, Kahneman and

Tversky's in psychology, and Lakoff's in cognitive linguistics, among others as inspirations (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 9). This also serves to highlight the multidisciplinary growth of these as concepts, and their widespread roots in the social sciences and explains the similarities and linkages between them.

Framing, to begin with, essentially refers to the manner in which a topic is presented. The entire concept is rooted in the idea that the way a subject is introduced and explained to an audience affects their perception of it. It can be further divided into emphasis and equivalence based approaches that look at manipulating content itself and rearranging similar information in different ways respectively (Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2016, 8). In terms of social media it can be particularly useful in understanding how the specific styles of content prevalent on various platforms, along with the trends influencing these, impact understanding on the part of those who interact with them.

Such styles are shaped by a combination of technological and social features and factors as they prevail on a given site. The time period being looked at further influences the kind of content and presentation that may be found. For instance, campaigning periods before major elections have often been marked by a proliferation of political memes across the world as noted in countries as distinct as Brazil, USA, and India (Chagas et al. 2019; Haddow 2016; Jose 2018).

Such memes have certain unique characteristics: they are pithy, precise, express clear opinions in favour of one candidate or ideology, and their meaning can be instantly grasped by the average observer. At the same time they follow in a long tradition of political humour and satire coupled with references to pop culture that make even those who disagree with the perspective being presented laugh more often than not. The manner in which political issues are framed via memes has certain implications for how people perceive them: they preserve

small moments that would otherwise be swept away in the cacophony of the 24-hour news cycle; the speed with which they are consumed allows for a wide range of opinions (or alternately a reinforcement of a particular dominant opinion) to be disseminated quickly; considering there is no space for sources they allow misinformation to travel quickly; and so on to name just a few. Their presentation allows for these features, even as it itself springs directly from the nature of current social media platforms that are designed for the instant sharing of such bite-sized bits of information.

A simple search using the keywords “Narendra Modi memes” throws up numerous examples of the above. The similarity of the messages being disseminated across a variety of meme formats is striking. Most of these propagate a particular public image of the candidate in question, and render it commonplace through sheer repetition across memes. This is a common tactic in the utilisation of such political memes. The precise format used may differ, but it nevertheless carries the same characteristics, and reduces the virtues and vices of whatever is being discussed into one or two lines. There is no attempt to prove their veracity and sources rarely provided. Indeed, part of what makes them ideal vehicles for framing misinformation as fact are the ability to pass off whatever is being said as a joke while repeating it enough times for it to sink into popular consciousness.

But despite their ability to influence how issues are viewed, memes lack the ability to set media agendas. According to its proponents, agenda setting refers to the ability to impact the importance audiences give to a particular issue based on relative placement or coverage (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177). While traditional media still plays a significant role in this, social media is fast reducing its ability to do so (Sayre et al. 2010, 12). Indeed whether traditional channels can continue to perform such gate-keeping functions at all in the age of new media has been repeatedly questioned by scholars. William and Delli Carpini (2004, 1213), in their examination of the scandal surrounding Bill Clinton’s impeachment argued

that the blurring of genres between ever expanding media platforms, the opportunities these presented to non-traditional actors to influence discourse, and the room thus created for the public itself to begin setting the agenda, all contributed to this demise. Indeed, some suggest that on such social media sites ‘the wisdom of the crowds’ along with assistance from algorithms could possibly substitute older forms of elite agenda setting (Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason 2010, 24). The effects of this are already being seen, particularly in discussions emerging from studies examining the impact of online user feedback on news media (Lim 2006; Castillo et al. 2014; Sayre et al. 2010).

However such user-driven agendas are prone to fragmentation, with individuals self-selecting into like-minded groups. Scholars from Sunstein (2001) onwards have noted the existence of such echo chambers. Indeed Iyengar and Bennett (2008) have argued that we are approaching an era of ‘minimal media effects’ marked by a reduction in the ability of news media to persuade people given that most now deliberately limit their exposure to viewpoints that they reinforce their pre-existing beliefs.

This view has given rise to much debate in the field. In a direct rebuttal to Iyengar and Bennett’s article, Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010) argue that we must move our conceptions of media effects beyond persuasion, to seeing these in terms of attitude formation. They believe that the media individuals engage with do much more than simply confirm biases. Further, social media may also give rise certain unique forms of media effects. One such example would be of inadvertent effects – the impact upon users of those forms of content that they may not consciously choose to interact with but nonetheless encounter as they scroll through due to their popularity among their social circles, as part of targeted advertising on the site, and so on.

Such features may actually form an increasing part of the priming process as it takes place on social media. Priming is often regarded as a part of the agenda-setting ability of the media that publics consume, yet remains distinct in that it allows for audiences to form standards that they can then use to make political judgements. Both approaches rely on the assumption that people's perceptions are shaped by considerations that are most salient during the period in which they are formed (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11). Due to this, priming, as seen above can also figure as a valuable lens through which political advertising on social media sites can be understood.

The impact of such advertising on potential voters has been so great that electoral bodies across the world, including the Election Commission in India, have now begun to insist on closer examination of the regulations governing these (Thomas 2019). Indeed, in the run-up to the recent Indian general elections many sites voluntarily agreed to tighten restrictions, following accusations of fostering bias and interference in elections in other parts of the world (The Hindu BusinessLine 2019). Most famously, the controversial case of such advertising during the 2016 US Presidential elections grabbed headlines globally.

Political advertising on such sites consists of a many-pronged approach from targeted ads to sponsored posts. Indeed, some scholars count the promotional material that enthusiastic supporters are then encouraged to post as engagement (Wei and Golan 2013). All of these contribute to building up particular attitudes and opinions among people, not directly but in a variety of more insidious ways traditionally used in corporate advertising ranging across sheer repetition to allusions to other ideals. The result can be a priming of users to react in certain ways to particular news, based on ideological perspective and candidate loyalty. However conclusive data examining such perspectives remains scanty, particularly in the Indian context.

Difficulties of Studying Social Media

This is not to say that there is no data available. However, the methods and practices followed by the studies that generate it deserve closer scrutiny. One of the key difficulties in assessing studies, even those narrowly defined to look specifically at how communication practices in social media affect political socialisation defined as political participation and opinion formation, remains the sheer diversity of theoretical approaches and methodologies used. This has its implications for the comparative study of such results.

Attempts at such comparison have, however, been made. In an analysis of the metadata generated by a collection of 36 quantitative, survey-based works examining the linkages between social media and political behavioural-dependent variables including voting, volunteering, and so on, Boulianne (2015) found various common themes running through them. All the data sets examined relied on self-reported data for instance, in large part due to researcher's inability to directly access records. Most studies were based in Western democracies, and only two offered any kind of cross-national perspective. Further only four were conducted before 2008, indicating that most of these can be regarded as pioneering studies in a relatively new socio-technological field of study that simply did not exist as a widespread focus of attention as recently as a decade ago. This is confirmed by the small number that included panel designs, once again owing to practical considerations. The same number, only four, were able to access large samples (defined by Boulianne as including over 1500 respondents).

Even within such broadly comparable studies though, differences prevail. As Boulianne found, the studies that involved random samples of youth were likelier to find that social media has made a dramatic difference. While several explanations have been offered for this

such as a correspondence with the greater likelihood of younger people adopting newer technologies, this also raises questions about how representative such samples can be considered of the electorate as a whole. This also remains one of the most frequently studied age groups. This may be, in part, because most socialisation theorists as seen earlier believe this to be a crucial stage for the formation of enduring political habits and opinions.

Another problem, as Boulianne points out, is that given that none of the studies seen in the sample utilised experimental designs it may be difficult to establish any causal relation between social media and political socialisation. Indeed, the correlations observed cannot be equated by causation as they may depend entirely on other variables. Such variables themselves are not always well defined, in a manner regarded as generally acceptable. There is a lack of general consensus on what precisely is being measured in most cases.

For some variables, such as social media itself this cannot be helped due to the fast-changing nature of the underlying technology being studied. Others are key concepts from political communication that have long generated debate. For instance, assessing political knowledge among respondents interacting with a particular form of media has long been a challenge for scholars. In context of soft news programs in traditional media for instance, it generated some debate between Matt Baum and Mark Prior (Baum 2002; Prior 2003). Further, methods for measuring it remain subject to critiques. To continue with the above example, Prior's approach of interpreting it as gaining political information regarding current events and politics in general can be contested by viewing political knowledge itself as opinion formation rather than the acquisition of such information. A social media platform that fails to educate users in the facts of political life may nonetheless prove to be influential in the formation of their attitudes as citizens around key political issues. Gaining an understanding of this would then require an entirely different set of questions in the kind of quantitative survey format frequently used in such studies.

Indeed, many scholars have attempted to use a wide variety of methods to address the challenges of examining social media as a medium of communication. Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010, 25) have argued in favour of models such as ELM (elaboration likelihood model) while Cheung and Thadani (2012, 463) have combined it with the Heuristic-System model, to quote two recent studies – one arguing a more theoretical point and the other directly addressing a particular phenomenon via quantitative data. Others such as Bennett and Iyengar (2008) have highlighted the growing distance between some traditional methods and new media itself, and called more the creation of more innovative methods and theories to answer these challenges.

However, of the theories that have been proposed many have suffered charges of technological determinism by overemphasising the extent to which social media and other such innovations have changed social structures and behaviours. The impact of such technologies has indeed been transformative in many regards and it is indeed the focus of many studies. Of these, many have dealt with this particular critique by explicitly taking into account the broader contexts being studied, and viewing social media itself as a change rather than a root cause. In a study on political socialisation in India, it is thus vital to keep in mind the particular circumstances and social realities that shape social media usage in the country. The manner in which people interact on a medium is shaped in equal parts by the people and the medium.

The Creation of Online Identities

This interaction itself is the focus of study for many, and such works draw implicitly upon the ideas of dialogic deliberation, of viewing conversations about politics among citizens as formative of their beliefs and ideas. The social networks formed through such sites as also

seen as political networks, mobilising people even as they help them form their basic ideas about themselves and others around them as citizens. The kind of ‘idle talk’ that is conducted on such sites influences these to a large extent (Brundidge 2010, 681). As Kim and Kim (2008, 51) point out, the idea of such political talk as fundamental is supported by theories such as Habermas’ communicative action, Giddens’ theory of structuration, and Buber’s concept of dialogue . Taken together, such informal conversations allow citizens to “construct their identities, achieve mutual understanding, produce public reason, form considered opinions, and produce rules and resources for deliberative democracy.”

Such preferences, popularity surges, and other effects as highlighted above are formed by users within social media contexts in distinct ways, as part of their online personas. Research into these has revealed the complex manner in which people create and recreate themselves in the virtual world as social beings. From the moment a user signs up for a social media platform they begin two important processes of representing themselves online through the creation of their own unique profile as well as choosing which profiles to follow or otherwise interact with.

Such profiles present an opportunity to users to present themselves to others. They include not only the basic information about themselves disclosed by users but also the content that they post. Research shows that for many it is easier to reveal their innermost thoughts and opinions online. Using a series of experiments, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) showed that for many the internet allows them to better access and reference their ‘true-self’ qualities. Among the reasons cited for this in the study were the anonymity made possible by the reliance on self-disclosure by social media and the heavier costs that would have to borne for such honesty offline.

The latter though may be critiqued by highlighting the reasons for which most people join such sites. Foremost among them are the desire to strengthen social bonds and connect with other people, reasons stated more often than not in the taglines and mission statements attached to such sites themselves. As such, for many people their posting habits are largely determined by the particular image of themselves that they wish to construct for an imagined audience on the platform.

However, consistent with such experimental findings, these images may nevertheless be more honest self-presentations. Due to the range of individuals and communities that they can now access, individuals with viewpoints that are in the minority in their immediate social surroundings can now find acceptance among virtual groups thus lowering the costs of such honesty online. At the same time, such presentations may suffer from an excess of the same. As Wang et al (Wang et al. 2011) argue, most individuals regret overly blunt outbursts on social media made during highly emotional states.

As seen from repeated social media ‘scandals’ such posts tend to derail the particular images of themselves individuals may have built up over the years, even though these images themselves have their roots in a kind of ‘true-self’ expression as seen earlier. Such complexity with regard to ‘honest’ expression highlights some of the key difficulties in assessing authenticity in virtual expression. Indeed, recent research on impression management among young Facebook users illustrates this issue.

Impression management forms a part of a broader suite of connection strategies used by individuals while networking. It is often linked to building and maintaining not just links with other individuals but also social capital within a group. Social media sites such as Facebook, suggests a study by Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2011), assist in this by allowing individuals to convert latent ties to weak ones. For instance, a tenuous connection may be

made on Facebook with a girl with whom one shares a class in college but has never actually spoken to offline. Indeed the study goes on to assert that these ties are what enable the formation of the kind of expansive social networks characteristic of the reach and audience provided by social media alone.

In such a scenario, as one's 'first impression' upon a new acquaintance is increasingly made online, identities are established over the virtual public space mediated by the platforms upon which it takes place (Enli and Thumim 2012). While personalisation of the profiles where one's identity is constructed is encouraged, these take place with reference to larger social collectives with whom the individual wishes to display an affiliation. Indeed some researchers believe that most people make a conscious effort to make their allegiances clear on their pages across sites (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008).

Identity markers of this sort may include photos, symbols, tags, and so on. Many identifiers also originate within groups, rather than being presented to them (Farquhar 2012, 454). Certain ones are also extensively used to signal orientation not to outsiders but to those already within the group, usually attached to posts with an aim to boosting the individual's social capital. Such 'dog-whistle politics' have become quite popular in recent years with fringe groups and extremist ideologues online (Hirsch and Gramer 2018).

Recent research shows that such identifiers are typically used to boost one particular aspect of an individual's personality that they wish to most prominently display while using social media and so can only provide a limited representation of their true selves (Farquhar 2012, 448). But on sites such as Facebook these are, while exaggerated, closer to a user's offline persona than on platforms that provide greater anonymity due to the increased likelihood of the presence of those with whom one is likely to meet in the real world as well, marking a

corresponding increase in the expectation of embarrassment in both spheres in case of blatant misrepresentation.

Indeed, on Facebook many users post keeping an eye on their expected audiences for precisely this reason. While people may not always accurately guess the size and composition of the public that is viewing their posts, they are nonetheless aware of it and attempt to calibrate their modes of expression accordingly (Acquisti and Gross 2006). Such attempts at calibration show quite a bit of variation depending on the background on users themselves. A study conducted among young people in Israel yielded very different results from similar questions asked of the demographic in the United States (Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Maoz 2015).

The latter study went on to describe four main strategies that individuals use to cope with such expectations. They try to control who can and cannot view their profiles or posts, attempt to imply what they mean rather than stating it outright, use humour to get out of tense situations, and repost or share other people's posts rather than saying anything at all themselves (Mor, Kligler-Vilenchik, and Maoz 2015, 7). These tactics are particularly pronounced when it comes to political dialogue online which carries with it the added burden of greater chances of confrontation with family members or friends who disagree with them offline, or in some states may even hinder the user's careers or have serious legal consequences.

Within the realm of the social too, critique and censure shape behaviour. Farquhar holds that this sensitivity to response turns the user into a performer, who reacts to audience cues in order to shape their behaviour. In turn they provide intentional and unintentional cues to their audiences as well, for example through the identity markers described above as well as through conforming to norms set by particular groups respectively (Farquhar 2012, 447).

Indeed the study of the unspoken rules that govern conversations of social media has only recently begun to receive scholarly attention as shaping behaviour and expression on such sites. This has its implications for political deliberation as well. In the context of the 2012 US elections, Thorson et al (Thorson, Vraga, and Kligler-Vilenchik 2014) found that among American youth (ages 18-29 years) political content posted on Facebook was viewed negatively. They associated political expression with attention-seeking, conflict-provoking behaviour. In order to avoid being associated with such negative characteristics most preferred to discuss political issues only through the lens of humour or neutrality. As a result people tend to self-censor content that references politics or major political issues on Facebook (Sleeper et al. 2013, 4)

Such avoidance may have been a strategically smart choice for those aspiring to greater social capital. McLaughlin and Vitak (2011), in a broader look at norm evolution in such settings, found that the primary determinants in understanding reactions to such negative violations on the part of users online by their social groups depend primarily on two factors: the relationship between the violator and other users and the precise content of the post. Such soft sanctions expression in such social spaces can be held to have a direct impact on how the young people who are their primary users not only engage in but think about and articulate their views on politics.

It remains important though to remember that there is much diversity even among sets of general norms from site to site as well as among different sets of users. Another study that virtually replicated the findings of earlier works with reference to negative perceptions of political talk on social media further attempted to probe at what possible reason there could be for some people to continue engaging with politics on the platform. They found that the primary reason the same perceptions led some people to abstain from and others to participate

in it lay within the differing personalities and lived experiences of the participants as well as their levels of political interest (Vraga et al. 2015, 285).

But complicating this further are hints that social media itself is increasingly linked to the development of personality as well as several psychosocial variables among young people who are growing up alongside it (Michikyan and Subrahmanyam 2012). Adolescents are increasingly coming of age in the heavily networked public sphere of cyberspace and the implications of this are being explored by psychologists and sociologists alike. A key factor in shaping behaviour in such a setting, as seen in Farquhar's performance metaphor, is thus the audience.

The impact of this can be seen on discussions on a variety of topics. To focus on political posts, for instance, on Facebook these are both far more heterogeneous than what individuals may encounter in their daily lives as well as seen by a more diverse audience. Since individuals rarely choose Facebook friends entirely on the basis of political ideology (even hardline supporters of specific beliefs usually have some family members or friends with different views among their friend lists) Vraga (2015, 282) points out that this coupled with the network of loose ties that most maintain on the site ensures that even a post by a single ordinary individual is guaranteed to generate some friction. This may also explain why many people view posts on such a venue as 'too public for politics' (Thorson 2014, 210).

Such dramatic moments are enhanced; indeed sometimes rise from, the unique manner in which time functions online. Older posts can become relevant again with little warning, as seen in the case of celebrity tweets from years ago. This effect is particularly marked with regard to political opinions that the individual held years ago. Even well-intentioned remarks are often misunderstood, and indeed an entire 'clickbait' industry has arisen around fostering such deliberate misunderstandings.

Given that every post includes a varied audience from various parts of the user's life – friends, family, co-workers, neighbours, etc – a post may be subject to 'context collapse' where a sentiment that may be accepted and even shared within one circle of acquaintances becomes offensive to another in front of whom the individual may not have otherwise expressed them at all (Marwick and boyd 2010). For instance, a slightly lewd joke may be deemed funny by a friend but rather off-colour when shared on a platform where it appears on your grandparents' feed as well.

Further, social media posts always run the risk of real life consequences. As seen earlier these may range from social embarrassment to legal action. In India, these have had a marked effect on online dialogue about politics. From schoolgirls to party leaders, many have been held liable in the courtroom for comments made or shared on social media even after the scrapping of Section 66A of the IT Act. Cyber-bullying too works as a deterrent, as seen in a recent study of some of the tactics employed by right-wing trolls to force others to censor comments disparaging their ideologies (Udupa 2016). Among the more popular trends, used with great effectiveness against dissident journalists in particular, appears to be doxxing which involves leaking individual's addresses and phone numbers on the site itself. This is often followed by real world harassment (Coates 2015).

But despite these risks many continue to use the medium to discuss key political events. As seen in numerous studies discussed earlier, it continues to provide a platform for socialisation and mobilisation around issues and events. Indeed the very persistence of such trends on social media indicates its fundamental importance in communicating about politics in the 21st century.

Marshall McLuhan on the Importance of the Medium

Social media as a medium of communication presents certain unique opportunities as well as challenges before individuals who utilise it to express their political views. In none of the studies above were political opinions described in any but the most basic terms, free of any ideological affiliation. As such, it seems reasonable to conclude that the results seen could thus be held to be distinct from allegiance to any particular set of ideas or beliefs. The precise content of the opinions posted actually seems to matter less than the manner and technology used to communicate them.

These results then tell us as much about how individuals communicate about politics using the medium of social media as about their politics. A closer look at the importance of the medium used for the dissemination of these messages becomes important. One of the pioneers of such study, Marshall McLuhan put forth several ideas that might be helpful in this regard.

McLuhan essentially viewed all media as extensions of man's senses and capabilities. They assist us in knowing the world around us even as they may occasionally deceive us in much the same manner our fallible eyes or ears do. By extending our senses, media essentially allows us to experience this world in particular ways. Every extension affects not just a particular sense but our perception, thinking, and manner of understanding. On a broader scale, it does so for all members of a given society. So the way a society views itself may be held to vary according to the prevalent modes of communication of the day (McLuhan 2003).

Due to this, social change is intrinsically bound up with changing communication technologies. Indeed McLuhan used the terms medium, media, and technology quite interchangeably in his works. A medium for him represented "a larger entity of information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our

views of the world around us” (McLuhan 1975, 74-75). He further divided his analysis of these into hot and cool media.

Both are best understood through examples. Film provides an excellent one of hot media, a medium that works through significantly enhancing a particular sense. By appealing to our eyes, our visual sense, it allows for an extension of these and thus enables communication. It requires little intervention from us by way of thinking to understand its messages: what a film wishes to tell us is clearly visible on the screen. There is little participation required on our parts to comprehend it beyond the obvious. Our attention is completely captivated via a given sense as the presentation of it is bright and loud, with defined meanings.

These are absent in cool media. In a TV show, a bit more participation on our parts is required to parse the contents. Unlike in film, TV presents no opportunity for a self-contained direct extension of the senses. It is working on a lower key, more subtly. A TV show engages us and thus convinces us to work a little harder to understand it, to participate actively in the creation of meaning.

It has been suggested that as modes of understanding or analysis this dichotomy works best when applied to media with the same modality (Levinson 2003). It would thus make sense to talk about film as a hot medium when compared to TV, or the telephone as a cool one when compared to the radio. But this may be a flawed approach. We risk reducing the analysis to that of content patterns and usage trends, rather than the nature of the medium itself. The alternatives offered by Levinson to explain the degree of involvement required through availability, accessibility, usage trends, etc once again largely ignore an exploration of the unique nature of a given medium in favour of its usage. Besides, it is quite doubtful whether McLuhan himself ever intended these to be neat categories to divide all media into. Hot and

cool media are merely concepts to assist in the exploration of the details by which a particular medium enables communication in a specific manner.

Such an exploration was for him further hindered by some of the complexities inherent in the examination of a prevalent medium. His chief concern remained the ubiquity of it. The media we are surrounded by influence both us and our environment, restricting our ability to conceptualise it properly. As a particular medium becomes more and more common in society, it affects our cognition not only in the manner described above but also in terms of our ability to see its impact clearly. If we live within a particular system we tend to adopt its parameters and limits within our own thinking. This makes it difficult to see either the ways in which it is shaping us or the margins of its efficacy.

Communication is how we set the parameters of our world, of what is discussed and what is left unsaid and unnoticed. And what is discussed varies according to the particular form of media used. McLuhan uses various examples to illustrate this. Speech, writing, radio, television, and so on have all had their particular impact. He explores this in detail in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and concludes that “as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside” (McLuhan 1962, 32). The externalisation of our perceptions results in an internalisation of the communication patterns prevailing in our society as our primary means of understanding the world around us.

This particular effect can be best described as a ‘Narcissus trance’, one that cannot be fully avoided. After all the effects of such technologies take place at a subliminal level, altering perception itself slowly rather than displaying themselves as drastic changes in opinion (Marshall McLuhan 2012, 104). As such these present a tricky object for study. Compounding the problem is the essential amorality of the technology itself that acts upon society in a particular context and is itself shaped by its usage.

But a new scale is nonetheless introduced by it. We are further extended beyond ourselves by a new medium like social media, into a new communication model. And in this way our societies too are changed. The scale of previous human functions, for example the articulation and spread of personal opinions along social networks, is enhanced. This occurs in both the US and India, in Russia and Ethiopia. It happens regardless of the particular opinions being held. And in this way our cognition of ourselves and our world are altered by the mode of media that is most prevalent.

Cultural Impact of Social Media

Although he did not predict the rise of social media in its current form, McLuhan did postulate what an ‘electronically interdependent’ model could mean for society at large, coming as it after the dominance of the mass culture of television and films. At the centre of his theories on this electronic age, lies the concept of simultaneity. As outlined in his *Laws of Media*, McLuhan (1975, 77) believed that this age would be one of overwhelming simultaneity, inundating the individual with information and misinformation alike. The environment this results in is one of an unprecedented access to knowledge but at the same time, knowledge as an overwhelming mass. This is borne out by recent research as well, which shows that while people are increasingly relying on social media as a source of information it is often difficult for most to differentiate between facts and fabrications (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Campbell et al. 2009). Data flows on social media in general, and with regard to political issues in particular, tend to be legitimated by networks of people rather than fact or source checks due to the sheer volume of content and the problems inherent in sorting through them all individually. Their credibility often depends on the people sharing them and those viewing rather than their sources (Cheung and Thadani 2012).

But on the whole, social media, as an electronic form of communication tends to obsolesce the “visual, connected, logical” (Marshall McLuhan 1975, 78). There is a lack of linearity in the social media experience today whether seen in immediate terms as in the determination of newsfeeds and dashes by complex algorithms or indirectly via concepts like the compression and expansion of time while navigating cyberspace. The way in which content is presented, in a ‘personalised’ manner as determined by a set of codes in accordance with a commercial policy aimed at extracting revenue, renders it almost chaotic.

Further, this lack of order is hardly missed. It would in fact make little sense on such a medium. One of the key points of appeal for social media users is the access to whatever one wishes to see in near unlimited quantities. A Google search for even the most obscure terms instantly leads to multiple posts covering every aspect of it made over the years, arranged in order of relevance. In this manner, linearity and older forms of order are pushed away forgotten and largely unlamented.

The prioritisation of preferences in this manner can be held to be yet another mark of the transformation from a mass to a network to a personal communication society. This may lead to the retrieval of older systems in new ways as well. Campbell and Park (2008, 374) explore this with reference to mobile phones but it is equally relevant in the context of the social media that these often constitute gateways to. Through a historical review, a preference for interpersonal over person-machine or broadcast forms of contact can be seen. These are once again enhanced in the age of electronic media, and given supersession over traditional mass media forms that previously dominated. Indeed, a social media following is a vital component of most entertainment industry CVs today.

Some, such as Levinson (2003), believe that this points towards a return to the older, pre-literate acoustic space (that is both constant and surrounding) through such media. This space

differs from that established by the literate, visual space that preceded it. McLuhan himself believed that TV had already ushered in the demise of the latter. Social media may have sealed its fate. But a more intriguing proposition, of analysing social media through a novel blend of the two forms remains. At least early forms of it, relying primarily on text posts can be seen in this manner.

The rise of video formats online, both on social media and other commercial ventures, in recent years may prove Levinson right but the concurrent usage of text among users presents an intriguing circumstance. One possible explanation can be derived from McLuhan's claim that new media essentially makes content of older forms (McLuhan 2012, 105). This argument is strengthened by the evidence seen across formats on social media. YouTube for instance, can be seen to have made content of TV and indeed played a massive role in the paradigm shift that led to the online streaming services that dominate the medium formerly controlled by television and still referred to as it even though the technology involved has completely changed. Such digital formats while making content of TV, have completely changed these to far more personalised systems. Further, as seen earlier, other formats are fast gaining popularity over text posts in several parts of the world (WeAreSocial and Hootsuite 2019).

The concepts of hot and cool media can be used to shed some light on these aspects of social media within the broader context of cyberspace. Social media present an instance of cool media as by their very design they require the active involvement of users at all stages from signing up for sites to posting content. This involvement itself is what gives rise to some of its most unique features such as the user-generated nature of all such content, marking a remarkable departure from the kind of gate-keeping seen in other forms of media. It is also one of the driving features that make the kind of personalisation seen above possible.

Along with fuelling these, the psychological logic of cool media rests precisely in its ability to convince us to participate. Social media does so in a unique manner by telling us that everyone around us is doing so. By logging on to a site, we are essentially entering a broader social net of people who we can then communicate with in various ways. Such networks are also quite unique to the medium. The closest equivalent in other technologies would be either film (which provided a mass audience but no direct, personal contact) or telephones (which provided the latter by sacrificing the former).

Also, as with other forms of cool media, it entices us to participate through its incompleteness. Unlike a film, which is essentially complete even without an audience (witness the flops that run to empty halls while still remaining films, albeit bad ones, as a media form), social media simply does not exist without participation. It provides us with tools in the absence of content. The tools themselves are worthless in the absence of users and the messages they generate.

It is worth noting that these then only enable the creation of messages in particular ways, generating certain constraints and contours to the content that can be disseminated via the medium. These particularities in turn shape how the medium impacts the messages, users, and more broadly the societal context within which it operates. For instance, some hints may be drawn from recent work on the ways in which social media has affected the perception of candidates in elections (Garrett 2019). Aside from scholarly sources, many journalists also report that individuals are growing more and more heavily biased in their perceptions to the point of delusion (McArdle 2016). It is increasingly more difficult for those living within echo chambers unique to social media to understand ideas beyond them. In heavily digitised countries of the West such as the US, voters are more polarised than they were before the advent of social media according to surveys (Mitchell et al. 2014).

McLuhan points out that the nature of the medium (hot or cool) plays a role in the kind of candidates and strategies they employ to appeal to the masses (McLuhan and McLuhan 2014, 51-61). This is borne out by research into the Clinton campaign's methods to cover up the President's scandals in a period when social media was just starting to emerge in the US as well (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004).

While there may be resistance to such technologies among particular groups, and indeed some among these may even choose to shun them altogether, these are rarely effective in halting the changes such technologies bring. Just as even the most isolated tribe today lives within the protections offered by a nation-state so too does avoidance present no real solution to cooption. On a concrete level, this may be seen most clearly in the shadow profiles Facebook builds of those who are not currently on the platform based on information provided by friends who are.

This is not to discount either the messages on it or opinions surrounding it. In case of the former as well, McLuhan's work does not discount the importance of content itself. As Levinson (2003) points out, a medium can only be held to be as important as the messages it contains. Further, the entire purpose of the existence of a particular medium remains highlighting and clarifying the message itself. To this can be added two points: the salience acquired by it in the society at large depends largely on its effectiveness in disseminating messages, and while the role of the medium is formative but it does not supersede these. However studies which focus entirely on content run the risk of missing the forest for the trees. While an analysis of content is indeed vital it is also incomplete without a closer look at the medium itself and the numerous ways, as seen above, that it shapes communication and indeed society as a whole.

But one of the key critiques of McLuhan's work has long been that it fails to explain the precise manner in which a given form of technology thus shapes society in general and social organisation in particular (Fishman 2006, 573). It is here that McLuhan falls short. However, network theory provides several answers to fill this gap. It is this that shall be further explored in the next chapter, explaining in greater detail the links between communication and socialisation, and the particular forms of society.

CHAPTER FOUR: NETWORK SOCIETIES

What Are Network Theories?

In a recent article that sought to explain the astonishing level of global popularity achieved by the fantasy saga *Game of Thrones*, a prominent television critic argued that its appeal lay primarily in the grand approach it took to telling us not merely the story of a single person but an entire society (Tufekci 2019). Such stories prove compelling for many because they enable us to take a broad view and see not merely how individuals act, but how their very personalities and actions are shaped by the larger structural contexts within which they find themselves.

In real life it is more often than not impossible to do so: the limitations of our particular circumstances hinder our ability to fully understand the factors that give rise to them. Attempting to make sense of these can be a difficult task, but richly rewarding for the insights it provides into the working of what may otherwise seem to be unrelated phenomena.

While social media has been seen both as an agent of socialisation, and a medium of communication in the preceding chapters it remains difficult to fully comprehend the historical context within which it arose and has gained such popularity. The facts of its rise have been made clear but their linkages with broader patterns globally remain difficult to make. In this difficult task, network theories may provide some clues if not answers.

While network theories remain highly debated in their particulars, there are certain key features that characterise them: a high value placed on information as a resource, the transformation of the economy on a global scale, the networked patterns of societal functioning, and a focus on the technologies that have made these possible. In this study, I have primarily addressed these theories as seen in the works of Manuel Castells and van Dijk,

with some insights borrowed from a range of other writers when necessary to facilitate understanding. This is not to discount the valuable contributions or contradictory views put forward by other theorists but to capture the essential elements of the field from the early theorists whose works continue to dominate it, especially with reference to the role of the new communication technologies of which social media now forms a major part.

While van Dijk was among the first to refer to patterns resulting from the spread of such technologies as 'network societies', it was the first volume of Castells' influential Information Age trilogy that popularised the term (van Dijk 2006; M. Castells 2010a). The latter's account of network theory drew most of its evidence from patterns of living and economy in the 1980s and 1990s. Two concepts in particular shaped his explanation of these: the rise of informationalism and the transformation of capitalism across the world. Taken together with the micro-electronic communication technologies that made this possible, these led to the spread of a network society (Castells 2010a, 78). The form that such networks took differed qualitatively from older, similar groupings. They shaped our entire society and its patterns of existence.

van Dijk took a slightly more moderate view: he focussed on the technological aspect undergirding this transformation and highlighted its role in shaping organisation and structures within current systems (van Dijk 2006; Hacker and van Dijk 2000). Castells on the contrary believed that they had and would continue to fundamentally transform these systems themselves (Castells 2010a, 210). Following this reading, the rise of social media in the political arena may be held to be a natural extension of this transformation.

Regardless of how radical a view one may choose to take of networks themselves, their impact on how voters are organised, informed, and mobilised using such technologies is undeniable. Further, capital generation on the medium is informational both in terms of the

economic wealth generated through its internet infrastructure in the form of sites and apps as well as in terms of the social status of influencers and advertisers. This further brings out the potential of network theory to explain both the broader socio-historical patterns of which social media forms part as well as to provide a means of exploring its internal dynamics and functioning.

While the latter can be used to make sense of the peculiarities of the communicative process established by social media, the former sheds light on the role this can play in the processes of socialisation. As such, network theory provides valuable insights into these phenomena. That it provides a better understanding than other available theories is of course debatable. But there are some significant advantages that it does provide which most sociological theories dealing with the impact of technological changes on modern society cannot.

First, it establishes clear and logical linkages between historical and present developments with regard to such changes. It traces their roots through the decades, enabling a better view of where we have come from, and how we are likely to progress. This is not to confer upon it the status of a predictive theory but to highlight its ability to clarify the historical trajectory of the present scenario. Second, with reference to this study which primarily aims to look at the effects of a new mode of communication upon political opinion formation a theory that is grounded upon the impact of changing communication technologies upon broader societal trends seems most suitable. Third, it is an exceptionally adaptable theory: it acknowledges fast-changing nature of the technology it deals with and remains open to revisions where necessary. At the same time, its basic assumptions can be applied across a range of media expressions for analysis.

Finally, data in support of network theory (especially in the works cited above) has been extensively drawn from various countries around the world highlighting its suitability for an

analysis of the Indian scenario. While it is true that some of the assumptions that undergird its basic propositions do bear an Anglo-American provenance, this has been explicitly addressed by both the scholars under study. On one hand, van Dijk sees this as a limitation and believes that the patterns seen in non-Western societies may indeed show some differences, particularly due to historical factors. He calls for a comparative framework, and indeed supports the perspectives of those such as Martin Hagen working on it (Hagen 2000). On the other, Castells' approach indicates that while socio-cultural distinctions are inevitable across nations the basic trajectories of technological development that have already occurred in countries like the US may provide some ideas as to the paths that will be taken by others (Castells 2010b, 375). The approach taken in analysis below seeks a balance between the two views: there is an acknowledgement of difference where it occurs, but it cannot be denied that many of the trends seen in Indian politics today do follow patterns seen in network societies globally ranging from the transformation of geography through virtual space to the reputational battles characteristic of Castells' 'scandal politics'. As such, network theories retain much of their explanatory power in this context.

The Space of Flows

The virtual reality of cyberspace sometimes seems to operate as a distinct addition to our lives, as a world unto itself but one that is nonetheless tacked on to the material reality we inhabit. Observing this, Castells proposed "the hypothesis that a new culture is forming, the culture of real virtuality, in which the digitised networks of multimodal communication have become so inclusive of all cultural expressions and personal experiences that they have made virtuality a fundamental dimension of our reality." (Castells 2010a, xxxi) This argument has been put forward in various forms by the other theorists as well. Wellman for instance, points

out the connections of individuals over communities fostered by the new forms of media that are not anchored in specific geographical or time zones but organised around the persons who use them through their access to this virtual realm (Wellman 2001).

In order to understand such connections and their broader implications for the way in which virtuality and reality interact it is crucial to understand the manner in which they have led to a reconfiguration of space and time in network societies. There is a general consensus among network theorists that the increasing usage of micro-electronic communications is indeed leading to changes in our notions of where and when we are situated with reference to others. However, the specifics of such changes are the subject of much debate. Among van Dijk and Castells as well, there is considerable disagreement over what the latter terms 'the space of flows' and 'timeless time'.

Both have primarily been utilised within the original texts to explore the functioning of the socio-economic and structural aspects of network societies. Considering they do so by contextualising the nature of the interaction that takes place on the newer technologies that dominate its media landscape, they are also well-suited to exploring the internal dynamics of social media communication and how it ties into the public sphere as it exists in such societies. Further, it is worth noting that such changes in perspectives on space and time form part of the larger cultural trends that have made social media possible, as well as been exacerbated by it.

Space in the network society is increasingly dominated by flows of capital and information that determine the rise of particular areas as central and auxiliary nodes. This replaces the earlier geography of places (Castells 2010a, 453). For instance, instead of simpler regional systems, what directly affects the fortunes of those living in particular areas are flows that enable production hubs for foreign (mostly Western) companies to rise based on a variety of

complex factors most of which are well beyond the control of the local or even national. Infrastructures of connectivity, marked by sophisticated communication and transport facilities, are a fundamental part of this transformation of a place to a node in the wider system of flows.

Such nodes then attract greater amounts of capital, labour, and power, sometimes even becoming meganodes as seen in the case of cities (for example, New York) and sometimes regions (such as Silicon Valley). This is supported by the variegated nature of such flows themselves. While certain forms of production, informational services, and so on may be spread out globally, face-to-face decision-making still plays a large part in the system. Even the elite that is usually able to travel seamlessly through such flows gather around certain nodes to their own advantage (Castells 2010a, 429-440).

But while such nodes then gather ever greater functionality within the space of flows, they generally lack social or institutional existence. Political power tends to remain largely concentrated in the space of places. It is in the latter than cultural and social meanings are still found (Castells 2010a, 440). This resultant tension between a functionality tied to flows even as meaning continues to largely be found in places within the network society is explored by Castells in the second volume of the series, and is discussed further in the following sections as well. Simply put though, the identities that hold primary importance in political life and social movements in the network society continue to be rooted outside it, in the space of fixed places.

Often, these are the same as those places and peoples that are excluded from the system of flows. The marginalised (whether peoples or places, often both) are left out of the space of flows, yet are to a greater or lesser extent subject to its influence (Castells 2010a, 453-460). The space of flows thus by its very operation creates those with incentives to be resistant to

the system as a whole. The powerlessness underlying this tension is one of the key sources behind the older communal identities that such marginalisation tends to foster.

From this basic description, parallels can be drawn to communication and information flows over social media. It too forms a part of the space of flows, providing just such a disembodied space within which information flows over regions far beyond the local. The frame of reference for these becomes global in nature. They qualitatively are not the same as the economic flows seen above, but function in similar ways by traversing space and affecting users far beyond their immediate range. The effects can be unpredictable. For instance, the use of memes exemplifies this. Much has already been said about this in the previous chapters, but it is difficult to overemphasise the uniquely global nature of these. To take the popular Facebook page ‘Hindu nationalist anime girls’ (which had over 28,000 followers at the time of writing) as an example: it uses ‘waifu’ memes themselves culled from a subculture of English speaking fans of Japanese anime to present mocking depictions of Indian political issues (“Hindu nationalist anime girls” 2017).

Crucially, space is transcended via such flows and instead becomes almost a process rather than a fixed spot. As Wellman highlights, the geographical location of the individual becomes almost irrelevant (Wellman 2001, 8). He describes in particular observing a young woman conduct an intimate conversation on a public train, a now familiar sight that involves a blend of public and private spaces that renders these as well as the location of the other person obsolete in the conduct of the conversation itself. Via social media, space is increasingly reconfigured into a virtual rather than material reality within a cyberspace of flows that individuals can step in and out of at leisure.

Major sites and commercial players such as Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, etc become virtual nodes around which usage patterns are clustered. Their rise and fall are largely dependent on

the accumulation of users. As geographical nodes ultimately rely on a combination of economic and human capital so too do they, although these can become quite intertwined in a setting where massive profits are generated through the collection of user data. Flows of these, coupled with on-going trends and attempts to maintain or gain relevance on the part of individual sites, inform the movement of investors. At the same time, these flows can be unbalanced where elites are concerned. This can be seen on the global level (an Instagram influencer with a large fanbase in a high-income country stands to make more money than a similar profile with followers from the global South) as well as on a country-specific level (Indian social media continues to be dominated by upper-caste, urban men) (CSDS Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019).

Further, early adopters or those with bigger resource pools at their disposal to begin with tend to be far more successful in their use of social media (Lieber 2018). As the statistics of the backgrounds of social media users in India show certain groups remain marginalised and underrepresented in terms of both usage and visibility of such platforms (CSDS Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019). Their low capacity to be ‘seen’ within this space further diminishes their power in the social setting established by it.

Another point of similarity, that the space provided by digital media shares with a space of flows, stems from the lack of political infrastructures present in it. It is a global, disorganised commons largely shaped by the decisions of private companies and a handful of governments. Any law made by the Indian government is unlikely to have a significant effect on the experiences of users in the US or UK. Some ripple effects may make their way across the system, for instance in the form of ToS changes seen in a handful of major sites, but they would be part of a complicated worldwide chain rather than direct impacts. Regulating such a space is a complex task, and what little regulation exists is through a consortium of inter-governmental and private agreements.

van Dijk's view would cast the examples used above in a slightly different light. While he too believes that space is increasingly contracted in the network society, for him it does not lose its relevance. The essential difference is that for Castells places are subsumed within flows, whereas van Dijk sees them as components. He believes that the prevalent technologies have enabled people to be more selective than ever before in choosing their locations, especially within virtual networks (van Dijk 2006, 157). His analysis focuses to a greater extent on the manner in which public space is reconfigured within this paradigm. It is increasingly a mediated space, a platform formed by media technology on which discussion and debate is held (van Dijk 2006, 161). Interestingly, Castells too arrives at the same conclusion albeit through another path. The exact nature of this public space is further explored in the following sections.

In a similar vein to Castells, van Dijk too emphasises the role that face-to-face communication must continue to play. However, for him this is once again due to different reasons. It is due to the biases, prejudices, and other kinds of "baggage" people carry on with them from their material realities that influences their virtual interactions to a great extent (van Dijk 2006, 166). Indeed for him, location in the real world as a constituting factor of people's personalities is vital in shaping the roles they take on online. For instance as Udupa's study of right-wing 'nationalist volunteers' acting to attempt to shape historical and media narratives on Twitter in India showed, the interactions between such groups and other users outside them were shaped by a mix of interconnected online dynamics and offline differences between the two (Udupa 2016).

Another point of disagreement between the two scholars though emerges in their conceptions of nodes. In contrast to Castells' formulation, van Dijk regards individuals as the fundamental nodes around which network society is organised. This is in large part due to this view of networks themselves as "the social counterparts of individualisation." (van Dijk 2006, 168)

However here too while their arguments differ, their conclusions in practice work out to be quite similar. To continue with the above example of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, platforms can be seen as nodes even if we fully adopt van Dijk's view as agglomerations of individuals communicating through the network.

Equally interesting, though more controversial, are conclusions that van Dijk arrives at through this analysis. While the individual may well be a node, according to him, the consequence of an individual life for society continues to diminish as the social environment becomes more objective. As people are increasingly faced with a world where they form but one part of much bigger networks, a widespread sense of powerlessness begins to grow (as Castells earlier pointed out with reference to identity in the space of flows). This is further accentuated by the fragmentation of communities as they are replaced by such networks (van Dijk 2006, 160). Once more, such trends provide further support to the marginalisation of those on the fringes of the system.

Timeless Time

In a similar vein, time in the network society too undergoes a drastic transformation. The concept of time as a socio-historical construct, resulting in vastly different experiences for people in different eras and places is crucial to understanding the role that timeless time plays in Castells' formulation, primarily in the lives of those inhabiting the space of flows. As they work on flexible schedules, multi-task, and move through various zones, time as an ordered sequence becomes increasingly irrelevant. The disruption of linear time is made possible through the constant connectivity provided by forms of electronic communication (Castells 2010a, 468). The individual is constantly present, unhindered by the limitations of clock time. In this sense, it represents a taming of time itself through human technology.

Perhaps most symbolic of this disregard for time is the ordering of posts on social media. Most newsfeeds and dashes run according to algorithmic functions, as explored earlier, rather than being chronologically ordered. Even the few platforms that have the latter as the default option regularly interrupt them with sponsored posts and advertising. This is hardly surprisingly given that most such sites are global in nature, and specifically designed to help you spend as much time as possible. Indeed, articles bemoaning time lost browsing social media apps proliferate on these very sites themselves. Such effects are but natural given that these are specifically designed to ensure users spend the maximum possible time doing precisely that with features such as endless scrolling, to name just one (Andersson 2018).

Further, within this ‘timeless’ time zone the communicative individual is both eternal and ephemeral (Castells 2010a, 492). This can be most clearly, and perhaps poignantly, seen in the rising number of social media profiles of deceased persons. Indeed some estimates suggest that soon there might be more dead than living users on certain platforms that have been around long enough (Öhman and Watson 2019). Such remnants have given rise to a whole set of complex ethical concerns ranging from the EU’s recent decision on the right to be forgotten (allowing individuals to stipulate that these be removed from the web after their death) to attempts by sites to allow commemorative profiles akin to virtual burial sites where their loved ones may publicly grieve their loss (González 2014; Facebook Help Centre n.d.).

As seen in this example, social media shares a complicated relationship with the passage of time in the ‘real’ world. Users are detached from this by site design, instant communication with a global community spread across time zones, and the addictive nature of the browsing experience itself. At the same time, they are constantly reminded of time in myriad ways as well. To present another example by being bombarded with birthdays, anniversaries, and so on, or reminders of social events they have pledged to attend.

Time is thus individualised, a phenomenon that precariously straddles the line between timelessness and linearity. Each individual effectively experiences social media on a unique timescale, an extension of the personalisation characteristic of new media. At the same time, they are broadly constrained by certain major biological and social factors. As a result, there is a certain tension inherent in the notion of time itself on social media. For instance: even as a feed stretches on endlessly with updates from two seconds to two days ago, there are discernible seasonal trends and patterns in what most people and companies are posting at a given time.

At the same time, two other kinds of time provide challenges from within the network society itself. The first is glacial time, representing the slow transformation of our environment on a scale so vast it seems to us to be eternal due to the shortness of our own lives in comparison with the grand natural processes that take place on it (Castells 2010a, 498). The second refers to our own biological clocks, the fixed patterns within which most of us still are born and die. At the same time, in case of the latter, death itself is increasingly being challenged by scientific means, and for those within the network society delaying it for a considerable period is not impossible (Castells 2010a, 475). Indeed as seen above it can even sometimes be transcended in virtual if not material reality through profiles and posts that stay up long after the individual is dead. A servitude to such bio-time is sometimes seen by Castells as indicative of an exclusion from the realm of timeless time although given that humanity as a whole is still subject to their biological clocks regardless of their places in the network society, this remains a rather debatable proposition.

But the biggest challenge to Castells timeless time comes from without, from van Dijk. For him, to speak of 'timeless time' in a network society is itself something of a misnomer. Rather than losing its relevance in a network society, time becomes more important than ever before (van Dijk 2006, 157). But for him too, it is not linear time that is so crucial but rather a

socially constructed version of it. As with space, with increasing technological prowess we become more and more selective of how we choose to locate ourselves even within time frames (van Dijk 2006, 159).

Owing to this selectivity, we gain greater control over events that are increasingly ordered in the manner of our choosing. Coupled with the rise of instantaneity, it leads to the emergence of a notion of time that is almost entirely determined by individuals themselves. Once again, the rise of phenomena ranging from flexible scheduling to the arrangement of social media posts sorted by relevance to the user provides evidence of this.

With this, network breakdowns begin to look akin to natural disasters. More and more people join such networks even as the technological infrastructures holding them in place (particularly with regard to communications) become more complex and the processes behind them more opaque. Indeed, one of van Dijk's core arguments regarding the network society derives from this assumption to postulate that computer-mediated communications enhance such "opaque and uncontrollable" processes further enhancing the general feelings of powerlessness and marginalisation discussed earlier. (van Dijk 2006, 160)

It must be acknowledged that it is largely from Castells' work that the above explanations of the intertwined notions of the space of flows and timeless time are gathered, although van Dijk has also been frequently cited to provide an alternate perspective as well illuminate certain key points that Castells leaves unaddressed. This bias requires some explanation: it is primarily due to the fact that these particular ideas are dealt with in much greater detail in Castells work, with entire chapters devoted to each. For van Dijk, they are simply not as central to the questions regarding network society that he wishes to address and so while he does discuss them it is not with the same level of detail.

Indeed their centrality to Castells' understanding of the cultural aspects of network society clearly brings out this contrast. He directly links the space of flows and timeless time to his notion of an emerging culture of real virtuality (Castells 2010a, xxxi). This refers to the increasingly augmentative role that cyberspace is starting to play in our understanding of our world and what we perceive as 'real'. To illustrate, one indication of this growing perception of the virtual as real comes from the rise in prosecution of cyber-crimes, as well as the introduction of new laws for these (Attrill-Smith et al. 2018). The very real damages that these cause and the impact they have upon individuals are recognised formally by states and subject to the similar compensation as older crimes. Digitally assuming someone else's identity, for instance, constitutes a case of identity theft in a manner similar to physically pretending to be them elsewhere does.

Boundaries of Political Power

Before any discussion on the form and nature of political power in the network society can be undertaken, it is important that its boundaries be clearly defined. Castells and van Dijk concur that only those within the network society, with ready access to the microelectronic communications that forms its cornerstone, will be able to participate in it fully. The voices of those on the margins (more often than not those who were already rendered vulnerable by older social structures) are likely to go unheard (Castells 2010b, 370; van Dijk 2006, 95). In terms of social media, this can already be seen to be the case. Those participating in political conversations online in India tend overwhelmingly to be upper-caste, urban males (CSDS Lokniti and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2019).

van Dijk goes on to argue further that it is political elites that shall benefit most. As those with a keen interest (and incentive) in politics gain access to better technologies and

information to facilitate them, they shall obviously benefit immensely. At the same time, such benefits may not disperse across the wider population, many of whom he believed take only a tepid interest(van Dijk 2006, 107). This is a somewhat controversial assertion. To say that the majority of people in a democracy (or indeed any system of government) simply do not care enough to participate seems strange indeed. While there are indeed numerous cases of voter apathy and indifference scattered across history, it is rare indeed for there to be a dearth of people willing to debate their rights, responsibilities, and duties within the public sphere so serious that it would impede democratic functioning altogether. In the Indian scenario moreover, with its exceptional rates of voter turnout and vibrant public life, concerns about disinterest from the population itself leading to disaster for the democracy seem strange indeed (Anuja 2019).

Assuming then that all those who are able to do so are also willing to participate in political life, what might this look like in the network society? Here, van Dijk and Castells both approach the question very differently: the former attempts to address possible institutional and structural changes in his query while the latter provides an interesting take on the emergence of certain trends characteristic of network societies as major forces in politics. Taken together, these present a picture of both the manner in which this affects the existing facts of political life as well as the new challenges it presents. For ease of understanding, it makes sense to begin with van Dijk's notions as these help clarify the circumstances under which politics may play out as we move towards a network society before moving on to Castells' ideas about what is likely to occur as a result.

Drawing on David Held's classification of models of democracy, van Dijk first envisions what trends within each of these the emerging communicative technologies are likely to exacerbate or soothe. A quick summation of this exercise is as follows. In procedural, legalist democracies, these are likely to lead to the reinforcement of government power by making

more and more information available to them. In a similar vein, in competitive multi-party democracies, such technologies would be used in terms of information primarily to boost decision-making and campaigning to appeal to the electorate with the maximum possible effect. Plebiscitary democracy holds that the new media could make direct democracy via referenda or other such means a reality for modern times. Pluralist democrats believe that it offers chances for greater diversity in public discussions and for greater levels of citizen participation across various sections of society. Within perspectives from participatory democracy, the socialisation aspect is emphasised indicating the role such technologies could play in shaping the citizenry and its attitudes (van Dijk 2006, 101-103).

But such digital democracy has its pros and cons. At its most basic, as most scholars agree, it represents a diminishing of state power over networks of information. Such information is now available freely, perhaps more so to some citizens than others depending upon their access to and level of proficiency at utilising the relevant technologies (van Dijk 2012). At the same time, it also leads to the accumulation of ever greater data on private citizens' lives that leave them more vulnerable to the excesses of state power than ever before (van Dijk 2006, 104). A Facebook post presents an individual with an accessible avenue for expression of their political views, allowing them to start a discussion on a topic of public interest, connect with others who share such views, or perhaps even simply make their own position clear. It presents other users with a chance to know their friend, colleague, or perhaps even representative better, or become aware of a perspective they may not have had much exposure to otherwise. At the same time, it provides data for commercial interests, as well as a ready archive on the opinions the user has subscribed to. Further, it allows government agencies to gather the same information, with a chance of legal consequences or other repercussions down the road.

In case of the latter, these may structurally be held to strengthen bureaucracies over political actors. Information gathering, and indeed the wielding of it through official channels occurs in most democracies today primarily through these (van Dijk 2006, 100-101). At the same time the quality of information that is made available, particularly on social media, can hardly be considered reliable even though it is sometimes used as such giving rise to the much talked about phenomenon of ‘fake news’. Coupled with the 24-hour news cycle that such sources contribute to, this results in a need for greater technological and critical capacities for citizens who wish to access verified facts as well as a danger of people succumbing to misleading rumours. The case of the killing of five nomads passing through Rainpada village in 2018 on the suspicion of being child molesters fostered by Whatsapp videos, for example, presents a tragic case of the latter (Dixit and Mac 2018).

Complicating the situation further are vested interests such as political parties and lobby groups that benefit directly from certain forms of misinformation being widely circulated. Most of the historical ‘facts’ circulated against polarising political figures from rival parties on social media, for instance, have been repeatedly debunked by historians with little effect. In such a scenario, the education required for citizens to become more discerning may not necessarily come directly from the state. At the same time, government bodies may step in at least with regard to specific threats such as the Election Commission of India’s attempt at instituting digital codes of conduct for the period before elections in conjunction with major social media sites (Election Commission of India and Internet and Mobile Association of India 2019). Given the recency of such attempts, their efficacy remains difficult to comment upon.

Such misinformation forms part of a broader trend of system vulnerability unique to network societies. Political systems are increasingly being influenced by technological integration with communication channels that they do not fully understand or control (van Dijk 2006,

96). As noted earlier, social media sites are essentially commercial ventures that are answerable to no one in particular. The maximum control is exercised by their shareholders and, to a lesser extent, by the home governments of their largely Western bases. Governments of the global South are dependent of the goodwill of individual corporate heads to honour their requests, as the Indian Parliament found out when Jack Dorsey (the CEO of Twitter) simply did not comply with a request to attend a parliamentary hearing (Mandavia 2019).

Politics and Networks

This, however, covers only the external threats that may result in destabilisation. Castells and van Dijk find themselves in agreement once again over the possibilities of resistance such systems generate by their very functioning as well (Castells 2010b; 2011; van Dijk 2012). All over the world as more and more is being surrendered to such networks from the level of individual data to state power there are emerging pockets of internal discontent that threaten its stability from within.

It is precisely such pockets that are better explored through Castells' ideas regarding identity in the network society. Firstly though it must be emphasised that Castells looks upon networks as the means through which power is diffused through society (Castells 2010b, 424). This is a far more radical view than van Dijk's, who merely regards networks as organising principles (van Dijk 2006, 101). As such, for Castells, political power is accordingly found in such networks. It lies in "the codes of information and images of representation" that are produced by them (Castells 2010b, 425). The true site for the struggle over it then becomes the very consciousness of the individuals that comprise and must necessarily navigate such networks. The ability to influence opinion-formation becomes a contested space.

Essentially, within most contemporary societies access to formal political power is regulated through certain institutions. These institutions in turn are accessible only to those approved of by a large section of the voting public. This is the basic set-up that underlies the various forms of democracy seen all over the world. To reach this vast public in contemporary times, and to influence its opinions, there are few strategies as potent as those offered by media campaigns (Castells 2010b, 371).

Language and expression are, in Castells' formulation, quite fundamental to this process. These provide a direct link between communication media and political socialisation with one directly influencing the other, particularly with reference to opinion-formation. If this is reminiscent of McLuhan's work, it is because the two share some other assumptions as well. Both hold that the most efficient forms of messaging in such a contemporary setting, where a cacophony competes for public attention, tend to be simple with a focus on the audiovisual (McLuhan 1975, 77-78). Castells goes a step further and believes that it is even more efficient for such messages to be ambiguous, so that they can be interpreted in the most favourable light by each individual (Castells 2010b, 372).

Such touches of personalisation, even in messaging directed towards a mass audience, are vital for successful media campaigns in network societies. When Guehenno refers to both a defined political sphere and truly autonomous actors (which were among the foundations of industrial-era liberal democracies) as lacking in contemporary societies this is precisely what these entail in terms of political action: a politics that spills over into social and cultural spheres, and actors that are highly individualised as well as divided into communal identities (Guéhenno 2000).

Such communal identities themselves pre-date network societies. They are usually derived from territorial, ethnic, or other such loyalties located well outside the space of flows and

timeless time characteristic of Castell's network society. For van Dijk, they form a kind of baggage that people bring with them online, as explained in the section on the space of flows. Either way, what is significant is the extent to which these challenge traditional notions of nationalism and citizenship.

As such, they represent a crisis for the state with reference to legitimacy (Castells 2010b, 402-403). A state may find it difficult indeed to represent its people, if they derive their primary sense of identity from a narrow communal notion that must necessarily exclude other groups of their fellow citizens. Indeed, in some cases such that those of religious or ethnic identities, the idea of the state may for such groups become entangled with such communal notions. This twisted view of democracy may take firmer hold in countries where party systems too have lost credibility. This loss is aided by a number of factors, not least of which are the manner in which party politics tend to play out under the gaze of the hyper-electronic media characteristic of the network society (Castells 2010b, 375). An illustrative example is that of the rising importance of scandal politics in such a setting.

It is important to acknowledge the importance of electronic media systems and their usual style of functioning in contemporary societies as the setting within which such scandals can be utilised. *Prima facie*, scandals represent a struggle for good reputation – itself a concept that depends entirely on good opinions held by others – and as such fit in perfectly within a society where the primary struggle is over influencing the perspectives of individuals through such media.

Further, as the media grows more and more technologically powerful, it tends to (as noted in earlier chapters) make regulation on a national level correspondingly difficult. Parties and candidates in the meantime, increasingly rely on it to reach the masses. Castells argues that given how expensive the whole business of media campaigning and public relations in

politics has become, it is inevitable that political actors will exhaust legal means of generating funds to match their rivals in this enterprise leading to higher levels of corruption. This then would provide fodder for potential scandals (Castells 2010b, 396).

As more and more scandals occur, they form part of an on-going chain ranging from minor instances of wrong-doing to more serious systemic flaws. For the public, such news begins to form a kind of white noise. The impact then is determined more by the volume of the coverage that a particular incident receives than its severity. As such, media coverage itself becomes subject to politics and is the ground where narratives are determined, heavily influencing public perception. The next stage then is judicial intervention, allowing non-elected bureaucratic bodies to supersede political parties, and emerge as “media heroes” (Castells 2010b, 397). In this manner popular electoral politics are increasingly delegitimized.

The contribution of the 24-hour news cycle as well as the immediate dissemination of news on social media in establishing this pattern cannot be underestimated. On social media sites, news is immediately broken by individuals (not even necessarily news agencies) that are either directly involved or more often than not recipients of planned ‘leaks’. From there on rumours abound and take on a life of their own, as seen in the studies on rumour modelling mentioned in Chapter 2. The sheer overwhelming volume of the discussion that takes place within a short period based on incomplete facts over social media reinforces Castells’ observations on the nature of news and its image-making powers in the network society.

An excellent example would be the case of Rahul Gandhi. While it can be argued that he is perhaps not a particularly good politician, it is difficult to understand why in a country where most of our leaders would hardly qualify as public intellectuals, he is the one best-known as ‘pappu’ (a mocking slang word that invokes a childlike figure lacking in intelligence and common sense). In large part this can be ascribed to the success of those who oppose his

party politically in utilising the inherent nature of social media messaging with great effectiveness to discredit him. 'Evidence' of his lack of intelligence is often shown through short, audiovisual clips shorn of all contextual data. The only thing left for the viewer to do, usually with the aid of helpful captions, is to see how silly he sounds.

The sheer volume of such clips, particularly during the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns, led to the perception among voters that he was generally incompetent despite them actually being a handful of isolated incidents, which while hardly impressive, would have certainly been less damaging in a pre-social media world (Yadav 2019). Further once this image of a 'pappu' began to take hold it became part of popular imagination through viral jokes and memes, encouraged by political actors but primarily perpetuated by ordinary people taking part in this latest trend. Once again, these grew in number to great proportions in a short period.

This question of accumulation of multiple posts is highlighted as significant because it is not only one of the primary reasons for the effectiveness of social media as an image-maker, it also exemplifies the combination of immediacy and eternity provided by such campaigning using social media that renders it so useful as a tactic. Posts on a particular theme can gather steam and accumulate quickly, and then remain available online for a long time. Even if the original is taken down (as often happens with controversial posts), even a few minutes are long enough for some users to catch on and others to archive the tweets. Despite being posted in seconds, nothing can ever be truly removed from the internet. At the same time, this is not to say that reputations are fixed. As Castells notes, regarding scandal politics, "all political actors practising it become entrapped by the system, often reversing roles: today's hunter is tomorrow's game." (Castells 2010b, 400)

The consequences of this can be seen in the way political activity is increasingly structured almost as a show being enacted before an audience of voters. As media platforms come to mediate the connection between state and society, political actors grow more and more desperate for their attention which becomes a necessity for these actors to stay relevant. The rise of symbolic politics, of political mobilisation over apparently ‘non-political’ causes, and so on, are all trends that reflect this necessity (Castells 2010b, 417).

This is not to say that the media itself is merely a battleground. While Castells does believe the media in a network society to be autonomous (according to him ownership does not equate power over media networks – at best it may serve as a capacity to shape), even neutral in that it transcends national boundaries and feeds into international circuits, this seems to be a limitation of his work (Castells 2010b, 373). In part it may have been fostered by his analysis being restricted to slightly older forms of electronic media such as television, which were most prevalent at the time his work was penned. But even accounting for that, his vision of an unbiased media seems quite utopian. Especially given the level of control commercial social media sites exercise over not just the content posted on them but the personal data gathered from their users and the extent to which their revenues depend on these, it seems to be wishful thinking to regard the media as a completely independent platform free of extraneous influences. And even if companies themselves are held to be essentially apolitical, their very commercial concerns lead to the emergence of biases in content. A prime example of this can be found in paid political advertising that remains extremely prevalent across all sites in India.

Moreover, even he acknowledges the extent to which such mediatised politics lead to the exclusion of those without access to the media (Castells 2010b, 370). As discussed earlier, in the network society there remain marginalised groups that lack the ability to access the communication technologies so crucial for participation in its political life. However, for

some among those in society who formerly formed part of its outskirts, the horizontal connectivity provided by these very technologies can offer avenues for both greater levels of political knowledge and participation. The latter two are among the greatest boons offered by new media among the general population as well. Their positive impact has been noted by both Castells and van Dijk, particularly with regard to the emergence of new grassroots movements ranging from the environmental to the feminist (Castells 2010b, 417; van Dijk 2006, 103).

Critiques of the Network Society Approach

While critiques and criticisms of network theory more generally abound, this section shall be limited in focus to those directed at the specific approaches adopted by Manuel Castells and Jan van Dijk in their work as it is these scholars whose works have primarily been utilised in the above analysis. Castells' version, being the more extreme of the two, has been more severely criticised by sceptics than van Dijk's. Indeed for some, the latter presents almost a remedy to the former through his adoption of a more restrained perspective (Cuffe 2012).

The use of works from two vastly different perspectives provides a useful opportunity for balance. To address limitations in one's argument, the second can be invoked. For example, Castells is accused of reducing the relationship between state power and that of international economic networks to a zero-sum game in a manner that does not account for several observed nuances (Bromley 1999, 16). Here van Dijk's more moderate approach provides a solution by suggesting a closer integration among the two than Castells anticipated, possibly leading to a transformation of both (van Dijk 2006).

van Dijk has been lauded by critics of Castells' network society for managing to escape the overt determinism that for many renders the latter flawed. However, it is these very critics who then argue that his work relies to too great an extent on descriptions and lacks a proper theoretical base (Cuffe 2012). Given that a certain degree of generalisation is part and parcel of theory-building, especially when it's declared scope is as vast as to cover society as a whole, these would appear to be two sides of the same coin. Either we may have Castells determinism and his stronger theoretical base, or van Dijk's descriptivism and his relatively milder approach.

The latter may indeed be held to be better suited to the use of network theory as method. Rather than regarding it as a comprehensive theory, we can instead utilise it as a method by which empirical data can be organised and examined. Several sections within van Dijk's work provide excellent examples of this. While there are indeed theoretical propositions underpinning them, these are used more often than not to sort through data gathered from trends in contemporary society to gain a better understanding. Such an approach can be useful indeed in the study of social networks, and has to some extent been followed in this chapter as well.

This is not to say that method is the domain of van Dijk and theory of Castells. The former's work contains theorisations aplenty and Castells draws his examples from data on almost every major country in the world. To use Castells' work as a method is simply to utilise it as a structural framework for understanding, something that he himself quoted as one of his desired objectives in authoring it. As noted earlier, while there are certain deficiencies in his concepts they are hardly so overwhelming as to detract from the main thrust of his argument and the basic propositions he puts forward.

The only major critique that would indeed destabilise his theory as a whole emerges from the supposedly incomplete conceptualisation of networks themselves within Castells' work. But this may be held to be a misunderstanding. As Anttiroiko writes, networks are best understood as social theoretical metaphors rather than analytical concepts (Anttiroiko 2015, 15). As such they are necessarily fuzzy in their outlines and this may be regarded as strength rather a weakness if we are to take them as method given the theoretical flexibility they provide.

But in emphasising the novelty of the network society Castells has been criticized for leaving certain historical continuities unaccounted for in his analysis. An exemplary section would be that in which he dubs McLuhan a prophet of the mass age but remains sceptical of the ability of his work to address newer forms of media. As such he ignores that mass and new media remain connected by a myriad of inherited characteristics that the latter takes on from the former as well as the intermingling among them in a network society that both are functioning simultaneously in (at least for the time being).

As Bromley puts it, albeit with reference not to media characteristics but the organisation of social power in Castell's paradigm (although the point holds for all such discontinuities throughout his work), "... modernity was always multifaceted and multidimensional, it is difficult to argue that the logic of the old and the new are substantively dichotomous." (Bromley 1999, 15) Indeed even some of the categories highlighted by Castells as unique to the network society bear such links. To give yet another example, the concept of informational labour has been questioned by Webster as to its transformational capacity for shaping the economy in networked societies considering such labour remains largely subordinated to the logic of capitalist markets within them (Webster 1997, 76).

However, in Castells' defence, it may be argued that this does not detract from the crux of his argument much. While he may have ignored certain linkages with the past his descriptions of present day phenomena are indeed strikingly accurate, so much so that critics have found it possible to discover historical continuities within them themselves. As such they remain useful for analysis, and to give such criticism its due, are made more so if their limitations are kept in mind and accounted for.

For others, Castell's enthusiasm for highlighting the novel brings with it an added complication: due to his focus on description, the resultant conceptualisations are quite sketchy. However, an Anttiroiko points out, his ability to bring out the new is precisely what Castells' work is celebrated for. At the same time he does agree that in his focus on establishing linkages between disparate phenomena, Castells does sometimes ignore the clear establishment of the phenomena themselves as concepts (Anttiroiko 2015, 15-16).

Indeed the fuzziness of the boundaries of several concepts within network theory forms a recurring theme. An explanation for this lack of clarity however can be sought in the nature of the theory itself which essentially aspires to present a certain overarching worldview than an analysis of a particular aspect of society. Further, such loose definitions can actually prove to be assets in analysis because they allow concepts to remain open to variations in material realities while still being able to capture their essential characteristics. This is a particularly valuable trait in a theory centred around the role of technology, for the fast-changing nature of the latter often evades theorisation on precisely these grounds. At the same time some of this caution is indeed merited, particularly for those who seek to use it for explanatory purposes. As Holton (2005, 210) notes, "If network threatens to become the metaphor of the current global moment, we may do well to heed Grahame Thompson's recent warning that if everything seems to be an instance of networked activity, then his proliferating metaphor may fast be losing its analytical purchase."

Further, given its particular use for the analysis of the workings of social media in this thesis not all critiques carry equal weight. In order to make use of a theory that covers numerous aspects of economy, society, and culture in pursuit of a specific object some limitations must necessarily be imposed to confine the study to a feasible level. For instance while the detailed critique presented by Bromley of certain technical flaws in Castells' conception of production and management within the global system of network societies is indeed full of interesting points that must be explored further, its utility within this context of social media is rather limited given that the primary purpose of his network theory here has been to analyse a phenomenon on which this has a limited impact (Bromley 1999). It would be incorrect to say that it has none, for it is interlinked to broader patterns of organisation and behaviour within network societies, and to provide a full explanation of the debates generated by all or even most of the multiple interlinked propositions put forward by the network theorists discussed is well beyond the scope of this work.

Such debates do present several opportunities for theoretical growth. For instance, according to Andrew White, Castells' ideas regarding the development of identity based movements in network societies undermine not only political but civil society as well (White 2016, 4). However, his own conceptions of these appear to rely on more traditional definitions and do not adequately account for how these categories are themselves thrown into flux and new forms of communication and media take over. Indeed, the transformation of the political at least has been extensively discussed in the preceding section. The further changes seen in civil society are indeed not given due notice by either theorist. But it would be more interesting to count these as a chance for further exploration and additions to network theory rather using them as ground to dismiss it altogether.

Finally, one of the most frequently cited yet puzzling complaints are those of technological determinism. As Webster puts it, technology cannot be considered an "autonomous social

phenomenon” that simply produces certain effects on a passive society (Webster 1997, 80). On its own, it is a perfectly valid observation. But it would be difficult to note it as a flaw within either network theory. In both the works discussed above, the impact of technology is contextualised both in general terms as well as with reference to the experiences of particular societies from world over. Indeed both works are essentially results of the observations gathered from the interplay of society and the new communicative technologies, with each of the latter two affecting the other to a considerable degree.

Through these a picture of a new digital society begins to emerge. It must be acknowledged that this image at best serves as an ideal type. No real society, especially not one such that is India which is still very much in the process of digitising, can be said to mirror it exactly. However, as mentioned earlier, despite their flaws network theories do serve to highlight features of the impact of these developments on political life and social relations to quite an extent. They can also serve as guides for further research in understanding how the technologies they are centred around may continue to change our lives in the future.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In keeping with the overarching goal of this thesis, the preceding chapters have attempted to capture some of the major debates most relevant to the study of the political socialisation taking place via social media in India. Through an intensive study of the literature available, some conclusions can be drawn with regard to the most prominent arguments presented in the field. These are not definitive conclusions but rather indicators provided by a summary of the research that has been conducted so far in the field.

A relationship does emerge between socialisation and social media. There is a definite correlation between the two given that the ages of those in the most vulnerable stage of their lives with reference to imbibing perspectives that may inform their views of major issues and become part of the enduring political attitudes that they carry with them throughout their lives are the same as the majority of social media users worldwide. India is no exception to this trend. Indeed as Boulianne's review showed, it is within this age groups that social media has had the highest impact with reference to influencing opinions and forming enduring attitudes among voters (Boulianne 2015).

At the same time, it is extremely difficult to isolate this impact from other agents such as families, peer networks, and so on. Indeed, as numerous studies cited in the case of online image management indicate, the manner in which social media affects individuals is deeply enmeshed with their offline backgrounds, lives, and personalities. Nevertheless it also holds the potential to alter all of these. Given the interactive nature of this media form and its effects, disentangling it from other agents of socialization altogether is a futile task. Nor would it be a particularly worthwhile one. As the review of socialisation studies in Chapter 2 shows, most approaches towards understanding processes of attitude formation must necessarily consider multiple factors and influences to be able to capture some semblance of

what is ultimately a complex reality. While it may be tempting to try to judge whether a particular medium such as social media is ‘truly’ influential by viewing it as a singular factor in opinion-making, any such attempt would place it outside of the complicated matrix within which it actually functions in the day-to-day lives of individuals, and as such yield skewed results.

Another side-effect of this complex reality is the difficulty in assessing precisely how social media affects political attitudes. While there is a slight tilt towards its role in opinion-formation and mobilization around key issues in the literature, it is worth investigating further whether this comes from social media itself or simply that this is the particular facet that most works looking at its impact as a media form have chosen to study in depth. Several of the works discussed in this thesis conform to this general trend as well.

An argument can also emerge, from the debate between Iyengar and Bennett (2008) and Holbert, Garrett, and Gleason (2010), as seen earlier, on adjusting our views of what is to be studied itself. Indeed this forms part of a broader call, raised by works from both socialisation and communication studies, for updating existing models. Since a majority of the latter have largely been derived from and in the era of the dominance of more traditional formats such as TV, newspapers, and film, they are not quite adequate to fully capture the nuances of social media. The latter includes novel technological and social features that require newer theoretical frames such as that represented by network theory in order to be fully understood.

Such frames themselves often carry implicit assumptions as well. Through an examination of works looking at the impact of social media in recent years, there emerge several views of the precise role that it is regarded as playing in the socialisation process. Some regard it merely as a technological pathway through which other agents such as family and peer networks act upon the individual, either by utilizing it as a tool through which these can act more

efficiently upon the individual or as a venue where they can act upon it. These approaches are somewhat similar in that they both regard social media as merely enabling other agents rather than as one itself.

But a third, contrary perspective has also been taken by some scholars. This aims to establish social media as an agent of socialisation in its own right. While the idea has some backing in socialisation literature given its historical acknowledgment of media in general as an agent, the bulk of the justification for elevating social media to this level derives from the argument that it does not merely enable older agents but reconfigures them altogether on the medium to make possible new forms of interaction. The manner in which these take place and act upon the individual are unique, and this distinctiveness derives largely from social media as a format itself. For instance as the section on the presentation of online selves shows, the idea of a peer group itself expands and is in many ways reconstructed altogether in the virtual space established by such sites.

In large part, the distinctiveness of this virtual space is due to the unique way in which it shapes and presents content. The latter deeply affects the former, as seen in the sections on forms of content and algorithmic determinations in particular. The overarching role played by the technological facilitations provided and constraints imposed by such sites have only just begun to be explored by academics but examples abound in popular culture. For example the colloquial phrase ‘do it for the gram’ gained popularity as Instagram did, and referred to the tendency of individuals to reorder their behaviour, dressing, and activities to click pictures that would make them look better in accordance with the norms prevalent on the site.

Indeed, the establishment of such unique norms and codes of behaviour across various sites themselves form part of the manner in which these socialise individual users. Such norms often derive directly or indirectly from the manner of presentation on the given site. While

there is considerable diversity across sites due to a variety of factors ranging from user demographics to prevalent format (video, picture, text, etc), there are some common features as well. These are found in different forms across some of the most widely used platforms, and form some of the hallmarks of the spaces established by them. Such modes of presentation affect interactions between users as well as on the broader patterns established among ‘audiences’ (if that word can be applied in this context, which is itself a debatable issue) and creators. The key features that characterize them can be seen in the spaces established for exchanges. These tend to be constant, chaotic, and non-linear.

This constancy, explored by network theorists through the concept of timeless time, is a paradoxical one in most digital societies. Within the realm of social media, a single post can be seen as eternal and ephemeral in terms of accessibility, the former from the perspective of digital record-keeping and the latter from the attention accorded to it by others. Both these opposed aspects simultaneously form part of its existence as a post.

The chaos mentioned is not necessarily as negative a force as the rather pejorative word would indicate. Rather it refers to the sheer volume of data being generated at every moment, which in turn requires the simultaneous application of multiple media effects to be understood. Indeed there are even calls, as discussed earlier, for the creation of new frames given that many of these emerging forms of content have only now become technologically possible and so present novel challenges in terms of analysing their impact. A simple example of this can be seen in the challenges faced by individuals attempting to maintain certain public personas online as seen in the third chapter. Even a few decades ago, public personas were maintained only by public figures that usually had teams to manage these rather than ordinary citizens trying to balance public faces in front of such vast and diverse groups. The novelty here lies not in the public personas adopted, which individuals have

performed throughout history, but the sheer scale of the public in front of which these must now be balanced by the average person.

Non-linearity, in turn, permeates the entire experience of social media. Whether it is terms of the non-chronological ordering of posts according to an algorithmic calculation of ‘relevance’ (or another such factor) or the broader effects explored in terms of cultural impact through the works of Marshall McLuhan in this thesis, it is a crucial factor underlying the digital landscape of such sites. This non-linearity has been interpreted in a variety of ways, ranging from grand narratives of a technological mastering of time and space to more pragmatic ones as merely an expression of the commercial impetuses that ultimately drive such sites.

But these characteristics cannot be regarded as wholly determinative either in understanding the manner in which social media influences individuals. As seen earlier, the reality of the situation is far more complex than that. While the presentation effects explained above do have an impact on the content disseminated through the medium, offline factors can temper the impact of these in various ways. It is more often than not the same groups that dominate across physical and online spaces alike. The Indian social media landscape continues to be overwhelmingly upper-caste, urban, and male. This also emphasizes the difficulties of using any universalistic media effect frames to understand such content, given the complexity of the interplay of these factors across virtual as well as geographical groups. This also highlights the co-determinative relationship that social media shares with other agents of socialisation, adding to the difficulties of isolating it as factor.

Further, social media straddles the line between a medium of personal communication and a mass media format. The individual posting their own political opinions is not simply expressing themselves; they are doing so before an audience. The size of the audience varies from a few friends to thousands of followers. The public aspect of such personal expression

can be seen as the rationale for the economic model behind much of ‘influencer’ culture. It also leads to a blurring of the public and private spheres of life, a dilemma observed in theory (by Wellman in his work on network societies) as well as practice (the case of online image management). This also has an impact on the very forms and content of the messages disseminated through such sites, as the personal is turned into an object of mass consumption, and increasingly understood as such. The impact of the latter can be seen in the emergence of algorithmic imaginaries as well. Indeed, understanding this aspect of social media may require us to simultaneously consider multiple facets of it. Aside from those mentioned, the evolution of the medium itself, the commercial models underpinning social media, the nature of political scandal and the establishment of personal reputations in the politics of the network society all play a role.

Indeed, this enmeshment of numerous perspectives in examining any single aspect of social media and its impact is perhaps why network theories come closest to providing an overview. Through establishing electronic communication as the cornerstone of their approach, they provide an explanation of how this affects a broad range of processes across society. While the socialisation process has not quite been explicitly addressed by either of the two scholars whose works this thesis mainly focuses on, these can be used to understand it better. While both Castells and van Dijk initially wrote while social media was in its infancy, in their conceptions of electronic communication they were indeed able to anticipate the rise of such instantaneous media forms and their ideas regarding its impact can indeed be substantiated today with evidence from numerous countries, including India. Further, such network theories are also useful in illuminating the linkages between communication and socialisation far beyond the cultural aspects that McLuhan and his successors remain largely restricted to. Their importance as analytical tools has been discussed in some detail in the last chapter, and

it is following those arguments that their usage for understanding the Indian scenario can be established.

The utility of network theories for analysis in this context emerges through the explanations they provide for some of the major phenomenon seen on and around social media. Firstly, through ideas such as the space of flows and timeless time they help in clarifying the internal logic of the virtual realm established by such sites. The two concepts capture key parts of the manner in which the virtual lives people live on social media sites increasingly function as extensions of their reality. Through an exploration of the transformation of places into flows in the physical world, the former allows us to draw parallels between geographical nodes and the processes surrounding them, and the manner in which social media sites function similarly as internal nodes within the virtual realm around which individuals tend to cluster. While van Dijk and Castells do not agree on the precise nature and functions of such nodes, their differences serve to bring out differing perspectives and so enhance the discussion surrounding the space of flows.

Timeless time, in its turn, provides a broader look at the breakdown of linear time seen earlier in terms of presentation effects. By contrasting the unique manner in which time functions on such sites with other forms such as biological and glacial time, the concept allows for an exploration of the way time itself is reconstructed online. The individual is rendered a constant in terms of presence as well as the constant collection of data that cannot be easily erased. Deleting a profile, for instance, does not remove one entirely from this online sphere, although intriguing new legal formulations such as the EU's attempts at the Right to be Forgotten are now starting to emerge (Google Spain SL, Google Inc. v Agencia Española de Protección de Datos, Mario Costeja González 2014). At the same time, such attempts also highlight the essential fragility of online existence, dependent to a large extent

on commercial sites and spaces that may shut down or change their regulations, leaving users stranded with few options.

Secondly, by linking such communicative media with societal behaviours, network theories help in gaining a clearer understanding of the transformations taking place in various processes of democratic politics today. By defining the boundaries of networks more clearly, they provide a framework for understanding both institutions of the digital societies they form as well as those who remain on its outskirts. The way in which these affect how political life is organised is also explicated, as seen for example in van Dijk's assessment of the impact that ICT is likely to have on various kinds of democratic states.

Moreover, network theorists also attempt to explore various phenomena – both theoretical and pragmatic – that arise within such polities. The connections between technological means like social media and the likely results are made clearer through such analysis. The impact of such disruptions on various aspects of political life from the socialisation process that is the primary focus of this thesis to campaigning, bureaucracy, justice systems, and so on, all form part of the paradigm that is explored. Many of the issues discussed by theorists as emanating directly from the rise of electronic communication forms such as social media are immediately relevant in contemporary India. For example, it is easy to relate the rise of scandal politics, importance of PR, narratives of personal reputation, and other such trends to events in modern Indian politics. As such, network theory enfolds many of the points made in earlier chapters to make larger arguments about the nature of politics itself in digitised societies.

This is not to say that this thesis is itself exhaustive in terms of what it accomplishes in its understanding of the impact of social media. The limitations which bind it must also be highlighted here, to balance the arguments given above and provide greater context. To begin

with, such arguments drawn as they are from a diverse collection of studies conducted across distinct countries and cultures, may not necessarily serve as perfectly accurate predictors of the Indian experience. Indeed the unique trajectory that the Indian experience has taken forms much of the rationale behind conducting an India-specific study. None of this is to say that global trends have no impact on the country's usage and socialisation patterns but that in their specifics they may show characteristics that differ from those seen in the West (the site of the majority of the studies cited). One example of this can be seen in patterns of news consumption in India, where both digital and print have shown growth over the past year unlike countries such as the US where print is struggling to compete with the former (Singh 2019).

Further, given the sheer volume of studies published each year and the numerous aspects of social media usage that they deal with it is inevitable that in a limited work some have been missed. While every attempt has been made to incorporate all major works that serve to better understand the primary topic, some have necessarily been excluded through the constraint of limited space. This has also been compounded by the restrictions imposed in terms of time. This thesis largely deals with data in particular from 2009-2019. The key reason for this remains that pre-2009 levels of social media, and indeed internet usage overall, in India were far too insignificant to have much of an impact of broader processes of political thought or action. Indeed this also serves as a reminder of the sheer novelty of social media itself. As can be seen in more detail on the section on its evolution in the first chapter, the medium itself grew largely in the past two decades and simply did not exist in anything resembling its modern form prior to the 1990s.

The rapidity of this technological change poses another major challenge for the arguments put forward in this study. At the same time some attempts have been made to offset this effect. The particular features and associated consequences of multiple sites have been looked

at, rather than a focus on say simply Facebook's or Twitter's characteristics. And wherever possible, the key features common to most social media sites such as a focus on user-user interaction, algorithmic imaginaries, and so on, have been examined rather than specifics that may hinder generalisation.

At the same time, there is a risk of over-generalising distinctive aspects of various sites that may perhaps be better seen individually. This is most prominent in the last chapter on network theory, which deals mainly with the broad themes and ideas presented by this paradigm and associated evidence. Once again some attempts to deal with this have been made in the chapter itself, primarily through an explanation of why this theory can be held to be well-suited to the explanatory needs of the main topic of this thesis as well as through the section that presents the criticisms levelled against it.

Finally, there remain several key arenas related to the theme of political socialisation itself on which sufficient data is simply not available as yet in the Indian context. For example, among these is the question of the rural-urban digital divide in the nation. This has been hinted at in various journalistic pieces in recent years but systematic study has not yet been undertaken to an extent that would make any generalizations possible. The latter is also further hindered by the array of differences that prevail among various states in India and the difficulties attached to reaching any definitive conclusions that would hold true on a national level. This thesis only attempts to look at this issue in the most general terms with reference to the marginalization of certain groups from the networks of political power. The scenario discussed under this topic in the preceding chapter perhaps comes closest to an estimate of what those across the divide may face in an increasingly digitized polity.

But even such a tentative hypothesis in this regard is extremely difficult to prove on the basis of the current literature. Indeed that the rural-urban divide itself exists in terms of social

media is yet to be definitely proven. For one, the term digital divide has mostly been used globally to refer to the gulf between the technologically literate and illiterate. The latter terms themselves are highly debatable in a world of constantly evolving technology. Further, they may be separated by demographic factors unrelated to geography such as age, education, gender, socio-economic levels, and so on. Given the lack of data at the moment, it is quite difficult to postulate with any degree of certainty that the rural-urban divide truly is the predominant digital gap among the Indian population.

Given these limitations, this thesis marks only a modest attempt at understanding the issue at hand. It marks only a beginning in what must necessarily be a much longer debate. Indeed, given the transformation it has caused in such a short period, it is sometimes difficult to remember that social media itself is a remarkably new technology, and has only just begun to make its impact felt on politics over the past decade. Given the exponential growth that it appears to be poised for in India over the next few years though, it is quite likely to provide far more food for thought and discussion in the coming years. We may even experience an exacerbation of some of the trends noted in this thesis as well as the emergence of new ones, although predictions with reference to such a fast-changing technology remain exceedingly difficult to make, as noted earlier.

While the focus here has essentially been on reviewing the existing literature and attempting to examine the impact that social media has had on political socialisation through it, most of the theories explored have their origins in countries other than India. While, once again as discussed earlier, an attempt has been made to contextualise these with reference to the Indian scenario and read these in the context of events and trends from Indian politics, in order to truly understand the unique manner in which our political life specifically shall be impacted by this medium further research is needed. This need is already being fulfilled by various institutions attempting to gather data on the virtual lives and social media preferences

of Indian voters as well as academicians examining particular cases. The latter are also well-documented by journalists and other writers who provide more well-rounded pictures of the scenarios beyond the data observed. Even market research groups and technical studies aimed at improving design features have much to contribute.

At the same time, certain India-specific trends can indeed be seen in the literature. India's social media user base continues to grow at a rapid pace, and as noted earlier, the majority of the new users are also new voters and form a decisive part of the electorate. While the precise manner in which social media is influencing them is difficult to pinpoint owing to both the concurrent working of other agents and the lack of available studies, some features are indeed starting to emerge. Chief among these is the role played by it in opinion-formation on key issues.

Indeed, in recent elections the medium has been actively used by political parties to mobilise citizens around major and minor 'scandals'. As seen in the section on scandal politics as well, with rising internet penetration this particular form of internet bombardment around a particular picture, incident, video, etc followed by a public play of reputational PR is seen on social media with increasing frequency (especially around elections). The seeming directness of the interactions is also held by some to present a contrast to what are perceived as the 'biases' of traditional media and may contribute to the rising preference for it as a political battleground over these in the future as well (Ranganathan 2014).

At the same time, the commercial forces that drive social media continue to facilitate some of its most troubling aspects as an opinion-maker in the Indian case as well. On a structural level, these include features such as algorithmic determinations and data-driven, targeted political advertising. The latter in particular is rendered more problematic by the lack of fact-checking and haphazard policies behind it. Indeed anecdotal evidence would indicate that

these form part of the reason why the right has been so uniquely successful in utilising it in India, although studies available on the issue are still quite limited.

But the reluctance (and in some cases inability) of sites to censor even outright lies form a notable part of the puzzle these present to Indian legislators as well. There are few regulations governing content in India so far although organisations like the Election Commission have made notable strides. However the implementation of these remains dependent on the cooperation of private, and usually foreign, companies. From a policy perspective, it is difficult for the Indian state to currently check the impact that such sites have on citizens within the existing system. Further, beyond a few constitutional bodies and NGO efforts the political will to enforce such rules has been rather limited except in a small number of cases easily refuted publicly or ignored altogether by the companies behind such sites. Given the current maze of regulations, it is quite likely that policies on free speech and content regulations will continue to be governed in practice by individual sites. In this case, further research on the impact of such content is sorely needed in order to understand the impact on users and their lives.

However, as mentioned earlier there remains a gap in terms of theoretical studies examining the influence of this medium on broader processes such as socialisation. This thesis has been a small attempt to help fill this void that nonetheless requires far more work to be truly addressed. It is to be hoped that through such research a clearer picture of the increasingly complicated relationship between social media and Indian politics would finally begin to emerge.

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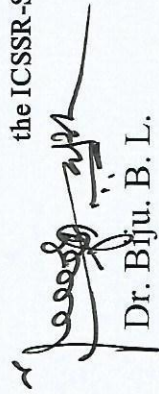
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