Post Truth Society: Public Opinion and Social Media

V.P Rakesh

Department of Political Science NAS College Meerut

ABSTRACT Media has witnessed phenomenal growth as well as changes during the last few decades. The growth rate of social media is unexpectedly very high. Especially Facebook, and Twitter have grown faster and captured millions of users in just a few years. The way digital technology is becoming accessible , it is obvious that more and more people will join the social media specially in developing . Though social media has democratized information – access to information as well expression of opinion, still the growth of social media is not without its perils. For example it could intrude into private space of individuals and often used to create hype. Among the plethora of information and opinion – it is a formidable task to separate authentic information from opinion, and objectivity and perception. Social media is often being used to obfuscate reality. It has been witnessed in recent elections and other public policy debates that objectivity is gradually being pushed aside and perceptions have dominated the scene in developing public opinion

Introduction : Democracy As virtue under Siege

Democracy , as often argued , is the just and the most evolved form of governance . It is because , , as claimed, people have equal share of political power. The other important argument is that political participation empowers people and helps what they get what want. In this process democratic system makes people more virtuous, and more caring for one another. If any evil or distortion creeps in democracy , the democratic system, as forcefully debated by Amartya Sen , being self correcting takes care of it on its own. . However, there are equally forceful arguments given by Sen himself that democracy , is not an virtue per se therefore, it should be judged by its results(Sen, 1999, Drez and Sen 2013) . Among the several challenges that democracy has faced and is being faced are creating an environment in which each citizen exercise equal opportunities and indulge in informed debate. The issue of economic and social equality has been fervently debated and across political ideologies it has been agreed that inequalities are not compatible with the idea of democracy ,and if is not possible and feasible in near future to eliminate them – social inequality must be abolished on priority basis and economic inequalities to be kept in within the manageable limit . Dr Ambedkar had candidly observed on these issues that unless we have social and economic equality political equality cannot be effective lest being effective . (Ambedkar 1948). It is altogether different matter that economic inequalities after declining till 1970 are again on increase and it is argued that they have reached to the level that was during French Revolution.(Pickety, T. 2014) .In , recent years democracy, the other issue being debated is about " fair and informed debate" which constitute the core of formation of public opinion . Democracy as often, mentioned is not rule of majority but rule of law, albeit though law is legislated by majority but there are certain inalienable rights to people –natural rights as advocated by John Locke (2015) , in democracy must not be transgressed by any law. The important components or argument to sustain these democratic virtue is , citizens rights to have a fair , free informed and objective debate so that people can elect a competent government

However, history is full of examples that government elected by the people , on many occasion proved not only incompetent but also paid scant regard to democratic virtues. Examples are cited of the rise of Hitler in Germany and many more . It is also argued that demagogue take advantage of democratic norms and practices to strengthen their hold on government. Democracy per , has little safe guard against these perversions. Because of these shortcoming wide range of social science research , have indicated that political participation and democratic deliberation actually tend to make people worse--more irrational, biased, and mean(.Jason Brennan 2016). Jason Brennan because of these failure of democratic system argues that a new system of government--epistocracy, the rule of the

knowledgeable--may be better than democracy. Not exactly like Plato's idea of philosopher kings but Brennan focuses on rationality and knowledge/ He argues that, it is time to experiment with the idea of epistocracy . It is altogether different that the idea of epistocracy , whether experimented or goes into the oblivion of history but it is high time to argue how the public opinion , which is vehicle of change in democracy , is being formulated in the present era radical changes in media technology.

Here it is pertinent to mention that though the world have moved quite far from the Athenian Democracy , or Indian village republics , which were elitist in nature and did not had the three pillars – of liberty , equality and fraternity – as modern democracy has .But the challenge of democracy – the fear of populism and demagoguery continue to haunt it, today as it haunted earlier . Plato had seen how his mentor Socrates became the victim of anti-intellectualism and sacrificing himself on the alter of truth. So many saints in ancient India saw the collapse of republics. These unmet challenge of democracy as elucidate by Isaac Asimov(1980) still persists . The scholar argues that " do not trust the experts" and "there is a cult of ignorance in United State and there always has been".. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant threat winding its ways through our political and cultural life nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that my ignorance is as good as your knowledge" In this paper a modest attempt is being made how , understand , how the politics of post truth is changing the political participation practices and how the social media communication is contributing in this .

Post-truth, Media, Communication and Public Opinion : A Theoretical Construct.

The word post -Truth, as per the oxford dictionary is international word of the year 2016. The word as" an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'(Oxford Dictionaries 2016). The word was first used by Stojan Steve Tesich, to describe the cover-up of Watergate scandal in USA in 1970. In Post Truth politics, denotes a " a political culture in which politics (public opinion and media narratives) have become almost entirely disconnected from policy (the substance of legislation)" (David Roberts 2010) In "post-truth" politics—a reliance on assertions that "feel true" but have no basis in fact" (Economist 2016). Although power seekers have been laying since time immemorial, but what has been changed in recent time is the power of post –truth to build public opinion has increased phenomenally. Because of several reasons - virtual retreat of socialist or commu-nist ideology, the promise of benefits of new economic order – the liberalization, privatization and globalization has not trickled down to the masses. The rise Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism and

inability of liberal values to provide effective answer to these problems. And the change in the pattern and technology of communication or media has been of great help to the post truth politic.

The Media refers to various means of communication and also the communication devices used to interact with people . The journey of communication has travelled a long distance from oral to print - newspaper, books to electronic like radio, television and now digital like internet. The pattern of communication has also changed from individual to mass media to social media .In last few year the social media has increased phenomenally. It is being used for personal to group communication. There re may web sites used for social interactions and networking like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn Twitter; gaming sites and virtual worlds video sites such as YouTube; and blogs, are social media These offer portal communication . Social media sites allow staying connected with friends and family and also increasing ones circle of friends , exchanging ideas –through blogs and ohe medium and also engaging in community activities- promoting a cause and supporting . Social media has liberated people from the grips of publishing houses and controls of the editors . It is now possible for any creative persons to publish its work on social media and get reaction of much wider audience, than ever. Inother words scoial media has democratized knowledge and information. It is an effective tool for mass mobilization. However, all these sites are not healthy in social terms – some of them often they transgress the accepted morality and may cause irreparable damage to mental health and value system of people. Some of these sites , experts suggests should not be accessible to children and adolescent – because of their low ability to self regulation. Besides these adverse impacts the social media has been a effective instrument of creating a "post – truth society " in which the not facts and objectivity but perceptions matter. The referendum Brexit -2016 and US Presidential Election of 2016, the social-economic changes in Greece , Venezuela and also the changing mode of public discourse in India too , are the testimonies that that social media and electronics medias could effectively utilized to shape perceptions. In this article an critical assessment of the social media on other issues of public policy concern are being discussed. However before it an modest attempts has been to theoretically construct the impact of social media.

During the evolution of society the invention of technologies like painting, language, and writing have had impact on culture forming opinions Public Opinion, as it is commonly understood is the aggregation of opinions which influences decision making and public policy Throughout the history of human civilization multiple communication channels have shaped public opinion, in 21st century the social media – as defined above is the latest addition

Communication is discipline having traits of humanities and social sciences as well The first attempts to develop a model of communication was attempted about four hundred year before Christ, by Aristotle He disused public speech situations in which the speaker with a definigoal; to persuade the audience to act in certain manner to achieve the objective However , the public speech is a sort of monologue and if at all feed back is obtained that comes through cheering in support or voices of rejections but it is rarely a dialogue . However the curcial issue is to receive feed back which in public speech could only be indirect (Foulger, 2004) Opinion can be defined as a subjective believe that is based on the interpretation of facts and emotion and public opinion is the aggregate of dominant opinions within a society. Studies across societies reveal that rhetoric play an important part in public opinion making – which essentially means repeating the same theme – in multiple manner, in a persuasive manner ,some time overt and some time covert., some time directly stating but often by creating imaginaries- fanciful or freighting, but cajoling people to behave in a definite manner. One thing is very important for rhetoric , that is its context- without it, it is irrelevant . Rhetoric is a "mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of

energy to object, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action." (Blitzer, 1968) Harold Dwight Lasswellbased on the study of Nazi propaganda machine during thirties and forties said in public opinion making is to understand WHO, WHAT, WHICH, and WHOM Who is communi- cating, what is being communicated, which medium or channel is being utilized, and whom is being addressed Keeping these in consideration understandability improves but again it is also monologue with poor feedback. This model is a linear model. With advent of social media the linear model of opinion building though exists with other multi-Dimensional levels of communication models but is loosing importance and / or is being reinforced by multidimensional communication, in which communication has eight (a) INTRAPERSONAL, (b) INTER PERSONAL (C) , GROUP INTERACTION,(D) CULTURAL LEVEL, dimensions (Ruesch and Bateson'1951). Though not developed in the realm of social media but precisely on this model social media works and has become effective tool of shaping public opinion

The concept of public opinion has evolved through the social, economic, and political processes during the eighteenth century However, public opinion has always been part of the human community, whether in families or , communities certain dominant opinions always persist around which universal consensus is evolved . Through the invention of the printing press made it possible to overcome geographical and social frontiers allowing for a greater and wider public discourse. The social media has added new dimension to public opinion making . It could be used for one to one communication, in closed group communication and for public communication as well. Now a person has a choice to select audience , categories them in categories and communicate –with different tone and texture. The other important issue – the constrains of time and physical presence has been overcome . Virtual presence of the communicator makes the difference. Sting, biting one liner, ridiculing established pluralist and liberal tradition is the new metaphor of political discourse. Populists do not speak to contest facts , for them truth is of secondary importance , they do not speak to convince but to reinforce the prejudice or bias or ridicule critical analysis. The strategy is simple but powerful , create a we versus they binary and create a sense of deprivation among the "we". Make 'We' believe that all democratic institutions, since long are being manipulated by (pseudo) intellectual for their own comforts and nurturing "they" community as committed supporters. The uniqueness of this post-truth politics is along with the high decibel campaign , visible in print and electronic media , a parallel campaign is also run through social media. This parallel campaign is akin to traditional whisperings or rumor mongering but more effective, given its customized reach and speed. Primarily the recent referendum on Britain leaving European Union (Brexit), the Presidential Election in US and also the debate on various public policy issue, and elections in India have shown the power of perceptions in opinion making. For example in deep rooted democracy and fairly transparent electoral system perception was created even after referendum result that "Many Brexiteers genuinely believe that those in and near power who backed Remain are deliberately seeking to reverse the referendum result" (Cooper Charlie 2016). Commenting on the presidential election of USA, in the Washington Post the columnist wrote "The practice of post-truth — untrue assertion piled on untrue assertion — helped get Donald Trump to the White House. The more untruths he told, the more supporters rewarded him for, as they saw it, telling it like it is"(Marcus Ruth 2016). More pertinent remark or analysis came from the Susan Glasser "Stories that would have killed any other politicians truly worrisome relations about everything from the federal taxes Trump dodged to the charitable donations he lied about, the women he insulted and allegedly assaulted, and the mob ties that have long dogged him—did not stop Trump from thriving in this election year. Even fact-checking perhaps the most untruthful candidate of our lifetime didn't work; the more news outlets did it, the less the facts resonated….. The election of 2016 showed us that Americans are

increasingly choosing to live in a cloud of like-minded spin, surrounded by the partisan political hackery and fake news that poisons their Facebook feeds." In India too politicians are accused of post- truth, and every political party accuses other for it, and every politician claim that he is victim of it , perpetrated by other (Ramesh 2016**)**

The Beckoning

Of course, there's always been   politician and other who created binaries and reaped divided , gained power. There has always been demagoguery, but the new phenomena of post truth is bit complex and needs a clear vigilances from democratic institutions The forces of technological innovation , great new tools of public speak, paid and planting news are handy tools. The digital technology has democratized the information but accountability is missing   and cross checking the causality. But facts are facts not matter how they are suppressed they reveal their strength but many time it is delayed . This delay costs heavily to human civilization . This has to be guarded

Refernces

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