

Violence and New Media Ethics: An Insight

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Abstract: *Who could have imagined the speed and depth of new media until Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was overthrown by an upsurge resulted from an acute civil resistance or until the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi? No doubt, the Arab Spring was germinated in a virtual world and further escalated into the “real.” In this scenario, it can be said that the ego (of the civil society and of the youth bearing new spree of freedom) opposes the conscious recall of repressed unpleasant experiences that ultimately culminates in a new era (or a different era, if not new). The upsurge, in this sense, is an epitome of “constructive violence.” But then again, the series attack on Buddhist monasteries and Shrines in Ramu, Bangladesh in reaction against a Facebook image of desecrating the Quran gives us a different glimpse regarding the versatility or charisma of new media. Hence, drawing two examples that cover both the constructive and destructive milieu of new media, the paper is designed to address the concept of new media ethics and the idea of violence the new media bring forth. Keeping “violence” under a broader aspect the paper illustrates what kinds of ethical issues may arise from the consumption of new media and technology. It sheds a light on the popular argument that technology is ethically neutral or ambivalent. Finally, the paper takes into account the behavioral aspects of individuals and community when they are blessed (or cursed?) with overt CMC (Computer Mediated Communication).*

Re-locating Violence in the Age of Information

“Technology changes everything, crime and violence included”

– Savona

In “real” the term violence is more associated with the idea of a destructive force that intends to harm physically and psychologically. On a more extended level violence is instigated through oppression, denial, repression, and assault. When physical violence is concerned it is more likely to erupt from the elemental vulnerability of the human body. Direct physical violence – aimed at harming, injuring, or killing other people – indubitably stands at the center of the whole issue of violence. This form of violence is always exercised in a manifest manner and is mostly intentional (Heitmeyer, Hagan). On the other hand, psychological violence is more subtle in its course of action. Psychological violence is based on words, gestures, pictures, symbols, or deprivation of the necessities of life, so as to force others into subjugation through intimidation, fear, or specific “rewards.” Psychological violence certainly includes some forms of psychological cruelty and particular kinds of torture (Heitmeyer, Hagan 23). The web is more prone to

exercise psychological violence where the victims are more easily accessible. The violence is more disembodied and online oriented. With the advancement of internet access a community of “netizens” has been formed worldwide. Therefore, the technologies, basically the new media have started a new trend in case of social interaction. Crimes have taken a new form to intrude into our social life. When we say technology is a curse we mean to say that the organized criminals maximize their strength and minimize their chance of getting caught through exploiting the boon of technology. The techno-peddlers (yes! they are traders of information) use new technologies to communicate; to organize themselves better, to widen the spectrum of their businesses, to update their *modus operandi* and techniques, and to avoid law enforcement risk (Savona 8). The level of individual and communal violence is on the rise due to the availability of the almost easily accessible network. On an individual level it includes mainly harassment, cyber-bullying and blackmailing. And this is mostly done through using information (personal to be specific): utilizing information, tampering with information, exploiting information and what not. Hence, violence in cyberspace somehow revolves around the accessibility of information.

We may have come across the “great” Charles Augustus Magnussen, an information-tycoon from the third season of the stunningly re-invented Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. Magnussen is a figure who considers information as assets and later exploits these assets to blackmail renowned people. This is a form of abuse and violation of human secrecy and it obviously resides implicitly. The more we become techno-savvy, the more we are repressing our basic instincts (mostly negative) and thus rechanneling our dormant instincts into sole utilization or exploitation of resources that are basically informational. In this era of technological advancement, the idea of violence is no more limited to an extreme form of aggression that includes assault, rape or murder. The term assumes a disguised way of conducting action: a “behind the veil” feature that allows people to go for a disembodied adherence with it. Violence can now be more associated with the global information networks related mostly to social media and hubs of cyber interaction. And the premises on which violence lingers have become mostly political.

The exposure of the top secret intelligence gathering operation run by U.S National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation has redefined the concept of trespassing international border. PRISM – as they named it – has been the most outwitting surveillance program since 2007 by the U.S. Defense Authority until it was exposed by the former CIA official Edward Snowden. The existence and details of PRISM were leaked by the now fugitive whistle-blower, Edward Snowden, who worked for Booz Allen Hamilton. They are one of a number of private security contractors providing outsourced services to the U.S. government begun under the Clinton administration and growing markedly following 9/11 (Stoddart 1). PRISM might sound like the comic book S.H.I.E.L.D that used to gather information from the major hubs of social networking media. If anyone has any kind of affiliation with the major networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, Yahoo, Skype, his/her information is vulnerable to PRISM. PRISM deals with the particulars of individual interaction that include chatting, photo sharing, logging into mail, skype-talking, etc. Similarly, the U.S government was keeping an eye over the exchange of information that took place among their target group (it may be a particular country or an organization). The U.S State Department legalizes the attempt by raising a question of national security and a stiff attempt to foil further threat in a post 9/11 era. The plan backfires after its exposure. The countries that were considered to be the former allies of U.S are now questioning their ties with the U.S State Department. One of the logical effects of the PRISM exposure is that it created tensions among the different countries and a cyber-alert has been unofficially instigated in most of the countries. The current international politics echo the tension of cold war and can now be termed as “cyber cold war.”

New-media Mediated Crime: How is Technology Related?

Technology acquires the power to change our lifestyles and thinking pattern. Crime, in this case, also has its pervasive nature that let it sprout through the cyberspace. Criminal behavior is largely modified with the advancement of ICT. They can now organize themselves and communication has become more instant for them. Their *modus operandi* is now more disembodied and disguised. If we consider a few cases that happened in recent months we can develop a pattern through which a group of organized criminals are operating. No doubt, Facebook is an awesome medium to “share” things but it is also being used to share “violence” too. Let us have a look at this news collected from Ain O Salish Kendra (Legal Aid and Human Rights Organization, Bangladesh):

On 2 November 2013, a group of miscreants brutally attacked, vandalised, torched and looted houses, business establishments and temples of the Hindus in Purbopara, Goshpara, and other Hindu areas adjacent to the Girls School Road of Banagram village located in Santhia Upazila of Pabna district. The attacks seem pre-planned. This locality is known as Hindu majority areas. The attack was carried out following a rumour that Rajib Saha, a class-X student and son of a local Hindu businessman Bablu Saha, had posted derogatory comments against the Prophet (SM) on the social networking site Facebook. The said rumor has spread around the locality. In retaliation a large number of local people led by the miscreants gathered and staged violent demonstrations against the Hindu community at around 12.30 pm. They started to vandalise homes, properties, and business establishments of the Hindu community.

Re-constructing Marx's opinion, we can say that religion is not the opium of the masses anymore; rather religion is the new pawn in the cyber world to drive the masses towards a "target." Post 9/11 has marked a new epoch in the formation of what Žižek calls subjective violence. According to Žižek, violence takes three forms: subjective (this includes crime, terror), objective (racism, discrimination, hate-speech, etc.) and systematic (the suppression resulting from political and economic institutions) (Žižek 2008). Religious violence tends to sprout from its institutionalized knowledge which later spread out in a subjective form. New media here give a leverage to cover every nook and corner of the cyber criminals' target spot and the casualties it invites are alarming. It is something like influencing "real" through "virtual."

One of the most notable factors that give criminals a benefit in cyberspace is the question of embodiment or overcoming spatial hurdle. The criminals do not have to show their presence in the victimized area. They rather spark up a flame of interest (or controversy?) for the masses and sit cozily behind their computers to watch the uninterrupted flow of massacre they have pre-planned. For example, lots of Facebook pages are pro-active in disseminating hate speech: be it for religion or against religion. One such page is *Basherkella* which overtly propagates religious extremism and out and out denigrates state machineries through its posts. The amount of people who "liked" the page is shockingly high. Although there are lots of fake profiles liking the page but the fact remains: fake profiles are also managed by "real" people. The pages provide vigorous speeches and post photo-shopped images of defaming a particular religion (in this case Islam) and ignite a flame of protest among the masses who do not even care or have less knowledge about investigating things for proof. These are the bewildered masses that are being driven by the masterminds of cyber-crime. New media mediated crimes are accelerating for many reasons: availability, less expensive, negotiating spatial hurdles, speedy way to confront peers, guarantying anonymity, handy usage, and under regulated for a developing country like ours (Savona 2004).

Technology, hence, provides a pull to the newer ways of harassment for public. Ranging from hacking and cyber stalking to sexual bullying through Facebook, the crimes have got new dimensions. The sexual offenders, the so called religious and the secular propagandists are proactive in cyberspace. Apart from all the cyber-mediated crimes the paper focuses more on these two aspects so as to explicate the idea of violence (both on an individual level and communal level) that intertwines the boundary of "real" and "virtual." In case of sexual offenders it is more likely that they are the stalkers whose only job is to look for erotic computer communication, from mild flirtations to seeking and sharing information about sexual services to frank discussions of specific deviant sexual behavior (Jaishankar). In Bangladesh, things get messier with internet pornography, disseminating malicious information, internet prostitution network and the widespread syndicate acting via Facebook, Viber, Whatsapp to carry out human trafficking. Amid this wilderness of internet, the call for the practice of and lessons for cyber-ethics or New Media Ethics is beyond question.

Ethical Neutrality: How Far Does Technology Go?

Many critics argue that technology is ethically neutral and only acts upon the users' own manual intention. But a more convincing stance has been put forward by the French theorist Jacques Ellul, who thinks that technology is more or less deterministic (Jeronimo, Garcia, Mitcham 99). Ellul insists that "technique carries with it its own effects quite apart from how it is used ... No matter how it is used, it has of itself a number of positive and

negative consequences. This is not just a matter of intention” (Ellul 35). He adds that “technical development is neither good nor bad nor neutral” (37). We become conditioned by our technological systems or environments. On a certain level we build machines and afterwards machines build us. The same goes for technology. It determines its own use and it is erroneous to assume that technical tools depend more on their workmen. For example, the “poke” option is included in Facebook in order to give a virtual nudge to someone. In this case, the “poke” is an option only for the “nudge.” Hence, the inclusion of “poke” option is not neutral at all. Technology has its own deterministic biasness. Another communication theorist Neil Postman argues that in case of technical, physical, symbolic and accessibility factors, technology is out and out deterministic. He argues that:

- i) Because of the symbolic forms in which there are coded information, technology is intellectually and emotionally biased;
- ii) Because of technical and economic stature the media have social biasness
- iii) Because of the accessibility and speed factor, technology is politically biased.

Thus, technology is a metaphor which classifies the world for us. It sequences us, frames us, enlarges us, and augments us.

New Media: Ethics Otherwise?

Traditional journalism, while clinging over their age old regulations and norms, remains unquestionable in their fixed ethical stance until a new form emerges to make us think otherwise. New Media ethics deals with distinct, quite out of the box ethical issues which call for a new insight in the case of chaotic cyberspace. Digital media include Facebooking, blogging, Twittering, digital photo journalism, citizen journalism, etc. The aspects of traditional journalism are changing irrevocably. Technology has bestowed us a way of expressing ourselves which was almost impossible in the age of television and radio: the one way communication of “feeding only” information. New media appears as an option of mouthpiece for its users. Professional journalists along with the newbie share the same ground of social media to express their opinion. This raises the first ethical question: who is a journalist? The “democratization” of media – widespread technology that allows its users to take part in every action – permits the masses to engage in information sharing and publish news of many kinds. This blurs the line of journalists and what it needs to be a journalist. The definition of journalism can be investigated from a two vantage points: skeptical and empirical. A skeptical way of defining journalism deals more with the idea of “what does it matter who is a journalist or who is not?” For the skeptics, the question itself is unimportant. For example, one might say that anyone can be a journalist, and it is not worth arguing over who gets to call themselves a journalist. But for the empirical part, rigorous and systematic approach to the question is needed. The traditional history of journalism involves gathering information, writing and editing reports, publishing news and sharing opinions. It can be called a non-fictitious way of writing. When these criteria are involved, any one cannot be tagged as journalist or having the knowledge of journalism. It feeds the crisis of journalistic recognition in this age of New Media.

The question of ethics resides in many layers of New Media. Being itself a controversial ground where contents run before proof, New Media raises accountability for issues like anonymity, rumors, impartiality and content sharing. Anonymity online is not only accepted but also celebrated in case of sharing. With the anonymity available online, one of the crucial props of virtue ethics’ effectiveness at any age — shame or risk of shame to a sense of pride in “self” — is gone (German and Drushel). Anonymity online allows more freedom of expression than traditional newsroom journalism. Traditional newsroom journalists have their own accountability for their write-up whereas online journalism puts more emphasis on the content rather than the owner. Online technologies facilitate this disconnection between the individual and the incident. Hence, the ethical questions arise: When is anonymity ethically permissible? Is it okay/not okay to maintain different sets of ethical standards in two different spaces? What should be the guidelines in that case?

The speed and depth of New Media have contributed in nurturing rumors. Newsroom journalism is facing a pressure because the online postings and sharing information make their printed version a bit clichéd. This makes them re-think whether to wait for the proper witness and proof. They seem to rely on the information superhighway of New Media and allocate their news accordingly. The rumors become burning when it comes to

the issue of national interest or religious crisis. As stated earlier, the New Media is a vulnerable ground for manipulations. As too many cooks are involved, the broth of news content seems to be endangered. Cyber criminals use New Media as a tool for propagating their own ideology. There are less ways of tracking down the content owner and rectifying his/her actions. As there is less accountability, there is more justification from the other side.

Digital journalism enhances partisan journalism. Earlier, print media seemed to be unbiased and rely more on representing rather than taking a stance. In case of online journalism, one group enjoys commenting upon issues and events, with or without verifications and another group uses New Media as a mouthpiece for their own political parties or movements. Not that these opinion journalism and partisan journalism did not reside in the history of traditional journalism, but it becomes more debate worthy when a question of exposure comes; whereas impartial journalism lacks vigorousness, partisan journalism tends to be more conflicting and audience grabbing. The recent leakage through Wikileaks proves that mainstream journalism cannot reach every nook and corner whereas the digital world has an excellent ability to breach privacy sphere. Now the questions: which one is better for a healthy democracy – an impartial journalism or a partial one? Is breaching privacy ethically acceptable? Who will take responsibility for the rumors and their aftermath?

The Sexualization of New Media: Deterioration of Ethics

New Media prefers exhibitionism. Ranging from “selfies” to “check-ins,” the social media strive for recognition from others. It involves objectification of body and the exposure of materialistic attitude which is next to racism and sexism.

With the advent of new media technologies such as the internet and cellular phones, children and adolescents are no longer merely consumers of this sexual ideology, but also creators of digital content that performs this ideology. Such content can range from the relatively tame ‘girls making out’ images found on sites such as collegehumor.com to sexually explicit photographs transmitted through cellular phones within a circle of friends that draws the attention of law enforcement (German and Drushel).

Teenagers are the most vulnerable here. They delve themselves into pornography through “sexting.” “Sexting” is a term which includes sharing of nude or semi-nude photos of one’s own in the social media. Obviously we are yet to find out any logically laid down legal and ethical standards of combating such issues. A generation that is psychologically obsessed in exhibition will only bring forth a distorted boundary line of what is right and what is wrong.

Conclusion

New Media is never a naive, sanctimonious ground to be acted upon. It is true that it surpasses human limitations and carries us forward to a new dimension of interactions and sharing which brings forth the world in one global line. On the other hand, it is dark, dystopian and always craves for attention. It never depends on the users’ hand as it is more self-regulatory and self-enhancing. We are being titillated and seduced by the ecstasy of hyper-reality: the space or arena where the distinction between real and imagined, surface and depth, or reality and illusion is no longer valid. Hence, representation is replaced by simulation creating a new mind-machine dualism.

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