

## ***Differentiating Information in Globalisation Era: A Case Study of Social Media Literacy and Activism***

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### **Introduction**

When people use the term *literacy*, reading and writing, speaking and listening are what usually spring to mind. Of course, they are introductory elements of literacy. However, contemporaneously we use so many different types of expressions and communications in the day-to-day life. And the concept of literacy is beginning to be defined as the ability to share meaning through systems of symbol to be able to fully participate in society. This description holds good even for social media literacy. Many closely interrelated terms like information literacy, media literacy, media education, digital literacy, and social media literacy among others describe the new set of competencies in this milieu.

Great ideas constantly have a life of their own, especially on the web, where information travels on electro magnetic (EM) waves. What social media would become - a widely popular globalisation tool - seems like an unforeseen development. Even so, the upshot of social media in globalisation is that the entire world has turned into a global village!

### **Globalisation concept**

In the author's view, network society has led to globalisation of social media. In the simplest terms, the network society is a social structure based on networks operated by information and communication technologies (ICT) based in microelectronics and digital computer networks that generate process and distribute

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information based on knowledge accumulated in the nodes of the networks (Manuel Castells, 2005:7). On the other hand, globalisation is a widely and, of course, a term intended to describe the recent and rapid process of transnational economic, social, and political integration. This worldwide integration allows people to communicate, travel and invest internationally and helps companies market their products widely, acquire capital and human material resources more efficiently, share advanced technology, and enjoy economics of scale.

When it comes to defining globalisation, it seems to mean so many things - a global economy, growing prosperity in India, so on and so forth. In nutshell, globalisation means everything as well as nothing.

#### **Definitions of globalisation**

There are various definitions of globalisation. Giddens as early as 1990 has given a neutral definition to globalisation. According to Giddens:

*Globalisation is the intensification of worldwide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happiness is shaped by occurring many miles away and vice versa (Terhi Rantanen, 2005: 6-7).*

But even in this definition, Giddens referred to the consequences - how local happenings are shaped by events many miles away. However, he does not talk about how these happenings are shaped, rather, emphasises the intensification of worldwide social relations. Even if he did not mention media and communication, it was obvious that worldwide social relations are intensified by them and thus become mostly mediated.

Thompson, who focuses more on media and culture than Giddens, is more unequivocal about the role of media and communication, although similar to Giddens he did not mention it specifically. According to Thompson:

*Globalisation refers to the growing interconnectedness of different parts of the world, a process which gives rise to complex forms of interaction and interdependency (Ibid).*

The above definition has been considered as the operational definition of globalisation for this paper.

### **Influence of social media on activism**

Social media is an astounding tool that can be easily used by those who have access to it. Social media creates vast opportunities for those who are coming out with innovative and unique ideas, as its access is expanded worldwide. At this time, social media literacy is putting into practice the transformation, the effectiveness of using social media as a dominant form of activism.

In his essay *Small Change*, Malcolm Gladwell, a notable writer who writes for *The New Yorker* and the *Washington Post*, critiques the use of social media activism. According to him, social media is an effective tool used for activism. However, in his opinion, social media cannot make a revolutionary change when compared to traditional activism.

In the same vein, in their book *The New Digital Age*, Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google, and Jared Cohen, the director of Google, discusses the use of social media for activism under the title: *The Future of Revolution*. The main focus here is on the advantages and drawbacks that come with social media activism (Suman Kumar Kasturi, 2017: 121).

Social media activism for some people is only about limitations, but these shortcomings will not keep it from moving further. As technology advances and becomes a resource worldwide, global connections will get bigger and be used as a fundamental tool for social media activism.

Social media can serve as a better tool for protest in the present and future revolution, as it is very effective in the diffusion of information swiftly to a broad audience. Due to the ease and spread of wide-reaching technology, social media is becoming more profuse. The availability to use social media creates global connections and they make it possible for countries to express new and old concerns to all. In some countries, modern advancements due to newfound accessibility to information are the source of disorder. This exposure to new sources of information provides a reason for many countries to protest. The desire to act is overwhelming insofar as social media literacy is concerned.

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Social media networks provide vast opportunities because of their ease of use. To their advantage, many people will use technology to start a social movement, due to the worldwide spreading of social media networks. Social media literacy makes activism easy to start. This point can be well explained by taking *Euromaidan* into account.

#### **Social media role in Euromaidan revolution**

The 2013-14 Euromaidan revolution resulted in the fall of Yanukovich's super presidential regime and provided an entrance for political and economic reforms for a more pluralistic political system in Ukraine. In February 2014, Ukraine returned to the 2004 constitution that significantly limited presidential powers in favour of the prime minister and members of the parliamentary coalition (Henry E Hale and Rober W Orttung, 2016:118). In our discussion, the vanguard of Euromaidan is expressed through social media, mainly Twitter and Facebook. Before the commencement of protests, Twitter was not widely used in Ukraine. According to Olga Onuch, an Assistant Professor in Politics at the University of Manchester and an Associate Fellow at Nuffield College at the University of Oxford:

*Many reports have credited initial tweets by journalists and activists as the key mechanism that brought hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians out into the streets. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com>)*

According to her, some of the preliminary findings from their study are surprising and contrast with reports from news media outlets. Also, social media and social networks have a great impact on Euromaidan. Onuch also expresses her opinion about social media's role in promoting the protesters' demands.

#### **Alteration of information on social media in globalisation**

The unexpected can always happen, as seen with the protesters of the Euromaidan movement, who were initially peaceful until they were forced to fight back for their rights and to take steps toward accomplishing the goal of their movement. There is no doubt that Twitter has been essential for the Ukraine protest. It provided the connection to further protests by spreading information and gaining participants. In Ukraine, its main use was to gather protesters and

release events. Nevertheless, all-inclusive, it is used as a source of information to outsiders - a worldwide audience.

With the globalisation of technology providing a vast and efficient spread of information, people are connected like never before. Even though the vast networks created by social media spawn many opportunities, still they have some problems. Because the networks are worldwide it means that everyone has access to social media literacy as long as their technology is advanced enough. This can become a problem as Cohen argues:

*Countries that have not yet had their first big protest in the new digital age will experience it on a global scale, with the world watching and potentially exaggerating its significance (Kathleen Duffy, 2014:2)*

Network connections through social media provide access to all information that is articulated. Yet, all the information expressed is not always accurate, thus resulting in the spread of false information - propaganda. It is very much essential to separate the truth from everything else.

Cohen and Schmidt agree that:

*It's the people who make or break revolutions, not the tools they use. Technology can help find people with leadership skills - thinkers, intellectuals and others - but it cannot create them. Building a Facebook page does not constitute a plan; actual operational skills are what will carry a revolution to a successful conclusion (Ibid).*

Carola Frediani, while referring to the Ukraine protest in her article, *How Ukraine's Euromaidan Played Out Online*, made it a point that by the spread of false information alone, it is impossible to stop the veracity of facts. False information has a great impact on people's emotions; therefore, the Euromaidan news team has a group of volunteers responsible to verify the sources of information so that incorrect information is not provided. According to Carola:

*Ukrainian activists have also moved beyond social media to embrace what might seem like an odd digital tool for street protestors: bitcoin. Since Ukraine's Euromaidan revolution is still underway, it needs funds to stay afloat.*

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*Not an easy matter, especially if money is sent from abroad. So in the last few weeks, campaigners have started to collect donations via Bitcoin. Photos are popping up online depicting protestors holding signs with QR codes, which are the digital addresses for sending Bitcoins. By using the most popular cryptocurrency, anyone in the world can send money immediately, in any amount, and with almost no fees. The Helpeuromaidan.info website specifically set up to organize people and resources, added an English-language donation page, where funds can be sent through credit cards, PayPal, but also through several digital currencies: Bitcoin and even Litecoin and Dogecoin, two emerging cryptocurrencies (Carola Frediani, 2014:1).*

It is a matter of significance that on social media, there is no control over the alteration of information. So, as a remedial measure to the altered information, it is necessary to check the authority of the information that is received - and not to believe everything that is spread through media networks. For example, in the case of Euromaidan, it was more English-speaking people who comment on the activism than Ukrainian people. This gives you an idea about how social media connections influence the information that people are receiving, for better, or for worse. All this happens on social media for it is worldwide; anyone can comment and opine. Despite the falsification of information, it will not prevent the use of social media as a tool for activism (Ibid).

The information available on social media is weak and not strong - built on weak ties. So, social media activism is built on a poor foundation of information. Nevertheless, these weak ties make it possible for the information to spread rapidly and globally. Weak ties will not inhibit social media activism from being successful.

As of date, social media use is inevitable because it is so efficient and so trendy. The weak ties of social media are low-risk but the use of social media for activism is not always low-risk. Those who release or receive information from social networks are, or become active participants of a social movement who are putting themselves at a higher level of activism, therefore, at risk. In the case of

Euromaidan, all protestors became involved in high-risk activism due to the brutality that was inflicted upon them by the force of the government trying to stop the movement.

The success of using social media as a tool to gain participant activism has risks. This could be best exemplified by Euromaidan. Though social media activism is successful in using social networks as a tool to spread information efficiently and gain participants, it is not yet successful at completing a revolutionary movement due to the lack of a hierarchy. A hierarchy is necessary to have an organised plan of action once the protesting has moved towards a takeover. In the case of Euromaidan, social media activism is held back by its failure to fulfil a movement because there was no organisation hierarchy to implement the change desired by the protestors. Once protestors gain control they do not have successful plans of how to run things to satisfy the people. That's what happened in the case of Euromaidan. On social media, it is particularly difficult for large masses of people to make a change because they do not have the power to make the change, only the freedom to rebel and express their views.

### **Conclusion**

On the whole, social media literacy is an unavoidable force that is being used for activism. The advancement of technology has made it possible for social media to spread around the world. As social media spreads to most countries vast network connections are made, leading to network societies which are free from all sorts of boundaries. With these network societies, great opportunities would draw closer. The main one is the use of social media as activism to run a social movement.

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