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## INTERNET SOCIOLOGY RESEARCH ON ELECTRONIC MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION CULTURES

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The present research investigates the cultural locations and artifacts that play a pivotal role in supporting the Internet as a communication channel. The range of objects and locations include many digital platforms such as blogs, search engines, social networking systems, and reality television. This study examines the phenomenon of blogs and their role within the blogosphere as a manifestation of the public sphere. This chapter employs multi-sited ethnography and case studies to provide insights into the characteristics of discourses and participation that have become defining features of the emerging Internet-mediated public sphere. The present study explores the significance of the Internet within a convergent media landscape that has emerged in relation to reality television. The research methodology used in this study was the use of an ethnographic approach, specifically using a case study design. This technique encompassed many methods such as multi-sited investigation, content analysis, and participant observation. This chapter elucidates the manner in which separate media converge to engender a broader network phenomena.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 OVERVIEW**

The advent of the Internet has brought about substantial changes in our daily lives. The advent of technology has facilitated the emergence of novel modes of communication, interaction, civic engagement, affiliation, self-perception, and interpersonal connections. This sociological investigation is based on the cultural aspects of communication that are influenced by the mediated environment of the Internet. The research focuses on technology as its core issue, specifically examining the Internet as a product of several interconnected technical manifestations. While many Internet technologies may possess ordinary capabilities and functions, there are others that have substantial importance, since they play a crucial role in the continued survival of the Internet as a form of media. Internet technologies encompass a collection of interconnected technical modalities. The shape and character of the medium are derived from this collection of interrelations. The Internet may be seen as having a socio-technical nature, whereby social and technology elements are intricately interconnected. The significance of the tie between sociotechnological



links and the Internet lie in the emerging relationship that binds the two, although similar linkages may be seen in other technological forms. The Internet's network structure exhibits a dynamic interplay between social and technical factors, resulting in regular reconfigurations and the emergence of novel structures and linkages.

## 1.2 THE PLACE OF THE INTERNET AS A COMMUNICATION MEDIA

The most significant change in communication throughout the nineteenth century was the transfer of messages into electronic form and their subsequent detachment from the sender. The first manifestation of electronic communication, seen in the telegraph, underwent transformative changes in subsequent mediums like as radio and television, ultimately culminating in the development of the Internet. The Internet exhibits distinct characteristics in comparison to prior electronic media formats, primarily due to its networked architecture and decentralized governance. The advent of the Internet has significantly altered the characteristics and behavior of individuals within the realm of social interactions. The emergence of the 'Netizen' has brought about significant transformations in established social frameworks, including the facilitation of networking among individuals who are not acquainted, the dismantling of the conventional hierarchical approach to information distribution, and the erosion of conventional modes of communication. According to Hauben and Hauben (1997), the Internet facilitated the expansion of their knowledge and experiences via regular information exchange and distant cooperation. The Internet thus alters the manner in which the world is seen - signifying something, manifesting in a certain manner, and existing inside various frameworks or applications. The proliferation of information and communication technology has the potential to significantly enhance our culture via the expansion of infrastructure for information-sharing. According to Martin-Barbero (1993), the concept of 'mediation' occupies a fundamental position in comprehending the negotiation and transformation of culture across many settings. The mediation of information and culture on the Internet is enabled by technology, therefore highlighting the influential role of technology in shaping its informational and cultural spaces and systems. Therefore, in this research, the Internet is examined as both a cultural artifact and a generator of culture, concurrently. Considering and incorporating both of these viewpoints is crucial when examining culture, as it serves to prevent the inclination towards either excessive enthusiasm for technology or unwarranted fear and aversion towards it.

## 2. INTERNET, CYBERSPACE AND CYBERCULTURE

Since its inception, the Internet has been widely recognized for its transformative capacity, since it enables many positive outcomes such as facilitating digital democracy, reducing poverty, enhancing education, fostering gender equality, improving health, altering traditional offline experiences, and promoting social connections and community engagement. Scholars have highlighted the Internet's capacity to enable counter-hegemonic and anti-establishment discourses, foster collective action in online social demonstrations, support economic, military, and intellectual endeavors, and contest authoritarian governments. However, there have been scholars who have posited that the medium plays a significant role in the formation of a novel public sphere, altering power dynamics, redefining spatial and temporal norms, and supplementing real-life interactions.



Nevertheless, the inherent lack of clarity around the network has rendered the Internet susceptible to subjective analysis, particularly in regards to its classification as either a system or an ecosystem. There were differing perspectives about the nature of the entity, with some seeing it as a "grouping of interconnected items" and others viewing it as a significant intellectual and social community functioning in alignment with the principles of collectivism. The challenge in comprehending this medium might be ascribed to its rapid transformation and the evolving concepts of time and space. Consequently, the rapid advancement of technology poses a challenge for academic study, as it struggles to maintain relevance in the face of prevalent ideologies, gossip, and speculative futurological predictions. The first examination of the Internet mostly focused on the contrasting notions of a negative dystopian future and a positive utopian future. This study can be traced back to Plato's apprehension over the impact of writing, which he believed led to a decline in memory and true knowledge, rather than enhancing them. Barlow's (2001) advocacy for Internet sovereignty may be characterized as an idealistic perspective, while other scholars presented more moderate viewpoints by highlighting the Internet's facilitation of individual disengagement from public affairs and civic participation. The initial contrast between utopian and dystopian perspectives on the Internet aligns with Ogburn's (1964) concept of cultural lag, which posits that the consequences of technological advancements may not become apparent until a significant period of time has passed after its inception. The prevailing perspectives on dystopianism and utopianism throughout the 1990s were heavily influenced by computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, a comprehensive grasp of these concepts only evolved via the scholarly works and organizational initiatives of the US federal government and the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The concept of utopia and dystopia, on the other hand, faced opposition from researchers who saw Barlow's liberal visions as a manifestation of disappointment resulting from the clash between libertarian ideology and capitalism. These scholars argued that the notion of a digital nirvana was unsuitable due to the Internet's reliance on government support. Prominent scholars such as Calhoun (1998) and Monberg (1998) have proposed the concept of techno realism as a means to provide a more balanced perspective on the societal impact of the Internet, contrasting it with the extremes of utopian and dystopian viewpoints.

Several first ethnographic studies on the Internet introduced novel approaches to research conducted via technology, such as using participant observation in online environments. The emerging ethnographic styles demonstrated the many manifestations of online social formations, illustrating how the Internet functioned as a multifaceted instrument, a virtual space, and a distinct mode of existence in various contexts. The methodological reinvention I have undertaken draws inspiration from a viewpoint that emphasizes the need of applying methodological advances in ethnography to comprehend the emerging forms effectively.

The intricate nature of the cyberspace is examined via the delineation of two distinct categories: Gibsonian cyberspace and Barlovian cyberspace. The term "Barlovian cyberspace" refers to the present arrangement of networks and electronic exchanges, with a focus on the procedural elements of these interactions. The implementation of a division inside the realm of cyberspace seems to be a pragmatic approach in managing research conducted on the Internet, and has shown to be beneficial in the context of this particular study. The cyberspace examined in this research is intricately interconnected with both the World Wide Web and networks of production and consumption. The concept of cyberspace has its roots in a multifaceted history



of technical advancements, including fields such as cybernetics, virtual reality, and social and epistemological responses to emerging modes of physical and urban environments. Cyberspace has been conceptualized as a mythical realm, transformed into a public domain for various forms of social, political, economic, and cultural engagement. It is seen as both a cultural place and a cultural product. According to Bell (2001), the cultural characteristics discussed in this context pertain to the material, symbolic, and experiential qualities associated with individuals, machines, and narratives in daily life. According to another group of scholars, the concept of cyberspace represents a spatial dimension that has the potential to either foster or eradicate communities, while also transforming the manner in which individuals engage with one another and construct their perceptions. This phenomenon is indicative of a globalized cultural shift occurring through the circulation of various cultural elements, referred to as ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, finanscaples, and ideoscaples.

### **3. HISTORY OF THE INTERNET**

The Internet is the outcome of a series of historical events that have influenced its development and continue to have influence on it in the present day. In order to cultivate a sociological comprehension of this medium, it is necessary to situate it within a suitable socio-historical context in conjunction with preceding forms of media. This aims to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the Internet, highlighting key milestones that have significantly influenced its evolution. The focal points of investigation are the concepts of networking and the establishment of communities, obsolescence, and the value of democracy as a political domain.

#### **3.1 Web-Based Communication Traditions**

The Internet gained relevance throughout the 1990s upon its accessibility to the general population. As its inherent capabilities were gradually revealed, it began to be seen as a transformative and groundbreaking method of communication, sometimes referred to as "New Media," which positioned previous media formats as antiquated or obsolete. The early excitement for the medium was driven by the fundamental components of interactivity and the potential for a novel way of dissemination. The Internet's capacity to maintain a visual environment on its interface played a significant role in the development of its many possibilities, with interactivity being a fundamental aspect. According to Haring, the emergence of the Ham radio culture in the United States during the 1920s may be seen as one of the first examples of an interactive culture within the realm of electronic media. Ham radio is differentiated from amateur radio due to its ability to facilitate both the transmission and receipt of signals, enabling real-time talks and chance encounters over the airwaves. These interactions may afterwards develop into friendships via written correspondence or continued radio contact.

#### **3.2 Networks And Communities**

The Internet underwent a transformation in terms of its structure and form, driven by a series of circumstantial events. These occurrences occurred in atypical ways and were dispersed throughout many years. According to Rheingold (1994), the development of computer networking was in progress, but



significant progress in establishing the Internet network was achieved when the United States implemented the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and initiated the creation of the ARPANET. The launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union sparked a series of consequential events, leading to the establishment of the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in October 1957. The US military's response to the Russian maneuver might be seen as a reactive development, as described by Rheingold (1994: 71), which prompted them to take immediate action. The establishment of ARPA facilitated the convergence of several early innovators whose concepts had previously been deemed unviable and impractical. In his work, Rheingold (1994) provides an account of the experiences of Douglas Engelbart, a prominent figure in the field, who subsequently led several groundbreaking advancements in computer and Internet technology. During the 1950s, Engelbart, an electrical engineer, engaged in considerable travel to various institutions, commercial enterprises, and entrepreneurial entities in order to garner financial support for his computer development endeavors. The majority of those residing inside these communities saw Engelbart's ideas as implausible, akin to "science-fiction schemes" (1994: 66), resulting in a lack of significant attention or interest. During the approximate year of 1960, many had the conviction that computers have significant use. At that juncture, Engelbart secured support to embark on the realization of his concept of developing "thinking machines." Engelbart subsequently assumed the leadership position at Stanford's Augmentation Research Center (ARI) and secured substantial financial support from the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). The ARI was responsible for the development of several technological innovations, including the first word processors, conferencing systems, hypertext systems, mouse pointing devices, and mixed video and computer communications, among other advancements.

The collaborative nature of the network system became evident via many early advancements. Cerf (1993) posited that the establishment of CSSNs (Computer Supported Social Networks) was a pivotal development that facilitated the emergence of early human connections on computer networks. These CSSNs played a crucial role in establishing a culture of informal alliances. The number 16. Gillies and Cailliau (2000) highlight Netville as an example of an early Collaboratively Developed Socially Situated Network (CSSN) that was created via the joint efforts of ARPA and its affiliated organizations. The provision of governmental assistance to Netville facilitated the cultivation of shared ideals among its members, therefore safeguarding the community from external influences. Netville maintained its exclusivity until the 1980s, at which point it underwent colonization by influential institutional forces. This colonization ultimately resulted in the downfall of Netville in 1990, mostly due to the implementation of a process known as "Patron swapping."

#### **4. WEBLOGS IN THE PUBLIC REALM AND AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL OBSERVATION**

The ways in which data is produced, consumed, and distributed online have been drastically altered by social technology. In this chapter, I talk about the research I did on blogs, a subset of the Internet that has become popular as a new venue for public debate and networking. Blogs provide users with a low-barrier-to-entry way to establish and maintain their own unique channels of expression. Blogs resemble webpages visually, but they are not the same thing at all. The content of a blog may be changed regularly and is meant to be read by its readers. In contrast, websites are static in the sense that their structure and information are



unlikely to change much over time. In addition, blogs employ hyperlinks to connect to other blogs and websites, creating a virtually infinite resource of knowledge. Blogs are indicative of a public realm because of their openness, democracy, and adaptability. Blog is a relatively new phrase. Weblog is a portmanteau that was coined in 1997 by technology pioneer Jorn Barger. In 1999, Peter Merholz split the word Weblog into the phrase We Blog on the sidebar of his weblog, coining the shorter-term Blog in the process.

Bloggers are Internet users who produce blogs; Blogging is the practice of taking part in a blog community by creating, reading, and replying to blogs. According to Tremayne (2007), the concept of the public sphere is the inspiration for the term "Blogsphere," which describes the ecosystem formed by blogs, bloggers, and their followers.

However, academics have a different take on the blogosphere. According to Yang, it is the "links between blogs that make the blogosphere such a dynamic, interrelated whole" (2006: 4–5). According to experts like Hudson (2008), the blogosphere is as broad in scope as the range of human ideas. That's why the term "blogosphere" may have different meanings to different individuals. It's a place for politics and socializing and democracy and community building and everything else. Although most blogs concentrate on written content, there are also visual (art blog), photographic (photoblog), video (video blog), musical (MP3 blog), and aural (podcast) varieties. Other textual genres, such as social networking platforms and 'microblogging' (Twitter), which emphasize brief postings, have diverged from the original blog format. Moblogging is the emerging trend of reading blogs on mobile devices, made possible by developments in mobile technology in recent years.

Blogs have been there since the Nineties, but it wasn't until 1999 that they really took off. Blogs began as online diaries and homepages, but they've since expanded to include news, politics, economics, law, medical, travelogues, movie reviews, celebrity gossip, and more. It wasn't until Google acquired the blog-hosting service Blogger in 1999 that blogging became a breeze for the average person. Researchers have found 'blog-like' phenomena throughout human history. The Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci is sometimes considered one of the first bloggers due to his 'largest unpublished blog' of all time, which consists of over 30,000 pages of diary entries. Usenet, commercial online services (GEnie, BiX, email lists), the Bulletin Board System (BBS), and free websites (Tripod and Geocities) were all digital forerunners of blogging on the Internet.

#### **4.1 Situating Blogs as A Public Sphere**

Habermas (1989) initially developed the concept of the public sphere, defining it as a 'bourgeois public sphere,' where people congregated to debate issues that affected them. For Habermas, the rise of capitalism meant the end of the 'bourgeois public sphere,' which he chronicled in a historical-sociological analysis. As a result, he said, the public sphere was turned into a mass media fiefdom where conflicts were conducted over the direction of information and how it influenced people. Although Habermas provided a comprehensive historical analysis, his book was critiqued for being too brief and lacking in depth about key facets of the phenomena. Fraser (1990) criticized Habermas and advocated for a more inclusive public sphere that would welcome "subaltern counter publics" (a parallel public sphere developed by oppressed groups). Others, like



Hauser (1999), have argued that public spheres take shape via the discussion of topics rather than the demographics of the people who take part in them. The 'rhetorical public sphere,' in Hauser's view, is the foundation of the public sphere, and it exists independently of familiarity amongst interested publics or shared surroundings to focus only on problems that are considered.

Calhoun (1992) suggested that the public sphere, in which citizens express their opinions and ideas, should be founded on rational-critical discourse that prioritizes dialogue rather than power. From Habermas's concept of the public sphere, Calhoun drew a contrary conclusion, arguing that the decline of the public sphere shows that the public sphere has regressed since its advancement was predicated on the democratic adaptation of the circumstances of mass society. Public space, according to Arendt's (1958) associational paradigm. Arendt believed that the topic of public speech was unimportant, and that the discourse itself was a powerful tool. When contrasting the Habermasian public sphere with those created by electronically mediated settings, the differences become further clearer. According to Garnham (1992), the Habermasian approach is inadequate because it focuses only on the free press model and fails to consider the issue posed by other types of mass media. Garnham posed a challenge to the public sphere concept by arguing that unlike FTF circumstances, mediated communication does not ensure the providence of speech and gesture or the ability to assemble freely. Since the institutions within which symbolic forms are generated, circulated, and consumed were shifting, he also advocated for shifts in viewpoint.

Therefore, the advent of the Internet heralds the birth of a new public sphere, unrestrained by the boundaries of the national public spheres that have up to now supported representative democratic institutions. An argument may be made, drawing on Arendt (1958), that the advent of "New Media" necessitates a "new polis," as well as novel conceptions of labor, citizenship, family, and privacy. Ever since the first blogs appeared, several academics have attempted to chart their potential. According to Perlmutter (2008), blogs are crucial for democratizing the Internet, collecting eyewitness accounts of events, and providing political analysis and criticism. A similar point was made by Rosenbloom, who said that the "power and authority of the traditional general-interest intermediaries, notably newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters" (2004: 33) might be drastically diminished by the rise of blogs. While some, like Bly (2006), see blogging as a viable alternative to traditional media outlets, others, like Scott and Hall (2006), view blogging as the 'stepchild of the Open-Source movement' due to its ability to lower barriers to entry and undermine preexisting power structures.

## **5. THE SAREGAMAPA REALITY SHOW IN INDIA AS A CASE STUDY OF REALITY TV AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE**

Reality television is a prominent kind of programming that has a significant role within contemporary television culture, as broadcasters strive to captivate viewers across a diverse range of channels. Hill (2005) defines reality TV as an inclusive classification including a diverse array of entertainment programs centered on actual individuals. The intricacy of reality TV stems from its capacity to straddle the boundaries between informative and entertaining content, as well as between documentary-style and dramatic presentations. A noteworthy aspect of the contemporary television cultural environment is to the manner in which reality television incorporates new media platforms, hence providing viewers with augmented opportunities for



involvement and participation. Reality television serves as a catalyst for the transformation of television, as it deviates from its conventional attributes and adopts a novel shape and heightened relevance. Reality television is a constituent of the genre known as "Factual Television," which encompasses a diverse range of genres, sub-genres, and hybrid genres that focus on non-fictional subject matter, including news, current affairs, documentaries, and reality television. The categorization of factual information plays a significant role in determining the exact genre and sub-genre of factual television. Current affairs and investigations include a wide range of subgenres, including political discussion, consumer-based tales, and investigative journalism (Turner, 2006). Likewise, within the realm of documentary filmmaking, several sub-genres may be identified, including expert documentaries, observational documentaries, and general documentaries.

The term "reality TV" commonly implies a genre characterized by unscripted content featuring non-professional actors and authentic situations. However, critics contend that this label is misleading due to the fact that many reality TV shows place participants in extraordinary settings or abnormal circumstances that diverge from everyday reality. However, Giles (2003) argues that the word 'reality show' has increasingly become a broad categorization including television programs that include audience engagement. The phenomenon of reality television has been present in various iterations since the inception of the television medium. Nonetheless, the emergence of this television genre as a significant cultural phenomenon occurred mostly throughout the 1990s. NBC television in the United States aired one of the early iterations of reality programs in 1948. The television programme was named "I'd like to See," in which viewers submitted requests for specific content they wished to see on television or desired locations they wanted to visit. These requests were then fulfilled via a combination of in-house demos or recorded video. The airing of this particular show served as a catalyst for the development of other subsequent programs, including the Dumont Network's *You Asked for It*, which was shown in 1950.

The decades of the 1940s and 1950s saw the emergence of a wide range of reality show formats, many of which played a significant role in solidifying reality television as a widely embraced genre. According to Clissold (2004), Allen Funt's 'Candid Camera' (US, 1948 –) is highlighted as one of the most notable, long-lasting, and well-received television programs in the United States. The television program *Candid Camera* focused on alleviating individuals' concerns around monitoring while documenting the reactions of ordinary individuals in exceptional situations. According to Clissold (2004), the emergence of *Candid Camera* may be attributed to many socio-historical factors. These factors included Funt's involvement in the US Army in 1941, as well as his role as a research assistant performing psychological tests at Cornell University. Funt's production, titled 'The Gripe Booth,' originated from his tenure in the United States Army, during which he covertly captured audio recordings of American troops expressing grievances pertaining to their professional duties. The proliferation of reality programs in the United States indicates a discernible pattern whereby each new format draws inspiration and influence from preceding iterations. Huff (2006) provides a comprehensive account of many reality formats, highlighting their cross-medium migration, exemplified by the impact of radio on early reality forms. The program known as "This is Your Life," conceived by Ralph Edwards for radio, was later adapted for NBC television in 1952. This show offered captivating revelations about individuals' personal histories. Edwards, in addition, developed the radio program 'Truth or punishments' in 1940, afterwards adapting it for television in 1950. The format included participants being





presented with challenging inquiries, sometimes resulting in incorrect responses, and subsequently being subjected to whimsical acts as punishments. In a similar vein, it is worth noting that in the year 1948, the Dumont network broadcasted a program known as 'The Original Amateur Hour,' which subsequently served as a source of inspiration for many talent programs such as 'American Idols,' 'Popstars,' and numerous others. In the United States, the genre of reality television has been notably impacted by the conventions and characteristics of tabloid reporting. According to Langer (1998), the inclination towards "tabloidism" may be attributed to the dissemination of conventional narrative structures, such as narratives featuring ordinary individuals engaging in exceptional actions. In the United Kingdom, the emergence of reality television coincided with a decline in the popularity of documentary television and the rise of American tabloid television.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The advent of the Internet has brought about significant transformations in several aspects of human civilization. From a historical vantage point, the medium in question represents the apex of a need for expediency and broad coverage that has propelled the development of electronic media since the advent of the telegraph. Nevertheless, the advent of the Internet has presented a multitude of novel issues, including the realms of individuals, organizations, and nation states. The Internet, functioning as both a medium and a cultural domain, has the effect of diminishing the influence and authority of conventional institutions such as nation governments, media organizations, and commercial enterprises, while concurrently granting more agency and empowerment to people, groups, and communities across several dimensions. The changes in communication dynamics have contributed to the emergence of new kinds of citizenship, societal structures, and methods of information consumption. The phenomenon of information, once seen as an external commodity separate from the person, has now become a cultural entity that has seamlessly assimilated into our daily routines. The blogosphere, being a public arena, is a very intricate domain. The blogosphere's extensive worldwide reach facilitates the engagement of a broader international audience. However, the proliferation of online platforms also leads to an overwhelming supply of content, resulting in a fragmented public sphere where meaningful public debate is hindered, and the pursuit of publicity takes precedence over substantive discussions. From an Arendtian standpoint, blogs and their textual publics may be seen as a manifestation of the public sphere, since they embody the concept of the "space of appearance" inside a shared realm known as the blogosphere. The coexistence and interconnectedness of these two separate elements facilitate the emergence of the digital public sphere. Bloggers often have a proclivity for conveying information in the form of narratives, drawing from a spectrum of occurrences taking place in other contexts. Bloggers are able to differentiate themselves in the blogosphere by using narrative storytelling as a means to interweave factual information, fictional elements, and personal opinions. Moreover, blogs may be seen as ongoing discussions that are intended to be further developed, amended, and expanded. In this context, the digital public spaces may be seen as constituent elements of a spatial domain that manifests in an unbounded and continuous manner.

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