Technology, Media Literacy and Public Sphere: A Critical Evaluation

Ashes Kr. Nayak

Abstract

The paper reflects on the notion of literacy and its evolving dimensions in the age of new media-technology and communication. Historicizing the concept of literacy from the preliterate period to the contemporary age of new media, it analyses how literacy has changed the course of mediation and public deliberation. It attempts to engage the reader with a radical interaction, throwing light on the structure and functions of media and its impact on public sphere. Drawing the ideas from, Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas to name only a few, it investigates the real and virtual elements in the age of evolving media emphasizing the understanding of media ecology, its transformation and its side effects on the public sphere.

Key words: Media literacy, multimedia literacy, public sphere, media ecology

Introduction

The concept of 'public sphere' is widely debated in academics since the English translation of Jürgen Habermas' work, 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' (German 1962, English translation 1989), and its introduction among the English speaking community. Drawing the central idea from Habermas,
many critics (Calhoun 1992, Thomson 1995, Kellner 2000, Bohman 2004, Brandenburg 2003, Crossley 2004, Gardiner 2004) have elaborated upon the origin, structure, function, after all the transformation of the public sphere, and its effects on public—debate, discussion and consensus. Considering its scale and operation in the age of evolving media and technology, it would be a Herculean effort to trace the origin and evolution of public sphere. Habermas himself, consciously or unconsciously, has conceded to the fact that it is quite a cumbersome process to go back to the origin of public sphere as he writes, in the initial section of his influential book, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, “The usage of the words “public” and “public sphere” betrays a multiplicity of concurrent meanings. There origin go back to various historical phases and, when applied synchronically to the conditions of a bourgeois society that is inherently advanced and constituted as a social-welfare state, they fuse into a clouded amalgam” (Habermas 1989, pp.1).

At the same time, there is no universally agreed definition of ‘Media Literacy’, believed to have been coined in early twentieth century after the invention of motion picture. As of today, the most commonly accepted definition of media literacy is “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages” (Aufderheide 1993, Livingstone 2004, Brian & O’Neill 2008). It deals with two aspects: one is technical, i.e. access to technology and its adoption/adaptation and the other one is cognitive, which is much to do with critical thinking.

As far the history goes, public sphere originally was a specific meeting place found in primitive tribal societies where people used to bring matters of public interest for discussion and an agreed upon solution through consensus. Since its inception in stateless tribal communities around the world, to the time of city states of ancient Greece, who supposed it ‘as a realm of freedom and permanence’ (Habermas 1989, pp.4), public sphere has been in the process of continuous evolution in its form and structure. This
has been substantiated by German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1989) through “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere”, as also by many other thinkers in the later stages of the development of the theory of public sphere. However, the contemporary public sphere under the influence of technology is changing more rapidly than ever and strongly affecting the public discourse. It has changed the mode of interface among the constituents of public sphere and the state. Media, as one of the constituents of public sphere is playing a determining role in debates and deliberations. But the over encompassing role of media, corporations and state in public and private domains have led to the degeneration of the public sphere. Reiterating from Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*, John Michael Roberts and Nick Crossley write, “The relationship of the individual to the state has increasingly become one of client or consumer of services, rather than citizen. Individuals have become increasingly dependent upon the state, losing the independence that is central to the citizen role” (Roberts & Nick Crossley 2004, pp.5).

Such a deteriorating condition of the public sphere often challenges its political functions, i.e. to say the manner it used to act as a realm for political debates in eighteenth century Great Britain and what Habermas terms it as bourgeois public sphere. Bourgeois public sphere was relatively small in size and it was characterized by free speech, genuine argument and a direct relationship among its constituents. But in the contemporary public sphere, the all-pervasive nature of media has reduced the distance ‘virtually’, but in reality, [new] media has created a hiatus among the constituents of public sphere, where freedom is restricted under the influence of technological infiltration adaptation and corporate grip over media. Such a precarious situation not only restricts the public in exercising their freedom, but also exposes them to tainted and often manipulated contents such as false opinions and commodity culture. It has raised questions over the authenticity
genuineness of discourse in public debate which is more often controlled by media, and its involvement in frequent production and reproduction of opinions, information and ideas. Questions are also arising on the pattern of consumption of media content and the opinion generated through virtual public debate as professional standards and normative principles of media suffer deterioration, as it’s clearly evident from the age of propaganda to the recent paid news syndrome.

In such a critical state of mediations and structural transformation, in the case of both media and public sphere, the virtual circumference of the latter is becoming wider driven by technology that has led to denial of equal participation for all in public discourse and exclusion of the masses because of weak media literacy. It further raises questions on the rationality of the discourse in public debate where there is misrepresentation of actors, opinions and ideas generated through media debate, and mediated between the constituents of the public sphere, and between the state and the private sphere. The ever changing public sphere and media as part is creating a distance between media literates and partial or weak media literates. And it is becoming wider with the invention of every new technology and its adoption in the process of mediation. Such an evolving phenomenon has led to one-way flow of information and opinion from accessed’ dominant voice to the suppressed voice; producer of media content to its passive consumers. At this critical juncture, ‘media literacy’ defined as the ability to critically ‘access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages’ can be a solution to many problems in the cultural, political and social realms evolving out of the structural transformation of public sphere.

Reflections on literacy

Literacy and public sphere are intimately connected. As literacy is taking new dimensions with the invention of new
technology and means of communication, its repercussions on the form and structure of public sphere is inescapable, as a healthy public sphere is dependent on literate individuals. One pertinent question here comes to the fore is what literacy actually means and how does it affect the structure and functions of the public sphere along with the formation of public debate, discussions and consensus. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share are of the view that, “Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge required to read, interpret, and produce certain types of texts and artifacts and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one’s culture and society” (Kellner & Jeff Share, 2005, pp. 369). Such an explanation reinforces the idea of Media literacy and its close relationship with one’s culture and society. Literacy from this context can be seen as a condition of individuals or a society for critical and intellectual evaluation of texts. Not only it speaks about text in a literal sense, but also it brings many other social and cultural phenomena starting from the production of images, sounds, music and video to the evolution of socio-cultural movements—within the purview of text literacy under such circumstances is often seen beyond its functional perspectives, i.e. the mere ability to read and write. It is seen what Szwed (1981) considers as the ‘social meaning of literacy’ dealing with “the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts of their performance and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities” (Szwed 1981, pp. 14). Literacy varies depending upon its social context. Interaction and dialogue take place in a specific social context which requires a specific kind of literacy that differs from socio-cultural setting to other socio-cultural settings. A particular geographical condition creates the need for a particular kind of language to survive that subsequently determines the condition of literacy in that particular territory. That is how; literacy in a country side differs from the condition of literacy in urban centers. Literacy
in Silicon Valley of US or for that matter Bangalore in India differs from the literacy of Easter Island, the world’s remotest location in the vastness of Pacific Ocean. Not only that, literacy differs depending upon its political or economic context in a particular region, nation or state. Literacy in the world’s politically most troubled regions like the Middle-east, Northern-Africa differs from literacy in politically stable regions. On this note Rosalind Thomas writes, “We use the descriptions ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ today to denote a whole range of meanings, for both the ability to read and write, and the degree of refinement or culture” (Thomas 1992, pp.1). Literacy from this perspective can be seen both as an idea for the emancipation and enlightenment of individuals, and as a contradictory category for a complex and rigorous pattern of social and cultural control. At some level literacy works as a unifying force, but at some other levels, it is a force for the strategic subdivision and fragmentation of the society. Where the modernist approach to literacy was crystallized in the eighteenth century enlightenment with the liberation of human being, subsequently such a deceptive and disguising approach to literacy has been contrasted along with the rise of post-structural and postmodern thought in the works of Michele Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and others. Such a contradictory position of literacy has been well reflected by Kaestle in The History of Literacy and the History of Readers, where Kaestle writes, “Literacy is discriminatory in two ways, with regard to access and with regard to content. Problem of discrimination are not over when access is gained; there is a cultural price-tag to literacy. Thus the question of whether literacy is liberating and constraining also has to do with whether it is seen as an instrument of conformity or as an instrument of creativity.” (Kaestle 1988, pp.116).

From the days of writing, to the age of digital communication, literacy has gone through a continuous evolution quite unconsciously. But still, common men’s perception on literacy is restricted to the conventional ability to recognize letters in symbolic
characters or the ability to read and write in a language, i.e. writing. The idea of being literate/semi literate raises questions over the concept of literacy and its impacts on the dynamics of public sphere, as it is directly linked with public culture. Simultaneously, literacy affects the form and structure of both public and private institutions as they constitute of literate individuals. Literacy strengthens democracy and democratic institutions through the collective realization of democratic principles. It also provides a framework for building a conscious citizenry. However, the way literacy has been appreciated and promoted is subject to question since history.

If we look back to the preliterate period, we can assume all women/men to be literate or partially literate. I say partially literate, because literacy as concept is a continuum not a perfect state of condition. There was an age when human beings used to communicate through symbolic sound to signify meaning within a community. If we look beyond the literal meaning of the word ‘literate’, we can say all men or women were literate during the preliterate age because they used to communicate and express in a language. This form of communication used to vary among different communities with its distinctive uniqueness maintaining its pluralistic character later suffered decay under the influence of scribal or print culture and so on. The experience of such oral form of communication (oral literacy) is unique in its character as it was free from mechanical mediation and representation. Such a condition in the preliterate age is characterized as ‘acoustic’ space, within which the human mouth and ear are the main organs of communication, serving as transmitter and receiver respectively. In this sense we can draw a line between the concept/condition of literacy what it was in the preliterate stage, the literate period and in the contemporary age what we term as media literacy/new media literacy.

We can say, ‘literacy’ is all about understanding the affairs of the world that immediately surrounds us. If we consider it in
the 'piliterate age', it was a prerequisite for community participation and social involvement. It was about understanding the world through an interaction with the reality. But, the content of reality/experience is under continuous evolution/change/corrosion as a result of ever changing notion of literacy/literate culture. In such a situation, what we have gained is unconscious literacy (virtual literacy) and becoming semi-litres where stress is more on the accessing of information, ideas and goods rather than their processing and retention for effective decision making that influences individual and collective action affecting the public sphere. It is quite an observable fact that we all are literate, but the scale of literacy varies. Here, literacy may be oral literacy, print literacy, visual literacy, computer literacy, digital literacy, and if we combine all, it becomes multimedia literacy.

Theorizing media literacy

The concept of literacy and media literacy is quite synonymous. Media literacy as a term has been defined differently by different authors. Most often, it revolves around the consumption of media content and its production that deals with both technical and cognitive abilities. Brian & O'Neill writes, "The fundamental objective of media literacy, according to the Aspen Institute definition is 'critical autonomy relationship to all media' organized around a set of common beliefs or precepts, which recognize that [the] media are constructed and they have wide commercial, ideological and political implications' (Aufderheide 1997, Cited, Brian O'Neill 2008, p.15). Such a definition brings to the fore the implicit relationship of media with commerce, ideology and politics. It draws the attention of media consumers to be aware of the customary relationship between media and many other cultural, political, economic and ideological elements that sets the course for the construction of media contents and its dissemination among the masses.
Carole Cox writes that "Media Literacy refers to composing, comprehending, interpreting, analyzing and appreciating the language and texts of both print and non-print. The use of media presupposes an expanded definition of 'text', i.e. print media texts include books, magazines and newspapers. Non print media include photography, recordings, radio, film, television, videotape, video games, computers, performing arts and virtual reality." (NCTE Commission on Media, Cox 1994, pp.13).

As cited in Baran and Stanley, media scholar A.M Rubin refers to three definitions of media literacy: From the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy - the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages. As per media scholar Paul Messaris knowledge about how media function in society. From mass communication researchers, Justin Lewis and Sut Jhally - understanding cultural, economic, political and technological constraints on the creation, production and transmission of messages (Rubin 1998, pp.3; Baran & Stanley 2004, pp. 358).

Communication scholar William Christ and W. James Porter offered an additional overview of media literacy, writing, "Most conceptualizations (of media literacy) include the following elements: Media are constructed and construct reality; media have commercial implications; Media have ideological and political implications; Form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes, and conventions; and receivers negotiate meaning in media" (Christ and W. James Porter 1998, pp 7-8; Baran and Stanley 2004, pp. 359).

Almost all definitions take a critical stance in matters of media consumption and content creation. While the notion of 'text' in Media literacy subscribes to cultural studies’ approach drawing heavily from the works of Richard Hobart, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams, like many others, it also subscribes to 'critical theory’ of Marxist and Neo-Marxist thinkers of Frankfurt Institute of Social Research (ISR) in the revolutionary works of Max
Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas, like many others. Along with, it also subscribes to a critical stand taken by Louis Althusser in the theory of ideology through his seminal essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)', Michele Foucault in matters of discourse, power, knowledge, and disciplinarily, Antonio Gramsci in matters of hegemony, and later thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Ernest Soja and a few others' pioneering works in the field of spatial dialectics. Further this tradition has been carried forward by contemporary Critical Discourse Theorists like Tuan A. van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough and others. Not only that, Media literacy also subscribes to Semiotic or Textual approaches developed by Roland Barthes, Ferdinand D. Saussure, C. S. Pierce and others for the critical consumption of media texts.

As such, the following are some of the key elements that characterize information management and media literacy: (1) Managing the limited space of the individual brain with selective exposure and selective retention of valuable, desired information and leaving some space for information processing/interpretation, (2) Bridging the lag or gap between the source and the receiver, one of its determinants is the technical gap which has more to do with the access to information, and the other one is the incongruity between the source and the receiver that can be termed as the knowledge gap. (3) Developing immunity and resistance towards manipulative and shoddy media content. (4) Escaping the virtual traps of media as a matter of choice and selection of what to watch, read, listen or scroll. (5) Using the media content if it is worthy of but not getting used by media. (6) Information processing: identifying the need for information - selecting the source - filtering the information source - storing the information - retrieving the information. (7) Understanding media and its role in the society, its social responsibility and accountability towards the public. (8) Becoming self conscious and critical consumers of media content.
Media & Public Sphere

Media, as a constituent of public sphere sets the platform for public debate and generates public opinion. The possibility of an ideal public sphere, as mentioned by Habermas, a sort of 'Bourgeois Public Sphere', depends largely on the presence of a free and transparent media as its constituent. Douglas Kellner (2000) is of the same view in Habermas. The Public Sphere and Democracy: A critical intervention. Douglas Kellner, as so many others have been foreseeing the mutation of the public sphere into a realm of mass cultural consumption and administration by corporation and dominant elites instead of upholding its position as a realm of rational discussion, debate and consensus. Under such circumstances, the contemporary public sphere can be put into question considering the interference of media and system in the public and private realms of individuals. Further Douglas Kellner argues over the structural changes of the public sphere and its repercussions on society and remarked that the contemporary public sphere constitutes, as it was analyzed by the Frankfurt scholars, a new stage of history, marked by a fusion between the economic and political spheres, a manipulative culture industry, and an administered society, characterized by a decline of democracy, individuality, and freedom (for full text see Bronner and Kellner, 1989). This contravenes Ted Fleming's idea in Habermas. Democracy and Civil Society: Unearthing the Social in Transformation Theory about the Habermasian concept of public sphere, which asserts itself against the systemizing effects of the state and the economy. The integrated structure of politics, corporate and media (as it is has been reflected by Bronner and Kellner, 1989) is now controlling the public sphere, where media, as seen by Herman and Chomsky (1994) is an apparatus of manufacturing/engineering consent or dissent often in favour of the dominant class and their interests. This has led to the onset of a culture industry and, associated commoditization, standardization
and massification (classical Frankfurt School, Adorno &
Horkheimer, 1993) and what Bourdieu terms as "dumbing down
steered by commercial imperatives" (Crossley 2004, pp.96). In
such a situation mediation is unlikely to be purely a neutral process.
On this regard, J. B. Thomson argues that the entire process of
mediation has become a quasi interaction, where participants are
not oriented towards specific others, and symbolic forms are
produced for an indefinite range of potential recipients through a
process that is monological. Media has created a new kind of
public sphere which is 'despatialised and non-dialogical in
character' and is potentially global in scope (Thomson 1993,
McQuail 2005, pp 83).

The whole scenario puts media in suspicion, as media is
assumed to be free, unbiased, rational, and ethical in its approach
and works within normative principles. It only mediates not
manipulates. Likewise, the idea of a public sphere is normative,
though the concept of ideal public sphere seems impractical. Public
sphere thus presupposes freedom of speech and assembly, a free
press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and
decision making. However, in the contemporary public sphere
under welfare state capitalism, public opinion is administered by
political, economic and media elites who manage public opinion
as a part of systems management and social control. The radical
press which was known for its 'watch-dog' role has been morphed
into a 'lap-dog' of state and a handful of corporate owners. Such
a transformation is grounded, what Douglas Kellner claims, on
Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's analysis of culture
industry, in which giant corporations have taken over the public
sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rationale debate into
one of manipulative consumption and passivity where "public
opinion" shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate,
discussion and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or
media experts. The transformation of the public sphere that
Habermas goes on to describe is indeed an erosion of the public
Asfiam University Journal

sphere as a realm of free, discursive opinion formation. Habermas, as so many others, blame the mass media and their increasing commercialization for the continuous erosion and effective demise of the public sphere.

In contravention to the dominant paradigm of public sphere in the age of print and television, contemporary authors and critics in the age of new-media and internet romanticize the Habermasian public sphere and its idealistic character of 18th and 19th century Europe. Social theorists argue over the role of the internet in revitalizing the public sphere and regaining the ideal characters. They dream and imagine a dialogical and interactive sphere with nearly full participation and freedom of expression, leading to a fair and rational debate in favour of greater public interest. However, its continued existence seemed untenable with even a more determining role of corporations and state in the affairs of the public. James Bohman is of the same view in ‘Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy’. Supporting the earlier argument Bohman writes, “The Internet was thought to herald new possibilities for political participation, if not direct democracy, even in large and complex societies, as ‘electronic democracy’ might replace the mass media democracy of sound-bite television. The high hopes of electronic democracy seem to have faded, however, as critics such as Sunstein (2001) and Shapiro (1999) have come to argue that central features of internet and computer-mediated communication generally undermine the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is required for genuine democratic deliberation” (Bohman 2004, pp. 131).

Over all, such an alteration is typified as virtual transformation of the public sphere, where public debates, discussions and movements have gained illusory support and remained short lived. Though such movements across the globe, like the string of uprisings in Arab countries against dictatorial regimes or the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement in the US against defunct
economy. to anti-corruption movement in India led by Anna Hazare against defective democracy have gained momentum through cyber-activism and followed by nonstop television coverage. Virtually, they have turned into media spectacles and mere eye-catchers. No doubt, to some extent such movements have been able to reinvigorate the public sphere generating mass consciousness on global and local issues, but they have remained transient in character. Besides, the hyper-real nature of media content, and its alleged involvement in manipulation/distortion of facts and images with the help of new technology raises serious questions over the ethico-ethical dimensions of sharing information and ideas and its implications on the dynamics of public sphere.

**Reciprocal repercussion**

Cultivating media literacy comes under the broader issue of policy decisions, its implementations and acquiring critical thinking. Introduction of media literacy education from the school level might be one direction as it has been adopted in some European countries. As the objective here is more on the conceptual aspect of the public sphere, and the role of ‘media literacy’ in revitalizing what seems a debased public sphere, I do not discuss the policy matters that would bring about changes in media literacy discourse. When we discuss technology and its persistent impact on media and public sphere, the question of media education comes to the floor. For that matter, the desirability of quality media education for the establishment of a healthy public sphere cannot be denied. The change in technosphere has already raised serious questions on the ethicality of production and consumption of media texts. Not only that, it has also changed the course of knowledge production and its dissemination among the masses. The continuous evolution of literacy/media literacy has led to the fashioning of new identities directly or indirectly linked to the communication practices of individuals. While at some levels,
literacy has been able to generate a conscious mass, at some
other levels; such consciousness has led to an upsurge in the
number and intensity of conflicts around the globe. On the one
hand, new literacy has been able to generate a collective voice
transcending individual and social barriers; on the other hand it is
working as a functional force for the strategic subdivision and
alienation of the collective mass on the ground of their multiple
identities or consciousness. What many imagine as an ‘ideal public
sphere’ seems impractical, though, the possibility of a public sphere
close to some ideal characteristics seems a realistic assumption.
Habermas’s idea that a free press resulted in an ideal public sphere
is subject to question since the press itself was controlled by the
bourgeoisie. Similarly, contemporary electronic culture is also
owned by elites. One of the most noticeable facts in the course of
transformation is that the bourgeois of print culture have turned
into elites of electronic culture capturing more power with the
control over media and public sphere. The fact that the masses
do not have a hold over the public sphere is evident as public
opinion generated in a so called fractured public sphere is either
directionless or directed at the will of media that favors the
dominant class interests. In an ideal or near ideal public sphere,
the public sets the agenda for itself and other constituents, including
the media. In the contemporary public sphere, media continues
to set the agenda for public debates and discussions with biases
and vested interests. To some extent, new media, especially internet
is considered to have the desired potential to herald some of the
ideal characteristics of public sphere that would promote pluralism,
inclusive, equality and democratic participation. Yet, there is the
possibility of a decentred public sphere generating weak public
opinion. Greater control over the media by elites is altering the
power structure, shifting it in favour of mostly corporate houses
and politicians. The public is not always aware of or conscious of
such disempowerment or amputation of the public sphere. Under
such circumstances, the masses need to understand the dynamics
of state, media and the public sphere. A better understanding of media and an expanded notion of literacy, cultivating critical autonomy and acquiring new multitasking skills of technical mediation could bring the public sphere on course. Literacy needs to be ‘redefined’, ‘promoted’ and ‘appreciated’ on an individual basis. What the public needs at this hour is a protective shield in the form of ‘Media Literacy’, strong enough to resist the invasion of public sphere.

References


