

# THE CHANGING NATURE OF NEWS PRODUCTION & CONSUMPTION- A STUDY ON SOCIAL MEDIA AS FIFTH ESTATE IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

The fifth estate comprise of individuals that are constantly connected to each other. Social media enabled the individuals in society to source, consume and distribute information, this has enabled individuals to become interlinked and not be dependent on the fourth estate i.e., the media. From a theoretical perspective, the paper aims to understand the influence social media has on the media and whether it undermine the role of media as fourth estate in an Indian democratic society. Past survey reports were analysed and interviews with journalists were conducted to understand how the usage of social media by the fourth estate (i.e, media) has strengthen the news production. The paper concludes with fourth and fifth estate working in synergy and bringing a change in production and consumption of news.

**Keywords:** social media, Fifth Estate, Media, News, Fourth Estate

## INTRODUCTION

The past few decades internet has revolutionized information storage, publication, creation, sharing and consumption. This has affected and impacted businesses, institutions, industries across multiple fields from politics, medicine to media. Social media has become an inseparable part of individuals' day to day life. Past scholars have defined social media as a group, comprising of multiple internet-based applications that allow creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), this have enabled and enhanced participation among multiple individuals at same time.

Social media has gained importance in field of journalism, due to its implications in production and consumption of news (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Past studies focused on social media bringing negative change in quality, credibility, diversity, and loss of business model that support high-quality journalism (Chyi & Lasora, 2002). Quality and credibility of news are fundamental elements of fourth estate. The fourth estate i.e., media are said to hold other institutes accountable, they act as watchdogs by providing accounts and reporting the activities. Furthermore, the fourth estate is said to be an independent pillar and not influence other institutions, these institutes maybe industry, business or even government. In few countries the fourth estate is state controlled, hence, they don't function independently but being part of government. In democratic society, an independent fourth estate enables them to investigate, track, report on other institutes and bring it to publics' attention. The fourth estate showcases facts, opinions, that enable the public to form their own opinions on the matter. However, popularity of internet and social media usage have brought

changes in news consumption among individuals. Whether high usage of social media undermined or strengthened the role of media as fourth estate in Indian democratic society is still to be seen.

Scholars in past have argued individuals connected through networks form the fifth estate (Dutton, 2009). Users have the ability to source out information they want, these can be achieved with the aid of search engines and social media. Users have the ability to create their own content and engage with other networked individuals through means of blogs, email, tweets, posts, comment, likes. These tools established by online environment, enabled the users to be independent from other institutes, form and express their own opinions. The user-generated content can gain greater traction with the help of the media and at times upheld function of accountability earlier reserved only for the fourth estate. Hence, the Fifth estate is a powerful force, that is composed of distributed activities of multiple individuals functioning in a decentralized manner. Hence, the research paper attempts to understand whether fifth estate undermines or strengthen the fourth estate? The research paper will examine the role of social media in changing patterns in news consumption, production, their importance in fourth estate and fifth estate. The researcher has utilized past survey reports to gather social media usage and consumption statistics to understand the trend and conducted interviews with journalists to understand the changes in news production due to popularity of social media.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Effect of Social Media (i.e., fifth estate) usage on media organisations (i.e., fourth estate)**

Past researchers have examined the use of social media by media organisations (i.e., Fourth estate) on multiple fronts, these are use of social media to source out information (e.g., Lawrence, Molyneux, Coddington & Holton, 2014), social media influence on news sharing practice (e.g. Lee, 2015) or its impact on gatekeeping practice (e.g. Schmitz-Weiss & Alves, 2016). This research paper would attempt to bridge the gap with its implication as fourth, fifth estate on the changing ecology of news.

In Indian context, the definition of speed and cycle of news has become faster than ever with the popularity and surge of social media. For instance, newspapers and television news channels constantly update their websites, posts on social media throughout the day. The news organisations believe multiple updates during the day would garner more attention from audience and would lead to more profits (Lee, 2015). The obsession with speed among the news industry has encouraged the journalists to publish content online as quickly as possible, this leads to expense in ethics (Lee, 2015). However, journalists consider this as a benefit and a challenge. A benefit is that journalists have the ability to share every second of the developing story, but it can be a disservice to the democratic society we live in. For instance, the pressure to publish and constantly update the news stories lead to greater chance of errors an contribute to misinformation in society and erode audiences' trust in the press (Maier, 2005). Journalists have tried to counter this at two levels, at one level, journalists who blog or tweet are attempting to normalize this in their existing norm and journalistic practice. In a research study, journalists stated they would run the tweet by the editor first. The tone of the tweet is of great importance (Farhi, 2009). At second level, the journalists attempt to maintain the accuracy of news.

Past studies have discussed benefits social media brings to journalism but also challenges too (e.g. Broersma & Graham, 2015). There is ample evidence found that journalists see themselves as important for wide array of societal functions as a watchdog, detached observer or socially committed advocate for disadvantaged in society (Willnat & Weaver, 2014). Many are not open to embracing benefits of participatory media and use social media to report story to reinforce their traditional role as journalists in society (Lee, 2015). The practice of cross-verification has taken a backseat, social media posts give journalists expert opinion and post from verified sources (Reich & Golder, 2017). Social media has influenced news organizations to package and market their news stories so that it suits to audience taste and publish specific story for specific audience (Tandoc & Vos, 2016). There is a shift in mainstream media journalistic practice with advent of social media, as new factors influence journalists actions, and they help audience filter through useful, credible, reliable and important news. The 24-hour news cycle requires a never-ending supply of news and updates, journalists are pressured to supply speculation, leading questions and their own analyses and commentary in place of documented information (Bennett, 2004). The rating driven and audience driven nature of news industry may mean news items that get more audience attention and thereby rate higher on search engines, may often get priority over news that journalists consider more newsworthy, relevant, timely, suitable for target audiences or in sync with their organizations values (Lee, Lewis & Powers, 2014).

### **Current Trends around Social Media Usage and Consumption**

Deep penetration of internet connectivity in both urban and rural parts of the country are attributed to the constant growth of social media subscribers in India (TRAI, 2018). Digital India mission, an initiative by government of India accelerated to this growth. Post Covid-19, individuals in India have been inclined increasingly to use social media for gathering information, expressing opinions, engaging with others and campaigns.

The internet subscribers in India have increased over the years in urban and rural areas as well. There are 834 million internet users in India as of January 2022 (TRAI, 2022). In relation to social media, there are 467.0 million social media users in India as of January 2022. It is equivalent to 33.4% of the total population (Kepois, 2022). With the ease of internet access and easy accessibility of smartphones, the average time spent by Indian social media user is 17 hours per week on various platform compared to China and United States. Smartphone is the principal source of news for 35% of the country's internet users, majority of whom use one or more social network (IAMAI, 2019). Facebook and YouTube are the most popular networking sites (Statista, 2019). As per the data published in meta-advertising resources, Facebook has 329.7 million users in India in early 2022 and Google advertising resources indicate that YouTube has 467.0 million users in India in early 2022.

A survey conducted by Reuters institute for study of journalism, in India, it is said 63% Indians consume news through social media, in relation to 59% for television and 49% for print media. As many as 53% of the respondents use Youtube to access news while 51% used WhatsApp (Digital news Report, 2022). It is said that India is a strongly mobile-focused market, with 725 accessing news through smartphones and 35% via computers. This leads to a growing importance of news

aggregating services as mobile notifications have become inbound channel in the Indian region. Another significant way in which the Indian media landscape is affected by the social media is the choice for users to choose their own sources of information, 38% of the Indians trust the majority of the news they see and a majority across all platforms trust online personality or influencers. The mainstream media has not been marginalised by the rise of social media. Indians residing in metropolitan cities (i.e. Mumbai, Chennai, New Delhi, Hyderabad, Pune and Bengaluru) with 80% of the respondents prefer to read and consume news through social media platform. Thus, majority of the mainstream newspapers and news television outlets have gone digital while individual articles and stories are being circulated on social media. This data also showcases a close relationship between social media and mainstream media. The mainstream media keep a close eye on website traffic of every post and tweet on social media, as popular stories are shared by friendship group on social networks. The role of social media is significant in breaking news events. For instance, some of the most compelling report of Japanese earthquake 2011 emerged on Twitter but within a few hours there were also significant sharing of mainstream media content. Another instance is users sharing video of potential news on social media, journalists use it to spin a story and quoting it as breaking news on social media. In India, mainstream media organizations efforts are being on popular social media sites i.e., Facebook, Twitter and Instagram which have increasingly squeezes out some of the earliest news sharing an aggregating community such as Reddit. As mentioned above, Facebook has emerged as a mass network for sharing news and twitter has gained immense popularity in the field of politics and elections as well.

### **Social Media Influence on News Production**

The relationship balance between news producers and consumers of news is rebalanced due to emergence of social media and interactive tools provided by the social media. The oldest form of two-way communication was user commenting on the news website. It was in 2008 during Mumbai Terror attacks, when Indians relied on Twitter to attain information. The second mass use of social media in India was in May 2009 national elections, for first times online voter registration and transparency campaign started. Politicians attempted to reach voters through social media. The number one topic on the trends list of Twitter was the twitter tag '#indiavotes09'. This led to rethink among news organisations about audiences, the potential use of social media as a journalistic tool in the country. A senior editor recalled that in today's time, journalists in India have formulated multiple teams handling different segments such as social media handle, audience engagement specialist, a small team that monitor and filter the user-generated content on the social network sites. However, in India it still hasn't completely revolutionized the way journalists work or interact with audience on social media. The change revolutionized with adoption of Facebook and Twitter by mainstream journalists. One journalist acknowledged that social media usage helps in news sourcing, engaging with the audience which help in construction of well-informed stories. However, social media enables and provides every citizen with the opportunity to report a potential news event and contribute in the actual news production process, this collective contribution by networked individuals may have a collective impact (Earl & Kimport, 2011), which is one potential source for fifth estate. A senior correspondent stated that today all mainstream organizations showcase a live blog, wherein live conversation is taking place around a big developing story and

verified facts with eyewitness and audience opinion from social media. This gained momentum during COVID-19 crisis in the country, wherein the mainstream media outlets such as Times of India, Hindustan Times, Wion had introduced Live News Update specific to a city, these updates would include verified information from government, hospitals, tweets from public, politicians, and comments of the public on social media. However, journalists in India are still wary of the sudden usage and participation of audience on social media as it leads to erroneous reporting, low credibility and quality of news stories. The mainstream news organisations such as The Hindustan Times, The Mid-Day, The times of India, The Indian express, The Hindu introduced the concept of paywall, wherein some of the content is accessible only if the audience subscribe to the media website. This is done in search for a sustainable business model. Overall, the attitude of Indian organisation toward social media has transformed from period of 2008 to 2019. Another journalist stated that Newspapers and television news channels have normalised their use of social media as source material, filtering best for mass audience and developing new skills and roles for networked journalism in process. Additionally, news organisations have worked through dilemma associated with social media and have created published guidelines for citizens and journalists. There is a need for training programmes on journalists' on how to embrace the new formula while protecting their brands and principles.

### **The Fifth Estate and Social Media**

The literature review, trends and interviews illustrate that though mainstream media as fourth estate in India is still powerful, they no longer hold monopoly of news production and distribution. Interactive tools by social media enable political parties, individuals, to enhance their communitive power using the technologies to form their own network circle. This power is achieved because individuals have opportunity to source out their own information with less dependence on news outlet and network across the world. The individuals current use of technologies have led to creation of independent source of accountability i.e. The fifth estate (Dutton, 2009). Similar to the media which might get controlled by business interest or state they are no longer independent source of accountability, similarly, the control by internet realm determines the level of independence of the Fifth estate.

The fifth estate characteristics are similar to Fourth estate on various fronts, such as the information given is anchored by a specific network individual and his/her collaborative network, rather than the media and is not controlled by the state. There are multiple instances wherein social media was utilized as a vehicle to hold individuals accountable. For instance, the farmers' protest was protest against three farm acts enacted by the parliament of India in September 2020. Videos and images of the protest have aided to bring awareness to the farmers cause and many have gone viral including one of the police officer with baton raised in hand towards an elderly Sikh man. Hashtags were used by the youth to show their support and hashtags like #Farmers Protest, #standwithfarmerschallenge, #SpeakupForFarmers, #isupportfarmers were trending to keep subject relevant. The individuals on social media wanted to counter negative post.

In India, one can find varying forms of involvement in politics by networked individuals of Fifth estate. Social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow the citizens express their opinion.

Another instance is #Flipkartdoglahai, wherein citizens expressed displeasure when flipkart an e-commerce website cancelled orders of customers during the Big billion day sale. Another hashtag #Delhimetro trended when the metro trains in New Delhi faced technical snags; another hashtag #MumbaiRains trends when heavy rains and waterlogging is flashed in the city. The instances above showcase the citizens power to hold government or business corporations hold accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, multiple celebrities, politicians, sportspersons, businessmen, fashion designers joined twitter to be in connect with the public directly. Thus, for niche content social media is emerging as a major source. Furthermore, the individuals of the social media have the ability to curate their own content which is selected by the news outlets as published on media website, at times few stories on mainstream media are simply filled with reactions individuals have on a specific situation. At times the information provided by the fifth estate is fake but is showcased by media as real news. For instance, during the pandemic one major fake news was about Vitamin C virus removal remedies, a series of fake videos showcasing reputed Dr. Devi Shetty was recommending people to improve their immunity by taking hot water with lemon juice. Another instance, a video of congregation of Islamic missionary Tablighi Jamaat created a super spreader event in Delhi's Nizamuddin was picked up by mainstream media and depicted in wrong light. The quality and reliability of information is inevitably varied but they demonstrate the influence can be significant and complementary rather than alternative, especially in stories picked up by mainstream media and vice versa which are amplified. Here one can find several instances in which the fifth estate has at times undermine the fourth estate as watchdog.

## CONCLUSION

The Indian mass media is using social media strategically to maintain the communicative power, but the networked individuals are using the social media to source their own information (through blogs, Facebook pages, twitter handles etc) that are independent from the media and to network with other individuals to enhance their own power. However, the fourth and fifth estate are not competing or substituting for one another, but involved in a media ecology that is enabling the two estates to be complementary and reinforcing. The analysis of overtime trends indicates that there is popularity on use of social media as compared to other forms of media, and because of ease of accessibility of smartphones, the social media usage for entertainment and news will keep on increasing in the coming years. This has not gone unnoticed by the mainstream media. The significance of online news and social media are reflected in practice of mainstream media of fourth estate as well as the practice of networked individuals of fifth estate. Both are using the social media to enhance their power of communication in ecology of news production and consumption. The observations suggest the need to move beyond the dominant question about the uptake of online news and traditional media displacement, to look at the evolving ecology of news production. The fifth estate doesn't undermine the fourth estate, both the estates are reinforcing and functioning in synergy given the complex Indian media society. More systematic research is required on journalistic practice, networked news organisation and networked individuals overtime.

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