Cyberspace in the Age of "Information Panopticon"

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Abstract: In the view point of human rights, the importance of the cyberspace is shooting up day by day as the conventional media hides many information that pertain into the violation of human rights. When the media is either afraid of the after-effects, or fond of the violators, the cyber activists take out the sword of bravery. This paper analyses the reflections of social networks, blogs and sites such as WikiLeaks in the age of mass surveillance and attacks on privacy. The pros and cons of the "Information Panopticon" and the arguments on the ethics of hacking are studied. Contributions of persons such as Julian Assange and Aaron Swartz in the fight for internet freedom are studied. The politics and poetics of hacking as a tool in this freedom fight are brought to the focus. A case study has been conducted in the light of democratic uprisings in the Middle East, on the correlation between social media and political change. The ethics and practices of Hacking in the present world, where powerful countries are masking the information about their attack on the rights of people as well as that of other countries, is studied in this paper. With special reference to "Nilppu Samaram" in Kerala, the power of social media as an agent of change and as an element of the fourth estate has been analysed. The paper concludes that cyberactivism has a hopeful future to complement the continuing fights for justice and human rights.

Keywords: cyberspace, conventional media, WikiLeaks.

Introduction

In this new and changing world, the role of the Internet is inevitable in bringing out social change and sparkling revolutions. News and facts can no more be hidden from the public since the main stream media has given way to the social media. When the cyberspace found out its space in the real world, it threatened the powers and the bureaucrats. It was in such a context the massive attacks against the Internet freedom rose.

- The struggles for hailing human rights over the cyber space are mainly for two reasons.
- Freedom of Expression
- Privacy

Freedom of Expression

The Internet is censored in many ways in many countries. Sometimes, people get arrested in the names of a few remarks they have made on the Internet. In this era of social networking, the posts, shares and even likes are brought under the microscope by the cops illegally.

In this way, the authorities have placed a block on internet freedom almost in every nook and corner of the world. On the other hand, it is evident that social media and cyberspace are the only tools to uncover truth when the mainstream media covers the truth. In that sense, the power of the cyberspace is awesome. From the revolutions in Egypt to "Nilppu Samaram"(Standing strike) in Kerala, cyberspace has portrayed its role in the changing world.

Case study: Internet Freedom in India

India contributes to a lion's share in the number of social media users all over the world. A survey was conducted among various persons to find out their motive for using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp etc. The results are shown in the following Pie diagram.
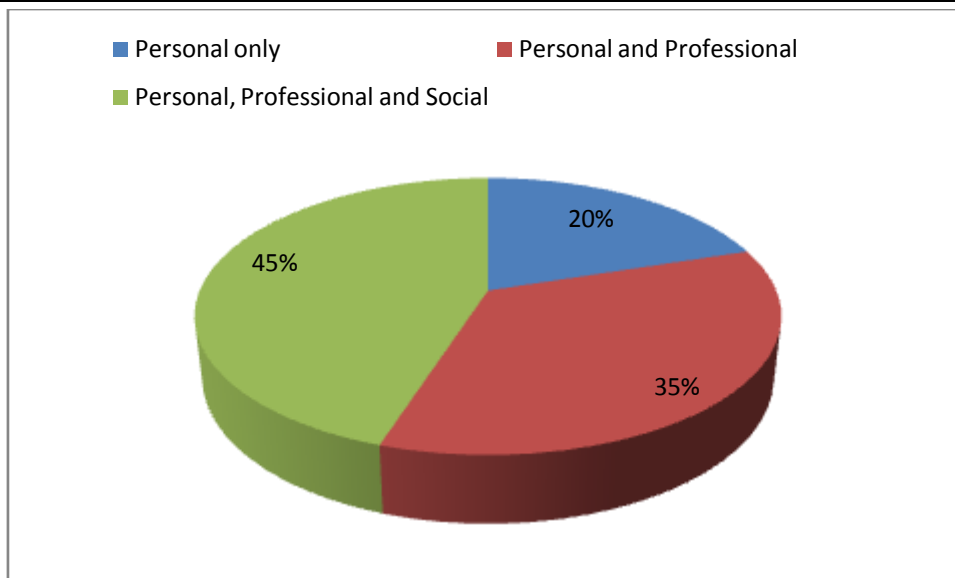
Fig-1: Social Network Usage Trends

It can be seen that only 20% users are utilizing the social media exclusively for personal purposes such as meeting friends, sharing photos etc. 45% users are using them for their professional purposes also. Social networks such as Linked In are specifically designed for professionals. The persons belonging to this group uses the social media for business promotion, client relations etc also. The remaining 35% of the users are facing the challenge on freedom of expression – that is, those who utilize the social media for personal, professional and social purposes. They dare to voice their public opinions on their walls. They are ready to discuss sensitive issues like politics, religion, government policies etc on the social media. The authorities are always interested to make them silent, especially when it becomes against certain policies. This case is not limited to the social media, but to the websites also.

Article 19(1)A of Indian constitution states."All citizens shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression. This freedom is not absolute. Article 19(2) puts some barriers. It empowers the Parliament to enact certain laws to rein in free speech for matters concerning to national security, public order, decency etc. It is this clause, which is sometimes misused by the Government to ensure silence.

In December 2014, Govt. instructed major Internet Service Providers(including mobile ISPs) to block a list of 32 websites including very useful sites such as Github, daily motion, vimeo, archive.org etc. The official explanation was that India's Anti-terrorism squad had sniffed out Anti-India contents on these websites tracing it back to ISIS[4]. The ban was reversed after two days. Here the issue is that they could have banned the respective "web pages" instead of banning the entire "websites". It is more like an attack on the internet freedom and accessibility when most resourceful sites are blocked.

In November 2012, two girls were arrested in Palghar near Mumbai. One of them had put a post on facebook questioning the "Hartal" declared by Shiv Sena on the death of Bal Thackaray. Another girl was arrested for "liking" that post. Ironically, Police arrested them for "hurting religious sentiments". What is the relation between this post and religion remains a mistery until now. The Honorable court then declared these girls as innocent. This is the way our freedom is being slaughtered over the internet.

At the same time, one interesting aspect is that people are becoming more and more brave enough to talk for human rights through social media. The social networks and blogosphere are playing the key roles here. For instance, consider the case of "Nilppu Samaram"(Standing strike) by Adivasis in Kerala. Even thought it was a struggle for human rights, it went unnoticed by the mainstream media. Bloggers and social media activists brought the strike to the limelight. Bloggers and free lance journalists penned about the strikes, later the posts were shared in the social media including facebook, twitter, whatsapp etc. When the people became well aware of the issue, the print and visual media had no way except bringing up the issue. Then it became a major issue of discussion in the edit pages. This is the power of the social media. Nothing can be hidden anymore. When the growth of popularity of an event grows linearly in the social media, the corresponding growth in the main stream media is found to be exponential.

A U.S. based NGO, Freedom House conducted a research to analyse the degree of online freedom in different countries. Their findings about India are shown in the table-1.

Table 1: Internet Freedom in India

	2013	**2014**
Press Freedom Status	Partly Free	Partly Free
Internet Freedom status	Partly Free	Partly Free
Obstacles to Access(0-25)	15	13
Limits on Content(0-35)	12	10
Violations of User Rights (0-40)	20	19
Total(0-100)	47	42

From 2013 to 2014, the signs indicate a wave of hope in the Internet freedom. When compared to countries like China, Britain and Saudi Arabia, the degree of internet freedom in India is appreciable[1].

Right to Privacy

The "PRISM" project of NSA (National Security Agency) of United States of America flied sparks all over the globe. Their mass surveillance project scanned the private communications without anyone's consent. With back door tie-ups with the telecommunication giant AT&T, NSA collected the communications of Americans. Interestingly, it was not limited to the Americans; they stole the data from international calls, mostly diplomatic, secret and professional calls. They spied over the emails, chats, social networks and private servers.

There is no such thing called privacy in this cyber era. It is more like an "Information Panopticon". Everyone is being watched from somewhere at every moment, even they are not aware of it. A sense of insecurity prevails. No one knows from where and how they are being watched.

It is in this context that we have to read the hackings took place recently. It is a different kind of Activism – "Hacktivism". Persons such as Edward Snowden, Julian Assange and Bradley Manning were attacked by the U.S government pointing that they broke the laws by leaking their secrets. The secret was nothing but that every American was being watched, their phone calls are being spied and their internet communications are always leaked. Later, it came to know that NSA was not only snooping Americans, but also the private and domestic transactions and communications of other countries, diplomats and that of governments. When the internet fighters brought out this truth, they were called as cheaters and law breakers. In fact, they have not broke the law, but the government. Because, when a law is to be enacted, it should be supported by the constitution. A law cannot be formed if it contradicts the constitution. So the law broke the law here. There are internet activists like Aaaron Schwartz who have played a vital role in making the WWW as we enjoy today. Aaron was a freedom fighter for the internet and he was found died after his arrest.

Still, we have rays of hope. Wiki Leaks and EFF(Electronic Frontier Foundation) are in the forefront in this fight for internet freedom. EFF has approached court to take actions against NSA's invasion against privacy[3].

In this world, nothing is a secret. Every time one person logs into the internet, his/her data will be stored using cookies. It includes our browsing patterns, likes and dislikes. It is not harmful when they are using it only for recommendations and showing advertisements to the customer. It can be used in the other way too. When using applications in our smart phone, we have to click 'yes' to a number of conditions before installation. It includes the permission to access our location, contacts, messages and many more.

According to freshly leaked NSA documents, the NSA grades their targets in a scale of one to five, or trivial to catastrophic, where one is the easiest target to break while five is almost impossible to break. For example, breaking into a Level 1 target requires little effort because of the trivial nature of its decryption techniques. Looking into someone's facebook messages is a minor "Level 2" task[2].

How to Ensure Privacy?

Some methods to ensure privacy while using internet are using proxies, using https browser plug ins, changing DNS, using private search engines, secure emails, encryptions and using Virtual Private networks

Conclusion

The cyberspace can play an important role to hail human rights in this modern world. Blogs and social networks are being used increasingly for this purpose. At the same time, there are moves to chain the internet freedom from the governments. Social media has the power to make the main stream media forced to report matters pertaining to human rights. Since the privacy is at stake due to mass surveillance projects, activists are turning to hacktivists nowadays. Even though privacy cannot be guaranteed, there are certain techniques to uphold our privacy in the internet.

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