

INFLUENCE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS ON NEWS DISSEMINATION IN KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

In a democratic country, news is important in framing public opinion. Thus, the role of news media cannot be ignored in any democracy. Earlier the news was disseminated through conventional means of mass communication that include print versions of newspapers, radio and television. However, with the advancement of technology, the news media also got revolutionized. It became more interactive, quick, convergent and inexpensive. Now more news is available in the form of online/web newspapers, e-magazines, and blogs, podcasting/podcasting and news web portals. Besides, social networking sites like Face book, Twitter are also used for news purposes.

While this online media is emerging worldwide, it is also gaining popularity in Kashmir especially among the youth. Leading newspapers and magazines of the valley (Greater Kashmir, Rising Kashmir, Kashmir Time, Kashmir Monitor, etc.) have launched their online editions. Different news web portals were launched and face book also gained eminence as news media.

During the 2010 uprising in Kashmir, a news website was launched from Kashmir called 'Kashmir Dispatch'. Within couple of months of its launch when the print editions of the valley newspapers were banned and news on local channels was restricted, this news portal became popular. Since mobile SMSs were also banned in the valley, the use of Face book walls and accounts for the spreading of information on Kashmir increased.

The paper will study the emergence of NEW MEDIA as NEWS media in Kashmir with the main focus on 'Kashmir Dispatch' - a fast emerging news portal from Kashmir. It will also study the usage of Face book by the Kashmiri youth in disseminating information on Kashmir.

KEYWORDS: Kashmir, New Media, News Media, Social Networking, News Portals.

INTRODUCTION

The news media plays a critical role in any democracy. News keeps the people aware of the activities of the government; it mobilizes public opinion and plays an important role in making the government accountable to the masses. Among the different facets of mass communication, news is the main medium that acts as the mirror of the society. It is the news media through which the public comes to know the problems of the society and is of crucial importance in educating the public mind and enables the people to have their opinions on matters of public concern.

The dissemination of news has witnessed a revolutionizing growth from the times when its concept emerged. Earlier the news was disseminated through conventional means of mass communication that include print versions of

newspapers, radio and television. However, with the advancement of technology the news media also got revolutionized. It became more interactive, quick, convergent and economical. Now more news is available in the form of online/web newspapers, e-magazines, blogs, podcasting/podcasting and news web portals that have emerged as 'new media' for communication. Besides, social networking sites like Face book, Twitter, LinkedIn, Orkut, and many more are also widely used for news purposes.

When this online media is emerging worldwide, it is also gaining popularity in Kashmir especially among the youth both in rural and urban areas. Leading newspapers and magazines of the valley (that include Greater Kashmir, Rising Kashmir, Kashmir Times, Kashmir Monitor, Kashmir Observer, etc.) have started their online editions. Magazines from Kashmir that include Kashmir Scan, Conveyor, KashmirWala, Hamada Kashmir, etc. have launched their e-editions. Different news web portals like Kashmir Dispatch, The Global Kashmir have been launched. Face book, Twitter and other social networking sites also gained eminence as news media. The political situations that prevailed in Kashmir during last 60 years had made Kashmir is 'news-addicts'. Therefore, these media were more readily accepted and utilised in the valley when traditional means of communication didn't enjoy the requisite freedom.

According to largest circulated English daily newspaper 'Greater Kashmir', more than 125 countries read or visit their online edition on regular basis. The news portals from Kashmir like Kashmir Dispatch also gained immense recognition in the valley in short period of time. These new media news sources not only serve needs of people from Kashmir but also cater to the information requirements of interested people living overseas, who despite being away from the valley want to remain connected.

A study conducted in 2011 by Ministry of Home Affairs has reported that youth of Kashmir use web mainly for accessing local newspapers or to get news from Kashmir specific websites. The usage of social networking websites comes close at the second position and Face book is most popular site among these. (Bhehra, 2011). During these three years the usage of new media for news has increased manifold. The younger generation being more internet-savvy and prefer to gather news on web. Jammu and Kashmir has more than two million internet subscribers. (Mirani, 2014). With the internet emerging as an important medium of communication across the globe, facts reveal that Srinagar has become highest in the state in terms of Internet usage with more than 21,532 broadband internet connections operational. The data revealed further that 75 percent of Srinagarites are using internet connections. (Manzoor, 2014).

During 2008 and 2010 uprisings, when people were restricted to their homes due to continuous strikes, curfews and media was going through tough times, internet provided an easy option for news. The example of Kashmir Dispatch illustrates it better. During this uprising (in 2010), Kashmir Dispatch a news portal was started by a group of professional youth. In short period of time, this website became very popular and emerged as one of the main source of information to the people of the valley when print versions of the newspapers and magazines were not printed and news on local channels was banned. This news portal also utilised Face book to propagate news and share the links of their popular stories. About this portal, Kashmiri weekly newspaper *Kashmir Life* writes-

This portal has been making waves on internet particularly some social networking sites the portal became popular during the summer unrest when most the newspapers in Kashmir were not published in the face of severe curfews and restrictions put on movement of people including journalists.

As the web portal was bereft of any trappings of printing and circulation it was able to report news round the clock, which proved to be a boon for the portal launched on April 20, 2010. (Qureshi, 2010).

The founders of the web portal are four young people from Kashmir (Tabish Naseer, Jalees Andrabi, Syed Tehseem and Atif Syed) who engage guest writers, bloggers and columnists from different organizations to contribute for Kashmir Dispatch. The website (Kashmirdispatch.com) is being read in India, USA, UK, UAE, South Africa, and scores of other countries. On an average, the web portal is being visited by 5-8 thousand people on daily basis. (Malla, 2011). The portal tried to give detailed coverage to the issues highlighted. As per Tabish Naseer, one of the founder of the portal, "The content is revised after every ten minutes and extensive research is done on all the stories. The size of each story is approx. three times more than news stories of other media organizations. (Naseer, 2011). It signifies that detailed research and investigation is carried on every news story.

To understand the emergence, popularity and the impact of 'Kashmir Dispatch' and to study the use of internet for news purposes in Kashmir, a survey was conducted among youth (18-35 years) of Srinagar (summer capital of the state) who were mostly students and professionals (Engineers, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, etc.). Besides, the content on *Kashmir Dispatch* was analysed to understand the types of the issues covered by the portal.

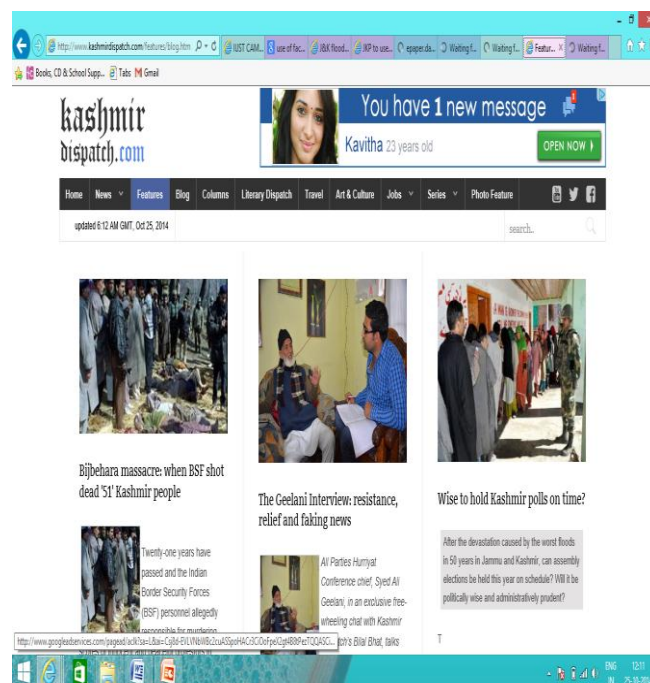


Figure 1

The study revealed that with the growth of technology, use of new media for news is on increase. All the respondents selected for the survey had access to internet. The survey revealed that all respondents use internet for news, out of which 77% use it regularly for current affairs followed by 12% who use internet for news on education and employment. Eighty-eight percent said that they prefer new media for news than the traditional media proving that new media vehicles are popular among the youth of Kashmir.

Regarding the use of social networking sites like Face book, twitter, Google plus, etc, eighty-eight percent uses it to remain connected with their friends and eighty percent use it to obtain news. Ninety percent of respondents visit

Kashmir Dispatch for news. Almost all of them have started accessing *Kashmir Dispatch* between May-August 2010 when other sources of news were banned/stopped their publications. It revealed that turmoil in the valley was one of the main reasons behind the popularity of the portal. *Kashmir Dispatch* was one among the very few providers of local news during 2010 when news on local channels was banned and local newspapers could not be printed and distributed.

Eighty-nine percent of respondents said that they got the information about the news portal through different social networking sites especially through Face book. Ten percent got this information through friends and other sources. All the respondents who read *Kashmir Dispatch* are aware about the *Kashmir Dispatch* pages on Face book and 83% of these respondents are registered as members on these pages. Fifty-four percent of the respondents visit these Face book pages regularly showing the interest of the audience. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said that they participate in the discussions of *Kashmir Dispatch* on its Face book pages. Sixty-three percent of respondents said that they visit the news portal to get the information about Kashmir followed by thirty-six percent who use the portal to read other contents (features, blogs, poetry, columns).

Since 2011, there were huge advancements in the internet related technologies in the valley with more service providers (BSNL, TATA, Reliance, Airtel, Aircel, etc.) launched their services in different corners of the valley. So the access to the internet also increased manifold during these years. A survey conducted in Awantipora (rural area of Pulwama district) recently revealed that 70% of youth in the area have access to internet. The study conducted to study the impact of Face book on youth has revealed that Face book was not widely used for news purposes in Kashmir prior to 2010 summer unrest. Reports from major websites suggest that there are up to 40,000 active users of Face book from Kashmir alone and this rise was mainly due to the unrest. With the ban on SMS in Kashmir region during the political unrest, most of the people in Kashmir immediately switched to Face book either over internet or from mobile phones and started to upload status message, pictures, videos on Kashmir, upload news items on Kashmir and create new groups. Some groups related to Kashmir even have the fan following of about 12000 and more. (Malla, 2011).

A news story by Associated Press in August 2010 under the headline 'Face book, YouTube used as weapons in Kashmir fight' also published by *The Washington Post* has quoted a New Delhi writer 'Shuddabrata Sengupta saying that "With student discussion groups banned and thousands of security operatives believed to be snooping on protesters, the youth of Kashmir are using the Internet as a virtual meeting place. Social networking sites, though presumably under Indian surveillance, have proven to be more effective than any previous form of political communication in Kashmir. The struggle on the streets and in the corners of cyberspace has a mutually complementary nature. (Hussain, Facebook, YouTube used as weapons in Kashmir fight, 2010).

The international news agency also reported that Face book was extensively used to debate the weekly calendar of protests and other related issues when other media of mass communication were blocked in the valley. The Face book was extensively used by youth to discuss the different aspects of the turmoil and it is the interactive character of the website that made it more popular.

A quick study of the Face book pages on Kashmir yields interesting results. For instance, there are more than one hundred Face book accounts comprising the nomenclature that include the name 'Kashmir' and are regularly updated by its users with the information about the events in Kashmir. A random survey of Face book pages on Kashmir and a qualitative reading of some of the popular blogs also show that those espousing the cause of the Kashmir dispute utilise this medium

to propagate their ideas and share information. This new media is being actively used in shaping the political discourse and utilised actively by groups belonging to different ideologies. All the political leaders and separatist representatives of the valley have their accounts on social networking sites (with Face book and Twitter topping the list) through which they communicate with the general masses.

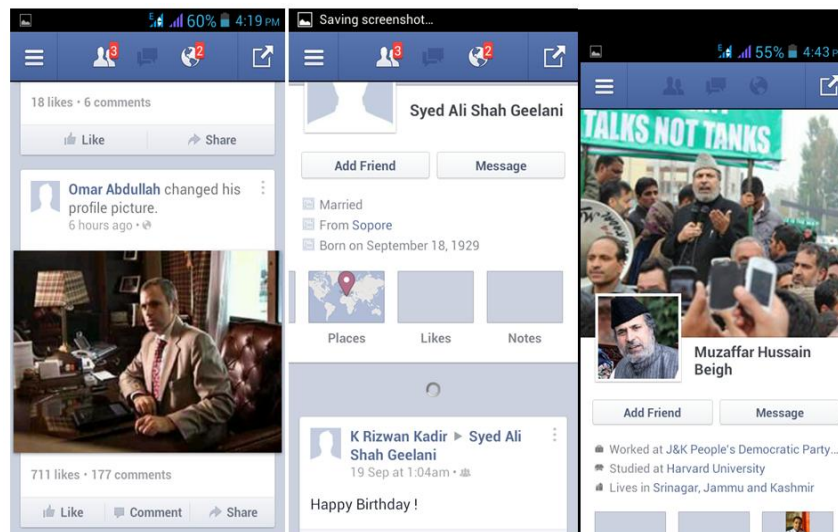


Figure 2

Social networking sites like Face book and Twitter are not only used to communicate verbal messages but also to disseminate images and videos that make these media of news more authentic and credible. One such incident was reported by Associate Press where it wrote,

Young Kashmir is upload videos and images shot furtively from window showing government forces damaging vehicles and property during curfew, when there are no journalists around. Because of the video evidence that cannot be denied and people believe it completely. (Hussain, Facebook, YouTube used as weapons in Kashmir fight, 2010).

Even during the recent disasters, social networking sites played a critical role in disseminating news about the floods when all other media of communication including the mobile networks were affected. This disaster sparked a huge social media response around information-sharing. On Face book, a group called Kashmir Flood Information Channel had people putting out the latest information on the floods, and also giving out details about the rescue operations.

One of the latest posts point out that the state machinery has completely failed in rescuing people and rather it is the local people who are coming together to help those who are stranded, both tourists and residents. Another post asks that people should not spread rumours, another mention how one family is stuck in a particular colony in Srinagar and gives out the mobile number of the family to be rescued.

According to a PTI report the Army headquarters was forwarding all the distress messages received by them on its website, Face book page and Twitter handle to a WhatsApp group, which includes, senior commanders from Srinagar based along with the units in field areas. These and several other incidents reveal how social networking sites are used to disseminate the information even in unusual situations in Kashmir. Under these extreme situations, the chief administrators of the state including Chief Minister Omar Abdullah used this platform to provide feedback and latest information to

the people. Some of the tweets by Chief Minister made on September 7, 2014 are –

- Many of you have tweeted for help today. We are trying our best.
- The boats have begun rescuing people. And operations will continue as long as they are needed.
- 50 more boats are on the way and will be launched as soon as they arrive.
- Around 25 boats flown in to Awantipora air base for South Kashmir rescue ops and are being sent to the affected areas.

It is evident from the analysis that *NEWS MEDIA* has got revolutionized in Kashmir with the introduction of the internet and related services. The new media vehicles that include online editions, e-papers, news portals, blogs and social networking sites not only disseminate the news in all circumstances (ranging from protests to disasters) but also provide with opportunities to all to participate in this process. The turmoil in the valley that often largely affects the operations of conventional sources of mass communication has to a large extent contributed in the success and popularity of new media as news source in Kashmir. All sections of society are making maximum use of these channels be it general masses, mainstream parties or separatist groups to share their news and views. This involvement in news dissemination has made these new media channels more popular and credible.

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