

Redefining the Indian Public Sphere: A Study of the LGBT Rights Movement in India

KIRAN VINOD BHATIA

MICA-The School of Ideas, Ahmedabad, India

New media networks have led to a personalization of the political sphere as affordances provided by the virtual space give precedence to the significance of the 'self' over the 'masses'. Through this paper an attempt has been made to understand how the LGBT community uses new media technologies to transcend the boundaries of the traditional public sphere in order to create a realm of self-identification in the virtual world. The study focuses on a group of Indian citizens who identify themselves as members of the LGBT community, who are digitally active and have participated in activities to mobilize public opinion in favor of the legalization of their sexual preferences. The study delineates how the LGBT community translates online discursive practices into offline civic engagement activities through the process of community formation, mobilization, setting up agenda for collective actions and creation of a realm for expression by the marginalized other.

Keywords: New media, virtual space, LGBT community, politico-public sphere, counter publics, LGBT rights movement

The political function of the public sphere is to provide space for the creation of the public opinion. It enables the public to participate in the decision making process and exert influence on the people in power. The structural transformation of the public sphere was initiated by the advent of media; first the printing press and later the satellite television (Habermas, 2011). It led to the 'mediatization' of politics which implies a process through which the constituent elements of politics either assume media forms or are defined by changes in the dynamics of modern mass communication channels (Esaiaasson & Asp, 1996). According to Asp and Esaiaasson, ". . . the mediatization of politics can be seen as a three-stage process in which there is a development towards increasing media influence. This influence can be exerted over people's perceptions as well as over political institutions". In this top-down politics (See Figure 1), policy decisions are made without initiating a participatory discussion with the public of the state. What emerges as a result of this unilateral method of governance is a manifestation of the 'elitist ideology' in the form of dominant political discourse and its direct translation into governmental policies and decisions.

The boundaries of such a public sphere are determined by frames of interpretation imposed on the emergent political issues by the ideological biases of the media owners, the invested commercial interests as well as the political pressures directed by actors in power. A distinctive feature of this relationship between the media and its narratives is that it permits the initial definition or primary interpretation of the topic in question

Correspondence to: Kiran Vinod Bhatia, Research Scholar, FPM-C, MICA, Shela, Ahmedabad-380 058, Gujarat, India. E-mail: kiran_fpm15@micamail.in

(Anderson, 1991). The determinist effects of the hegemonic structure influence most traditional media institutions and prevent the production and articulation of oppositional views.

Media narratives selectively politicize the citizens so as to integrate them within a collective polity that focuses on a pre-determined set of issues to the exclusion of the others. This 'passive collective conscience' then comes to be influenced by the political discourses that fall within the purview of dialogues initiated, sustained and reproduced by those who acquire power positions in the society. The term 'passive collective conscience' is used to draw

attention to the fact that within the framework of the top-down flow of information model, a shared consensus is generated by the dominant discourses on political issues that are made available in the media space by people in power. Though public participation exists even in this system, the level of involvement of the individuals is significantly low as a result of which interpretations derived are limited to the frames of analysis that are available. Media are not the primary definers of event in a society but their debatable relationship with power structures make them a crucial determinant of the political reality which is interpreted as a function of the dialectical process involving action and reaction (Johnson-Cartee, 2005).

Mediated political messages are thus nothing but products of monotonous organizational practices. These systemic products have impoverished the ways in which citizens are addressed politically. The levels of engagement deteriorated significantly as 'mass packaging' of political messages gained prominence in the political arena (Blumler & Michael, 1995). Meyer claims that 'Media democracy has replaced deliberation with pseudo-plebiscites', a claim that is challenged by the affordances provided by new media in facilitating public participation in political discussions (Meyer & Hinchman, 2002).

Redefining the Politico-Public Sphere

The advent of new media has challenged this traditional definition of political sphere by introducing an element of 'reciprocal arrangement' between the two ends of the political continuum. It has revived the democratic communication roles between the leaders and the citizens by providing for an initiation of deliberation through feedback mechanism. The vertical structure has been dismantled and now, in its place, stands a horizontal integrated network of distinct nodes that are representative of diverse publics existing in a society (See Figure 2). As multiple voices are heard in the newly developed interactive medium, the component of 'dissent' is not only visible but also considered a significant development towards democratizing the political sphere further. New media has re-created the political sphere as a 'personalized public space' wherein media networks are constituted by social relations and communication technologies (Howard, 2011).

In this system, plurality, access to information and unqualified exchange of ideas enhances political participation and leads to the formation of an 'active collective conscience'. Patterns of participation that give way to the construction of a shared ideology through the use of new media networks are characterized by the active involvement of the users; the term 'active collective conscience' has thus been used. Content is generated,

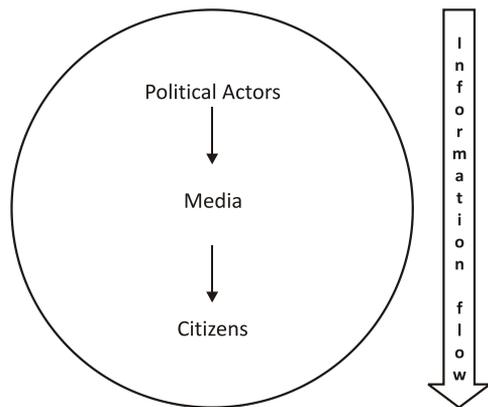


Figure 1 Classical interpretation of the politico-public sphere

disseminated, discussed, refuted or supported by the people themselves and this leads to their active involvement in the emergence of a popular political discourse. The political issues are not interpreted within the frames already available/made available in the media space. Issues are selected and prioritized according to personal opinions of what is of importance to the user in question. In this reciprocal arrangement, all the three forces that influence the political sphere i.e. the media, political actors and the citizens have direct relational dependence on the others. No single force operates in exclusion to the others and yet neither dominates the functioning of the remaining entities. In order to understand the significance of the new media networks and their direct bearing on the reconstruction of the political domain in a society it is important to examine the four core characteristics of these networks.

First, the new media networks extensively rely on social relations that thrive in the society; thus, examining an individual's engagement with new media channels can reflect the social linkages of which he is a part in the real world; these are called anchored relationships. Moreover, new media technologies facilitate creation of online communities which not only reinforce the existing social networks of which they are a part but also help the members maintain the geographically dispersed face-to-face networks (Norris, 2004). New media networks

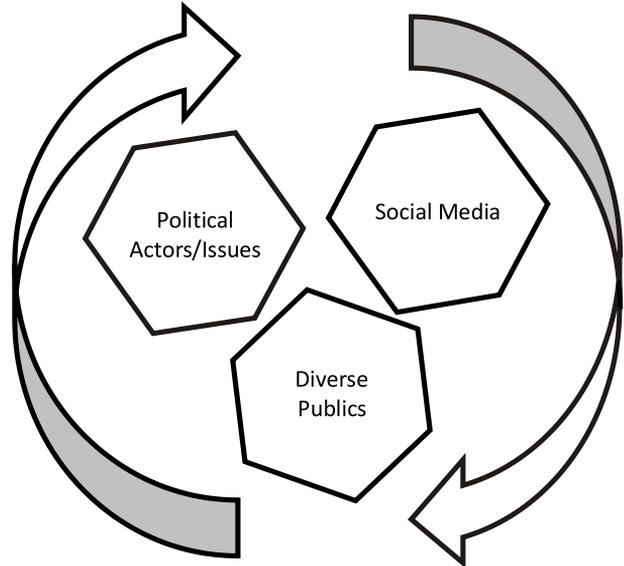


Figure 2 The horizontal integrated network

can be seen as an extension of an individual's social self into the virtual realm that promises greater connectivity, accessibility and maintenance of interactive communities created by the individual. Second, these new media networks give genesis to a space for debate and discussion and counter the systemic limitations that are integral to the content generated by traditional media channels. They allow everyone to participate in the discussions of the political issues as well as raise marginalized questions that might be of significance to a specific group. However, this doesn't imply objectivity and unbiased expression of facts by individuals. The content generated by the users-cum-members of this shared space can revolve around selective perceptual rendering of the issue and may not provide for a holistic interpretation. However, plurality, which is the third characteristic of these networks, arises from the co-existence of multiple perspectives existing within a shared framework of the information and communication technologies. Finally, the shift from 'the mass' to 'the self' has been reinvigorated by the expansion of new media networks. Decisions regarding the area of discussion, people participating in the debate, the time, place and the form in which information is relayed are taken by the individuals. Emphasis is placed on 'narrowcasting' (Castells, 2009) as opposed to broadcasting as the hierarchal set up of the traditional media channels is decentralized to give way to a complex articulation of the expectations of various constituents of the political sphere.

Changing Patterns: Gay Rights Movement

In order to reconstitute the elementary characteristics of a society it is essential to realize that the dominant structure needs to be challenged by creating space for various alternatives to co-exist. When the dominant structure is seen as juxtaposed against various alternatives that can be availed, the authenticity attached with the former is questioned to the extent that people identify areas of disagreement in a context wherein their individual aspirations and expectations clash with the normalized collective culture. New media technologies neither extend the available space for new alternatives to thrive nor attempt to displace the dominant narratives in order to accommodate new ones. New media have created a new realm for expression of ideas that are central to communities which lack representation. Before the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, people from the LGBT community suffered not only from brutal discrimination but also from physical abuse at the hands of the government agencies. When a gay night club was raided by the police in Cairo on May 11, 2001, the arrested homosexuals were tortured and raped in the police custody (The Guardian, 2001). Later, twenty three of them were convicted for having sinned against religion and were humiliated publically. Here, we can discuss Foucault's conception of the dynamics of power in a 'panoptican' as comparable to the power dynamics existing in the Indian society. Foucault explained how knowledge produces power structures instead of preventing them by internalizing coercion through knowledge that is gained by the process of observation. The existence of the LGBT community is questioned through the knowledge obtained by observing people in power and thus an oppressive regime against the expression of this existence is enforced by those in power.

"Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations" (Foucault, 1997).

According to Foucault, thus, power is not limited to the institutional politics in a society. Power is everywhere and is granted to and exercised by individuals through their everyday interactions. Power is largely embedded in those everyday instances in which individuals participate and thus power makes us who we are. Foucault's conceptualization of power is not associated with the domination of the state only; it runs deeper and questions the people at large who use and often misuse the power they derive, but of course from the social structures. According to him, "power is diffused rather than concentrated, embodied and enacted rather than possessed, discursive rather than purely coercive, and constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them" (Gaventa, 2003).

The new media technologies can be seen as mediums which initiate the questioning of what is observed by the people who are being oppressed. It allows the 'subaltern' to speak and create a discourse of their own. It allows for discursive power to be employed and created by the oppressed as they emancipate themselves, liberate themselves of the oppression. Prior to the advent of these technologies, knowledge was generated and disseminated by the powerful in order to reinforce the power structures in the society but new media enabled the people being oppressed to generate a different knowledge and understanding of the reality which defied the normative patterns that had been standardized. They developed their own systems of power and knowledge as a form of resistance. This

was possible because, online discursive engagement contributes to sustaining civic communities, opening up opportunities for contention and setting the collective agenda for change (Shelat, 2014).

Initially, there existed no space for this community in the society and so new media technologies helped them transcend the boundaries of this available space in order to create a realm of self-identification in the virtual world. Ramy Youssef started an anti-homophobia campaign as he tried to create a narrative that represented concerns of the less privileged LGBT community in the society (2014). The aim was not to ensure the convergence of the so-called normative and deviant but to create a new identity for the perceived deviant community. This could have been possible only if the community could escape the meaning attributed to their existence by the collective culture and create an environment that would be conducive to the formation of a new identity. Traditional collective recollections about this new community could be erased only when this community identified a way to disassociate itself from the collective space altogether. The presence of contradictions in the politico-public sphere is essential because it leads to a negotiation of differences and thus an articulation of multiple worldviews simultaneously. The possibility of multiple interpretations leads to the questioning of a single truth that is manufactured by the power-structures with an aim to indoctrinate the public mind. 'In stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public' (Fraser, 1990). Thus, it is not a matter of co-existence but of mutually exclusive existence in a permeable space enabled by the intervention of new media technologies.

The use of new media technologies has helped many marginal communities challenge the people in power and find a way to express issues that have been central to their everyday experiences. This has not only helped in dismantling of rules that define the 'normative' but has also helped people recognize 'the other' as an embodiment of differences that are integral to the maintenance of the sanctity of a plural society. Thus, membership in the virtual space implies both 'building and destroying ... identities, categories, relationships, space stories' (Haraway, 1991). In 2010, two American teenage boys, Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas, committed suicide after they were bullied for being gay. This gave rise to a social media campaign 'It Gets Better Project' by Dan Savage who uploaded an eight minute video on Youtube in which he expressed his struggles as a gay man in a 'perceived' straight world. The idea was to acquire the right to be heard, the right to accept one's own identity and the right to legitimize it on one's own without looking for an agency that would confer the stamp of validity on his existence. Many non-heteronormative people consider the new media as an important medium for resisting oppressive regimes of gender and sexuality (Alexander, 2002; Bryson, 2004; Chatterjee, 2002; Heinz, Gu, & Zender, 2002).

For instance, a study of experiences of the Australian LGBT women by Mary Bryson explains how the digital space helps LGBT women to embrace their difference in an environment where many similar others participate and interact. These women consider the online world to be a space for accepting and expressing their real gender identities as opposed to their lives offline where cultural imperatives define their existence (Bryson, 2004). The digital space provides them with a cultural context to participate and overcome the social exclusion for being different. This environment is thus not a subculture; it is composed of the subaltern publics in the society and is built on new premises and in a new realm altogether which shares with the collective culture only what can be understood as a 'point of departure'.

Eventually, the issues of an individual find massive support as many people who share in the same problems participate in the discussion. This ensures that the center slowly merges with the margin and the set boundaries are disrupted. It is important to note

that in cases such as these, no attempt is made by the marginal communities to occupy the center. Their only intention is to find a legitimate place for themselves on the margins, a place that ensures them of equal rights to a dignified existence. Yes, one of the aims of that video was to create an acceptance for people like him but that didn't mean there was a need for validation from an authority other than the self. Moreover, as these marginal narratives find voice and space for expression through the new media channels, the members at the center relate to the struggle as they interpret it within the context of their own problems.

Dan Savage knew that 'the self' was indeed many people out there who shared this new identity with him and still never found a way to express their stake in the possibility of an alterity. Within three years, the project could give birth to 50,000 user generated videos as the masses assimilated into 'the self' and the center became marginal with regard to the normalized mode of being. Today, the US has joined a league of the twenty three states in the world where same-sex marriages have been legalized and there is greater acceptance for plurality. This can be possible when the 'mass' assimilates into the 'self'; what then finds genesis is a 'collectivized self' which resists the dominant forces and strives to obtain the agency to identify both the problems and the ways to resolve them. New media technologies infuse greater participation by promoting the creation of a collective identity, a perception among individuals that they are members of a larger community by virtue of the grievances they share. New media may be able to foster collective identity across a dispersed population, which can be mobilized in support of collective actions (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001).

Study Description

The study focuses on a group of Indian citizens who identify themselves as members of the LGBT community and share three common characteristics: they are comfortable with their sexuality and can discuss about it, they are digitally active and they have participated in activities to mobilize public opinion in favor of the legalization of their community. I have studied people who have been able to transcend the societal barriers, who are very comfortable with their sexual orientation and use new media technologies extensively in order to counter discrimination, generate empowering messages about the LGBT community and create space for discourses emerging from within this community to be expressed and heard. This study draws on the positive deviance approach which is ". . . premised on the belief that in every community there are certain individuals and groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers while having access to the same resources" (Singhal, 2013).

The study follows a multi-sited design and twenty in-depth interviews were conducted in namely five major cities i.e. Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kolkata and Pune. The entire study was carried out using new media technologies. The interviews were conducted through Skype and I have been able to build a relationship of trust with my participants to ensure that they were ready to commit to the study, were willing to immerse themselves and engage honestly with the research questions. I draw largely from my personal experiences of having worked closely with the LGBT community on various occasions. I have been in touch with most of the participants ever since, through Skype and WhatsApp. Many of my participants wished to maintain their anonymity and so I decided to use pseudonyms for them. The study used snowball sampling or chain referral sampling to get in touch with the study participants and this process continued over a period of one year; from May 11, 2014 to August 15, 2015. During this period, I had been actively involved as a volunteer with a not-for-profit organization in Vadodara, Gujarat. My experiences in that organization helped me in gaining a deeper understanding of the issues that are of concern

for the members of the LGBT community. This paper draws extensively from the twenty interviews that were conducted; my experiences as a volunteer helped in developing the research questions in consultation with the gay rights activists and the members of the community.

This study is a qualitative research and is a transformative process in which social reality is constructed by the continuous interactions I had with my participants. Within the interpretive paradigm, the researcher approaches the study situation with a set of preconceived images in mind; however, a qualitative researcher also acknowledges that any study is a combination of the emic and the etic processes. The emic process or an inside perspective allows the researcher to study the reality from the social actors' point of view; in that the researcher attempts to understand how the actors understand the reality. The etic processes allow the researcher to link the cultural practices to external factors such as the socio-economic conditions of the social actors, their lived experiences and the political milieu. Using these processes simultaneously will help the researcher study how the members of the LGBT community describe their actions based on self understanding that is historically and culturally bound and also to identify factors within the structural apparatus which either limit or enable them (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). A paradox about social reality is that it is constructed¹ and so in order to understand the reality, I ensured that:

- (i) The perspectives of the social actors who construct that reality were included.
- (ii) Reality was defined based on the interactions between the researcher, social actors and the society.
- (iii) I was prepared to shed some preconceived images about the reality, whenever the interactions revealed otherwise.

All the participants were available for clarifications throughout the study and were given the transcripts of the interview for respondent validation. After the interview transcripts were analyzed, I could identify five themes which define participants' perspectives about the significance of new media technologies in enabling the members of the LGBT community to represent their concerns in the public sphere. These themes include disembodiment in the virtual space, coalition building, political activism and empowerment. These themes frequently overlap as each is a dimension of the broader phenomenon of the use of new media technologies by individuals.

Discussion

Disembodiment in the Virtual Space

This section addresses the question of how the members of the LGBT community transcend the societal barriers which make the real spaces unsafe. Mohit says that people in the real spaces are yet not comfortable with the idea of alternative sexual orientations; not that they don't know about it but that they think such deviations threaten the very existence of the Indian culture. "I started getting uncomfortable about my sexuality when I shifted to Mumbai. This is an incident from the time when my boyfriend and I had gone to a club to celebrate our first anniversary. When the clock struck 12, we kissed each other. The club had a problem with that and we were literally chased out of the club by the bouncers. I was so shook by this incident and felt so fearful that I could never muster the courage to express my affection for my partner in public again" (Mohit, Mumbai).

One of the participants explains, "Online forums are comparatively safer. In the virtual space we can share our problems with others, seek support- physical, emotional

and financial, and also meet in the real space through the online communities. Though meetings are being organized in real spaces too (especially in Delhi) people find it difficult to come out in the public and accept what they feel about themselves because of the societal pressure. Some people therefore create fake profiles on online communities; a large number of people find it easier to connect with others on the online communities”.

“The absence of the physical body in electronic space and the anonymity this offers has a liberating effect on repressed social identity, as ‘electronic technology’ becomes a tool for the design of freely chosen identities” (Fereshteh, 2005). Virtual space proves to be a point of departure from the real space and helps in transcending cultural imperatives.

Coalition Building

Virtual communities helped most of the participants to connect with others who could relate to the experiences they were going through. This made them feel very confident about themselves. The initial doubts they had about their sexual orientation were resolved when they interacted with people who had gone through similar experiences. “People of a different sexual orientation are very discreet. It won’t be easy for them to reconcile with their sexual identities without finding a coalition on the internet. I am a very shy person, for instance, and it would have been almost impossible for me to talk about some issues to people whom I knew in real life. I created a fake profile and joined an LGBT group on Facebook. I read about the challenges faced by these communities and suddenly realized that I was never the only one. There are many people who are eager to help others and they invite people to talk to them. When you know that you are not the ‘odd one out’ you feel more comfortable about who you are” (Aman, Delhi).

Coalition building, according to my participants, has to do more with engaging in discussion about the rights of the LGBT community. These rights include the right to express themselves freely, the right to love freely, the right against discrimination based on sexual orientation and the right to lead a dignified existence. “The major problem in our society is the emphasis on categorizing sexual orientations within gendered identities. Gendering is a tough business and we should think of a possibility where gender can encompass a continuum of sexual preferences. Politicizing the private sphere will lead to more complications in the public sphere and a greater subjugation of the marginal communities. Though anal intercourse is a criminal offence according to the Indian constitution, the people in power also rape gay men. Isn’t it an act of unnatural sex then, I wonder?” (Abhilasha, Ahmedabad).

The members of the LGBT community create profiles in the virtual space in order to seek counseling. The virtual space proves to be crucial in two ways; first, it helps create large groups at low transactional costs, second, these non-institutional groups challenge the status quo in the society and enable the formation of people-to-people contact (Shirky, 2008). “I remember a person who had not come out to his parents and someone went and told them about his orientation. The family took him to doctors, psychiatrists and this created a lot of stress in his life. He talked about this on a group, of which I am a part, and we contacted other psychiatrists who explained to his parents that being gay or lesbian or of any other orientation is not a disease. It is normal! I don’t know much about this but his parents at least stopped harassing him after this intervention (Ruksana, Kolkata). Thus coalition building on the internet helps many people deal with the anxiety of having being pushed to the margins of the society for being different.

Political Activism

All the participants were asked to define political activism in their own words. Most of them defined political activism as the contributions they have made towards creating

awareness about the LGBT community. "I had organized a screening of the movie 'I Am' in Vadodara and had invited people for the event. The purpose was to create more appreciation amongst the LGBT people for themselves and the event concluded with a discussion of our rights in the society. This initiated a dialogue about the various issues we face in our everyday lives and helped us learn from each others' experiences" (Dhima, Kolkata). Similarly, some of my participants had taken part in the Pride parades that are held every year to mobilize the masses towards accepting the LGBT community in India. Thus, political activism is individualistic and yet change oriented. This relates to the concept of subactivism which aims to expand the scope of received notions of what counts as activism and civic engagement in the virtual space. Subactivism is to be taken as a potent reality in the political life of the citizens and be identified as an entry point for the citizens, especially marginalized sections, into the world of civic engagement through interactions, deeds and information sharing (Bakardjieva, 2009). "I worked in the first ever Indian gay movie and the movie was screened in the film festival 'Kashish'. This is political activism as we have started looking at the members of the LGBT community in terms other than just their sexual preferences. We are normal, we have aspirations just like other people and for us political activism is talking about the various areas in which we can excel and specialize". The efforts are generally directed towards re-positioning the LGBT community members in different areas of the society and to ensure that they are valued and respected for their abilities rather than just their sexual orientations.

At an individual level, many participants write blogs, organize events, manage websites and participate in discussions about the rights of their community. The aim is to ensure that their right to choose their sexual preferences is given a legal sanction. All they want for themselves is the freedom to lead a dignified existence. "Had it not been for the internet, it would have been very difficult for us to mobilize people and organize these various events. A lot of student groups in JNU meet every day and work on their issues but what about professionals who can't meet regularly? Thus, we organize political debates in association with the student groups. For example, Harmless Hub is an association that organizes discussions during elections and so on. The idea is to mobilize the youth and others for this cause. During this election we also met the candidates of a political party who seemed keen to work for the betterment of our community. Online engagement sometimes has political consequences (Prakash, Delhi).

Empowerment

Empowerment, according to most of the participants, starts with discovering one's sexual orientation through experimentation. The members of the LGBT community cannot socialize freely as it is very difficult to find out whether the other person is gay or straight. It is only through the virtual communities that people can approach others with same aspirations and socialize. Socializing is empowering because it helps them appreciate who they are. "Right from the time I realized that I was attracted to girls, I felt alienated from others. I could not discuss this with anyone for I always feared that I will be ostracized by my friends and family. I could express and indulge myself only in the virtual space and that helped me socialize with like-minded people. I got a chance to know Nivedeta, my partner, only through a virtual community" (Aishwarya, Pune).

These online interactions make them more confident about their sexual orientation and they get to meet their virtual friends in real life. It happens only when trust has been established and both are comfortable with each other. Most of my participants now have groups to socialize and they feel more in tune with their real selves. For them, empowerment also comes from having found emotional anchors online. Meenal (Kolkata), affectionately talks about his friends as his extended family. He is emotionally stable now given the fact

that he finds it easy to go back to people who understand his struggles. "Having people who sympathize with you is very different from having people who can empathize with you", he explains. It helps them imagine themselves as a part of a larger abstract community, a community of comparable others with whom they share a set of common goals (Anderson, 1991).

Conclusion

There exists a flip side to this new development. New media networks have led to a personalization of the political sphere as it recognizes the significance of 'the self' over 'the mass' in democratizing the political discourse by giving space to unaffiliated independent opinions to emerge. Though, they let arguments and divergent views determine the construction of the 'active collective conscience' which in turn might influence decisions taken by the people in power, doubts have been raised about its neutral nature, rationality and authenticity of the content generated, quality of discourse and the probability of the discussion having the desired effects. Moreover, accessibility to these networks, cost efficiency and adequate skills required to use these technological innovations are some other limitations. Participatory parity index is thus very low in countries where digital divide between various sections of the polity is large. In the end, what emerges through discourses on the new media is not the collective conscience per se but the collective conscience of the select urban elite which is an irony in itself.

Note

¹ This idea has been borrowed from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman's work 'The Social Construction of Reality'.

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Kiran Vinod Bhatia is enrolled in the fellow program in Management and Communication (FPM-C) at MICA, Ahmedabad. For her doctoral thesis, she is conducting a study on the role of media education in promoting religious literacy amongst rural school children in India.