

**NEW MEDIA: A POLITICAL PARTICIPATORY SPACE OR MASS DISTRACTION  
– A STUDY IN MIZORAM**

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## CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

In the process of studying new media technologies as a means of mass distraction or political participatory space for the people of Mizoram, the researcher found that the technology provides for both. Even though the survey conducted on 1480 Mizo netizens did not indicate that distraction is an issue for them in the presence of work, the ideas of mass distraction as a product of the attention economy is theoretically comprehensive. It would be naïve for us to think that social media platforms, and in a broader sense, internet-based applications are solely designed to serve the purpose of promoting democracy. The distractive nature of these platforms also creates profits in exchange for our attention. However, these same platforms host activist that use the space for political participation, which inevitable becomes one of the key functions of social media platforms. Therefore, regarding the question of whether new media technologies provide us a space for political participation or mass distraction, it would appear as if they do both, and rather effectively.

The second survey showed that Mizo netizens agree that it requires more than social media participation to produce actual effective results in dealing with issues. Furthermore, the survey indicated that higher participation in social media activism has a positive effect on participations outside of social media spaces i.e. offline activism. The current zeitgeist reflects the necessities of social media activism in issue amplification while it should not be negated how important gatherings and demonstrations are as a tool for protest. Political participation may be one of the outcomes as the development of the interactive space on the Internet evolves. However, there are various factors that are required for an issue or a cause to be effectively amplified.

### **6.1 Theoretical arguments**

At this point, the study attempts to generalize the mechanism that motivate members of a community to engage in political participation by addressing the findings made through the surveys as well as Netnography.

In order to provide a generalization of the processes that motivate individuals into entering political participation, Civic Voluntarism Model appear to be most consistent with the findings. According to Verba and colleagues (1995), CVM requires three essential components

for political engagement – 1) agent motivation; 2) the agent’s ability to participate; and 3) agents have a higher probability of participating if they are members of groups that demand for such involvement. These necessary components can be theorized in the model as demonstrating the requirements of resources for participation, engagements, and recruitment process.

*Resources* denote components such as time, money, and communication and organizational skills, that provide the means and ability to be politically active. Since, new media technologies brought about affordable means of communication that does not demand too much time, social media activism can be expected to provide the resource necessary to engage in political discourse.

One glaring issue faced in social media activism for Mizos was that they were not familiar with the platform. According to the data collected from the first survey, an astounding 70.54% ( $n=1044$ ) out of 1480 respondents said they have never used Twitter. However, the outcome of the social media activism that resulted after the shooting that took place between police forces of Assam and Mizoram (Event 4) seem to indicate that the unfamiliarity of the platform did not hinder their participation. The unity and sense of duty felt among the community can be seen from tweets such as those presented in Figure 5 and 6 where participants considered their participation as a form of *hmatlang* on social media spaces. Table 4 under Section 4.1.1 showed that even those that have not used Twitter joined the platform and didn’t hesitate to ask for advice on how the social media movement was to take place, as well as how to use the platform as a resource for participation. Since Twitter is free and can be used at one’s leisure, it serves as an effective resource to promote a narrative. The Mizo Twitter users saw the potential the platform brought and employed it with the intention of promoting their own narratives and gathering media attention in the process.

*Engagements* is a component that deals with politics, or attitudes that incline citizens to become politically active in the discourse process. Political efficacy could be defined by the conviction that one's activities will have an impact on politics coupled with a sense of confidence in both political authorities and members of the group. Furthermore, those who have the means to engage in political engagement would be less likely to do so if they were not so motivated. People are more likely to raise concerns regarding a problem if it has a direct

impact on their lives or if it has political, moral, or ethical implications. People who have these reservations are more inclined to be politically involved in the subject at hand.

Despite having the resources and the necessary motivations to participate, individuals rarely engage in political activities until members of their network specifically demand it. *Recruitment* is another component of the CVM that takes place through networks that include acquaintances, colleagues, or friends in a person's social space (Verba, et al., 1995).

Recruitment may be less relevant for individuals that are already politically active and are immersed in the political system. As seen in the data collected, some of the users that showed higher levels of activity and those that have a Twitter account for longer periods exhibited regular participation than the average participants. Those that are in political scenario such as party workers, were also much more active on Twitter, regardless of what timeline or what issues are prevalent at the time. Existing literature may also argue that activism may consist of political intentions that involve special interest groups. In fact, Wolfsfeld and colleagues claim that –

“...politics comes first chronologically, in that a rise in the number of extensive protests is more likely to precede changes in the use of social media than to follow it.”  
(Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013, p. 116)

Successful participatory democracy, according to traditional democratic theory, should inculcate unity, equality, and devotion to the public good. The internet doesn't provide for this system of democracy. In fact, Margolis and Resnick said –

“...the evidence reviewed indicates that the parties, interest, news media, bureaucracies, and public officials who dominate politics in the real world have become more adept at exploiting the Web for political purposes than their real-world rivals who lie outside the mainstream.” (Margolis & Resnick, 2007, p. 313)

Mizo communities showed a heightened sense of unity during the events. This was a result of the idea that foreign agents were causing harm to the sanctity of the larger community. The feeling of *US* versus *THEM* can manifest into a powerful unifying tool. That is the reason why border issues are a hot topic among the political arena since the boundaries already represents the divide that the two sides will be contesting for. This could extend beyond border

issues between states of the same nation, while it is also evident with nation states. The same is true for smaller communities as well, any unifying force is stronger in the presence of a threatening external entity.

Issue amplification and media hype depend on prolonged media attention which the events, except for Event 3, enjoyed. The problem with Event 3 that dealt with the contentious issue of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 was not that it did not enjoy media coverage, the issue seemed to extend from the fact that it was a larger issue that did not have a specific unifying force to the Mizo community. As a result of the lathi charge orchestrated by Assam Police forces on demonstrators at Zophai/Hailakandi area that ended up with the injuries inflicted on Mizo journalists, Event 1 enjoyed extensive coverage by the media in Mizoram, much more so than its counterparts in Assam (Vansanglura, 2020). Condemnation from journalist associations not only meant the incident immediately favoured coverage, it also meant that the notions of unity came into play like any other border dispute that Mizoram and Assam experienced. Also, the incident of gang rape in Delhi and demonstrations by Anna Hazare have enjoyed extended media coverage and therefore exhibited social media interactions and activism more than others (Narayanan & Pradhan, 2016). However, as Chung (2011), extended media coverage and public interest on the issue are the components needed to create a Twitter storm. Furthermore, issue amplification requires novel issues that are not familiar to the greater public. Border disputes are not new issues and the general public are well versed on tensions that prevail around the border. However, since the border clash resulted in casualties, Event 4 garnered higher levels of attention among media outlets as well as the general public.

Even though social media is an effective tool in mobilizing individuals on a social issue, the participants from Mizoram understood its limitations. Slacktivist scholars would be proud of the community for realizing that it takes more than social media activism to bring real change. The example of *Hnam Hnatlang* was a success story in a sense that it resulted in the organisation of a massive gathering that demanded the removal of the CEO. The mobilization started on social media networks and effectively brought people to express their solidarity with the movement to remove the CEO, which they accomplished. Extreme unity among Mizos on social media was evident. This could be due to the idea that fear and anger are emotions that the algorithms find easier to use to convince individuals on social media to participate.

According to Lanier (2018), negative emotions illicit more participation as compared to positive ones. He expanded on this idea later on when he talked about how social media turns us into aggressive people (although he used a different word for it), claiming that the strong foundation of social groups is a result of a shared hatred for other groups. Collective outrage.

## **6.2 Mizo netizens and the barriers to participation on Twitter**

The research identified three main barriers to participation for Mizo netizens in terms of entering political participation on Twitter – 1) difficulties with the language; 2) a general disinterest on Twitter; and 3) the unfamiliarity of Twitter space. The first point is not an issue when it comes to interactions among the Mizo community. It only becomes an issue when participants have to use other languages such as Hindi or English to communicate among the platform. It might also not be an issue if the intended outcome was to increase the number of activities a certain topic or tweet enjoys. However, the issue of language still provides barriers to entry for people that consider Twitter as a space where people share short messages in English. The second and third barriers are almost similar in the sense that the general disinterest in using Twitter is the main reason why members of the Mizo community do not use the platform, and therefore, are unfamiliar with it. This unfamiliarity of the platform also creates an issue only to a certain extent not just because of the ease of use of the platform, but also the presence of other users that are willing to provide instructions of use. This might be the case for a group activity where members of the community pull their strength together to achieve a common goal, however, it might not be the case for general use.

## **6.3 Further discussions**

The call for action is evident in the use of loudspeakers (megaphones) in the pictures that were analysed in Figure 10. Mizo society practice a form of community information channel they call *tlangau*. In modern times, the responsibility of this information dissemination generally falls under the purview of the YMA. Traditionally, the role of *tlangau* would fall to a person in the village that would announce information verbally to the villagers. Localities in modern day Mizoram still practice this role albeit accompanied by modern technologies such as a public announcement horn loudspeaker that would be placed at multiple points in a community (Ratnamala & Malsawmzuala, 2021). The most common use of this system of public announcement is information regarding the death of a member of the community. Another

common example would be the announcements for *hnatlang* (which as mentioned in Section 1.4.1 is a call for social service which the community is expected to render). The power dynamics between the YMA and the community fosters notions of participation. Although the YMA are not affiliated with parties or politics (and are in fact are members of the community itself, with a handful of members as leaders), this practice unifies a community for participation with the purpose of serving the common good and these dynamics could extend all the way to political participation.

The Internet in its ability to spread messages at the click of a button limits the control institutions have on censorship of information. This provides an advantage for activist, since these contents would have gone through different layers of editorial process, or filters, if the technology did not exist (Khazaeli & Stockemer, 2013). This is one of the reasons why the general population take up information dissemination online rather than leave the process to the media. Social media activism exhibits its strength by virtue of the speed at which information can be shared with the public. However, concerns are prevalent on the issue of disinformation and misinformation.

The idea painted by critiques of the Internet paint a dark picture. However, new media technologies have also grown into various categories of usage. Such examples may include self-help Apps help us in aspects of social and personal improvement. Apps such as Duolingo helps in learning new languages, diet Apps help in maintaining a healthier lifestyle, workout Apps provide assistance to the users' physical wellbeing, schedulers help in maintaining routines, etc. Not only does these Apps improve the very idea of human improvement, the amount of innovation that went into development gives an extremely optimistic idea of what new technologies can be developed in the future. However, there are concerns regarding its trajectory since individuals tend to indulge in entertainment rather than self-help.

The Romans understood the *vox populi* and figured out what they concluded the general population demanded. As the Romans say "*Panam et circenses*" which translates to "Bread and circuses," or "Bread and games," or "Food and entertainment". Sanders (2012) argues that the spectacle is a recent addition to the spiritual world of consumers and blurs the line between the sacred and secular. It suggests that the spectacle represents reification, or the transformation of abstract concepts into concrete objects. The study explores how the use of spectacle in

contemporary society is similar to the use of bread and circuses in ancient Rome to distract and pacify the masses. Chomsky (2002) was analogous in his opinion of the masses as bewildered herd, whereby the powerful elite controls the masses, where the role of the masses is to consume and not perform. Debord's (1967) idea of the spectacle theorizes that – in reproducing an economic ideology that depends on consumer want and the expectation of unrestricted pleasure, entertainment, or emotional fulfilment, the spectacle is distinctive to contemporary society.

Adorno and Horkheimer (2010) posits that popular culture is like a factory producing standardized goods for profit. This could be the very same phenomenon that drives the production, consumption, and distribution of content on the Internet. The algorithm decides what is relevant and what keeps you hooked to your devices. The content creators themselves are not free of the criticism that goes towards what kind of material they make since they are players in the attention economy as well. Content creators make what they deem would generate the most amount of clout, producing material that would garner the most traction online, materials that would result in the most amount of views, or likes.

The Internet brings new forms of parasocial relationships. We get to know people better but we don't necessarily interact with them. Some, if not most, of these relationships are one-sided especially when it comes to celebrity fandom. This is one of the main attractions towards using Twitter as was in the case of K-pop fans flocking to Twitter for updates on the activities of their *idols*<sup>25</sup>. The level of open access an ordinary person has to their celebrity influencers' daily social life is evident on Twitter. However, the requirement is that the influencer is present and active on the platform, whether it is indirectly in the form of fan-pages, or directly. Furthermore, this was one of the major reasons why Mizo netizens flocked to Twitter in order to protest against the Assam CM of the time, who exhibited higher levels of activity on Twitter. But still, even when it comes to regular non-famous, non-influencer, regular individuals, social circles and relationship building on social media seem lacklustre, one-sided, and parasocial in nature regardless. However, direct sponsorship channels such as Patreon may bridge the gap

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<sup>25</sup> The term "idol" with reference to K-pop denotes a type of celebrity working in the music industry in South Korea.



between the consumers and the creators creative process. Some content creators would even generate material from the suggestions of their patrons.

There is an understanding that when discussing capital profits from our usage of new media technologies, one must not deny the fact that financial gain is also required for the platforms to sustain themselves, or make improvements without a budget for research and development. All these requirements cost lots of money since operational cost for big industries such as those in Silicon Valley are not cheap. This is also the reason why the creation of an exclusively democratic application is unrealistic since existence in a capitalistic society cost lots of money. Individuals will have to settle for the existing structures and attempt to improve the system as much as is allowed under the present regime. Research already indicated that even in governments that are more authoritative, the higher levels of Internet penetration shows evidences of improvement in governance.

In conclusion, the findings of this research reveals that Mizo netizens will be ready for political participation at a large scale when there is a need for issue amplification over issues where – 1) the issue has a level of novelty whereby the issue garners higher levels of public attention as well as media attention; 2) the issue enjoys extended media coverage; 3) the participants are provided with the necessary resources, i.e. cognitive tools, time, access to the Internet, and new media devices; 4) there is an established network that calls for participation supported by social norms that encourages participation; 5) the issue provokes individuals that are politically engaged and aware; and 6) the issue has elements of risk the involves harm to the society (*hnam*) by outsider forces.

The structure of new media technologies will also benefit from this level of activity since any type of activity that focuses users' attention in their platform dictates that they make a profit. So, for the moment, if individuals get distracted by the socio-political activities that bombards them with notifications, the resultant loss of attention may have to be ignored for the greater good of democracy.

#### **6.4 Scope for further research**

As it must have been evident from the methodology and the findings presented, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram provided the platforms for political discourse, even much more than

Twitter did. Since Facebook and WhatsApp provide the option for segregated communities that are formed based on a common shared interest, those that use political discourse for group cohesion will, therefore, have higher activities. A more in-depth study is required in order to find out the mechanisms that make these platforms so effective. A cross-platform comparative study of social media platforms may provide a better understanding to how exactly each one functions in shaping modern society and the role they have in promoting democracy.

The analysis of photos that were used during civic participation require a more in-depth attention. A more deconstructive approach such as semiotic studies may provide for a more concrete study into why people create and share photos during a political event.

Further studies on how various groups are formed and how they function in social media. Pop culture consumption and fan-culture groups like the ones we encountered in this study (the Mizo K-pop Fan Club) provide an interesting subject for studying group formation and functions of fandom in social media spaces.

Not only does modern day technologies provide for services that constantly improves (or changes) the landscape that users experience. These changes are usually small, but sometimes they can be relevant to the user experience to such a level that platforms may experience a decline of user activity. You may even notice that a lot of Apps on your devices roll out updates every day. The rapid pace at which new mediums of communication are developed, as well as the swift changes developers make to existing Apps, provide a scope for research that is vast and ever evolving.

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