CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Information was far more challenging to obtain pre-internet era than it is now. It was necessary to subscribe to a newspaper or visit the library in order to stay updated with the latest information. A massive shift occurred with the advent of digitization and information technology. The ability to access any information, including news, politics, and scientific findings, as well as literature, entertainment, and gossip, as well as adorable baby photographs and cat videos, is now available in the palm of our hands. Never before has there been such easy access to so much knowledge.

One may define new media based on its capability of quick content sharing, its avoidance of spatial constraints, or its interactive nature. However, the exact characterization and generalization of new media faces a problem when you consider the multiplicity of its use, lack of monitoring as well as the ambiguity of its imminent expansion (McQuail, 2010).

New media platforms have seen a gradual change brought about by commercial restructuring since its inception. The new structure created an attention economy that functioned to create profits at the cost of our attention. In the meantime, leading scholars in the field were quick to point out the democratising paradigm that it brought, claiming that it would bring about a new form of democracy. This enthusiasm for the new technology suggests that we dive head first and use it extensively as much as possible, for as long as we can since participation of such an extent would only appear to benefit democracy in the long run. Then how is it that scholars who praise the shift in democratic paradigm at the same time warn us of its excessive use? This research will attempt to study whether *new media* provides a new paradigm for democratic space or is a form of *mass distraction*.

Larry D. Rosen, on the *Psychology of Technology*, referred to new media technologies as *Weapons of Mass Distraction* as a play on the acronym *WMDs,* meaning *Wireless Mobile Device,* and not how it is most commonly used, i.e. *Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Rosen, 2012). He talked at length about how cell phone owners get increasingly attentive to the alerts on their devices. He said that we all started carrying this device with us which pretends to be a phone but is much more than that. Some of these new media devices today are in fact much more powerful than some of the laptop computers that are in use today. Not only are they tiny

computers that fit in our pockets, but in certain aspects, they can do most things a modern PC (Personal Computer) can do. Sometimes these small devices perform much better and are much more efficient. One of its functions is to notify the owners of various content that is customised for the device. The issue here is that the devices are a major mode of distraction for the users. Alerts on our devices have become a steadfast source of obsession. Therefore, questions can be raised as to why they are designed that way. Questions of why social media platforms have notifications that are red and beg for our attention.

This results in what Hendricks and Vestergaard called the *Attention Economy* where the goal is to gain profit by creating technology that draws and holds interest of the user for as much time as possible (Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2018). This market structure is characterized by attention as a precious commodity that we sell in order for the industry to make a profit. Social media is a big part of what grabs our attention. This attention on social media can, therefore, be focused on in many different forms be it entertainment, social interactions, to engage in para-social[2] relationships online, or even providing a platform for online activism.

In spite of the negative effects of the Internet on modern society, it is important to address the positive usage of the technology as well. This research will delve into the idea of new media technologies as weapons of mass distraction and also study how it can be used to facilitate political participation. Mizoram, a small state in the Northeast region of India, is the area selected for this research. For the purpose of this research, a few events from the area that demanded participation on contentious issues (mainly border issues) were identified to study how and why people from that area use social media when it comes to political participation. This will be expanded later on in Section 3.1.3.

One glaring problem present is the rate at which Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are changing. Not only the speed, affordability, and penetration of the internet has changed at a rapid rate, even our usage patterns transform with change in interest. The apps we use and how we use them constantly evolve, not to mention social media platforms themselves is experiencing change (or growth). For example, during the course of this research,

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[2] A parasocial relationship is a one-sided relationship formed when one party extends energy, interest, and time and the other person doesn't know they exist (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Twitter is experiencing some structural changes after its acquisition by Elon Musk who claims that he will make the platform encourage free speech (Lerman, 2022). Regardless of the changes that operate in the online spaces, this research will focus on the situation at the time, and the interest of the users at the time the study was carried out.

Social media participation finds its worth in its efficiency to inform, organise, and exchange of ideas and values between groups of individuals that may otherwise find it difficult. The ease of access, lower cost of participation, and the speed at which information can be shared has greatly shifted the modes of activism in favour of online spaces. Social media, therefore, could be seen as an important communication channel through which the social issues could be encouraged to dwell in the *netizen's* political consciousness.

The following sections will be used for introducing the Internet, how social media platforms are used for activism, and also provide an introduction into the state of Mizoram.

1.1 Introduction to smartphones and the Internet

It is important for us to also look into how the Internet has become a permanent and dominating feature of our everyday lives. For most of us, this journey probably began with the introduction of the smartphone. The Motorola DynaTAC 8000X (1983) can be considered as the first cell phone. However, the IBM Simon (1994) could be considered the first 'smartphone' as for the first time a phone came equipped with a touchscreen and in-built software applications. From the Nokia 1100, the all-time best-selling cell phone, all the way to the iPhone and Samsung Galaxy(s), they forever changed our concept of phones, their utility, and relevance in our daily lives.

From the release of Apple's original iPhone in January 2007, smartphones coupled with an internet service has become an essential element that outlines our behaviour. There was a time before the era of cell phones, when certain households with good/decent income could afford a telephone connection from the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL in India). The telephone directory was one of the most important companions to that *one* telephone in the house that was extensively used by everyone in the house and sometimes that served as a contact point for the neighbours in the vicinity. There idea of 'my phone' was an alien concept back then as compared to being a norm in today's time. Although landline connections are still

used by many businesses and sometimes households, the scene has shifted immensely towards cell phones, and in today's context for smartphones, the Internet connection is a mandate.

1.2 New media and social networks

The term *new media* in the broadest sense represents new communication technologies of the time. According to Gitelman and Pingree, all media at one point were "new media", which provides new associations across what may be called traditional media (Gitelman & Pingree, 2004). They consider new media as an evolving concept and studied it from a historical context. Therefore, in today's context, the term new media would be applicable to devices such as smartphones, internet connections, social networking, streaming services, podcasts, blogging and micro-blogging, video sharing websites, modern video games, mobile communication, online shopping, etc.

According to Robert K. Logan, the main difference with traditional media (otherwise known as legacy media) lies in the idea that new media is a descendant of traditional media and depends heavily on traditional media for the material. New media refer to those digital media that are interactive, two-way, and involve some sort of computing. So, the main point of departure between traditional media and new media lies in interactivity (Logan, 2016).

New Media is also defined by the evolution of communication channels. According to Crosbie (2015), communication mediums have evolved from interpersonal (one-to-one), to mass media (one-to-many), and finally to new media (many-to-many). He also emphasized the conditions that are required for the emergence of the new medium – The development of modern computers that are interconnected through the Internet. This enabled the process by which data is sorted, packaged, and transmitted in numerous ways by many individuals who are both senders and receivers who share control over the content (Crosbie, 2015). Studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) also led to new concepts such as "*hyperpersonal*" communication which examines the mechanisms with which the source, receiver, channel, and feedback processes interact with communication medium, extending our capacity to carry out interpersonal relations in enhanced or amplified ways (Walther, 1996).

These new channels of communication may also be, for some people, more attractive than face-to-face interpersonal communications. Social support can be disadvantaged in face-

to-face communication when parties involved are incapable of fully grasping the issue presented. A person may not be able to help another due to lack of experience whereby efforts that stem from that situation could likely be clumsy or strained (La Gaipa, 1990; Goldsmith, 1992). Furthermore, personal relationships tend to be bound by layers of intimacy that a third party, relatively unknown individual may be free of. In such circumstance, individuals may be subjected to an unqualified acceptance of social support (La Gaipa, 1990). Therefore, some scholars are of the opinion that new media technologies provide the social platform that is more attractive for some people and may even diminish some of the adverse aspects of face-to-face communication (Walther & Boyd, 2002).

Misnomers, and misrepresentations of the term *new media* may be easy to make since it is, for one, still new, and most importantly, rapidly and continuously changing the way we communicate, consume media like movies and music, buy things, and/or socialize. In this study, we shall focus our attention towards *social media* and its role in facilitating democracy.

1.2.1   Twitter as a new public sphere

Social media is undoubtedly an important battleground where activists constantly work to guarantee the visibility of certain issues, whether it be to ignite debates over them or attract mass media attention, or both. It indeed works as an effective forum for publicising contentious issues. Whether or not Twitter is the most frequently used App on mobile devices (which is true for the case of Mizoram as well), it is undoubtedly the chosen battleground for online activism.

Twitter, created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, falls under what is termed *micro-blogging* where users share short messages to the public who have subscribed to the account of the person who shared the messages. According to Murthy (2013), micro-blogs are defined by internet-based services where – 1) users may create profiles in order to publish short messages; 2) these messages are displayed for users that subscribe to it; and 3) users can decide whose messages they may observe. The appeal of Twitter, therefore, as compared to other social media sites like Facebook, is the availability of public, easily consumable content, that comes in tiny packages. Murthy also mentioned how Facebook is different from Twitter in such a way that it prioritizes community and vibrant communication (Murthy, 2013). Twitter, he said, gives more credence to the accumulation of followers who are invested in the published content of the

concerned user. Furthermore, the platform is unique in a sense that it provides an open platform where users can interact with opinion leaders such as top government officials and celebrities. Therefore, the platform is rather appropriate for effectively hosting collective outrage that is directed towards a particular individual of power.

In order to look at the problem in a clearer context I will present a recent and relevant case to address the question of social media as a facilitator of social action. Starting with the well-known *MeToo Movement* started in 2017 after a group of women came forward with accusations of sexual misconduct against Harvey Weinstein, a prominent Producer in Hollywood.

The original purpose of the hashtag #*MeToo*, as used by Tarana Burke in 2006, was to empower women through empathy, especially young and vulnerable women. In October 2017, Alyssa Milano, a famous actress, encouraged using the phrase as a hashtag to help reveal the extent of problems with sexual harassment and assault by showing how many people have experienced these events themselves. The phrase 'Me Too' was tweeted by Alyssa Milano around noon on October 15, 2017 and had been used more than 200,000 times by the end of the day and tweeted more than 500,000 times by October 16. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. It garnered so much attention that more than 70 Hollywood celebrities have shared their own stories of how they faced harassment in the workplace. It also gave birth to other movements of the same nature that further highlighted the need for a discussion on the issue.

However, the movement is not without its fair share of criticisms. An American professor of International Politics, Daniel Drezner (2018) wrote that it created a shift in the norms of Hollywood such that –

> "[Firstly] Actions that do not rise to the level of sexual assault constitute a threat in the workplace. [Secondly] If someone accuses a more powerful person of sexual harassment, the reaction should not be 'he said/she said' but rather a presumption that the accuser is likely telling the truth, because the risks of going public are great." (Drezner, 2018, para 7).

One of the criticisms that the movement received – The notion that the accused are 'guilty until proven innocent.' Furthermore, the punishments sentenced for these accusations demand immediate penalties that are similar across the spectrum of misconducts (minor to serious offenses) exposed which were primarily public condemnation and the termination of their careers. Finally, even though it is suitable to attribute the scale of the movement as a result of social media, the main contention lies in the question of whether the movement would have garnered such attention if the agents/victims were not celebrities.

In India, we have socio-political movements combating discrimination based on caste, class, gender, race, and social evils like rape and murder. Let us look at two examples of new media and socio-political movements in India – 1) Anna Hazare and 2) Nirbhaya Case. Firstly, members of the government were quick to point out that media's back-to-back coverage of his 'dharna' was the only reason the event had garnered public attention. However, later studies have attributed the success of the agitation to a number of factors, including new media.

The fast-unto-death protest began in August, 2011. By August 15, twitter hashtags #isupportannahazare, #janlokpal, and #lokpal were trending. News reports claim that by August 28, the search engine Google has turned up 29 million results if you entered Anna Hazare in the search box. 360,000 people had 'liked' a Facebook page on Hazare, the Support Anna Hazare Fight Against Corruption page on Facebook go 140,000 likes. Parashar in 2012, conducted a study surveying 50 people in the age group 16-35 in Delhi and found that 78% said they were mobilized through new media platforms to participate, 64% claimed to spread the message of protest through new media while 20% said they did not respond in any way. Given the massive use of social media and its popularity among the stakeholders, mainstream media was forced to follow the lead during this movement (Narayanan & Pradhan, 2016).

Secondly, regarding the Nirbhaya case, the use of social media for activism has transformed the technology into a resource for quick and reliable updates on information, live coverage of protest events, a medium for protesters to connect with their loved ones and friends, and a tool for activists to collaborate on upcoming plans of action (Ahmed & Jaidka, 2013). A mapping of 62,473 tweets by Narayanan and Pradhan (2016) show the number of tweets in the pre-protest phase at 20,366 rising to 25,207 in the peak of the protest, and 16,900 after. The

authors assert that the users are active participants rather than passive consumers and such events could signal an end to the dominance that conventional media has in the future.

1.2.2 Hashtag activism

Also known as the "pound sign", the symbol # has been a tool for counterpublics to group messages on social media message boards. Hashtags create shortcuts by providing hyperlinks to these messages by grouping them together. People that have the same thoughts may do the same and create a large collection of ideas grouped by common notions. In this way counterpublic groups may invite participation on the topic to allies that support or share the same ideas. The usage of the symbol started on Twitter in 2007, since then hashtags have become integral for online communication and interaction to a point where it is used in other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram that have incorporated the into their own platforms. According to Jackson and colleagues (2020) –

> "Hashtags, which are discursive and user-generated, have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed within the fast-paced pastiche of Twitter." (Jackson, et al., 2020, p xxvii).

As more individuals use hashtags to link various interests, prominent news organisations, politicians, celebrities, and officials have taken notice of their prevalence and have utilised them for discourse on a variety of subjects. Additionally, they were quick to start their own Twitter profiles and hire social media teams whose job it is to react to the brand-new communication capabilities. The platform provided them an effective tool for reaching out to a larger audience. The effectiveness and popularity of this new system of messsage dissemination is undeniably evident.

Most, if not all, social media activism uses this hashtag function to promote their own movements by creating trends. Trending topics on social media greatly impacts the level of attention a social issue may have from the general public as well as mass media. Creating hype on social media regarding a particular issue depends on active public discourse along with extened media coverage (Chung, 2018).

The trend that a hashtag reaches, or the number of use it has, does not neceesarily signify the extent to which a message is distributed, since, the purpose of a hashtag promoting one narrative has not always worked out the way it is intended. For example, in the midst of social media being bombarded with negative images targeted towards the New York police, a hashtag #MyNYPD was used to form a more positive image of the New York Police Department. The same hashtag was hijacked by individuals from the opposite side of the aisle to spread numerous accounts of police brutality (Jackson & Welles, 2015; Jackson, et al., 2020).

1.3   New media in India

According to the United Nations agency that oversees international communications, more than 3 billion people are now using the Internet globally. The number of internet users has increased from 738 million in 2000 to 3.2 billion in 2015, of which two billion live in developing countries according to a new report from the International Telecommunication Union. That's a seven-fold increase that brought internet penetration up from 7% to 43% of the global population. In 2015, internet penetration in India, according to World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database – ITU[3], was at 15% but this has risen up to 46% as of 2021.

The Internet is accessed through computers, smart TVs, smartphones and other mobile devices. In India, the Internet is accessed mostly through smartphones and tablets. Three basics reasons could be – 1) the availability of affordable data packages; 2) unreliable broadband services; and 3) the availability of cheap smartphones (Narayan & Narayanan, 2016). According to TRAI, although the number of internet and broadband users constitutes only a small portion of the total population, the proportion of access of internet is much higher for mobile devices than that of broadband connection. Fixed broadband subscriptions in India numbered at 18,653,312 in 2016, which saw a 46% increase to 27,560,000 by 2021. The number of mobile cellular subscriptions in 2016 was 1.13 billion, which saw a tiny 1.76% increase to 1.15 billion in 2021.

1.4   A brief introduction of Mizoram

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[3] Source: data.worldbank.org/indicator/

Mizoram was a part of Assam till 1972 after which it became a Union Territory. It became a full state on 20 February, 1987 after years of insurgency movements. According to an estimate by Population Census[4], Mizoram by 2023, should have a population around 13.8 lakhs. However, the latest 2011 census puts the amount at 10.9 lakhs out of which 36.48% (n=400,309) live in Aizawl (the capital of Mizoram). The state ranks as the second least populated state, and the 3rd highest literacy rate in India. Located in the Southernmost landlocked state in North-East India, it shares borders with Bangladesh and Tripura in the West, Manipur and Assam in the North and Myanmar along the East and South.

The territorial boundaries of Mizoram serve as a means of preserving group and communal unity between different clans and therefore serve as the suitable foundation for ethnicity. The formation of ethnicity based on territorial settlement dictates that while members of the *Hmars* and the *Paites* and other non-Lusei clans (with the exception of Lakher and Pawis) within the state seem to inculcate themselves to the *Lusei* ethnicity, going as far as to speak the *Duhlian* language, while members of the identical clans that settle down in Manipur and elsewhere beyond Mizoram knowingly attempt to preserve their own distinguished identities by clinging to their vernaculars and traditions (Nunthara, 1996). The *Chakmas* and the *Reangs,* even though they are considered as formal residents of the territory as far as political context is considered, they remain separated from the idea of *Mizo* ethnicity since they share no common heritage or customs with the *Mizos*. This results in existing political tensions between *Mizos, Chakmas,* and *Reangs*.

The *Duhlian* dialect, also known as the *Lusei*, is the *lingua franca*[5] of the state and has come commonly referred to as the *Mizo ṭawng* (meaning language). *Duhlian*, English and Hindi are the official languages of the state. *Mizo ṭawng* is the most dominant among these and is used for verbal interactions. However, English has its base in education, administration, formalities and governance, is widely used. The area also consists of other dialects like the *Hmar, Mara (Lakher), Lai (Pawi), Thadou-Kuki, Paite, Gangte,* etc. The Roman script and Hunterian transliteration techniques were combined to form the Mizo script, which was

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[4] Source: https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/districtlist/mizoram.html
[5] A language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different.

developed by Christian missionaries Rev. J.H. Lorrain and Rev. F.W. Savidge, and has clear signs of a phonetics-based spelling system (Nunthara, 1996; Lalthangliana, 1892).

Christianity is the main religion of Mizoram and is practiced by 87% of the population. Its importance in society is extensive and is considered to be a vital part of the *Mizo* identity in today's time (Pachuau, 2014). Modern day *Mizo* was built on the foundations of Christianity that was brought in by Welsh and English missionaries during the late 1800s. The *Mizos* of that time practiced animistic rituals and were administered by several tribal chiefdoms. The tribal lifestyle and rituals were regarded by them as a barrier for law and order. Their solution was to introduce modern education along with Christianity. The community's activities with this religion, and the performances surrounding death are seen as prime organizers for identity formation. This praxis, therefore also functions as boundary markers around which concepts of belonging and exclusion are raised (Pachuau, 2014).

Northeast India has a history of violent clashes along the lines of ethnicity or religion, seeking cultural and political autonomy. Mizoram itself was a part of an insurrection against the Government of India back in March 1966 led by the Mizoram National Front. It is important to mention that at the time Mizos shared strong historical affinities with the Burmese than those in mainland India (Nibedon, 2013). This may not be the case today, more than 30 years later after the Mizoram Peace Accord was signed on June, 1886. However, the dynamics of tensions that prevail around the Assam-Mizoram border may have a larger scope for exploration in this context. Territorial disputes between Assam and Mizoram as well as disputes between Reangs and Mizos with regards to Assembly Election during November, 2018 will provide incidents that the research focus on to study how and why Mizos use social media for political participation (see Section 3.1.3).

1.4.1 *Tlawmngaihna* as cultural norms that boost participation in Mizoram

The term *tlawmngaihna* denotes a moral code of conduct that the Mizo community is expected to follow and exercise in their daily lives. Chatterji defined *tlawmngaihna* as –

> "the compelling moral force which finds expression in self-sacrifice for the service of the others." (N. Chatterji, 1975, p. 513)

Tlawmngaihna, as a defining characteristic of a person, makes the individual virtuous or *tlawmngai* and are held at high esteem in the community. The idea of *tlawmngaihna* comprises of various virtues and ethical practices that guide the life of the Mizos. For example, a person exhibiting *tlawmngaihna* is prepared for any occasion that demands his contribution, whether that be in the form of physical tasks or by self-sacrifice. In a nutshell, that person is altruistic and chivalrous and always puts the welfare of others before himself (Gangte, 2018). According to Ralte –

> "The emphasis of *tlawmngaihna* is an act of charity wherein self-interest is subordinated to the interest of community." (Ralte, 2017, p. 71)

According to the Lushai Hills District (Village Councils) Acts 1953, the term *Hnatlang* refers to 'a common service for the common good of the villagers which the residents of the village are to render.' Furthermore, according to the Act, *Hnatlang* has become a mandate among the community to an extent where fines not exceeding Rs.50 are imposed to families that cannot provide individuals to participate in the service. However, this provision exempts people below the age of 15 and above the age of 60 years. The practice of *Hnatlang* coupled with *Tlawmngaihna* as a moral code of conduct, responded directly to crisis and emergencies in the community. According to Hlawndo, some examples of *Hnatlang* may include – 1) the repair or construction of houses for those that have suffered natural disasters; 2) delivering news about someone's death (*zualko*) to different or neighbouring villages; 3) the transportation of the body of a dead person (*miruang zawn*) from one location to another; 4) Construction of community water supply or wells (*tuikhur*) among many others (Hlawndo, 2011, p. 47).

The vorticities of *tlawmngaihna* and the social reward and reverence it comes with have been long-held values in Mizo society. Therefore, when it comes to participation, be it community activity or political cause, the persuasive ethical code, which exhibits expression in self-sacrifice for the service of the others, seem to be a strong impetus for participation. The development of these virtues into the norms of society provides a sense of eagerness towards taking up civic responsibilities. Identification, familiarity, and practice of this trait manifest as a strong motivation for netizens of Mizoram for services the community would deem to be a

necessary *Hnatlang*. The next section will define two instances where online participation was demanded from the community.

1.4.2 Political Participation in Mizoram in New Media spaces

Social media activism has taken place a few times in Mizoram whereby online agents take up the spread and dissemination of information on various issues. This research will focus on four events that demanded online activism among netizens. One example was an incident that happened on November, 2018. As the Legislative Assembly elections were to take place on that month, rising tensions regarding how the displaced Reangs (Bru) from Mizoram that settled in Tripura camps would participate in the election. The general populace of Mizoram had a disagreement with the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of the time, S.B. Shashank's decision to make arrangements for the displaced Brus to cast their votes from the Tripura camps (Chopra & Saha, 2018). The Mizo population claimed that repatriation attempts have been conducted for years and the idea of casting votes from outside the state was outrageous. They also claimed that agreements were made during the previous election (November 2013) that displaced Brus would be allowed to cast their votes only within their constituencies inside Mizoram. The general uproar that was fuelled by non-Governmental organisations led to thousands of people gathering in Aizawl for a protest rally on that was referenced as "*Hnam Hnatlang*" where the people demanded the removal of the CEO from his post (Hmar, 2018; Karmakar, 2018; Kalita, 2018). The term *Hnam* translates to 'a race, tribe, nation, or clan'; while *Hnatlang,* as mentioned in the previous sections, means a common service, for the good of the community, that the members are expected to participate in. Many were quick to discuss the issues, and spread awareness through social media creating hype for the issue to the point where it dominated the public discourse. Mizo netizens took to Twitter and used hashtags like #ShashankOut #HnamHnatlang accompanied by photos to express their minds and/or express their solidarity with the people. Figure 1 shows people gathering for a peaceful protest where demands were heard from opinion leaders, and songs were performed for the crowd by singers.

1.5 Slacktivism, echo-chambers and virtue signalling

Slacktivism, according to Dwigth Ozard and Fred Clark in 1995, is a portmanteau of the words *slack* and *activism,* defined by meaningless activities by the youth as an attempt to affect society on a small scale (Christensen, 2011). Today, however, it is defined as a feel-good attempt at

activism that takes place online, but has zero political or social impact. This *feel-good* concept can also be further expanded into a term we now call *Virtue Signalling*. It is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as –

> "an attempt to show people that you are a good person, for example, by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media. It is the habit of indicating that one has virtue merely by expressing disgust or favour for certain political ideas or cultural phenomenon."

Figure 1. *Hnam Hnatlang* near Assembly House, Aizawl on November 6, 2018. (Source: Twitter[6])

Although many scholars agree with the idea of social media activism as lazy and lacking effort, it is undeniably relevant in the current global zeitgeist. No amount of criticism seems to negate the fact that legacy media in current times give immense attention to social media so much to the point that it is a norm for news channels to mention tweets by whomever relevant individual it is that tweeted something they deem is relevant.

In competitive athleticism, the person who runs the fastest, or the team that scores the most goals is rewarded. They're accomplishments are affirmed and rewarded with prizes

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[6] https://pbs.twimg.com/media/DrU3_qkX0AEq7cC?format=jpg&name=small Retrieved on March 2, 2023

sometimes ranging till fourth-best performances. This is also true for academic performances and anything that has everything to do with physical or mental competency. New Media however, has seemed to bring about new forms of virtue and rewards. Those that are make the most noise through their words, those that are most followed, for reasons that can stretch way beyond that of the physical or mental capacities of a person or those of the purely superficial attributes, are rewarded. We can see this in everyday use of social media spaces where the most beautiful or the most talented musician, or those who *say* they run the fastest, or those that express the most outrageous ideas are helmed with the opportunity to influence the largest amount of people with the help of their talent. That is not to say they don't have the right to express their ideas, however, the motives behind seem to be for internet *clout*[7]*,* and/or *content* which is a performance exclusively to garner attention online. Social media spaces seem to neglect certain qualities that gave virtuosity to the opinion leaders in the age of information technology. The two-step flow of information highlights the importance of opinion leaders in shaping the way society thinks. The efficacy of opinion leaders is based on the fact that they are - 1) well known to the society and, 2) therefore, are trusted. There seems to be a fracture in the two-step flow of information when it comes to social media spaces which results in fringe, or even misinformed ideas re-emerging into the public discourse. Regardless of how social media platforms tried to tackle misinformation during the COVID-19 period, it did not do enough to curtail the rise of misinformation that led to the upsurge of anti-vaxxers (Pertwee, et al., 2022). Studies indicate that, new media technologies create a space where confirmation bias is reinforced, forming an *echo-chamber* for the establishment of like-minded users framing and strengthening a common narrative (Cinelli, et al., 2021; Garrett, 2009).

Miller (2008) he argued that new media has brought with it an online culture increasingly dominated by *phatic* communications i.e., messages that serves purely social purposes rather than conveying or transferring informational or dialogic intents. The preservation of networks is a key function of discussion and communication in advancing societal harmony. The term 'phatic function' of communication refers to this. Indeed, social media in particular has received praise for its potential to foster activism and social change by increasing awareness of injustices, inspiring people to take political action, and facilitating the

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[7] An informal term used to denote influence or power, especially in politics or business. The Urban Dictionary adds that in popular culture, people with clout are seen as popular and cool.

organisation and coordination of that action for maximum impact (Miller, 2008). However, he argued against social media questioning the assumption of rise of social media as linked with increased political activism, or an increase in online activities as an indication of increase in political participation (Miller, 2017). He argued that –

"…the rise of a phatic online culture in social media activism has atrophied the potential for digital communications technologies to help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere." (Miller, 2017, p 1).

The idea of political activism in his work was extensively downplayed. Miller's work ignores the intended outcome and the approaches surrounding online activism. It ignores the importance of virality that drives most collaborative voices that intend to promote a narrative.

1.6   Purpose of the Study

As access to and availability of media changes rapidly, new forms of usage are presented to us faster than ever before. Although there are challenges in categorising New Media, it can be accepted that it offers many new paradigms of production and reception of content as opposed to traditional means of communication. However undeniable it is that new media promotes social movements; we must also address the question of whether new media acts as a tool for mass distraction.

There's also the question of whether the advent of new media and social media platforms break individual isolations. We have more information available at our disposal and now more than ever people can connect faster, easier and more efficient. However, to borrow from Benedict Anderson, there is the possibility of there being an imagined *virtual* community (Anderson, 2006). Social communities formed on online platforms like Facebook, where users might aggregate thousands of "friends", many of whom they probably don't know personally, many that they've never met. Interactions among users, in such cases, seems meaningless and devoid of purpose. The idea of expressions on social media platforms seem more like virtue signalling that serves to fulfil the feel-good element the platform caters to.

Being media literate is all about knowing how to read and analyse media messages. This means that in the era of information superhighway, individuals will have to be more

cautious when consuming media. Following this idea, this research will explore the social functions of new media in facilitating political participation as well as offer a critique to the existing structures of new media platforms.

1.7   Statement of the Problem

This research will attempt to study the use of social media, focusing on the efficacy and processes with which new media technologies are used in tackling social issues, and question whether this same innovation doubles as a tool of mass distraction.

Considering the freedom with which new media users can expand the boundaries of usage of their devices, it is no surprise that the avenues of scope has been extensively expanded. But it only begs the question of what this new scope of use brings. Scholars are keen to explore the democratizing potential while still acknowledging the negative aspects of what the new technology brings. This research has presented a whole range of problems originating from the use of the Internet. The core argument for all the issues is the commercial nature of the industry that followed demand. Ever since the Internet developed into a technology that warranted tremendous attention, *Silicon Valley*[8] has dominated the markets. It is here that the development of modern forms of communication were invented. The development of the Internet which started with ARPANET[9] all the way to the innovative ideas that brought us modern-day smartphones, have all contributed to the shift in modes of communication and collaboration among members of the society.

Regardless of which side of the argument one may lean towards, it is rather obvious to state that the ease of access to information, the instantaneous exchange of said information, and the communities it fosters, new media undoubtedly brings about new forms of political participation and collaboration. The spreadability combined with the instantaneous nature of information sharing on social media, has beaten legacy media when it comes to how and when, we receive materials. How often do we see events unfold through social media before we hear

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[8] The area South of the San Francisco Bay Area is where the place called Silicon Valley is located. This name was used because the area is associated with the silicon transistor, which is utilised in all contemporary microprocessors, the name was originally used in the early 1970s.
[9] The U.S. Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was the first public packet-switched computer network.

about it on TV? Furthermore, the prosumer model defines that the content that floats on social media platforms are generated by the users themselves. This means that the Internet, which exhibits similar structures of a *rhizome* (further discussions on this topic in Section 2.2), allows for contribution from those that have the privilege to do so. Since, the technology has been made available and affordable to such large numbers of the population, it is only fair to assume that society has the capacity to enforce larger means of participation.

This research will try to study the methods of use of social media, the effects of its distractive nature, the utility it embodies, and the motivations that promote political participation in Mizoram.

1.8   Research Questions and Objectives

With careful consideration, the following are the list of *Research Questions* this research will attempt to answer:

1. Are new media users of Mizoram passive or active participants in socio-political movements?
2. Do new media technologies provide a space for political participation for the people of Mizoram?
3. Are new media technologies tools of distraction for the people of Mizoram?
4. What unique mechanisms do social media users of Mizoram present in handling social issues?
5. Does levels of online activism correlate to levels of offline participation?
6. What are the major limitations/motivations that impede/encourage the social utilities of new media?

Considering the above research questions, the following are the list of *Research Objectives* this research will attempt to fulfil:

1. To map out new media consumption patterns of the people of Mizoram.
2. To find out the influence of social media for socio-political mobilizations in Mizoram.
3. To study levels of participation regarding socio-political issues and its influence on users' attitude towards offline participation in Mizoram.

4. To identify the mechanisms that dictates the functions and uses of social media in Mizoram.

5. To find out characteristics of new media that limits/encourage creating social change for the people of Mizoram.

1.9   Definition of key terms

In order avoid making false equivalencies when it comes to various terms that will be used in the process of writing, this section will be used to clarify certain terms and concepts that will be used for the thesis. This is due to confusion that can arise from terms such as online activism and social media activism, or even the term activism in general. Activism on social media spaces are still contentious subjects since so many scholars argue over the merits and the low-effort it takes going as far as to use terms such as *clicktivism* or *slacktivism* (Freelon, et al., 2020; Christensen, 2011).

With regards to the public relations, *activism* is broadly defined as –

"a process by which groups of people exert pressure on organisations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activist find problematic." (Smith, 2005, p. 5).

In sociology, activism is generally described as a series of contentious performances by which the general populace attempt to tackle social issues through collective action (Tilly, 2004). Generally, activism comes into effect when a group notices a prevailing issue. Historically, activism borne out of the existence of socio-economic disparities, as well as disparities in relation to gender, and race (Smith, 2005).

Online activism, which is sometimes referred to as *cyberactivism, cyberprotest*, or *cyber-social movements,* and in its most simple form is basically any form of protest or activism that takes place over the Internet (Vegh, 2003). This incorporates social media activism as well as protest or activism that takes place outside of social media. A good example of online activism outside of social media spaces would be the famous website for online petitions named *Change.org* where many issues from all over the world gets highlighted and users may agree to a virtual signature for the cause to reach a target. Other examples may include non-profit websites that are dedicated to serve as a mouthpiece for a particular issue or cause, such as 1)

Amnesty International to raise awareness for human rights abuses worldwide; 2) Khan Academy that promotes education; 3) Oxfam International that tackles poverty and inequality; 4) UNICEF website that works for children around the world; and 5) Charity: Water that provides clean water in developing countries. These websites are usually created by NGOs as a public relations initiative and have no value when it comes to social interactivity. Therefore, when the term social media activism is used, it is more specific towards protests and activism that takes place on social media platforms, whether it is Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, etc.

Offline activism refers to participation in demonstrations, or gatherings for a cause that a group, organisation or group of organisations may arrange in order for an issue to be raised to the public. This may include marches, picketing, sit-ins, civil disobedience demonstrations that may or may not become destructive.

1.9.1 Retweets, comments, and likes as a form of protest

The question of what activism takes its form with regards to offline participation is quite simple. An individual may organise or be invited to a gathering or demonstration that serve an issue or a cause. In this instance, as is in most cases of offline participation, participation would require physical presence. Compared to social media activism, offline activism requires the sacrifice of time, effort, energy. Furthermore, there are risks involved to individuals when it comes to those offline activisms as it requires civil disobedience. These risks are not so prevalent when it comes to social media activism. Considering how civil disobedience can end up with casualties, online activism seems a much safer option when it comes to the risk involved. However, this sentiment is not an argument against the efficiency of online activism since death and level of risk involved are not actual measurements that dictate the efficacy of a demonstration.

Social media activism sees its effectiveness showcased in such mundane activities as clicks, likes, comments, and/or retweets. The requirements for hyping up a narrative depends on these activities that leads to a topic becoming what we call *viral* in the online space, eventually demanding attention from even the biggest legacy media channels. The purpose of creating a *Twitter storm* lies on the volume at which communities contribute their effort and time in these clicks, likes, comments, and/or retweets. The louder the volume, the higher the frequency at which the message travels in order to reach a larger audience. Therefore, when it

comes to online activism, clicktivism and slacktivism seem to promote the end goal of creating a loud enough voice that ends up dominating the public discourse. The mechanisms that create this storm will be discussed further in the next chapter. This research will consider online participation defined by these tasks that would otherwise have been considered as *clicktivist* and *slacktivist* activism. Activities, that would have otherwise depended solely on legacy media, and/or offline activism for exposure.

1.10 Brief summary of chapters

This thesis will be divided into six chapters and a short description of each will be provided in the section below –

Chapter 1: This chapter was an introduction to key concepts and arguments that this research wanted to highlight. It focused on fundamental arguments surrounding the nature and purpose new media technologies in society, what they can be used for, and how they impact users' behaviour. The chapter consist of brief introductions to new media technologies and how Twitter is used as a space for public discourse. Other concepts such as phatic communication, slacktivism, echo-chambers were also introduced in this chapter.

The chapter also gave a brief introduction of Mizoram in terms of its location, ethnicity, language, and religion and how these factors play a role in identity formation around the region. It also gave a glimpse into ideas of *tlawmngaihna* as cultural values held among the community that fosters participation in various ways.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, and research objectives were also presented. Finally, the chapter ended with definition of certain terms that will be used in the course of the research.

Chapter 2: This section will be dedicated to literature related to the subject of enquiry. The chapter will be divided thematically based on broader topic of discussions. Such topics will include readings that consider social media as a tool for democracy. These writings claim that as the Internet has spread across nations, its use and penetration has resulted in higher levels of democratic participation as well as demand for a better regime.

The chapter also delves into how the counterpublics, political leaders, as well as bad actors in society all have free access to the technology which itself causes issues. Other issues discussed pertain to studies that indicate rise in misinformation, more political divide among citizens, and how echo-chambers provided by social media platforms promote cognitive bias whereby individuals group together with like-minded people where their beliefs are reinforce among one another. The section also provides writings that deal with mechanisms that dictates the creation of attention towards an issue on social media. The Internet as a rhizome structure was also discussed with writings that criticize it using search engine optimization as examples.

The final section deals with the argument for the commercial structure of social media and the Attention Economy that functions to make profits out of our attention.

Chapter 3: In this chapter we will be discussing the methodologies used with reference to Netnography and two survey conducted for the research. The section starts with an explanation on what Netnography entails, the advantages and disadvantages of the method as well as ethical concerns regarding the methodology. The research demanded the identification of specific events for study, hence, a timeline for consideration of tweets for study were described. Furthermore, sampling methods and justifications were also provided in this section.

The next portion of the chapter was dedicated as a description of the survey questionnaires, the purpose for conducting survey using questionnaires, the method of designing the questionnaire, and the methods for collecting the samples for research. The two surveys conducted serves to support the research in order to study how Mizo netizens use the internet, whether new media technologies cause distraction, what and how they use social media, and whether social media activism has any effect on offline activism.

Chapter 4: This chapter will comprise of discourse focused on findings and interpretations of Netnographic findings specifically since survey findings will be presented separately in the upcoming chapter. The section began with defining the intended outcome of activism on social media platforms, the players that were responsible for issue amplification, the methods of controlling a narrative for activist intervention to contentious issues, and the analysis of photos shared during social media activism.

The analysis of tweets during political protests including observations of the images shared, and a brief analysis of participants social media profiles, provided an interesting insight into how Mizo netizens react to contentious issues when the need for issue amplification occurs.

Chapter 5: This chapter will consist of analysis and interpretations for the survey findings. While the first survey questionnaire attempted to explain whether new media technologies create distractions in the workplace for netizens of Mizoram, the second survey tries to answer the question of whether social media activism has any positive relation to offline activism.

Chapter 6: Theoretical frameworks followed this section with Civic Voluntarism Model being crucial to the argument along with issue amplification and media hype including how and why netizens of Mizoram participate in social media activism. This section of the thesis will be dedicated to conclusions and discussions, the analysis and interpretations for various findings, and it will also include the limitations of the research will also be presented in this section as well as scope for further research.

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