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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS ANTI-SOCIAL CREDENTIALS: CHALLENGES, THREAT & OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The twenty first century witnessed unprecedented rise in the use of technology which has changed the way we see and perceive the flow of information across the globe. One of the most important variables which have facilitated this technological revolution is the emergence of World Wide Web. The emergence of World Wide Web has been central to the development of information age and is one of the most fundamental tools now a days through which people communicate and information is exchanged. There are many platforms through which information is mediated and circulated over the 'Internet' and Social Media has emerged as one of the most important platforms over the past decade.

KEYWORDS : Social Media , Anti-social Credentials,Threat ,Opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Websites such as Facebook and Twitter have facilitated the rise of social media and taught us to communicate and converge information over a considerably large chunk of population. In India there are 145.6 Million people who use and exchange information through social media which earlier in 2012 was around 63.1 Million. This statistical data demonstrates the emerging strength of social media, the number of which has more than doubled over the past three years.

In this article, we will try to understand and explain the rise of social media and the emerging challenges for law enforcement agencies in contemporary Indian society. We would argue that social

media has transformed all the geographical barriers and has emerged as an invisible force (Political, Social as well as Economic) which has the capacity to influence and mobilize a large number of people within a very short span of time because of which the challenges before the law enforcement agencies have increased manifold. This article will investigate those challenges and deliberate over their possible implications.

Websites such as Facebook and Twitter are now one of the most important platform through which people (especially youth) communicate and where there is a continuous exchange of information which sometimes also leads to formation of public opinion. There have been various instances where formation of public opinion through social media has led to violence in some form or the other which in turn disrupts law and order and multiplies the number of challenges for law enforcement agencies. In 2012, there was an isolated incidence in Bangaluru with a North-east student which led to unprecedented mobilization of opinion through social media. It created a menace for law enforcement officers to be able to maintain law and order. Mass scale migration of people from Bangaluru was the consequence of mobilization of opinion through social media and it also led to regional hostility between the people of two states. Incidences such as what happened in Bangaluru presents new, unique and ever changing permutation and combination of challenges before the law enforcement officers. Therefore, it is important to understand the nature and scope of challenges created by social media, not only to address them but also to understand their limits and application which can guide us in future towards averting any future threats of law and order disruption.

The influence of social media on ever increasing number of people has both connotations i.e. good and bad. While social networking sites gets a very large number of people connected, it becomes very difficult to scrutinize the information that is being circulated. Small and isolated incidents such as what happened in Bengaluru can be aggravated and made a national issue by exchange of information, ideas and opinions over different social networking sites. This can have multifarious consequences for law enforcement agencies. Firstly, the exchange of information over social networking sites have no limits and the nature of information can be good as well as bad which in turn could affect the law and order. Secondly, because of the minimal involvement and participation of law enforcement agencies over these social networking sites it becomes immune to any positive intervention, in case there is a collective formation of public opinion. Thirdly, any attempt to understand the consequence of social media has to come from within the social media itself and for that it is an imperative for the law enforcement officers to keep a track to happenings in social media and become an active part of it. Because of the new and ever changing nature and reach of social media people have become more vocal in expressing their opinions over anything and everything; be it politics, social issues or economic ones. In a heterogeneous and deeply stratified society such as ours, public opinion could be dangerous if not channeled properly. This requires an organic link to be established between social networking sites and law enforcement agencies.

Many police departments have begun to use social media in tentative or experimental ways. But because of the fact that social media phenomenon is relatively new, many police agencies have not yet taken a comprehensive approach towards considering their overall philosophy about social networking. In India only few states including Meghalaya has manual regarding the use of social media for law enforcement . But if we look outside India we will find number of successful example on how social media has been tactfully handled by law enforcement agencies to maintain law and order. While in Canada, The Toronto Police Service (TPS) is an excellent example of such experiment. The TPS has a reputation in the field as one of the most advanced law enforcement agencies in the use of social

media. There are currently over 200 individuals in the TPS who have received training and are authorized to use social media to communicate on behalf of the department. There, the Social media is used in two ways i.e., to investigate as well as to communicate with people at a larger scale. From Toronto Police Service experience we can say that social media should not be just another "megaphone" for the police to spread their messages; it should be used to solicit communications from the public to the police as well.

The other aspect of social media lies in identifying the opportunities that lies with using the social media as a platform not only for exchange of necessary information but also for circulating information about various policies. It can serve two purposes, i.e. it can increase the awareness among people active on social media on various issues and it can also help identify the target area for policy intervention through understanding the prevalent public opinion. Therefore, social media if seen as an opportunity could act as a mechanism for promoting governance and forming a consensus for policy level intervention. In urban areas such as in Delhi, the social media is so active that ward level policy intervention is extensively debated over social media websites which in turn has substantial influence when policies are actually being formulated.

With the coming up of information age where information is spread very quickly through internet and social networking sites, formation of consensus is slowly becoming an integral part of governance. Building consensus through mobilizing public opinion over different online forums for policies and steps taken to enhance the quality of governance is an imperative now a days to ensure the smooth functioning of a democratic social order. Contemporary model of networking in governance now a days is more inclined towards forming a consensus through voting and subscribing to ideas over social networking sites. Ideas and opinions are expressed and a consensus is formed online which helps in comprehending the situation which in turn helps in formation of policy and rules.

Another aspect of social media is the networking and promotion of various products, ideas and opinions through publicity over these networking sites. Now a day even elections and electoral politics find a place in social networking sites. Candidates and Political Parties are now actively indulged in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their candidates and their ideology. In this year's assembly election in Delhi, the role of social media was humongous which brought extensive penetration of politics into social media. For some political parties support was being confirmed by subscribing to a particular Facebook page. This demonstrates the acceptance of social media for various different purposes, be it economics, politics or social reform.

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections were India's first real media elections or at least a substantially mediatized one compared to previous polls. It was also being argued that it was the logic of social media that went equally hand in hand with political logic that determined the outcome of elections. It was observed that exposure to social media influence people's political preferences too. Some theorists have gone to the extent of saying that electorates with higher media exposure are more likely to stand in support of economic liberalization. Therefore we can say that higher exposure to social media changes public opinion, voting behavior, economic preferences and what not. This creates opportunity as well as a challenge for law enforcement agencies to deal with dynamically changing public opinion and preferences which in some cases might as well create a nightmare for law enforcement officers to create stability and peace amidst these changing circumstances.

Today the percentage of population active on social media has increased significantly. The rise of active users has been not only restricted to urban area but also to rural India. The increasing use of social media in rural India has grown more than hundred per cent in the past year with 25 million people

using the Internet to access Twitter and Facebook, according to a report. Urban areas witnessed a growth of 35 per cent with 118 million users as of April 2015. On the other hand, the number for rural India stood at 25 million, up from close to 12 million last year, showing a growth of 100 per cent. Increased number of people on social media gives both opportunity as well as challenges to law enforcement agencies. Lately, the cyber-crime has increased on a large scale. According to a report from Symantec, a security solution provider, India ranked second among nations that were most targeted for cyber-crimes through the social media in 2014, after the US.

With the rapid expansion in the use of social networking by law-abiding citizens as well as criminals, many law enforcement agencies are feeling the need to have a team of experts to study social media activity. The intelligence developed through effective observation of social media communications can have a significant impact on tactical police operations. In a recent case in which Krishna Kumar, a 65-year old Hindi typist, who usually sits outside the General Post Office in Lucknow with his typewriter and struggles to earn a bare minimum for his family. A sub-inspector reportedly asked him to vacate the spot on denial of which he was bitten and his typewriter was broken into pieces by him. Local reporters present there, caught the whole action shooted in their cameras and the news spread like wildfire on the social media. There were vehement protests regarding the incident on several social media platforms and an outrage towards the insensitivity of the sub-inspector. His pictures of the incident did several rounds on Facebook too. A lot of people tagged the UP CM office and the CM too asked the concerned DM to take prompt action. The Chief Minister's Office took note of the posts and initiated action against the sub-inspector. Chief Minister later ordered the suspension of sub-inspector for his actions. The CMO also tweeted to the DSP and DM of the area to gift Krishna Kumar with two typewriters, who gets typewriter within 24 hours. All credits for this benevolent action goes to social media which made this petty issue such big that the administration had to take cognizance within 24 hours. Hardly matters that such type of incident was very regular in daily life but action taken this time, was Exemplary in nature! A big salute to social media!

We have also seen many instances of Forwarded Posts on Social Media when some needy persons get money/ help through the posts being shared in charity by many persons. However being a little nuisance for other people, in such cases, if it is really genuine, we feel that social media is like a boon for those needy. Same is the case when somebody seeks direct help from some influential people over their social account. In a recent case, a young girl, after being eve-teased by some goons in the AC compartment of Patna- Delhi Shramjeevi Express, sought help from the Hon'ble Railway Minister of India over tweeting on his social twitter account. Taking immediate cognizance, the concerned minister ordered the Railway Force to take up the issue and at the very next station; two dozen goons were arrested and sent to jail.

We may perceive the use of social media by law enforcing agency also in yet another example of Darbhanga Police in Bihar. A "Facebook Page of Darbhanga Police" was created in June 2014 by Mr. Kumar Ashish, IPS 2012 (also author of this article), the then ASP of Darbhanga District which was aimed at addressing and understanding the problems of common people. People started liking the idea and expressing their local problem extensively. Prompt action of public grievances made this attempt extremely popular and a better relation between Police & Public flourished by leap and bound. Again, at Madhepura District (Bihar) in the capacity of SP(Superintendent of Police), the same person has initiated Whatsapp groups with Press-Media & Common People to have a direct two way communication along with photos & videos. It helps immensely in fixing the responsibility of all concerned officers and in reducing the menace of Corruption in administration. This step is proving a

milestone in better governance as well as grievance redressal. After successful Facebook & Twitter handling, Police administration of Delhi, Mumbai and other big metros have launched their APP to solve the common public issue and specially the women safety concern. Such examples of interacting people over social media should be encouraged and adopted in as many places as possible.

With the ever increasing number of people using social media, their challenges are also enormous. The first and foremost challenge for law enforcement agencies is to be social media friendly. To observe and understand the issues being circulated over social media and enable the department to address the issues relating to law and order.   These days, terrorists and anti-establishment persons target social profile of innocent people and by forging their photos/ signatures and other identity proofs; they use that information for destructive purposes. Secondly, we need to develop or better say, prepare our cyber crime office to deal adequately with any such issue in a timely manner. Any delay in dealing such type of crimes may lead to severe implications like those of (Muzaffarnagar riots 2014, Maharashtra havoc after Bal Thakaray's death etc). Thirdly, the need to have some strict guidelines for commoners to access the social media is essential. We need to understand that everything can't & shouldn't be shared on social media just for the sake of our Freedom of Speech. If it hurts the sentiments of some stakeholders of society, it should be avoided. And fourthly, it has become indispensable for us as common society to be aware of misuse of Social Media. It may work as a tool for propagation of any particular ideology which may be nefarious to common Good (Islamic Terrorism) or as a tool to deny/ accept some facts (Controversy of IAS vs other services) or to develop a Mass Opinion (Jan Lokpal Movement in Delhi, 2011) or to generate a false impression (Rising Intolerance in India) and many more. We find that above are some burning examples of misusage of social media platform where it has constantly been used to mould the public perception to create/ make visible the brighter/ gloomy side of a situation which may or may not be genuine.

Social media can be perceived as a way of interaction between different sets of people that also transcends any geographical barriers. Contents and issues deliberated over social media are no different from common social issues faced by us in our day to day life. To understand these issues and to get acquainted to it, any law enforcement agency must be A Master of this platform. With the help of high grade technology, this task we would say has become a little easier. All needed is to get familiar with these networking sites and to get ourselves acquainted with issues and ideas circulating over this digital world so that we could face the challenge when any problem transcends the digitized world and enters into real one.

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1.The World Wide Web is an information space where documents and other web resources are identified by URL, Interlinked by hypertext links and can be accessed via the internet. The World Wide Web was invented by English scientist Tim Berners-Lee in 1989.
2.Social media are the websites and application that enables users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.
3.See www.wearesocial.net/tag/india/ number of active internet users in India has exceeded 350 Million of which 145.6 Million are active users of social media platforms.
4.http://megpolice.gov.in/circulars/SOP_SocialMedia.pdf
5.Toronto Police Service started interaction on social media in 2007, which furthermore developed in 2011.

6.Palshikar Suhas (2014): "Modi, Media and the Middle Class" Seminar, 656, April.
7.Gandhi, Jatin (2013): "Modi Mythology", Open Magazine, 18th July.

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