Convergence and Dynamics in Alternative Media in the Digital Age: Emergence of a Participatory Virtual Public Sphere

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Abstract:

India as a country with its vast socio cultural diasporahas always beena flourishing ground for the growth of alternative media. The countless social stigmas attached with class, caste and religious segregation and social inequalityhas essentially lead to ademand of unbiased and free media sources. Structural reforms in a country as vivid as India is complicated and demands time, specially when the enormous population and the diversityis taken into consideration. This makes it way more difficult to bring the masses on common grounds and direct them to take actions regarding their welfare and development. However, various types of traditional media, folk media and other sources of alternative media have made the task of social reformation easier than it otherwise would have been. With the advent of information technology and digitization, the sources of traditional and folk media has merged and taken a very evolved avatar which is more interactive and stands in itself true to the Bullet Theory of communication. The messages now conveyed reach the masses immediately and the respective response is generated thorugh digital means. This response can be measured in terms of impressions, subscribtions, likes, support or reactions. The feedback mechanism and introduction to a'Call to Action' system of response has changed the paradigm of social development completely. This study aims to analyze how conventional form of alternative media has evolved with changing times and has been shaped with technological advancements, challenging the existing cultural hegemony. The study is directed towards analyzing the media convergences in digital age alternative media and find out how it has facilitated social change in twenty first century. It also aims to study the content consumption patterns and the popular culture that has been created. The study will focus on understanding the leading trends, mediums and channels and how they helps in directing mass actions. It shall also focus on finding out the factors that led to the development and growth of alternative media in India.

AIM: To study the convergences, growth and role of alternate media in India in the digital age.
Objectives: The objectives of the study are-
- to trace the convergences in alternate media in the digital age
- to find out the popular alternative media sourcesindigital age
- to analyze the content consumption patterns across popular mediums of alternative media
- to study the nuances of participatory culture in the digital age alternative media

Introduction:
Alternative Media is popularly defined as any form of media which works towards spreading information without being under any political or governmental pressure. It is free of biases and influences of powerful people. It portrays the issues of the voiceless section of the society which generally involved the marginalized and outcaste people whose issues generally do not get the lime light and the mainstream media often ignores their plights and in turn their rights as well! The famous British Entertainer Ben Edwards said, 'While mainstream media is lead by profit ratings and popularist culture and filtered by the current political climate, Alternative Media is lead solely by the convictions of the campaign and film maker'. We live in the times where our thoughts and actions are largely influenced by mainstream media and alternate content consumption. According to the reports published by Statista Research Department on March 19 2021, the year 2020 reflected that the highest daily content consumption was that on television media when compared to media sources. However this data cannot overshadow the fast and ever-

growing spread of new media and alternative media whose cause and effect is as deep rooted as that of any mainstream media.

Traditional form of Alternative Media:

The earliest form of alternative communication could be traced as early as 4th century CE when Bharat Muni wrote the 36 book of Natyashashtra. Around 2000 years ago we had our first Sanskrit street theatre Koodiyattam from the land of Kerala. Street theatres and folk literatures were the sole source of entertainment and information in ancient times and this could be understood by the folklore of our country where men and woman from various tribal communities would gather together to celebrate occasions like crop harvest, marriage, puberty or simple nature worship. They would often compose rhyming prose and ballads which would speak of morally uplifting tales or stories of bravery and also worshiping the nature. These poetries would usually be accompanied with traditional instruments like some single string instrument or percussion instruments. There would be performances with special attires and accessories to mark the importance of the occasion. The folklores were important medium to communicate people of the changes and updates associated with the community and make them aware about matters of common interest and social welfare.

Folk literature holds its importance and roots in the ancient Indian lifestyle and living. It is mostly in the context of what people were exposed to and have lived. It was primarily considered as the 'song or poetry of the people". In the pretext of Indian musical history, the two types of music literature were, the songs of the Gods that later became the Hindustani Classical music and the Song of the people that became the Indian folk music. The folk music and folk literature consisted of varied aspects of human life and struggles and stories of human bravery, friendship, plight and agony over the ages. Romanticism and spirituality became secondary and connoting the struggles of common man and his life became primary in the context of literary value of folk music. Even the stories from epics like Mahabahrata, Ramayana, Upanishads and various religious text would be sung and performed by street artists. The most famous of these alternative communication mediums were the Jatra culture of Odisha and Bengal which has its origin in the 16th century's Vaishnavism and Bhakti movement, Teejanbai's street performance that originated in Uttar Pradesh which spoke about the stories from Ramayana and Mahabharata,Jakari of Haryana which talks about the essence of life and livingand many other community dance forms and performance arts of tribal and street artists. In year 2019, an Indian drama thriller "Article 15" was released. The movie was roughly based on a true event that took place in the Badaun district of Uttar Pradesh. The film started with a notable folk song/poetry called "Kahab to Lag jayeDhak Se" written by Mr. ShakeelAzmi. The poem talks about the class distinction and the comparison of privileges enjoyed by the upper caste and rich people compared to the poor people. Use of folk literature and folk songs has always been in trend in Bollywood, but until 21st century, the use of such poetries was restricted only to the aesthetical value. In recent times, the folk literature has been essentially used to establish larger meaning in the films and video projects like establishing cultural differences, class struggles and underlining unspoken distress as well has oppression. For example, VishalBharadwaj's film Haider (2014) uses the famous poem "Gulon Mein Rang Bhare" by Faiz Ahmed Faiz to establish the relationship between the protagonist and his father and his father's love for the land he belongs to. Similarly, in NeerajGhaywan's film Masaan (2015) poetries of BashirBadr and Dushyant Kumar were used to establish the feelings associated with the city of Benares and Allahabad (now Prayagraj). Use of folk literature and folk poetry as expressionism in film and establishing social and emotional distress has become a subtle art of storytelling.

Background of the study: The Digital Age

Alternative media has countless sources and types and each of the mediums has its own nuances that make it affective among certain target audiences. Besides, it has been evolving since ages and has been changing its overall aura and reach. Alternative media in digital age refers to the evolution of the conventional media platforms and communication elements into more advanced and effective forms using technical advances and other innovative means. The communication in digital age alternative media has becomes a two way process with much focus on the response, mechanism from the audiences that leads to a 'Call of Action'. It means that people who are the viewers of the content also becomes the means to create new content. So, the consumers are becoming producers. Social revolution and change in public attitude was rather a slow process before the advent of digitization. With the technology being a part of communication process, there has been a rise in the feedback and response from the audiences. The cause and effect of each message send through digital means of alternative media is immediate. The

active participation of the content consumers has revolutionized the entire concept of alternative media and its role in social change.

The technological advancements in the field of media haslead to several convergences in the traditional media and has mixed with the new media to provide a very effective and interactive medium of expression. The phenomena of 'Call of Action' through different online prompts like 'Subscribe', 'Share', 'Follow etc has helped the content creators and artist to expand their reach. The digital platforms had enabled people to actively participate in the discussions and debates and express their differences if any. Audiences are exposed to wide arena of unconventional topics that they would otherwise be hesitant to open up about in public space. Options of 'Like', 'Share', 'Subscribe' etc helps in spreading a message like wild fire and also bring about changes on the go. The study aims to trace the effectiveness and popularity of these trends.

Methodology
Type of study
The study involves both qualitative and quantitative method data analysis.
Design:
Given the nature of the study, a survey method was chosen for the data gathering. The survey was conducted among 129 participants out of which 71.3 % people were aged between 19-29 and 20.9% people were aged 30-40. Most of the respondents are from the age group with maximum exposure of digital content. This age group is often targeted the most by the content creators because they are techno savvy and are adaptive to changes. Moreover, people from this age group usually are looking for creative and fresh content always and are the one who actively contribute to the society in form of participation in community building and other social engagements. Hence it is considered most reasonable to have a generous percentage of respondents from the same age group.
**Sampling:**
The study was done through a survey which was primarily conducted amongst members of the media community which included communication students and media personals as well as academicians who are regular consumers and creators of content on various traditional and modern media sources. The reason why this study was majorly conducted among respondents from such background is that they have a thorough theoretical as well as practical understanding of the term Alternative Media and its role and impact on society. Also, these respondents are well versed with the media convergences and are in touch with the new trends as well as learning about older trends as part of their academic curriculum.
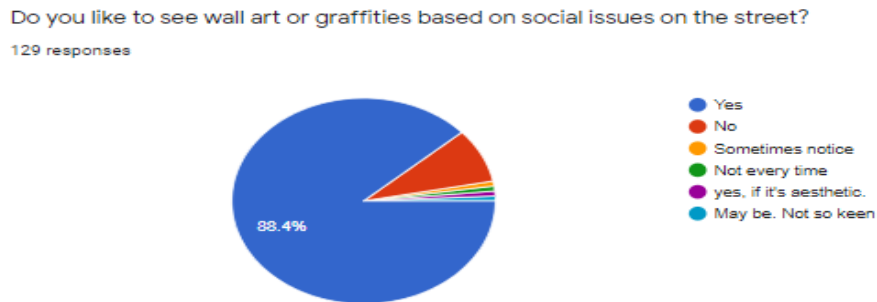Apart from the same, a survey has been conducted among some random respondents to know the general opinion of people who are not directly in the media and communication however they are aggressive content consumers and participate actively in social trends.

Findings:
Awareness about Alternative Media sources
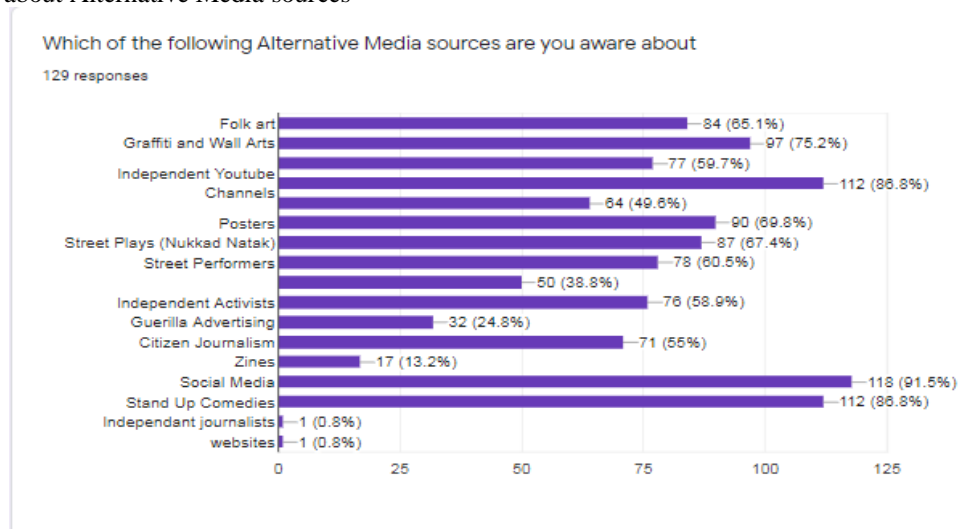
The survey shows that most people agree that social media remains the most popular source of Alternate Media content. However, this study also proves that er large number of people (91.5%) are well aware about other alternative media sources as well. This is probably the reason why Yotube remains the second most popular alternative media content portal popular among people. Approx 86.8% people claim that they are aware about Independent Youtube channels and their content. An equally popular number is achieved by the Stand up comedians and their channels, as an agent of social change and a key to make good and fresh content that triggers social change. Many stand up comedians such a Kunal Kamra, Graffitis culture and wall arts culture which gained popularity in late 20th century in India, remains the third most popular kind of alternative media which is considered effective for social change and awareness quotients. Around 75.2 % people said that they are aware about graffiti and wall arts. 88.4 % people expressed that they love to see socially relevant issues communicated through graffities and wall art.

Do you like to see wall art or graffities based on social issues on the street?

129 responses

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes notice
- Not every time
- yes, if it's aesthetic.
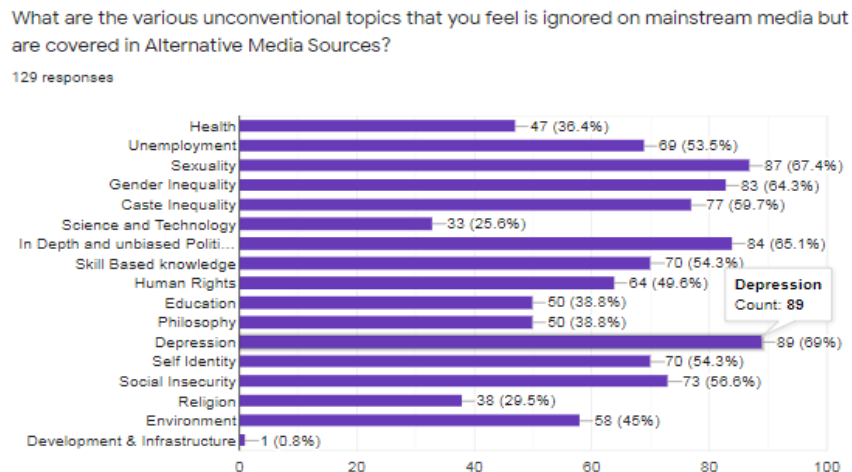- May be. Not so keen

88.4%

Traditional types of Alternative Media like that of Posters, Folk arts, Street Plays and performers also had their fair share of popularity after graffities with more than 65% people being aware about their functions and impacts.

Special place for Journalism: It was found that more than 50% people well aware about various kinds of Independent journalistic channels and journalists and with the existence of Citizen Journalism as an alternative media. People believed that through social media, independent journalism got its major strenght and has become a key elment of social justic and surveillence.

24.8 % people said that they are aware about guerilla advertising and its impact on human psychology and its role in e commerce growth.

Zines and raphic novel though are very fresh concept in the field of Alternative media in india but the study shows that approx 13.2 people are aware about them and some also mentioned their popular Zines and graphic novels. The most notable among them are the ABtman, Hawkeye, Watchmen, Hellboy, All Star Suoerman, In Love and Pajamas, Day Tripper, Saga, ElDeafu, A Contract with God, Persepolis, Maus, Palestine, Tin-tin & Doshu.

What are the various unconventional topics that you feel is ignored on mainstream media but are covered in Alternative Media Sources?

129 responses

| Topic	Count
Health	47 (36.4%)
Unemployment	69 (53.5%)
Sexuality	87 (67.4%)
Gender Inequality	83 (64.3%)
Caste Inequality	77 (59.7%)
Science and Technology	33 (25.6%)
In Depth and unbiased Politi...	84 (65.1%)
Skill Based knowledge	70 (54.3%)
Human Rights	64 (49.6%)
Education	50 (38.8%)
Philosophy	50 (38.8%)
Depression	89 (69%)
Self Identity	70 (54.3%)
Social Insecurity	73 (56.6%)
Religion	38 (29.5%)
Environment	58 (45%)
Development & Infrastructure	1 (0.8%)

Convergence and Dynamics in Alternative Media in the Digital Age: Emergence of a Participatory Virtual Public Sphere

In the survey, 94.6% people agreed that Alternative Media sources has allowed to create a virtual public sphere were they can finally talk about issues that have been consdered taboo since a long time and have allowed them to talk about things that they were otherwise hesitant to discuss in person. Alternative media helps giving space and attention to unconventional topics which are often ignored on mainstream media. This is one of the biggest advantage of alternative media upon the mainstream media that it gives exposure to the unconventional topics that are often too bold to be discussed in public sphere. Since Alternative media in digital age can empower you with privacy as well as interaction with specific people over a certain topic is the reason why many people are able to discuss things that were earlier considered aboo for the society. According to the survey, more than 80% people said that they approached alternative media sources to search for topics like depression, sexuality, gender equality and discussed them. Over 75% people said that they get a more accurate and indepth results of political analysis and unbiased social opinions over alternative media sources rather than on mainstream media. 84% people think that alternative media gives an unbiased political analysis when compared to mainstream media which they consider to function under political pressure. Beside the above, other topics which people said were 84.5% agreed to the fact that Alternative media helps them acquire more in depth information and analysis of the subject of interest that they have and that too with great details.

Do you think Alternative Media sources allows you (people) to talk about and know about things that you otherwise would be hesitant to discuss in public sphere?

129 responses

● Yes
● No

94.6%
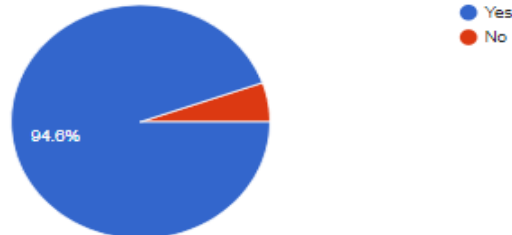
Voice of the Marginalised groups:
More than 77% people said that they can freely check out caste related issues and can find their problems be represented on alternative media. Gender issues, human rights issues and issues of social security are often considered not of too much importance for the mainstream media. 89.1% people agreed that problems related to the marginalised communities are often ignored by the mainstream media. Unless and until there is a huge controversy attached to any event or occurance that concerned the minority community and gender, it is not given due importance in the daily affairs of the mainstream media.

The issues related to the marginalized communities often gets ignored on mainstream media.

129 responses

● Agree
● Disagree

10.9%

89.1%
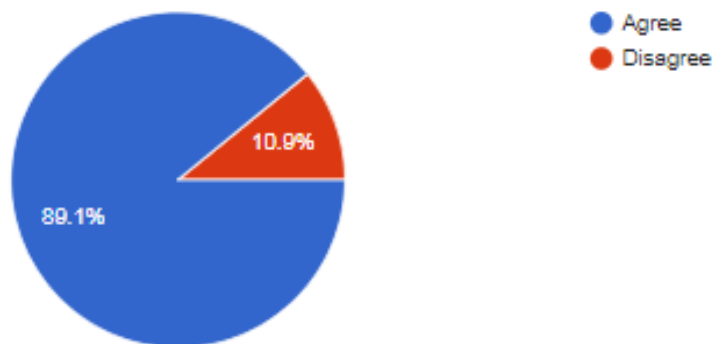
Most Effective form of Alternative media:
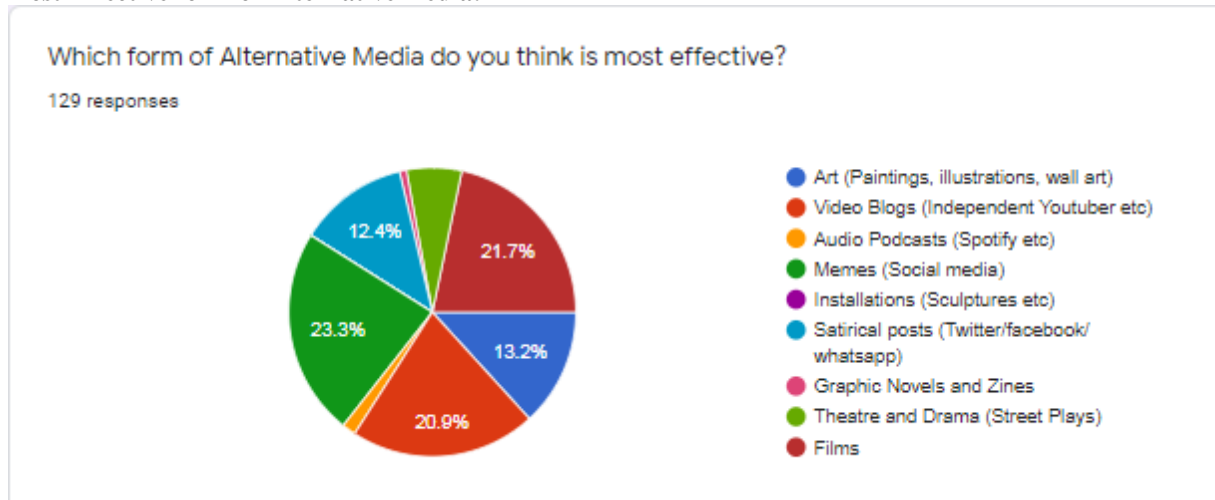
Visual metaphors are the best way to communicate ideas in a precise manner across masses in a limited time span. Internet has givent that power to everyone and hence the memes have becomes the most powerful source of influencing opinions and instigating ideas and questions in people's mind. Approx 23.3% people said that memes were the most affective kind of Alternative Media content that has great influence. While Films and Video blogs or audio visual communication remains the second most popular content when comes to the factor of influencing. Among other influencial content forms included, theatre, audio podcasts, art and installations which inclined towards more specific audiences and intellectual people.

Relatable content:

79.1 % people said that the contents like social media podcasts and vblogs that they consume on various platforms are far more relatable to them than the ones they see on mainstream media. The reason being the freshness of the content that the creative mannerism of expression plus the relevance of the issues that are portrayed and talked about. 52.7 % people consider that even wall arts and graffitis represent the issues that are local and concerning to them personally.

COVID and Alternative Media:

As we discuss about relevance of the issues and its freshness, we also found that 84.5% people think that the content over various alternative media platforms have been helpful for them to cope up with the global crisis that the world faced last year due to novel coronavirus pandemic. People agreed that the contents on social media have actually helped them and benefitted them in several ways and that they were able to keep a track of the proceedings on timely basis because of the social media.

The same period also saw a rise in people's participation on building a highly active public sphere wehree they shared their quarantine experiences and it became rather a very supportive unit of social bonding as well as coping mechanism from the distress that the pandemic had caused. According to a study conducted by STATISTA, shows that there was a 75% rise in the content consumption on social media post the first lockdown. The study also said that there was a significant increase in particular types of content platforms and genres. For example, the frst week of lockdown showed an increase of 61% in DIY (Do it yourself) videos, a rise of 71% in comsumption of Online streaming channels, and a total increase of 64% in consumption of electronic newspaper (e-paper). This data tells a lot about how the convergence of digital media and alternative media has helped people find creative ways to utilise their skills and be productive as well as stay updated.

Popularizing folk literature on mainstream media

Theconvergences in the alternative media after the onset of communication technology and information technology

has not only made the process two way but has also helped in preserving the folk literature and street art culture. Many independent Youtube channels like KalArt, Jashn-e-Rekhta, Urdu Studio, Hindi Kavita, Kitaab-e-maazi, Spill Poetry and many more have been working towards keeping folk culture and literature alive and have gained mass popularity with time. These channels have merged the audio poetry with elegant videos of artists and celebrities reciting the works of great authors. One such platform is that of Rekhta which worked towards the reviving and preserving the Urdu poetry culture and another channel KalArt which works towards keeping the Hindi and other folk poetry alive. The convergence of Audio Visual media has enabled the artists and content creators to come up with creative and appealing content for digital platform users. Independent artists can also have their podcasts which is dedicated to revive literature and folk tales.

Socio Political Awareness

Above 50% people said that they spend a lot of time on watching political analysis on Youtubeby independent journalists. They also say that social media platforms like Facebook, twitter etc helps them to stay updated on the trending issues in politics and pushes them look at a situation from different perspective. This is also the reason why use of social media has become very vital for political parties to run their pre election campaigns. Many studies have been conducted (link I the references) which shows that 2014LokSabha Elections was largely influenced by the social media campaigns. The type of promotional videos and campaign videos that the 2014 election saw was very different than how it has been so far. 80.6% people ranked political content to be the most frequent topic to come across on various alternative media sources. This frequency of the occurrence of a topic is directly proportional to the average time spend of that particular genre. And more time spend on a certain issue will lead to formation of an overall public opinion about that subject.

Many people claim that alternative media sources have allowed independent journalists to flourish without being under the pressure of political parties and give unbiased and factually supported arguments on many burning issues. Some on the popular faces of such independent journalists are DhruvRathee (link in the bio), Abhisaar Sharma, PunyaPrasunBajpayee and more. Political sphere that has been created on social media has also resulted in many 'Call to Actions' like protests, expressing dissent with the government and raise voice in support of a social issue, demands for various human rights concerning subjects. It has also raised awareness about many serious issues of society like LGBTQ rights, woman safetythrough channels like Swaddle (Youtube), domestic violence, marital rape, child trafficking and so on. Human rights and gender related awareness has been ranked on the third most frequently approached   subject   by   netizens.

Virtual Community Building:

The convergence of various alternative media sources had also created communities which work towards gender equality and other issues to gather more and more support for their cause. These online welfare groups run by both NGOs and government bodies, report a large number of cases every year where woman and other victims approach for help. One such commission is the Vanitha Commission which takes online complaints for domestic violence and woman safety related issues. After the famous Nirbhaya case, the social media was overwhelmed with posts concerning woman safety and the issue was so much escalated by common man through various online and offline alternate media sources that the government and the administration was bound to take strict actions. The pattern that this event showed was that the protest groups could actually promote their activities that are carry out offline as an expression of dissent were also able to gather support and make people aware that they can contribute their support through organizing offline protests and posting the same on social media. This has resulted in a pattern that social media which itself is a source and alternative media platform becomes a platform to promote the activities of other alternate   media.

Similarly, the recent trend of fund raising and online petition signing has also seen an upsurge. People are now able to reach out to the public support by converging various audio visual activities with online promotions for funding and support from global audiences. This has also made people aware about injustice pertaining in the society which is often ignored by the mainstream government. 82.9% people said that they have come across and participated in various support group activities as well as fund raising activities. The biggest among this is participation in the hash tag culture and various social media campaigns that raise socially relevant issues.

Protests and Campaigns

The convergence of social media campaigns with large number of people who are indulging in offline activities has lead to a platform that propagates thoughts and helps people express their opinions and stand with cause that they believe in. One out of every three respondents wrote that they have involved themselves in activities like hash tagging, sharing posts related to protests, changing profile pictures and participating in online events to extend their support to NGOs and groups having agendas for social change. The most recent of it being the Farmer's Protest in India which started late in August 2020 when farmers predominantly from the state of Punjab, Indiagatheredat the Delhi border to express their disagreement with the three Farm Acts that were later passed by NDA government in the parliament in September 2020. Farmers from all over the country gathered at the borders of the national capital delhi and within weeks it became a very powerful movement lead by SamyuktKisaanMorcha. The protest gained international fame when celebrities like Rihanna and environment activist like Greta Thunberg expressed their solidarity with the movement. Hash tags, sharing viral posts were not the only actions that were carried out on alternative media platforms but many artists from the industry and those who are working independently came forward with their self composed rap songs and documentaries with rebellious lyrics and motivational as well as quirky manner to display their angst and also made videos that simplified the complicated nature of the bill and made it easier to understand for the local people. Another such protest which the respondents actively participated in was the Anti CAA and NRC movement in year 2019. The pattern of communication and expressionism related to the dissent shown was similar to that of the Farmer's Protest. However, it was also observed that folk literature like Faiz Ahmed Faiz's song 'Hum Dekhenge' became the voice of the protest. This started when a group of students protesting at IIT Kanpur sung this song to express their solidarity with people who were protesting at ShaheenBagh. Example such as this proves that various kind of alternative media converges in the virtual sphere to create a more impactful public sphere where contents merge and so do content creators and people can express themselves free from any external fear until there are regulations imposed by the authority.

Some of the other campaigns that the respondents mentioned about were the MeToo movement, LGBTQ rights, Decriminalizing of Article 377 (Kashmir), India against Corruption, Support for Doctors, Greta Grewig's Environment Campaign, Anna Hazare Movement, Save Arrey Valley movement, Nirbhaya movement, BHU Woman Student Protest, Solidarity campaign for FTII and JNU, No School No Fees, Judicial and Police Reform campaign, Support for IAC
.

Objectivity (Mainstream Media vs Alternative Media)

While the convergence gives insane power to express it also comes with a question on its objectivity. Since it is very easy to express personal opinion based stories to people and manipulation and propaganda becomes far more easier. The reach of these medium and impacts is huge and there is no official body of governance to keep a check on the activities of people and how much spread it has. In the survey people have expressed major concerned over the factual accuracy and rationality of the things shared over social media and other alternative sources. Sometimes the line of difference between what is right and what is wrong is very vague when it some to artistic expression hence leading to many controversial posts and often ending up offending the sentiments of community or gender or a sect. Approach - The community media approach argues that the participation of members of a community in content production and media organization is central for alternative media. Others see the provision of content by alternative media as an alternative to mainstream media (large scale, state-owned or commercial, hierarchical, dominant discourse vs. small scale, independent, non hierarchical, non dominant discourse). One can identify the approaches that use the notion of counter hegemonic media that are part of civil society and form a third voice between state media and commercial media. Andfinally one can identify approached that speak of rhizomatic media that are relational because they link different protest groups and movements, connects the local and the global, and establishes different types of relationships with the market and/or the state. This typology seems arbitrary. An underlying that is grounded in and justified by social theory and used to explain the differences and commonalities of the approaches is missing.

Limitation of Alternative Media

Alternative media sources have evolved over time and have made significant changes in the socio political sphere and behavior, it still has its own limitations. When asked about the limitation of Alternative media, the respondents

mainly   focused   on   the   below   listed   issues:-

Credibility – Since alternative media gives one much freedom of expression, it can also be misused by anti social agents to spread communal violence, misinformation and propaganda. Since alternative media sources gives a powerful impacts on the first sight, people are too refrain to do fact checks on everything that is written, spoken or expressed. Since there is no governing body to regulate or no editorial support to filter the information, a large portion of the alternative media sources can possibly be hijacked by organizations of vested interest to spread fake news   and   create   mass   hysteria   and   control   public   opinion.

Sustainability - In digital space, some of the contents like memes and tweets are very brief, they do not give a complete idea about a situation and might often be ignored by the public. While in the non digital space, it is very hard for the audiences to keep a tract of the events and occasions that are organized where a certain communication would be done. Say for example a group of artists who indulge in street performances are never sure about their total reach as the viewers are volatile and might as well leave in the middle of an act. While if they record and upload their performances on the digital platform, it still cannot guarantee active viewers as chances of a post getting viral is very low and is subjected to unknown circumstances.

Accessibility - Alternative media do not tap into the larger demographics. They are restricted to people who have active access to such things or are part of educational curriculum which studies those aspects. A part of population is unaware about its existence and prefers mainstream media over it, this is due to the digital divide or inaccessibility and unawareness of such platforms. Few of therespondents claim that the language of alternative media is so vast that at a time, it will be accessible to a limited number of audiences. This could be the target group or the section of the society it has been directed too. Even among that there is an uncertainty of reach. It is often focused on small groups with shared interests which limits its reach. Upon that the audiences of alternative media is scattered and the ever changing rule of digital media, engagement on posts and videos are low and sometimes cannot reach the wider audiences.

Funding - Alternative media most commonly lacks the support and finance which is achieved by mainstream media so it causes some problems to reach every corner and cover every aspect of current topics. They lack support as it is mostly non profitable media which limited or negligible funds. Hence not having enough resources challenges them to pose a serious competition to mainstream media

Conclusion:

The digital age has allowed people to be the content producers and consumers simultaneously. The digitization and social media has enabled people to participate actively and contribute substantially into the communication discourse that in return brings positive social changes. This could be also observed through the attitude change in people towards certain social practices and increased awareness about social issues. The social media has empowered people to voice out things which usually gets ignored by mainstream media. The audio visual nature of communication has also lead to immense convergence of conventional and alternate media and folk media with the digital world. This has preserved the folk culture that was on the verge of extinction as well as boosted its popularity among the masses. The alternative media sources has also allowed people to access unbiased political analysis and in depth information about controversial subjects and topics that are less discussed in social sphere. The study also shows that the convergence in alternative media has also allowed people to actively participate in expressing opinions and calling out for protests and dissent whenever required on small and large scales.

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