

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Poster Session

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"From digital divide to digital culture – emergence of online public spheres in Bangladesh"

Abstract

Bangladesh, a South Asian nation with a population of 160 million, falls within the bracket of 'haves not' in any discussion on digital divide, which is generally conceptualised as inequalities of access to digital communication technologies. The orthodox view on digital divide discussion argues that these inequalities ultimately lead to socio-economic and democratic deficit in the societies. This paper differs with this theoretical concept to understand larger impacts of digital media in developing countries like Bangladesh and proposes to examine cultural impacts of new digital media instead of narrow focus on the quantitative measures of technological access. It makes the argument that despite limited access to online media, a small but strong online-based public sphere is being developed in Bangladesh as alternative to traditional print and broadcast media based public sphere.

The theoretical framework of this study is two-folds. First, it takes Balnaves and colleagues' (2009) analytical framework of 'digital culture' to understand changing media landscape of Bangladesh, thus divorcing it from the theoretical domain of 'digital divide'. As mentioned, the digital culture emphasises social and cultural analyses of the phenomena in the societies. The second theoretical concept is found in Habermas's (1989) normative theory of public sphere – 'a domain of social life in which public opinion is expressed by means of rational public discourse and debate'.

Using the 'Shahbag Protests' as a case for analysis, this paper explores nature and trends of online media usage in mobilizing political demonstration that was to protest a war crime tribunal judgment. Tens of thousands of people took to Dhaka streets in February 2013 following protest calls in social media by Bangladeshi online activists and bloggers.

Findings of the study suggest a clear transformation of political communication patterns in Bangladesh where Internet and mobile phones play significant roles in mobilizing people. Bangladeshi bloggers and online activists form virtual communities through processes of interaction, engagement, participation and affinity on contemporary socio-political issues that often extends to real life events, and ultimately suggests emergence of alternative public spheres. However, these spheres rely heavily on traditional news media and mainstream social media (e.g., Facebook) for content and issue generation.

References:

- Balnaves, M., Donald, S., & Shoesmith, B. (2009). *Media theories and approaches: a global perspective*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Habermas, J. (1989 [1962]). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Polity Press.