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

Panel 4: Media Changing Identities: Focus on Gender and Generation

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"Debating rape in India: Readers comments in the online public sphere"

Abstract

This study examines online readers' comments on news about rapes that followed the gang rape of a young student in New Delhi in December 2012. The national discussions, protests and subsequent change in rape law that followed the incident does highlight that rape became a political issue of women's rights. At the same time the protests also drew attention to the role of social media in pushing, debating or driving sociocultural change in society. This article proposes to look at an area of social media that has been sidelined in the shadow of twitter and facebook, that is, online reader comments. Readers comments contribute to the complex and contested discourse on gender violence, even if we consider the limited population who participate online. Mostly, reader comments are a rich source to understand the meanings that common people bring to the public sphere. Unlike twitter and facebook, reader comments allow public participation of people without having to reveal their identity or other affiliations like family or friends. And unlike twitter it is a site that is often ignored by professional journalists who increasingly turn to other social media as a source for people's views and to construct stories. This paper will analyze comments on news on rapes in the web edition of the Times of India after the December gang rape. Using qualitative analysis, I will look at how reader debates on gender violence are framed in competing discourses that intersect across identity, caste, gender, religion and how politics are appropriated in discussions. The findings illustrate how readers also discuss denigrating views that are strongly communal, propagate further stereotypes and visibly demonstrate hate which would be considered inflammatory elsewhere in the sensitive Indian context. The findings reveal how social structures construct, implicate, mediate and contest rape debates in the online public sphere.