



## Communication, Participation and Socio-Cultural Integration

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### **Communication and Human Development**

Communication has been at the heart of human activities. People communicate at home, school, office and public places. Every day, they talk to family members, colleagues, friends, and strangers. Through communication, society is made possible. Without communication, there will be no communities. It is communication that distinguishes human from other species. With language, humans free themselves from the limitations of acting in response to sense experience in a rather narrow present as other animals do (McNeill, 2014). With linguistic tools, they can survey and catalog their environment, record their success and failure in their interaction with the environment, and accumulate experiences for changes and improvement of their situation.

As people live in different environments, they are confronted with different challenges and develop different ways of handling their specific environment. When different groups of people live in remote areas without much contact, their languages and cultures will become different. For them, there is no need to develop compatible communication tools to interact and understand one another.

The Age of Discovery and European exploration from the end of the 15th century to 18th century accelerated the contact of people between the West and the East. Global trade flourished and European empires extended their reach to other continents. After the Industrial Revolution, the pace of globalization further accelerated with the introduction of steam transport and instantaneous electrical communication. European empires spread across much of America, Asia and Africa. The European civilization, including its language, religion, science, institutions, and cultural values, was disseminated across the globe. Industrialization and urbanization led to the breakup of older forms of village life, which changed the daily experience of innumerable persons drastically.

The advancement of communication technologies in the 20th century, including radio, television, satellites, computers and the Internet, has tied together humankind more closely than ever before. After the collapse of soviet communism in December 1991, the spread of Western liberal democratic values was conceived by some to be final and permanent. Fukuyama (1992) argued that the dominance of Western liberal democracy signified the endpoint of humanity's sociocultural evolution and the final form of human government. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the optimism of having one unified world sharing a liberal democratic order was shattered by the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks on the United States. The renewed patriotism and nationalism in the United States as well as other countries, including the former Soviet Union states, cracked the myth that globalization brings about a unified world sharing universal ideas and values. Today, humans are still confronted with the challenge of socio-cultural integration. On the local front, people are divided into elites and masses, rich and poor, rulers and ruled. On the global front, various nations are contending the Euro-American hegemony. The present paper will focus on the division of people on the local front in the globalized age.

### **Globalization and Socio-cultural Integration**

Robertson (1992) defined globalization as "a process of compressing the world and deepening a global consciousness". National economic markets have been influenced by the immense power of the global economy. The international capital inflows experienced a remarkable rise from the mid-1990s to the first half of 2000s, both in Emerging Developing Economies (EMDEs) and Advanced Economies (AEs) (Pagliari & Hannan, 2017). International capital flows sped up the process of integrating national markets into global ones. The Global Financial Crisis in 2008 affected all major economies in the world. The capital inflows dropped sharply in 2008 for both EMDEs and AEs and regained their upward momentum in 2009, only to fall again in late 2011 as the peripheral Euro Area sovereign debt crisis intensified (Pagliari & Hannan, 2017). With financial globalization and volatility in the interlinked world markets, people became aware that they would be affected by a financial crisis broken out far away although they had no idea how it happened.

By revolutionizing the means of communication, large corporations have acquired massive freedom of maneuver in their attempts to reintegrate markets for labor power, goods and services, and thus to maximize profits on a global scale. Neoliberal economics, which emphasizes that rational self-interested individuals will

maximize their utility through voluntary exchanges in markets, has brought the worship of free markets and free trade to an unprecedented new height. It argues that rational consumers and firms, when free from external interferences, produce an efficient equilibrium. The society will be better off with elimination of price controls, deregulation of capital markets, lowering of trade barriers, and reducing state influence on the economy, especially through privatization and austerity.

The result of globalization and free trade, however, does not fulfill the promises given by the neoliberal economists. In 2016, the UNCTD remarked in its report,

“Considered in a long-term perspective, most developing countries outside some Asian sub-regions have failed to significantly reduce the income gap with developed economies. The big investment push in developing regions remains one of the unfulfilled promises of the more open global economy set in place in the 1980s and 1990s; and after general growth accelerations at the beginning of the century, convergence is now losing steam with a more challenging international environment. To attain sustained and inclusive growth, countries need to adjust their policy strategies in order to advance structural transformation”.

It continued in the next paragraph:

“... many developing countries have not been able to develop sufficiently their manufacturing sector (experiencing a “stalled industrialization”) or have even endured a “premature de-industrialization” since the 1980s owing to a policy strategy centered on unilateral trade opening, financial deregulation and the retreat of the developmental state” (UNCTD, 2016).

According to this report, apart from some Asian countries, globalization and free trade in past decades did not benefit the developing world much. On the contrary, the neoliberal economic path led them to “premature de-industrialization”, hurting the growth of the economy.

Although the developed countries stand to gain in a globalized world with neoliberal economic practices, only big corporations and the rich reap the benefits. The income gap between the rich and poor has widened over the years. Take Hong Kong as an example. Hong Kong is one of the freest economies in the world. In 2015-16, Hong Kong was ranked 7th out of 148 places in the *Global Competitiveness Index* of the World Economic Forum. The World Bank ranked it 5th out of 189 places in the *Ease of Doing Business Index* in 2015 (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2016). Hong Kong’s Gini coefficient was 0.46 in 1981 (Cheng, 1982), and it rose to 0.54 in 2011 (Census & Statistics Department, 2011). There are certainly many factors contributing to the income gap, however, globalization and small government did not help to narrow it in the past three decades.

Statistics further showed that Hong Kong people at the 20th percentile got a monthly income of HK\$7,650 in 2001 at constant price, but it was decreased to HK\$7,500 after a decade in 2011. At the 50th percentile, the monthly income in 2001 was \$12,380 and \$12,000 in 2011, also registering a decrease. Only rich people get richer. People at the 90th percentile got a monthly income of \$33,750 in 2001, and it was increased to \$38,940 in 2011 (Census and Statistics Department, 2011, p. 95). The “trickle-down” process did not materialize.

Stiglitz (2016) observed that large segments of the population in advanced countries have been getting worse. In the US, the bottom 90% has endured income stagnation for a third of a century. Median income for full-time male workers is actually *lower* in real (inflation-adjusted) terms than it was 42 years ago. At the bottom, real wages are comparable to their level 60 years ago. He pointed out that neoliberals, apparently worried about adverse incentive effects, have opposed welfare measures that would have protected the losers. While politicians do not deliver their promises of benefits for all, they provide few measures to protect those who are displaced by workers in other countries in the name of free market and free trade. In 2016, nearly 15% of the American population was on food stamps (Kak, 2016). A strong distrust and lack of confidence in the establishment grew, and collective actions against globalization and mainstream politicians finally emerged.

After the victory of British voters in Brexit and the win of Donald Trump in the US presidency in the latter half of 2016, the anti-globalization force grabbed the spotlight. In a way, Brexit and Trump’s win can be seen as a rise of nationalism against regionalization and globalization. But the discontent among the common masses about neoliberal economics, particularly free trade, immigrants, refugees, and minimal government intervention, is the root of recent upheavals in European and American politics.

*The Wall Street Journal* reported on April 21-30, 2017 that Whirlpool planned to move production to Poland, a EU member with lower wages, from France. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right National Front, immediately pledged a 35% tax on imports from Whirlpool and other companies that shift manufacturing outside France if she was elected as president of France. The local inhabitants interviewed by the reporter said they were considering to vote for Le Pen. Since France began using the euro in 1999, industrial production has fallen 10%. Le Pen said, “We must break with this ultraliberal model that has been imposed on us by our leaders for years” (Dalton, 2017, April 21-30, p. A4).

The classical elite theory stipulates that all societies are ruled by a minority. In all ages, the organized minority imposes its will over the disorganized majority. One distinguishing characteristic of the ruling elites is their organizing capacity vis-à-vis the disorganization of masses (Mosca, 1939). Good organization calls for good communication. Ruling elites control not only economic resources and military force, but also “ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 1971). Mainstream media, including newspapers, radio, television and news magazines, are used by the elites to cultivate a dominant discourse with a constructed social reality to maintain the elites’ governance. The common masses rarely have direct access or control of the media, not to say transmitting alternative or anti-establishment messages through the media (Tuchman, 1972). Without communication, no organization is possible.

### **The Failure of Legacy Media and Ascendancy of New Media**

The mainstream legacy media, including newspapers, radio, television and magazines, has failed to represent the masses’ views and discontents. Mass media do not represent the “masses”. As there is little exchange of information, views and ideas between the elites and masses on equal terms, the masses cannot participate effectively in important decisions made by the elites. In democratic countries, the masses may still exercise their control of the elites in periodic elections. In autocratic system, the masses can only hope for “enlightened-benign” rulers to appear. The legacy mass media cannot play a role in integrating the masses with the elites as they serve mainly to articulate a dominant narrative in favor of the elites’ rule. Habermas (1989) noted that the mass media public sphere had transformed the culture-debating public into the culture-consuming public. The essence of critical-rational political discussions in the public sphere was lost. The general masses, particularly the counter-publics, were denied access to the dominant public sphere.

One common response of the elites to Brexit and Trump’s Win was “utter bewilderment” (Johnson, 2016). A widely shared explanation was the masses had been driven by irrational fears and overblown anxieties, reacting with impulses for no reason. A more extreme view was “it’s time for the elites to rise up against the ignorant masses” and to “un-delude” the “deluded” masses (Traub, 2016). Before Brexit or Trump’s victory, most public opinion polls indicated that things would run as normal – British citizens would vote to stay in the EU or Hillary Clinton would win the presidency, albeit by a small margin. Nearly all mainstream media predicted the same as the majority public opinion polls.

Most of the polls failed to predict Trump would win the election. Traditional pollsters base their results on questions posed to randomly selected people, often by telephone interviews. In retrospect, they failed to reach mobile phone users and those who were weary of surveys. A new company, Brandseye, which got its prediction right, used a different method which analyzed social media posts. Its different approach pointed to a Trump victory as well as Britain’s Brexit vote. Brandseye’s method is to sift through social media for relevant posts, a process known as crowd-sourcing, and then use a computer algorithm to rate consumer sentiment about products or politicians (Reuters, 2016). The success in predicting political outcomes through analysis of social media and big data points to the emergence of new media as a platform for articulation and aggregation of public opinion. New media provides an alternative public sphere for the masses to express and exchange their views, ideas, resentment and anger.

Trump was not popular with America’s newspapers. Of the 100 top circulation print newspapers, two endorsed him. More than 200 newspapers supported Clinton, while Trump received the support of fewer than 20 (Sillito, 2016). Trump, however, was popular and received more support in the new media websites and social media. In the midst of the election campaign, social media analysts Impact Social studied posts on Twitter and other social media platforms in Florida. They found Trump was well ahead of Clinton in positive comments. This ran counter to the polls, which were giving Clinton a small lead.

The online analytics company Tubular Insights identified in the middle of the campaign that in online news, the site creating videos that were generating the greatest levels of engagement (likes, shares etc.) was InfoWars. This site featured claims that Clinton had a secret “Satanic Network” and had Parkinson’s disease, as well as other conspiracy theories (Sillito, 2016). Using the Internet and social media, the masses now have alternative channels to express their views and empower themselves into collective actions. When most people were shocked by the referendum result of British voters to leave the EU and Trump’s presidential victory, communication ecology in the 21st century had changed.

Bennett (2012) offered an explanation for the emergence of new media as a platform for a new form of collective actions and social movements. He noted that the dominance of neoliberal economics in recent decades has privatized public sectors and the market deregulation philosophy has made relationships between individuals and civic organizations less centrally manageable (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2012). There is a decline of group loyalties and social fragmentation, as well as a growth of personal stress and sense of responsibility for

choices and consequences (Beck, 2006; Bennett, 1998). Instead of asking how things will affect the collective well being, the question becomes how things will affect ME.

Accompanied with personalized politics is a strong mistrust of politicians and mass media because they seem to be indifferent and irrelevant to one's interests, especially, those of young people and marginalized groups (Bennett, 2008; 2012). Consequently, alternative personalized media, particularly on mobile phones, Internet websites and social media, constitutes a new platform for alternative views and collective actions. While the counter-public's views before Trump's ascendancy were not represented in mainstream media and conventional polls, the suffering and angry masses found their expressions in new media which did not follow the conventional ritual of "objectivity", "fact checking" and "balanced reporting" in the elite-controlled mass media. Trump-fans and Clinton-haters were not listening to mainstream discourses about how good free trade and globalization were, they were reading InfoWars, or websites that told the "truth" Trump supporters wanted to hear.

New media could serve as an alternative public sphere for the masses because it has an *individuated networked structure*. It provides a platform where individuals can express their private dissenting views, yet with the potential of reaching huge and diverse audiences through numerous private and public networks. Previously, dissenting or anti-establishment views needed to reach the wider public through the mass media in order to apply pressure to the state or the market for changes. With the emergence of social media, dissidents and marginalized groups do not need the mass media to publicize their views any more. Through social networking sites, they can reach big audiences not only in their own country, but in others as well.

### **New Media as an Alternative Public Sphere**

From daily experiences, communication can help to increase understanding and foster collaboration among people. Communication is crucial in integrating people into a community. But communication itself is not sufficient to solve the problem of resource allocation, distribution of social values, and conflicts arising from social injustice. The cleavages between the elites and masses will not be closed simply by more communication, let alone one-way communication. The masses in both developed and developing countries have for many decades suffered from the neoliberal order, which mainly benefits well-off elites and big companies. The dissenting voices of the masses are seldom represented in mainstream media as legitimate discourse. Opposition to the neoliberal order is often counted as "irrational", "selfish" and "short-sighted" in mainstream mass media, which are filled with voices from big business, government officials, pro-establishment academics, and social notables.

In consequence, the masses' discontents and opposing voices are suppressed in mainstream media, discouraging two-way dialogues between the elites and the masses. When new media emerged by the turn of the new millennium, the distraught masses and marginalized minorities grabbed the opportunity provided by new media to build their own discursive power to counteract the mainstream discourse. With the new platform of communication, the masses can articulate and aggregate their own interests and express their discontents through collective actions including protests, voting and social movements.

The alternative and "rebellious" nature of new media has been testified by many social movements in the recent decade. In May 2009, social media was used to mobilize an online movement that moved offline in Guatemala in protest against the Guatemalan President Alvaro Colom. He was accused of murdering lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg by a video produced by Rosenberg himself before his death (Harlow, 2012). Online networking sites helped to sustain massive protests for about three months, both online and offline, demanding justice and Colom's ouster. In the uprising in Egypt in early 2011, social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, played a central role in mobilizing people to protest in Tahrir Square leading to the downfall of President Mubarak (Tufekcil & Wilson, 2012).

In the Occupy Movements in the United States, social media contributed to an emerging logic of aggregation, assembling masses of individuals from diverse backgrounds within physical spaces to confront the establishment (Juris, 2012). In August 2010 in Chile, protest broke out against the Barrancones power plant which would have closed a reserve housing 80% of the world's Humboldt penguins. In the two days following government's approval of the project, 118 Facebook groups against Barrancones were created (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012). Protesters finally succeeded in stopping the company from building the plant in the reserve area. Facebook use was found to be associated significantly with protest activities in Chile (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012) and in the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014 (Lee, So & Leung, 2015).

Studies have shown that social media can play an "outrage", "radical", "anti-establishment" or "insurgent" role in collective actions (Arditi, 2012; Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2012; Downing, 2001; Juris, 2012; Lee, So & Leung,

2015; Rovira Sancho, 2014; Tufekcil & Wilson, 2012). The dissidents and counter-publics in Brexit and Trump's victory demonstrated once again the power of the Internet and social media in upsetting mainstream narratives in legacy media.

## Conclusion

The recent upheavals in European and American politics have awakened the elites to the alternative platform provided by new media in constructing an alternative social reality, which can be counter-hegemonic and refute the mainstream narrative of the elites. More important, the counter-hegemonic discourse can move people into action and displace the power and position of the elites.

At present, two communication platforms, one provided by legacy mass media and the other by the Internet and social media, with two contrasting discourses and two versions of social reality existing side by side. Whether or not these two platforms and two discourses can have dialogues is crucial to a successful integration between the elites and masses. A pre-requisite for genuine dialogues between the elites and masses is both sides are willing to listen to each other. It is even more crucial that the elites are willing to give up some of their advantages and gains from the neoliberal order to meet the needs and aspirations of the masses. If the masses can have more participation in economic, social and cultural affairs through genuine dialogues in the new public sphere, there is a good chance of arriving at a just socio-cultural integration.

When the masses cannot participate in the decision-making process of their country through legacy media, they can only resort to the alternative public sphere provided by new media to build their discursive power and construct their own version of social reality. If the elites continue to aggrandize their gains at the expense of the masses, society will inevitably splinter into opposing camps, making social integration harder than ever.

As new media possesses a unique feature of "filtering" undesirable or unwanted messages, if the user chooses to block out messages he or she does not like, the message or communicator of the message will be filtered out. This again is due to the "individuated" nature of the communication network formed in the cyberspace (Pariser, 2011). Since social media users are engaged in "private" communication and have control over contents to which they are exposed, they are likely to confine their contacts to like-minded people and to avoid those whom they would like to ignore. This echo chamber effect (Garrett, 2009) will reinforce existing and inclining views embraced by the counter-publics. Without exposure to opposing or alternative views, the discourses and actions may become overly critical and extreme. It will contribute to social disintegration rather than integration if the masses decide to stay in their echo chambers.

It is likely that with increasing influence of new media in politics and economy, the elites will try to control and manipulate it like what they did to the mass media before. They will try to dominate alternative public spheres which threaten their power and interests. Meanwhile, when the older generations are gone, with more and more people using new media which will gradually displace the information and entertainment role of traditional mass media, some prominent websites and social media platforms controlled by the state or businesses will certainly appear. However, it is doubtful whether these state- or market-controlled new media sites will become the dominant public sphere and thus nullify the counter-publics' role of new media. The individuated and low-cost nature of setting up social networking sites will allow people to set up alternative and insurgent sites easily. More important, new media users can block "unwelcome" information and discourses and receive only contents they want. This makes the domination of elite discourses in the new public sphere difficult and ineffective.

If the elites and masses are unwilling to negotiate for a fair distribution of social values, incessant fights between the have and have-nots will last. This scenario also applies to the global world where the Euro-American powers dominate the global distribution of wealth and cultural values while many nations in other continents are still struggling for a decent living and dignity. The socio-cultural integration of humans on the global front poses an equally challenging task for the growth of humanity.

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