

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM: A CASE STUDY OF 'JALLIKATTU' MOVEMENT

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Abstract. In the last decade, there has been a phenomenal increase in the usage of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially in the social media sphere. As in every epoch in history, the current age is also frequently witnessing social activism and social movements. The social movements of the current age are characterised by the comprehensive and frequent usage of social media. In this article, the role of social media in a social movement 'Jallikattu' (movement) in India has been analysed. There are two theoretical perspectives regarding the role of technology and social change: 'Technological Determinism' and 'Social Determinism of Technology'. In this study, it is found that the correct theoretical perspective that should inform the relation between ICTs and activism is neither of the two, but a third perspective called 'Social Shaping of Technology' perspective.

Keywords. *Social Media, ICTs, Social Movement, Social Activism, Jallikattu*

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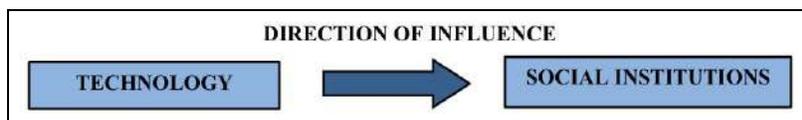
Introduction

From the dawn of humanity, there have always been attempts made by common people to fight injustice and inequity and make society more just and humane. For this purpose, people have adopted institutional and non-institutional means. A prominent non-institutional avenue for the purpose of social change has been social movements. Social movements are weapons of the weak against the strong and help to change inequitable societal power structures. There is a need to deepen democracy as part of the development process and social movements need to be understood as an organic part of the development process and not antithetical to the development process. There has been an explosion in the development and proliferation of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) usage in general and social media in particular. The world has witnessed the extensive usage of social media in social movements like in the Arab Spring uprising and in the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. In this article, the role of social media in a social movement called the 'Jallikattu' (movement) in a state (province) of India called Tamil Nadu in January 2017 has been analysed.

ICTs and Society – Theoretical Perspectives

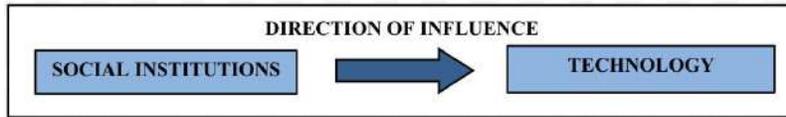
Before deliberation on the role of social media in social movements, it is pertinent to understand at a theoretical level, the relationship among technology, social dynamics and change. There are a few basic theoretical perspectives regarding the role of technology and social change. The first is 'Technological Determinism' which postulates that technological change determines change in social institutions (Marx, 1994) which is illustrated in Fig 1. A statement attributed to Karl Marx, that the windmill created the feudal landlord and the steam engine created the industrial capitalist is an example of this approach. Here "Social Institutions" must be understood with a broad connotation as standing for all kinds of institutions in society including, social, political, economic and cultural institutions.

Fig. 1. Technological Determinism



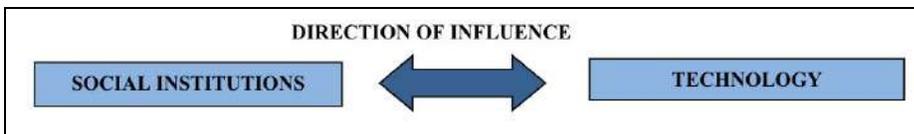
On the other extreme, there is the 'Social Determinism of Technology' approach (refer Fig 2), which postulates that it is the change in social institutions that determine the change in technology (Green, 2001).

Fig. 2. Social Determinism of Technology



In between these two extremes there is a third perspective, that is '*Social Shaping of Technology*' approach (refer Fig 3), which takes a middle ground and gives importance to both the effect of technology on social institutions as well as the effect of social institutions on technology (Williams & Edge, 1996).

Fig. 3. Social Shaping of Technology



Social Media and Social Movements

Currently the social movements that are seen belong to a category called '*New Social Movements*' (NSMs). These NSMs are based on some issues distinct from the earlier economic class-based movements and anti-colonial movements. The participants in the NSM feel that they are autonomous individuals who have similar thoughts and consensus in line with other members of the NSM to be a part of collective action which questions the order of action holding social authority. The movement as a whole has no authority over its individual participants. Thus, these movements have an element of being '*leaderless*' and offer an egalitarian social space to its participants. According to Melucci (1989), the characteristics of NSM are information oriented, contemporary in nature; value the concerns and actively engage in receiving feedback. This nature of reflexivity of social movements can be enhanced through social media. ICTs and social media can give a voice to the subaltern sections like tribes, marginalised ethnic groups etc. An example would be participatory and community media initiatives like '*Video Volunteers*'.

The term '*Civil Society*' refers to the institutions that exist between the individual on one hand and the state and the market on the other. Civil society has been endowed with a huge potency due to the availability of ICT tools like access to mobile voice communication, internet, mobile Apps etc. The developing countries like India, Brazil and many more may have higher rates of new social media users than developed countries like Norway, Finland, and the USA. This enables civil society to engage with the state in a bi-directional, reflexive, and qualitatively enhanced manner. This can be useful for the purpose of social and political activism.

Gil de Zuniga et al. (2012) found that the socio-political participatory behaviour of people is positively influenced by social media and information seeking motives, resulting in

increased activist communication over online and offline. Youth in general have the advantage of having the space for idealism. The fact that they do not know the limit of their strength and the limits of the possibilities of social change makes them restless. Their restlessness combined with their idealism is a potent combination and an ideal mix which can help them to effectively participate and contribute for progressive social movements. Thus, we have seen massive youth and student participation in the Paris leftist student uprising and the anti-war pacifist movement in America in the 1960s and 70s. Youth also have the advantage of being tech-savvy and hence they have an easy familiarity with social media technologies. So, their combination of idealism, restlessness and social media expertise characterises youth and student movements of the last decade like the 'Occupy Wall Street' and 'Arab Spring' movements.

The use of social media for social causes is not restricted to the youth. Even a senior citizen advocacy group has initiated the development of a blog to share ideas and engage in conversation on the topics like ageism, health care and getting equitable home service support for senior citizens (Trentham et al., 2015). But then when it comes to activism it is but natural that youth and student-based movements use social media to the maximum extent.

Research Questions

This research work strives to answer the following research questions:

- a. *Does the usage of social media in the 'Jallikattu' movement prove the theoretical perspective of "Technological Determinism"?*
- b. *Does the usage of social media in the 'Jallikattu' movement prove the theoretical perspective of "Social Determinism of Technology"?*
- c. *Does the usage of social media in the 'Jallikattu' movement prove the theoretical perspective of "Social Shaping of Technology"?*

Methodology

Case study method was adopted for this research paper. The case taken is the "usage and effect of social media in the 'Jallikattu' social movement". The case study method was chosen because the empirical reality concerning the mutual impact of social media and social institutions is changing rapidly in current times and this method may suit best for understanding, analysing, and deciphering the findings. Further, the concerned aspects of the social reality are rapidly evolving, a descriptive qualitative study would be more significant than a quantitative modelling. Yates and Van Maanen (2000) asserted the descriptive method is good for studying the current information age. There have also been other studies which have used case study as a method for understanding the role of social media in social activism and social movements (Stewart & Schultze 2019; Mundt et al, 2018).

Case Study Protocol

As Yin (1989) cited, in a case study an embedded analysis needs to be done with a specific aspect of the case. In this study, the specific aspect is the usage and impact of social media within the broader case which is the 'Jallikattu' movement and a within-case analysis has been done.

Through the following points, the basic structure of the case study method according to Yin (1993) is being defined,

- a. The case definition - It is defined as "Usage and effect of social media in the Jallikattu social movement"
- b. Unit of analysis – It is the Jallikattu social movement
- c. Why this case?

Tamil people have a long cultural history for thousands of years and Jallikattu was an important aspect of that. So, the prospect of Jallikattu getting banned was an emotive issue in Tamil Nadu and hence this issue snowballed into a social movement against the ban. This was the primary motive to choose this case for the study.

The rapid development in telecommunication infrastructure, the affordable smartphone price, low-cost mobile data availability, the conviviality of social media platforms and tools, explains the vibrant and strength of cyber society in the South Asian region (Kadoda & Hale, 2015). This situation holds true in India and more so from the report of Digital and Social Media Landscape in India (2019) it is evident that the Tamil Nadu has one of the highest penetrations of internet and social media among states within India.

This was the first time in the history of Tamil Nadu and one of the first instances in the history of India that social media was extensively used in a social movement. Hence this case was chosen for the purpose of this research. Data was majorly collected through secondary sources and from unstructured interviews.

Case - 'Jallikattu' Movement in Tamil Nadu, India

'Jallikattu' is an ancient sport which has a history of 2400 years; majorly played in Tamil Nadu; has its association with the harvest festival of the state called 'Thai Pongal' which honours the role of bull in agriculture. 'Jallikattu' is similar to the Spanish bull taming event but is a far less crude version of it. In 'Jallikattu', to win, one need not 'tame' a bull but has to hold on to the bull's hump for a specific duration. Hon'ble Supreme Court of India had banned 'Jallikattu' on the grounds of cruelty to the bulls in the year 2014. This was based on a petition filed by the PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) – an international non-profit organization. In January 2017 before the Thai Pongal festival, a peaceful people's movement started to revoke the ban on 'Jallikattu' engulfing the whole of Tamil Nadu.

The protests were held all over the different cities and towns of Tamil Nadu. The epicentre of the protest took place in one of the prominent and prime locations known as Marina Beach (the longest urban beach in the country) at the state capital – Chennai. Thousands of youngsters, more specifically students from across the state gathered to do an

absolute peaceful protest to demand for 'Jallikattu' to be allowed again. This protest was supported by all the political parties and was not sponsored by any political or religious group (Singh, 2017). The protest over the course of time became a movement and has become the most popular Tamil mass movement since the anti-Hindi agitation of the 1960s.

The youngsters of the current age are channelised and interested in meaningful socio-political issues and concerns and not with traditional party politics and personalised politics advocated by politicians (Bennett, 2008; 2012). This was reflected in the 'Jallikattu' issue which was an issue inextricably linked to the cultural identity of the Tamil people and youth. Though all political parties in Tamil Nadu supported this movement, there was a huge trust and credibility deficit that traditional parties suffered from. Hence this movement was not led by Tamil political parties but by the youth and students. In fact, all the established political parties and even Tamil nationalistic organizations were all meticulously avoided by the participants of the 'Jallikattu' movement as they wanted to keep it apolitical and free from any established vested political interests.

The 'Jallikattu' movement in Tamil Nadu was largely driven by social media. Hashtags like #WedoJallikattu and #MakkalMovement were used on Twitter and Facebook to garner support for the cause. Many film stars and celebrities supported the 'Jallikattu' movement through social and conventional media, refer Fig 4 for the screen shot of celebrity tweets.

Fig. 4. Celebrity tweets reported in Times Now (News) twitter page



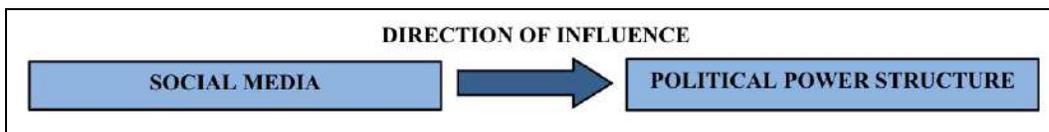
According to Castells (2012), youth activism may also have an element of not having its demands defined in a concrete manner and the process of the movement may be the message of the movement. Current youth movements may try to build something new and that “something” may not be very clear. And that “something” may continuously get defined and redefined through the process of the social movement.

The ‘Jallikattu’ movement started off with the overt objective of resuming the ‘Jallikattu’ sports tradition, but the process of the movement added other objectives to the movement like reinforcement of Tamil pride and identity, highlighting the plight of Tamil farmers and highlighting the exploitation of natural resources made by foreign Multinational Corporations operating in Tamil Nadu. The movement ended with an ordinance brought out by the state government to conduct ‘Jallikattu’. The end of the movement was marked by an element of violent action by the police on the peaceful protesters (Murali, 2017).

‘Jallikattu’ Movement – Framework for Social & Technological determinism

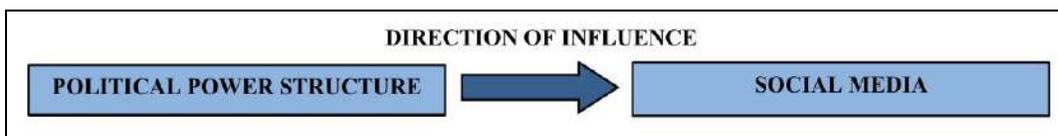
If the theoretical perspective of technological determinism is applied to the ‘Jallikattu’ movement, then social media used by the activists will influence and change the political power structure as shown in Fig. 5.

Fig. 5. Technological Determinism – Jallikattu Movement



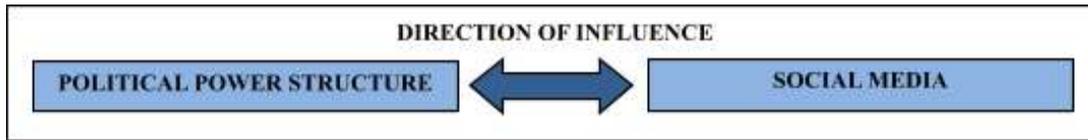
If the theoretical perspective of social determinism of technology is applied to the ‘Jallikattu’ movement, then the existing political power structure will be able to mitigate the effect of social media used by the activists. Moreover, the existing political power structure might even be able to reinforce itself as shown in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6. Social Determinism of Technology – Jallikattu Movement



If the theoretical perspective of social shaping of technology is applied on to the ‘Jallikattu’ movement, then social media will have an equal effect on both the existing power structure and the activists and will not be able to affect the net balance of power between the existing political power structure and the activists as shown in Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. Social Shaping of Technology – Jallikattu Movement



'Jallikattu' Movement and Social Media - Analysis

The points to support both technological deterministic perspective and social determinism of technology perspective within the 'Jallikattu' movement are explained here. Most are practically operationalised but some points deal only with the potential analytical possibilities.

The following points about the usage of social media in the 'Jallikattu' movement support the technological deterministic perspective:

The development of the protest was reported in all major news channels across the country; the images, stories, tweets went viral. In Hong Kong during the 2014 'Umbrella' movement many individuals acquired news through social media and it positively influenced the people to support the movement (Lee et al., 2015).

This was the case in the 'Jallikattu' movement also. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp were filled with iconic images of youngsters flashing their phone lights (refer Fig. 8), to show their unity during the night protest (Aiyappan, 2017). Social media was used not just for the initial organizing of the protests but also for sustaining the protests by helping in the logistics part. Messages like "I can provide food, water for protesters" were common on Facebook and Twitter (PTI, 2017).

Fig. 8. Image of youngsters flashing their phone lights during Jallikattu protest



The concept of ‘public sphere’ proposed by Habermas (1989) is a unitary space where the members of the public can join with universal access and which facilitates democratic discourse. The social media space is a public sphere but with the inherent limitation that those who are on the other end of the digital divide will not be a part of this public sphere. Lee et al. (2015) advocates that public interest issues on social media give scope to those platforms to become ‘Insurgent Public Sphere’, for arousing interest; mobilising people; collecting opinions; making demands and imposing pressure on administrators and political authorities. In the ‘Jallikattu’ movement, the social media platforms became an insurgent public sphere that raised, aroused and demanded the revoke of the ‘Jallikattu’ ban.

Marginalised groups can use social media and use a phrase from Edward Said, ‘Talk truth to power’. Social media is characterised by the production of content by common people and when this happens as part of a networked social movement, this horizontal and decentralised content production has the potential to challenge the conventional hierarchical and centralised media controlled by government and corporate institutions. And this was true in this movement also as content related to the movement was democratically generated in real time by the participants and disseminated horizontally in the social networks.

A video footage showing policemen attacking the protestors and vandalising vehicles and other properties went viral on social media. But police said, those are doctored footage, and they did not use force on protestors and on their properties (Sandhu, 2017). But in general, from this it follows that social media has the potential to raise awareness about any excesses by the state and give an advantage to the activists and their cause.

Internet and social media provide social capital to resource-poor socio-political actors and it further offers a place for them in the societal collective consciousness (Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2009). In the 'Jallikattu' movement, not just people from upper middle classes like software engineers but people from lower classes like auto drivers also participated and it was led by the common people themselves.

Grassroots movements of today are localised, non-hierarchical and networked (Brodtkin, 2007; Castells, 2012). In the same way, the 'Jallikattu' movement was localised to Tamil cultural practices associated with Tamilians, it was non-hierarchical, and it connected within its network Tamil people the world over.

Through social media, not only the Tamils in Tamil Nadu but also the entire Tamil diaspora across the world could accumulate social capital and participate successfully in this movement. For example, even in Odisha, the Bhubaneswar Tamil Association had organised a demonstration as part of this movement and had posted it on social media.

Social media facilitates the quick aggregation of people around topical and emotional issues, but this may need only an ephemeral engagement from the participants (Earl et al, 2015). Since pure online participation over social media needs only an ephemeral engagement, it manages to get a wider set of participants. In the 'Jallikattu' movement, the people assembled on quick notice based on messages on social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. But they also could leave and rejoin the movement whenever they want. Social movements, by their very nature, have a fluid structure. They do not have strict norms of membership and have rather amorphous boundaries. The process of being a part of social media based social movements gets easier and vaguer. A person can become a member just by hitting the 'Like' button on a Facebook post/page or by responding to an email addressed to them (Kavada, 2015).

Since the number of social media-based movements that calls for participants are less, the social media facilitates the concept of 'organizing without organizations' (Earl et al., 2015), that permits the coordination and management of collective action with no cost and without complex organizational infrastructures (Della Porta & Mosca, 2005). This was also true in the 'Jallikattu' movement as there was no proper organization involved.

Social media in general helps to create shared interest and in specific produces 'shared awareness'. According to Shirky (2011) the shared awareness is characterised by understanding of the situation, its intensity, getting along with other participants and coordinating for a collective action. In the 'Jallikattu' movement, apart from the generic learning that happens from participation in any social movement, specific classes were held at the protest sites to educate the participants about the issues and thus a 'shared awareness' was created and this 'shared awareness' was transmitted through social media based electronic conduits to other participants in the movement. As Castells (2012) says, this shared awareness provides hope for the movement participants and this hope leads to outrage which provides the collective psychic energy for expanding and sustaining the movement.

In a study on housing patterns, it was found out that positive narrative through social media of improvement and empowerment among many resident activists can challenge stigmatised views about low class neighbourhoods (Matthews, 2012a; 2012b). Likewise, among many people who do not understand Tamil culture, there is a certain stigmatised view about the 'Jallikattu' event. They think that it is an irrational event which only inflicts wanton cruelty on the bulls. This is an uninformed opinion as the Indian supreme court guidelines explicitly prohibit any act of cruelty against bulls during 'Jallikattu'. This kind of a biased opinion does not take into consideration the deep cultural significance of 'Jallikattu'. So, the social media campaign for 'Jallikattu' can help to de-stigmatise the views of non-Tamil people about 'Jallikattu' and create positive opinions about the same.

The following points about the usage of social media in the 'Jallikattu' movement support the social determinism of technology perspective. As in the previous section, most are practically operationalised but some deal only with the potential analytical possibilities.

IT based proprietary platforms and social media are focused on corporate surveillance, driving profit interest by the content developed and curated by the users of those platforms (Fuchs, 2014). In general, the social media platforms restrict other users to access the data and activities of an individual. These platforms show interest in mining, storing, and curating the content developed by an individual user beyond the moment it is shared, and they develop analytics for further usage (Poell, 2014). In this regard, the state may also develop social media content by harvesting and curating it to strengthen their point of view. The state might want to show selective incidents of some isolated violent or wayward acts engaged by some members of the movement and make the public interpret that as the representation of the movement as a whole so as to delegitimise the movement. For example, in the case of the 'Jallikattu' movement, some Tamil nationalists used an anti-central government narrative on social media which could be interpreted from an ultra-nationalist viewpoint as "anti-national" posturing. This kind of news can be curated and used by the state to delegitimise the movement. Hence it is seen that technological deterministic perspective can be countered by the social determinism of technology perspective. That is, the potential of social media-based technology to change the existing power structures is countered by those power structures using the very same technologies and the status quo is maintained.

If activists can use social media effectively, then the state can also use social media to its advantage to quell a social movement. The political party controlling the state can also use paid and unpaid volunteers from their social media cells to create opinions on social media which can neutralise the social media effect of the activists.

During the 'Jallikattu' movement, the mainstream media in Tamil Nadu which in general is controlled by the existing power structures was fully in support of the movement. But during the last few days, after the ordinance on 'Jallikattu' was passed by the Tamil Nadu state legislature, the mainstream media turned against the movement. At this juncture, the strength of the social media could not help the movement to sustain and the movement ended.

During this movement in 2017, the social media users in India was less than 300 million (Statista, 2020). So, this means that a large section of Indian population was excluded from social media usage. In a developed state like Tamil the proportion of social media users will be higher but nevertheless there will still be a large chunk of Tamil population who will be on the wrong side of the digital divide. This digital divide is largely determined by the existing extra-digital societal divides (Kumar, 2007). Hence this will affect the efficacy of the 'Jallikattu' movement. Hence it is seen that the non-technological structural factors of society mitigate the effect of social media in this regard.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, when the usage of social media technologies in the 'Jallikattu' movement is analysed threadbare, it is found that both the theoretical perspectives of technological determinism and social determinism of technology seem to be equally potent. Hence the best perspective that can be used to explain the usage and impact of social media technology within this movement would be the social shaping of technology perspective which takes the middle ground in this regard. The social shaping of technology perspective posits equal importance to the effect of technology on social institutions and vice versa and hence assumes a theoretical mid-position between a social determinism of technology perspective and a technological deterministic perspective. When the social shaping of technology perspective is applied, then it is found out that social media can help social activism and can help to change society's unequal power structures but also brings out the limitations of social media vis-à-vis the existing social power structures. The application of the social shaping of technology perspective gives a moderate and realistic understanding of the potential of social media used by social movements and social activism for changing society's power relations.

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