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Ethnographies of Privacy: Frameworks for Analyzing Popular Culture Practices on Social Media

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Introduction

This paper sets out to think through some of the emerging questions around the idea of privacy and the concomitant popular culture practices on social media. Additionally this paper will map the existing scholarly theorizations on cyber cultures, the cyber space and popular culture practices on social media especially with respect to privacy concerns. The paper will then attempt to think through possible methodological frameworks in research approach towards studying social media practices and lived experiences of online privacy.

The cyberspace and cyberspace cultures in particular have opened up enquiries from various perspectives. Some have argued that computers, the Internet, online technologies and social media in particular will enable an "inclusive and participatory popular culture".[1] First, this utopian perspective however negates the topographies of class, caste and gender terrains on which access to digital technologies is disproportionately distributed and accessed. Second, the 'popular' in popular culture is certainly political and while the

definitions and approach to popular culture remain contested, oscillating between extremes of domination to subversion and resistance, the extent and level to which these technologies offer democratic participation in production and consumption needs to be investigated. Power in the cyberspace operates through sociological, cultural, political, economic and technological modes.[2]

As argued by Adorno and Horkheimer in the context of mass culture[3], social media technologies and practices as a culture industry are firmly integrated and enmeshed in structures of the larger global capitalist economy. And while some suggest that there is a blurring of lines between social media producers and consumers,[4] I argue that we need to interrogate the social media structures within which producers and consumers emerge and make agentic choices.

One emerging and pertinent concern around new media technologies broadly, and social media technologies in particular is that of privacy. Castells has argued that the historical change because of the transition from an "industrial age to the information age" has made information as a commodity ubiquitous to economic productivity.[5] To extend his argument, I see information (personal information, photographs, purchasing patterns, geo-spatial tagging, images, emails and private conversations etc.) on the Internet as fundamental metadata crucial for generating further information about users/citizens/subjects. Hence some questions emerge: Who controls this information? Who has access to this information? Who generates and provides this information? How is this information mined and processed? And how is this information utilized?

While the cyberspace offers a certain sense of anonymity in online actions and projections, it also at the same time, makes it very easy to identify, locate and mark its users. Social media activity and participation is predicated upon wilful volunteering of personal information, name, location, phone numbers and other information. As a specific instance, the ubiquity of smartphones in urban cities provide downloading of third-party applications which requires wilful surrender of the phone camera, personal messages and other database in the phone by the user. For example, a popular social media networking site, Facebook demands access to these before a user can download its application onto their phones. This access is knowingly or unknowingly

provided by users, sometimes with little or no understanding of its implications.[6]

Emerging Questions and Concerns

In the background of developing new media technologies and the concomitant rise of social media technologies and practices, I'd like to argue that we must (i) revisit, rethink and re-imagine the idea of privacy in general and social media privacy in particular. Additionally we need to undertake (ii) mapping of contemporary Youth cultures around social media practices and concerns of and about privacy from a gendered perspective. In the sense that how do social construction of the ideas around masculinity and femininity feed into privacy concerns among young men and women? Specifically what are the "technologies of the self" that young men and women learn and activate in their social media practices? Related to these broad queries is also studying (iii) the default ways in which social media technologies offer 'settings' and ideas of privacy to social media users and what are the ways in which the users understand, make sense of, process and act upon these settings. These questions on social media privacy also exist in the context (or lack of) public policy on privacy. There is a social, political and cultural context to the idea of online privacy in India and the State has a role to play in its defining, limiting and policing the idea of online privacy. This also feeds into the perceptions of surveillance in the minds of social media users.

Since popular culture is a site of contestation between forces of domination and subversion, it is imperative to engage with (iv) how young men and women revise/resist and subvert social media structures to protect their concerns of privacy. What are those techniques that they employ to transgress social media structures which may or may not be designed with inequities and are pre-dispositioned in unequal ways in their relationship with social media users.

The concerns in and around privacy are manifold. The first level is that of the user/consumer of social media technologies. The second level is that of business enterprises using social media technologies to reach out to possible consumers. The third level is that of the State in its surveying of social media practices of its citizens.

The first level involves users practices of sharing their personal information online including their names, addresses, phone numbers, education and work profile. It also includes information exchange with other users on social media including messages, posts, and photographs whose privacy may or may not be entirely protected with access provided to third-party applications for building their databases and perform targeted marketing activities online. One pertinent concern to highlight here is that of personal photographs shared by users with each other on social media, this includes among other things, photographs in personal setting, place of education, work, family photographs and also photographs or selfies that are sexual in nature. While the last example may not exactly constitute pornographic content but lack of privacy or protection structures around sharing of such selfies and photographs may lead these photographs to be available elsewhere for pornographic consumption.

The second level is that of business enterprises who are tracking online movements of users. Online activities of users can be tracked by the internet applications that users use, this information is also shared and made available to other third-party applications. For instance, while Facebook may have information about the user's personal information, photographs as well as online surfing habits, this information will also be shared with third-parties such as other businesses promoting themselves/advertising on Facebook. While this can constitute as a violation of privacy, it also lays bare the opaqueness of social media structures. Ironically a lot of these permissions have been unknowingly and wilfully surrendered by the user when they make their accounts on these portals. In many cases this transfer and sharing of information is completely unknown to the user, who will also be targeted with specific advertisements on the basis of their online practices.

The third level is that of State surveillance on the internet via the Information Technology Act 2000 and 2008. While the Supreme Court struck down the contentious Section 66A of the Act and watered down Section 79, thereby safeguarding users and their comments on social media, some sections still allow the state to monitor and decrypt information through any computer. This continues to have far-reaching implications for concerns around privacy.

Perspectives on Theoretical Approaches

In this section I will make an attempt to discuss texts which can be formative in developing an approach to engage with some of the concerns and questions pertaining to this issue. I will briefly discuss some works which can work as sign-posts from where further exploration can be pursued.

Sasken argues that analysis of digital technologies must not restrict themselves to a technological interpretation but recognize how they are embedded in everyday social life. She suggests that they may give rise to entirely newer social orders or may re-constitute older forms of hierarchy.[7] She stresses the importance of engaging with this interaction of the digital and the material worlds, and also the mediating cultures which make possible this interaction.

Haraway's conceptualization of the Cyborg is an important work for some of the initial questions put forward by this paper.[8] Haraway speaks of hybrid identities as social constructions formed at the intersection of gender, nature, technology and culture. I would like to read her work along with the concerns of the public/private divide especially in reference to her iteration on borderlands and boundaries and the imprecision of the difference between the physical and non-physical in reference to newer technologies, and particularly social media in this case.

Related to the Cyborg is also the idea of the 'networked society'. In writing about the 'information age' and the economic, social and cultural import of the 'network society', Castells foretold how the world as we know it will pivot around information, and how it would become a crucial element of an increasingly globalized world.[9] His theorization on the networks and flows of communication, both at the level of production and consumption have an important bearing on some of the initial formulations and research questions outlines in this paper. His work on the 'Power of Identity' lays special emphasis on the State and the construction of meanings and identities in the 'network society'.

If we were to re-read and take ahead Haraway's Cyborg along with Castells' 'networked society', we can see Cyborg not just as a hybrid of the human, the animal and the machine, but the 'networked Cyborg' as a lens to

map popular cultural practices on social media, where users are producers and consumers, engaging in a participatory but also a rigid frame of communication.[10]

Foucault's concepts of the 'Technologies of the Self' and 'Governmentality' are also central to some of the questions raised in this paper.[11] Extending it to the study of (digital) technologies of the self, Foucault's work can be read in terms of the practices and strategies social media users employ to make sense of the ideas of privacy, to negotiate with structures of social media or develop their own strategies to resist various invasions of privacy. It would also be interesting to explore whether these technologies of the self differ for men and women, and if that in any way also reflects the social construction of masculinity and femininity through social media practices.

There is considerable work on privacy issues, from the perspective of the State and the citizen, between multi-national corporations and the State, but not enough work which investigates the notion/practice/strategy of privacy as a lived experience in the online world. In 2014, the Indian government floated the Right to Privacy Bill, which was shelved soon after and the government is in the process of re-drafting the provisions of the bill. Specifically discussing the idea of privacy with respect to newer technologies and the social media, Schild argues that privacy and power work together in rendering the digital subject on social media visible and/or invisible to the gaze of others.[12] She argues that the very architecture of the Internet and social media in particular is predicated on the culture of openness and voluntary sharing of information. I argue that this sharing of information is conscious as well as unknown to the users many times and this makes privacy concerns and practices oscillate between "publicness/privateness and subjectivity/ obscurity".[13]

Developing Methodological Frameworks

With reference to the questions outlined in this paper, and the theoretical approaches surveyed in the previous section, I will now discuss possible methodological frameworks appropriate for enquiry in the current context.

The very nature of online media points to a constant state of flux,

technological changes and developments continually inform and build new media structures. All applications on the Internet are regularly updated, providing with a newer forms of interface, privacy setting, user preferences etc. While these may superficially present themselves as mere technological changes, these have profound cultural import on the lives and practices of users. Fuery for instance has argued that new media is largely a cultural phenomenon and any approach to studying online media needs to trace and foreground the socio-cultural context within which it has emerged and is located.[14]

If we are to consider social media as part of the Internet culture industry, partly influencing and being influenced by larger structures of global capitalism, then a Critical Theory approach can serve well to answer some of the questions discussed in previous sections.

One of the concerns outlined in this paper was also to investigate social media practices from a gendered perspective. A critical feminist approach will be useful in examining if the ideas around privacy are shaped by or do they shape broader notions of masculinity and femininity, how are the experiences, practices of young men and women different from each other? How can it help understand online behaviour of men and women? It would be interesting to examine if it is possible to escape gender binaries and essentializations using feminist media approaches to study this phenomenon. Feminist perspectives can help shake some of the assumed givens of social media: how can the 'social' be conceptualized and defined within social media, can the Internet be seen as a male domain and by extension gendered? Can we draw on existing theorizations around masculinity and technology to discuss gendered practices on social media especially with respect to privacy? However if the digital can be seen as a blurring of the public and the private, can it offer newer forms of solidarity, exchange and much wider access to women vis-a-vis the material world they inhabit? While Haraway's Cyborg seeks to move away from the boundaries between the human and technology, and as some argue, as an extension, a blurring of lines between men and women in the cyberworld, feminist approaches can help grapple with these iterations.

There are emerging concerns around the existence of social media

ethnography in a chaotic digital world. How can we conceptualize the internet as an ethnographic site, not bound by topographies of location and region? Postill and Pink raise the question that how can we map the social, material and technological world of our ethnographic research participants?[15] They in fact argue that we must departure from the classical approach to ethnography on the Internet via formations of network and community and instead realign our lens to engage with routine, sociality and movement instead. Further they add that online ethnography now offers newer sites of ethnographic inquiry and developing of newer forms of ethnographic practice. While newer approaches to ethnography continue to inform the practice, I suggest that we do not abandon the networks and communities as a frame for carrying out ethnographic research and at the same time also incorporate newer formations such as those of routine, sociality and movement.

Conclusion

This working paper sought to bring to fore some of the emerging questions around cyberspace and cybercultures in particular, with reference to the notion of privacy and its operation as an idea and practice. This paper serves as a map to signpost possible theoretical and methodological approaches that can be incorporated in the study of popular culture practices on social media. Theoretical approaches range of human-technology blurring and interaction to a network of societies that are constantly connected, and the technologies of the digital self that are embodied by new media users. Subsequently social media ethnography has emerged as a specialized form of enquiry, where conceptualization of digital ethnographic site(s), participant observation and recording of data and analysis continue to be contested and debated fervently. With incremental changes in digital technologies, methodological approaches need to be constantly modified, appropriated and adjusted to accommodate changes in the site of research and user patterns. This presents itself as a methodological challenge, and hence an enquiry of this nature requires some aspects of classical and traditional forms of ethnographic practice in conjunction with newer ways of engaging, understanding and analyzing the choices, activities and practices of ethnographic participants.

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Endnotes

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6   This assumption is based on some preliminary conversations with young people in the age group of 18-22 years of age in Delhi who disclosed that this sharing of information and giving access to their data to other third-party applications on their phones, is not a matter of concern and/ or that they do not have any understanding of the implications of divulging such information.

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