

SOCIAL MEDIA, EMERGING KNOWLEDGE AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN MANIPUR

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Abstract: This paper examines the way in which entry of social media affects knowledge system and reconstitutes social relationship in everyday life in Manipur. Based on the forms of media available in society, knowledge system can be divided into mass media knowledge system and social media knowledge system. Drawing from multi-sited ethnography conducted in Manipur this study looks at the relationship between social media, knowledge system and social relationship in everyday life. The study observes that discursive activities such as posting, commenting or circulation of contents on social media play a crucial role in the constitution of knowledge in our contemporary mediated by the digital technologies. The knowledge system of social media discourse is largely constituted by participation from “below” i.e. the popular or ordinary people. This paper concludes that in today’s world the knowledge system of a society is very much constituted by the activities on social media and the kind of discourse available in it. In this era of internet and digital technologies, the society is entering towards social media knowledge system. The social relationship in everyday life is increasingly constituted by knowledge produce through social media.

Keywords: Everyday Life, Knowledge System, Manipur, Popular Discourse, Social Media.

Introduction

Today, like any other parts of the world social media is embedded in everyday life in Manipur, a borderland state in India. As ordinary people in Manipur are interacting, communicating and discussing about the public or larger social issues in various topics on social media, publicly or collectively, it is essential to think about “public

sphere” and “counterpublics”. Public sphere refers to a space where individuals can come together as public and discuss about society or public (Habermas, 1989). It is also argued that social media does not have the requisite for public sphere (Fuchs, 2014; Kruse, Norris and Flinchum, 2018), or social media is transforming the public sphere in contemporary (Seeliger and Seignani, 2022; Staab and Thiel, 2022). Social media is also an important site for alternative public or “counterpublics” i.e. a parallel discursive arena to circulate counter discourse for the marginalized or subordinate groups (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2023; Fraser, 1992; Suzuki and Velasquez, 2025). The way how ordinary people talk about larger public issues of the community, society or state is more possible on social media unlike in mass media when there is no such possibility. The discursive activities on social media also become an important site for knowledge production as well as source of knowledge consumption.

In Manipur, the advent of social media has already affected in the most visible ways during the 2023 Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict. It can also be said that social media has already affected the pre-existing knowledge system in the state. Social media is not merely about communication and interaction among individuals and groups but also an important site or source for knowing about the everyday life and society through contents circulating on social media including news or information. Social media helps in the formation of discourse constituted by popular i.e. popular discourse. This popular discourse operates as knowledge that is in negotiation or interaction with other knowledge including the official ones. Official knowledge(s) are generally located or resided in the official institutions such as court, media, archives and university. For a larger population or the popular world social media is also important source of knowledge. This study is about examining the social media knowledge system as different from mass media knowledge system. Here, social media knowledge system refers to the kind of emerging new knowledge system with the advent of social media.

Previous studies on knowledge have looked at the indigenous knowledge system and western knowledge system (Barnhardt and Kawagley, 2005), questioning the dichotomy between indigenous knowledge and scientific knowledge (Agrawal, 1995), knowledge as different from culture (Barth, 2002), knowledge and its relationship with power and discourse (Foucault, 1980), paradigm shift in scientific knowledge (Kuhn, 1962), historical-social situation of knowledge (Manheim, 1960), ethnographic knowledge in colonial context (Dilley, 2007). Neuberger et al. (2023) distinguish between linear type knowledge order of mass media and circular type

knowledge order of digital media. Linear type of knowledge order is characterized by “clear link between roles and phases of the knowledge process, and a clear distinction of contexts and positions in the hierarchy” where knowledge flows from source to audience in linear order (Neuberger et al., 2023, pp. 187-188). In circular type knowledge order, “roles and phases in the knowledge process is dissolving”, sources and audience members can participate in knowledge process and the knowledge process has circular structure (Neuberger et al., 2023, p. 190). In mass media there is “linear knowledge order” because there is non-reciprocal circulation of information and “circular knowledge order” in digital media is made possible by reciprocal circulation of information. Neuberger et al. (2023) distinguish two types of knowledge order in different era of media, yet their framework does not examine how circular type knowledge order in social media intersect with the lived reality of ordinary people in everyday life. This article focuses on the knowledge system constituted by social and cultural practices of everyday life that is possible on the new media system. There is a research gap in understanding how the shift from mass media towards social media creates new knowledge system and affects the social relationship in everyday life within a society.

Thus, it is crucial to understand the changes in the society or the everyday life when there is a shift from mass media knowledge system to social media knowledge system. For instance, in the context of Manipur, how does the advent of social media redefine the understanding of social media users about themselves, the “other” and the larger society? In his essay *An Anthropology of Knowledge* Fredrik Barth writes – “People construct their worlds by their knowledge and live by it, and therefore an anthropology of knowledge should ask how these varieties are variously produced, represented, transmitted, and applied.” (Barth, 2002, p. 10) The knowledge system of a society is very much related with the nature of the media present in that society. Whenever there is a change in the media technology there is a change in the knowledge system and it directly affects the social reality. For instance the coming of print capitalism, like newspaper, helps in the rise of nationalism as it allows the disparate people to imagine themselves together as a community i.e. nation as imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Social media also changes the nature of protest and movements such as Gen Z protest (Shrestha and Paudel, 2026) and Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Miller et al. (2016) argues that both the social media and the world are changing each other. In a time when social media is changing the world it is crucial to study how social media is transforming knowledge system and the larger society.

There is a growing amount of data generating on social media particularly from the social media users. As much as it is easier for the knowledge to disseminate to the larger people with the help of digital technologies, knowledge is also increasingly generated from below. One of the distinctive characters of social media is the possibility for the social media users to interact and circulate information or knowledge among themselves. In the era of mass media, there is less possibility for the ordinary people or the popular to participate in knowledge production. But today social media help in the creation or production of knowledge by the popular. The knowledge system is increasingly constituted by the unofficial domain of the popular world in social media. Even the official knowledge is increasingly in interaction with the ordinary people. The understanding or perception of the ordinary people in their everyday life is also increasingly influenced or shaped by the unofficial knowledge available on social media. In recent years in Manipur, the perception and understanding of the ordinary people about the identity and “history” or “past” of their community or other community is also drawn from the contents circulating or activities on social media.

For Barth, the problem of knowledge is about “what a person employs to interpret and act on the world” (2002, p. 1). In Manipur, people talk wide ranging topics on social media such as history, development, identity, governance, ecology, community relations, conflict and religion. Discourse on social media is concerning because it is not only about how much knowledge of these topics are changing but also importantly about changing social relationships among individuals, groups and communities in everyday life. Thus, it is important to understand emerging knowledge system in the context of media transition. How does the advent of social media help in the formation of popular discourse, reconstitute knowledge system and produce new knowledge thereby affecting the social relationship in everyday life in Manipur? This paper aims to explore circulation of discourse in everyday social media activities and analyse how it affects the existing discourse, knowledge and social relationship in everyday life in the context of Manipur.

Field and Methodology

Manipur is inhabited mainly by three major ethnic communities of Meitei, Naga and Kuki. This state witnessed the transitioning period from mass media into social media during 2010s and later widely popular in 2020s. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp were not massively used but by the mid of

2010s particularly after the availability of cheaper mobile internet data social media users were gradually increasing. With the growing access to social media by the ordinary people it was common to observe ordinary people expressing their voice and concerns about the larger social or public issues on social media in their post or comments. It is a new phenomenon where ordinary people start speaking among themselves and also towards or against authority not at the level of locality such as neighbourhood but in the larger social settings of social media at the level of community and society.

This study uses theoretical framework of Barth's anthropology of knowledge. Barth asserts that knowledge has three interconnected aspects: "First, any tradition of knowledge contains a corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world. Secondly, it must be instantiated and communicated in one or several media as a series of partial representations in the form of words, concrete symbols, pointing gestures, actions. And thirdly, it will be distributed, communicated, employed, and transmitted within a series of instituted social relations" (2002, p. 3). These three aspects are present on social media discourse. To understand the emerging knowledge system of our everyday life in our times it is essential to understand the discourse constituted in and through social media. Popular activities on social media such as communication, interaction or post, comment and sharing of contents both represent and constitute the knowledge system and social order. This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork that I have conducted in Manipur from July of 2022 to March of 2024 for my PhD research (Marcus, 1995). I have collected data through interview and participant observation. I have also observed activities on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X and WhatsApp. During my ethnographic fieldwork I have followed guidelines for ethical consideration as provided by American Anthropological Association (2012) and Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al., 2020).

Social Media and Formation of Popular Discourse

Barth's concern in anthropology of knowledge is the body of knowledge that are produced in the context of social relation (2002, p. 1). The transition from mass media into social media is also about transitioning forms of social relationship in relation with circulation of information. In mass media era, the larger population of the ordinary people were in receiving end, silent spectators or silent majority (Baudrillard, 1983) rather than vocal ones. By virtue of its architectural design of

social media, individuals from different social positions as well as from below can speak and assert their voice not only as individually but also as collectively, and also not in localised space but in the larger public space of society through or in social media. One of the important characters of social media is “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) and this allows ordinary individual not only consume knowledge but also actively participate in the creation of knowledge. The knowledge coming from social media discourse can align with official discourse or it can also go against the official knowledge. Even if the knowledge generating from social media does not changes the official knowledge or discourse it can definitely affect or change the knowledge for a large number of ordinary people. The rise of misinformation, disinformation and fake news can easily disrupt the existing knowledge including the official ones affecting the social order. During the conflict situation for instance in 2023 Meitei-Kuki ethnic conflict, individuals from both ethnic communities were using social media in their claims and counter claims of the “narrative battle” (Chakrabarti, 2023). Thus, the kind of knowledge that is produced from social media discourse is also intentional rather than merely consequential.

Circulation of Knowledge

The shift from centralized to decentralized, intermittent to continuous and repository-based to emergent knowledge sharing make possible for the individual to engage in online communal knowledge conversation in social media (Majchrzak et al., 2013, p. 40). During my fieldwork in Manipur I have observed that social media space is social and cultural rather than just a mere space for communication or interaction. Both state and people respond and react to what is circulating on social media. Some contents go viral instantly or in short time depending on how the community reacts to such contents such as image, video, audio or textual post. In one instance, a video went viral about a Christian pastor’s mockery statement on the traditional practice related with death ritual. Many Meitei individuals including Member of Parliament condemned the remark and demand for apology from the pastor. Later the pastor made a video of his confession and went viral on social media. Confession is very common practice in Manipur in many cases individuals are required to confess, for certain “unacceptable” acts, deeds, or statements, by the civil authority or organisations. During the ethnic conflict, in one incident a Meitei woman made a certain statement about the position on ethnic conflict that affects the position of the Meitei community and her statement went viral on social

media. Later, her confession video also went viral again on social media. In the above cases of viral on social media, people share information that goes against the interest of the community and goes viral in short time only to condemn what is said or done.

The state or government also censors certain information circulating on social media. The video of “naked parade” of two women during ethnic conflict went viral on social media evoking emotions of anger and shame to social media users across country. The government ordered the social media platforms to remove the content of the viral video. From time to time there are cases of arrest of social media users related to social media post. Both confession and censorship on circulation of contents on social media are modes of regulating knowledge. With its possibility for speed, reach and connectivity, social media changes how knowledge is shared or created, and has created an evolving knowledge ecosystem challenging the older management of knowledge (Hemsley and Mason, 2013, p. 157). Activities on social media including posting, commenting or sharing of contents are all forms of circulation of knowledge with assertion of particular worldview, and they either reproduce or changes the existing knowledge. In Manipur, how people understand about history, identity, land and ethnic conflict are also very much derived from social media discourse. Circulation of information is also driven by emotions of the social media users. Viral is one particular phenomena where emotion drives information in becoming viral. There is also close relationship between emotion and public, i.e. “public nature of emotions, and the emotive nature of publics” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 14). Social media also produces particular public i.e. “affective publics”. Papacharissi understands “affective publics” as “public formations that are textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds” (2016, p. 320). In social media, information or content that has more association with the emotions of the larger collective be it community or society are in wider circulation in speed i.e. going viral on social media. In social media, knowledge that has more emotional appeal are increasingly producing and circulating in society.

Social Media and Ground Reality

One of the concerning issues in media is the question of representation, and representation between mass media and social media is different. Media representation on mass media reflects the ideological position of the institution and

can also be an Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, 1971). Thus, the question is how far media representation reflects reality. Representation on social media is also largely coming from social media users from different social positions thereby exists multiple ideologies. My informant from Kuki community told me that people can express their viewpoint on social media. I was told that social media can help in bringing out issues in public, and it can be about lack of infrastructural development in the hill or relationship between leader and people. He also claims that social media is a source of knowledge for such issues and provide ground reality. There is also lack of trust to the mass media from the valley as he asserts that valley media misrepresent tribal community, for instance tribal issues like development issues are not given attention but focus on negative side. To my informant, mass media of valley misrepresent tribal community while social media can represent ground reality. Unlike in mass media where reality may comprise in duality i.e. real world and media world, social media users can engage in representation of reality making possible for existence of multiple representations of identities and realities on social media (Cho et al., 2022, p. 945).

When the ethnic conflict broke out on 3rd May 2023, I come across my Facebook a live-streaming video of the clash or conflict where house were burning in a village and people were running for life. For me and for hundreds of other people the first reportage of violent conflict came from social media and not from mass media. From their live video, social media users could show the larger society about the ground reality from his point of view as a person or villager caught in conflict. During the ethnic conflict the social media users from Meitei community also express that the national mainstream media misrepresent the ethnic conflict by favouring the narrative towards the Kuki community. Both the communities were using social media to put forward their desirable narrative. Contents in social media ranging from social and political commentaries to banal content of the mundane everyday life are ideological and political (Bouvier and Way, 2021, p. 345). During conflict situation, the ideological and political characters of contents become more explicit on social media. Social media become another battle site for ethnic conflict i.e. “narrative battle” where conflict is increasingly wage on the knowledge domain. Conflict is also wage for controlling the narrative and representation. At the other extreme pole, social media also produces fake reality by deliberately circulating fake news, misinformation and disinformation particularly during the conflict. It was observed during the conflict that fake news or misinformation were circulating

during conflict such as images and videos about sexual and gender violence. In many cases, fake information evokes real emotions like anger and fear during the conflict. Emotion is central in social media dynamics. Social media creates a kind of paradoxical situation in knowledge production. Social media helps in representing ground reality without mediation by ideology of media institutions. Social media also take part in producing fake reality through fake information that are producing and circulating among the ordinary people.

Historical Knowledge

Liu (2018) argues that social media provides a platform for the individuals to produce alternative or counter-framework of history challenging the hegemonic and official framework, thus enabling diverse individuals to participate in the production of historical knowledge (pp. 1688-1689). Before the outbreak of ethnic conflict social media users from both the ethnic communities of Meitei and Kuki discuss about history of their community and society in post and comments. But the history discuss in the social media are opposing and contradictory to the interest of each other community. Meitei social media users post various images of historical or archival records of government containing the word or claim that Kuki is refugee from Burma. Likewise, social media users from Kuki community also bring out images of colonial texts and PhD thesis claiming that Manipur's territorial area is "700 sq. miles" and not the present territory. With this historical understanding Kuki community also demand a separate homeland for Kuki in the present territory of Manipur. On the other hand, Meiteis also claim that Kukis are "foreigner", "refugee" and "illegal immigrants" from Burma. It is also important to bring out here that these claims and counter claims among the larger population of ordinary people on history or past takes place in recent times only after social media became popular. Birkner and Donk (2018) argue that social media can be used to debate common past and function as counter-public, and also bring out the suppressed view of the past to discuss about history and identity (p. 379). Various archival documents and records in image formats are circulating on social media. So, the archival or historical documents are not limited to only few scholars, academics or individuals but reaches to the larger population of ordinary people. Likewise, earlier debate on history is generally limited with academics, scholars and intellectuals. Ordinary people take part in the historical debate through their posts and comments on social media in the unofficial domain of everyday life.

Historical debate on social media may not change the written official history but it produces a kind of historical imagination among the popular about the past in relation to land and people. Thus, there can emerge a gap between official knowledge and popular knowledge on history. The coming of internet and social media makes it possible for the larger people to participate in mnemonic activities in sharing their stories or point of view to their audience (Khlevnyuk, 2018, p. 328). Officially or in official history, Kukis are not refugees, but unofficially or in the popular historical narrative (popular history) Kukis are divided into old Kuki and new Kuki based on when they migrated to Manipur. The position that Kukis are “refugee” is also taken by Naga community and visibly asserts this position on social media. Based on how popular understand or imagine about historical knowledge in their everyday life, it will determine what kind of inter community relationship will exist. The ordinary people on social media are beginning to play the role of mouthpiece and gatekeepers of the knowledge on history. In this conflicting situation when a community make a historical assertion the other community take it as historical distortion. This creates a non-compromising situation leading towards discounting or negating the other community’s historical assertion or position and targeting the other community by name calling. This contestation on historical narrative also contributes towards the identity formation in line of “us” and “them” or “insider” and “outsider” or simply as “citizen” and “illegal immigrants”. Hate speech between the two communities on social media is part of this contestation in historical narrative and asserting their historical position. For the popular world in everyday life, historical knowledge is also very much derived from “history” that is collectively understood and circulated on social media.

Conclusion

The transition from mass media into social media is not merely about changing the nature of communication but also changes the knowledge system as it is observed in the context of Manipur. Social media becomes a site not only for consuming knowledge but also for producing knowledge. Social media knowledge system is different from knowledge system in mass media and it has the characteristics of bottom-up, decentralized and heterogeneity. Knowledge in social media is constituted not only from official and rational-critical discussion but also from unofficial and affective/emotional registers. Social media has democratised knowledge production and this also entails a paradoxical condition that allows for both representing ground

reality and also for producing fake reality. Knowledge produce in the social media is important to the extent that it is also becoming a source for identity formation of how individual or group sees themselves and others, thus influencing the social relationship in everyday life.

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