HE HUMAN civilization has lived with a range of technologies that they invented to make their life more comfortable. As students of communication whenever the authors studied, taught, researched, and wrote on new media it always increased their curiosity to understand the concept called ‘Social Media’ differently. Sometimes this creates a situation when the concept, idea or phenomena of social media, often quoted as a part of new media, remain an unanswered matter, whether this pertains to a technology and technology support or something beyond that. We tried to generate a discussion on social media as a component of new media to understand its various nuances.

As teachers, researchers, and practitioners of new media, our confusion is – where to draw the line of new media between the technology and/or the phenomena. This is not the first time in the history that we witness the dilemma between technology and the impact of the technology on society. Any new technology has to meet the necessary prerequisites of its (a) technical validity (b) economic viability (c) social acceptability, and (d) reduction in labour of work. This reminds the work of Heidegger on “the question concerning technology” when he said that the problem is not so much on the existence of technology or the forms it takes, rather our orientation to technology. New media as a technology or our orientation towards the technology is what make the difference in today’s world. As Andrew Feenberg says:

“technologies normally stabilize after an initial period during which many differing configurations compete. Once stabilizes, their social and political implications become clear. But despite decades of development, the internet remains in flux and innovative usage continue to appear. The nature of network is still in question and it is not a fully developed technology”

However, to contextualize the technology, new media, social

The inclusive growth and positive contribution of the invisible super power of social media is possible if we can keep on emphasizing the 3A factors (Availability, Accessibility and Adoptability) in society.

Moore’s Law: The processing power of the computer double’s every eight months
Gore’ Law: Myth about the internet double in their distance from reality every 18 months

The authors are Faculty and Professor, Mudra Institute of Communications, Ahmedabad (MICA) respectively.
We can connect each and every individual on the planet without a single paper. We have already witnessed this transformational nature of media in a span of time. India also experienced the ups and downs – opportunities, limitations, appreciation, and criticism and reached to a point where it is regarded as ‘Information Rich’ society.

Every technology (media) with its own capabilities in terms of sound, image, and live interaction has played a key role in transforming the media while replacing or subliming with the invention of newer or other media. The emergence of the Internet has offered a digital platform that enables to interact with all the communication features – print, sound, still photos, and videos in an interactive way. This particular feature makes it stand alone from other forms of medium. Today watching an event on TV and discussing about it on social media is not unusual among those who have access to these media.

Thus, the Internet technology is a convergence of all other forms of existing media and brings people together to a common platform, where they not only consume the information but also contribute for the validation of the information. This particular characteristic of the Internet based medium converts it all to the ‘Social Media’. Though internet has a broader implication, the usage of social media is limited to the creation of a virtual platform where people connect, create, and communicate with each other on one particular issue or multiple issues. So social media is described as any website or services that facilitate using a particular media to share an idea, advertise, promote or deliver a content. Media in this sense could be documents (scribd.com), presentations (slideshare.com), photo (flickr.com), or videos (youtube.com). For some reason the mass media (newspaper, TV, radio) seems to use this term often as the umbrella term and it confuses the matter. Social media is a platform and powerful source of information transmission where people with an expertise in a discrete area or with something important to get across are leveraging social media sites to talk to 1.8 billion other people across the world. So this is more communicative than any other forms of media and not an alternative media. This is a platform which is facilitated by one or multiple technology which is sublimed for the end users or audience and a convergence of all kind of existing medium. The scope of social media goes beyond this when we bring the issue of social networking in it, which is most important in today’s mediascape visualised by Arjun Appadurai (2006).

We would not do justice by saying the social media is another form of media or alternative media, rather we would prefer to call it a service provided to the humanity, which does not only integrate information but also integrate humanity across the planet. However, this also brings the age old concern – does the social media bring equality to the mankind or becoming the dividing line between the privileged few and ‘the others’?

Brings people together or creates ‘the others’

The social media brings people together, creates an information superhighway by converging all kinds of media together. It is also true that at each point of
the usage of the social media, there is involvement of multiple technologies in a very sublime manner. However the debate of the politics of technology and power structure in sociological literature raises the fundamental questions; Who is at the receiving end? Who are the beneficiaries and who are “the others”?

It would not be wrong to say that social media brings another form of capitalism – ‘information capitalism’. The phenomena of information capitalism can be seen and examined both in the global as well as Indian perspective. True to the Marxian argument that capital plays the role of dividing the society, social media plays the similar role of alienating the ‘developed’ countries against ‘the others’ (underdeveloped countries) in global context and ‘digital natives’ and ‘the others’ in the Indian context. This led to the debate of inclusion and exclusion in the power structure of information superhighway. The sublime technology creates the difference. It has truly been stated that ‘technology has an in-built characteristic of being absorbed by those who have resources to acquire it’. In today’s context there are multiple infrastructure simultaneously contributing to the creation of ‘the other’.

If we go by the report of Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, India now has 121 million Internet users with a population penetration rate of 10%. Another study conducted by IMRB for Internet & Mobile Association of India, out of the 69% of Indian rural population, only 4.6% have accessed internet at least once in their lives. In this context only a small section of Indian population can access the information superhighway, which in turn can empower them. At the same time there are little more than 90% of Indian population excluded from the universe of social media. This is not only marginalizing the so-called unprivileged majority but also brings the clear distinction of socio-cultural division within a closely netted network. There has been division among inter communities, cultures and groups but the digital divide creates fraction within the community, culture and groups that has created multiple layers of marginalization within the family, peer groups, and generations etc. and crafted a new form of ‘the other’, which is never discussed at any forum. Now a family can be divided into groups with generation ‘X’ (those who has the accessibility to Internet), and generation ‘Y’ (those who don’t have the accesses to Internet). It has rightly been termed as “Information Rich” and “Information Poor”. This also strengthens the existing forms of all kinds of discrimination in the society in the name of caste, class, marginalized communities, and population. Since last 15 years, though India has seen the rapid growth and penetration of the technology and there are instances of the positive use of these kind of platform to connect the privileged few to debate and discuss on the issues of social inclusion and development, there is no information on how the country has empowered the marginalized section of the society. While attempting to bring people together another form of ‘the other’ has emerged due to use of the information superhighway. This happened in spite of the fact that the first experiment with computers in select schools took place in late 1980s.

However, this does not negate the contributions made by social media in the last one and half decades. In spite of the stigma attached to the accessibility and adoptability of social media and creation of ‘the other’, the new media has contributed immensely by bringing people together and in most cases facilitated to go beyond the individual self. It, hopefully, would lead to the integration of the technology with the ‘cell phone’ and would bring ‘the others’ to the information superhighway platform of social media. The ITU reports that there are 771 million mobile phone users in India, which is almost 65% of Indian population and it is growing at a faster rate. This gives a bigger hope.

Social media: from the self to society

Though this is true that the politics of technology divides the society between the privileged few and the excluded majority, the most unique character of social media ‘networked effect’ can contribute for the creation of a new social order that denies the rule of ultimate power structure. In the process of networked self, the self presentation become an ever-evolving cycle through which individual identity is presented, compared, adjusted, and defended against the constellation of social, economic, cultural or political realities. There is also a possibility that a minority in the privileged few can be the change agent to bring the change in the larger society.

The architecture of the technology that belies these networked platforms of interaction rests upon the principles of
convergence enabling multiple and overlapping connections between varieties of distinct social spheres. The networking on Cairo social movement or the Pink Chaddi campaign for gender equality or the anti-corruption campaign in India is good examples. In the context of individual self in social media or to be specific in social networking sites (SNS), private sphere of sociality are sustained through SNS networked friends, self and others. It is within the architectural plateau that the networked self is actualized, taking advantage of expressive and connective qualities of SNSs. This allows individual self not only to connect with the individual families or friends and acquaintances, but also connects with a networked self beyond the primary network of the self and strengthens the weaker social ties.

In this context social media should be understood as more than a platform with the rule of accessibility where an individual self can make the difference provided there is a networked self, which converged into a collective behavior. This networked self, communicated across collapsed and multiplied audiences, seeks social opportunities for expression and connection. These opportunities take variety of forms, originally generated by relatively autonomous social agents in terms of individual self and connect to the networked self while pursuing for social goals who can’t be ignored.

**Conclusion**

The journey from an alternative media through the lenses of privileged few and majority of ‘the others’ to the networked effect of individual self social media brings an innovative experience of new power structure of information infrastructure and determines other superstructures of the society. However, the dilemma continues with the ever changing nature of technology and issue of accessibility and adoptability from the individual self to networked self. The inclusive growth and positive contribution of the invisible super power of social media is possible if we can keep on emphasizing the 3A factors (Availability, Accessibility and Adoptability) in society. By ensuring the 3A factors in society we can also avoid the emergence of another power structure and creation of ‘the others’.

(E-mail:santosh@micamail.in arbind@micamail.in)