SIMULATED LIBERTY: THE POLITICS OF CYBER SPACE

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Abstract

The quantity of netizens who regularly use social networking sites like Facebook and WhatsApp are found to be on a rampant increase. In spite of this, the features which make these spaces so alluring have been understudied or rather not well addressed by scholars. At such a juncture, it becomes imperative to investigate and comprehend the impact cyber space and its affiliated formulations have on the way we understand ourselves and form relations with others in our socio-political space and time. The paper has limited its field of study to social media/social network sites, especially WhatsApp and Facebook, for those are the places where netizens form a new habitation and a novel abode, and much of the emphasis is laid on the concept of "profile picture/" or "DP," an entity, by nature, both abstract and empirical and thereby assumes the halo of mystery.

Key Words: Cyber space, Penopticon, Answerability, Gaze

The twenty first century assumes a greater significance for a variety of reasons. One among those is the development of technology, especially the one associated with computer and cyber space, which makes life on earth take on complex dynamics and ultimately leads to the virtual becoming more real than the real. Conceptualizing humanities in the digital world is one among the infinite array of hurdles encountered by the present generation, for "meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, brominating in a void" (Abrams 204).

The word "humanities" contains in itself the trace of humanity/subjectivity, arguably, the most widely discussed, debated and theorized philosophical and political entity. One of the widely accepted definitions of subjectivity is that, it is "the potential to reflect upon and evaluate [one's] thoughts, feelings, and actions" (Atkins 1). This "capacity for self-reflective activity, or, broadly speaking, subjectivity" has always been "grounded in one way or another, for example, in God, spirit, nature, society, the body, the brain, or some combination of these" (Atkins 2).

Since subjectivity was the direct expression of God to Rene Descartes, his philosophy revolves around questions about the truth of perception, manifested in his studies of natural philosophy. Simone de Beauvoir, by contrast, regarded "subjectivity as the expression of the human body enmeshed in a social matrix, and so her philosophy is oriented to questions about the ontology of interpersonal relations, inter-subjectivity, and the interrelation of biology and politics" (Atkins 2). Philosophers in the phenomenological tradition such as Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir, and Judith Butler, "highlight the active powers of embodiment in structuring perception and consciousness, thereby undermining the possibility of a strictly empirical account of either self or world" (Atkins 2). Nietzsche, Freud, and Foucault regard "the living body as a constellation of powerful and often conflictual urges and impulses that give rise to different forms of subjectivity according to the organism's internal organization and the 'disciplinary' effects of socially regulated practices and norms" (Atkins 2-3).

But, in a world where "God himself can be simulated… reduced to signs that constitute faith," where "the whole system becomes weightless… a gigantic simulacrum - not unreal, but simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference," one has to evolve novel strategies or philosophical foundations to come to terms with subjectivity and its multifarious manifestations. (Baudrillard 4)

The quantity of netizens who regularly use social networking sites like Facebook and WhatsApp are found to be on a rampant increase. In spite of this, the features which make these spaces so alluring have been understudied or rather not well addressed by scholars. The impact of cyber world is such that today we have terms like "digital natives," those who have grown up immersed in the hardware and software of the day, "digital immigrant"/ "digital diaspora," those who encounter cyber space in their middle ages or twilight years (Gardner 2). For the "digital immigrants," cyber space is a virtual space, a space that is removed from reality, because they have experienced a world/reality divorced from cyber space. But, for the "digital natives," the term virtual space triggers no signification, for they "cannot remember a time without desktops, laptops, mobile phones, or the Internet" (Gardner 2). The virtuality attributed to cyber space does not hold any ground in the current social scenario, for the "digital natives'" experience of WhatsApp or Facebook interaction is as natural and real as engaging in a real-time conversation with a "real" individual in a "real" space and time. At such a juncture, it becomes imperative to investigate and comprehend the impact cyber space and its affiliated formulations have on the way we understand ourselves and form relations with others in our socio-political space and time. The paper has limited its field of study to social media/social network sites, especially WhatsApp and Facebook, for those are the places where netizens form a new habitation and a

novel abode, and much of the emphasis is laid on the concept of "profile picture/" or "DP," an entity, by nature, both abstract and empirical and thereby assumes the halo of mystery.

It is important to analyze the outcome of some of the studies conducted by eminent scholars over the last few years. The results of a 2004 study on social interactions of college students across all media by Baym N. K., Zhang Y.B., and Lin M. show that "64% still prefer face-to-face interaction, 18.4% prefer the telephone, and only 16.1% prefer the internet for making social contacts" (Qtd. in Sponcil 2). Lenhart A., Purcell L., Smith A., and Zickuhr K. in 2010 found that "72% of all college students have a social media profile with 45% of college students using a social media site at least once a day" (Qtd. in Sponcil 4). According to Lenhart "about 57% of social network users are 18-29 years old and have a personal profile on multiple social media websites" (Qtd. in Sponcil 4). Pempek T.A, Yermolayeva Y.A, and S. L. Calvert's study indicates that the amount of time spent daily on social network sites varied greatly. However, an analysis of the data indicated "most participants spent approximately 30 minutes a day socializing, mostly during the evening hours between 9 p.m. to 12 a.m. Students spent an average of 47 minutes a day on Facebook" (Qtd. in Sponcil 5). According to a recent study by Sheldon P. "more than 50% of college students go on a social networking site several times a day" (Qtd. in Sponcil 5).

The increase in the number of users and the time spent on the cyber world everyday is mind-blowing. The most worrying part is that, "although students did communicate with friends and family by posting information on social networking sites, they spent much of the time viewing information without interacting in any way" (Sponcil 4). They spend a lot of time "reading other individuals' profiles or news feeds or looking at others' photographs" (Sponcil 4).

One of the important things observable on Facebook and WhatsApp is that most of the photographs shared, tagged in or kept as display picture conform to the normative standards of the contemporary society. One hardly sees a display picture portraying intense emotional outburst or sadness. Yet another common feature one can observe is the tendency to keep celebrities' photographs, especially from the entertainment industry, or an inspirational quote as display picture. Why would an individual use a stranger's photograph to represent himself/herself on a virtual platform is an interesting question that deserves careful analysis. An equally important question concerns the question of what forces netizens to share only those events that appear to be episodes of "joy" in their personal life. These questions assume a greater significance in the context of the frequently used claim that one has complete liberty on the cyber world and can maintain his or her own individuality without worrying about the societal restrictions.

These applications perform the role of what Louis Althusser would call Ideological State Apparatuses, in the sense that it instills in you the feeling that one has to be happy all the time, and one can be happy only by following or practicing certain "mandatory things." An individual

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understands these "mandatory things" from the photographs and comments shared by others on his or her friend list. As Leo Tolstoy opined "All happy families are like one another, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," (1) society has a formula for happiness and it wants only happiness in that form. It validates something as happiness only if it conforms to the stipulated formulae. This Lacanian "Other" has an indomitable control over the formation of the self-image. It would be useful to employ Jacques Lacan's formulation of "Mirror Stage" here, for the above mentioned observations can be ontologically and conceptually rooted in Lacan. In the mirror stage we are confronted with the "mirror" image that the world reflects back to us. But, that image, similar to the image one recognizes in an actual mirror, is a distortion that leads to a "misrecognition." That "misrecognition [according to Lacan] is the basis for what we perceive as our identity. For Lacan, subjectivity is construed in interaction with 'others,' that is individuals who resemble us in one way or another but who are also irrevocably different. We become ourselves by way of other perspectives and other views of who we are" (Bertens 161). We also become ourselves under the gaze of the Big Other or *grande autre*. This Other, "the locus from which the question of [the subject's] existence may be presented to him," (Bertens 161) is not a concrete individual, although it may be embodied in one, but stands for the larger social order.

Netizens neither are forced nor do they experience any form of restriction imposed on them to conform to the normative structure, for such a realization would invariably warrant a revolt against the system. Power always operates in unison with knowledge, as observed by Foucault. What makes Facebook or WhatsApp profile holders to stick hardly on to the existing paradigm of representation of the self and the self's relationship with the "Other" is not the norms dictated by an external omnipotent agency, but the knowledge those profile holders acquire from their cyber association with other profile holders regarding what is expected to be shared, commented and tagged in on such virtual platforms. As Antonio Gramsci has remarked, consent is manufactured in us to follow these patterns and never challenge it, for to pose a challenge, one has to evolve a counter-knowledge, which would again, in time, become yet another normative structure as difficult and strong to either recognize its existence or to counter it. (Holub 8)

Every society has its own notion of beauty. It is difficult for somebody who does not conform to this model to feel confident about the way he or she looks like, such is the power of discourse. The only option available for those people is to cover their "ugliness" under the garb of a celebrity's photo. For them the virtual world of WhatsApp provides an environment for experiencing things that may be hard to come by in the "real life." They feel confident while chatting with people online, for their display picture provides a "psychological moratorium," a temporary relief from the feeling that they are not beautiful. In other words, those things that are denied in the real word is what we demand and reconstruct in the virtual world, for human

beings would never wish to have conflicts between their real-self characteristics and their ideal-self characteristics, both of which are constructed by structures of power operating in the society.

The sense of inferiority cultivated in them by their surroundings is heightened by the fact that they form a notion of self "by looking at others' profiles." Teenagers "get a sense of what types of presentations are socially appropriate from others' profiles" for they "provide critical cues about what to present on their own profile" (Boyd 120). The studies mentioned above point to the fact that a major portion of the profile holders on social networking sites belong to the emerging adulthood section. It also makes clear that people, especially teenagers and emerging adults, try their best to put on novel identities and try to impress others, for they belong to an age group that needs appreciation and acknowledgement more than any other age groups. Obtaining comments from other users on pictures and wall postings improve images that individuals have of themselves. It is a way of receiving attention from a broad spectrum of people in an indirect way. "A timely response elicits gratification and good feelings of self and satisfaction of personal and interpersonal desires" (Sponcil 6). Thus, it becomes a norm that a woman must be angel like beauty and a man a macho. Black skin color, pimples, absence of beard or moustache become a matter of self-worth, resulting in what can be identified as "Cyber Depression."

Recently, WhatsApp has introduced a unique feature which provides a person the opportunity to see whether the message he/she has sent was read by the other person or not. If the person at the other end has seen the message, then instead of the usual two "black tick marks," two "blue tick marks" would appear. But, one can always deactivate this feature. It is possible to draw a parallel between Mikhail Bakhtin' concept of "answerability" and WhatsApp's decision to introduce a new mode of notification whereby the sender of a message can verify whether the message has been read by the person at the other end. According to Bakhtin, we are born into a dialogic relationship with each and every other thing in the world and we are answerable to the whole world and cannot escape from it.

> …we cannot choose not to be—in dialogue…. The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we are answerable… We are responsible in the sense that we are compelled to respond, we cannot choose but give the world an answer. Each one of us occupies a place in existence that is uniquely ours; but far from being a privilege, far from having what Bakhtin calls an alibi in existence, the uniqueness of the place I occupy in existence is, in the deepest sense of the word, an answerability: in that place only am I addressed by the world, since only I am in it. Moreover, we must keep on forming responses as long as we are alive. (Holquist 28)

WhatsApp appears to be a material manifestation of Bakhtin's abstract philosophical notion. The moment one turns on this feature of WhatsApp, one are answerable to everyone who sends message. The luxury of claiming not to have seen the message is lost irreparably. As Bakhtin observes, what is generally considered as a privileged space, a space where one is not held responsible and answerable to anyone ceases to be a unique and alluring space, and on the contrary, becomes a space of answerability, for an individual on WhatsApp or Facebook is caught up in the same conundrum in which the goalie is stranded in N.S. Madhavan's short story "Higuita," betrayed and isolated by his entire team mates. It is a difficult space to occupy, for one is always under the gaze of the Other, every reply one gives back, and even the time one takes to form a reply and the nature of smilies used in the reply are observed, analyzed and commented up on, and over a period of time becomes attributes of the individual. It is important to invoke Baudrillard once again at this juncture. The burden of answerability and other related questions come only because one feels that the WhatsApp profile holder is "real," and is fully present just like in normal conversation. What if a message that is send to a particular number is not seen by the profile holder but by another person who is his/her life partner and deletes it immediately. As Baudrillard observes:

> We need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them…. The media represents world that is more real than reality that we can experience. People lose the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy. They also begin to engage with the fantasy without realizing what it really is. They seek happiness and fulfilment through the simulacra of reality… . (5)

The moot issue is the belief that one is subjected to the omnipotent "gaze" of society. The act of hiding one's "last seen" and "message seen" on WhatsApp could be conceptualized as a desperate attempt to evade the gaze, for the gaze, as Sartre would put it, not only constructs the self, but also defines and redefines it in multifarious ways. Those people who do this on WhatsApp are, arguably, afraid of the ways in which their kith and kin on WhatsApp are going to define and conceptualize them based on their "last seen." Questions like "what would my mother think if she finds out that I was online till two o'clock in the night? What would my wife/husband think when he/she sees me online at weird hours?" put both teenagers and adults in serious mental and emotional trauma. The origin of these questions is the feeling that people are always "scrutinizing" them. It is in this context that the paper assumes a greater significance, for all these show that those who hide their "last seen" are fundamentally "hypersensitive" and intrinsically "suspicious" of others watching them.

The moment an individual begins an account on Facebook or WhatsApp, the individual has to willingly subject himself/herself to a particular social regulation and live the rest of the life under the illusion of freedom coupled with the fear of gaze—a modern day "panopticon." As Foucault puts it: "By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (200). However, the prisoner cannot see the supervisor. He never knows if he is being watched. It induces in the profile holders a state of "conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 200). In other words, even if the surveillance is discontinuous in its action, "the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers" (Foucault 201). There need not necessarily be an observer who constantly monitors each and every movement of ours on WhatsApp, on the contrary the feeling that one is observed is sufficient enough to constantly worry about one's display picture, status bar and regulate oneself in accordance with the norms followed by "Others" on WhatsApp.

This situation is similar to Foucault's observation that "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (202). For Foucault, the "panopticon" stands for the modern world in which its citizens, are "the bearers" of their own figurative, mental, imprisonment, in other words, WhatsApp and Facebook profile holders are complicit in their own confinement.

The question that demands immediate attention pertains to why one accepts this panoptical state of affairs, a world in which individuals are under constant surveillance and, even more importantly, in which they constantly monitor themselves for signs of abnormality or even mere strangeness. Foucault's formulation of ideology probably can provide a key to solve this query. According to Foucault:

> …ideology gives us a sense of belonging and contributes to our well-being…. What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs throughout the whole social body. (119)

We obey power, are loyal to it, even to the point of policing and repressing ourselves, because it makes us feel what we are. As Baudrillard observes "it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them" (14). Lacan's psychoanalytic model could

also be invoked to explain the hold cyber space has over us. This abstract space gives us the illusion that it makes us whole. It would seem to neutralize the desire that results from our entry into the "Symbolic."

The instances narrated in this paper would appear to be isolated and stray for many, but I believe a detailed study would bring to light the deep structures of cyber politics. The irony of our academic discourse, according to Ralf Waldo Emerson, is that "tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time" (qtd. in. Peck 2). The notion of self and existence on the cyber world is becoming intricate as each moment ticks away.

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