

Diffraction non-anthropocentric communication practices in the post abnormal

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Abstract

The familiar definition of Communication is “*communis*”, meaning common (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971); “*sadharanikaran*” identifying common ground/commonality through *Dhvani*, i.e. meaning formation (Kapadia-Kundu 2015; Kamei and Bagga-Gupta 2021). This definition, however in the post pandemic/ post abnormal, requires discussions on what “agent”, “network” and “environment” are in the role of communication and media engagement at macro and micro scale. Consequently, the research paper will suggest a set of questions that should probe the definition further in post abnormal communication practices. Taking a Cartesian view of nature with non-anthropocentric approaches, the paper looks at rethinking of epistemological and subject-object models and the mono/multi-dimensional, anthropocentrically-oriented conception of communication practices. As a methodology the research maps the offline and online multi-media communication practices of digital natives enrolled in a graduate program during the COVID -19 pandemic. The paper discusses the possible characteristics of communication in the posthumanism context across the continuum of time and space incorporating the transmedia platforms of the digital age. The posthumanist perspective confronts us with the cognition of entwinement of the non-human and human actors as tools of representation accounted as “weird” (Morton 2015), “chthonic” (Harway 2016), “vibrant” (Bennett 2009). This perspective can be used as an analysing tool in re-examining the diffractive (post) abnormal communication practices and processes which becomes ex-centric, nomadic, personal as well as communal, singular and different. The paper proposes a critical reflection on the ontology with insights on theoretical and empirical approaches to allow a better understanding of post abnormal communication practices with the impact of digital technologies.

Keywords: non-anthropocentric, posthuman, post abnormal

New Media and Geographies: leading to the post abnormal

Development of new media technology infrastructure, increased availability of online content, new and cheaper models of online content creation and consumption has for long led to a new breed of communication. The current Pandemic has reinforced this digital media content creation and supply value chain facilitating time-shifted, non-linear forms of communication. Our engagements in the communication spheres have adapted and further shifted on to more *niche* forms of engagement. Herein we see further diversification of agents across networks of value chain to re-structure content to influence people's communication patterns both online and offline. The pandemic and post-pandemic shift shows new buyers and new business models to monetise their content over an increasing number of platforms and forms of content consumption. Digitalisation has further led to multi-platform navigation with cross-platform content-navigation capability with multiple the entry and exit points for communication. Keeping the facilitation that long tail of economics provides through data harvesting, exclusive targeting through platform-specific niche immersive content, are the key communication assets acquired exclusively by distributors to drive customer acquisition. Peer to peer, direct-to-consumer service, which bypasses infrastructure-based value chain and distributors will continue evolving with new models of communication giving rise to new ways of capitalisation and new forms of revenue generation models.

Manovich (2001) in his work the language of new media rightly states that the contemporary communication culture is rooted in information networks as important cultural sites. Herein, the information culture also takes references from earlier communication method of organising and retrieving information through patterns of user interaction with information objects and displays. Actors can engage at potentially infinite, versions wherein "production on demand, "just in time" is the trend. The interface at both digital and cultural level becomes an important site with branching-type interactivity with periodic updates and trending posts where "networks allow the content of a new media object to be periodically updating while keeping its structure intact" (Manovich, 2001, p. 57). The human-computer interface (HCI) in this non-anthropocentric approach involves multiple levels and layers of interfacing. The concept of space and postmodernism includes spatialisation privileging space extension and collapse wherein the dichotomy of centralised control vs. loss of centralised control continues. Digitalisation with the human and non-human actors allows for this spatialisation where sequential and non-sequential communication can now be randomly accessed. The hierarchical organisation of information with hypertext and hyperlinks engaging psychological and physical movement through space is another feature that current communication and cultural interfaces draw on with references from older cultural forms.

Methodology

To further understand the above mentioned aspects of communication practices in the current scenario, the research maps the offline and online transmedia communication practices of digital natives enrolled in a graduate program to observe:

1. types of communication exchanges and world building
2. communication platforms and tools used
3. emerging patterns of communication process
4. factors observable towards the post abnormal communication practices

An initial level of assessment of communication tools and platform usage was made which was followed by non-participative ethnographic approach. This was followed up with an asynchronous online discussion on contemporary communication practices. Approximately 300 students belonging to the age group of 18 to 22 years of age belonging to urban and semi-urban areas who called themselves as the “millennial/Gen-Z” were included in this study for a period of six months. Data received was categorised using Grounded theory approach based on emerging and recurring themes.

Communication networks and world building: agent, network and the environment

The role of the communication environment influencing the very communication process has been noticed while mapping the respondents. This is further confirmed by the respondents affirming that there has been an increase in usage of online platforms during the pandemic.

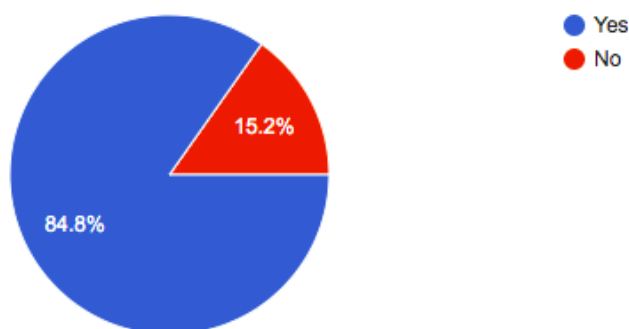


Figure: Response to increase in usage of online platforms during the pandemic

As one respondent states, “I’ve been surprised at how me and my family have adapted to using technology for communicating with friends and family. We have formed several groups in different platforms... organise

parties, meetings, attend weddings online etc. Besides, I have been binge watching a lot because of the personalised content that many of the OTT platforms provide”. Rise of fanbase culture using platforms like Weverse is another trend with terms like ARMYs associated with fandom.

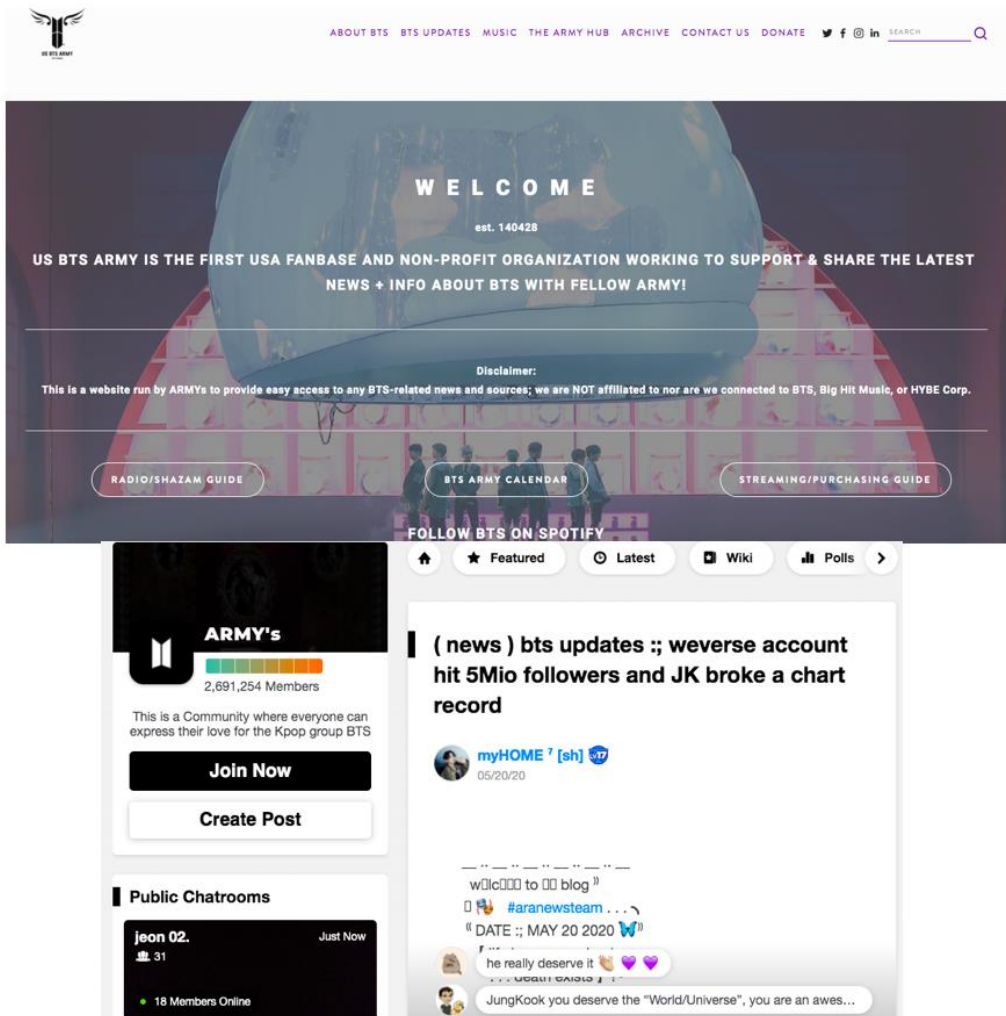


Figure: Screen shots showing rise of fan base communities

During the early stage of the lockdown, apps like Discord gained a lot of popularity. People made servers on Discord to talk to each other, listen to music together, discuss topics, play games and so much more. As one respondent mentions, “Discord still remains popular amongst our generation... My college life started online, I started making friends just by sharing funny memes, and even learned many skills on just a screen [...] Staying at home made people want to be heard even more and hence these apps proved to be a source of comfort to anybody facing the distress of quarantine”. A similar app called Clubhouse where people randomly join virtual rooms and have discussions about various topics has seem to have gained popularity. Majority of the respondents use the online platforms for information seeking which is followed by usage for entertainment.

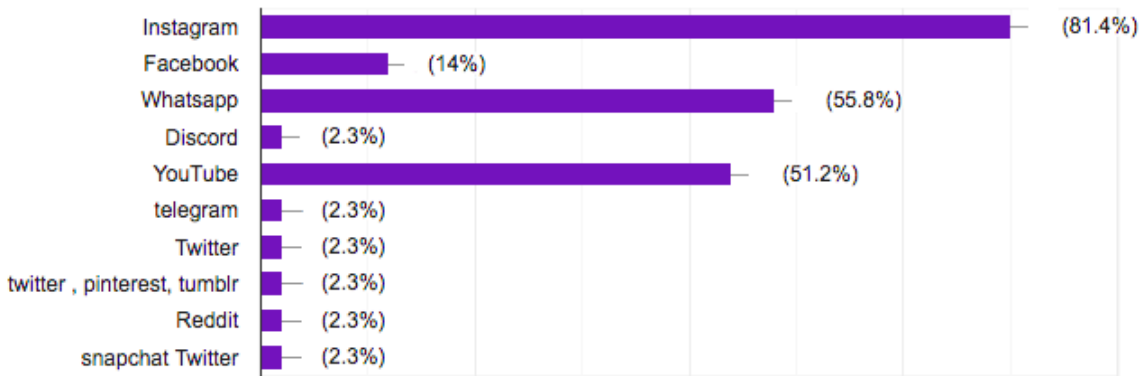


Figure: Usage of online Platforms based on preferences

Instagram has been the preferred platform of the millennials as they feel they can find more people of their age group for networking. However, the millennials feel that each of these platforms can be used based on the nature of engagement required. As one respondent states, “Reddit has dedicated forums for in-depth discussions (subreddits) ranging from every topic under the Sun where everybody is invited to put forth their perspective mostly in long form text. Twitter, because of its character limit, is much more instantaneous and brief and much more open. Facebook, on the other hand, has closed groups where only the members can see the posts. Discord, is voice-based hence you get to talk to people for real and works using invite codes so your group is small and concise”.

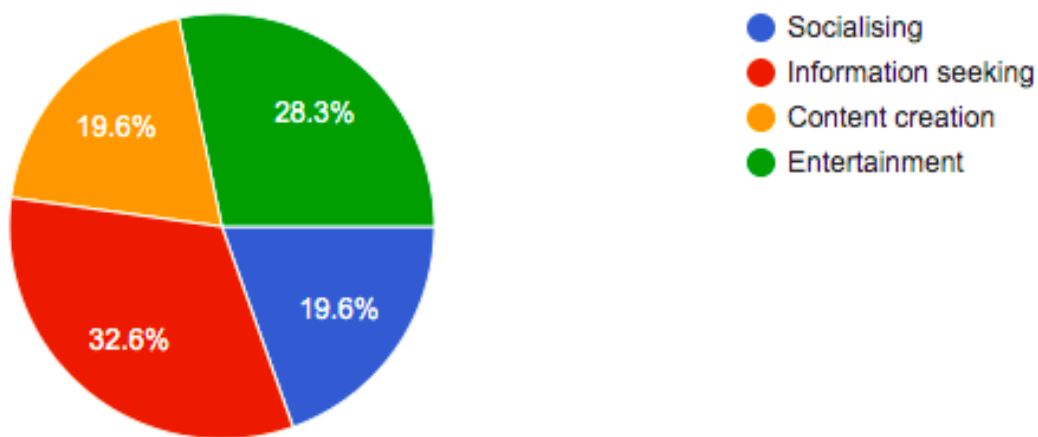


Figure: Respondents’ usage of online platforms for different purposes

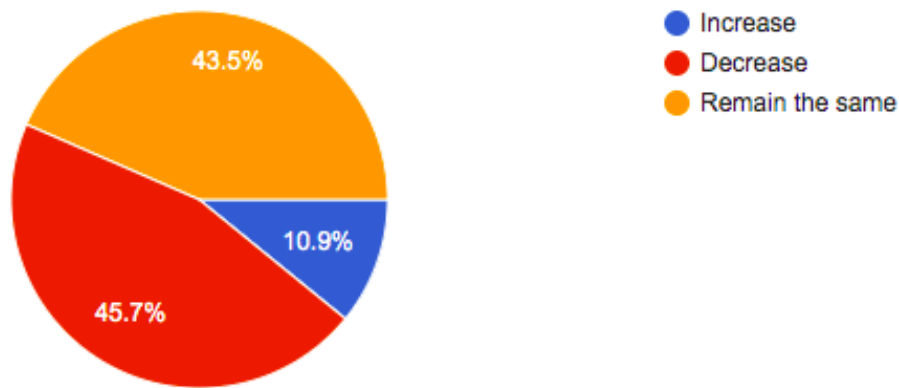


Figure: respondents' opinion about their online usage post-pandemic

Respondents feel the pandemic has created a new form of communication pattern where they feel each medium used for communication facilitates different forms of connecting. Nonverbal communication which the millennials feel is an important way of communicating has found a new lease with the usage of Emojis, termed as reactions and usage of GIFs and GIPHYs. The respondents mentioned missing the face to face contact during the lockdown imposed by the pandemic where communication has been limited in terms of the haptics and proxemic. However they mentioned the ability of humans to adapt to the environment. Thereby, coming up with alternative ways of transiting in the process and attaining fluidity in form and patterns of communication. Herein they feel that though physical mobility and face to face contact will increase post-pandemic with lesser dependence on online only mode, the hybrid mode of communication will continue based on the lessons learned from the “new normal”.

The respondents also feel that online networking has capacitated peer support and engagement which they believe will continue even in the future.

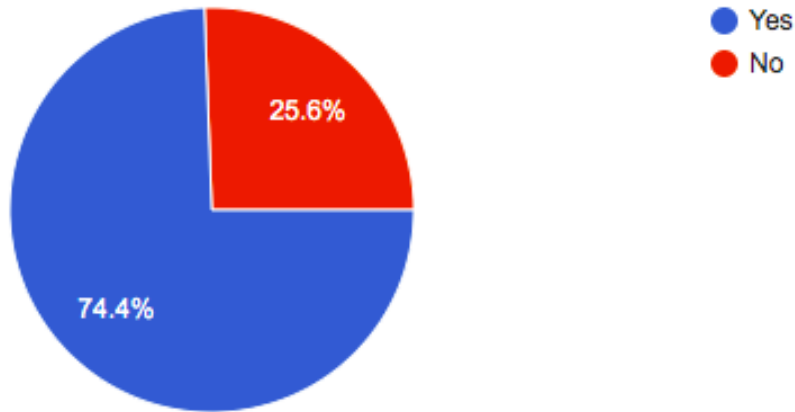


Figure: Engagement in peer support in online communities/network

Another observation that was noted was some respondents who considered themselves “introverts” were comfortable with the pandemic imposed lockdown. Most of the respondents considered themselves as passive users of social media. Here the concept of being ‘anonymous, belonging, living in the interface’ (Lister et al., 2009) in the online space and the public sphere leads to the dichotomy between the real ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ real in new communication practices. Some respondents also feel that the pandemic has led to more intra-personal rather than interpersonal level of communication. As stated by one respondent, ‘I love the space I have, time to pause, reflect and react in the medium of my choice and/or be teleported.’

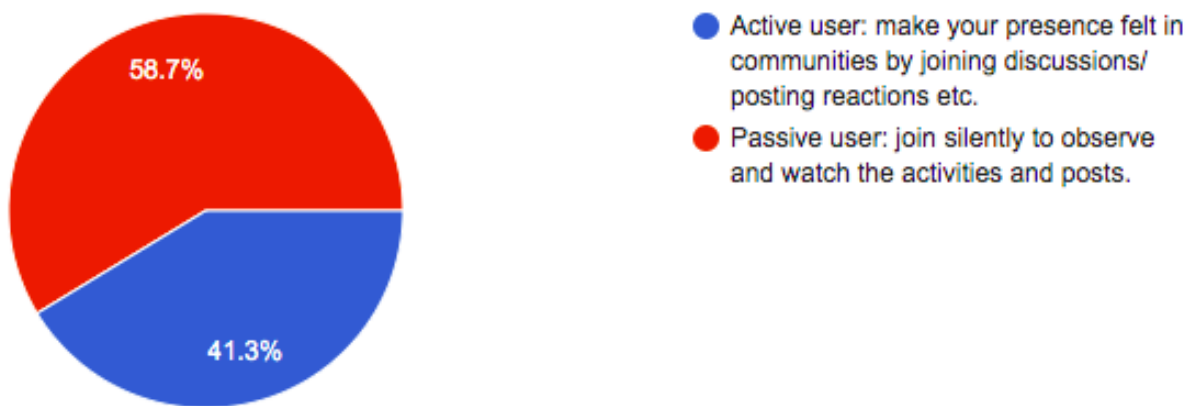


Fig: Engagement of respondents as active or passive users in online communities

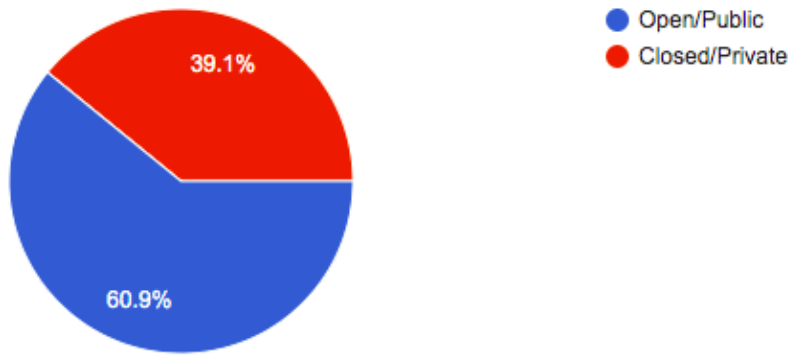


Fig: Preference for Open or Closed community

Further they also preferred open communities in social media where content could be accessible by all. They also feel that the narrative of content/entertainment has changed from “you going to an experience to the experience coming to you”. The respondents also focused on the growth of a shared experience (including ones across borders) in the hybrid mode of communication in the abnormal.

Post abnormal metamorphosis: disconnectedly connected

“Content” has become a massive label with influencer culture on the rise with even prepubescent teens having massive followings. The current trend also shows the Gen-Z relying on social media for news and information where social sites have also become rich sources of misinformation. Group dynamics in online forums; tech-etiquette are other tangents which are worth mentioning in the contemporary communication platforms. Remote working experiment, time management, convenience, better organisation, mobility are terms associated with the hybrid form of communication. Respondents feel that pandemic lessons have taught virtual meets takes less time and increase productivity. Millennial feel organisations can come up with better plans which will increase work life balance. As one respondent states, “Post pandemic, we will be evolved versions of ourselves...this link between health and economics is becoming increasingly real for more of us”.

New forms of communication came to life, as one respondent states “Things which were known only to happen in person, started happening over Zoom calls. Millennials came up with their online party, ‘House Party’. It showed that people were trying really hard to keep in touch using these applications”. Be it sharing a playlist of their favourite songs or communicating via memes, zoom parties and birthdays, stand ups, informational events, multiplayer game, etc. things are changing. Teleparty, earlier known as Netflix Party, has picked up as a new way to watch programs online with friends.

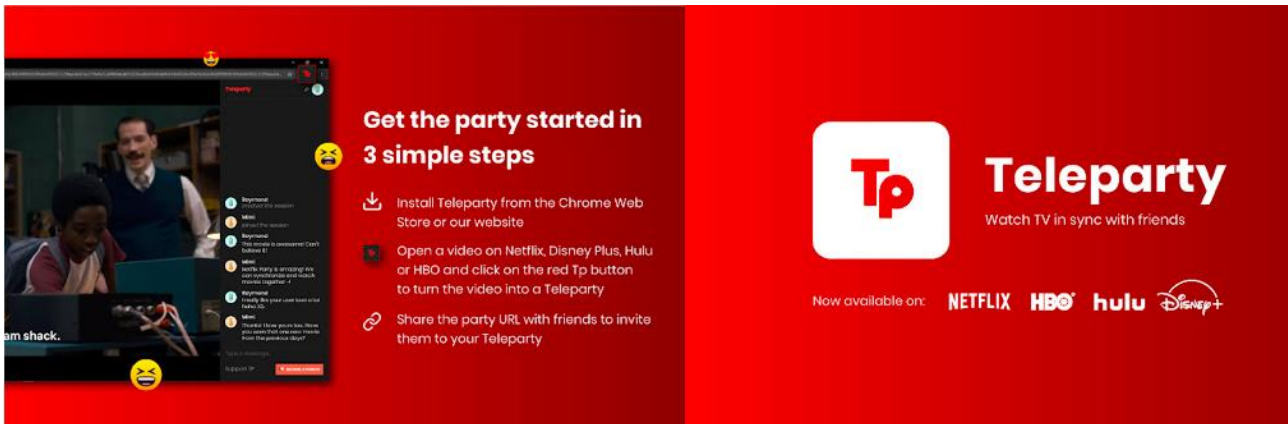


Figure: Teleparty, other ways of socialising

We see new possibilities for communication where virtual and tele-reality allows us to move across existent and non-existent time and spaces. An online screen connected to a network becomes our own ‘window to the world’ engaging us with both human and non-human entities. As Lev Manovich (2001) mentions cultural interfaces try to find a middle ground between the conventions of general-purpose human-computer interface HCI and the conventions of traditional cultural forms, where there is tension between standardisation and originality. Wherein Manovich (2001, pp. 99-155) mentions that our society is now a society based on simulation of the screen calling for association...

“between the physical space where the viewer is located, his/her body, and the screen space [...] The intriguing phenomenon being the existence of another virtual space, another three-dimensional world enclosed by frame and situated inside our normal space [...] Rather than being a neutral medium of presenting information, the screen is aggressive [...] It functions to filter, to screen out, to take over, rendering nonexistent whatever is outside its frame. No single window completely dominates the viewer's attention and as is often noticed, the screen disappears and completely takes over the visual field”.

The public sphere is often defined as an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems and through that discussion influence political action. Digitisation has made this discursive space "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" and "a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed" (Habermas 1989, p. 136; Robert 1999, pp. 115–129). Habermas (1989) categorises public sphere as a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed and that it should be open to all citizens, and free from influence from governments or private businesses. Users depend on their digital network to guide them through the

information ecosystem. Messing and Westwood (2012) have mentioned that 'social media has had two effects: by collating stories from multiple sources, the focus is on the story, and not on the source; secondly, endorsements and social recommendations guide readership rather than traditional gatekeepers or ingrained reading habits'. The respondents mention how they check social media posts not just for the post but sometimes even more for the reactions and the comments associated with it. Thereby leading to new areas of online public sphere discourse study with critical reflection on the ontology with insights on theoretical and empirical approaches to allow a better understanding of post abnormal communication practices with the impact of digital technologies.

The economic, social and political dynamics of cultural production has furthermore led to lower barriers to entry with community presence in the political economy of the digital media. McChesney et al. (1998) mention that the political economy of communication entails two main dimensions. One which positions media and communications systems in the context of broader structure of society by observing how 'media and communication systems and content reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations'. And the other examining ownership mechanisms along government policies which further influence media behaviour and content. Thereby looking at structural factors and the labor process in the production, distribution and consumption of communication as a whole. Themes also revolve around how we experience new media and how they in turn shape our world as the process of 'social shaping' through a medium gives it a social form, an identity, which influences the way it is used and its influence in the communication world. Media and the communication environment they create are products of the world in which we live which is further influenced by social, economic and political experience and economic circumstances of the communication sphere. These circumstances may be commercial or intellectual, or a mixture of these and other factors, but they leave the medium with a social form that cannot be ignored (Lister et al., 2009).

In terms of sociability, the respondents found transmedia storytelling exciting because it represents a shift away from technology for the sake of technology and toward human experience. Despite the glitz and glam of media technologies, transmedia and cross-media experiences are really about using technology to serve a higher purpose, connecting through these experiences. Communication takes place across multiple platforms and invites audience participation. The content creators who could also be prosumers use the characteristics of each medium, both old and new, to contribute a distinct part of the narrative that is satisfying as a stand-alone experience. However, each component makes a distinct and meaningful contribution to the overall communication experience. This facilitates multiple entry points, making a narrative and the discourse around it accessible to a wide range of consumers and media users.

Going viral another major theme in our communication spheres which is based on user's behaviour in the online platforms creates a commodity out of the data of users and further spirals to communities. This online culture is shaping the contemporary communication landscape. Which is in line with what Lister et al., (2009) have mentioned as to how the internet has afforded new ways of experiencing the self and new ways of relating to groups; where the nature of the communicative practices that network computing facilitate define the precise nature of those forms of interaction where the participants are there but not there, in touch but never touching, as deeply connected as they are profoundly alienated.

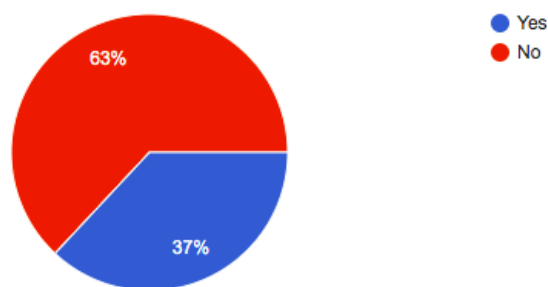


Figure: Response on if viral/trending news influences the respondents' opinion

The idea of anonymity and the effects that it has on communication has long been discussed in such communicative practices which involves identity associated with even performance and performativity in the era of self-publishing. Some respondents feel communication through platforms like Zoom calls are more like performance, "Your camera is on and you look at yourself addressing the screen... your communication extends beyond the screen where there is the other side of the screen where you are interacting with others." Self in relation to others, to a community or network affords its users the opportunity not only to publish themselves but also, and crucially, to publish their network (Lister et al., 2009). The opportunity to articulate their existing communities through the links made on online spaces will continue to evolve as future communicative practices.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) had highlighted the most significant areas of social networking sites as impression management and friendship performance in communities. Online and offline social networks and network structure do show the dynamics of network based communications. User-generated content in the prosumer culture has seen platforms like YouTube on the rise where it is also attributed the era of post television. The lockdown restrictions induced by the pandemic has further seen growing ecology of online/hybridised communication platforms leading to a state of continual evolution of communication practices. Human creativity, technological affordance and economic advantage each contribute to shaping our own individual

networked media experiences – as both producers and consumers with the communicative practices of the reality of new technologies and techno-cultures (Lister et al., 2009).

Miller and Slater (2000) mention that just as new media are not experienced as places apart from ‘real life’, so too the changes brought about through the interaction of new media [...] while significant, are not experienced as revolutionary transformation, but as continuous with already existing social structures and senses of identity. They further emphasise recognising the materiality of these technologies and their place in everyday lived experience; ‘these spaces are important as part of everyday life, not apart from it’ (Miller and Slater 2000, p. 7). One such example picking up trend which will become a continuing style of communication is the hybrid mode of collaboration in real time- offline and virtual mode. The recent Global Citizen Live performance of Cold Play and BTS in different locations in real time for their song “My Universe” is one such instance which has been extremely popular amongst the fandom.



Figure: Coldplay and BTS ‘live’ synchronous performance Coldplay and BTS (Global Citizen Live, 2021)

The modified aspect of reality and representation through telepresence also redefines the aspect of control, control of the message and the platform. Our cultural activities are revolve around synchronous and asynchronous timelines of hybrid telepresence as Manovich (2001, pp. 153-159) mentions:

... of ‘representational technologies used to enable action, i.e. to allow the viewer to manipulate reality through representations’ and telepresence [...] Brenda Laurel defines telepresence as "a medium that allows you to take your body with you into some other environment... you get to

take some subset of your senses with you into another environment. And that environment may be a computer-generated environment, it may be a camera-originated environment, or it may be a combination of the two." [...] The body of a teleoperator is transmitted, in real time, to another location where it can act on subject's behalf [...] the essence of telepresence is that it is anti-presence" [...] Benjamin and Virilio mention 'phenomenon of a distance' which equate nature with spatial distance between the observer and the observed; and they see technologies as destroying this distance [...] By foregrounding the importance of person-to person telecommunication, and "tele"-cultural forms in general which do not produce any objects, new media forces us to reconsider the traditional equation between culture and objects.

Diffusion 2021 a month long festival of exhibitions, discussions, screenings, performances, events and celebrations in both physical and virtual spaces and places is another example of "being here and being there" at the same time in our new communication network.

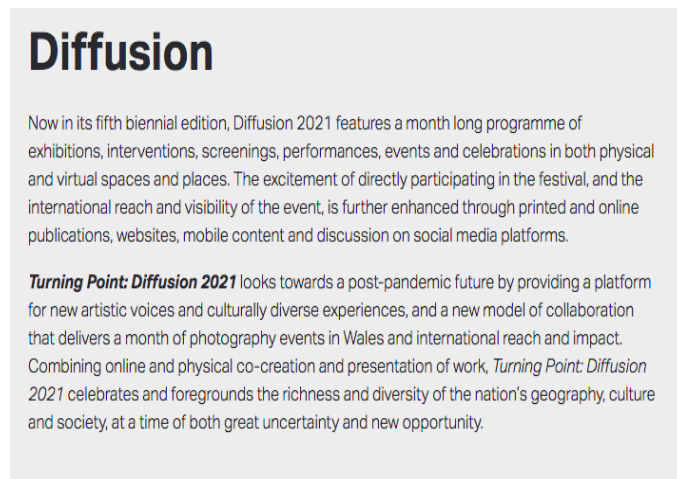


Figure: Screenshot of Diffusion festival description ("Diffusion," 2021)

The above examples reconfirm Roland Barthes' (1973, pp. 69-70) "Organon of Representation" where representation is further not defined directly by imitation: even if one gets rid of notions of the "real," " of the "copy," there will still be representation for as long as a subject (author, reader, spectator or voyeur) casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out a base of a triangle, his eye (or his mind) forming the apex – Triangle of representation; "as the 'mobility' of the gaze became more 'virtual' realistic — the observer became more immobile, passive, ready to receive the constructions of a virtual reality placed in front of his or her unmoving body. Now the spectator has to actually move around the physical space in order to experience the movement in virtual space where the virtual world is precisely synchronised to the physical one. Therefore if in the simulation tradition the spectator exists in a single coherent space — the physical space

and the virtual space which continues it — in the representational tradition the spectator has a double identity. He/she simultaneously exists in the physical space and in the space of the representation. In the era of telepresence viz. dynamic, real-time and interactive, we are still looking at a flat rectangular surface, existing in the space of our body and acting as a window into another space.

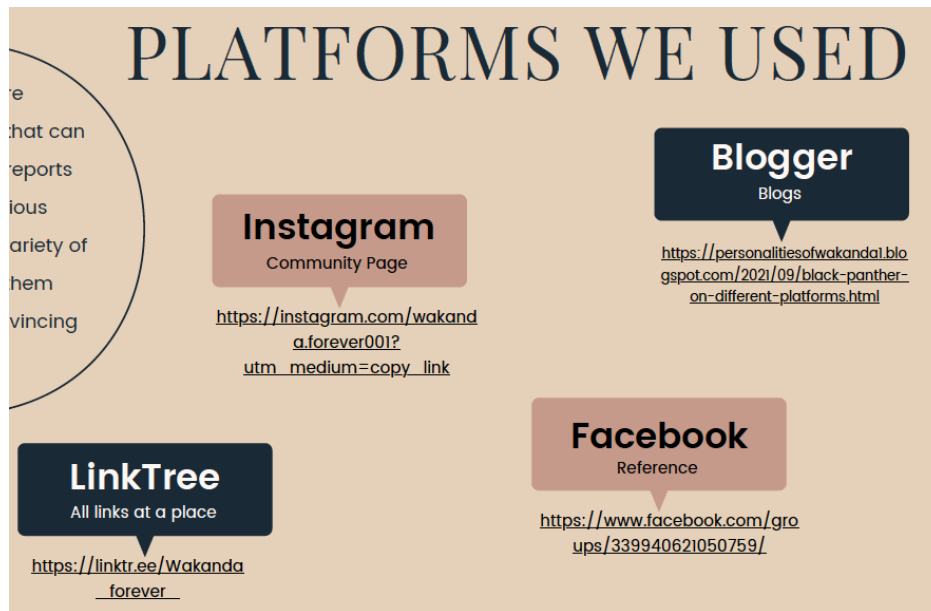


Figure: An example of respondents using multiple media platforms to collaborate and communicate.

The respondents have mentioned the importance of these media platforms as important resources in which information flows fluidly.

“From day-to-day life hacks to skill-based tutorials to storytelling and connecting with one another, all of this is done effortlessly [...] Because it is a huge community of users interested in multiple things, one can get what one wants easily and also share easily and is appreciated or rewarded for the same. There are particular groups for particular kind of information/story- Youtube channels like Al Jazeera, Instagram pages like brute, etc. where a specialised information and answer to specific questions can be found [...] another great advantage is that multiple perspectives, options and opinions are available and you can make your own choice of selection. The multiplicity can be a challenge but also a mind opener”.

Pierre Lévy (1997), in his early works mentions the construction of collective intelligence through intelligent communities and networks where self-policing community regulating environment is an important feature of this type of knowledge production environment. Dynamics of standardisation coupled with "the logic of selection" leads to the question of authorship of messages in many of these context giving way for looking at

new models of authorship where soft power comes in the picture in many of these networks. The texts authored thus are ruled by metonyms, hyperlinks and intertextuality. Wherein the text now becomes a product of collaboration across interactive networks. As stated by another respondent, “various social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter can help us keep in touch with people of various kinds- family, friends, teachers, professionals. This form of communication helps us in various ways- education, entertainment, relation building, etc. Be it across countries, age groups, interests, etc. it brings everyone on the same platform and from there onwards it’s the individual’s journey [...] an individual can easily switch from one medium to another for communication. And there he/she will find something new and make new relations, gain new information and develop. This is a fluid medium without any restrictions of movement in the mediums. The benefit of mobility is that is one is unsatisfied with the information he/she can try someplace else for the same”.

Media consumption culture which has set in, further raises important questions around meaning making and media usage in the communication environment. The ‘being here and being there’ through the connectivity that networks provide is considered to be ‘enabling’ and ‘engaging’. Technology, environment and different actors take up a form of agency. All of these agents as discussed above continue to shape the nature of communication that take place. The agents and networks become an extension of experiences and choices which will continue to extend to the Post-normal communication sphere. Lister et al. (2009) add to this by stating that just as human knowledge and actions shape machines, machines might shape human knowledge and actions.

Conclusion

The filters of already existing cultural codes, languages and representational schemes continue to interfere with the logic of communication practices adding additional layers of conventions (Manovich, 2001). The information communication revolution with digitalisation post pandemic will look at changing economics and regulations engaging new social issues and challenges around the post-truth phenomena where the knowledge gap, surveillance, sharing and market “hacktivism” continue to exist. Where new market intelligence aggregating in unprecedented scope with data shadows and on line surveillance has been going on for long. Internet in this case continues to be a mass media with networks of communication and hyperlinks engaging both personal and mass data. We notice this interactive dynamics between the public and private vis-à-vis individual and community in the mediasphere. Recent trends in communication pattern also show the hybrid form of both online and offline mode of communication in areas of both semi public/private spaces. There is also the rise of avatars, simulation, second-life in this hybrid form of existence and representation in the online communication spaces. The hybrid form of communication has led to greater engagement of cyber agents, artificial intelligence and actors (human and non-human) together with other technologies allowing for development of artificial intelligence/body/intelligence augmentation. This

reaffirms the Cartesian view of looking at actants with non-anthropocentric approaches by rethinking epistemological models of repositioning singular or multi-dimensional conception of communication patterns and practices in our fluid environment.

The non-human and human actors in their network continue the kinetics of “weird” (Morton 2015), “chthonic” (Harway 2016), “vibrant” (Bennett 2009) communication with different level of choices, as the study shows. This impact can be seen in the changed way we work, accelerated space-time compression and integration; convergence of different forms and mediums of communication; easier and cheaper access to technological platforms, with average person now spending more time online. Here we see users with more control over media selected, compiled, used. There have been new forms of social connection beyond physical limitation of space with new communities of interest formed. Other changes in communication will be observed around the kind of interactions and narratives that exist in the communication network. Personal avatar existing literally “inside” the narrative space further affecting the course of narrative events. Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) concept of “remediating,” i.e. translating, refashioning, and reforming other media, both on the levels of content and form will continue to shape the Post-abnormal world.

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