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Effectiveness of Social Media as a tool of communication and its potential for technology enabled connections: A micro-level study

Trisha Dowerah Baruah

Department of Mass Communication
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Dispur, Guwahati-781006, Assam, India

Abstract- With the world in the midst of a social media revolution, it is more than obvious that social media like Facebook, twitter, orkut, MySpace, Skype etc., are used extensively for the purpose of communication. One of the most important advantages of the use of social media is the online sharing of knowledge and information among the different groups of people. This online sharing of information also promotes the increase in the communication skills among the people especially among the learners/students of educational institutions. Online tools and technology has not only mediated communication in countless ways, but that the very ways we communicate and even the ways we talk and think about communication are changing as a result. Social media have the potential to fundamentally change the character of our social lives, both on an interpersonal and a community level.

Index Terms- Social media, communication tool, publicity, branding, Social media tools

I. INTRODUCTION

The term Social Media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. Social media takes on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. With the world in the midst of a social media revolution, it is more than obvious that social media like facebook, twitter, orkut, myspace, skype etc., are used extensively for the purpose of communication. This form of communication can be with a person or a group of persons. Today most of the people specially the youngsters are hooked on to the different social media for keeping in contact with their peers. Social media is media for social interaction as a superset beyond social communication. There are pros and cons to the use of social media. One most important advantage is the online sharing of knowledge and information among the different groups of people. This online sharing of information also promotes the increase in the communication skills among the people especially among the learners/students of educational institutions. There is also a flip side to the use of social media tools. Sometimes, such tools are misused by people which leads to interference into one's privacy. Such instances can lead to dangerous proportions keeping in view the ethical aspect of the use of such media. The social media tools have virtually bought

people close to one another specially those living in far off places.

However, these days it has been witnessed that most of the business houses also engage in social networking while promoting their products and services. Very often, the head honchos of the business groups tries to maintain a healthy relationship with their valued customers. Social networking sites are now seen as a promising means of publicity, which every 'brand' must embrace. Social media as a medium of promotion contributes, through its immediacy, to a healthy and direct relation between brands and their public in an online environment. This immediacy offers the public the ability to be present, to communicate, to influence and retain a stronger position towards brands. In addition to using social platforms to monitor conversations about their industry, competitors, and products, companies are increasingly reaching out to their customers via the social Web to communicate messages about what they have to offer. In fact, social media is transforming the way organizations communicate — the many social tools that are available today are very cost-effective compared to traditional approaches such as email and online advertising. Blog posts and tweets enable businesses to create communities, offer immediate feedback or assistance, and promote their products and services. This paper basically tries to analyze the effects of the growth of social media and its implications in the society. This paper also tries to find out the usefulness of social media as a tool of communication.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the paper are –

- (i) To analyse the impact of Social Media as a means of communication tool
- (ii) To assess the usefulness of social media as a too, of communication
- (iii) To assess the potential of social media as a tool for technology enabled connections

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study is basically a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the role and importance of social media as a tool of effective communication. In order to empirically examine the effectiveness of social media, survey method was used for investigation, as this was found to be the most appropriate method to carry out a survey in order to find out the growing

importance and the use of social media as a tool of communication. Observation method was also used for the present study.

The area that has been selected for the present study is Guwahati city which is fast becoming an industrial region in the north-eastern part of India. A sample survey was carried out among the residents of Guwahati city. A total of randomly selected 200 sample of people residing in the urban areas of Guwahati city has been taken into consideration.

Sources of data : Data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include survey work done among the residents of Guwahati city. Document analysis of the secondary sources includes internet , magazines, books and journals has been carried out to study the impact and the use of social media in the social context and its potential for future growth.

IV. REVIEW OF PAST LITERATURE

In the paper ‘**Predicting the Future With Social Media**’ by Sitaram Asur and Bernardo A. Huberman. They demonstrate how demonstrate how social media content can be used to predict real-world outcomes. They further demonstrates how sentiments extracted from Twitter can be further utilized to improve the forecasting power of social media. In the paper ‘**Workplaces and Social Networking**’, the authors Andrea Broughton, Tom Higgins, Ben Hicks and Annette Cox talks at length the policy and practice relating to the use of social media by employees. They were guided by the fact that they had already engaged to some extent with the issue of social media, what it might mean for their organization and how they were going to formulate and communicate a policy to staff in two major UK employers. The first organisation was British Telecom (BT), and the second organization was Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC). In the paper, ‘**Predicting tie strength with Social Media**’, Eric Gilbert and Karrie Karahalios, d presents a predictive model that

maps social media data to tie strength. The model builds on a dataset of over 2,000 social media ties and performs quite well, distinguishing between strong and weak ties with over 85% accuracy.

V. AN OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The term ‘Social media’ refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. In the words of Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Social media is media for social interaction as a superset beyond social communication. Enabled by ubiquitously accessible and scalable communication techniques, social media has substantially changed the way organizations, communities, and individuals communicate. Social media takes on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. By applying a set of theories in the field of media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure) Kaplan and Haenlein created a classification scheme for different social media types in their Business Horizons article published in 2010. According to Kaplan and Haenlein there are six different types of social media: collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. Youtube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life). Technologies include: blogs, picture-sharing, vlogs, wall-postings, email, instant messaging, music-sharing, crowdsourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Many of these social media services can be integrated via social network aggregation platforms. An overview of social media has been shown below-



Figure 1: Overview of social media

Massively Multiplayer Online game (MMO) is a multiplayer video game which is capable of supporting hundreds or thousands of players simultaneously. By necessity, they are played on the Internet, and usually feature at least one persistent world. Cartrider, World Warcraft are some of the examples of MMO. Through social media, a person can also publish any news and views via web. Digg is one prime example of such media. It is a social news website. Facebook Connect, Digg Dialog, Digg Bar, Digg API(Application Programming Interface) are the important features of Digg. A person can discuss on any issues on skype, yahoo or google talk, and also there is the option of bulletin boards. Social networking is fast catching up as a means of keeping contacts and also sharing information with others. Microblogging is another way of posting messages online. Twitter is a popular microblogging website. There are also livestreaming of videos available online for the viewers to see. A virtual world is an online community that takes the form of a computer-based simulated environment through which users can interact with one another and use and create objects. The term has become largely synonymous with interactive 3D virtual environments, where the users take the form of avatars visible to others. These avatars usually appear as textual, two-dimensional, or three-dimensional representations, although other forms are possible (auditory and touch sensations for example). Virtual worlds are not limited to games but, depending on the degree of immediacy presented, can encompass computer conferencing and text based chat rooms.

Livestream, formerly known as Mogulus, is a live streaming video platform that allows users to view and broadcast video content using a camera and a computer through the internet. Users can stream live video or broadcast pre-recorded video in their channels, utilizing multiple cameras and on-screen graphics. Social gaming commonly refers to playing games as a way of

social interaction, as opposed to playing games in solitude, like some card games (solitaire) and the single-player mode of many video games.

Social networks sites like orkut, MySpace, YouTube etc. and numerous other similar sites (including the social bookmarking ‘ sites like www.redit.com, www.digg.com and www.facebook.com) on the Web help create new virtual communities where discussion and exchange of ideas through words, images and sounds take place across national and regional borders. He basic features of communication that are included in any social networking sites are inboxes, walls, status messages, notes, and comments. Most of the people prefer using social network as the primary means of communication. Initially social networks started with simply a profile picture, profile details, and some form of a wall, and drove most of their usage via communication. Social network is a new communication medium along which people broadcast and receive various bits of information.

A. History of social media

When we think of social media, the we generally think of facebook and twitter. However, in reality it is more than that. The earliest ways to send messages over long distances were probably both audio and visual. People used to communicate smoke signals by day and beacon fires by night in ancient China, Egypt, and Greece. Drums were used in many parts of the world to extend the range of the human voice for communication as well. The seeds of social media were sown during 550 BC when the regular postal system was established in Iran where horse riders and horse-drawn wagons carried mail. Usually, mail consisted of governmental dispatches and was delivered from one place to another. The evolution of social media can be gauged from Figure 2 as given below-

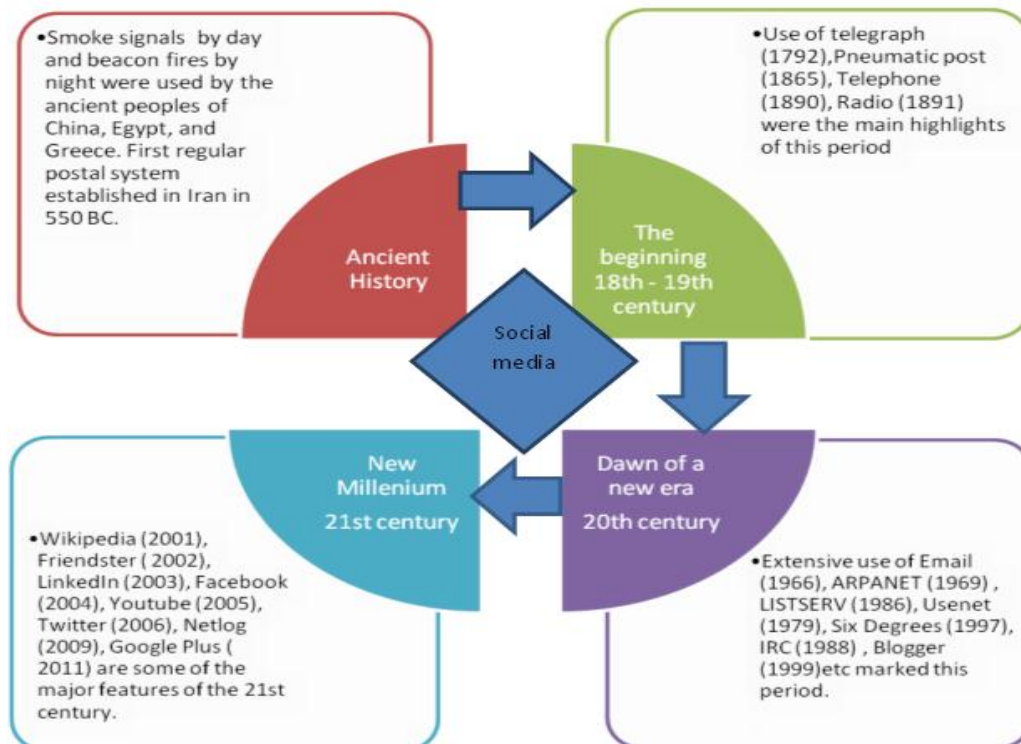


Figure 2: History of social media

The 18th and 19th century were breakthrough period where devices like the telegraph (1792), telephone (1890) and radio (1891) ushered in a new era of the sending and receiving messages over long distances. The increasing number of express messages between businesses, financial and legal offices and banks in growing cities, as well as busy street traffic, gave rise to new methods of telegram and letter transportation. The pneumatic post was introduced to combat the shortcomings of the telegraphic network in Paris. The invention of telephone and radio took the meaning of communication to another level. The 20th century was marked by the growth and development of internet. With the growth and development of internet, there came era of exchange of messages from one person to another digitally or via web. Email, ARPANET, USENET, BBS (Bulletin Board System), IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Listserv, Blogger, Six Degrees, Livejournal, Napster were some of the important sites for social interactions and sharing.

The 21st century saw a spurt in the growth of social networking sites by the launching of Friendster, Fotolog, Photobucket, Flickr, Orkut, Facebook, Ning, Digg, Twitter, Netlog, Youtube etc. Social media has come a long way since the days of the telegraph and even the more recent days of Internet-relay chats (IRC), and it continues to evolve. In the last few years, social media has become a convention of the online landscape. Major social networks and social media websites make changes and improvements on a fairly regular basis, so it's sure to keep evolving in coming years.

B. Social media classification

Social media can be classified into the following categories –
Social networking sites : A social networking site provides a web-based platform for building social networks or social relations amongst people, e.g., shared interests or activities. They provide a means to interact over the internet, e-mail and now even the mobile phones. The most popular websites offering social networking currently are MySpace (started in 2003), LinkedIn (started in 2003), Facebook (started in 2004) and Twitter (started in 2006). A social networking site would allow a user to create profiles or personal homepages online and build up a social network. The profile page thus created is like the user's personalized webpage and contains profile information of the user like gender, religion, orientation, interests, place of birth, current location, marital status, books liked etc. The page can be customized as the user wants and include video clips, music files or photos on their page. Also included on the page is a list of friends that form the user's network. Typically, these friends are actual friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, who may have sent a friend request and the user has included them in his/her list.

Blogs : A blog (derived from the word weblog) is an "online journal where an individual, group, or corporation presents a record of activities, thoughts, or beliefs". There are many websites that allow users to create blogs without any paying any fee like Wordpress.com, Blogspot.com, and blogger.com. Anyone can create a blog on these websites and these blogs can be accessed by anyone by typing the web address or URL (Uniform Resource Locator). Another popular sub category of blogs is microblogging. A microblogging site is like any blog

except for it limits the number of words that can be published in one message. Twitter.com is an example of microblogging.

Content generating and sharing sites : These sites serve as sources of information for various topics. Photo-sharing sites like Flickr.com, picasaweb.google.com, Video sharing sites like youtube.com, slide sharing sites like slideshare.com, document sharing sites like docstoc.com etc all fall under this category. These sites serve as free content for all users of internet. Users can search for content, download and use the content available on these sites without any fee. The content is also generated by the users. This type of user generated content is also known as crowdsourcing. Video and powerpoint presentation can be shared and uploaded in youtube and slideshare. This is a major advantage to most of the people who are unable to get access to the educational resources.

User appraisal sites : User appraisal sites serve as a platform for appraisals of various products and services. Though it is possible for consumers to express their view in any of the medium, user appraisal sites mainly deal with such reviews. Sites like www.mouthshut.com, www.pagalguys.com are prime examples of such websites. These websites serve as a starting point of consumer's decision making model for gathering information about products or services they are contemplating of buying. As such these sites serve as important word of mouth for consumers and a source of expressing post purchase feedback.

VI. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL OF COMMUNICATION : CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Social media offers a variety of avenues through which we can communicate with people. In fact, social media is known to have been used widely in educational field also. Over the last 30 years the nature of communication has undergone a substantial change and it is still changing. Email has had a profound effect on the way people keep in touch. Communications are shorter and more frequent than when letters were the norm and response time has greatly diminished. Instant messaging has created another method of interaction, one where the length of messages is shorter and the style of the interaction is more conversational. Broadcast technologies like Twitter transform these short bursts of communication from one-on-one conversations to little news (or trivia) programs : which we can 'tune in' whenever we want an update or have something to say.

Online communication tools also have the potential to increase our awareness of the movements of our professional or social contacts. Twitter, for instance, offers us an update of things people we know happen to be doing at a particular point of time. This phenomenon has been referred as social proprioception by Clive Thompson (2007), named after the physical quality of proprioception that tells a creature where its extremities are by the reception of stimuli produced within the organism. Social proprioception tells us where the nodes of our community are and provides a sense of connectedness to and awareness of others without direct communication. Internet is the third place where people connect with friends, build a sense of togetherness.

Increasingly, a computer with an Internet connection is the locus of a range of interactions in a variety of media and a gateway to an array of social spaces for work and play. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and virtual

environments like Second Life and World of Warcraft have become online meeting spaces where users— members, residents, or players—can interact and express themselves. They offer a way to keep in touch with existing communities that users belong to offline, such as social and professional groups. They also make it possible for people who would not normally communicate more than a few times a year to keep in touch— colleagues met at conferences, for instance, or friends met through the online community itself. Sites like YouTube and Flickr represent another forum for online communication that is centered on sharing, preference, and popular culture. Visitors can browse movies (in the case of YouTube) or photos (in the case of Flickr), express personal preferences, add commentary, and upload their own creative work. YouTube is also a repository of popular culture in the form of newscasts, television shows, movies, or music videos that are of current interest. The kinds of interaction that occur on these sites center around shared interests and include not only verbal commentary, but commentary in the form of original or derivative works based on popular pieces.

One of the reasons people prefer such form of media is because of the interactions they can have there, both social and professional. Whether it is as simple as checking back to see what other comments have been added to yours or as involved as attending a workshop or presentation in a virtual world, the nature of the attraction lies in the connections between people that these online spaces afford.

VII. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

A survey was conducted among the residents of Guwahati city in the urban areas. Guwahati is the gateway of North-East India. The spurt in the growth of industries have truly made it a world class city. The total sample size was 200 which consisted of students, teachers, engineers, marketing professionals, businessmen etc. A careful analysis of the data reveals the following results-

On being asked whether social media is a major form of communication tool, 125 respondents said that social media is indeed a major form of communication tool while 75 respondents have replied in negative. This is indicated in Fig – I and Fig - i

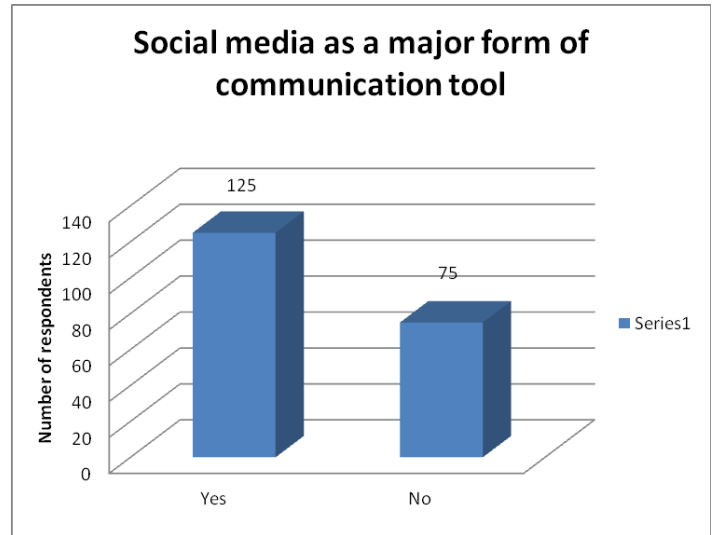


Fig - I

The above data is represented in the form of pie diagram as given below-

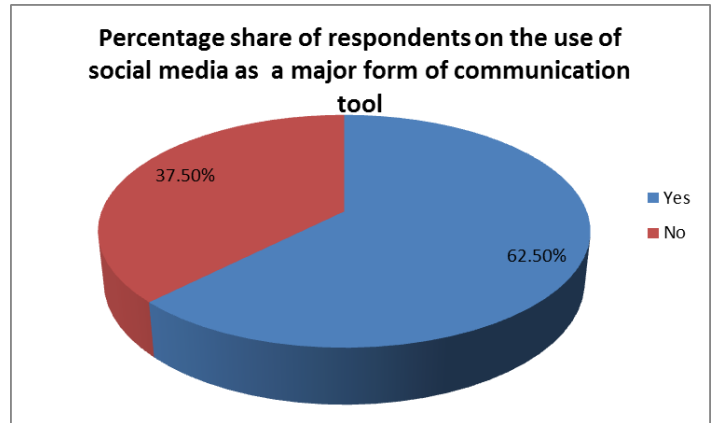


Fig - i

On the question of utilisation of social media for educational purposes, 138 respondents have replied in affirmative that social media is widely used for educational purposes while 62 respondents said that social media is not used for educational purposes. This is represented in Fig-II and Fig – ii as given below-

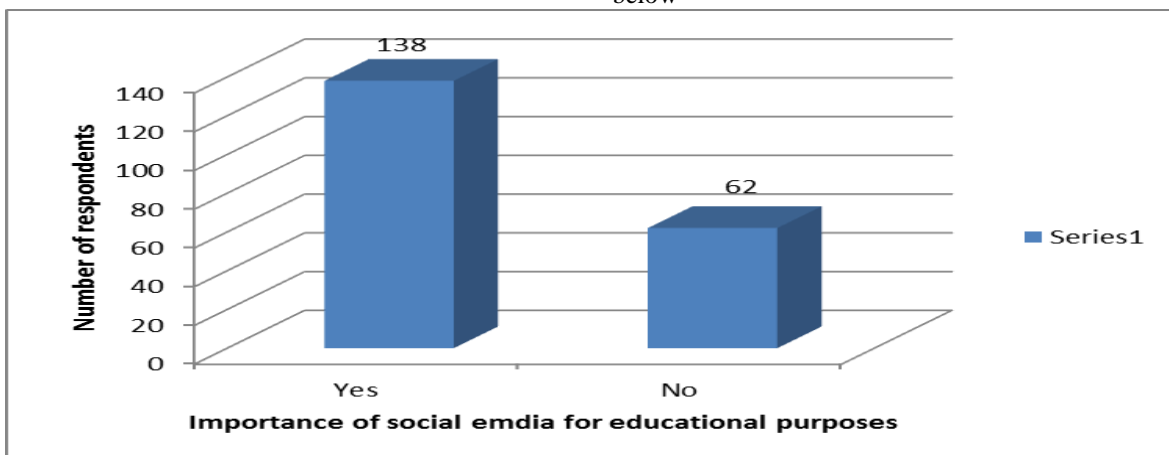


Fig - II

The above data is represented in the form of percentage as given below-

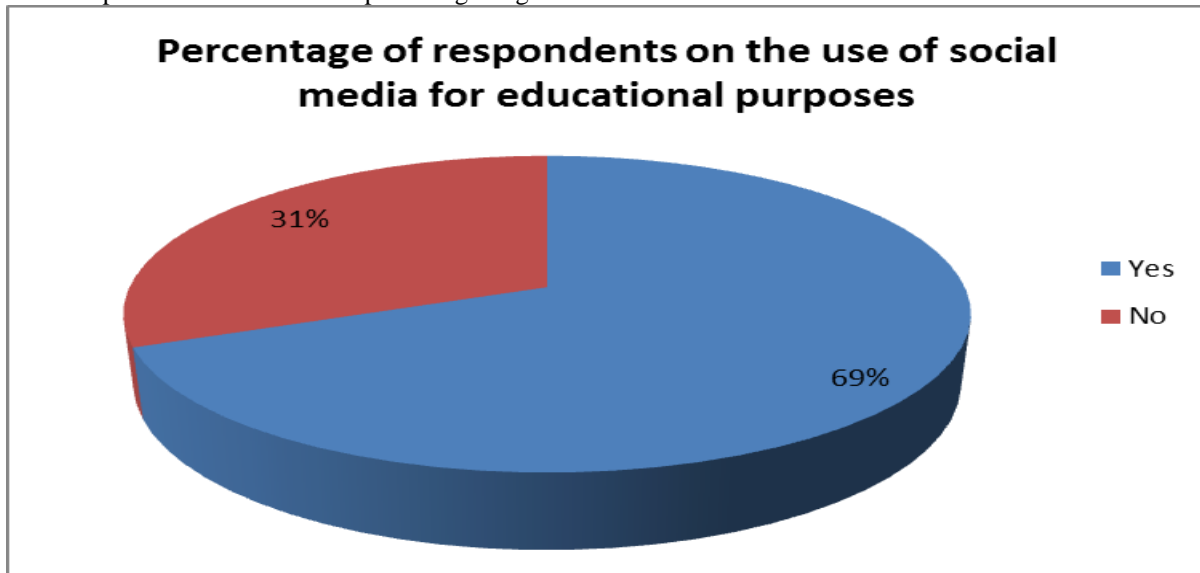


Fig - ii

On being asked the major forms of social media tools which the respondents preferred the most, 50 (25%) respondents said that they prefer social networking the most, 32 (16%) respondents giving their preference for wikis, 26 (13%) respondents for video sharing, 25 (12.5%) respondents for microblogging, 23(11.5%) respondents for blogs, 18 (9%) respondents for social news and

bookmarking, 10 (5%) respondents for photo sharing, 9(4.5%) respondents for podcasts and 7(3.5%) respondents have preferred RSS (Really Simple Syndication) as a potent social media tool. This can be represented in the following diagram (Fig – III and Fig – iii) given below-

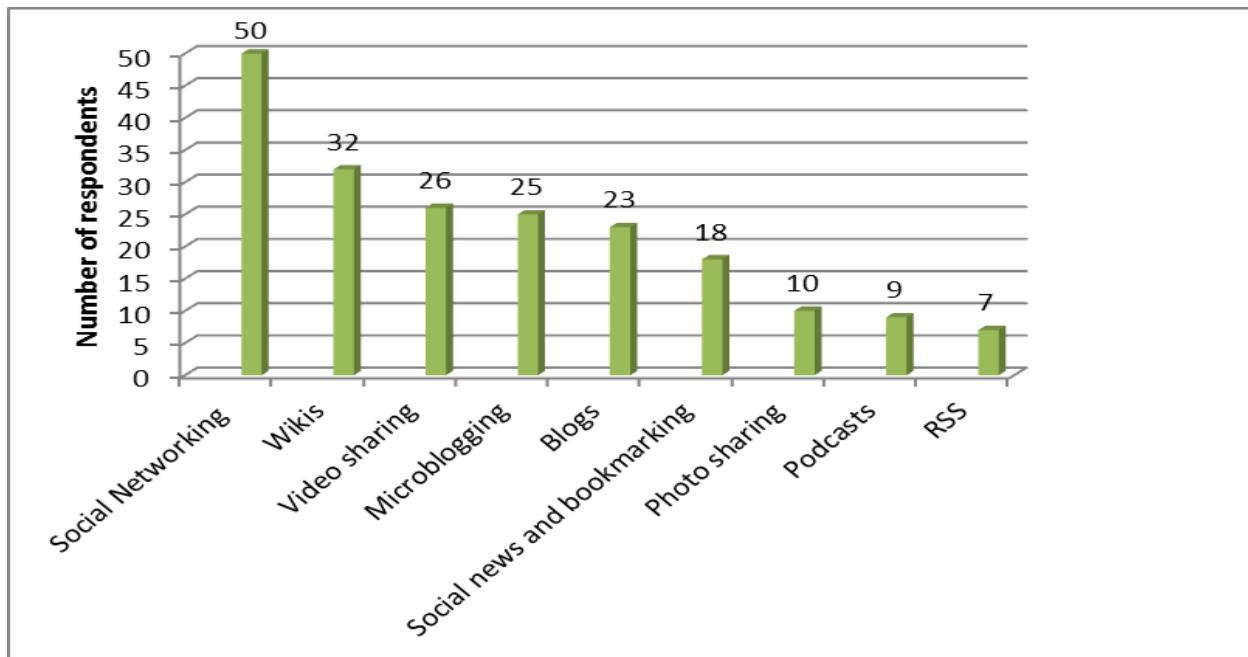


Fig - III

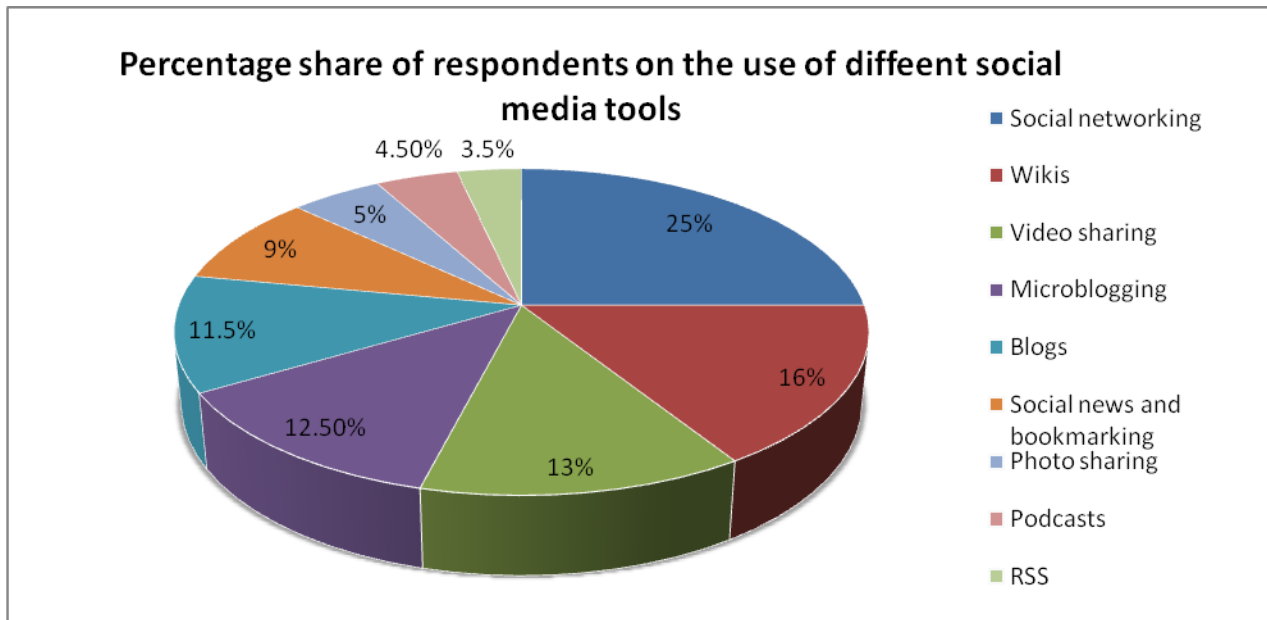


Fig- iii

As regards the usefulness of social media, 52 (26%) respondents said that social media plays the role of an interactive medium, 38 (19%) respondents said that social media acts as a source of information, 35 (17.5%) respondents said that social media bridges communication gap, 32 (16%) respondents opined that social media helps in sharing of ideas, 21 (10.5%) respondents

said that social media is an important customer interaction tool, 12 (6%) respondents said that social media is an important crisis communication tool while the remaining 10 (5%) respondents said that social media is an important marketing tool. This is represented in Fig – IV and Fig - iv given below-

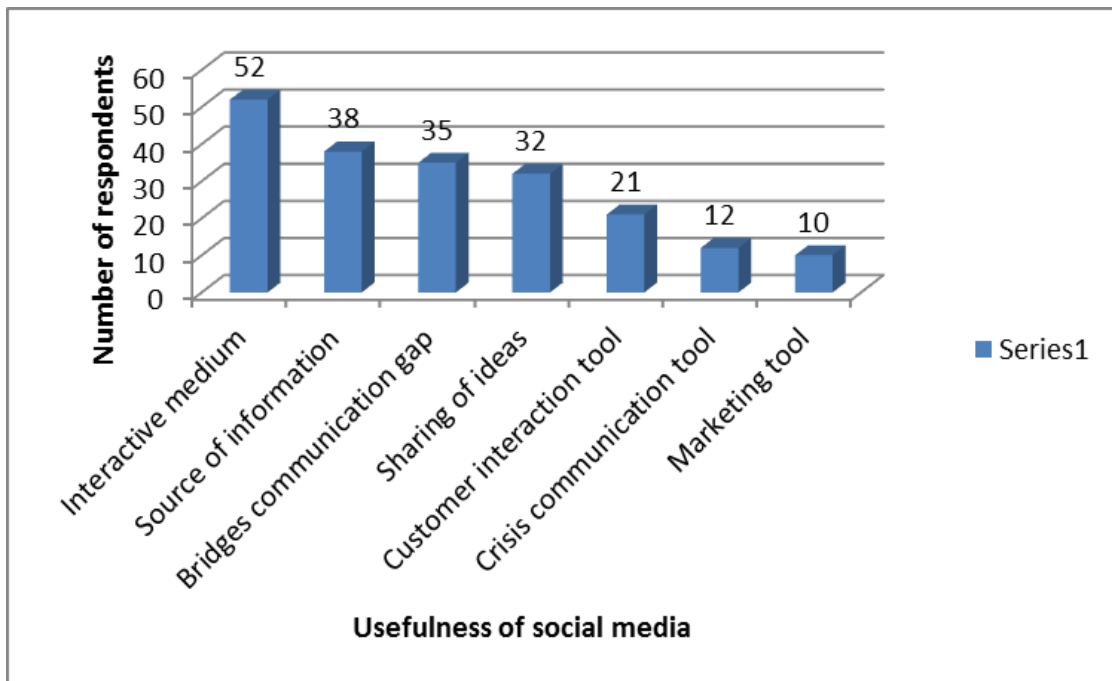


Fig - IV

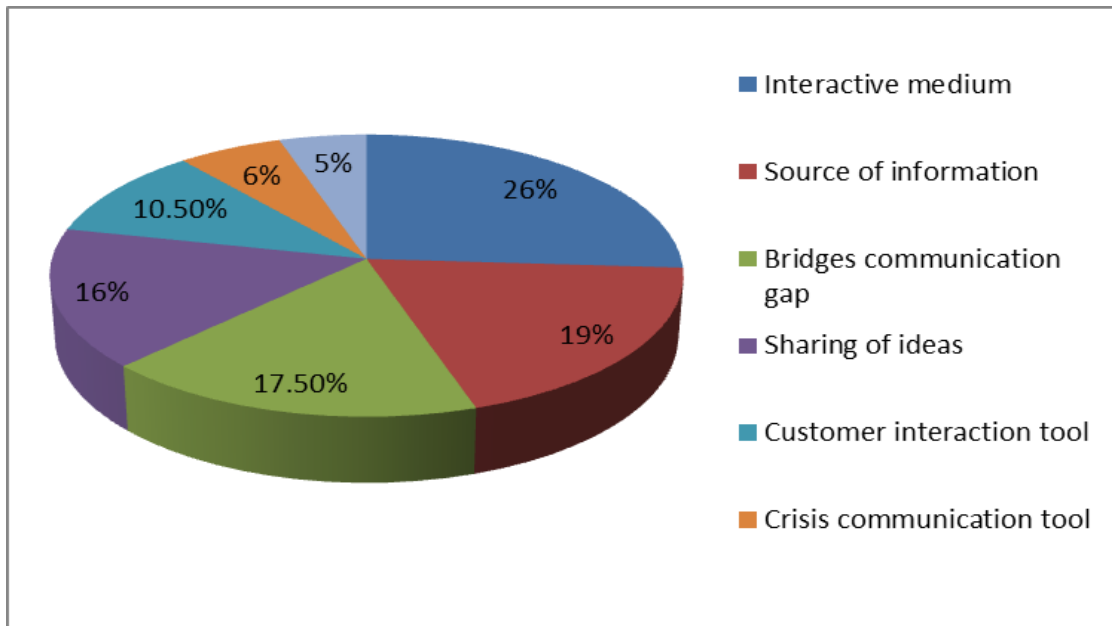


Fig - iv

A careful analysis of the above mentioned data brings to light the fact that social media has indeed done a commendable job in bridging the communication gap among people. The different social media tools help the people to interact with one another within the shortest possible time. Social media have the potential to fundamentally change the character of our social lives, both on an interpersonal and a community level. Changes in interaction patterns and social connections are already evident among young people, who are the heaviest users of social media. Thus one can say that social media has grown by leaps and bounds. This is evident from the fact that 62.5% of respondents consider social media as a tool of communication in a place like Guwahati while 37.5% respondents replied in negative. Among the major tools of social media, 25% respondents have preferred for social networking sites followed wikis (16%) and video sharing (13%) and micro blogging (12.5%). The fact that social media is an important interactive medium has been well justified as 26% of respondents have said it is an interactive medium while another 19% have said that social media is an important source of information. 17.5% of respondents have said that social media helps in bridging communication gap and another 16% have said that it helps in sharing of ideas. In the business sector, social media is used as an important tool of crisis communication and also a customer interaction tool. Growth of social media has revealed the following advantages and disadvantages. The main advantages of social media are –

- ✚ **Sharing of ideas** : Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events and interests within their individual networks. Web based social networking services make it possible to connect people who share interests and activities across political, economic and geographic borders.
- ✚ **Tool of communication** : Social networks are increasingly being used by teachers and learners as a communication tool. Teachers create chat rooms, forums and groups to extend classroom discussion to posting assignments, tests and quizzes, to assisting with

homework outside of the classroom setting. Learners can also form groups over the social networking sites and engage in discussion over a variety of topics.

- ✚ **Bridges communication gap** : Social media bridges the distance among different people. It offers platforms for online users to find others who share the same interests and build virtual communities based on those shared interests. With the availability of social media technologies and services, content sharing and user interaction has become relatively easy and efficient.
- ✚ **Source of information** : Content generating and sharing sites serve as sources of information for various topics. Users can search for content, download and use the content available on these sites free of cost.
- ✚ **Important marketing tool** : Social media is widely used by most of the firms/organizations to market their products/services in the society. The companies resort to social networking sites to generate opinions on the existing and future products that are available in the market. This is an excellent marketing strategy undertaken by most of the companies to draw consumers and elicit public opinion. Such comments or opinions help the organization to redesign their products. Such social networking and user appraisal sites are an important way of promoting products and generating opinions.
- ✚ **Important customer interaction tool** : Social Media Networking is perfect for customer interaction, customer feedback, and customer support. New business contacts can be obtained for networking purposes.
- ✚ **Important crisis communication tool** : When the major forms of public relations tool fail, social media can be used extensively to communicate with the general public regarding any crisis situation that might have gripped the nation or any organization. But it is important to remember that while social media can have a positive impact during natural disasters, it can have a

less favorable effect during business crises, in which case, corporate communication teams need to understand how they can use social media to their advantage. Communications landscape has changed thanks to social media, especially during times of crisis. For instance after the earthquake in Japan in March, 2011, millions of people logged on to YouTube and twitter to post messages and videos and also to check out updates about the devastating natural disaster.

✚ **Low Costs/ Cost effective** : It is cheaper to use online social networking for both personal and business use because most of it is usually free. Unlike in other forms of media like electronic or print, one has to pay a certain amount of money for a news item to get published. A person can scout out potential customers and target markets with just a few clicks and keystrokes.

✚ **Less time consuming**: Social media is an effective time management medium of communication both for business as well as for academic purposes. One can post a message or browse for any information at the click of a button. This is an added advantage in comparison to print and other electronic media like television and radio, Though one can get the updates in television, yet social media channels provide impromptu information and connection with the people that matters most. However, in spite of being an important tool of communication, social media has its own set of disadvantages which are given below –

✚ **Intrusion into privacy** : Social Networking are part of everyday life and for many of us a primary way in which we keep in touch with friends and family. Privacy is a huge problem in such networks. This becomes a serious issue when the users are targeted on the basis of their location, age etc. leading to kidnapping and murder. Very often it has been seen that most of the people who have opened accounts in social networking sites does not reveal their true identity leading to fake personal information and misleading people. The younger lot are at a serious danger of being misled by such people. Problems of harassment, cyber stalking and online scams can frequently be seen in day to day affairs.

✚ **Breakdown in familial ties** : When people get addicted to social networking sites, there is a breakdown in the family ties. This is because the person gets hooked on the sites for communication with friends. Youngsters specially feel free to discuss their problems and share stories with their peer rather their parents or close relatives. So, in the long run, the close bond with the immediate family breaks down.

✚ **Reduction in worker productivity** : Frequent usage of social media can have an influence on worker productivity. Employees may waste valuable time using Social Media Networking.

✚ **Slightly Impersonal** – Social media will never be able to beat the advantage of dealing with consumers face-to-face, yet many organisations still come make it seem like they don't really care about their followers by using things such as auto DMs on Twitter. When an

organisation auto DMs a new follower it makes it seem like they don't not have time to have a quick look at the followers profile for a few seconds. It is far better to say nothing than to send an automated, uncaring message to a potential custom.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Collaboration through online mode becomes easy if it is facilitated by social media technologies. For instance , learners can collaborate on team projects . Learners in the same study groups can co-draft documents, spreadsheets, presentation slides and more with Google Docs. Faculty members are cashing on the growing popularity of blogging and micro-blogging by using blogs as additional teaching/learning resources. Social media provide simple, inexpensive ways to organize members, arrange meetings, spread information, and gauge opinion. As more systems emerge, there will be greater capacity for groups to organize and participate in collective action, a hallmark of civil society. Social media can be effective for building social authority; individuals or organizations can establish themselves as experts in their fields, and then they can begin to influence these fields. Thus, one of the foundational concepts in social media is that, with social media, one cannot control one's message completely, but one can contribute to discourses. Social media technologies are capable of reaching audiences all over the world.

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AUTHORS

Trisha Dowerah Baruah, Research and Teaching Assistantship (RTA), Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Housefed Complex, Last Gate, Dispur, Guwahati-781006, Assam, India
Email ID: trisha.baruah@gmail.com