

Youth and Digital Empowerment

Making a case for exploring empowerment potential through digital engagement.

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Abstract: Rapid expansion of digital technologies and their equally intensive consumption calls for an empirical approach to understand the technology usage and its resulting benefits. In absence of a scientific approach to study the phenomenon, the empowerment potential of the New media technology often remains in the realm of an intelligent guess rather than an understanding based on empirical data. This void ought to be filled by exploring that relationship between digital consumption and user empowerment and the proposed paper seeks to do that. The paper intends to act as an action document setting the direction for research studies to be undertaken under the engagement and empowerment theme. The paper calls for looking at aspects like educational, personal, social and professional empowerment to develop a holistic understanding of what digital dividends are enjoyed by the youth and what are the grey areas that need further attention. Broad objectives outlined by the paper include studying factors like socio-economic, gender, regional, linguistic etc. and their relationships with consumption pattern and exploring the relationship between dense digital networking and increased/intense socio-political empowering experiences. This paper essentially makes a case for developing an understanding of the kind of empowerment digital engagement brings to the youth.

Keywords: digital engagement, Internet, empowerment, user generated content, digital dividends.

Introduction

The digital world is expanding and Internet is widely believed to be a catalyst of change through the end users' empowerment. This is equally true of India where the youth happen to be both the harbinger and the biggest beneficiary of this revolution. Internet users' statistics for year 2016 (www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/india, based on Internet & Mobile Association of India's data) put the country's Internet population to over 462 million and ticking. A great chunk of these users are in the age bracket of 15-25 years driving the internet consumption in the country. The online youth is hitting the World Wide Web for everything from educational quest to job search to participating in social debates to entertainment. Given such diverse engagement, Internet's impact on the youth is believed to be all pervasive, having an effect on all aspects of their life; educational, personal, social and professional.

Yet, despite such intense digital consumption, limited empirical data is available to understand the kind of impact Internet usage has had, especially on the youth. Such a knowledge remains critical to develop an understanding of current and future value of the Internet contributing towards the user empowerment.

This concept paper essentially makes a case for exploring the kind of empowerment digital engagement brings to the youth. Although, being targeted at the youth, educational empowerment remains the immediate concern, this paper also seeks to set direction for a comprehensive approach to research studies done under digital engagement and empowerment theme. Such research quests that look at all aspects like personal, social and professional empowerment to develop a holistic understanding of what digital dividends are enjoyed by the youth and what are the grey areas that need further attentions.

Existing Literature and Gaps

Developing a comprehensive understanding on this front requires contextualizing Indian experiences with global data to find out similarities and gaps both. Such an attempt at reviewing existing research studies throws an interesting mix of data. Yet, since these studies were done in different social backgrounds, available technological infrastructure and other such factors, their data need to be read in their given context for an appropriate understanding. This thought drives the categorization of literature review in two distinct categories; Indian and Overseas studies.

Indian studies

Indian studies mainly focused on the consumption of the Internet or what the youngsters are doing on the Internet. At their given time and context, such studies were of their own relevance which is evidenced in studies, besides others, of Krishnamurthy, Sundari, (2003), Kalyanaraman, Sriram and Sundar, S. Shyam (2003), B. J. Geetha and R. Subramani (2009), Kanwal Nalwa and Archana Preet Anand (2003). But with rapid expansion of internet infrastructure leading to ever increasing and intense consumption, the dearth of empirical research studying direct linkages between consumption and empowerment is glaring. The following studies are some of the examples of limited research efforts on Internet consumption and empowerment.

Aparna Purushothaman (n.d) examined women empowerment through Internet usage. Empowerment was measured in terms of participants having acquired certain qualities/skill like reduced fear of using Internet, improved confidence level and reduced ignorance in terms of using Internet. This research reinstated that just the availability doesn't bring the women closer to ICT and make their access easy rather the technology's use by the women has to be seen in the social and political scenario in which the women access a technology. Similarly, **Michel L. Best and Sylvia G. Maier (n.d)** looked at the usage and perception of information technology among a modest sample of twenty nine women respondents in the rural areas of the state of Tamil Nadu in India. It concluded with following observations: women found it useful to use ICTs; ICTs use had gender-specific perceptions and usage patterns; while using ICTs, the users encountered obstacles in terms of structural issues like time, location, illiteracy and not personal like prohibition from a relative). The study also opined that perceptions of obstacles to ICT use correlate with manifestations of gender awareness. **Chandran, D. (2000)**, focused on frequency, time spent and purposes of using internet by the respondents. The study found that using web Web and e-mail services of Internet for communication and information gathering were the main reasons for the use of this technology by the respondents. **Kanaujia and Satyanarayana (2003)** conducted a study of the Science & Technology community of Lucknow city to assess the level of awareness and demand of web-based learning environment among Science & Technology information seekers. The major findings of the study revealed that users consulted e-journals regularly on the Internet, used Internet for consulting technical reports and online databases. **Mishra, Yadav and Bisht (2005)** researched to know Internet utilization pattern of the undergraduate students of G B Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar. The findings of the study showed that majority of the students used Internet for preparing assignments. **Rajeev Kumar and Dr. Amritpal Kaur (2006)**, in their study including both the faculty and the students in select Engineering colleges, concentrated on differences of Internet use. Namely, how frequently the Internet was used, what were the methods employed to acquire Internet skills, what were the preferred place of using Internet, what were the purposes, what were the preferred ways to browse the information on the Internet, what possible problems did the users encounter while using Internet and finally what were satisfaction level of the users with the Internet facilities available at the college.

Digital Habits of School Students: TCS GenY Survey, a nationwide study profiled the trends and pulse of the school students across cities of India viz a viz their use of technology. The exclusive study captured the trends in terms of accessing information and preferences while using social networking platforms, future education mindset, and career interests among the school kids. Besides, it compared if school students in major metros and mini metros had any differences. The study found that mobiles were the principal device for students; social life is clearly lived online by this generation; Home remains the preferred location to surf the internet; four in ten are shopping online and new careers like Retail, Tourism, Media are attracting students. Another study on Muslim youth, “Empowerment through ICT education, access and use: A gender analysis of Muslim youth in India” advocates that ICTs in developing countries had the potential to empower the marginalized and the socio-economically weaker sections, especially women and minority groups. Conducted on a sample size of over 155 young Muslim women and men studying at three computer training centers in Mumbai. Reflecting on gender compared data, when it came to perceived empowerment, girls showed higher gains than boys from computer learning when combined with ICT use. Hence, the study concluded that notwithstanding gender-based digital divide, if attended to and bridged, ICTs could act as an equalizing force. One more study, named, “**New Media and Media Students: an Approach and Use Pattern Analysis**” confines itself to only those studying media studies. The study analyzed how these media students viewed different new media platforms and what did they use it for? Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative (focus group discussion), the study analyzed how seriously students approached new media facilities.

A detailed review of the above mentioned Indian studies clearly reflects few gaps. The studies are scattered and narrow focused both in terms of studied population and scope. Most look at the usage-pattern, lack a holistic approach and fail to rigorously examine the linkages between usage and the subsequent impact.

Overseas Studies

Lillie, Jonathan (n.d) studied American women and looked at personal empowerment through Internet technologies. Conducted on a modest online women population, the research underlines individual empowerment through participation in cyber communities and the subsequent empowerment. The study identifies the components of empowerment from the Empowerment theory propounded by Edward Schwerin which lists eight primary components of empowerment. Jonathan Lillie, employed the Uses and Gratifications theory and tried to analyze how the internet consumption led to the satisfaction of its users and in which aspects. **Deborah L Wheeler's** study on Egyptian women used interviews with 25 female Internet café users and found three main empowerment threads; increase information access, expand or maintain social networks, and transform social and political awareness. **Joseph Kehinde Fasae and Fasa Rachael Aladeniyi (2012)** based their study on science students in Nigeria. It focused on the purposes of using the Internet, the problems encountered and effects of using Internet on academic achievements and satisfaction level. While **Laurel Felt (2010)** made a strong case for adopting and using new media technologies for educational and social benefits/dividends. In the participatory culture, the focus of literacy should be on community involvement rather than individual expression, it concluded. “**The New 3 E’s of Education: Enabled, Engaged, Empowered; How Today’s Students Are Leveraging Emerging Technologies for Learning**”, a report by “www.tomorrow.org” focused on finding out how internet based technologies were integrated by American school students and for what possible advantages and the empowerment. The report suggested three new “E’s of Education– enable, engage and empower”.

- “Enabling students to reach their potential through increased access to educational resources and experts that extend learning beyond the capacities or limitations of their school or community”.
- “Engaging students in rich, compelling learning experiences that develop deeper knowledge and skill development especially the problem-solving, creativity and critical thinking skills so highly desired for our world today”.
- “Empowering students to take responsibility for their own educational destinies and to explore knowledge with an unfettered curiosity, thus creating a new generation of lifelong learners”.

Mckinsey Global Institute (2011) in its report pointed out the job and wealth creation possibility of the new media technologies and its impact on economies. Focused on 13 countries with different stages of development it included G8 countries, dense Internet penetration countries like South Korea and Sweden and big economies like Brazil, China, and India. The report establishes that Internet maturity correlates with wealth creation, and that even in the near future, Internet will continue to play the catalyst of global economic growth.

Yves Punie (n.d) in her book a wider analysis of the role of Social Media in user empowerment. Based in European context, profiling many related studies (Punie et al. 2009b), and the book talks about the actual and potential impacts of Social Media in terms of two clear trends. First, it said, is the trend of users' contributing to the content (user-generated content). The second trend pointed towards the creation of collective knowledge through Social Media-enabled collaboration. Users through Social Media participations help in creating, reviewing, refining, enhancing and sharing information on varied topics, e.g. professional, health-related or political. This Collective knowledge is then accessed by different groups in the society like citizens and governments, patients and doctors, teachers and learners etc. as per their needs. Such knowledge is then used for achievement of personal and public goals (Centeno et al. 2009). Focusing on the social media interaction, **Shanyang Zhao***, **Sherri Grasmuck**, **Jason Martin** (2008) identified the perceived dividends social media platforms bring to the users. The study investigated how virtual identities are created on the Facebook. Analyzing 63 Facebook profiles, it propositioned that the users tend to implicitly claim their virtual identities rather than making it too explicit. Ethnic identity, late adolescent friendship, courtship and sexuality formed the core of this study conducted at an urban public university at a large Northeastern city in the United States.

Besides the above, students' Online consumption has been studied at in some other related researches too. **Lindsay and McLaren** (2000), for instance, analyzed the online researching pattern of the college students, what was the quality of these researches and the type of researches being undertaken. **Burton and Chadwick** (2000) profiled the web oriented research habits of students. In doing so, the study reflected that barring a small percentage, a majority of the students went for a combination of library and online resources in writing research papers. The study also stressed that easy of access was a major factor in their pull towards online resource utilization. Students gave the most positive ratings to "sources that were "easy to understand, easy to find" and "available" (Burton& Chadwick, 2000, p. 321)". In another study, **Pascoe, Applebee, and Clayton** (1996) also listed some factors driving the academic Internet use. These were: ease, convenience, and accessibility to resources.

"Computers and the Internet: Tools for Youth Empowerment", was another qualitative case study conducted among school students in Canada. Most youth opined that Internet usage helped them reduce their anxiety when communication and dealing with adults, it also changed their perception of their social status, helped them increase their social besides supporting reflective thought, increased efficiency, and improving their access to resources. Overall, youth thought of computers and the Internet as tools that empowered them. **EszterHargittai and Hinnant** (2008) found that youth with higher levels of education and from a more resource rich background use the net for more capital enhancing activities such as informed political participation, career advancement, consulting information about new financial and health services. Likewise, **Donna Chu's** (2010) study from Hong Kong described the media use patterns of young people there: why they go online? Their information management initiative, content production, collaboration and sharing activities on the Internet. Based on responses from 649 secondary schools students in Hong Kong, the survey concluded that despite growing up "digitally," or being "digital natives", the young respondents did not show a very intense user characteristics. Rather than acting as "prosumers", majority remained passive consumers in most cases. Another study, **"Online Technology and Networking: Some Gender Perspectives"**, talks about gender-linked barriers created owing to income levels, age, and/or gender. This is truer in case of women who are seen mostly in passive roles of 'consumers' of information and Internet services. The study called for a more intense participation and interaction of women in technology networking, which was likely to add not only to their own personal development, but also bring gender sensitivity. **Bellarmino A. Ezumah Murray. (2012)** examined the college students' relationship with social media networks. The study concluded the following; "college students use Social Media Network Sites" (SMNSs) for so many reasons on Internet. These include keeping in touch with friends, sharing photos, keeping in touch with family and entertainment.

Gaps in Literature

Western studies too, like Indian studies in the realm of Digital engagement and Youth empowerment, are marked with scattered focus, linked to specific time-frame and interest areas. These leave several dimensions unexplored and lead to identifiable gaps. Some of which are as following:

There is a paucity of studies linking Internet consumption and youth empowerment, especially the youth at the college/university level. Most of these studies have their own perspectives on empowerment or focused on one aspect only.

The scale of research was another area of concern as most studies were conducted on modest sample population, and limited to a small geographical area.

The literature review also indicates that many studies were independent analyses and were not posited in any theoretical framework. Further, the elements of empowerment analyzed were narrowly focused.

A Case for More Studies Linking Usage and Empowerment

The existing gaps as outlined by the representative review of existing literature necessitate more academic research in terms of volume in size, immediacy in context, variety in focus areas and holistic in approach. Taking the "use and impact" route, the studies need to explore how the quantum and intensity of the internet usage can be directed towards the users' holistic development; personal, educational, social and political.

Studies exploring empowerment would also help in determining the nature of content that helped in empowerment. That, in turn, would help in identifying the right content and customize future content to that end. Such studies would be of great help to various stakeholders like content providers, advertisers and the policy makers.

Empirical data linking the two variables of usage and empowerment would also be greatly useful to future researchers to correlate and arrive at some universally agreed theory/idea/finding aimed at understanding the technology-user interface and the resultant benefits.

The knowledge resulting out of a deeper understanding of the technology-user interface and the resultant benefits can directly lead to skills development among students. The end users' perception of internet mediated content with demonstrable benefits would help develop customized web content. This would be of immense value to the content providers.

The given context of existing identified gaps, and potential benefits of a new approach make a strong case for more studies linking usage and empowerment. An understanding of empowerment that covers the educational, social, professional and personal lives of the online youth.

Validity, Reliability and the Academic Scrutiny

To satisfy the parameters of validity, reliability and academic scrutiny, it is important that the studies conducted in the said domain are posited into some theoretical framework. The following theories can be of immense value as providing the common ground looking at the triggers for technological use, reasons for usage and the perceived benefits by the users themselves. This can be added with other appropriate academic theories as the need may be.

1. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

“The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)”, looks at the concept of “attitude” as a trigger and predictor (Intention) of human behavior. Developed by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, it focuses ng on intention, Behavioral Intention to be precise. The base proposition of the theory is that an individual's particular behavior is guided by his perception of the outcomes he expects from performing that behavior.

There are two factors that determine Behavioral intention are: attitudes and subjective norms. “An attitude is a person's opinion about whether a behavior is positive or negative, while "a subjective norm is a perceived social pressure arising from one's perception". Together, attitudes and subjective norms are thought to determine behavioral intention. Behavioral intention then leads to performing the behavior. As a behavioral process, an expanded TRA flow model can be expressed as follows”:

Belief toward an outcome	Attitude	Intention	Behavior
Evaluation of the outcome			
Beliefs of what others think	Subjective norm		
What experts think			
Motivation to comply with others			

Figure 1: The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

2. Technology Acceptance Model

“The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)”, an extensions of the Theory of reasoned action (TRA), demonstrates the technology-user interface, as in, how and what pulls them to use a particular technology in the way they do. Developed by Fred Davis and Richard Bagozzi, the Technology Acceptance Model hypothesizes a direct link between the two technology acceptance measures: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use.

Perceived usefulness (PU) - This was defined by Fred Davis as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance".

Perceived ease-of-use (PEOU) - Davis defined this as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free from effort" (Davis 1989)

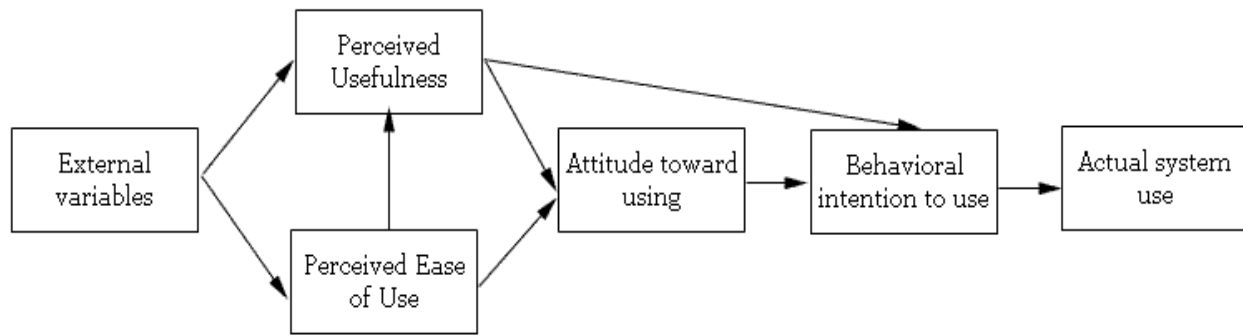


Figure 2: Technology Acceptance Model from Davis, Bagozzi et Warshaw (1989)

3. Uses and Gratifications theory

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) attempts to look at media consumption and effect from users' perspective: "how users deliberately choose media that will satisfy given needs and allow one to enhance knowledge, relaxation, social interactions/companionship, diversion, or escape". Its assumptions formulate that the linking of need gratification to a specific medium is user driven. That People have enough self-awareness of their media use, interests, and motives. But UGT's central assumption is that the consumers' consumption has a clear intent and use.

Lately, UGT has been used to incorporate studies of user's relationship in terms of new and emerging media. Ruggiero Thomas, in his study "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century" argues that "uses and gratifications is a key theoretical perspective to understanding the adoption and use of new communication technologies".

Using UGT to look at Internet usage has thrown three main categories of gratifications: content gratification, process gratification, and social gratification.

- Content: "Uses for the Internet include the need for researching or finding specific information or material, which are gratified with content".
- Process: "Users gain gratification from the experience of purposeful navigating or random browsing of the Internet in its functional process".
- Social: "Uses encompass a wide range of forming and deepening social ties".

The New Approach: Aims and Objectives

The new approach calls for concerted attempt to study and establish clear linkages between Internet consumption and its impact leading to empowerment of the youth.

The new action points

Work-areas for intended research studies in this domain are linked to the gap areas of the existing research body. The running gap theme, in the realm of Digital engagement and Youth empowerment research studies, is marked with scattered focus and linked to specific time-frame and interest areas. These leave several dimensions unexplored and lead to identifiable gaps. Some of these are as following:

There is a paucity of studies linking Internet consumption and youth empowerment, especially the youth at the college/university level. Most of the existing studies have their own perspectives on empowerment or focused on one aspect only.

The scale of research is another area of concern as most studies are conducted on modest sample population, and limited to a small geographical area.

The literature review also indicates that many studies were independent analyses and were not posited in any theoretical framework. Further, the elements of empowerment analyzed were narrowly focused.

The gaps in the existing studies automatically lend themselves to the action areas of the proposed approach. The new action points for research can be broadly explained, but not limited to, in the following objectives.

- Ascertain the consumption quantum and usage pattern of the Internet by the youth.
- Studying the youth as various sub-sets like high school students, college students, and students pursuing higher education.
- Study the factors like socio-economic, gender, regional, linguistic etc. and their relationships with empowerment, if any.
- Assess the nature of information sought – personal, social, academic, career (specialized or generic in nature) its availability and the end users' perceptions on the utility of such information.
- Map the New Media interaction of the youth and explore the relationship between dense digital networking and increased/intense socio-political empowering experiences.
- Identify the constraints, if any, in accessing internet and its impact on knowledge levels and empowerment.
- Enlist the suggestions of youth on the nature of information they would prefer on select and dedicated web portals/platforms.
- Explore the Internet's potential to lead to possible empowerment in terms of educational, livelihood, knowledge/life skills and socio-political empowerment.
- Explore the role of users in creating user generated content and its linkages to empowerment.
- Any other relevant aspect that lends credence and value to understanding engagement and empowerment.
- Establish the current concern and future research areas.

Perspective on Empowerment

The term empowerment is open to multiple and different interpretations, owing to the disciplines and intentions it is looked at from. Hence, the term "Empowerment" has been defined from multiple dimensions by scholars depending on the context and the discipline of study. Page and Czuba (1999) propose the following: "Empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important". Kieffer (1984) believes "Empowerment is an interactive process which occurs between the individual and his environment, in the course of which the sense of the self as worthless changes into an acceptance of the self as an assertive citizen with sociopolitical ability". Parsons (1988) concludes that "Empowerment is a process of internal (person's sense or belief in her ability to make decisions and to solve her own problems) and external change (ability to implement the skills, the capabilities and the other new resources acquired in the course of the process)".

Empowerment, thus, is an ongoing process. Edward Schwerin (n.d) established eight primary components of empowerment after a lengthy review of empowerment definitions emerging from many disciplines. These components are:

Self-esteem and self-efficacy – “both imply how a person feels about her or himself. While self-esteem is their evaluation of self-worth, self-efficacy refers to how much control a person feels that they have over their environment through an evaluation of personal capabilities”. **Knowledge and Skills**- “abilities and knowledge that might be easily found and developed through Internet use, Schwerin particularly stresses personal competencies such as interpersonal communication, stress management, coping skills, problem solving, etc.”. **Political Awareness**- “developing one's own sense of social causation, justice, and events - as articulated by Freire”. **Social Participation** –“participating in a variety of community groups and activities”. **Political Participation**- “acting from one's political awareness to affect change through political processes by involvement

in local organizations or governing bodies”. **Political Rights and Responsibilities-** “knowing and standing up for the traditional human rights or other subjective concepts and fulfilling the responsibilities of a citizen”. **Resources-** “having access to human needs, social and political resources”.

Empowerment is understood quite differently if parameters are not set. Empowerment, as per in paper, is to be looked at in terms of skills acquirement or capacity development in the following aspects of the youth’s life.

Academic Empowerment -New Media facilities like Internet is believed to have brought following benefits to the youth; availability of large pool of educational contents, variety, pointed, easy and cheaper access. Has this improved educational/professional competence? How strong is this empowerment?

Knowledge/Life Skills Empowerment- Exposure to worldwide information leading to broader worldview; greater awareness leading to improved participation and increased confidence, and hence, better interpersonal skills. What do the users feel about it?

Livelihood Empowerment- Job related information/opportunities used and exploited by the youth. What types of information is available? How do the youth use these? Which sites are frequented? How does it help them? Are they satisfied?

Socio-Political Empowerment- New media facilities like Internet are believed to be helping youth create and maintain social networks (membership of cyber groups). Such cyber group and online associations lead to increased social and political awareness and participations (readers' comments, blogging, maintaining WebPages etc.) Therefore, by giving the youth a tool to voice their opinion on various socio-political issues, Internet facilitates intense social participation leading to their social inclusion. Such inclusivity results in socio-political empowerment of the youth. What are the end users opinions?

Operational Definitions

Empowerment, thus, has been defined by scholars with different focus points. For the proposed approach, however, below mentioned descriptions shall act as the broad operational definitions spectrum of the terms.

Empowerment: The paper proposes to use and test the term Empowerment in the sense of increased availability/accessibility, improved knowledge and/or competencies, greater confidence and intense/better social participation.

Youth – High school students, college students, and students pursuing higher education.

New/digital Media - The studies to focus on only Internet (Web-based platforms like websites, blogs, search engines, job portals, social networking sites etc.), and not other forms of New Media like mobiles, iPods, iPads etc.

Consumption – the frequency, intensity and variety in accessing/utilizing internet by the users.

Perceptions – Users’ expectations about the likely benefits/dividends of consuming the new media. Perception here is aimed at finding out “the users’ understanding of how important or useful they think is the tool (internet) and its contents”. What users’ perceive as the dividends of using Internet and the possible benefits they may enjoy by doing so? In other words perception implies how the potential of New Media and empowerment are looked at by the specific target group.

Impact – The perceived and actual effects of consuming internet by the users. The term “Impact” is meant to explore and establish the act of intended benefits/effects consumption brings to the users. Does the intensity and/or pattern of consumption lead to users’ empowerment in aspects of personal, educational, social and political? As per the proposed approach, awareness and changes in the cognitive levels are also a measure of impact.

Post Script

This concept paper on Digital engagement and dividends, thus, advocates an approach that is based on a comprehensive assessment of the technological infrastructure required and its availability and the needs/desires/motives and the reasons of the users' digital engagement. Equally central to the proposition is the ability to analyze the actual engagement and the resultant benefits or dividends enjoyed by the users. Empirical data gathered to such an end will go a long way in customizing not only appropriate content but also help align its delivery on the right platform to the right recipients. A potent combination of right content available on right platform reaching the right consumers is likely to bring intended benefits resulting in greater digital engagement and dividends.

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