Media, Technology and Family: Interrogating the Dynamics of Interactions

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Abstract

The media environment and character have undergone profound transformation in India since the early 1990s. The television broadcast sector in the country has grown fast during the past 20 years by taking advantage of the extant rudimentary broadcast regulation and liberal economic policies adding more and more channels across genres and regions and exposing the viewers to increasing volume and variety of programme content, including international content. Championed by an emerging domestic media entrepreneurial class, the material conditions of media production underwent sweeping changes during this period. The mediascape became further complex with the advent of the new interactive communication technologies that have rendered dialogic – open ended, interactive and discursive - engagement with audiences a possibility, thus marking a revolutionary break with the monologic, traditional media. The emergence of an affluent and globally oriented urban middle class in the post reform decades of the 1990s and 2000s has provided significant impetus to the growth of the media sector. However, what implications such profound transformations have had for family, an important and foundational unit of social organization, remains an underexplored question, partly due to the conceptual complexity around the institution itself. This paper makes an attempt to address this gap by reviewing the existing scholarship on the pathways of influence that link family and the cultural institution of media in the light of the significant technological revolution in the sphere of communications as also shifts in the country's socio-economic and cultural milieu. The analysis is focused specifically on television and digital media.

Keywords   :   India, media, family, digital, television

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Contents

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Tara Nair

Electronic media - radio and television -in India remained monopoly of the state until the early 1990s, posturing as an important 'national' institution symbolizing the cultural prowess of the country and relaying messages of unity, national integration, and economic development on behalf of the governments at the centre. The reach of this media, however, was limited during the early decades, accessible only in select metropolitan cities and mainly to the elite and the affluent. The 1990s heralded a revolutionary shift in the country's electronic mediascape, when transnational television programmes began to beam in, starting with CNN's broadcast of the Gulf War in 1992 and followed by STAR TV's launch into entertainment broadcasting (Mishra, 1999). Taking advantage of the country's rudimentary broadcast regulation and liberal economic policies and championed by an emerging domestic media entrepreneurial class, the television broadcast sector grew fast through the ensuing decades adding more and more channels across genres and regions, exposing the viewers to increasing volume and variety of programme content, including international content. The material conditions of media production underwent sweeping changes during this period. By the end of the 2000s there were 196 million television homes in the country, 80 per cent of which were connected to either cable or satellite networks. This indeed was a commendable achievement given that the number of cable and satellite homes in India in 1992 was only 0.41 million[2].

The introduction of digital technologies closely followed the phase of commercialisation of the electronic media in India. Fast diffusion of mobile telephony and rapid rise in internet use[3] have been instrumental in accelerating

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[2] Prasar Bharati, *Doordarshan*, 1999.

[3] The adoption of multi-functional computing devices, particularly, smart phones, has grown phenomenally over recent years (103 million units shipped in 2014). See, www.idc.com. As for internet, the data shows that user base has risen from around 200,000 subscribers in 1999 to about 243 million in 2015, making it the third largest in terms of use of internet. See, www.internetlivestats.com, for data on internet users by country. The emergence of affordable local brands and convergence of prices have mainly contributed to this increase (Accenture, 2014).

the pace of digitalisation of media, getting the stage set for the emergence of an elaborate multi-media system that converges distinct and diverse modes of communication technologies into an integrated network. This indeed brought about a profound transformation in the media environment and character (Castells, 2001) as the new interactive communication technologies have rendered dialogic – open ended, interactive and discursive - engagement with audiences a possibility, thus marking a revolutionary break with the monologic, traditional media where "...voices …typically remain on a step removed from the life of the audience.... relegated to the status of "background noise".[4] The emergence of an affluent and globally oriented urban middle class in the country in the post reform decades of the 1990s and 2000s has helped accelerate the growth of new media and communication technologies. For a large segment of this class, media consumption happens increasingly in highly privatised enviornments (on niche connections or personalised devices).

How do the above changes in the character and environment of media technologies interact with different social and political realities? Does the new decentralized and diversified digital environment engender newer forms of sociability? What influence does it bring to bear on societal institutions? Specifically, does it impact the institution of family and intra-family relations? Such questions have been in academic writings as part of larger analytical enquiries into the effect of globalization and modernization on societal structures and relationships. In the case of India one encounters two distinct strains of analysis in this connection: one that positions media, mainly television, within the modernization project of the pre-reform era driven by the state and aimed at achieving the goals of development and growth, and the other that reflects theaporias and optimisms associated with processes of liberalization and globalization.

It is important to note that unlike in the western nations, both private television and digital media entered the country alongside the wave of economic reform and restructuring introduced in the 1990s. They, hence, have evolved in close interaction with the structural transformation of the economic sectors ensued through the subsequent two decades. The structural changes brought about during the period have impacted the economic and

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[4] See, Kenneth J. Gergen, *Cell Phone Technology and the Challenge of Absent Presence*, http://www.swarthmore.edu/Documents/faculty/gergen/Cell_Phone_Technology.pdf

social lives of all though in different ways. The country has witnessed the hegemonic rise of the middle class (extending the class beyond the traditional elites) both as a socio-economic formation and as a political force thanks to service-sector led economic growth, rapid expansion of urbanisation and higher education (Kapur and Vaishnav, 2014)[5]. The relative poverty gap has further widened as the state has progressively retreated from the provisioning of basic services compelling the poor to increase their involvement in informal activities or risky agricultural practices or migrate to urban centres. Relaxation in trade barriers has triggered increased cross border flows of goods and services, including from culture industries. The cities have emerged as 'strategically critical arenas' where neoliberalism and the attendant modernism articulated themselves mainly through the spectacle of consumption (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).As Sundaram (2004) puts it "Cities have borne the brunt of the new globalisation both in transformative and imaginative terms, with changes in infrastructure, social arrangements and constant expansion" (p.64).

What implications such profound transformations have meant for the institution of family remains an underexplored question. However, one cannot ignore the fact that there have been perceptible changes in the composition of households through the 1990s and 2000s as manifest in

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[5] Who constitutes the middle class is still a matter of debate in India depending upon how one defines its material characteristics. According to Deshpande (2009), "Groups described as 'middle class' in the media and in dominant discourse are far from the middle of the economic pyramid and close to its top. Groups that are actually in the middle – a wide band around the median level of living – are too poor to be of interest to the mainstream media, and not poor enough for the occasional 'human interest' story on starvation deaths or the like. Thus, what is generally referred to as the middle class in India constitutes a fairly small minority, even though it succeeds in casting a much larger ideological shadow". This view is corroborated by the A recent panel study found that a sizeable proportion of respondents across all income groups perceive themselves to be part of the Indian middle class. Thus 47 per cent of lower middle-income respondents (annual income Rs.36-96000) self-identified as middle class, even as half of middle income (Rs. 96,000 to Rs. 180,000) and 54 per cent of upper middle-income (Rs. 180,000 to Rs. 720,000) respondents did so. See, Kapur and Vaishnav (2014). Some scholars argue that middle-classisation, a defining feature of liberalising India has led to increased polarisation as "the upper segments of the middle class become richer, indulge in more are more lavish consumerism, and isolate themselves in gated communities", while the poor becomes poorer not in absolute terms but certainly in relative terms (Mooij and Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2009: 83).

shifting shares of those who report themselves as residing in nuclear/joint families and rising share of female headed or single member households. It needs to be acknowledged that the interchangeable use of the terms, household and family, is not encouraged by sociologists as theoretically they refer to distinct arrangements. Uberoi (2004), for instance, argues that tracing changes in the forms and composition of 'household', a commensal/coresident unit of residence[6], may not lead one to appreciating the process of changes in 'family' system as the latter refers to a more complex phenomenon of kinship behavior and the values and norms associated with it. Further, the understanding of 'family' is hugely contested in the country, as there is wide diversity of family systems across regions, castes, classes, communities and individual life cycles making its analysis highly complex (ibid.).

Such conceptual complexity around family has meant little appreciation of the ways in which this important and foundational unit of social organization shapes and is shaped by changes in the environment as also transformation of other institutions. It is our attempt in this paper to address this gap by reviewing the existing scholarship on the pathways of influence that link family and the cultural institution of media in the light of the significant technological revolution in the sphere of communications as also shifts in the political economy of policy making in India. We will specifically focus on television and digital media in the ensuing sections.

Mass Mediation through Television: Changing Notions of Family

Despite the challenges on the conceptual front, it is interesting to note that 'family' is central to the very existence and growth of television in India. Until the advent of colour broadcasting in India in the 1980s, the medium of television was an exclusive national education project, the relay system of the state to propagate progressive development ideals that it considered critical for embracing modernity. The social educational focus of television started giving way to 'socially responsible' entertainment around the early 1980s when colour television made its entry in the country (Kumar, 2008).

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[6] The Census of India defines a 'household' as a group of persons who normally live together and take their meals from a common kitchen unless the exigencies of work prevent any of them from doing so. The persons in a household may be related or unrelated or a mix of both.

Hum Log, the first family drama[7] in a serialised format, that started broadcasting in 1984, tried to integrate the national reconstruction ideals of the state in the genre of drama following the development communications strategy developed by Miguel Sabido in Mexico in the 1970s[8]. The serial celebrated the virtues of (north Indian) 'extended family' as an ideal form of living – 'a unifying civilisational ideal' (Uberoi, 2004). It may be noted here that, as Uberoi argues, the early sociological writings had valorised patriarchal joint family as *the* traditional Indian family to the complete neglect of other kinship practices prevalent, especially, in the Dravidian culture and among non-Hindu communities. More importantly, though the serial (and many that followed it through the 1980s) dealt with several issues regarding women's role in development– family planning, early marriage, illiteracy, domestic violence, work participation, and economic independence – they were carefully divorced from any discourse on the grossly unequal power relationship between men and women that sustains the edifice of extended families. Similarly they stayed away from problematising the intergenerational struggle for status, dominance and control which is constantly at play within families (Kumar, 2008; Mankekar, 1999). The television serials of the 1980s and 1990s, thus, tried to create the image of a 'national family' that extols the value of living together sharing in the common resources, while being staunchly entrenched in patriarchy.

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[7] The genre that revolves around family relationships and conflicts between family members.

[8] "...the Sabido methodology is a theoretical model for stimulating positive change in social attitudes and behaviors through commercial television and radio programming. Sabido pioneered the use of telenovelas to address social issues during the 1970s, when he was vice president for research at the Mexican television network Televisa. Over the next decade, he produced six social content serial dramas in Mexico and during the time when many of his telenovelas were on the air, Mexico underwent a 34 percent decline in its population growth rate. As a result, in May 1986, the United Nations Population Prize was presented to Mexico as the foremost population success story in the world. Since the 1980s, the Sabido methodology has been used to motivate changes in attitudes and behaviors on a wide range of issues, including child slavery, women's status, environmental protection, and HIV/AIDS". See Barker (2007). Available at https://www.populationmedia.org/2007/08/09/sex-soap-social-change-the-sabido-methodology/ (accessed 30 September 2016).

By the beginning of the 2000s, the media markets in the country were enlarged and fragmented with multiple regional television channels, multi-edition newspapers and magazines, an emerging digital and new media sector, and a fledgling FM radio. The regional language broadcasting received a big boost during this period thanks to the spread of regional transmission of Doordarshan, and more importantly, due to the launching of a host of private channels. The platter of programme choices became larger and niche channels with differentiated audiences started emerging across channels. The struggle of channels to tailor their content to suit the mysterious (yet measurable) audience has been steered by marketing departments and audience rating agencies whose metrics suggest that Indian families typically prefer to watch programmes together. This is said to have driven broadcasters to target entire families while creating programme content across general entertainment channels, especially, for the prime time evening slots[9].

Interestingly, almost all the major family serials across channels have had plots where women are the central protagonists. In the feminized programming scheme, women are portrayed as the strong pillars that hold the edifice of family together even when its foundations are weathered by erosion of traditional family values, individualist aspirations of the younger generation and their own ambition to be free of the pressures of cultural gate keeping. These women are able to assert their views and judgements on other family members and manipulate family level decision making by combining cleverpolitical strategies and feminine charm. Such characterization seems to fit the image of the new Indian woman celebrated by the champions of free market and consumerism – a woman who 'balances modernity and tradition' and is able to combine self-indulgence with focus on family and children (Bijapurkar, 2014). Though several scholars have seen the prime time dramas as regressive, some others like Munshi (2010) considered them to carry robust messages for women, especially in rural areas, about the need to be strong and independent. Munshi's argument resonates well with the findings of a study done a couple of years earlier by Osten and Jenson (2007)[10]. Their analysis strongly indicated that

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[9] Sapna Nair, 'Why do Indian TV homes prefer to be single'? *afaqs!*, June 10, 2008. Available at http://www.afaqs.com/news/story/21347_Why-do-Indian-TV-homes-prefer-to-be-single(accessed 30 September 2016).

[10] They used a three-year panel dataset (2001 to 2003) covering women in five Indian states.

introduction of cable and satellite television in India has been associated with increased autonomy of women. The women they compared before and after the introduction of television reported lower acceptability of spousal abuse, lower son preference, and lower fertility.

It may be noted here that many studies carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s examining the impact on television on social life indicated some degree of rearrangement of situational geographies due to the introduction of electronic media. This rearrangement involved displacing of individuals from their distinct physical settings dictated by their given social roles and spatial differentiation and relocating them in a media-created informational setting (Meyrowitz, 1985). In an ethnographic study covering two villages in Maharashtra (done in two rounds 1995-96 and 2000) Johnson (2001) observed that television had brought structural and psychological changes in social and family relationships.

> "Television has significantly contributed to the restructuring of social relationships in the village....acts catalyst bringing both men and women of all ages together on a regular basis in close proximity for an extended period of time. This closeness over time has created new types of relationships among people of different ages and genders....Television imparts messages and images to every viewer equally...Children and youth are often as informed and knowledgeable if not more so than adults. The need to watch television among family members initiates a breakdown in the sex-role differentiation of work toward sharing certain responsibilities, so everyone may watch television" (p.157).

Importantly, Johnson's research did not find any drastic restructuring of the gendered nature of social structure and relationships in the study villages. The social locations of men and women were still separated by thedictates of the dominant institutional environment of male dominance and gender inequality. While analyzing the observations from two phases of ethnographic research done in Dehradun (1991 and 2001) among middle class young male movie goers, Derné (2005) argued that external institutional structures that individuals face in their everyday life in a given society are critically important in rooting the cultural meanings they derive from media messages. Thus most of the middle class men consider it impossible to exercise their own choice in marriage given the structural barriers they face, but may enjoy the celebration of love in films or television. Similarly, they may

reject media portrayals of women's independence given the institutional structures of male dominance they encounter as an everyday reality at home. Much the same way, the elite and affluent Indians may "embrace new cultural imaginations of gender and family trumpeted in transnational media precisely because globalization has transformed their structural realities" (p. 44).

Despite the sparks of optimism surrounding the possibilities of women's empowerment that television engenders, the ideal of patriarchal joint families continue to frame the representation of women' lives and everyday travails in television serials in ways that do not disturb the statusquo. Women continue to be portrayed as assertive warriors of justice on the one hand, and self effacing martyrs on the other, ever willing to lay their interests and aspirations at the altar of the family to save the venerable institution from disintegrating. What is more important to note is that the contemporary television family in India has traversed a long distance from the 'national family' of the 1990s to be reframed into the primary site where individuals collaboratively and independently contend with a pervasive culture of consumption in an effort to assert their identities.

It is our argument in this section that the general entertainment television in India for the most part of its history has kept itself away from analyzing and interpreting family as an evolving institution caught in the interstices of larger economic, social and demographic changes. Same has been the experience with niche channels targeting specific audience segments like youth even as they have dealt with the peculiar social lives of the young generation and helped them negotiate the complex issues of identity and agency. As a result, media continues to portray a typical Indian family as one which is desperately Indian in that it deploys all possible means to keep its extended character intact, while trying to negotiate the individual ambitions and consumerist aspirations of men and women who co-reside within the institution. As Cullity (2002) found in the case of MTV India, Indian television has been successful in carefully crafting the hybrid image of a middle class western-Indian viewer, one who engages with 'modernity and the west as an individual and still maintains Indianness', the essence of which lies in 'maintaining integral connections or roots in a larger collectivity' (p.421). The youth in Johnson's (2001) study in rural Maharashtra mentioned earlier has shared these characteristics – rebellious, materialistic and bound to families.

Changing Notion of Media and its Import for Social Ties

As mentioned earlier, new media environment in India has undergone dramatic changes over the last decade. In a sample survey conducted in 2014 in select Indian cities it was found that 72 per cent of the students in the 12-18 age group own smart phones (TCS, 2015). A large majority of them, especially among boys, were members of social networking sites, mainly Facebook, followed by Google and Twitter. As per the findings of the survey, social media is a means for the youth to be part of the community and staying connected with family. India is the second largest base for Facebook with over 125 million users of the social networking website[11].

According to the statistics made available by the World Wide Web consortium for the year 2014 India is the third largest (after China and the US) with respect to the number of internet users (243.2 million)[12]. With a global population share of 17.5 per cent, India's share in internet users was estimated to be 8.33 per cent. More importantly among the top countries with more 100 million internet users, India has registered the highest growth rate – 14 per cent – over 2013-14. The reach of internet in India, however, was still very low in 2014 - only about a fifth of the population had access to internet as per this data. Estimates by Internet World Stats for 2015 puts India in the second position (after China and followed by the US) in terms of internet users (375 million)[13] with an estimated penetration is 18 per cent of the population. In other words, though the country tops the world in terms of absolute number of internet users, the coverage of population within the country is the lowest among the top 20 countries in terms of internet users[14].

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[11] See, http://www.livemint.com/Industry/vU55FbKdlz9vIfkxUb0EoL/Facebook-tops-networking-WhatsApp-in-message-apps-in-India.html (Accessed March, 2016).

[12] See, www.internetlivestats.com for data on internet users by country.

[13] See www.internetlivestats.com.

[14] As per the research done by TNS the time spent by an average Indian internet mobile user aged 16-30 years (millennial population) spends is lower (2.2 hours a day or about 34 days of a year) than the global average (3.2 hours a day or 49 days over the course of a year), See, 'Half of Online Indians Use Facebook, WhatsApp Daily: Report', *livemint*, Oct 7, 2015. http://www.livemint.com/Industry/vU55FbKdlz9vIfkxUb0EoL/Facebook-tops-networking-WhatsApp-in-message-apps-in-India.html (Accessed February 29, 2016). Those in the age groups 31-45

It is, however, a matter of concern that there are not many systematic studies available that interrogate the working of new and social media in the private and public spaces in India. Discrete reports in the popular media conjectures how social media affects family relationships by quoting mental health experts and counselors. Some of the reports refer to instances of 'absent-presence' even during times when family members are expected to be together and communicating, excessive gadget obsession in individuals, and rising incidence of infidelity.[15] The paradox of individuals being gripped by the 'fear of missing out' despite their intense involvement in virtual socialization has also been discussed in the popular media.[16]

Given the nascent scholarly understanding of the social working of new media in India, it is perhaps important to scan the considerable western scholarship on the interface between new media and social change to derive meaningful insights. It needs to be noted at the outset that even in cultural contexts, where new media reach has been nearly saturated, the research findings on its effect in social institutions and relationships have been mixed and inconclusive. This ambiguity largely emanates from the fact that unlike the monologic television or film, digital media is more versatile in that users not only are engaged in making meanings of the messages of the medium, but are active producers of messages and constantly in dialogue with the medium.

As regards the digital media's interface with family, some researchers argued that instead of focusing on the technology per se, attention must be devoted to exploring the density of preexisting relational environment in which such technologies are introduced. Studying the impact of internet on connectivity

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and 46-65 spend still lower time 1.8 hours and 1.5 hours respectively on their devices. About the half the time they spent on mobile is social media. The survey showed that WhatsApp is the most popular instant messaging (IM) app, whereas Facebook is the most visited social networking site. India has the largest concentration of users of WhatsApp with 56 percent of Indian Internet users opt for WhatsApp every day, while 51 per cent use Facebook. Still the proportion of users of messaging services in India is much lower - 38 per cent- compared to other Asian countries like Malaysia (77%), Singapore (76 %) or China (69%).

[15] Pratiksha Ramkumar, 'Social Media Affecting Relationships: Experts', *The Times of India* (Coimbatore), October 20, 2015.

[16] 'Beware Social Media Addiction Can Cause FoMo', *The Indian Express* (Delhi), February 4, 2015).

between people, Haythornthwaite (2002) found that family ties were likely to be disrupted if internet replaces face-to-face communication (as among family members). However, her analysis also demonstrated that the density of social ties between communicators is a critical determinant of how the new media impacts social relations. "…where ties are strong, communicators will adapt their use of media to support the greater range of expression important to their relationship, and use multiple means of communication to support their tie. They will be more ready to adopt new media that suit or complement theircommunication needs, more able to influence each other to use and adapt it, but also more able to influence each other to resist a change when it does not suit their mutually agreed patterns of communication. On the other hand, weakly tied pairs will be more passive in their use and adoption of new media…" (p.397). She termed this phenomenon - of 'more strongly tied pairs making use of more of the available media' - media multiplexity (Haythornthwaite, 2005). The presence of media multiplexity suggests that families with strong ties among members can successfully leverage new media revolution to counter its possible disintegrative impact.

There are other studies thatemphasise the characteristics of the technology as exerting absolute power over the relational environment. They argue that new communication media tend to dilute cross-generational or vertical communication between the young and old, as the former start investing their attention on nurturing horizontal networks of peer communication (Livingstone, 2009). According to Gergen (2002) the shift in favour of horizontal communication networks exemplifies the potential inherent in modern communication technologies to erase the physical presence of individuals by an 'absent presence', thus disconnecting meaning from the material context and eroding depth of vertical relationships. Cell phone is one technology that 'possesses capabilities to extend outward into the social and material world' thus 'impeding the cultural drift' created by absent presence implicit in other technologies of communication.

It has also been argued that deep and more committed communications have become redundant in a converged media and communication world, where formerly separate modalities of mediated communication – internet, telecommunications, portable computer, PDAs, broadcasting, wireless and infrared technologies, digital audio and video- have come together. It is in the new personalized 'digital habitats', constituted by social networks, instant

messages, video and online games, blogs, and video-sharing sites, do the youth work, play, interact, express themselves and connect with the wide world outside. As natives of this superlatively mediated world, they share a pervasive culture that transcends spatial and linguistic divides. Premised on a deterministic logic of technology, these studies have tried to argue that the pervasive presence of new media has given birth to 'a new generation of young people' with distinct skills, learning aptitudes and social preferences (Mesch, 2009). They value their independence and individuality and are capable of subverting parental overseeing and censoring with their crafty and intimate understanding of the technology.

'Disappearance of the Intimate': Media and Moral Panic

There are two clear perspectives as to how new media mediate interpersonal communication in social spheres. Katz and Aspden (1997) were among the earliest to conduct a systematic analysis of the effects on internet use on social contacts of individuals. The study did not find any significant association between internet use and social ties prompting the researchers to conclude that it neither affects social involvement of users nor makes them feel lonelier than non-users. However a much debated experimental study using longitudinal data published in 1998 by Kraut et al. countered this finding and argued that "greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness" (p.1017). Franzen (2007) reports the results of another study published by Nie and Erbringin (2000) that found empirical evidence for privatization of leisure and individualisation of transactions among regular internet users. Franzen's own analysis of internet users in Switzerland, however, refuted the hypothesis of internet reducing social interaction.

The anxieties about imminent obliteration of the intimate, face to face human interactions by the 'robotic moment' continue to bother observers of the great social transformation unleashing in post-industrial societies. Turkle (2011) has expressed such anxieties the most eloquently:

> "These days being connected depends not on our distance from each other but from available communications technology. Most of the time, we carry that technology with us. In fact, being alone can start to seem

like a pre-condition for being together because it is easier communicate if you can focus, without interruption, on your screen. In this new regime, a train station (like an airport, a cafe or a park) is no longer a communal space but a place of social collection: people come together but do not speak to each other. Each is tethered to a mobile device and to the people and places to which that device serves as a portal" (p.155).

She asserts that that the cacophony of online culture would tempt children into "narcissistic ways of relating to the world" (p. 179) and the "ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy" (p.280).

Interestingly, many studies by public health researchers have reinforced the fear that social media interfere and decimate real friendships, create distance between individuals, and make them lonelier. They warn about the rise of newer risks to families arising from individuals' over engagement with internet and social networking activities. Studies in this genre explored the risks associated with phenomena like 'face book depression' among young adults (O'Keefe et al., 2011) or online peer aggression/ harassment exacerbating instability and depression in teenagers, leading even to 'cyberbullicides' or suicides of those affected by cyber bullying[17] (Luxton et al, 2012; Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). It may be noted that in the early 2000s several reports appeared in the western media of the cult of suicides spreading menacingly in Japan. Internet chat rooms were blamed to be the sites where suicide pacts were made among consenting individuals[18].

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[17] Cyberbullying typically refers to intentional, targeted and repeated threatening, harassment , humiliation or embarrassment of a child or adolescent by another child or teen for by means of cellular phones or internet technologies such as e-mail, texting, social networking sites, or instant messaging. Cyber harassment and cyber stalking typically refer to the same actions when they involve adults" (Luxton et al., 2012).

[18] Harding, Andrew (2004), 'Japan's Internet Suicide Clubs', http://news.bbc.co.uk/ 2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4071805.stm, 7 December; Samuels, David, 'Let's Die Together: Why is Anonymous Group Suicide So Popular in Japan? *The Atlantic*, May, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/05/let-s-die-together/ 305776/ (both accessed 1 February 2016).

Predictions that envisage a spell of doom befalling human relations as result of increased exposure to new media have also been countered by scholars. It is argued that such fears do not seem to recognise the intimate interconnections between communication and social/cultural change. "Because culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves – that is, our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes – become fundamentally transformed.." (Castells, 2010: 357). And such transformation would be more radical in an era dominated by digital technology. Arguing on the same lines Adolf and Deicke (2015) connect internet proliferation to increased individualization. What is perhaps more important to notice, according to them, is that network architecture of the Internet also offers new possibilities for users to reintegrate with society and maintain social relations through communication. This phenomenon of convergence of individualization and network mode of mediated communication has been termed as '*networked individuality'* by Adolf and Deicke.

The possibility offered by digital technologies to retain one's individuality while remaining connected in the social world can have distinct implications for social relationships. In their study of how Filipino mothers settled in the UK and their children back home communicate transnationally in a 'polymedia' environment, Madinou and Miller (2012) aver that intense communication between mothers and children with the help of new communication technologies, especially mobile phones, significantly transform the experience of accentuated separation for both parties. They found that availability of affordable technologies that ensure instant connectivity is a strong determinant of the decision to migrate of these mothers. At the same time, the study also showed that the possibility of perpetual connectedness in a poly media communicative environment also results in frequent rupture and conflicts in the mother-children relationship.

Towards Interpreting Media-Family Interactions

Given the vastly diverse perspectives and value prescriptions around social impact of new media, where would one anchor the discussion on their impact on a basic societal institution like family? In India and many other Asian societies, family is not only a foundational institution of society, but "its position has been central and critical in ways that mark it apart from other (notably "western") societies" (Kannabiran, 2006: 4427). Much of

the anxieties about new media's 'negative' or undesirable impact emanate from a typical representation of family as an ideal homogeneous, cohesive unit that nurtures relationships with strong coping mechanisms (Sonawat, 2001). It is important to rupture this frame to make way for a more realistically dynamic understanding of family as a contested institution of intimate social interactions, shaped historically by material conditions as also by culturally defined relationships like kinship that defines obligations, rights, and boundaries of interaction among members of society. As Kannabiran (2006) argues, in India "there is relatively little material that looks at...the family as a material institution that demonstrates the playing out of contestation for material assets, privileges and rights in adversarial relationships, or even more interestingly in affective relationships that turn adversarial on account of aspirations to economic control/control over bodies" (p.4430).

One way to understand how changing communication technologies impact family structure is by locating families within the changing relational base of societies. As argued by some, the relations that characterized the small worlds of craft and industrial societies have been fragmented as post industrial modernity has created opportunities for the rise of libertarian individualism. The rise in the share of single member households in western societies is perhaps an important aspect of individualization. Such households constitute about a fourth of all in the US (Castells, 2010). In India, though they still form only about 4 per cent of all normal households, their share has increased between the census years of 2001 and 2011 from 3.9 per cent to 4.1 per cent[19]. Further, since 1991, while households continued to increase at a greater pace there has been a decline in the mean household size in India reflecting deepening of demographic transition process associated with fertility decline. There has also been a rise in nuclear families relative to multi-generational families (Nayak and Behera, 2014).

It may be noted here that the post industrial modernity is fraught with contradiction. On the one hand there is a movement towards detraditionalisation and individualisation wherein the traditional norms that have hitherto defined and shaped people's lives are undermined to pave way for emergence of liberated individuals. On the other hand, there has been an increasing fear of the risks anduncertainties that underpin the transition

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[19] See, www.censusindia.gov.in.

towards a new social order, which promises greater freedom from the shackles of traditions. In the micro social site of family, this contradiction is played out in the form of moral panic about a generation turning indifferent towards intimate family ties.

Interestingly, the moral panic about new media and its potential to disturb the apparently cohesive traditional Indian family has an explicit gender dimension. Media has reported instances from the states of Gujarat, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana where village panchayats, caste councils or khappanchayats have banned girls and young women from using mobile phones as a necessary measure to 'save' them from 'going astray' and getting into marital relationships of their choice[20]. One village leader in Gujarat is quoted as having stated: "Let them study, get married, then they can get their own phones. Until then, they can use their fathers' phones at home, if necessary".[21]

There are obvious challenges in current times to the imagination of family as a monolithic institution, a benign space where activities of production, reproduction, nurturance and socialization are converged in non-overlapping and non-hierarchical ways. Changes in a variety of factors in the demographic, psychological, social and economic spheres have made it possible for individuals to engage in these activities independently of the institution of family. Revolutionary developments in media and technology have mediated these changes and modified personal and intra-family interactions. The larger question is whether new media and communication tend to destabilize family ties by widening the gap between generations as feared by some, or they help reconfigure the family space in ways that could be transformative and empowering.

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[20] Cyberbullying typically refers to intentional, targeted and repeated threatening, harassment, humiliation or embarrassment of a child or adolescent by another child or teen for by means of cellular phones or internet technologies such as e-mail, texting, social networking sites, or instant messaging. Cyber harassment and cyber stalking typically refer to the same actions when they involve adults" (Luxton et al., 2012).

[21] Harding, Andrew (2004), 'Japan's Internet Suicide Clubs', http://news.bbc.co.uk/ 2/hi/programmes/newsnight/4071805.stm, 7 December; Samuels, David, 'Let's Die Together: Why is Anonymous Group Suicide So Popular in Japan? *The Atlantic*, May, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/05/let-s-die-together/ 305776/ (both accessed 1 February 2016).

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