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## From Coffee Houses to Chatrooms: Rethinking Public Sphere in a Digital Environment

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### Abstract

The contemporary era of digitalization has marked by significant developments, internet being one of them has revolutionized the entire world, by providing platforms to the citizens for articulation of their opinions and ideas on diverse social and state related issues, hence created a digital public sphere. Consequently, the paper aims to explore the role of digital platforms in efficient functioning of democracy with its potential to address societal issues and state affairs. It further provides a brief analysis of multiple digital public spheres operating in Pakistan by emphasizing upon their effectiveness and ineffectiveness. Since the paper incorporated the review of existing literature, it therefore presents comprehensive understanding of how digital public spheres (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs, online newspapers and etc) operate and influence the political actions of the users, while addressing the societal problems. The paper also explicates the merits and demerits of digital public sphere, alongside offers a comprehensive understanding about the evolution of digital sphere. Lastly, the paper highlights limitations of the digital public sphere and guides the possible future directions on the usage of diverse digital public sphere in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Digital Public Sphere, Development, Platforms, Internet, Pakistan.

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## Introduction

### Hebermas' Traditional Public Sphere

During the medieval era; kings, monarchs, churches, lords and royal families were deemed as ultimate powers and their authority was prevailing over the entire society. The monarchs and feudal lords considered themselves as “state” rather than representatives of their kingdom or state. By the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century, disintegration of feudal lords, kings and churches started as ultimate decision makers concerning state matters, hence the notion of public sphere was introduced. Initially, the idea of public sphere was originated by Jurgeon Habermas who analysed public sphere of Bourgeois (working class of medieval ages) which was believed to be “ideal”. The coffee houses, press and literary societies and salons were the prominent arenas where Bourgeois used to congregate and discuss the issues regarding culture, arts and literature. Afterwards, they started discussing official issues and problems regarding state as well as political matters were also discussed in those public spaces. The emergence of public sphere, the rule of churches and lords came to an end and the masses were given the autonomy and power to initiate discussions on state issues and seek for possible solutions concerning the state matters.

Hebrmas considered the public sphere of Bourgeois to be “ideal”. According to him, public sphere is an imaginary community that functions for common good of the public, however it does not essentially subsist in an identifiable community. Ideally, public sphere is a public oriented arena where the body of private persons, largely belonging from masses congregate for guiding the state affairs, articulating the societal needs with the state (Habermas, 1974). Hebrmas further investigated the importance of public views and opinions in practicing government policies and actions in the Western Europe in his book titled “*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*” which was published in 1962. Additionally, Hebermas also analysed functioning of public sphere, its effectiveness as well as certain limitations in his book and how this concept is influenced with the development and expansion of mass media technologies. He argued that mass media is adversely affecting the effectiveness of public sphere as the power elites are controlling every affair and subject matter in mass media, consequently making it difficult for the masses to raise their voices on certain issues.

Hebermas referred such control of mass media as “**refeudalism**” (Hebermas, 1962). Various scholars have criticized Hebermas’ public sphere for excluding minority groups and women from the public spaces. Although the traditional public sphere of Hebermas was subject to a great deal of criticism, however it still serves as a foundation for operating contemporary digital public spheres (Reinstra & Hook, 2006).

### Digital Public Sphere

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has marked by significant revolutions in the communication technologies that have transformed and modified interactions of people around the globe; internet being one of the remarkable inventions among those revolutions. The evolution and progression of internet over the past few decades are associated with an enormous transformation in the media landscape, as development of internet has revolutionized the world and new media technologies have constantly replaced by traditional media. Unlike traditional media, internet has a unique feature of interactivity, affordability, inexpensiveness and convenient accessibility all around the world; therefore, it allows its potential users to engage themselves in logical deliberations on variety of issues directly confronted by the society members. Furthermore, internet consumers could also access several websites or discussion forums for exchange of opinions, views, ideas rationally and

logically on critical issues and problems pertaining to state policies and political activities. Subsequently, this eminent aspect of internet has altered traditional public sphere into new digital form of public sphere whereby individuals from multiple and diverse social, religious, educational, ethnic backgrounds can engage in consensus-oriented discourses. Thus, the inception of internet developed possibility of decentralization of communication patterns which consequently enhances and boosts the efficiency of digital public sphere.

Digital public sphere is presumed as a communicative arena whereby individuals interact and share various ideas and information regarding subject of their interest; hence such information facilitates users to seek a desirable solution to counter those issues (Benkler, 2006). Moreover, digital public sphere, often referred as “virtual public sphere” is a deliberative space or area where citizens participate to communicate the dissent with a particular political agenda prevailing in a community by articulating their opinions about politics on blogs, commenting on social media websites or groups, tweeting using their twitter accounts, and posting or viewing any content on YouTube (Papacharissi, 2002). Furthermore, virtual or digital sphere is a platform where general public develop opinions, ideas and views, as these opinions are needed for appropriate functioning of democracy as well as for legitimization of control and authority (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). Rationality and logic are the true essence and key requirement for the operation of any public sphere, whether it is traditional or digital sphere. For the digital public sphere to operate effectively, it must be free from the state control, the arguments should be based on logic rather than emotions, and people involved in the public sphere should engage themselves in effective debate and discussion through dialogic communication (Fischer & Jarren, 2024).

Critics view digital public sphere as an unrestricted, open and communicative arena offered by various internet sites from cyberspace to network societies, information and communication technologies (ICTs) to social media sites, micro-blogging to weblogs, which permit the individuals to openly participate in deliberations and discuss the issues or matters of common interests (Wessler, 2008). Apart from these commonalities in goals and interests of individuals, issues discussed in digital spheres vary; some consider societal issues more desirable as they are being confronted directly by the local community such as inflation, poverty, unemployment etc. However, some public spheres consider political institutions and state affairs as obtrusive issues and, in such spheres, the state and political matters take precedence over the local or societal issues. (Ferree et.al., 2002).

Convergence of communication technologies have not only transformed various aspects of society but it has also changed political, economic and social scenarios. Advancement in traditional public sphere to digital public sphere encountered spectacular changes regarding communication among individuals, as coffee houses and salons were replaced by computer-assisted communication. Hence, it is considered inappropriate to make comparison of the public sphere of 21<sup>st</sup> century with the public sphere that existed centuries ago. However, the diverse virtual discursive arena i.e. the public sphere existing today has its deep roots in the Habermas public sphere, which is referred as the “traditional public sphere”. This traditional public sphere still serves to be the foundation of all the public spheres subsisting in the contemporary globalized world.

## **Rationale**

The advancement of digital technologies and globalization has facilitated transnational flow of communication; hence this revolution has enabled critics and researchers of cultural studies to shift their attention from traditional to digital public sphere. Considering this paradigm shift, the current paper examines how public sphere is operating in the digital environment as well as the role of

online deliberations and discursive forums in the contemporary globalized societies and nations. Furthermore, the paper also seeks to determine the potential influence of the digital public sphere, whether it is able to address the societal needs or not. Also, the digital sphere is also analysed in the Pakistani context in order to highlight the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of Pakistan's various digital public spheres. The paper also explores to what extent the multiple opinionated digital spheres are successfully operating in Pakistan and whether these public spheres are able to counter the societal and political problems in Pakistan or not. Besides, the paper aims to determine the obstructions rendering digital sphere as ineffective.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. To compare traditional vs digital public spheres.
2. To examine the role of Pakistan's digital public spheres in addressing the societal and state related issues.
3. To provide future directions regarding the effectiveness/ineffectiveness in the context of Pakistani digital public sphere.

## **Literature Review**

### **Network Society in the Digital Environment**

Due to enhanced and improved digital ICTs, the concept of network society emerged and became prevalent afterwards. Network society includes social networking sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, blogs and other sites employed by individuals for political or social communication. The network society eradicates all hierarchal inequalities and discriminations among individuals and the hierarchal system is substituted strategically by significant "nodes". These nodes are basically individuals in the network who cooperate or indulge themselves in conflict with each other during the deliberations within the network. The network structures of network society traverse all political, social, economic, technological and community issues in the spheres (Van Dijk, 2006). However, the network society is most of the times characterized by individualism rather than collectivism, fragmentation and formation of new enhanced form of mediated society. Additionally, social networking is more prevalent in the nations with higher income or the developed nations where every citizen has accessibility to internet. Whereas, countries with lower income or the developing nations have less frequent access to internet, thus social networking is less prevalent among those nations (Min, 2010).

### **Social Media Public Sphere**

Amongst all new and digital forms of networked public spheres, social media including X, Facebook and blogs serves as ubiquitous digital public spheres. Hence, "twittersphere", "blogosphere" or "infosphere" are the terminologies employed for the characterization of new media public sphere. These ideal social spaces provide opportunity to the amateurs of the community to articulate their opinions publicly regarding political and social change. The SNSs, primarily the Facebook and Twitter are not state controlled public spheres and the individuals in such spheres are allowed to freely generate and exchange their critical ideas and views on certain matters, meanwhile these public spheres are communicative platforms whereby rational and logical consensuses of like-minded public could be developed (Iosifidis, 2011). With the inception of such digital public spheres, public is no more considered a "physical entity", yet it is now characterized by the global interactions whereby physical or geographical boundaries have become insignificant. With this global association, SNSs enabled individuals across the globe to initiate deliberations on problems and issues concerning the public, generate public opinion, and transmit

these opinions and ideas of public to the state officials or authorities. Subsequently, the authorities make certain amendments in their actions and policies and conform themselves according to the public consensus (Shirky, 2011). Additionally, the societies in which democracy prevails, individuals of such democratic society indulge themselves in logical arguments and discussions on various SNSs platforms (Facebook groups, Blogs and Twitter) with moral accountability, however, it is essential for digital public sphere to operate successfully is aligned with states zero intervention which means that there should be no influence or control of state on the public sphere, only then the sphere would be able to have substantial influence on societal and political institutions (Bruns, 2023).

### **Deliberative Democracy and Blogs**

Blogs are the deliberative forums where political as well as non-political issues are subject to discussion. Furthermore, these forums primarily being used for political discussion are characterized by inclusivity and openness providing equal access to all the groups or parties where they can discuss their diverse and innovative ideas without any constriction. These interactive forums have a unique feature of “commenting” which permits the potential user or reader of the blog to give feedback, hence a complex network is being constructed in which diverse and multiple ideas/opinions are propagated, thus linking various blogs of contradictory ideologies with one another which lead to the creation of “blogosphere” i.e. interconnection of blogs. Moreover, this “commenting” aspect in the blogs is efficiently employed to influence the political actions (Drexler et al., 2007).

However, digital divide also affects control and ownership of such virtual public spheres. Digital spheres (including blogs) are mostly controlled and operated by elites or decision makers of the society, with an influence of state policies as well which do not allow members of virtual public sphere to raise their voices on any sensitive issue concerning state matters (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010).

### **Globalization and Transnational Public Sphere**

The phenomenon of globalization has brought a shift in public sphere rendering the access to international blogs, social media sites and communities rapid and easy (Papacharissi, 2002). In short, public spheres have also become globalized and transnational, hence facilitating the individuals from different nations across the globe to collaborate, interact and assemble in the virtual world through various social media sites or international blogs and exchange rational views and arguments on various transcending global and transnational issues that are confronted by the entire world directly or indirectly and they seek the most desirable solutions for those issues (Mpofu et. al., 2022). For instance, “Stop Global Warming” is a Facebook page that was created with the intent to address the prevailing issue of climate change worldwide and its drastic influences on the entire globe. The primary goal of the page is to underline the causes and any news related to global warming as well as to highlight the efforts of numerous NGOs (non-profit organizations) to prevent global warming. The page is essentially a transnational public sphere operating worldwide and allowing the individuals across the borders to congregate and tackle this global issue in an appropriate manner. Moreover, cyberspace is also visualized as the global or transnational public sphere. It is a space formed by computer networks congregating the individuals from the entire world in the virtual environment for deliberations and discussion on multiple issues of global concern (Dahlberg, 2001). Nevertheless, the pitfall of this virtual public sphere across the boundaries is that local community issues are being undermined.

## **Civil society and Digital Public Sphere**

Since the communication landscape is becoming complex, denser and participatory, it is enabling networked community to acquire increased information access, enhanced opportunities for public engagement, and better ability to mobilize a collaborative action. Therefore, potential number of online liberal individualists has increased over time, having access to plethora of information. Such networked community is termed as “civil society” which is comprised of various actors such as social or political activists, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), telecommunication firms, market brokers and various software providers (Shirky, 2011). The civil society serves as the mediator between the state and citizens of the society who is capable of providing a proper channel and structure to the citizens where they can hold debates and discussions on diverse issues and enable them to challenge the existing rules and policies of the state (Castells, 2008). Apart from online forums of deliberations, a vast network of web publishing is also undertaken by several organizations of civil society that facilitates constructive public deliberations. Besides, multiple civil activist groups are operating worldwide that initiate a particular issue of local, national or global concern and then indulge general public in productive debates and deliberations via internet. However, these online discussions and debates could sometimes lead to realistic protests and demonstrations (Scambler & Martin, 2013).

## **Online Newspapers as New Digital Public Spheres**

Besides the social media, blogs and other online forums, online newspapers have also emerged as a new form of digital public sphere which allows the citizens to articulate their views, ideas and opinions via the comment feature. Comment section in the online newspapers has gained recognition among the people, as it is utilized by the online readers for expressing their views as well as for criticising the news being published. The debates being generated in online newspapers contribute to the progress and development of a vivacious virtual public sphere. However, for online newspapers to operate effectively, certain ethical guidelines and principles for participation are established by the newspapers’ editors or policy makers, which guide the criteria of participation in the online newspapers, hence the true essence of participation is lost in online newspapers’ spheres (Zamith & Lewis, 2014).

## **Media as the Digital Public Sphere**

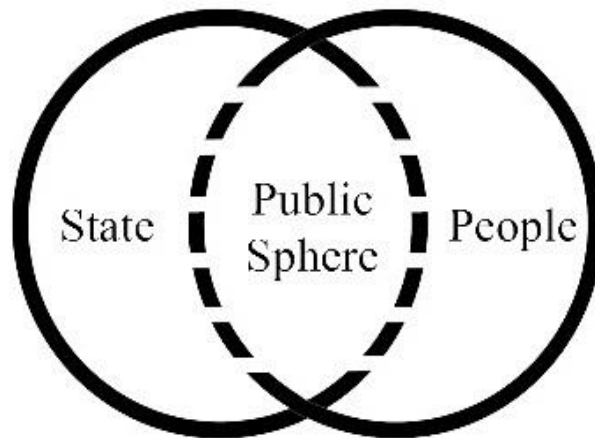
Apart from internet, blogs and social media spheres specifically the global media is also regarded as one of the critical digital public spheres by some scholars and critics in the contemporary industrial society. Mass media are the domains public where general audience can debate on multitude of issues instigated by the media owners or conglomerates (Freidland, 1996). Due to this conglomeration, rationality of arguments is always dubious as the global media commodifies the public sphere by preventing rational deliberations and altering the beliefs and perceptions of individuals according to the set agendas of the conglomerates or power elites. In this way e-media renders the public sphere ineffective by shaping political or social opinions of public. However, other scholars assume mass media as a traditional form of public sphere (Katz & Rice, 2002).

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical basis of public sphere in the digital environment lies in the public sphere theory instigated by Jurgeon Hebermas in 1962. Additionally, social network theory by George Simmell and Emile Durkheim also explicates the functioning of digital public sphere.

## The Public Sphere Model

**Fig.1.** *The Public Sphere Model by Jurgeon Hebermas*



This model was initially presented by Jurgeon Hebermas to explain traditional public sphere. However, this model is still applicable and functional in the digital context as well, since it provides a framework for understanding the effective operation of a digital public sphere. This model is comprised of three basic elements i.e. the people (citizens of state), public sphere and the state. Despite of the geographical limitations, the people or state citizens assemble together in digital arenas or spaces (public sphere) with the purpose to articulate logical views and opinions regarding the public policies or state affairs. Hence, public sphere serves as intermediary between the state/public officials and common citizens of the state (Wessler, 2008).

### **Social Network Theory**

The theoretical foundation of social network theory is positioned in the work of two sociologists Simmell and Durkheim, however, homophily and propinquity are the significant concepts pertinent to the digital public sphere. The notion of propinquity suggests that proximity triggers the interaction among people. i.e. individuals who share the geographical proximity will more frequently interact with one another as compared to those residing at distant locality. Contrarily, the concept of homophily implies that despite of geographical restrictions, individuals having analogous interests or sharing some commonalities in terms of values, beliefs, norms, attitudes etc tend to associate and interact with each other.

The traditional public sphere of Hebermas is determined by both the notions of propinquity as well as homophily, whereas the contemporary digital sphere of globalized era relies on the concept of homophily. The individuals from the entire world, coming from diverse backgrounds, educational experiences and different fields, yet having identical interests and values congregate in the digital environment and openly participate in rational deliberations where they discuss the issues of common interests and seek the most probable solutions regarding societal and state issues (Khan, Gilani & Nawaz, 2012).

### **Research Methodology**

Using literature review methodology, the current study examines the existing research on digital public spheres operating in Pakistan as well as the political, transnational and global public spheres worldwide.

## **Digital Public Sphere in Pakistan**

In the developing countries including Pakistan, equal access to technologies is not guaranteed, thus the citizens of such developing nations are incapable to participate in the practice of political change and state matters; as well as due to inadequate access to internet, these countries are unable to cope up with future mishaps. Moreover, the launching of 3g and 4g technologies as well as various wireless and cheap internet services in Pakistan have transformed the contemporary scenario, hence various digital public spheres are now effectively operating in Pakistan for resolution of societal and state issues. Some of the most significant examples of Pakistan's digital public sphere are mentioned below:

### **Change.org**

Change.org is an online website and public sphere forum operating worldwide whereby several petitions (transnational, national and local) are created and circulated via various social media sites, new media and emails with the intent to support a social cause and to counter the social as well as political issues. On this website, numerous social and political campaigns are initiated, supporters are mobilized and the decision makers are enforced to drive appropriate solution for the prevailing problems or issues. In Pakistan, this website has gained substantial attention of people, thus amateurs of society are actively creating and propagating various petitions to transform the political and social scenario of the country as well as to influence the political decisions and actions. Furthermore, people and civil society organizations (such as NGOs and activists) attempt to resolve the obtrusive societal issues for instance; lots of petitions have been signed on domestic violence, child abuse, women empowerment, issues of transgender community, and other conspicuous issues via this platform. Moreover, change.org exemplifies a virtual public sphere that facilitates the citizens to communicate their ideas, opinions and issues towards the government or public officials, so that these authorities could take suitable actions for countering that prevalent issue. Although, change.org is a pivotal change-oriented platform, however, it does not serve as an arena for debates or deliberations. Therefore, Facebook, Blogs, Twitter and YouTube are the sites for deliberations to discuss multiple issues or concerns related to society or state in Pakistan.

### **Pakistan's Participation in Transnational Public Spheres**

Although Pakistan's local or national public sphere is functioning efficiently, and people are involved in several digital spheres of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter or other local blogs, however contribution of Pakistan in the transnational public sphere is very limited. Despite of availability of internet connection and access to global spheres, still Pakistan and some other Asian countries are unable to link themselves with the transnational spheres operating at global level. One of the core factors affecting the global reach of Asian countries is diaspora. The literal meaning of diaspora is "Commune of Jews" and the term refers to a community or population that is dispersed from its indigenous land or territory. However, this term is employed for Asian countries, which are underprivileged in terms of participation in the transnational digitalized public sphere (Werbner, 2006). Asian countries including Pakistan are always neglected in the global activities as a few underdeveloped areas of these countries are deprived of technological access; hence they could not participate and contribute in the deliberations conducted at transnational level. Moreover, 3g and 4g revolutions have now facilitated the citizens of Pakistan to actively take part in global discursive forums and international affairs.

## **Political Public Spheres in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, Siasat.pk is the trending website and debate forum whereby daily political talk shows are streamed online and shared amongst the audience. Additionally, viral videos of politicians or political parties are also displayed on the official website and there is an article section as well where the individuals could share their opinions in the form of articles. Apart from article section, there is a live discursive political forum as well where individuals congregate and participate in the political affairs by criticizing the corrupt politicians and erroneous political actions. Siasat.pk engages the active community members in productive deliberations on myriad of political issues (Saba & Anwar, 2017). However, this forum is criticized for being biased rather than neutral and it is considered as a pro PTI website. Other than the political websites, Facebook, Twitter and blogs are used for political campaigning and other political activities. There are numerous pages and groups on Facebook supporting different political parties; in addition, Twitter is also used by individuals for political micro-blogging and several political blogs also allow the individuals to express their political opinions. Additionally, the politicians in Pakistan also employ the social media for dissemination of messages towards their supporters. For instance, in 2012 elections, almost all the political parties' representatives used Twitter and Facebook to get their messages across the citizens and their potential supporters (Schoemaker, 2013).

## **Cyber Jihad in Pakistan**

Extremists and liberalists are the two contradictory and rivalry forces prevailing in Pakistan. In the digitalized and virtual environment, both the forces use social media sites to propagate hatred against the other party. For instance, in 2010, a ban was placed on Facebook by High Court for promoting and disseminating blasphemous content. The liberal groups protested against this act, whereas the extremists launched "*MillatFacebook*" against the actual Facebook, hence created their own public sphere. Additionally, the assassination of liberal Governor (Salman Taseer) in the same year generated several public spheres of liberals and extremists on Facebook and Twitter. Liberal groups created several fan pages and demanded justice for Salman Taseer. Contrarily, the extremists used their public spheres to mobilize hatred against the liberals and this movement was "*Cyber Jihad*" against the liberal community according to the extremists (Faizullah, 2016).

## **Digital Public Sphere during 2007 Emergency Situation**

In November 2007, President Musharaf enforced emergency in the country and positioned a ban on traditional media outlets to prevent them for live coverage. At that time, the citizens employed several blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter to elevate their voices against the prevailing situation. The students of LUMS University organized demonstrations and protests by uploading videos on YouTube to approach the mass population of Pakistan. Along with this, the Emergency Times (ET) blog and the Teeth Masetro blog were the prominent functioning blogs at that time, which facilitated the civic engagement of the public, hence the public was able to speak against the authoritarian rule via these platforms. Furthermore, youth also posted numerous statuses and content on Facebook and Twitter to exhibit their dissatisfaction and displeasure with the current emergency enforcement. Consequently, these efforts of general public via digital spheres were fruitful in a way that the dictatorship came to an end and the democratic government took control over the country (Yousaf, Rahman, & Naqvi, 2012).

## **Other Significant Digital Public Spheres in Pakistan**

Apart from the political, transnational and other significant digital spheres, some other pivotal public spheres are operating in Pakistan that are serving the local community and such digital

platforms address those societal issues that are prevalent in our society. For instance, the transgender community is confronting extreme problems in Pakistan such as physical abuse, disrespect and hate speeches against them. Hence numerous NGOs and other organizations are working specifically to address these issues faced by this community. These organizations have created digital public spheres utilizing internet to approach the general public. *Atcept* and *TransAction* are the two community pages created on Facebook that involves the youth of Pakistan, whereby the people assemble and rationally discuss issues as well as raise arguments with the intent to seek a desirable solution to counter extremism and hate against this community as well as to empower them in true sense. Furthermore, various social movements have been launched recently to empower the women of Pakistan. Women were constantly being disregarded in our society; however, they are now playing pre-eminent role in the digital public spheres of Pakistan. Women are not merely the participants of the digital sphere; nevertheless, they are active and determined leaders who are taking initiatives for digital rights of women. For instance, *Bolo Bhi*, *Aunty Pakistan* and *Digital Rights Foundation* are the forums for women digital rights that are active on social media. Additionally, *Girls at Dhabas* is one of the most trending women community group on Facebook and Twitter which is instigated and operated by feminists. *Girls at Dhabas* is actually a movement or campaign to promote equality and egalitarianism in gender rights in the public realm. The hashtag (#GirlsAtDhabas) trend is used on social media by the feminists to draw massive audience attention towards this cause. All these digital spheres for women are visibly demonstrating the true women empowerment. Moreover, there are several marginalised communities in Pakistan who are always excluded from the public sphere and mainstream conversation (Saadia, 2015). Baloch activists' community is the appropriate example in this concern who are not given media coverage and their issues and problems are ignored in the public deliberations as well. However, these activists approached the international media such as *Aljazeera* via internet. They created their own public sphere on Facebook, Twitter and other online forums, hence they raised their voices on those spheres to reach the global media attention and in this way, this marginalized and ignored community gets massive coverage by international as well as national media (Schoemaker, 2013).

### **Discussion**

Due to easy, open and rapid accessibility of internet, digital public sphere is highly appreciated and applauded by scholars and critics of cultural studies. However, few scholars have criticized digital sphere which makes its effectiveness questionable. Considering accessibility of online media, every segment of society cannot have access to internet, as there are certain income, education and social status differences among various segments of the society especially in the developing countries like Pakistan, thus creating a digital divide between the haves and have nots of the society, hence making the usefulness of virtual public sphere uncertain (Dahlberg 2001). Additionally, few scholars argue that public spheres have become transnational due to digitalization and globalization, the international or political issues have taken precedence over the issues confronted directly by the local community such as inflation, poverty, unemployment etc (Schäfer, 2015). As individuals participating in the digital spheres vary in their ethnic identities, cultural and social backgrounds, therefore, spheres are more tribalized rather than globalized due to the reason that people from similar background are more likely to reject their varied and diverse opinions from other groups which might initiate a conflict in such spheres (Pawlik, 1994). Besides, this diversity is also contributing in polarization of debates as the entire community of virtual sphere is fragmented into small, like-minded communities whereby people only discuss issues

within that specific community due to compatibility in their opinions or interests while neglecting the challenging arguments (Susen, 2011).

Even though the social networking sites and various other online deliberative forums have transformed citizens into creators, editors, reporters, and distributors or broadcasters, however, such online debate forums are predominantly controlled by the powerful elites, politicians, government, civil society organizations or agents or the opinion leaders rather than the common citizens (Rheingold, 1993). Furthermore, criticizing the rationality of discourse, some critics emphasised that individuals become emotional and engage themselves in confrontational and offensive debates whenever any sensitive issue is discussed in virtual spaces, consequently the true essence of public sphere is vanished (Tong, 2015). Apart from this, identity issues arise in almost every digital sphere as people participating in the virtual space mostly swap their genders, age or other identities which consequently influence the quality of deliberations in the digital public sphere (Lunat, 2008). Although, women are now acquiring significant positions in the public sphere realm, nevertheless the inclusivity of digital spheres is questionable because minorities are still excluded from every digitalized deliberation due to difference in their practices as well as views and opinions and women are also harassed in the digital spaces which is a serious dilemma of every society (Rendall, 1999).

Lastly, the influence of commercialism could not be overlooked because the content of digital public spheres is now invaded and utilized by the advertisers as a platform for promotion of certain products/services. The placement of advertisements on online sites (including YouTube, Facebook, blogs and other deliberative forums) influence the public opinion by creation or exploitation of news events systematically that grab users' attention, thus the digital arenas have become commercial spaces (Johns, 1997). Subsequently, all these negative aspects render the effective functioning of the public sphere impractical due to lack of solutions for societal and state matters.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, improvements in technologies have facilitated public with innovative means of communication, hence digital public sphere is emerged to facilitates communication across the boundaries which eventually lead towards the emergence of transnational public sphere where people from diverse cultural and social backgrounds interact with one another and engage in deliberations on various global issues, which was not achievable via traditional public sphere (Crack, 2007). This globalized form of public sphere has led to the blurring of boundaries between the private and public spheres; hence both the spheres are now interlinked with one another in one way or the other.

Considering the digital sphere of Pakistan, even though there are several websites and platforms for change, however no significant change has been observed yet, because every issue discussed in Pakistan's digital public sphere fades out after sometime without seeking a desirable solution for that particular issue. Additionally, there is a need to empower the individuals of Pakistan in a true sense by advancing participation in real terms rather than merely giving them feeling of empowerment.

Although digital public sphere is accessible for everyone, however, mere accessibility is not enough to pursue the constructive and logical discussions. For efficient functioning of the digital public sphere, it is indispensable that the latent control of opinion leaders, higher authorities or government officials should be eradicated over the virtual spaces and equal access should be

guaranteed to resolve the societal and state matters in an appreciable manner. Moreover, the ideal digital space has not achieved its maximum potential due to certain physical, cultural, physiological and ecological aspects which serve as the determinants of access to various new technologies.

Despite of the expediency of digital public sphere, it is still a vague and indistinct concept due to certain social conditions existing in the society and intervening in the proper functioning of the public sphere, consequently affecting practical implication of digital public sphere. Contrarily, digital sphere is effectively contributing and reviving the old public sphere rather than merely serving as a replication of traditional public sphere.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

- Although maximum literature is available on the digital public spheres operating in the developed countries; on the contrary, limited researches have been conducted on digital spheres of developing countries. Previous studies concentrated their attention on the transnational online public spheres, while the local or national spheres were overlooked. Therefore, future studies should bridge this gap and conduct researches on local public spheres highlighting the issues of local community.
- There is a lack of research on public sphere functioning in Asia, thus it is essential to understand the digital public spheres of Asian countries specifically Pakistan and more researches need to be conducted on the merits and demerits of virtual public spheres of Pakistan.

As women are excelling in every field and creating various public spheres of their own, therefore the researchers should shift their attention towards the characteristics of women public spheres in Pakistan.

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