APATHETIC 'PUBLIC' TURNS PARTICIPATORY: DYNAMICS & IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Participatory public is an essential condition for the success of a democratic system. The definition and nature of 'public' has remained consistently under transformation from a non-participatory status to an active and participatory one. Owing to various historical developments the Greek participatory public turned into a mere spectator. The lost powers of the 'public' were regained by bourgeois public of private citizens; however citizens again became mere spectators as a result of various developments. The contemporary communication technologies led globalization has offered fresh prospects for the revival of the nature and role of the 'public' in a democratic system. These developments are shaping a 'new public' that is participatory and global in character. This article juxtaposes the findings from various theoretical contributions and traces the rise of the 'new public' and strives to substantiate it with empirical evidence.

Keywords: Public; new public; participation; globalization; communication technologies

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1. Introduction

The notion of the 'public' is directly linked to democratic ideals that require public engagement in public affairs. The word 'public' implies concepts of citizenship, commonality, and such things that are not private, but are common for all (Papacharissi 2002). The Greek 'public' was very participatory that took part directly in the management of political affairs (Opello & Rosow 2004). However, the concept of 'public' went under transformation and during the medieval period the term was attached with the physical being of the monarch. The 'public' was presented before the people who mere watched him/her as a spectator. Rise of the modern state brought many changes across almost all the walks of social, economic and political life, During this period, powers of the monarchical public detached from his/her physical being and flowed in different directions, consequently the nature of power changed (Gordon 2004). In 18th century 'bourgeoisie public' emerged as public of private citizens who were linked together by means of common interest. This public was participatory in nature. It provided a mechanism for legitimizing modern democratic systems by expressing its formal opinion in the shape of public opinion. Nevertheless, it also went under transformation and citizens were relegated to be mere spectator again (Habermas 1989).

However, the communication technology led globalization has provided the citizens an opportunity to be participant in the political process again in a very unique and unprecedented manner (Oblak 2002). At the heart of this process lie information and communication technologies (ICTs). The ICTs not only transformed the conventional 'temporal' and 'spatial' conceptions, but also concepts about publicity, activity and engagement (Crack 2007).

These communication technologies are distinctive in many respects from the technologies of the past. There rapid proliferation and acceptability across the world has changed the meaning of connectivity. These have brought together societies and individuals living far away from one another. Like 'medieval' or 'bourgeois' public, the contemporary era is also reconstituting the 'public' in its own unique way.

2. History of the term 'public'

The term, *public*, generally means what is common to a given social organization that surpasses the private. The *private* is the sphere of "self-defined interests and values", while the public is the realm of the "shared interests and values" (Dewey 1954).

Greeks had a clear division between public and private realms. However, in the private domain of the *oikos*, the Greek head of a family, contested only "necessity". Freedom was to be realized in the realm of public; nevertheless the public domain of free citizens depended on the private self-sufficiency of each as master of a household (Calhoun 1992). The 'public' in other words referred to 'masters', male and of course Greek, and the private realm comprised of slaves, women and children.

In the medieval era, 'publicness' had been considered more of a "status attribute". It was a 'personal' trait of the monarch. In a world dominated by kings, who could say *"L'etat, c'est moi,"* the public of a country had no existence separate from a king and his court. This was the zenith of "representative publicity," and rulership was represented "not for but 'before' the people" (Habermas 1989). Common citizens at times sighted the 'public' standing in the royal balcony of a palace, 'public' being presented before the people, thus citizens were relegated to the status of a mere spectator. They do not have the opportunity to participate in the public affairs.

The feudal political authorities of medieval era collapsed during a long process of schism. Towards the end of 18th century these authorities had disintegrated into private and public components. The position of church as representative of divine authority changed with the 'reformation' as religion became a private subject. However, church succeeded in maintaining its existence as a public body. The related polarization in princely authority resulted in the segregation of public budget from the private family expenses of a prince. The various institutions of public authority, together with bureaucracy, military, and legal institutions, emphasized their autonomy from the privatized realm of the princely court (Habermas 1989)

Lastly, the feudal estates went under transformation as well. The nobility turned into the apparatus of "public authority, parliament and the legal institutions". Whereas those involved in commerce and various professions and had already formed urban corporations and territorial organizations, evolved into a sphere of bourgeois society distinct from state and representing a realm of private autonomy (Khan et al. 2012).

The representative public sphere of medieval era, transformed into that new sphere of "public authority" which surfaced with national and territorial states. Public authority united into a solid opposition for those upon whom it was to be exercised and who at first, felt them to be on the negative side in this context. These were the "private individuals" who had been debarred

from public authority since they occupied no office. "Public" no more referred to the "representative" court of a monarch gifted with authority, but rather it signaled to an institution organized according to capability, it simply referred to a gadget bestowed with a monopoly on the legal application of authority. Private individuals who merged in the state, form the public body, public authority was directed upon them (Habermas 1989).

18th century witnessed the rise of the *"bourgeois public"* that could be comprehended as the sphere of private individuals brought together into a public body. That public body almost instantly claimed the right to use the publicly regulated "intellectual newspapers", in opposition to the public authority itself (Calhoun 1992). These private individuals, in such newspapers, and journals, debated that public authority on the general policies of social interaction in their essentially privatized but still publically related sphere of labor and commodity exchange (Ubayasiri 2006).

Habermas expounds in detail the characteristics of this 'public'. It is described as the "public of private individuals" who connect in deliberation of matters bearing on the authority of state. Contrary to the Greek idea, individuals in this case are understood to be fashioned principally in the private realm, which includes family as well. Besides, the realm of private is comprehended as one of freedom that has to be protected from the encroachments of the state (Calhoun 1992).

The discussion and deliberations of bourgeois public regarding issues of common interests were carried away by press from one part of the state to another and gave birth to public opinion. Civil society steered these debates. Civil society through public opinion brought the state in touch with the needs of the public. This shows that public of the modern era regain its lost status and became participative again.

However, certain developments in the European society brought decline to the bourgeoisie public. These included that the commercialization of the public sphere, and the emergence of cultural industries including commercial advertising and commodification of life that condemned citizens to be mere worker, consumer and investor. As a result of these developments citizens lost their participatory status and became once again spectator and a new phenomenon "expert opinion" began to replace the 'true' public opinion (Habermas 1989).

Mark Poster contends that social relations in contemporary era seem to be short of a basic level of interactive practice which, in the past, was the basic characteristic of democratizing

politics. Places such as the Greek agora, the town hall, the coffee house, the saloon, the tavern, the community Church, the public square, a public park, a barn, a factory lunchroom, a union hall, and even a street corner served as the valuable centers of democratic debates. Many of such spaces do exist today but no more play the role of a center to organize political debate and civic action. He feels that the media like television and other types of electronic communication try serve as alternate for those older spaces of politics but actually they separate citizens from one another (Poster 1995). Sitting before their television sets watching political shows, probably make citizens feel participatory but in reality they have regained the medieval period status of a 'spectator' again.

3. Rise of the 'new public'

As a result of the technological developments in communication, the citizens seem to have acquired novel means to regain their lost status as 'participatory public'. The modern citizens today have access to unprecedented levels of information that they can easily share with anyone located anywhere in the world. They have the means to enter into discussion over issues of their interest (Dahlgren 2005). These modern citizens irrespective of their national identities come into contact with one another through ICTs to form a virtual public body that engages in formal and/or informal debates about issues that are common across globe (Castells 2008). This public body at times manifests itself as a 'physical' public body as well, a new type of affinity binds them together (Hara and Shachaf 2008). Extra-territorial civil society actors steer these debates through various means and try to negotiate with the 'state', centers of global governance and corporations for the interests of the individual.

People are gradually becoming aware that social issues whether far or near are interdependent and intertwined. It is increasingly being recognized that everything affects everything else, such that diverse campaigns do not compete rather they strengthen each other (Taylor, 2002). This refers to a rising progressive global consciousness, which is based on growing awareness of the entirety of human social relations (Shaw, 2000), incremented by the enhanced connectivity of this era (Castells, 2008). This global human consciousness is providing a new affinity to the citizens of different states to be united as a virtual 'public body'. This is a new publicness, woven not around national identities and national concerns but around human consciousness and human desires for peace and prosperity irrespective of territorial confines (Tahranian, 2004). Issues like climate change and epidemic diseases are good examples that link

people living in different parts of the world with one another guided by human consciousness. World Values Survey data also support the assumption that people today feel themselves to be the citizen of the world. This consciousness of world citizenship is prevalent across the world irrespective of existing socio-economic disparities.

Figure 3.1

I see my self as a world citizen
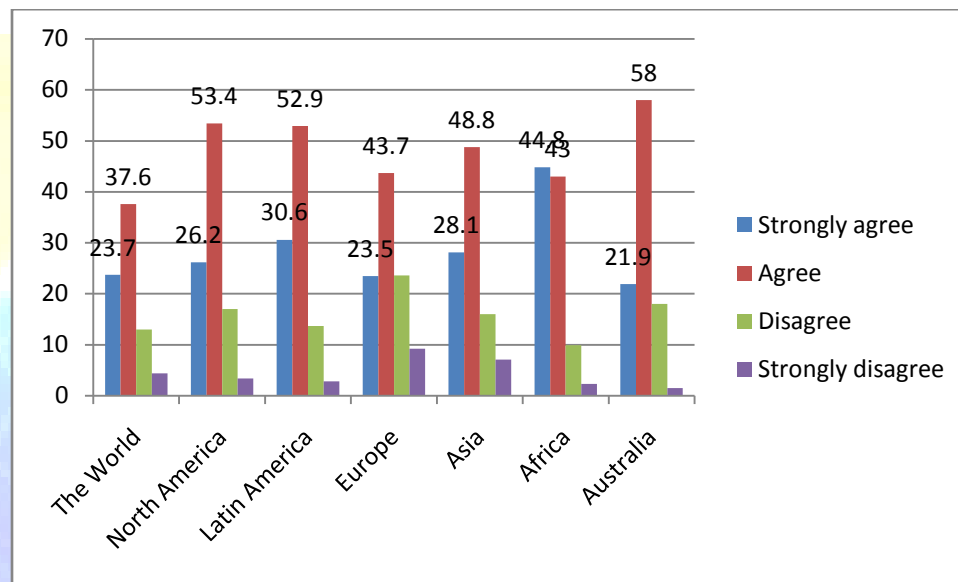
Source: World Value Survey

The question wording were, "People have different views about themselves and how they relate to the world. Using this card, would you tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about how you see yourself? I see myself as a world citizen."

There is a stark distinction between the new 'public' woven around digital gadgets and refeudalized 'public' of the last century. Habermas stipulated the decline in public sphere for the fact that due to mass media and cultural industries the 'public' turned into mere spectators. This is not the case with the digital 'public'. The digital 'public' is or at least theoretically has the opportunities to be active and participative (Dahlberg, 2001).

4. Dynamics

The transition from industrial age to information is underway. As a result we are witnessing changes in almost every walk of life. The major stimulus behind these transformations is globalization. Communication technologies are prominent characteristics of the contemporary wave of globalization. These have not only facilitated state and corporation but have also opened up new avenues for ordinary individuals. These technologies are creating an environment in

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which individual's political, economic and social capabilities get ameliorated due to various factors (Khan, Miankhel & Nawaz, 2013). Following are the two dominant factors that are fostering a participatory public.

i) Globalization

Globalization is a set of ongoing processes, without a beginning or an end, motivated by human instinct for improved style and standard of living, forcing connections among all types of institutions and organizations, resulting in destabilization and integration simultaneously and chronically.

Intensified connectivity and global flows are resulting in a situation where everyone gets sensitized to everyone thing (Chand, 2008). Rising convictions in the entirety of human relations and limits of the planet Earth are making citizens across the world feel themselves as citizens of the globe not of a particular state alone (Khan, Miankhel & Nawaz, 2012). Thus globalization by providing individuals new ethos and new basis to come together as a public body is fostering global human consciousness that links the members of the new public body and provide them a sense of affinity.

The contemporary globalization is characterized by communication technologies that provide the 'new public' the required means to get in touch with the fellow members across the world in no time (Oblak, 2002). The information society and knowledge industries are characterized with the removal of all the temporal and spatial challenges to distanced communication with the help of ICTs. The peculiarity of the technologies of the network society is that they do not just extend conventional communication media; rather these are entirely different in terms of their structure, speed, and scope (Crack, 2007).

ii) Information & Communication Technologies

ICTs refer to those technologies that are meant to process, store and share data in multiple shapes according to the needs of the user. These technologies encompass conventional technologies like television, radio or telephone and the modern technologies like computer, the Internet, cell phone, and a range of other contemporary devices. Inherently, these have socializing impacts of connecting people, groups, or organization (Weigel & Waldburger, 2004).

It is better to comprehend ICT in perspective of shaping a new set of associations and spaces, rather than as a high-tech tool. It is one more global field in which competitions over the distribution of power, resources and information will take place (Dijk, 2006). Just as the

invention of press, triggered a cascades of changes in the then society, in a similar way ICTs are expected to bring vast transformation. As a result of their character, and functions ICTs have profound sociopolitical and economic impacts (McChesney, 1995). Consequently, the interactions among individuals are also increasingly getting multimodal. Individuals carry out their dealings with others face-to-face, through the phone, and also online through modes as varied as e-mail, personal messages, social network relations, instant messaging, comments, collective participation in discussion forums and online games, and by sharing digital images, music, and video clips (Baym, 2009). A brief overview of these technologies will help comprehend the prospects for new public.

iii) Networking

A digital network consists of two or more computers that are connected in order to share resources (like scanners, printers and CDs), exchange data, or facilitate electronic communications. The computers on a network are connected by means of wires, telephone lines, radio waves, satellites, or infrared light rays (Winkelman, 1998). The Internet is the world's largest, most powerful computer network. Networked computers have the potential to expand the scale of the worlds beyond our imagination (Bell, 2008).

There is substantial evidence that virtual networks facilitate diasporic public spheres; support ethnicity by e-mail and uphold the functions of INGOs and social movements. They also offer information, support and facilitate possibilities for companionship for a multitude of people poorly served by the available facilities in the civic spaces where they actually live. In sum, most suitable to the global context, networks can construct social associations without limitations of physical space or presence (Axford, 2004).

iv) The Internet

The Internet is a system of interconnected networks that connects computers around the world via the TCP/IP protocol. It is a network of networks which enable users at any one computer, if they have authorization, to obtain information from any other computer and sometimes talk directly to users at other end (Gordon, 2004).

The Internet is a public, accommodating, and self-sustaining service accessible to hundreds of thousands of people across the world. However, the Internet actually uses, only a segment of the total resources of the modern public telecommunication networks (Dahlberg, 2001). Another significant feature of the Internet is that it integrates various stages of the

communication process, for example storage and sharing of information, interaction, and transformation of the communication channels in an unprecedented manner (Oblak, 2002).

v) Social Softwares

Social-software' facilitates social activities and socializing process beyond the confines of time and space. This results in the establishment of a 'new environment' of global interaction, which has both pros and cons for the community at global level.

The term 'social software' refers to a wide range of diverse technologies, along with the social dimension of these technologies that often rises from an integrated use of various technologies. Generally used social software includes social networking sites (SNS), weblogs, wikis, RSS feeds and social bookmarking (Dalsgaard, 2006). The different types of social media are similar in that they all posses' dense fundamental network structures that supply metadata and environment that can be useful while retrieving information from their content (Finin et al., 2008).

vi) Voice Over Internet Protocols

"Voice-over-internet-protocol" (VoIP) is an Internet facility which is a substitute to telephone calls over "Public Switched Telephone Networks" (PSTNs). The "Electronic Privacy Information Centre" (EPIC) is trying to get it established to facilitate the foundation for a public sphere. VoIP facilitates free or inexpensive phone calls to any part of the world, and also supports conference calls with many people chatting simultaneously on the same 'line'.

vii) Cell Phones

A mobile phone, sometimes also called as a cellular phone, or cell phone, is a communication device that can make and receive telephone calls over a wireless link within a wide geographic area (Tanenbaum, 2002). Contemporary developments in the mobile phones technologies include the improved features of phones to generate and pass on content other than SMS. High standard image and video facilities in the latest generation of mobile phones has paved the way to several new software that enable individuals to publish images, audio, and videos from mobile phones directly to related websites. Bulk SMS can now be easily sent through mobiles (Yadav & Rani, 2011).

Mobile projects offer better opportunities with drastic social impact than other ICT projects. For instance, access to cell phones is clearly much greater in comparison to computers and other less easily available technologies. With swiftly growing cell phone penetration in many

parts of the world and rising mobile network coverage in area, access is bound to increase further. Similarly, mobile projects can be far more inexpensive with only limited skills and training required to employ them (Kinkade & Verclas, 2008).

5. Implications

ICTs have huge potentials for brining different social, political and economic changes. With reference to citizens, ICTs have the potential to empower individual by providing him/her access to significant information, raising awareness and by generating networks of connected citizens across the world. ICTs can transmit the voice of the unfortunate and marginalized to decision makers in order to insist action from their policy makers to generate permanent fundamental change in policies (Kalas & Finlay, 2009).

ICT influences the lives of a rising number of individuals in different ways all over the globe. ICTs have not only been an essential element at the macro-level as in process of globalization, but equally at the micro-level where the enhanced use of mobile phones, for example, transformed daily communication methods universally (Weigel & Waldburger, 2004). Some of the important implications of the ICTs enabled 'new public' are presented here.

i) Participation

The major characteristic of the 'new public' is that it has become participatory again. Anyone with access to information today can be part of the new public body. However the difference is that today people have far more options as compared to bourgeoisie public of 18th century for getting information which enabled them to participate in public deliberations (Papacharissi, 2002).

Participation of the public which is by default global in character can have huge implications for various issues, political systems and institutions as well. Citizens' participation in matters of global common interests can help develop consensus. More importantly such participatory public can be instrumental for the rise of global ethos. Similarly it can pave the way for the reformation or reconstructs of political systems and sociopolitical institutions (Drache, 2008).

ii) The power of information

Access to information is imperative for an active and effective 'public'. The 'new public' is matchless in this regard with its bourgeois or Greek counterparts as it is facilitated by such communication systems that enable greater number of citizens to access unlimited information.

The informed citizens can hold governments and corporations accountable. The role of the Internet is paramount in this respect. One can find millions of web pages on almost every subject over the Internet. Furthermore, it is increasingly becoming user friendly and any one with some fundamental computer skills and access to the Internet, can retrieve information of his/her need from the Internet. By providing citizens information regarding rights, facilities and services, citizens can be empowered and opportunities for debates can be augmented (Weigel & Waldburger, 2004).

Obtaining and diffusing political communication through the Internet is swift, convenient, and cost-effective (Abramson et al., 1988). New technologies are supplying information and apparatus that has raised the position of the public in the socio-political domain (Papacharissi, 2002).

The Internet is facilitating public political action globally (Taylor, 2002). Several recent socio-political mobilizations have been primarily organized through the Internet and mobile interactions in various countries like Philippines, Spain, South Korea, Ukraine, Nepal, Ecuador, and Thailand. These manifest the strengths of information laden public and the new power of social movements (Castells, 2008).

iii) Connected Global citizenry

The 'new public' is more inclusive then any of its historical counterparts for its usage of multidimensional media. The contemporary information society and knowledge industries are characterized with the removal of all the temporal and spatial challenges to distanced communication with the help of ICTs. These have given birth to a globally connected citizenry. The 'new public' is rising out of the information technologies initiating from a 'computer' then linking them into 'Network', which initiated within a building, then extended to cities, states and eventually 'global-networks' emerged with the gadget of 'Internet', a global platform that provide opportunity to every citizen to become a 'global-citizen' (Chan and Lee, 2007).

These information civilization innovations are shaping a new global consciousness, founded on growing "awareness of the world's ecological and economic interdependence, cultural clashes and the need for dialogue and democracy" (Tehranian, 2004). This consciousness provides the basis for the rise of global 'public' joined together as a virtual body by a sense of global affinity which springs out in response to mundane issues of the twenty first century (Grundmann, 2001). This 'affinity' substitutes the 'common' interests which were

defined in the nation-state context that brought private citizens together to form a public body. As the mundane issues today are global in nature, therefore the emergent 'affinity' is equally global. However this affinity would be effective when there would be more and more terms of references (Crack, 2007).

According to a recent survey, email and SNSs like Facebook and Twitter have interconnected most of the world today. Around eighty five percent of the people across the world who are connected to the Internet exchange emails and 62 percent interact through SNSs (Ipsos Global @dvisor, 2012).

iv) Prospects for planetary governance structures

Internet can strengthen democracy by connecting people, with utter disregard to territory, and by fostering public spheres and fresh social movements (Min, 2010). Moreover, the growing incapacity of nation-states to face and deal with the processes of globalization of the problems that are the object of their governance pave the way for ad hoc shapes of global governance (Castells, 2008).

However, such governance structures at global level need legitimacy. Scholars have been debating the various aspects of these global governance structures with reference to legitimate use of power by such institutions (Kean, 2001; Castells, 2008). Rise of the 'new public' has provided an opportunity to provide legitimacy to these new institutions of the twenty first century by making them accountable in the similar fashion as public hold nation-state at the local level. It may be a bit early to make such claim but the available ICTs infrastructure, and the trend of growing global consciousness show that soon the 'new public' will be able to hold global governance structures answerable.

6. Discussions

Prospects for the rise of 'new public' are hotly contested with two sets of assumptions, one being intrinsic to the very nature of ICTs that have the potential for enabling a newer vibrant public and the second being environmental in the shape of the influence of state and market upon this new media.

The pessimists contend that the constraints that prevent the development and inclusivity of cyber public emerge from offline sociopolitical and cultural environments (Dahlberg, 2001). Problems of inclusivity and discursive parity within new public will sustain as long as there are disparities in the distribution of socioeconomic resources, along with disparities in telecom

infrastructures, computer literacy, cultural expectations, leisure and community support (Papacharissi, 2002). They believe that in reality, ICTs increase the disparities between the developing world and the developed world, the rich and poor, whites and blacks, the educated and un/less-educated, thus giving birth to "digital divide" (Min, 2010). However, enough evidence exists that gradually digital divide is ebbing away (ITU, 2013). Integrative capabilities, decreasing costs, and increasingly user friendly nature of the technologies are enabling the ICTs to proliferate horizontally (Khan et al., 2012).

Similarly, some argue that the anonymity of the presenter over ICTs and the debatable tendency towards mass tyranny may apparently weaken the very basis of the new public, and its capability to produce, seemingly positive public opinion (Ubayasiri, 2006). In a positive sense, anonymous communication can be explained as an opportunity for freedom from our bodily selves, with the entire biases that society assigns to our gender, race, class, age, and so forth. However, independent of the restrictions of accountability, cyberspace can be used to abuse and defame others without any concern of redress. It seems challenging to create circumstances for the public utilization of reason with out guarantees for the validity of statements and no/limited means for generating social trust (Crack, 2007). However, keeping in view the rapid innovative developments it is expected that this issue will soon get resolved by the technology itself.

Regarding the environmental concerns some contend that net-based interactions are not entirely free of corporate and state influence (Carey, 1995). The Internet to a certain extent is developed and influenced by commercial interests and online businesses dominate the Internet. The growth of material interests into many areas of cyber life is displacing rational deliberation by instrumental rationality in various online spaces. Many large-scale community websites are mostly corporate owned and profit-oriented. On the one hand they supply free space to virtual communities and on the other, sell space to advertisers that try to attract particular communities of interest. This shows the continuous colonization of online life by corporate interests (Dahlberg, 2001). Similarly, at times states also try to exert their pressure on ICTs by blocking some websites, penalizing individuals for breach of laws on the Internet or by not granting licenses to certain technology companies.

However, it should be kept in mind that cyberspace is a limitless 'space' (McChesney, 1995). Corporations and states may have influence over a portion of this space but it is extremely difficult if not impossible to entirely control this space. It seems unlikely that corporate

initiatives would completely dominate the online politics (Papacharissi, 2002). A huge amount of discourse occurs online relatively free from state and market influence (Dahlgren, 2005).

Moreover, these technologies have inbuilt tendencies for innovation and it can be expected that in future we are going to see such technological advancements that probably can not even be imagined today.

7. Conclusions

It is concluded that a 'new public' is increasingly emerging on the face of the earth. Different terms are being used to explain it. However, it is a fact that today's modern technologies are capable enough to attract apathetic public towards the arena of public matters. They are turning out to be active and participatory again as have been the case with the bourgeois or the Greek public.

However, the new public is different from both the bourgeois and the Greek public. It is far more inclusive than the bourgeois public as ICTs are entirely disrespectful to color, gender, caste and creed. Unlike the Greek public, it comprises of the private citizens of the twenty first century.

ICTs are the life line of the 'new public'. With ever-growing innovations in ICTs, their rising accessibility, affordability, compactness and user-friendliness it is expected that the 'new public' will not only expand in number but its effectiveness will also grow rapidly.

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