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Subaltern Voices in Digital Metanarratives: Power, Surveillance and Silence

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Abstract: *This paper examines how the struggle for voice, truth, and representation is reshaped in the digital age, particularly for subaltern groups marginalized by dominant political, economic, and cultural structures. Using a critical theoretical framework drawing on thinkers such as Spivak, Lyotard, Foucault, Gramsci, and Zuboff, the study analyzes digital platforms as contemporary sites of discourse, surveillance, and power. Through textual and conceptual analysis of theoretical literature and contemporary digital case examples, the paper explores how digital spaces both enable and constrain expression. The findings suggest that while social media platforms appear to democratize voice and visibility, they simultaneously reproduce hegemonic control through surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, and performative activism, resulting in the dilution rather than amplification of subaltern agency. The study concludes that digital platforms function less as sites of genuine emancipation and more as instruments of ideological control that transform dissent into manageable spectacle. Consequently, the paper argues for the necessity of resisting digital dependence and developing alternative, non-platform-based strategies for political organization and subaltern empowerment.*

Keywords: Digital Platforms, Hegemony, Metanarratives, Subalternity, Surveillance Capitalism, Voice and Visibility

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1. Introduction

Having a voice was, is and will always remain a matter of contest and contention. For ages, different sections of society have undergone various struggles, debates, and even wars to secure a platform from which they can voice their opinions and exercise their right to expression. Philosophers, thinkers, and statesmen have long grappled with the question of what grants a person the right to speak and what enables that voice to become the voice of the majority. Some argue that political influence is the determining factor; Marxist thinkers, inspired by Karl Marx, stress the importance of an individual's economic standing; cultural thinkers emphasize the role of civil institutions and hegemonic structures within society. Foucauldian thinkers add the dichotomy of power-knowledge and truth, Gramscian thinkers add the concept of cultural hegemony, and this list of perspectives is endless. These viewpoints often contradict, challenge, and even ridicule one another. However, an underlying concern runs through all these narratives, pointing toward a deeper consensus.

2. Truth, Plurality and Meaning

This concern gives rise to a crucial and persistent question: what is truth, or more precisely, what are truth(s)? The moment we pluralize this term; we open a Pandora's box of uncertainties and possibilities. This concept becomes the cradle of multiple theories that stand in direct opposition to one another, with most claiming to represent the singular and definitive truth. If a single, universally recognized truth were to become the dominant currency of society, it could lead to a homogenized social order, and perhaps even to a homogenized humanity. Yet the very idea that society is pluralistic in nature, composed of individuals who differ from one another and possess independent consciousnesses, challenges such a possibility. This plurality echoes the argument that truth is subjective and individualistic. From a pluralistic angle, meaning does not reside inherently in sounds or words but is produced within society, and society itself is not shaped by a singular opinion. Furthermore, it can be argued that societies possess multiple entry and exit points and that there are societies within societies. These internal formations function independently at times and unite at others, further reinforcing the idea that truth, meaning, and voice are continuously negotiated rather than fixed or absolute.

3. Subalternity and Metanarratives

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In all these theories, references to subverted voices and marginalized sections of society are often described as subaltern. Spivak states, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 287). The term *subaltern* refers to social groups that exist outside the dominant structures of political, economic, and cultural power and are consequently excluded from institutional representation and historical visibility. Such groups may engage in conversation, but these conversations fail to leave a mark on history or achieve the status of socially accepted truths. What causes these narratives to remain below accepted norms is a matter of investigation. The concept of metanarrative is very pertinent here. Lyotard states, "Discourse cites them in the process of expounding for itself what it knows, that is, in the process of self-exposition. True knowledge, in this perspective, is always indirect knowledge; it is composed of reported statements that are incorporated into the metanarrative of a subject that guarantees their legitimacy" (35). Lyotard clearly mentions that legitimacy and its guarantee are provided not through the direct acceptance of something as truth but through indirect processes that lie beyond discourse and visibility. "The relation to knowledge is not articulated in terms of the realization of the life of the spirit or the emancipation of humanity, but in terms of the users of a complex conceptual and material machinery and those who benefit from its performance capabilities. They have at their disposal no metalanguage or metanarrative in which to formulate the final goal and correct use of that machinery" (52).

4. Digital Platforms and the Illusion of Voice

Since ancient times, humanity has sought platforms through which voices could be articulated, heard, and legitimized—apparatuses capable of transforming expression into something grammatically acceptable and socially recognized as a form of currency. However, as Jean-François Lyotard argues, the performative capabilities of most discourses are so severely constrained that the voices of subaltern groups largely fail to register as metanarratives. Consequently, these voices remain suspended in a liminal space—marginal, fragmented, and often unheard—where some ultimately fade into isolation without ever attaining recognition. The advent of digital platforms marked a significant shift in this dynamic. The digital revolution introduced new forms of "digital voices" and provided, albeit often at a cost, the tools necessary for articulation, circulation, and visibility. As a result, multifarious sections of society suddenly gained access to instruments that enabled them to voice their opinions, structure them coherently, and make them publicly audible. These platforms not only facilitated expression but also standardized it—rendering voices grammatically correct, rhetorically persuasive, and socially consumable—thereby reshaping the politics of voice, visibility, and legitimacy in contemporary discourse. It seems like a fair game, more like a viral game. If you can make something viral, touch the chord with your audience, and gain enough subscribers to your voice, you can have a voice that is heard, develop a narrative, and even turn the dynamics of power discourse in your Favor.

5. Surveillance, Algorithms and Hegemony

The promise that "now your voice can have a platform" fuels the social media revolution, yet this metanarrative obscures a troubling reality. Digital platforms, despite their democratic façade, are an integral part of power structures, and "panoptical surveillance" is not far behind but is, in fact, a companion to hegemonic voices, which surveillance scholar Shoshana Zuboff identifies as "surveillance capitalism," where user data becomes a commodity for behavioural modification (Zuboff 8). These spaces are far from neutral; they are continuously monitored by both state and corporate entities. As Evgeny Morozov argues, the internet often serves as a tool for authoritarian control rather than liberation, enabling governments to track dissent efficiently (Morozov 17–18). The voices of marginalized communities, or what Gayatri Spivak terms "subalterns," struggle to gain authentic audiences on these platforms (Spivak 271). Twitter's 2020 Black Lives Matter movement exemplifies this paradox: while hashtags garnered millions of likes, systemic change remained elusive, leading scholars like Zeynep Tufekci to observe that social media creates an illusion of progress while actual revolutionary momentum dissipates (Tufekci 228). These platforms are now tools of hegemonic forces, as users experience temporary contentment through likes and shares, yet the pent-up anger necessary for genuine revolution fizzles

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out in the digital ether, leaving power structures intact while creating the comforting illusion of participatory democracy.

Through multiple channels, bots, and higher agencies, a complex and invisible force employed by power structures now silences subaltern voices at the level of thought itself. The civil apparatus is turned into a circus by the state apparatus, which governs not only bodies and minds but also thought processes.

Hegemony thus finds a new source for fulfilling itself. The suppression of subaltern voices operates through multiple channels—bots, algorithms, and shadowy regulatory agencies—creating what Foucault terms a "capillary" network of power that penetrates every level of social existence (Foucault 27). These invisible forces silence dissenting voices before they can even articulate themselves, operating through what Althusser identifies as both Repressive State Apparatuses and Ideological State Apparatuses working in tandem (Althusser 142–143). Facebook's 2018 algorithm changes, which deprioritized political content, exemplify this pre-emptive silencing, ensuring revolutionary ideas never reach critical mass (Silverman and Alexander). The platform's content moderation policies disproportionately flag and remove posts from Black activists and Palestinian voices, demonstrating how algorithmic governance targets marginalized communities specifically (Noble 1–2).

The civil apparatus has been transformed into what Debord calls "the society of the spectacle," where genuine political engagement is replaced by performative activism (Debord 12). State mechanisms now govern not merely bodies, as Foucault's biopower suggested, but colonize thought processes through what Deleuze terms "societies of control" (Deleuze 3–4). China's social credit system and India's Aadhaar surveillance infrastructure demonstrates this total governance, where self-censorship becomes automatic as citizens internalize surveillance (Botsman). Gramsci's concept of hegemony finds renewed relevance here; digital platforms become the modern apparatus through which dominant ideologies achieve consent without coercion (Gramsci 12). The subaltern's anger is not suppressed violently but channelled into hashtag activism and digital petitions that create the sensation of participation while ensuring no fundamental challenge to power structures materializes. This represents what Marcuse warned against: a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom that prevails in advanced industrial civilization (Marcuse 1).

The situation darkens further in war-torn and occupied territories were superpowers censor platforms entirely, plunging societies into bewilderment. As Morozov observes, authoritarian regimes exploit digital platforms as surveillance tools rather than liberation mechanisms (Morozov 89). This overdependence creates what Tufekci identifies as "networked authoritarianism," where citizens lose alternative channels for mobilizing social consciousness (Tufekci 241). Myanmar's 2021 military coup exemplifies this vulnerability: when the junta shut down internet access, activists who had relied exclusively on Facebook found themselves paralyzed, unable to coordinate resistance (Fink 35). Nepal's Gen Z-led protests in 2025, initially celebrated as social media revolutions, ended in violent crackdowns and mass disappearances after government infiltration of digital networks revealed protesters' identities (Quadir). These movements, appearing spontaneously organic, often bear traces of external agency manipulation, raising questions about authentic grassroots mobilization. The horrifying outcome reveals a bitter irony: the same generation that stood armed with smartphones now vanishes from digital spaces entirely, their accounts suspended or deleted, their voices erased. This digital erasure demonstrates how platforms that promise empowerment become instruments of oppression, leaving populations stripped of both traditional organizing methods and their digital alternatives.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, digital platforms create a mirage of subaltern empowerment while perpetuating hegemonic control. The metanarrative of democratized voice obscures the reality that these spaces remain governed by dominant power structures. Believing these platforms represent organic, neutral spaces capable of creating counter-hegemony for marginalized narratives reflects a dangerous naïveté that all stakeholders must vigilantly guard against. These platforms now mirror universal metanarratives in which superpowers, particularly the United States, operate on principles of digital imperialism—where larger fish systematically absorb smaller ones

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without apology, celebrating this process as restoring national glory. The digital footprints citizens leave become surveillance data, bringing hegemonic sharks to their doorsteps—entities capable of completely erasing identities. As members of civil society and social groups, we must recognize that our existence transcends hashtags, viral campaigns, and verification badges. We cannot place all our organizational capacity in platforms owned and monitored by power structures antithetical to liberation. Diversifying resistance strategies beyond digital dependence becomes not merely prudent but essential for survival.

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