

The digital revolution, especially the rise and pervasiveness of mobiles and smart phones powered by apps, have given new meaning to communication across ethnic and linguistic diversity. Some of the symbols that are used regularly by the masses, provide an insight that symbols are not only the manifestation of acceptance across cultures and languages, but a powerful tool of expression, and for creating narratives.

Let us take an example of the symbol iconised as forward button or share button that is an integral part of several apps like WhatsApp and Facebook. These are the two apps, that are used by over 500 million people across India, with over 200 million from small towns and rural India. A majority of this population would not qualify as literate, in the traditional definition of the term.

This symbol is a tool that empowers one to receive content forwarded and shared, by people I may or may not know. As a normal citizen of this country, I may be one of the million who can't read and write, but I can see a visual and perceive a message, and I can listen and watch an audio or audio-visual content. I am also one who does not know how to produce content. But any content that I receive, I may react or connect to it, and share it with my contact list, friends, and many a times, among groups where I do not know every member.

I don't have the skills or the tools to produce original content or information that I am sharing. However, my desire to share content is based on the fact that I want to impress the people I share this with. So I take pride in assuming that I am the reason or the source of this information, and people who are going to receive it would appreciate that it is me who shared this. The same psyche is going to play on the minds of those who received the information from me. And if they like the information, they would do the same. This means every information receiver becomes a producer by forwarding or sharing the information with others.

Incidentally, the nature of any information is based on its producer and their intent. If the information is based on facts and universal truth, the virality of the forwarded or shared information may end up doing good. But, if the intention of the content is emotive, based on hear-say, and not supported by authentic sources, then it may create a narrative that can impact negatively on society.

Unfortunately, the power of digital symbols is so universal that it enables masses to use it without applying critical thinking. Most of the people who receive information do not know if the information at disposal is authentic or not, they do not feel it necessary to check with the previous source, they do not know the tools to authenticate, they do not envisage the reach of the shared messages and the consequences. For every one of us forwarding or sharing a message is either fun, or pass time, or humour, or based on wanting to be the first one to share among friends and known circles.

It is ironic that while the symbols available to the masses through their digital devices empowers them to consume and produce information without being literate and educated; it challenges the masses that just having a media device is barely an empowering tool, unless the consumers develop critical thinking, and apply it to information being produced, consumed, and shared.

Osama Manzar is founder and director of Digital Empowerment Foundation.

Follow him on [@osamamanzar](https://www.instagram.com/osamamanzar)



House No. 44, 2nd Floor Kalu Sarai, (Near IIT Flyover) New Delhi - 110016

Tel: 91-11-422-33-100 / Fax: 91-11-26532787

Email: def@defindia.net

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