Political Reform by way of Social Media

It is fair to say human social interaction has been around for probably as long as humanity; however, today, the way in which people interact has been transformed by technological invention called The Internet – and specifically social networking. Today, social networks are the most common way people choose to interact with friends, family, colleagues, and even, adversaries. One of the major benefits of social networks is that people can find, locate and communicate with others who closely match their personal and professionals interests. It allows people – even strangers – in distant places with similar interests and values to securely and resourcefully communicate via internet-enabled network. As a result, presently, there are several social networking sites each carved according to particular interests and demographics. Some of these niche-based social networks include: Pinterest, Tumblr and Flickr. However, the most prominent networks appeal to a broader base and are all-encompassing; namely, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn (Kwak, 2010).

While it is true that these social networks are mostly used for entertainment, such as sports and music, some people and governments have found much more meaningful and revolutionary uses for these tools; including; social activism and political campaigning, which are areas I would like to explore in this paper.

In sum, social media is increasingly being utilized throughout the world to achieve desired political and social outcome and in this paper, we will examine the effects of social network on politics and governance. I will then present some critical analysis on the relationship between politics and social networks.

It is believed that the political activities and campaign styles of recent years have been different from past mainly due to social networks (Campbell, 2013). The reason of this change in political campaign is tied directly to popularity of the social networks and their increased availability and usage among ordinary people (Campbell, 2013). Historically, political campaigns revolved around one key political candidate and his/her staff. But with the social network revolution, these tools are used by ordinary citizens (supporters and opponents) to broadcast different activates related to the politician, his/her policy, and the political activities in that particular country or region (Campbell, 2013). Social networks have become the venue where political personals can float their upcoming and recent developments about any campaign, their plans and it is also the forum which could be easily used to detract or fail the campaign of the opponent (Campbell, 2013). Additionally, social networks are widely used to float national and international concerns which can politically affect the population of those countries (Campbell, 2013).

A good example of this is the Egypt revolution against the Housini Mubarak in 2012, who was then president and long-time serving dictator of Egypt. During the country wide freedom movement, there was a study conducted by Eltantawy et al to analyze the role of social media in the revolution of Egypt (Eltantawy et al., 2011). Results of the study showed that social networks played a vital role in the revolution. The results of the study also showed that on social networks the campaign against the government was started as early as 2009 and struck the internal system in 2010; and in 2011, it said to have taken the shape of a revolution. This case study also shows that during the protest, the sharing and discussions on the social networks also caused the protest to grow to the scale we saw at the end.

Another study was conducted in July 2009 to check the political influence of the 41 million people who were on some form of internet-enabled social network. The study found that 85% of all article shares were in one share or form related to news and the political happenings in that country (Kwak et al., 2010). The overall 85% is divided into further categories of entertainment, general knowledge, political, sports, and general news (Kwak et al., 2010). From this analysis, we can conclude how effective the use of social media is in the modern politics. These surveys are helping researchers who have a keen eye on the political happenings and its effects due to the social media campaigns.

One most heroic use of social networks was noticed in presidential elections of United Stated of America in 2012 between President Barak Obama and Mitt Romney. Each day of the campaign was highlighted by the traditional media as well as the social media. Both candidates had a well-funded social media strategy, they used social media to increase awareness of campaign – engaging citizens to take a more active and direct role in their respective campaigns (Foulger, 2012). They were engaged actively and whatever was not covered by the electronic media, they made sure it was distributed via their own social network. They also encouraged voters to support and amplify the campaign through their own networks (Foulger, 2012). Candidates were, in essence, completely “in charge” of their own campaign.

Additionally, there was a poll conducted via social media elections where people could select their favorite presidential candidate. At this poll, Obama leaped over Mitt Romney and become president for the second term on general election day (Foulger, 2012). Results of such online social media surveys are helping analyst make earlier prediction about the winners and which topics swayed more votes. Social media also showed that president Obama had 22.7 million followers and 32.2 million “Likes,” whereas Romney had 1.8 million followers and 12.1 million “Likes” in his pocket (Foulger, 2012). The sheer variance between those numbers reflected poorly on Romney for his inability to capture the hearts and minds of the American people (Foulger, 2012).

Social network has also placed an effective and more serious role in election in Asian countries, particularly in South Asia where there has been a large increase of people using social media for political purposes. The social media impact in this region can be best analyzed by looking at the recent political situation in Pakistan.

In recent years, Pakistan has been a center of geopolitical influence and attention due to its strategic geographical border with the Afghanistan (where NATO forces are undertaking their operations against terrorist), and other regional superpowers like India, Iran and China (Zafar et al, 2013). For the Pakistani people who are caught in the middle of geopolitical strife, the use of social media for political discussion has become very important. This situation has created anger in people which was being expressed in Pakistani social networks. Pakistanis in record numbers shared various content related to the government failures and national issues which were purportedly not being addressed by government China (Zafar et al, 2013). Also these political discussions and content sharing on social networks created tension and anxiety in the people, election 2013 resulted in record number of people appearing in polling day China (Zafar et al, 2013). And for the first time in the history of Pakistan, 80% of all eligible voters casted their vote in the general election. Analysts attribute this outcome to the anger and fervor generated through social media China (Zafar et al, 2013).

Given these examples, we know with certainty media is playing a very strong and important role in everyday life of not just Pakistanis but people around the world. For instance, India, the second most populated country in the world which borders Pakistan, is another country where social media has played a very strong role in changing the political dynamic of the country in a matter of days where it would have normally taken decades if traditional mediums were being utilized. To understand this, we need to look analyze the relationship between politics and social media.

The major benefit for social media is information. An informed citizen can cast an informed vote. Without information, it is impossible to make meaningful decisions. Like Pakistan, citizens need to have knowledge of societal issues, explore alternative option, and truly understand their political system.

Historically, mass media (sometimes referred to as “old/traditional media”) has been the predominant source of political information for citizens of a democratic society. Ideally, this media would fulfil their political role by: ‘disseminating the full range of political opinions, enabling the public to make political choices and enter the national life’ Mark Wheeler, Politics and the Mass Media (Qualman, 2013). It would behave as the “fourth estate and public sphere,” acting as an “impartial, object, and independent broker of information,” and it would do so with absolute independence, free of political bias, or financial special interests (Qualman, 2013). This task involved agenda setting and providing a wide range of information, interpretation and commentary to people in select regions (Qualman, 2013). However, with the advancement of “new media” such as social media and the internet, all of the barriers limiting “old media” from making an impact on social and political changes have been lifted. And analysts have for a long time studied the “the democratization potential of the internet” as a result of removing those barriers (Qualman, 2013). New media gives journalist – and anyone else - unmediated access to wide range of information, two-way communication channel, distribution channel for wide variety of content, low barriers to entry for access and production, and most notably, global reach (Qualman, 2013)..

The most notable component of global reach is participation. New media has created a “participatory culture” in which private persons (the public) do not merely act as consumers but also contributors or producers (Qualman, 2013). In a participatory culture, there are very low barriers for engagement, stronger support for sharing creation with others; and relationships are much more informal and comfortable, and each member of the community feels their contributions matter and are valued by others (Qualman, 2013).. In other words, it is unlike the old platform where it was much more linear, bureaucratic and prescriptive. New media gives users access to means of production. They have the ability to circulate ideas and content in real-time. Additionally, they are not bound by the difficult of having to control the flow of information (Qualman, 2013).. It also removes pragmatic need for agenda setting and breaks down barrier between the producers (journalists, bloggers) and consumer (readers, commenters). There is also diversification of public sphere, increased internal and external plurality of contributors, and anonymity can remove social stereotypes and hierarchy, even political convictions in places where freedom is restricted (Qualman, 2013).

However, we can’t rush to call this drastic shift in the way we cross-examine and elect our leaders “digital utopia” just yet, is not without its problems. It actually poses certain challenges which are worthy of examining, namely: information overload; quality issues that usually arise with online posts and discussions (Qualman, 2013); (e.g., is the person credible to speak about the topic? Writing etiquette issues, etc.) There’s also a bit of fragmentation of the public sphere, (the public can get split into different mediums, such as Twitter, Facebook, WordPress). With anonymity comes lack of accountability. The concept is also dependent on provision of “Equal Access” and assumes the users and their contribution is autonomous and independent (Qualman, 2013), but the reality is, some bloggers and websites are funded by special interest groups in politics and finance. In certain less democratic countries, there is also the issue of internet censorship (Qualman, 2013). While it is impossible to combat and mitigate all of these issues and limitations, they do need to be realized.

In conclusion, as Richard Allen, Facebook’s Director of Policy, articulated, the dawn of the digital election is in fact “a transformative moment for democracy…” (“General Election 2010”, 2010), and allowing people to cross-examine their leaders, candidates and political issues on viral, collaborative national stage puts “voters’ firmly in charge” …” (“General Election 2010”, 2010). Like Allen, I also truly believe it marks a “decisive shift away from the constraints of top-down traditional media.”

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