

Social Media Perception in Pakistan

Syed Shoab Ahmed

Lecturer, Department of Public administration, University of Karachi

Dr.Saima Akhter (Co-author)

Assistant Professor.Dept of Public Administration, University of Karachi

Executive summary

This article explores social media in Pakistan. It highlights various ways in which Pakistan's social media can be described as a communication tools.This article also discusses that why social media can not bring presently a big change in Pakistani society. One reason is that Pakistan's traditional media already serving this role.It has become known that there are various risks posed by social media that affect Pakistani society include ideological division and becoming a safe abode for extremist online communication network. Secondly, absence of regulations are producing unethical contents.However, West can play an important role in reducing these risks by sponsoring projects that produce guidelines for fitness of contents and the promotion of tolerance for online communication. Also, Donors can provide assistance for technical capacity by means of funding for broadband expansion and research on social media.

Background

The social media is getting firm footing in Pakistani society.Over the period from late 2010 to 2012 number of face book users increased in millions according to Internet traffic monitoring data.Number of Pakistani are also increasing on Twitter. According to Foreign Policy 2012, in the list of hundred most following twitter accounts , the account of Mr.Hussain Haqqain, Journalist omar Waraich and the government adviser Musharraf Zaidi are also included.There is tremendously increase in the numbers of internet users by millions since 2009 (Foreign Policy,2012) .Micro-blogging platform, twitter, face book and other social media resources are related to mass movement of change in the world, it is now wondered whether social media can also set off change in Pakistani society.

This article views the social media role in Pakistani society.It is assumed that the social media is a healthy platform for communication, but not medium for change.It determines how social media is serving as means of communication and describes what restricts its ability to bring change. This article also determines the risks posed by social media and explains how Pakistan and West can reduce these risks.

A very basic theme of this article is that social media resources are beneficial for Pakistani society, while the internet has some amount of risks from providing online communication platform for extremism and bring excuses for the government for censorship.Despite all the potential threats, the social media profoundly beneficial for Pakistani society such as; by providing access to information, it supports the democracy and create awareness among masses. By virtue of these reasons, it argues that social media related projects in Pakistan make for good investment through international funding resources.

Communication tool

Social media identifies as a communication tool in various ways.Firstly, it often breaks the stories that traditional media unwilling or unable to cover for example, in 2011 Pakistan paramilitary forces shot an unarmed man , begging for his life in park in Karachi.That brutal act was saved on camera and uploaded on social media for giving out information.Recently, derogatory remarks by a renowned politician against a community on traditional media took a new dimension through the power of social media (Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2011).

Secondly, social media is also serving as a platform for diffusing information about protests, campaign and other social movements .A noteworthy example occurred recently when cricketer-turned-politician staged a sit-in in the capital city of Pakistan (<http://socialmedia.pk/tag/imran-khan>) .Thirdly, social media role as humanitarian relief effort can not be neglected.It gets the world out about the charitable activities and emergency relief needs in case of any disaster faced by the country.There was a obvious display in the times of unabated flooding that devastated Pakistan in 2010.It was very obvious that government relief activities and international donations were not sufficient for dealing in that precarious situation; the common citizen of the country made appeals through face book and small blogs on social media for contribution of the community and also pointed out where the needs were greater through the web support on social media platform (<http://blogs.state.gov/stories/2010/08/06>).

Finally, Pakistan social media also stimulates political communication.A large number of Pakistani having different political ideology have joined twitter and share their views by throwing tweets on momentary bases.

Restriction on bringing change

Despite the role of social media in dissemination of information, mobilising, and politicking, Pakistani social media users have not been able to bring a tremendous change. A major reason why Pakistani social media did not work as a change agent is its minimum penetrating rate in Pakistani society. According to the study, the number of Pakistanis using social media remains a very thin ratio despite recent increase in users of social media, since internet connectivity rate is very low. Currently estimated figure is 11 to 17% of the total population in urban-based areas (www.audiencescapes.org). However, Pakistan's internet penetration exceeds its South Asian neighbouring countries, yet it is well behind those of Arab nations such as Tunisia (36%) and Egypt (26%). It is also wondered that only about six million Pakistanis are estimated to be on Facebook and only two million on Twitter (Michaelsen, 2011).

The Western role

The role of the West can be of great importance in Pakistani society. The international community, especially the West, can provide assistance to Pakistan in lowering down the risks posed by its social media. Donors can sponsor Pakistani society to focus on formulating guidelines for appropriate social media contents, keeping in view the proper balance between freedom of expressions and sense of responsibility. The West can host interethnic conferences through Skype and other social media resources with specific emphasis on positive online communication that may not diversify in the society.

The West can also help in carrying out research activities on social media. International donors can also provide important scholarship in Pakistan by funding the same research undertaken by Pakistani organizations and researchers.

Conclusion

Social media is an important forum for online communication in Pakistan. It is serving as an information source, a tool of humanitarian efforts, mobiliser of protests, advocate for social cause and facilitator for political discussion, but we can avoid the realities that due to media environment and limited penetration, it can not act as a change-agent.

But it does not mean that the situation will remain the same in forthcoming years. Pakistan's social media is getting enormous importance and recognition as a catalyst for change, since the number of social media users are continuously rising. It is observed by the researchers that the ability of social media for establishing public exchanges on marginal issues and promotion in such exchanges can be regarded as "first step towards change" (Ibid).

Reference

- 1) Haider Warraich, "Pakistan's social media landscape", Foreign Policy (AfPak Channel), March 18th 2011, <http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com>.
- 2) Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2011, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08748.pdf>.
- 3) <http://socialmedia.pk/tag/imran-khan>.
- 4) <http://blogs.state.gov/stories/2010/08/06/social-media-connects-pakistanis-us-flood-relief-efforts>.
- 5) AudienceScapes, "The Internet in Pakistan", Intermedia Knowledge Center, n.d., <http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles-pakistan-country-overview-internet-research-statistics>.
- 6) Michaelsen, "New media vs. old politics", 2011; Express Tribune, "Over 6 million Pakistanis on Facebook!" 2012.
- 7) Ibid.