Twitter Diffusion in the Political Communication of Pakistan

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Abstract

This study investigated the adaptation of political communication process in Pakistan using new communication and organizational paradigm originating in the evolution of the Internet and online social networks. This is the quantitative study in which survey method is used to analyze the twitter trends in political communication process of Pakistan. The study results have proved the continuous increase in the twitter users in Pakistan in last five years. Moreover, the study shows the twitter usage for political information and opinion building purposes by Pakistani citizens. The data verify the research question that twitter has become an important tool in political communication of Pakistan.

Key words: internet, Twitter, Political Communication, opinion building

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Introduction

For governments, politicians and people in power, having a strong mode of communication with the general public has been of utmost importance. In the ancient times, this might have happened through messengers who would go to public places and would announce messages from the people who were in authority. From interpersonal communication the process progressed to machine assisted-interpersonal communication (like telephone) and later to mass communication (Newspapers, Radio & TV). ¹ But, the advent of Internet has taken the level of human interaction to a whole new level. With the invention of radio, the concept of all powerful effects of media emerged and propelled by magic bullet theory. Later on, television altered the consumption patterns and now internet has changed the scene altogether. The invention of Internet has erased the boundaries and has made the world into Marshall McLuhan coined term 'global village' where all means of communication have been altered.

The fast growing trend of using internet - the Digital Media - for communication is not only restricted to personal interaction but political communication as well; it was due to the Social Networking Sites (SNS) that gave a new dimension to the course of communication and made it easier, broader and instantaneous, especially, for general public use. The SNS or Social Media is basically a platform which allows different identities to communicate their thoughts with others. These can be websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.² In today’s world the social networking sites are a great source of social interaction, information and entertainment. Moreover, its utilization for political purposes is deviation from its term “social” but is reality now. This study particularly aims to explore the significance of twitter in political communication process in Pakistan.

According to the recent stats of the year, Internet penetration in Pakistan is 17.8%, whereas total number of Internet users is around 30 million.³ Before the internet facility, like rest of the world, the political leaders of Pakistan also used to communicate only through traditional forms of media but now

the services of Social Networking sites such as – Facebook, Twitter, and Google – have become common elements of political communication in Pakistan.

Nowadays, social media is playing a very vital role in political communication to achieve success in election with good effective online communication, mobilization campaigns and also help to influence institutional decision and build consensus for proposed action. As the public engagement and open interaction through social media are the new trends in modern governments across the world, similarly social media in Pakistan has also been gaining vast popularity among the masses.4

Rationale & Significance:

Media has always played a significant role in the process of political communication. However, the mode of communication and media has changed impressively with time because of emerging science and technology – printing press to television and radio and now internet. Today the social networking sites (SNS), significantly, twitter is playing a vital role in diffusion of the political information about the policies and campaigns of political parties and even about politicians themselves.5 The significance of this study is to explore the trends of twitter diffusion in political communication process of Pakistan which, in form of research, is rarely available. This study is important for the political actors and media to know the significance of twitter in Pakistan in context of politics.

Methodology of the study:

This study has used quantitative method of research to explore the twitter utilization trends in Pakistan. Purposive sampling is the suitable sampling technique for this research study firstly because the scope of the study is limited. Secondly, the requirement of this study is to purposefully record only those conversations which fulfills the criteria of this study i.e. participants having experience of political communication through ‘Twitter’. In this regard through purposeful random sampling survey is done.

With the purpose of studying the citizens’ utilization of twitter for political information purposes the survey questions are solved from the hundred sample size. The hundred people were randomly selected from the list of twitter users.

Interviews from different media experts and observations are secondary data collection tool. The proper record was kept by the researcher of the trends on Twitter particularly related to the activities of the Pakistani politicians, their narratives and counter narratives in frequent tweets, their statements and comments related to political scenarios, their number of followers, number of retweets and replies on their official accounts. The secondary data is used to better analyze the survey data and to make study discussion and conclusion. The data is used to answer the following research Question:

RQ: Is Twitter being diffused in Political Communication of Pakistan?

Political Communication and Diffusion of Social Media

Denton and Woodward describes Political communication process as:

Pure discussion about the allocation of public resources (revenues), official authority (who is given the power to make legal, legislative and executive decision), and official sanctions (what the state rewards or punishes).

Doris Graber an American writer also adds in definition the political language – the body language and political acts (boycotts, protests etc.)

Denton and Woodward gives another definition of political communication as:

The crucial factor that makes communication ‘political’ is not the source of a message [or, we might add, referring back to their earlier emphasis on ‘public discussion, its form], but its content and purpose.

‘Purposefulness’, means the communication is considered as political by its purpose or intentions, therefore Brian McNair precise the definition of political as

1. Any sort of communication by politicians or political actors for certain objectives
2. Non-politicians and Voters communication with political actors
3. Communication about the political actors or their activities in any journalistic form
Communication include any form – verbal, written, symbols, images, gestures, body language, attire, hair style, make up etc. through which political image is developed or any message is conveyed.\(^6\)

The process of Political Communication revolve around three elements:

\[
\text{Elements of Political Communication}
\]
\[
\text{Political Organizations} \quad \text{Audience} \quad \text{Media}
\]

The old ways of political communication were particularly not difficult to use, to understand a speech at a campaign rally one need only open eyes and ears to the message being amplified over a public address system. A newspaper or campaign flyer is enormously easy to use, and a radio is not so difficult to tune in. There’s nothing difficult about hitting a button on a TV remote control, either. But none of these technologies come close in terms of ease of use to the internet.

The Internet has no single “inventor.” Instead, it has evolved over time. The Internet got its start in the United States as a government weapon in the Cold War. For years, scientists and researchers used it to communicate and share data with one another.

Today, Internet has become an essential element in daily life where almost one-third of the world’s 6.8 billion people use the Internet regularly.\(^7\) The Internet industry in Pakistan made its stepping stone, when the first dial up E-mail service was introduced in the country by Imran-Net in 1992-93. Serious support was accorded to Email services in Pakistan with the launch

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of a UNDP funded project called SDNPK - Sustainable Development Networking Program in Islamabad in 1993.8

The uses of Internet are countless; business use the Internet to retain customers, and introduce new products, Internet is a powerful advertising and marketing tool, other uses for the Internet include browsing, data sharing, shopping, banking, education, real time updates and so on. However, the most common and substantial use of Internet is ‘Communication & Socialization’ and the arrival of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in the world of Internet made the job more interesting for the users.9

The name of a social networking site which is known to be a milestone in the Internet world is ‘Facebook’. Launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook has now 1.44 billion monthly active users by 2015. Facebook provides people with the ability to share their thoughts, pictures, videos and ideas with friends and family across the world. It is easy to access, ubiquitous and offers an instantaneous way for people or groups to connect with others.10

Globally, one of the enormous hubs of political communication is Twitter - a micro-blogging website, launched in 2006 by Jacky Dorsey and since then its popularity has only increased. When a message is posted on Twitter, it is termed as a ‘tweet’ which must be restricted to not more than 140 characters. Once a tweet is sent, almost immediately, it is visible in the news feeds of all of the sender’s followers. Further, existing tweets can be re-broadcast or re-shared (retweeted) by Twitter users.

The information-sharing potential of the Twitter has made a strong impact in the recent years. News channels are no longer the only source for news bulletins. Increasingly, ordinary users are posting them on Twitter first. Hence currently, traditional news sources are frequently turning to Twitter, to identify critical events that should be covered, and as a valuable

resource for updates on newsworthy issues. People and organizations have now started tweeting formal notification and announcement on Twitter.\(^{11}\) It’s not surprising at all that how modern political activities have become more and more committed to reaching voters via digital means. Whether advertising on search engines and social media, reaching out to email lists with millions of subscribers, analyzing data for trends and voting intentions, or asking for political donations, the Social Media is often where modern political campaigning lives and dies.\(^{12}\)

As per a report (Martin, 2011) in Pakistan more than three million citizen-journalists freely write virtually. The growth of users of Twitter and Facebook in Pakistan is one of the fastest in the world, with over four million Facebook users. In Pakistan the per capita internet access is between 10-15 per cent of the total population that is more than double that of India. Using even the most conservative estimates, 20 million Pakistanis are regularly online, or the equivalent of the population of four Singapore.\(^{13}\)

The international norm of politicians to follow the trend of using Twitter and to express political motives and ideologies through tweets has become very common. The rapid-growing norm of such usage of Twitter is changing the dynamics of international and national politics. Due to this remarkable significance, Pakistani politicians are also briskly adopting the platform of Twitter and have been using Twitter very formally to convey their messages, narratives, announcements and strategies to the audience, fellow politicians and media organizations.

Internet enabled politicians to communicate instantaneously to a wider audience through Social Networking Sites (SNS) in a way that now the online political communication has become an integral part of all the leading political parties in Pakistan and worldwide.

Due to the encroachment of the Internet mass media television, radio and newspaper losing viewers and readers, the online news and information on the internet started appealing audience. People get political material from government websites, blog and different source of websites. Digital media is


\(^{12}\) Op.Cit Pavlik & McIntosh. P.30

becoming dominant as print media changed into online media newspaper that has taken a new shape, as we call it e-paper. The interference of media audiences is possible now in political stories with effectiveness. This was unthinkable ten or twenty years before.\textsuperscript{14}

It is understood that the digital media is the key factor in modern politics, it can help to develop the strategies by helping data collection, raising fund, gathering volunteers, and can also monitor the opposition approach and audience interest. It can also help supporter to run the campaign for candidates and shared histories to bust up the audience.\textsuperscript{15}

Social media played a major role in the 2012 U.S. presidential election with Facebook citing nine million of its users voting in the November election. Moreover, Facebook and Twitter have been used to mobilize individuals to participate in protests around the globe such as the London youth riots in the summer of 2011 and the 2009 Iranian protest against the reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and most especially those in the Middle East collectively referred to as the Arab Spring.\textsuperscript{16}

Large no of politician and political organizations use Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. Online political communication can play a vital role in building a wide base of followers and strengthening the candidate’s image, making it easier to achieve other goal. It is studied that social media can help greatly to achieve the success in election with good effective online communication, mobilize campaigns and also help to influence institutional decision and build consensus for proposed action.\textsuperscript{17}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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For the purpose of this study to analyze trends of diffusion of twitter in context of political communication in Pakistan the following results have been achieved in result of the survey.

**Results & Graphical Representation**

**Figure: 1.1**

For how long you have been using twitter?

- 1 or less year: 40%
- 1-3 years: 32%
- 3-5 years: 22%
- 5 & More: 6%

**Figure: 1.2**

How frequently do you use twitter?

- weekly: 38%
- daily: 52%
- rarely in a week: 10%
Do you know the use of hashtag (#) on twitter?

- Yes: 84%
- No: 16%

Figure: 1.3

Do you follow politicians on twitter?

- Regularly: 24%
- Often: 44%
- Rarely: 32%

Figure: 1.4
Which politician do you follow most?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bilawal Bhutto</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariam Nawaz</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imran Khan</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure: 1.5

For political updates which medium do you feel most accessible and easy?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure: 1.6
Which medium for news is more credible and reliable?

- Newspaper: 22%
- TV: 46%
- Twitter: 32%

Figure: 1.7

Do you retweet the tweets of politicians and journalists?

- Yes: 62%
- No: 38%

Figure: 1.8
Discussion & Analysis

The analysis of survey data shows that forty percent of twitter users have not been using twitter for more than one year, however thirty percent are in the period of three years. This shows that the use of twitter in Pakistan is not new, however, it is continuously on increase in last ten years.

Figure 1.2 shows twitter as a popular medium and activity among the users. More than half of the twitter users found interested in following politicians.
Twitter is called as social networking site but is found popular for political communication process among the users.

Imran Khan, the Chairman of the Pakistan’s political party Tehreek-e-Insaf, is found most popular among the twitter users in Pakistan. This result verifies the statement of Wasif Shakil, former Senior Social Media Content Developer of GEO TV, “Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf is credited for introducing the use of social media in Pakistani politics in 2013. Since then, major parties have formally embraced the social media, particularly Twitter, and been very active on it. PTI, PML-N, PPP, MQM and Jamat-e-Islami all have specialized cells for the purpose.” Shakil, also told: “Social media, particularly Twitter has helped politicians and political parties in spreading their message successfully. They can share their opinion at their convenience and without any hassle of organizing pressers.”

The survey results show television still as the most popular medium for political updates in Pakistan. But with very less dominancy over twitter i.e of two percent. This finding at one hand shows the decline of print media among citizens of Pakistan for political information, on the other hand the rise in popularity of twitter. However, a large no. of users still feel traditional media as the reliable source for political updates. But twitter is not considered as unreliable, a significant number of thirty two percent consider it a reliable source (Figure 1.7).

Sixty two percent of the twitter users found used to of retweeting the political actors tweet. This shows the utilization of twitter as means of political communication process. (Figure 1.8). The figure 1.9 shows popularity of Hamid Mir, Mubahir Luqman and Wasim Badami journalists among the users. This is the result of twitter political context utilization.

Sixty four percent users told that their political opinions do based on the information and opinion they get from the twitter accounts. This shows the twitter role in political agenda setting process.

Kamal Siddiqui, Director of Center for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ) IBA said, “Many Pakistani politicians use the platform of Twitter effectively. It helps in terms of reach and also when the message has to be given in a short period of time”.
Another communication specialist from ISPR (Inter Service Public Relation) G-II Major Qaiser Khan of Cyber Division told “Spreading messages through social media is extremely valuable, because, the things we see on Facebook and Twitter can make a big difference in our opinions.”

Conclusion:

This study discussion and data analysis verifies the importance of twitter in Pakistan political communication process today. The number of twitter users is increasing day by day with having significant political interest for information and opinion building. The study has resulted in affirmative for the research question. Twitter is being diffused in the political communication process in Pakistan. The study predict a positive future of twitter to perform the function of surveillance, interpretation, agenda building and public opinion formation.
References


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