

Effects of New Media Technologies on Political Communication

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Abstract

Today we are living in the age of web where world is moving on the tips of our fingers. The New Media Technologies have changed the world drastically. Even the traditional print and electronic media have been influenced significantly by the new media technologies. The growing radius of new media can be seen in the developed as well as developing countries. The revolution of new media technology has changed the pattern of political communication. This paper particularly elaborates the influence of new media technology on political communication. The paper demonstrates the extensive use of internet and mobile phones in the election campaigns in some of the developed and developing countries and its effects on political behavior. The paper also suggests some new horizons of political communication through new media technology especially in the developing countries. Effect of new media technologies on political behavior and voting pattern is the focal point of this paper.

Key Words: New media, political communication, digital media, election campaigns, campaign

Our lives are being heavily influenced by the TV News channels running their broadcasts round the clock. The influence of new media technology is a matter of great concern for media scholars and the society at large. The advancement of new media technologies in the new horizons of the 21st century is an important issue of concern for the modern societies. The world has become Global Village due to the rapid and fast growth of new media. People sitting in different parts of the world are closely in touch with each other through their mobile phones and internet. The new media has not only strengthened the traditional print and electronic media but it has had a great impact on the lives of the common people in different parts of the world. In addition to other spheres of media influences, the new media technology has put a great influence on political communication.

Political Communication is one of the most important areas of Journalism and Mass Communication. Political Communication includes the use of media by the governments and political parties to obtain public support whether in the election times or other than the election times. The subject of

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Political communication has its roots in the fields of Political Science and Mass Communication and both of these fields are closely interlinked. The different dimensions of political communication include the analysis of the media messages and also the political statements of the leaders of the political parties of the country as well as the prominent world leaders belonging to different countries. There are different patterns of political communication in different parts of the world depending upon their own socio-cultural and economic situations. But one thing is very much clear that democratic societies, whether developed or developing, depend greatly on political communication.

Different scholars and experts defined political communication in different ways. For example, Robert E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward describe political communication in the form of intentions of its senders to influence the political environment. In their words "the crucial factor that makes communication 'political' is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose"¹. Brian McNair provides a similar definition by saying that political communication is "purposeful communication about politics"². This means that this not only covers verbal or written statements, but also visual representations such as dress, make-up, hairstyle or logo design. In other words, it also includes all those aspects that develop a "political identity" or "image".

Today, we are living in digital world where new media technology has changed the world. We all have been heavily influenced by new media technology. We all use internet for information and connection purposes. The advent of internet has drastically changed our life styles. Web sites like twitter and You Tube are playing a big role for global connections between individuals and communities. We can upload our pictures and videos on different websites and share them with others. Even use of mobile phone has become very much popular in our lives. Facebook is one of the most important platforms for social interact between people worldwide. The geographical distances are being replaced with social interactions. This is all because of the revolution of new technology where almost all kinds of people can equally be a part of the global communication. The use of new media technologies has not only influenced the individuals and communities in the developed countries but also the people of developing countries and the countries in transition period have become part of the global community by using new media technologies, especially internet and mobile phones.

Just like a number of other spheres of our lifestyle, the new media technologies have greatly influenced political communication especially in election times. The election campaign of the American President Barrack Obama was mostly based upon the use of new media technology. It was designed in such a way that maximum possible benefits were obtained

through use of new media. The unrest created by fighting between political parties' workers during the elections in Kenya in December 2007 was also result of new media technology. A huge number of websites and blogs appeared after election stating the incidents of violence in Kenya. During the election campaigns held in a number of developed as well as developing countries during the last five years, the intensive use of new media technologies was made by the political parties of these countries to get the best results in the election. These countries include Germany, Iran Pakistan, Afghanistan and Ghana. In these countries the election campaigns were heavily dependent on the new media and the politicians, government officials and the international agencies, all of them made the best use of new media during the election campaigns.

New media technologies are playing a pivotal role in the societies where media is not free. Newspapers can be banned, radio and TV can be banned, but internet cannot be banned, blogs and Facebook cannot be abandoned, mobile phone messages cannot be stopped by the governments. In the recent move of the people of Arab countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya against their governments, new media played an important role in the huge agitation campaigns against the rulers. All of the major search engines like Google and Yahoo have Arabic services and the internet is heavily used in the Arab countries now a days. But in spite of all these facts there are still several questions about the future of new media technologies. Especially, what will be the role of new media in the social and political lives of our people in the future? These are important questions to be answered. Actually, this is the focal point of this research paper to explore the effects of new media technology including internet and mobile phones on the political attitudes and behaviors.

Political Communication in Developed versus Developing Countries

Political behaviors of the people living in the developed and the developing countries are totally different. For example, regarding election campaigns and voting process, there seldom happens an incident of fraud or violence in the developed countries like America, Germany, France, Italy etc. but this is a very common feature in developing countries in Asia and Africa. Even in countries like Pakistan every election campaign takes lives of several dozen people. The final day of the election campaign of 2008 elections in Pakistan was a bloody day in which 37 people were killed in a bomb blast and disturbances across the country³. On the other hand, the editor of one of the Germany's most popular newspaper 'Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung' states the situation of their country's election coverage in these words.

"We plan our election coverage without worrying about how to deal with violence – because election-related violence has never occurred in the

Federal Republic of Germany. We also plan our election coverage without concern for fraud – because we know the process will be transparent and clean. Anybody who wishes to do so can walk into a polling station at election night and see what is going on”⁴.

Dr. Gerchermann believes that the ideal democratic and completely peaceful society perhaps does not exist in the world. However, the media institutions can play their role in strengthening democratic societies. Keeping in view this huge difference of political communication, we must acknowledge that the situation of political communication is quite different in developed and developing countries.

Political communication is based on freedom of choice and only the freedom of information can make freedom of choice possible. Only a well informed and civilized public can make the rule of constitution possible. Only some strong legislative bodies and the independent judicial system can lead to the responsible governmental administration. These are the reasons why developed countries have a different kind of political communication without a fear of fraud or violence. On the other hand, in most of the developing countries, fraud, corruption and violence are integral parts of political communication. Even the general elections in these countries take lives of several dozen people and sometimes hundreds of people in clashes between political parties and sometimes with the police or the law enforcing agencies.

Use of Digital Media in Political Communication

Today we are living in the age of democracy and democracy is only possible in the societies where there is freedom of information and discussion. Free media is a pivotal part of the democratic societies. In the free democratic societies media organizations generate political debates and provide a platform for open discussions. New media technologies can flourish in such societies promoting an atmosphere of participation and democracy. In the developed countries of the world, no doubt, new media has played an appreciated role in promoting the independent and democratic values in the societies but the situation is different in other parts of the world. There are several challenges to political communication in the era of digital media in a number of countries. In undemocratic countries all over the world (whether developed or developing), the media organizations work under strict governmental censor. In these countries, media are controlled and used for propaganda against the enemies and for projection and publicity of the rulers and their policies. In such countries, digital media cannot play its role in spreading democratic values in the society. Yet there is another challenge of the availability of new media especially the internet in the countries and nations going through transitional period. In many developing countries the

atmosphere of political freedom does not exist. Furthermore, the availability of internet connection is also very limited in most of the developing countries. Therefore in such situations digital media cannot play an effective role.

In developed countries, political parties compete with each other in disseminating their messages through internet. They have their own web sites and blogs where they interact with their voters and supporters and get their feed back. Many of the political leaders have their Facebook accounts and they upload their video messages on You Tube. Their supporters, voters and even critics give their feedback through internet and even they can change their policies and priorities in light of the feed back received. The e-campaign of the American president Barrack Obama is one of the best examples of the use of new media technology in the 21st century.

As earlier discussed, the election campaign of the American president Obama was heavily dependent on the use of new media technologies. It is believed that Obama succeeded to convey his message to at least 30 percent of American citizens through new media. It was a great beginning of the use of digital media which provided not only one-sided propaganda and publicity material for the election campaign but also provided a platform for the political debate and discussion.

But even in the developed countries, there are certain limitations of new media technologies. Usually, only well informed and politically well aware people use internet and other digital media. Keeping in view this situation, an important question rises here and that is "What will the role of new media in political awareness of those people who belong to the lower middle class, having limited resources and limited knowledge about world affairs and who have rare chances to participate in the political process and activities?" Of course, this question is yet to be answered.

Obama's Election Campaign: The Best Model of the Use of Internet

President Obama's election campaign was the beginning of a new era of political communication and it opened new doors for researchers and media scholars to study the effects of new media technologies on society. This e-campaign started new horizon of interaction between media scholars and political scientists working on political debates and discourses. The tremendous use of new digital media by the organizers of the Obama's campaign was a big source of inspiration for the political leaders all around the world. Students of Online journalism can learn a lot from the lessons of this new media-supported election campaign. Obama is now leading the USA only because of the extensive use of the new media technology.

The Obama's campaign was supported by hundreds of volunteer workers who prepared and managed the whole campaign with a great zeal and zest. They worked day and night with deliberation and commitment. A new media division was created during the overall election campaign that was responsible for the delivery of the campaign messages to the general public in the whole USA. This division consisted of creative writers, experienced media professionals, and visual artists. Some of the prominent graphic designers were also hired for this project and they were assigned to produce the best possible brand image that could present Obama as the best possible president of the USA. The website titled as "MyBarrackObama.com" was launched in this regard to spread the messages of the election campaign throughout the country. The visual coverage of almost all of the daily activities and speeches of Obama in the political gatherings were uploaded and made available for the general public. The website later on became a source of political and civic education for citizens because legislation of several possible laws was also discussed in this website and the public opinion was known about several issues. Within a very short time this e-campaign became very much popular and almost 13 million Americans became receivers of the regular emails of the campaign and they registered their names in the mailing list of the campaign.

Perhaps the most important point to this discussion was the website of this election campaign and soon it became famous as MyBo. Actually this was a campaign version of the Facebook and it was looked after by the co-founder of Facebook Mr. Chris Hughes. This is important to mention that MyBO was never meant to focus on online socializing. Inside the campaign it was known as a mobilization network, and its goal was only to win the election⁵.

Just like the use of internet, mobile phone short message service was also extensively used to disseminate the messages to the voters. The SMS service was also a source of close contact among 25000 organizers of the campaign. The service was also used by Obama to deliver words of encouragement to his campaign workers.

The Obama campaign was a revolution in new media technology and politics. It opened new doors of interaction between new media and politics even in the other parts of the developed world. This election campaign can be a role model for election candidates and political parties in the developed countries but this is also a fact that this model cannot be applied to the developing countries which are lacking the new media technologies due to their socio-economic situations.

African Elections and New Media

The continent of Africa has 53 countries which are very much different from each other in social structure, languages and political atmosphere. They have nothing common except a common geography. Analyzing the situation of a continent having more than 1000 languages is really a difficult task. Keeping in view a very realistic approach currently most of the countries in the continent are very poorly connected with the Information technology. In most of the African countries the availability of the new media is very limited. Especially, the use of internet is available to rich and wealthy people only. But at the same time the situation is getting improved. Here, this is pertinent to mention the situation of two elections in two different countries, Ghana and Zimbabwe.

The Ghanaian presidential elections took place in December 2008. The whole process of election campaign was revolving around two major political rivals Mr. John Atta Mills and Nana Akufo – Addo. One of the special features of this election campaign was the intensive use of digital media and mobile phones by the political workers of both sides. The two parties not only established their websites for spreading their election campaign messages and collection of funds but they also used cell phones for network connections and monitoring of the election process. An SMS-based system of election campaign was also established to get the best results. Twitter was also used for the same purpose. This kind of election activity was never held before in the country and perhaps seldom happened in other African countries. Perhaps the most important thing in this regard was the live coverage of the election process on Twitter. Both of the candidates were having their presence on the Facebook. Both parties not only used internet and mobile phone service for getting maximum votes but also for the fund raising.

The final result of the election was astonishing. John Atta Mills, who was defeated two times earlier in the election, this time, won the presidential race. Both parties accepted the results which is a very rare phenomenon in the developing countries' politics. Why the defeated party accepted the results? It was because of the monitoring of election process by some of the international NGOs and observers through SMS service. Almost 4000 monitors were employed to observe the polling process and they were required to send their reports to a central monitoring point. The official result was almost the same as compiled by this international observer group.

Yet there is another interesting example of the use of new media technologies in the national election of Zimbabwe held in the same year 2008. Zimbabwe is one of the poorest countries of the world having a very low life expectancy rate which is only 37 years for men and 34 years for

women. The traditional media of Zimbabwe including radio, TV and newspapers was in the control of the state and no objective reporting was possible. The election posters of the opposition parties were torn down by the police men and other officials. One can imagine what will happen in such a repressive situation. The opposition party established a number of websites and blogs and made possible the best use of the new media technologies to win the election. The political workers used their websites to spread their messages against the government through these web sites. Some NGOs also set up a network for the monitoring of the election campaign through SMS and MMS. They monitored the election process and the compilation of results in more than 11000 polling stations.

As a result, President Mugabe lost the elections but he called for another elections arguing that 50 percent votes were not obtained by anyone in the elections. The first elections were conducted in March while the second elections happened in June 2008. But now the rules were different. NGOs were forbidden to monitor the elections. The use of SMS and MMS was also banned. Now the results were different. Mugabe won the elections with 85 percent votes and again became the President of the country.⁶

Although for the time being, African countries are lacking in the use of new media technology but at the same time the situation is being changed rapidly. With the passage of time, African countries are becoming more democratic. The use of Internet and mobile phones is being increased. Although the situation is getting better but it will take some time to improve the situation.

Furthermore, the digital media technologies can play an important role in the political and coordination process of the governments and societies. The Whistleblower site of the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission supported by the Government of Germany is one such example⁷. The web site of this commission provides an opportunity to the citizens of the country to inform about the corruption events and hence the commission afterwards investigates the complaint. This site can be a role model for other countries to follow to eliminate corruption from their societies.

Use of Digital Media in Developing Countries of Asia

Asian developing countries have some similarities with African countries but the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the people of Asian countries are different. Although in these countries the use of mobile phones has got tremendous boost, the use of internet is still very less in most of the countries of Asia. There may be several reasons for this but the most obvious reasons may be the low income and education levels of the general public to use internet.

In the developing countries of Asia usually governments have a strong control over media organizations and the media content is heavily influenced by the governmental policies. The states define the limits of media freedom and media organizations are not allowed to cross these limits. In these situations, usually governments misuse media for their own protection. Propaganda and censorship are common devices in the hands of governments in the developing countries. For example, in 2009 Reporters without borders listed 68 imprisoned internet users worldwide⁸. In countries like China, the governments have thousands of employees and civil servants in their internet police force. Their job is to continuously monitor the internet sources and if something against the government appears, they take action against the person responsible for the act.

But now there are also some positive signals regarding the positive use of new media even in the developing countries. The basic important thing is that free and independent media is necessary for democracy in the developing countries. Only a free media can guarantee the free flow of information in the society and can open horizons of participation among the citizens.

Bridging the Gap between Developed and Developing Countries

This is a fact that the gap between the developed and developing countries is becoming wider and wider day by day. This is because of the technological advancements and developments of the developed countries. Most of the developing countries lack in the technological developments. The other fact is that in the developing countries, only a few people have access to new media technologies especially internet. Especially, in some of the countries of Asia and Africa, the access to internet is very limited. In the developed countries like USA and European countries, almost everyone has a mobile phone and access to internet while this is not the situation in most of the developing countries.

This is the need of the day to bridge the gap between the advanced countries and the developing nations of the world, between the rich and the poor countries of the world. This is the age of new media technology where no one can live in isolation. This is the moral duty of the rich nations of the world to help the poor nations in providing them the new media facilities so that their people can take part in the process of political and economic participation. Once the gap between the developed and the developing nations is filled or at least reduced, the era of a true and fruitful communication between the world nations will begin. To achieve this objective, the developed countries should assist the developing countries to provide them technical facilities to facilitate their public. Secondly, there is no

justification to transfer the political role of mass media of the developed countries to the developing nations. Developing countries have their own socio-cultural situations and economic conditions. Many people cannot participate in the political discussions because of their own socio-cultural situations and the economic conditions of their societies. People of many countries of Asia and Africa have a very little access to digital media. Once the developing nations succeed to achieve the facilities of new media technologies, it can be expected a real positive political change in these countries.

Situation in Pakistan

It can be seen a tremendous advancement in the field of Media in Pakistan. Until 2002 there was only one state owned television channel (PTV) in the country while now there are 83 television channels licensed by the Government of Pakistan. Until 2002, there was not a single FM Radio station but now 124 FM Radio stations are working under the license of Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority⁹. Twenty years ago only half dozen English and Urdu newspapers could be seen in the market but now hundreds of newspapers are available in the market among which almost two dozen newspapers can be called as International Standard newspapers. Furthermore, dozens of very high quality magazines are also available in market which attracts specific kind of audience like sports magazines, women's magazines, political journals and general interest magazines etc. In short, Pakistani media got a big development in quantity as well as quality in the last one decade.

The Government has a very strong hold on Media in Pakistan. The state owned Pakistan Television can't broadcast even a single line against the Government. Private TV channels are kept under strict observation by the Government Authorities and their broadcast is suspended when they telecast something against the Government policies. According to Riaz, S. (2007), the Government pays huge revenue in shape of advertisements to those TV channels and newspapers who favor the Government policies and the media organizations that don't do this, have to deprive of this money. Ultimately, media organizations support the Governmental policies to get a bigger share of the advertisements revenue. Riaz argues that even the private media organization including newspapers and the television channels most of the time support the governmental policies to get a bigger share of the government advertisements¹⁰. However, with the emergence of a number of media organizations in the country now people have different options to get the latest information and it has become difficult to hide the facts from the public.

The new media revolution has strengthened the communities in Pakistan just like the other parts of the developing world. In a nation of 170 million people, the number of mobile phone connections has exceeded the figure of 90 million. It means that almost every second person has a mobile. Most of the people have more than one mobile phone with them. The mobile phone and its use is the cheapest thing available in the country. Even the companies are offering their Sims almost free of cost. In Urban areas almost every person is having a mobile phone in his or her hand and people look busy in capturing the moments of their lives in their phones.

The use of internet has also boosted with a great speed. Although more than half population of the country is illiterate and thus unable to use internet, the approximate number of internet users is more than 18 million. People living in the urban areas especially youth are very fond of internet. Seldom there is a home, office or shop, where there is no computer with an internet connection. Boys and girls are very fond of using Face book, Twitter and You Tube etc.

Use of new media technologies for political communication is yet in its evolution stage in Pakistan. Political parties have established their own websites showing their achievements, policies, objectives, manifestoes, etc. Even religious political parties have their own websites. These websites are updated on regular basis and they display the latest statements and activities of their leaders and their viewpoint on different national and international issues and events. These websites played a vital role in the 2008 elections of Pakistan. The workers of the political parties are also using the new media in support of their parties as well as propagation against the opponent parties. You tube is carrying hundred of such videos.

One of the important advancement in this regard, is the website of the Election Commission of Pakistan that played a significant role in the last elections¹¹. It displayed the details of the election constituencies, the contesting candidates, the rules and regulations of elections, guidance for the voters etc. The website displayed the recent detail of the election results of different constituencies. Although these results were announced later than the unofficial results of the private TV channels, even then, these were authentic results and more reliable than unofficial sources. Even in the non-election timings, this website has the most updated information about the political parties, their party position, the lists of the members of the National and provincial assemblies and Senate etc. Some NGOs also observed the elections 2008 with the help of their own websites and data bases. Some television channels conducted their on-line polls before the elections and predicted the victory of the Pakistan Peoples party, the ruling party of the country.

The workers and agents of the political parties made extensive use of mobile phones and short message service for political communication during the election campaign and the elections. Some candidates sent text messages to their voters to convince them to cast vote for them. The Election 2008 was perhaps the first election in the history of Pakistan in which new media technology was used by the Government of Pakistan as well as by the political parties of the country. Hundreds of websites are still working in the country for the political awareness of the general public. The political parties are running their own websites, updating them regularly and getting the feedback of their workers as well as the general masses. This is a huge change in the political atmosphere of the country and it is hoped that with the advancement of the new media technology the political situation will be changed. It is also hoped that the new media technology will be helpful in promoting a political culture of tolerance and understanding. However, the challenge lies in the availability of the internet facility in the far flung rural areas where majority of the people are illiterate and thus unable to use new media technology. Furthermore, their financial problems are also a hurdle in the use of internet. Once these problems are solved, and the internet facility becomes available to larger segments of the society, there will be more positive change in the political attitudes and behaviors of people. It is expected that the new media technology will play a pivotal role in the next national elections of Pakistan.

Conclusion

The new media technology has greatly influenced the political communication in the whole world. However, its effects are more evident in the developed parts of the world where this technology is easily available. However, it has also influenced the process of political communication in the developing countries. These countries are now giving more concentration to the spread of modern technologies like internet and mobile phones etc. It has been found that the new media technology has changed the political attitudes and behaviors in the countries where it is used frequently. The developing countries can also adopt the same way to bring a positive change in the political attitudes and behaviors of their public. The wide-range availability of the internet in the far-away rural areas of the developing countries including Pakistan is a major challenge in this regard. Once, this challenge is met, there will be a huge positive change in the society. It will promote a culture of tolerance and understanding. This culture of political tolerance will then lead Pakistani society to the path of development, prosperity and political stability.

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