

Using Social Media for Political Participation How are youth engaged?

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Introduction

In the last two decades, nothing has been spread all over the world like social networking. Social networking sites have become important factor and playing catalytic role in our daily life. When Andrew Weinreich invented Sixdegrees.com in 1997, he may not have any idea that such type of social networks would hit the world and become the part of our daily schedule.

These two decades have been characterized by the development of social networking sites and gain tremendous popularity. Due to the extensive use of these virtual feed, we can see the impacts and influence of social media in our daily routine. Moreover, it is very difficult to isolate social media from our daily affairs.

Social media has gained popularity among youth especially from urban area. It has emerged as virtual tool for them to interactions as well as to conduct various types of campaigns. In present scenario, many people are using different kinds of social media to perform political and social campaign all over the world.

In the initial phase (1997-2007) of the development of social media has not been used in a degree that we are doing today for political and social campaigns. But, in next decade (2007 onwards), many social media have turned out to be a tool for political and social campaigns and platform for such events. In 2008 for US presidential election social networking sites were extensively used and seen significant impact in the Barak Obama's victory in the election.

As we are coming across with many political movements, that have emerged by using the social media as a tool for gathering people. 'Arab Spring' can be the perfect example of political movements where social media were used as an important tool against totalitarian regime.

Political and social campaign spread all over the world very quickly and some movements shape the global movement as well. In USA the occupy movement and tea party movement became popular within the short span of time and got shaped like civil disobedience movement of 1960s.

It seems quite unusual now, if some social or political organisations don't have their own social media account. Even government organisations are becoming familiar with social media like Facebook or Twitter. 'Social media users are using this as a platform for different purpose and aims. Use of social media has spread everywhere; 'home to hospital', 'police stations to parliaments', 'schools to stationeries', 'societies to share markets', 'bus stand to bank' and so on' (Pokharel, 2017, p.159).

Social Media and Youth

Social media was created by youth minds in late 90s and early years of 21st century. Social media was not only the output of young minds but also acquired popularity because of youth engagement and attachment with it. The early users of social media were not any scholar or traditional techno savvy, it became popular among college students and spread in the society. The reason behind the today's craze for social media is directly connected to youth; it wouldn't be such impactful without the interest of youth in the use of Social Media.

According to the Pew Research Centre in 2005, just 5% of American adults used at least one of the social media platforms. In 2011 half of all Americans were using at least one of such platforms and in the end of 2016 it had risen to 69% of American population (PRC, 2017). Among these social media users, number of young users is higher than elderly population. According to the Centre 86% of 18 to 29 years old age group American youth are using at least one of the social media, where as 80% of 30 to 49 years old age group American are using such platforms.

Not only USA, social media became popular culture among youth in all over the world. These social media savvy are using it for different purposes; like connecting people, research, search job, social and political campaign etc. In some cases, social media has been used as a tool of crime, harassment, and cyber bullying and hate speech too.

Political Participation and Youth

Political participation is known as the civic engagement with politics. In modern democracy, political participation of citizen is vital. Without civic engagement in political process democracy can't sustain. According to the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Science*, political participation refers; 'those voluntary activities by which members of a society share in the

selection of rulers and, directly or indirectly, in the formation of public policy' (McClosk, 2008).

Encyclopaedia further describes the term political participation; 'these activities typically include voting, seeking information, discussing and proselytizing, attending meetings, contributing financially, and communicating with representatives.'

In the active form of political participation, citizens can establish party or take membership of party, enjoy voting rights, participate in elections, pay tax, serve the country and contribute to their society in need basis. Political participation also includes protest and campaign for civic right.

Though there is no common definition about political participation in the discipline of political science, but it often referred as 'political engagement' or 'public involvement in decision making' (Lamprianou, 2013. p. 21). Many scholars agreed that political participation is not only voting right but it is also the involvement of citizen in many decision making process.

We can see people's political participation flourishing in the democratic society than other sort of regime. But, the disturbing fact is that, even in democratic society, political participation of youth is very less as comparison to the elderly leader. According to the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) there is only 1.9% of the world's member of parliament are aged under 30 and only 14.2% of the world's member of parliament are aged under 40 (IPU, 2016). Though, age under 30 comprises the half of the world population but very less representative constitute in parliaments (IPU, 2016).

Parliamentary representation is an example of youth engagement in political process. 'Youth participation in party politics, political campaign as well as election and voting is not exacting. In the past two decades in Australia, Europe and the US, dwindling membership in political parties and low voter turnout has raised concerns that contemporary societies are facing a crisis of democracy. Research indicates the trend away from formal institutionalised participation is particularly marked amongst the young and this in turn fuels concern for the future of liberal democracies (Collin, 2015, p.2).'

In present decade, different wave of political participation has been emerged in all over the world. Youth are engaging more in informal type of political campaign rather than formal or party politics, for instance, after the Arab Spring many youths in the region have remained politically active through various movements (UNDP, 2016).

Social Media, Youth and Political Participation

As social media has to play catalytic role in our life, so many people are taking advantage of it in present world. People are making direct as well as indirect use of social media for political activism and participation.

One national survey about new media and youth in USA on 2012 by The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) showed that, youth from diverse racial and ethnic group are engaged in participatory politics through new media forms including social media (phys.org, 2012).

According to the Pew Research Centre (PRC, 2012), 'the use of social media is becoming a feature of political and civic engagement for many American.' As per the findings of PRC's survey in 2012, 66% of social media users or 39% of all American adults have engaged themselves at least one of the civic or political activities with social media.

Political participation through social media like election campaign, organising the protest, online petition or campaign for political motive have spread all over the world. South Asian youth are also attracted in social media for political participation in recent years (Pokharel, 2017, p.161).

According to the Bauerlein (2008) and Mindich (2005) quoted by Alina Muntean (2015) in 'The Impact of Social Media Use of Political Participation' by traditional measures youth are less engaged in politics than older citizen. Alina claims by quoting Baumgartner and Morris (2010:25) same youth who are not engaged in politics by traditional measures now engaging with politics related subject in social media (Munten, 2015, p.8).

Many researchers are claiming that, social media is becoming new tool for youth to engage in political campaign, activism and politically motivated protests. It became a powerful tool for mobilising people in such campaigns and movements. Citing Iranian example Philip N. Howard claims, 'without access to broadcast media, savvy opposition campaigners turned

social media applications like Facebook from minor pop culture fads into a major tool of political communication' (Howard, 2010, P.5). Most of the research from west and east concludes that social media is becoming a powerful tool for different types of political participations. We can see the use of social media as a tool for political participation in Nepal. Extreme use of social media has been used for electoral campaign, civic movements like 'Occupy Baluwatar' and solidarity protest in support for Dr. Govind KC's hunger strike lead by youth.

Nature and Dimensions

The use of social media has become important tool for political participation in recent years. The nature of such political participation is different than classical way of political participations and activisms. Due to the different nature of social media, now people can easily express their views and expression through virtual means, which can be spread all over the world within minutes. All these public may not be right or true, but public can believe in these views and it can lead to political changes. According to the post-election analysis by many international media after the US presidential election in 2016, social media played vital role to manipulate people's mindset to vote Donald Trump, where as mainstream media was against him; it is said that it is all because of social media campaign that trump could win the election.

Social media are public platforms but individual can use it as personal forum to express their views; that is why in recent period it has become very difficult to extract truth from propagandas and emotion and one cannot rely only on social media as far as truths are concerned. There has been great concern and debate after the US presidential election-2016 on social media and its misleading behaviour towards voters. Many scholars argued that, social media played vital role to mislead people by making viral fake and false news and glorification of Trump. Where, fact and truth were overshadowed by populism and rationality got ignored by emotions. Many people started calling it 'post truth politics' and this era as 'post truth era.' And in this era social media is playing a vital role to spread lies all over the world.

In his book 'Post Truth the new War on Truth and How to Fight Back', Mathew D'Ancona describes these phenomena as a threat for truth. He explains the phenomena of post truth:

'We have entered a new phase of political and intellectual combat, in which democratic orthodoxies and institutions are being shaken to their foundations by a wave of ugly populism. Rationality is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, liberty by a drift towards autocracy. More than ever, the practice of politics is perceived as a zero sum game, rather than a contest between ideas.'

Mathew argued that, there are many factors to lie and mislead people in politics and in recent year's social media has become tool to spread such political lies. But at the same time society have gain great achievement through the social media. Social media became very powerful tool for campaigns, where people can use it for gather mass and demonstrate in street like Arab Spring.

Many scholars are claiming that, social media can drag people for mass political movement but it is very difficult to give safe landing in proper way. It has been seen that because of its leaderless nature many big mass movements were either collapsed or became unpopular and people started ignore such movement (Tufekci, 2017).

Being made for commercial purpose; social media tries to engage people rather than conduce any movement and these business company never come to rescue the movement if such movement is going to crash. Zynep Tufekci (2017) claims that using social media we can make movement big but we will face problem in management and decision making.

According to her, the tea party movement in USA is strongly supported by few leaders of Republican Party; so that it became powerful movement and has huge influence on people. Mean time, there is no significant support by influential political party and leaders for The Occupy Movement that is why it could not give huge impact like tea party movement did (Tufekci, 2017). In her research in USA, Arab world and Turkey, she found that, most of the social media movements are leaderless, it has to face funding and decision making problem; and also the organiser repeat same campaign time and again due to the lack of decision making ability.

Although, there are many uncertainty and problematic things that could happen in social media driven political movement but it is almost impossible to isolate social media from

these things. Social media can be used very easily for political campaign and many scholars emphasizing the use of social media for all sort of participation or civil engagement. They claim that social media reduces the cost of campaign as comparison to its traditional forms and it has huge potential to attract mass and gain publicity within the short period of time. According to these scholar's social media helps to shape alternative narratives and overcome pluralistic ignorance.

But critics of social media claim that it can be Slacktivist, it can easily be surveillance and censored and also, it is very easy to spread propaganda by the users of social media. They claim that the ideal use of social media is just utopia and it helps to mislead people's mindset.

Conclusion

Social media is undeniable fact of our life in this era and we cannot ignore it even in political participation. People may use it for propaganda and making viral fake news, but it is very difficult to abandon these platforms just for some undesirable incidents. We have witnessed many successful social movements that reached logical end where social media was used extensively. Moreover, mainstream media and its monopoly have been challenged by social media.

Social media can be used for mass movement, election campaign as well as creating narratives and counter narratives. This can drag the huge chunk of youth who are alienated from mainstream politics in the world. But we have to be cautious about fake news, propaganda and hate speeches that take place in social media and it is up to us how we make the use of social media.

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