

Social Media, Youth and Political Participation

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“The youth shall be meaningfully involved at all levels
in the process of policy and plan formulation.”

- *National Youth Policy 2015 (10/E/5)*

Youth are future of the nation; yet they are rarely given opportunities at the decision-making level or in its processes. Youth were on the forefront of many of the biggest political changes in the world; yet once the changes are achieved, many of them find their voices unheard and ignored. Their priority for academic, entrepreneurial success or career coupled with the changing dimensions of their relationship with others in family life mean they are mostly unable to fully focus on one thing for long; and many youth tend to keep themselves away from politics considering it a domain of the politicians and because there are not easy and effective medium through which they can participate in the public discourse on political issues.

The arrival of the internet, and the emergence and popularity of social media and mobile technology, seem to be changing it. Informational use of social media exerts a significant and positive impact on individuals' activities aimed at engaging in civic and political action.¹ Youth are the heavy users of the social media – the internet-based platforms that allow individuals to publicly connect to others through networking, information and opinion sharing, and organizing.

A 2011 study of more than 2,500 students in California, USA concluded that:

For many youth, their interest in the internet translates into engagement with civic and political issues. Many worry that youth who spend significant time online will become socially isolated. But the opposite to be true. Youth engagement in interest-driven online communities was associated with increased volunteer and charity work and in increased work with others on community issues. The Internet can serve as a gateway to online and offline civic and political engagement, including volunteerism, community problem solving, and protest activity.²

¹ Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N. and Valenzuela, S. (2012), Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17: 319–336.

² Cohen, C.J. & Kahne, J. (2011). Participatory Politics. New Media and Youth Political Action. *YPP Research Network*. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/sites/all/files/publications/YPP_Survey_Report_FULL.pdf

South Asia, including Nepal, is in the midst of a surge in expansion of the internet and rather than replicating step by step the online progress of the developed world, South Asia is leaping straight to a world dominated by social media platforms accessed through mobile devices.³ The social media accessed through smartphones, bypassing domain names and webpages, lead to a situation where a number of users are aware about social media without knowing how to use the internet for other purposes.

The internet penetration in Nepal stands at 62 per cent of population, with more than 97 per cent of those accessing internet via mobile devices.⁴ Use of social media stands very high. The estimated number of Facebook users from within Nepal stands at 8.4 million. More than 88 per cent of them are youth (as defined by National Youth Policy 2015). Three among each four Facebook users from Nepal are between 18 to 35 years old.⁵

Social media allows Nepali youth to take part in conversations, discussions and debates about issues that potentially shape the future that they want for themselves in Nepal.⁶ Two of the representative examples of use of the social media in organizing for political activism are *Nepal Unites* and *Occupy Baluwatar*.

Nepal Unites was a movement started by a few youth demanding the Constitution from the first Constituent Assembly. A section of Nepal's urban young population, led by successful middle-aged professionals from different fields, has come together through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter under the banner *Nepal Unites*.⁷ From a few dozens placard holding youth in front of CA Building to thousands of youth joining its various initiatives within and outside the country, it grew into a formidable pressure group before becoming obsolete. An introduction to Nepali Unites in one of the webpages states:

We are an informal group of civilian-activists that believe in democracy and citizen supremacy. We came together to raise the common Nepali citizen's voice against the indifference shown by the political establishment. We demand accountability, particularly of

³ Warren, C. (2016). Breaking the walls: The fight for freedom of expression in the digital space in South Asia. *International Federation of Journalists*. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from https://samsn.ifj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FoE_Internet_SAMSN_IFJ_Report2016.pdf

⁴ NTA (2017). MIS Report 125. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from <http://nta.gov.np/en/mis-reports-en>

⁵ The data is retrieved from Facebook.

⁶ Tiwari, A. (2011, December 23). Social media as political player. *Nepali Times*. Retrieved from <http://nepalitimes.com/>

⁷ Jha, P. (2011, July 6). Nepal unites, but for what? *The Kathmandu Post*. Retrieved from <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com>

our senior politicians who have time and again proven their incompetence and dishonesty. At the same time, we seek to mobilize and motivate every Nepali to speak up and contribute to building a prosperous and responsible Nepal.⁸

Nepal Unites used the internet in organizing events and mobilizing people. While earlier civil society initiatives were led by individuals who had close links with political and democratic struggles and had better grounding in affairs of the state, protests by *Nepal Unites* are led by people who belong to a younger generation, and have been generally detached and apathetic towards politics.⁹

Occupy Baluwatar campaign was a response to a story about a Nepali woman robbed and raped by a policeman as she returned from foreign employment. The *Occupy Baluwatar* campaigners came from diverse social, economic, political and professional backgrounds and many of the campaigners had never worked with each other, and they knew each other through Twitter (discussions on #TIArape) and emails.¹⁰ The campaigners held protests for 107 days at Baluwatar, near the Prime Minister's official residence demanding justice for the woman as well as changes in laws regarding gender violence.

The #BackOffIndianMedia and #BackOffIndia campaigns where social media users protested against the Indian media's insensitive coverage of the April 2015 Earthquake; and India's perceived role during the border closedowns were some examples of youths using social media to express themselves. It's an established fact that more interpersonal political discussion influences political behavior of individuals thus encouraging youth to engage more discussion about politics leads to more political participation.

The innovative use of social media for social activism was also evident during natural disasters – especially during the floods in Western Nepal and Terai; and the April 2015 Earthquake. The social media was used to organize relief activities such as #FillTheBucket.

⁸ Nepal Unites (undated). About Nepal Unites. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from <http://www.nepalunites.com/p/about.html>

⁹ Jha, P. (2011, July 6). Nepal unites, but for what? *The Kathmandu Post*. Retrieved from <http://kathmandupost.com>

¹⁰ Koyu, P. & Pokharel, A.S. (2014). Occupy Baluwatar: A Reflection. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 19(2): 347-371.

Issues for Discussion

1. Given the digital divide, those actively participating in such [social media formed] groups, or those who have become the de facto leaders of such campaigns, tend to come from the relatively privileged socio-economic strata of the capital.¹¹ Although the number of social media users seems to be very high, it's truth that because of the economic condition and/or availability of resources, a large number of youths are unable to use social media for political participation. Will the digital divide foster a new form of political inequality? How can the digital divide be bridged to ensure that maximum number of youths is enabled to use social media for political participation?
2. Social media increases the political participation by the youth. Political participation amongst youth is largely dependent on the use of Facebook and more youth are showing stronger reliance on the Facebook as their platform for securing political information they need to make their informed political decisions.¹² It's also evident that information coming through social media are not always as correct as those coming from mainstream media. The fake news is being seen as a big problem for democracy as 'current social media systems provide a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation that is particularly dangerous for political debate in a democratic society.'¹³ In this context, how can it be ensured that the youth receive factual political information and engage in discussion based on those facts and not on fake news?
3. In an op-ed¹⁴ in October 2010, author Malcolm Gladwell argued that social media doesn't bring revolution. His argument rested in the facts that it's people who bring revolution with or without using social media as a tool; and that social media are build to diffuse high-risk activism needed for the revolution. There are also talks about *slacktivism* or *clicktivism*; and those believing in the power of social media also agree that the biggest challenge of online activism is converting the online action into

¹¹ Jha, P. (2011, July 6). Nepal unites, but for what? *The Kathmandu Post*. Retrieved from <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com>

¹² Abdu, S.D et al (2016). New Perspectives to Political Participation among Youth: The Impact of Facebook Usage. *The European Proceedings of Social and Behavioral Sciences*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.08.19>

¹³ Shorenstein Center (2017). Combating Fake News: An Agenda for Research and Action. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Combating-Fake-News-Agenda-for-Research-1.pdf>

¹⁴ Gladwell, M. (2010, October 4). Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/>

offline action, without which change is not possible. In this context, how can youths be persuaded enough to covert their online action into offline action?

4. While expressing opinions online or engaging in discussions about politics, it's very difficult to remain apolitical. While some of the social media campaigns aim to exert pressure on politicians, the campaigners become participants in politics. However, the lack of political organization and/or without more effective medium of advocacy being taken up, it's hard to exert the pressure on politicians and decision-makers only through social media. How can youth ensure that their voices expressed online be taken up seriously by media, others and politicians so they don't go unheard?
5. Some commentators fear that youth are caught in an echo chamber where they choose to only connect with people holding similar views... or the empty chamber where youth rarely or never discuss political issues.¹⁵ Social media is still emerging, but it offers valuable opportunities. But how can the youth tap the opportunities treading outside the echo or empty chambers?
6. When writing publicly, one needs to ensure that their writings do not bring trouble to them or the community. Not writing something, which could be defamation, or hate speech, is important. Equally important is to ensure decent / socially acceptable contents, and privacy of self and others. As social media become influential and people use social media to advocate change, regimes are likely to introduce measures to control or censor. How can youth ensure the responsible writing and discussion as well as to keep the platforms free from controls and censors?

¹⁵ Kahne, J & Middaugh, E (2012, November). Digital media shapes youth participation in politics. *Kappan Magazine*. Retrieved on October 25, 2017 from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joseph_Kahne/publication/255703562_Digital_Media_Shapes_Youth_Participation_in_Politics/links/00b4952040a462cc9e000000.pdf