Politics or No Politics on Social Media: Twitter and Pakistani Legislators

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Abstract *Social media is becoming an important forum for political activism and interaction; it is changing the entire landscape for political communication and is moving it to an all-new level (Kathurwar, 2017). The greatest advantage of Social Media is that the politicians themselves, are the producers of their own message. If, social media used strategically can greatly help the politicians to disseminate their message and lead the discussion in a desirable direction. Therefore, this study focuses on the usage of Twitter by the Members of National Assembly (MNA) in the last political regime i.e 2013-2018. The primary objective of carrying out this study is to investigate what the MNAs think their purpose of using Twitter was and are they tweeting the right content to fulfill their desired purpose on Twitter. According to the findings most of the politicians are using Twitter to disseminate their political information, hence fulfilling their political agendas.*

Key Words: Social Media, Politicians, MNAs of Pakistan Twitter, Political Communication

Introduction

Social media is becoming an important forum for political activism and interaction; it is changing the entire landscape for political communication and is moving it to an all-new level (Kathurwar, 2017). Political parties, politicians, government and non-government institutions, all are using this platform as a new form of communication and engagement with their audiences (Al-Mazaan & Garcia 2014). Users can interact, directly access politicians, and get involved in political activities in more direct, informal and innovative ways. Politicians, opinion leaders, and even individuals are using social media to express their views, participate in dialogue, expand their networks and connect with like-minded individuals (Katz, Lazarsfeld, & Roper 2005). The greatest advantage of Social Media is that the politicians themselves, are the producers of their own message, they have complete control over their message and yet the message is perceived as more authentic than any paid advertisement. Therefore, if social media used strategically can greatly help the politicians to disseminate their message and lead the flow of discussion in desirable direction. The evidence to this observation can be found in the case of Barack Obama's 2008 US presidential campaign which, according to a study conducted by Suomen Toivo Centre, is termed as the first electoral campaign in which the usage of social media had a decisive impact. Twitter and Facebook are the most popular for use by politicians, with 100 percent of U.S. Senate members posting on Twitter in 2018 and 99 percent of the U.S. House of Representative's posting. Similar statistics are evident for Facebook, with 95 percent of senators and 97 percent of representatives posting on the site in 2018. This means that the politicians if want to cultivate their relationship with the audience need constant presence on Twitter. Most important is that they should be active on social networking sites around the year, not just before or during elections to engage themselves with the audience. The presence of Pakistani politicians on Twitter shows that they are also using this medium to communicate with their audience, it can be observed that they are using it to achieve their political agenda. It has been observed that politicians in Pakistan are using Twitter extensively to stay in constant touch with their potential voters but the studies related to why and how the politicians using Twitter are scant. Therefore, this study focuses on the usage of Twitter by the Members of National Assembly (MNA) in the previous political regime i.e 2013-2018. The usage of Twitter by MNAs

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becomes even more worthy of investigation in states like Pakistan where democracy is still not much stable and in transition period. The primary objective of carrying out this study is to investigate what the MNAs think their purpose of using Twitter was and are they tweeting the right content to fulfill their |desired purpose on Twitter. The main goal is to explore that why MNA was using Twitter and are they using Twitter strategically because if using strategically it can help to generate more social capital which would ultimately help to rejuvenate democratic society,(Winner,2003,p.167).

To investigate the above- mentioned objectives, the following research questions are formed:

RQ.1. Why are MNAs of Pakistan using Twitter?

RQ.2. Do the content they are posting on Twitter are in accordance with their stated purposes?

The Political Use of Twitter: Conceptualizing Strategic Political Communication

The conceptual framework of this research revolves around the Strategic Political Communication. As compared to other forms of media, social platforms are becoming more popular in this modern era. People rely on social networking sites to interact with each other in the whole world demising geographical boundaries. These social networking sites are considered a perfect forum to share activities, attitudes, opinions, activities, deliberations, and debates. For the last six to seven years, social media platforms are commonly and effectively utilized for strategic political communication. The politicians are spending more time on social media and this usage is increasing day by day. Most of the politicians have their own official twitter account so they can interact with the public directly. The politicians have been observed to tell about their activities in order to get immediate feedback from their audience. Social media is claimed to be a perfect medium to analyze public opinion about politicians and government policies, hence making it more intensely used during the days of election (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan 2012).

The uprising popularity of social media has gradually changed the norms and values of communication through mainstream media. The whole communication process on social media platforms now relies upon the rules of social interaction and multi-directional communication. On social media doesn't form the public agenda but its the public who leads media agenda", whereas, in traditional media the response is tardy and most of the time doesn't even exist, the communication is fixated on transmission or one-directional communication.

This devolution of the interaction among social clutches of online opinion-makers and exterminating the top to down dimension, where vibrant part is played by traditional media and politicians to disseminate their political views to the addressees, reflects the distinctiveness of this important communication tool. In Social Media, communication is dispersed from the source (i.e. Twitter account of politician) by few reliable users, which then develop into opinion front-runners in the online system. According to Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy (2010) the legislators adopt Twitter to upsurge the influence of stereotypical models of press notes, press releases, and meetings. They also use these online platforms to spread their desired communication to huge public (Chun & Warner 2010; Jaeger & Bertot 2010; Chun et al. 2010; Bertot, Jaeger, Grimes 2010). Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, and Glaisyer (2010) further elaborated that Twitter is an effectual space for free speech and impartiality.

Shogan (2010) also highlighted that these social platforms have the ability to modify fundamental political communication strategies. Steiglitz, Brockmann, and Xuan (2012) claimed that this improvement in technology like Twitter is contemplated as low subsidy means of unswerving voter communication that dodges the costly and high-cost political campaigning of conventional political publicity on TV. Currently, social media has emerged as most growing medium in comparison with other forms of media, specifically Twitter endorse probable deviations in public participation and political communication (Pingree, 2007). Furthermore, Trammell (2006) also argued that in comparison to conventional mass media, online platforms allow two-way communication with additional benefits and study shows the "higher level of interactivity" (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak 2005) can affect the prospects of online available political information (Tedesco, 2007; Shah et al., 2007).

The advent of social platform technologies has been incorporated by an increasing amount of consumers posting images, videos and text messages online (Duggan, 2013; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Madden & Lenhart, 2015). An adequate amount of scholarship exists on how politicians engage in social media to increase their image

around the whole world. The growing popularity of Twitter has converted it into a platform through which politicians can create influence spread messages, and get involved with their publics and collect feedback. Jackson, Graham & Broersma (2016) made a comparison between the usage of Twitter by Dutch and British Parliament candidates and revealed that Dutch candidates were more eager to hold the communicating potential of Twitter, and it appeared that the audience reacted to the tweets by involving in more dialogue. Similarly, Aharony (2012) carried out a study to examine the tweets done between August and October 2010 by the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu; the President of USA, Barack Obama and the British Prime Minister, David Cameron. As per study US President tweets more than the other two but all three leaders used twitter for both objectivity and partiality. Furthermore, Oelsner, K., & Heimrich, L. (2015) explored that Twitter was the latest invention in political campaigning and on all stages, German MPs started to use Twitter and that proved foundation step towards communication with voter associations. Caplan (2013) analyzed the Twitter posts of two Democratic Candidate Paul Hirschbiel and Republican Congressman Scott Rigell and, of 2nd Congressional District of Virginia. It was found out that the two candidates used Twitter to share and appraise the voters regarding their present political activities, hence proved that social media had an important role in their campaign throughout election period. The same is a case in Korea, where members of National Assembly, unified the social platforms as a notable method of communication for conducting election engagements and developing relations with (possible) voters throughout non-election phases (Hsu & Park 2012).

Busby & Grant, Moon (2010) observed the use of social network instrument Twitter by Australian politicians. The examination advocated that political leaders were relying on Twitter to perform political duties and connections, and few of them were more confident than others, and those who used Twitter to communicate looked to be politically more beneficial.

In a little period of time, politicians in contemporary democratic civilizations all around the globe have begun to use Twitter and Facebook for targeting their voters (Gulati & Williams, 2010). The politicians have accepted this innovative media since they reflect it as fascinatingly essential for effective communication as compared to conventional media (Westling, 2007; Posetti, 2010). The existing literature shows that politicians all over world are relying on social platforms especially Twitter to influence their audience and disseminate their political ideology, therefore practicing Social Media strategically to gain popularity and ultimately their vote bank. In Pakistan, just like the rest of the world, it is studied that the politicians are very much visible on Social Media, especially Twitter. The source of most of the breaking news is now Twitter, the government officials, ministers even our Prime Minister and ISPR prefer to tweet the information. Keeping this observation and existing literature in view, it is important to see that what our politicians think why they are using Twitter, what is their purpose of using and are they posting the content according to their stated purpose? This study gives an insight that how strategically the legislators are using Twitter for political communication and public relations, are they taking maximum benefit or just posting randomly without any specific purpose. It is imperative to explore because if Twitter is used strategically and there is a positive equation between what producers think and what actually they are producing then it can strengthen the democracy in especially in countries like Pakistan.

The social media is observed as an idyllic place to gauge opinion of the public about the strategies of the politicians and governments (Steiglitz, Xuan, & Brockmann, 2012). Still, there are not enough studies have been done regarding the uses and abuses of Social Media by the politicians to achieve their political benefits and agendas (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams 2010).

Methodology

The data in this study is collected through Content Analysis and Survey. The survey was completed by the members of National Assembly of Pakistan. Keeping in view, that all members of National Assembly are educated and could comprehend English, the questionnaires in English language were sent to them during preceding democratic administration (2013-2018). Forty members of national assembly filled out the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was kept simple and almost all the questions were close-ended.

The data was collected in two phases. Initially, the request was made to the research cell in National Assembly Speaker's office to provide the details of the official Twitter accounts of MNAs on a simple form. The information on the official Twitter accounts of MNAs was gathered to understand which MNAs were using

Twitter. As per list to the list, 84 members out of 342 were actively using Twitter. Then 45 out of 84 members were selected as active Twitter users, which means they were at least posting content once a day.

In second stage of survey, the questionnaires were sent to the 45 members. Forty members gave back the survey forms whereas 5 members did not fill the forms despite many reminders. The content analysis of Twitter accounts of these members for the month of November 2016 was also done to investigate whether they were posting to the content to achieve their objective. The purpose is further divided into five sub-categories which are as follows:
a) Personal Activity (content related to their own-self, family and friends)
b) Political Activity (content related to their constituency, social gatherings, rally, protests,)
c) To Educate the Audience (any information given with the intent to inform the audience)
d) Call for Action (any content posted to motivate the audience to become a part of any activity)
e) To Respond on Some Issue (the statement of MNA on any on going issue) To analyze the purpose depicted in the tweets of the MNAs, the content analysis of Twitter accounts of 34 MNAs is also done. To fulfil the objective of study under discussion, the content posted by the MNAs during the month of November on their twitter handles is taken into consideration.

Findings and Discussion

The primary focus of this scholarship is to study that for what purposes members of the National Assembly were using twitter and Table1clearly shows the results that majority of the MNAs i.e. 59.5 % believe that they use Twitter to inform the people about the political engagements and ideologies whereas 13.5 % think that they are using Twitter to educate their audience about certain issue, then comes call for action and second-lowest percentage goes to personal activity. The findings reveal that the legislators are of the opinion that Twitter is the perfect platform to communicate political ideas with their potential voters or audience.

Table 1. Purpose of Activity on Twitter According to Survey

Purpose	Twitter Usage
Personal Activity	8.1 %
Official/Political Activity	59.5 %
Educate the Audience	13.5 %
Call for Action	10.8 %
Give response on some issue	5.4 %

Table 2 shows that 50.4% tweet political content which means they are tweeting mostly to propagate their political activities, 23 % are using to give some response on any issue, which is second highest here but at last place in Table 1. While comparing the results, it can be said that there is a slight contradiction between their opinion and practice, though it's a good strategy to respond on any issue on Twitter as it has the capacity to reach huge amount of people within no time.

Table 2. Purpose of Activity on Twitter As per Content

Purpose	Twitter Usage
Personal	11.9 %
Political	50.4 %
Educate the Audience	8.7 %
Call for Action	2.4 %
Give Your response on Some Issue	23 %
Other	3.7 %

Social media is significant for producing participation in the campaign, spreading links, unswerving communication with voters and activating party followers (Karlsen, R. & Enjorlas, B. 2016). In this study, it is

explored that majority of the members i.e. 59.5 % are using Twitter to spread information regarding their political activities to the voters and 8.1% respondents are using it to spread information about their personal whereabouts. This shows that MNAs are posting very little personal content. This proves that the primary purpose of their visibility on Twitter is to propagate their political activities and political happening. These findings reinforce the results of the previous studies which also concluded that the politicians were using Twitter to inform the public about their political engagements (Grant, Moon & Grant. 2010). Larson and Moe (2011) also found out that members use Twitter to circulate information regarding important political happenings. It can also be seen in the findings that 8.1% of the respondents use Twitter to tell people about their personal activities. It can be observed that even if the politicians are sharing some personal content, it may have some hidden meanings which ultimately fulfil their political agenda, for example if they are posting any picture of their family, it may be possible that they are trying to show their positive side to the public which would help in building their relationship with the audience and it will give more sense of closeness. This is clearly in relevance to the already existing literature which suggests, they share personal content besides political position perhaps to create a link or to diminish the division between political elites and voters, even if this closeness is a technologically mediated hallucination (Coleman, & Moss, 2008).

According to the content 50.4 % of the content tweeted by the members is to endorse political activities and 23 % of the content depicts that MNAs use it to give reply on some issue. Consequently, it won't be wrong to resolve that the main purpose of the political actors of using Twitter was to disseminate political content among their audience as they have mentioned in the survey. The results upkeep the existing studies establishing that social media enables politicians to set their own political agenda and distribute information among the public directly and the major intention of using social media is to expand the perceptibility of their candidacies and parties in public sphere and to promote politics (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). So it can be inferred that even if they are posting any other type of content which is apparently not political but their hidden agenda is to gain more social capital to strengthen their political position among the public.

Conclusion

The study established that the MNAs of Pakistan have begun using social media as a mode of interaction with their voters. The thought-provoking thing is that the majority of these using social media are active users and are convinced that Social Media especially Twitter fulfills their purpose of political and official interaction with their audience. The study can easily infer that these MNAs are aware of the implication and power of social media in today's era. MNAs responded that they use Twitter primarily for the purpose of official/political activity, which is very much obvious from the content analysis of their twitter accounts.

It is safe to conclude MNAs are using Twitter and considering it a serious platform and they are using it strategically because they are posting the content on Twitter according to their own perception of purpose. This means that the majority of the politicians responded in the survey that they use Twitter for political purposes and it is very much evident in the content analysis of their twitter handles that they are posting the content which supports their response.

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