Creating politically educated citizens:
Web 2.0's struggle in Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION.

As classical literature states, media performs several functions.

- o To inform citizens
- o To critique situations in society
- o To entertain
- o To opinionate and let others express their opinions on issues
- o To educate citizens
- o Commerce: media is just a business [1], [2]
- o To play the role of a watchdog and be a part of the system of check and balances in a political system [3]

When the global educational community witnessed the birth of media known as Internet in the early 1970's, it was beyond their imagination to conceive what shape this technology would take in future. But today, educationists in every corner of the world have realized the web's extraordinary power and influence on each and every aspect of our lives.

Thus, all the above mentioned roles of media are now applicable to Internet as well, specially in the age of Web 2.0 due to which, during the last decade, social connectivity of citizens has increased and more and more people now use the web to create and exchange knowledge and information among themselves.

Examples include the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which is written by citizens; YouTube, where citizens can upload their own video's; Twitter, where citizens can inform others what they are doing; and social networks such as MySpace, LinkedIn and Facebook, where citizens make their own personal profile pages.

The power of Web 2.0 has also been realized by several citizen movements, civil society organizations, protest groups and even political parties who have also started to offer their own pages on social networks. This gives them a chance to get in touch with their target citizens and to exchange knowledge and information with them.

Tom Armitage [4] rightly renames this new media, as "the next media".

In the year 2008, Barack Obama used this next media for his presidential election campaign. Experts such as Frissen [5] are of the view that this was one of the most successful examples of the use of Web 2.0 in politics.

Obama used several Web 2.0 applications, including social networks, instant messaging and YouTube, and combined all of them on his own social network: MyBarackObama.com. These applications did not only help him to reach his supporters, but that they also activated his supporters to spread the Obama message of change and to raise new funds. Web 2.0 mobilized the masses and gave an impressive result: the largest collected campaign budget in history and a landslide victory.

On the other side, his opponent John McCain's efforts on the Internet could not generate the desired results. This was not due the reason that McCain was not familiar with the web. There was a time in 2000 when he was the master of online technology. It was, after all, his strong online fundraising haul that kept him in the presidential candidate race that year.

The reason was the changed face of Internet. In 2000, the web was a different place. It was Web 1.0, with brochure-like websites with almost no interactivity. In 2008, the Web had become highly interactive and engaging with Web 2.0. John McCain seemed to have missed the transformation that was cashed by Barack Obama. If McCain had taken care of this aspect, results of the election, fate of the American nation and the state of world affairs could have been different.

Is Obama's example relevant for Pakistan's political environment? Can the citizen's of Pakistan be educated politically by using Web 2.0 in order to achieve desired results? There is no research to answer this question. And this absence compelled us to see what role does the web play in the politics of Pakistan, through our television show "Wired and Active".

PAKISTAN'S STORY.

Democracy in Pakistan can be termed as an audience democracy, where a majority of the citizenry is politically inactive. Many citizens do not vote when elections are held. The voter turnover pattern during elections held during the past two decades is an indicator of the above statement.

Election Year	Voter Turnover in %age
1988	43.1%
1990	45.5%
1993	41.0%
1997	35.2%
2002	41.8%
2008	44.0%

Source: Election Commission of Pakistan

In such an environment, the Internet becomes an important tool for the political parties to establish connection, especially with the youth of urban areas and to try to develop their interest in the political affairs of the country.

In order to find out whether the political parties are using this medium, we examined the web presences of the major political parties including Pakistan Peoples Party, Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz, Pakistan Muslim League – Quaid-e-Azam, Muttahida Qaumi Movement, Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf.

Our findings show that websites of almost all political parties are very similar to offline folders: they give citizens only a lot of information, but they offer almost no possibilities for interaction. They do not use the potential of new applications that could lead to interaction and stimulate knowledge exchange.

Only the website of one party i.e. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf offered their registered members a dedicated blog section.

Shifting focus to individual politicians, we found out that there are only a few politicians who are familiar with how powerful Internet can be in terms of tie up with citizens. Each of the major political parties had only one or two officials who were using applications such as Facebook and Twitter to engage with the online community.

So the view that Web 2.0 can be used to politically educate citizens and to attract voters seems to be contradictory to Pakistan's political reality. Political parties as organizations and politicians as individuals are yet to exploit the potential of the web to engage citizens and gain advantage over their competitors.

But this contradiction has not stopped political awareness from growing in the cyberspace because there is a small mass of youth that are both, politically active and online. It is Pakistan's bloggers community that includes bloggers from all walks of life including students, print and electronic media journalists, doctors, engineers, bankers and even a few politicians.

This community maintains a number of blogs where they express their opinion on the political happenings of the country almost on a daily basis and it is their blogs, which caused the youth to actively participate in many political movements. Two major instances that can be quoted where blogs played their part were the movement against the ban on electronic media by the former President Pervez Musharraf in the year 2007 and the restoration of judiciary movement, more popularly known as the lawyers movement, during the same year.

As described by Pool [6], "Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed, decentralized, and easily available, as are printing presses or microcomputers. Central control is more likely when the means of communication are concentrated, monopolized, and scarce, as are great networks."

At a time when the mainframe computer was seen as a symbol of bureaucratic control, Pool envisioned a decentralized and participatory media environment. He predicted that this would strengthen democratic culture, enabling citizens and grassroots organizations to circulate their ideas more widely than ever before.

Following the same lines, the active participation of bloggers and blog readers in Pakistan's political and social movements has provided the confidence to the Internet community to believe that they can bring about the much awaited revolution in Pakistan's political atmosphere. They feel that they are on their way to knowledge democracy.

On the contrary, Reymond Williams [7] challenges the belief that new technologies have power to shape and transform society. Instead, he argues, that we must understand that the emergence of new technologies, and in particular new communications systems, is a result of complex interactions among technological, social, cultural, political, legal, and economic forces. When a new medium strikes an 'old regime,' the political effects depend on both the technology and the regime and on the decisions, both technical and political, that shape the new medium and the institutions that grow up around it.

The impact of new media, in Williams's model, is evolutionary, not revolutionary.

Moreover, as more and more of the youth try to get educated and opinionated through blogs in Pakistan, they fail to realize a few of the core issues that are associated with this media, the most important of which is information integrity, which can be defined as the dependability and trustworthiness of information.

In the cyber-world, integrity is generally measured by applause, popularity and search engine ratings and not by critical evaluation of the sources of knowledge. And it is due to this imperfection that big power and big money find ways to control access to virtual communities. We find that some of the "democratic contributors" to online information are hired hands of politicians and corporations who want knowledge to suit their interests, as well as their opponents of who want the opposite.

But despite the integrity issue associated with new media, popularity of Web 2.0 is increasing among Pakistan's youth and this popularity is of concern to news television channels in three main areas.

First, the popularity of news channels is decreasing among youth as a large number of youth have actually switched from news channels and started to use blogs and services such as Twitter to get news updates. To retain this niche of audience, news channels need to develop expertise in offering news through new media, which is a specialized domain altogether.

Secondly, if news channels do not report a news item or an event making waves in the world of blogs, there is a high risk that netizens will loose confidence in that particular channel. And many news organizations might not be able to understand this diminishment of confidence due to their own lack of understanding of the power of new media.

Finally, news reporters are also developing a habit of using blogs and collaborative services such as Wikipedia as their only news source. The scope of their research is becoming limited, and that too, in this age of massive information. With today's news consumers sometimes being more aware than journalists themselves, this lack of research by journalists causes their own credibility to be on stake.

CONCLUSION.

Theoretically, Web 2.0 has a great potential to serve as a facilitator of knowledge and information exchange between citizens and politicians, and also amongst citizens. But in practice, in Pakistan's scenario, this role is very limited.

However, for Pakistan, the situation can change, if two areas of key concern are addressed.

On one front, political parties of Pakistan have a critical role to play, as played by Obama, in enabling the public, particularly the next generation, to interact with them through interactive websites using the latest of communication techniques.

Secondly, online citizens, both news consumers and news creators, need to be educated in order to leverage the emerging forms of power enabled by new media. An overload of indiscriminate information, as occurs in well-wired societies, reduces powerful information to meaningless gossip. It is only an educated online community that can separate information with integrity from information generated by popularity contests and clever manipulation.

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