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Political Public Relations and Social Media: A Theoretical Review and the Case of Pakistan

Abstract

The landscape of political communication has been changed or transformed due to growing popularity of social media. Since social media is based on 2-way communication, therefore, it provides an opportunity to initiate a dialogue and indulge in discussion with a large number of people. Therefore, this study is intended to explore the existing literature that how the politicians are taking full advantage of social media to connect with the audiences and communicate the political ideologies around the globe and then critically analyze the current scenario in Pakistan that how social media is being used by the politicians of Pakistan? Another objective of this study is to explore that what type of researches can be conducted in future regarding social media and political communication in Pakistan. It is important to consider that if used properly the technology can have a significant effective role (Kent, 2013) in any democratic society. Moreover, it has been concluded that in future no research in the field of democracy and political communication would be complete without studying and including the relationship and importance of new technology in the field of information and communication.

Keywords: Political Communication, Political Public Relations, Social Media, Politicians, Pakistan

Introduction

The landscape of political communication has been changed or transformed due to growing popularity of social media. Since social media is based on 2-way communication, therefore, it provides an opportunity to initiate a dialogue and indulge in discussion with a large number of people. Social media provides chances to cultivate and manage relationships with the users. These newer platforms have also allowed politicians to personalize their political profiles, give information of their own choice to the audience and shed light on their own views that may have the power to change the perception and opinion of common people. That is why, now widespread acceptance of social media has challenged the way traditional media have been used to spread news and to debate on most important political and social issues (Yang, Chen, Maity, & Ferrara, 2016).

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In this modern era, social media has amended the conditions and rules of social interaction. The politicians are now commonly seen altering the communication strategies and incorporating social media considering it an unavoidable part. The politicians need to adopt strategic political communication to ensure their visibility on social media and create the positive and favourable image among the public, thus becoming active in political public relations which is considered a significant offshoot of strategic political communication. There are numerous researches on political communication and political public relations via social media. Social Media is now considered as an indispensable element of public discussion and discourse in contemporary society, it presents a completely new perspective of how people communicate and engage with each other. The unprecedented approval of social media is perplexing the approach old media had been used to disseminate news and discuss most important and top priority political and social problems. Therefore, this study is intended to explore the existing literature that how the politicians are taking full advantage of social media to connect with the audiences and communicate the political ideologies around the globe and then critically analyze the current scenario regarding the case of Pakistani politicians to ingrain strong democratic values in the society.

Political Public Relations Through Social Media

About the role of social media in PR, one of the significant factors that has its impact on politicians was explored in research by Painter (2015). He talked about the impact of the source that information comes from on the presidential candidate of US 2012. It also investigated the impact of social media on the campaigning done through online communications on public, political parties, and public relations. The findings of the research point out that the function of Facebook was way more impactful in comparison with the websites used for campaigning and this also aided with the increase in both public relationship and bringing confidence in the government and the campaign. The literature talks about the connection between agenda setting and agenda building and also the links with public relations. There is a lot of research on the ways political actors and their parties can influence people's options and perceptions about them. Kim, Xiang and Kioussis (2011) discovered a similar thing after studying 2008 United States presidential elections. The results showed that the entity salience (subject and contender) linkages were found in public relations interactions and international media's coverage while influencing characteristic (tone) salience associations were found among PR interactions, international media and over all public opinion. Kioussis, Kim, Carnifax and Kochhar (2014) described the role of the US Senate majority leader in making the salience of subjects and queries recognized in reporting of news media and policy making in 2011, hauled up first and second level agenda building. The author conducted the research on a group of public relations interactions, newspaper items, and policymaking documents and revealed that a big connection exists between them and also supported that agenda-building connections exist at both levels. The writer also added that different types of information endowment, consisting of press releases, blog posts, Twitter and Facebook messages. Kalsnes (2016) explored that media actors, political actors and the public are three major actor groups in the political communication paradigm and hence he studied their usage of social media during the electoral process in Norway 2013. The study was particularly of importance as

it discussed how political actors just skip the role of gate keepers and directly communicate with their publics, privately or publicly. At the same time, both Twitter and Facebook, according to the results of the study, were essentially important to create activity and brought traffic on social media. The scholarship also focused on the philosophies of media logic and helps in understanding the process of political communication on social media. The scholar explained that the paramount effect of the social media logic was on media actors' diminishing their role as gatekeepers.

Conway, Kenski and Wang (2015) worked on questions arising the amount of substance that could avoid, gather, or appeal the attentiveness of traditional form of media. For the said purpose, the researcher investigated the agenda setting effects of the Twitter content of the main candidates for US congressional election of 2010 with the articles printed in the most popular newspapers of the country. Using the time series investigation, daily papers were studied. It was discovered that there existed an interdependent correlation agendas among Twitter content and traditional news. The practice revealed by the research was that the newspapers were following the political actors on some issues while predicting the political agenda on Twitter. Another important discovery of the study was that politicians were using Twitter for the purpose of reinforcement of their connection with constituency, get more popularity and approval from the public and also to confirm their involvement.

It is worthy to mention here that political public relations is an expanding dimension of research by integrating mainstream public relations and political communication into digital public relations. Frame and Brochette (2015) conducted a study on five French politicians who were using Twitter, for the purpose of public relation. The researchers used qualitative approach to political communication and found that the micro blogging facility available in social media gives politicians an opportunity to monitor closely the public opinion and daily events, to interact with people, media, shareholders, and other politicians, use it for PR and most importantly for the purpose of information circulation.

It is noticeable that there is so much scholarship regarding the positive aspects of social media, political communication and political public relation and its importance in everyday lives. On the contrary there are some scholars who doubt the productivity of the use of social media in the field of political PR, like Valentini (2015) is one of the authors who challenged the use of social media for the purpose of PR, voters and organization. The author found that role of social media in PR is much exaggerated, he argued that the use of social media is considered 'good' for PR because social media has the ability to mount discussions and great rapport among the organizations and public and keep them involved all times. But, the practical evidence in public relation generally is based on individual case and is limited to the dominance of current organizational practices with less information of the tangible worth of people or organizations. Furthermore, Momoc (2013) talks about the way politicians are more concerned about their image on social media among the public shows, that they are not much bothered in getting involved in discussions with their public, but the social media experts advocate that online space is for political communication with the involvement of public. The researcher found the results by using content analysis

method on the accounts of Facebook and blogs of various political leaders of the parliamentary party of Romania. While going through the existing literature many scholars worked on the same idea that the politicians use social media platforms to create their image but they don't do much in order to maintain or build relationship with the public by engaging in communication with them, thus undermining the scope of social media and political public relations. Ross, Fountaine and Comrie (2015) also explored in the scholarship that majority of political actors did not enjoy discussions with the public and did not get into discussions very often. Therefore the political actors used social media, especially Facebook, to transmit information rather than using it as a medium for two way interacting tool.

The scholars while working on the new disciplines, have also chalked out the gaps in the existing literature where there is a huge margin for further researches, As Taylor and Kent (2010) believed that the future scholarship in the subject of public relations and social media should be more focused on more significant matters like technology interfaces (Facebook, Twitter, etc.), rather than the matters including publics, shareholders, interpersonal and communication, issues etc. Many researchers also believe that politicians use social media to convey the manifesto to their voters but they also use it to get approval and support from their voters regarding their political activities. Similarly, Froehlich and Rüdiger (2006) also discussed that it is still complicated to measure or test the success or failure of PR. They had also stated that main part of political public relations is to gain public approval for their political manifesto and activities.

Politicians on Social Media: A Global Review

The number of social media users who use it for posting images, texts, videos etc is growing rapidly on daily basis. (Duggan, 2013; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, Madden, Rainie & Smith, 2015). Social media has also been called a perfect tool to know public perception about political actors and government politics. (Steiglitz, Brockmann, & Xuan, 2012) as it gives people and politicians a forum to become a part of political discussions at public or personal level. There are various researches studying how the politicians are using Facebook and Twitter. Walkman, Colliander, Madestam, Modig, Sagfossen and Harder, (2017) analyzed the active usage of social media by the politicians and also explored the negative or positive effects of personal content on these platforms on their popularity. This study talked about an essential realization on self-presentation methods of politicians particularly, and mostly concerning self-presentation was in the situation of failure. Kurt and Karaduman (2012) selected the parliamentarians of Turkey and investigated the significance and efficacy of social media platforms in current times by focusing on politicians, who had the power to make decisions in public sphere. The researcher found out that the politicians were very active and believed in the effectiveness of social media and the primary purpose was to reaching maximum number of people. Similarly, Mengü, Güçdemir, Ertürk, and Canan (2015) also conducted a study regarding the usage of social media by Turkish politicians. They used the method of content analysis to find out whether the usage of social media was favorable or not for the contesting candidates in the local elections of 2014. The results showed that usage

of social media was favorable due to the steadfast and easy accessibility of social media and one on one and friendly communication.

Social networking sites like Facebook and micro-blogging service like Twitter have the capability to influence the political participation in a positive manner. Twitter and in some cases Facebook, are taken as the best available carrier of self-promotion, thus offering politicians to instantly inform the audience openly and freely about the political activities. They can utilise social media strategically to motivate people to act in the desirable way. Many scholars are of the view that Facebook is the preferable medium to transmit information while others believe that Twitter has the privilege of being most trust worthy medium as far as political communication is concerned. Ross, Fountaine and Comrie (2015) studied Facebook posts of New Zealand MPs in 2011, keeping the win of Obama in the presidential elections of 2008 in the background, which motivated the politicians in the US and around the world to use social media to boast their election campaign. It was learnt during the study that Facebook had great power to influence communication outside individual networks. Social media is known for its quality of being able to help masses form opinion. Karamat and Farooq, (2016) studied social as a channel that helps public to gather and spread different thoughts, material, images and videos. It also helps people to cultivate communication and links among each other. The role of Twitter and Facebook in political interaction was also investigated in the study, it also talked about the high level of liberation that is made to create awareness using social media platforms and this was done through survey method.

Likewise, Di Fraia and Missaglia (2014) studied rapidly increasing transformation in political communication in Italy. They claimed that a large number of Italian politicians had started to use Twitter and other social media platforms a lot more than the traditional forms of media but their communication was unidirectional and top-down. Furthermore, Lukamto and Carson (2016) in Australia, conducted a quantitative content analysis on the usage of Twitter and Facebook by the Australian politicians in 2014. The results pointed out that the politician thoroughly enjoyed social media and were rapidly trying to acquire the skills required to operate digital media, especially Facebook. And according to the politicians, the purpose of using social media mainly was for political interaction. However, the researcher found out the amount of interaction of politicians among themselves on social media was very little. The literature shows that Barack Obama set the trend of using social media for political campaigning during 2008 Presidential elections. He is considered the first one to involve Twitter in his campaign and make maximum use of social media to achieve his political agenda. In the light of US presidential elections (2008 & 2013), Hong (2013) studied the scenario during Istanbul local elections of 2014 with regard to communication, information and agenda. He explored different ways in which social media especially Twitter became one of the essential component of campaigns, Twitter was the most favored mode of social media as it delivers immediate response and has operational interactivity. It was also revealed that the highest funds could be generated using social media platforms. As the literature on behavior of social media usage suggests that people use it to share small pieces of information in big amounts. Oelsner and Heimric (2015) discovered that Twitter has emerged as the latest tool of outreach by political

actors. Their study based on a detailed content analysis of five federal state parliamentarians, the usage of different social media platforms like Twitter, Youtube and Facebook in 2012. The results of the study suggested that all MPs were actively using social media and it turned out very effective as the first step toward communication with the public.

Twitter is gaining a lot of attention by the political actors to create impact, inform and get involved with their public while measuring public opinion about them. Graham, Jackson and Broersma (2016) made a comparison between the usage of Twitter by Dutch and British parliamentary contestants by conducting a detailed analysis of the content that both the contestants created on Twitter during the 2010 general elections. The study came with the results that Dutch political candidate were more likely to use Twitter so much so that the content created by them on Twitter was almost double as compared to the British candidates. The scholarship also discovered that due to the active involvement of the Dutch candidates, the community was more receptive and enchanted more in the discussions. To support the same idea, another study was carried out by Aharony (2012) to explain the usage of Twitter and its comparison between political actor's behavior from different parts of the world. For the said purpose, the researcher studied and analyzed the tweets by the Israel Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu from the period of August to October in 2010; the British Prime Minister David Cameron; and the US President Barack Obama. The scholarship revealed that the tweets by the US President were more in number as compared to other prime ministers, and the British Prime Minister had the least number of tweets, but the reasons behind using twitter for all the studies prime ministers/president were translucency and outreach.

In a similar study, Caplan (2013) carried out an analysis of different categories and intended approaches of the Twitter content of two politicians, Paul Hirschbiel the Democratic Candidate and Scott Rigell the Republican. The study found out that the main social media platform used to share information by both the candidates was Twitter. They used twitter to share information about their day to day activities, and political announcements proving the essential part played by social media in their election campaign. The preemptive strategies used by both the political actors to create an impact, drive action by the public and show how different they were from their counterpart, were measured by different tactics. Similarly, a scholarship carried out on Korea explored that the politicians have made social media as the primary form of communication with the voters during the election time and also in non-election times (Hsu & Park, 2012). The politicians in Korea were very much aware of the impact the social media could create on the voters, that is why they were propagating their activities on Twitter.

In another study by Moon, Busy and Grant (2010), explained the contemporary political scenario is highly influenced by the advent of social media and to prove their hypothesis, they conducted a quantitative analysis of Twitter use by Australian politicians. The study helped them in understanding the methods, the said politicians were using and engaging in online environment. The results of the study supported the hypothesis that politicians who were using social media had positive results as compared to the ones not using it. In the same manner, Nielsen

and Vaccari (2013) also investigated the social media activities of a small number of incomparable contestants. They also came up with the result that social media had great influence on their voters. He based the study on 224 prominent party candidates competing in truculent districts for the U.S. House of Representatives throughout the congressional elections in 2010.

Keeping in mind the changing scenario of social media, Bode and Dalrymple (2016) carried out a study to apprehend the behavior of politicians and the policy makers that how they communicate in the current changing world of digital media. As part of the study, main focus was given to the content created on twitter and according to the results of the study it was clear that the consumers of Twitter were more engrossed in political debates and discourses overall and very less in traditional form of media.

Lee and Oh (2012) carried a study on the usage of Twitter in Korean politics and carried out two different tests on the South Korean politicians and concluded that the influence of interaction happening on the Twitter by the politicians regarding to public's approach, emotional, and behavioral replies, concentrating on the influence of message personalization.

During the Norwegian elections of 2013, Karlsen & Enjolras (2016) revealed that there was a link between individuals and social media by studying the content on contestants' Twitter account. The researchers came up with the conclusion that social media has the ability to control and impact relationships of the individuals. They found out that there were two approaches prevailing on social media; a) party centered and b) individualised approach. They also believed that the individual approach was more active on Twitter but could have negative impact also. In the cross examination, the researchers found out that contestants who use both traditional media and social media for the purpose of interaction were more effective as compared to the others. LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrech (2013) explored that Twitter was an efficient method of communication in public relations in a case study on the congressional campaigns. (Martinelli, 2011) explains the relationship between democracy and public relation as vital and the emerging usage of social media for democratic activities was the reason behind closing this topic to work on. The researcher analysed the efficacy of Twitter in sending information and creating public involvement in US elections. The results of the study indicate that the usage of social media actually increases the chances of winning for the candidate, and the popularity of the candidates was also increased due to the use of Twitter.

Bringing Pakistan into Debate

The popularity of social media and its acceptance is increasing on daily basis with every passing minute in the world and the scenario is not much different in case of Pakistan too. It is considered as one of the effective medium of communication for official as well as personal communication. The people here in Pakistan completely realise the effectiveness and power of social media. According to a report (Internet world stat, 2016) growth rate of Facebook users was 33.3% only in Asia and in case of Pakistan the growth rate was 14% per annum and the total users of Facebook were 2.7 billion till June 2016 ("The digital landscape of Pakistan...", September 2017). Social media has provided the opportunity to discuss every issue openly, even the issues considered as taboo in Pakistan.

Pakistan is a democratic state but democracy here is still crawling and struggling hard to stand on its own feet, in fact sometimes it seems unstable. The common people don't have much access to traditional media and sometimes political issues take almost all the space in media, leaving no time to discuss public concerns. But now, with the advent of social media, every person has got an opportunity to share his or her own problems, concerns and ideas. Hence, social media is a place where common man can speak freely and talk about his own rights. Though the rapid growth of social media have negative aspects too. Sometimes, people take undue benefit of freedom and try to propagate and defame others. This practice is becoming a norm in today's politics. The politicians frame political issues on their social media platforms, lead the discussions and most of the times give certain direction to mold the public opinion. Like the modern democracies, politicians in Pakistan are also involved in political public relations, using social media to propagate their political ideologies, promoting positive self and negative others. They are using social media extensively to connect with their political units and voters. The politicians are using Twitter and Facebook to attain their political objectives and to build their relationship with the audience. Most of the content they are posting is related to their political activities and ideologies, their foremost purpose of using social media is to gain political benefits. Irrespective of the fact that social media is getting popularity because of its interactive nature and two-way communication, our politicians hardly respond to the questions or concerns of the audience on social media. They just post and spread their desired information, using it for one-way communication thus ignoring its distinguishing feature. They are just using it like traditional media in terms of response to the audience is concerned. They are the producers of their own message but ignoring the choice of their consumers which should be a primary concern in public relations, when someone wants to cultivate long lasting relationship with the audience and manage reputation. They sometimes post to criticise and attack the opponent and while doing so they don't even care about basic morals and values of the society. Sometimes the language of the posts and tweets is very abusive and insulting, which shows that they can go to any extent to achieve their political agendas.

The politicians in Pakistan seems to learn how to use social media effectively, they can cultivate long lasting relationship with the audience and can manage their reputation. They can connect with their constituency and can work better. Keeping the current scenario in view, it can be said that there is a lot of margin for research in the domain of political communication, political public relation through social media in Pakistan. Future researches can explore that how and why politicians are connecting with the people through social media? The work can be done on the identification of the politicians and difference in their online and offline identification can also be explored. The content, politicians are posting on social media can also be critically analyzed.

Conclusion

In the light of existing literature and whole discussion it can be concluded that if social media is used in a right direction and strategically, it can help public relation practitioner/politicians to strengthen democracy through discourse and discussions. The researchers, keeping the focus on the emerging role of public relation experts in this new modern post mass media society, suggests that if used properly the technology can have a significant effective role (Kent, 2013).

Moreover, Segerberg and Bennett, 2012, in their study put a special focus on the significance of social equity and education as important prerequisite for digital media. They also emphasised that they wouldn't complete any future research in the field of democracy and political communication without studying and including the relationship and importance of new technology in the field of information and communication.

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