Social Media and Protest Behavior

Qasim Mahmood[*], Amira Sariyati Binti Firduas[†] & Hamedi Bin Mohd Adnan[‡]

Abstract

The study adds a great deal of understanding about the use of social media for political purpose. The current review paper brings to the knowledge that the consumption of social media for news stimulates political debates among the users that ultimately leads them to find solutions of their political problems. The paper tells that if the authorities do not address the concerns of the users then new media technologies serve as instruments and facilitate them to contrive different devices to achieve their goals. So the use of social media for getting news, discussing political issues and other public affairs ultimately fetch protest behavior among its users in order to raise demands for solving their political problems. Moreover, disintermediation of social media and its anti-hegemonic nature make it more appealing as a global agenda setter for the users to highlight their disquiets at international level.

Keywords: Social Media, News Consumption, Opinion Expression, Protest Behavior, Gatewatching, Disintermediation.

Introduction and Background

During the last one-decade, the ICTs and the social media have played a gigantic role in different social and political movements and revolutions across the world. The expansion of social media and socio-political unrest in Tunis, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Italy, Spain and UK have raised many questions about the political potential of social media for communication scholars to answer through their research. It is widely accepted fact that technologies greatly influence the behaviors of the individuals and society that eventually alter the social and political dynamics of the system. The invention of radio gave birth to media effects related concepts, which were endorsed by the magic bullet theory. After that, television changed the patterns of media consumption behavior of the viewers and now new media has altered the landscape altogether. Despite of the fact that television is the main source of information and easiest to use; the citizens of the US consider Internet as more informative (Abida, 2013). The invention of Internet has generated a serious debate because of its wider acceptance and gigantic impact upon different aspects of the society. Graham (1999) articulates that a real transforming technology creates a dual impact; on the one hand it has the ability to serve the recurrent needs of the society in a better way (both qualitatively and quantitatively). On the other hand it must create an impact on the social and political life of the individuals.

[*] Department of Mass Communication, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad
[†] Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[‡] Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The current political circumstances of the world has raised the demand of interrogation about the function of social media in blazing protests, conflicts, dissent and other forms of belligerent politics across the world. So far the debate on social media and its effects on political culture is concerned; two groups with contradictory thought have been emerged up till now. The one is skeptic camp denying the role of social media as a powerful tool for political mobilization and change (e.g., Gladwell, 2010) and the second one is convinced camp that believes in the potential of social media as cardinal constituent of modern politics and activism (e.g., Howard et al., 2011). The proponents of second school of thought have overruled the research findings of the skeptic camp declaring them as misguided. They believe that there are ample proofs in various developing and even developed countries indicating the masses who keep themselves engaged in overt political activities like protests, rallies and demonstrations are heavy users of social media technologies and applications (Bekkers, Beunders, Edwards, & Moody, 2011; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012; Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012; Yun & Chang, 2011).

Since the emergence of Facebook in 2006, a flood of studies have been executed to map out the relationship between the usage of Facebook and political protest behavior among individuals. Most of the studies on new media and citizen participation have ratified this assumption and found a relationship between the frequencies of social media usage and protest behavior among individuals (Gil de Zuniga, et al., 2012). In order to prove the existence of the relationship between the usage of social media and protest behavior demands a theoretical debate. According to the Katz and Gurevitche's (1974) typology, people use media for getting news and information, building personal identity, establishing social relationship in the society and for diversion of mental state through seeking entertainment from the media. Existing research on digital media makes it clear that consuming social media for surveillance through acquisition of news is very much related to the various political activities. However the over usage of social media for entertainment purpose creates a negative impact upon the protest behaviors of the individuals (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). The past research on media effects has found that recurrent news consumption behavior of the individuals by using mass media increases social and political awareness that further develops a participatory approach in terms of politics among them (David, 2009; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006).

Social Media Permeate Collective Political Actions
The existing research has recommended various options regarding the use of social media by which users can trigger unanimous collective actions to influence the political culture of the country. The latest research has endorsed the power of the social media to influence the collective actions of the masses for political causes. Several studies have suggested the demonstrators to use social media to spread such information that mobilizes the masses and expedites the process of coordination among the protestors. This practice will eventually allow the new media users to come together for bringing forth political reforms by sharing opinion with other individuals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). A number of justifications to comprehend the presence of this positive relationship have been given by the communication scholars. The first logical reason that has been put

forward by the scholars to endorse their proposition is built upon the notion that online social media enables the political activists to contact with the large number of audience with no trouble hence making the social movements possible to reach to critical figures (Kristen & Saxton, 2012). The construction of identity among individuals and groups is another cardinal factor in originating political behavior among them. The social media offers multiple means to individuals to contrive different strategies to demonstrate protests by helping individuals to get interpersonal feedback and to strengthen the group norms (Dalton, Sickle, & Weldon, 2009). For instance, Facebook offers "News Feed" feature that facilitates the users to screen out their contacts and to remain updated about the activities going on with them. It also allows its users to join and to create their own social and political group based upon shared interests. Thus the users who are the members of different social and political Facebook groups have better opportunities to get such swift mobilizing information that is not possible through other means and accordingly grab more chances to get them engaged in different collective political actions (Yamamoto, 2006). The increased interaction happening upon online spaces eventually helps them to build strong offline bondage among members. This thing further enriches the power of the members of the social media and its users to increase their participation in different political rallies and protests (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009).

Besides this, new media technologies like Twitter, enables its users to interlace their political and personal life together by making public the users of personal political expression. Bimber, et al. (2005, p.367) defines social media technologies as *"a set of communication processes involving the crossing of boundaries between private and public life".* Hence social media offers a perfect condition for its users to take collective political actions. All these factors play a crucial role in generating collective debates, issues and solutions of the social and political problems to the users. Likewise social media has all the potential required for bringing mutual protest behaviors among individuals to find solutions of the political crisis (Bennett &Segerberg, 2011).

However only a small number of studies have empirically verified the power of the social media that instigates the political protest behavior among individuals. Moreover they have sampled different subgroups of the population like the demonstrators, the youth or different exclusive political platforms instead of collecting information from general public (Valenzuela et al., 2012). The time span of the data collection of these studies in addition to the limitations of the sample is another issue that mars the significance of the assumptions of these investigations. The scholars have collected the data on social media use and protest behavior among individual either in established democratic countries or under sever authoritarian atmosphere like Middle Easters countries and neglected the case of poor democratic countries that democratized themselves from 1970s to 1990s (Huntington, 1991).

Online News Consumption, Opinion Expression and Political discussion Translate Protest Behaviors
Previous research has established that news consumption behavior is a vital source for developing interpersonal political discussion among the users of social media,

establishing opportunities for learning and instigating political activism into them (de Boer & Velthuijsen, 2001; Eveland, 2004). Additionally new media technologies are used not only to find news by consuming different news sites purposefully but they are also great avenues for unintentional exposure to news (e.g., scrolling down the profile of a friend on Facebook and held on a link of a news story). In both cases learning is evident that increases the likelihood of taking political actions.

Another justification to endorse the relationship that exists between the use of social media and protest behavior lies in expression of political opinion. This claim affirms that expressing political opinion on social media requires detailed understanding, reasoning and depth of knowledge about politics which ultimately leads the individuals towards political rendezvous and protest behavior (Cho et al., 2009). Rymond J. Pingree commented in following way on the issue:

> *"Expression, not reception, may be the first step toward better citizenship. Its mere expectation can motivate exposure, attention and elaboration of media messages, and the act of message composition is often much more effective at improving understanding than any act of reception"* (Pingree, 2007, p.447).

According to Valenzuela, (2013) most of the new media scholars have declared that the political expression is in fact a form of political participation rather than an antecedent of it. He further reinforces his claims that there is a close tie between the explicit expression of opinion and protest behavior. The online political expression of opinion is significant mainly in emerging democracies where democratic institutions are not deep-rooted (Rojas & Puigi-i-Abril, 2009).

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) assert that the more individuals discuss about politics and other public affairs the more likely they are engaged in political actions. The political conversation over social media helps the individual not only to share information but also provides them an alternative framework to take in that information. According to Schmitt-Beck (2008) social media instigate political engagement in its users by offering a platform to them to fight with ideas, share highly structured arguments and produce their own stance on information distributed by the mainstream media. Hence political discussion over social media enhances the level of political learning and enables the individuals to take part in social and political causes more often (Valenzuela, 2013). The expression of opinion by using social media perhaps triggers online political talk, which is considered conducive by the new media scholars for interpersonal political engagements. Berger (2009) has asserted that the textual form of the new media technologies may possibly be more aim oriented than face-to-face discussion. According to him political debate on social media is an adequate mean to mobilize the individuals to actively participate in political process of the country.

Previously only political elites were used to engage in political debates and communication, but today the Internet and social media have become new discursive spaces that bring more participation and inclusion in political debates from non-political

actors (Vesnic, 2012). The interactive nature of social media is considered as a cardinal factor for establishing a difference between old and new media. The concept of interactivity is associated with the political ideal of active citizenship that provides an opportunity for the individuals to keenly participate in political debates of the government (Gane & Beer, 2008). The Internet and new media discussion forums afford the opportunity to the citizens to keep themselves engage in political discussion (Street and Wright, 2007). In the same manner Lusoli et al (2006) state that Internet has the potential to attract citizens and enhance the political participation. Dahlgram (2005) articulates that though the internet do not promise to provide a quick fix for democracy and solve all the problems abruptly but it immensely contributes to civic interaction among individuals that gradually introduces a democratic culture in the society. However, it has been proven hard to speculate the possibility of the shift in individuals' actions from joining causes over social media onto adopting real protest behavior. Morozoves, (2009) has categorized the users' online activities that do not bring in real life political actions and termed them as "Slacktivism". He is of the view that such activities serve the function of surveillance for the users, only increase user's sense of personal satisfaction, do not stimulate them to take overt political actions and has zero political impact on the actions of the social media users.

Social Media's Instrumental Role for Protest Behavior
Xenos & Moy (2007) has attached an instrumental value to the new media technologies while explaining the relationship between the use of these technologies for political purpose and protest behavior. In support of their argument Valenzuela (2013) asserts that the social media platform enable the disengaged users to join social and political causes. This further improves the probability of being mobilized for the disconnected users in both online and offline settings. The arguments of these scholars are based on the likelihood of mustering mobilizing information from social media either by direct willing exposure to the contents and profiles of some political or interest groups, social movements and NGOs or indirect incidental exposure to such contents. The knowledge of such mobilizing information is the basic and cardinal point for individuals to know where to go and how to attend a street demonstration.

Different scholars have explained the operational forms of the individual's political protest behaviors in detail. According to Lemart (1981) there are three levels of mobilizing information. The first one is *'indentificational'*, individuals and groups need to know the names and contact information to participate in different political actions. The second level is called *'locational'*; people get to know the venue or the time and place of political activity that is going to be demonstrated. The third level is termed as *'tactical'* individuals are instructed about the overt and covert tactics for how they can get involved in the demonstration. According to him social media as compared to the mainstream media is the most appropriate venue to impart the information regarding all the three levels to ensure the participation of the individuals, to incite political protest behaviors among the users and to take up the planned demonstration effectively. Hoffman (2006) while supporting Lamert's point of view asserts that the mainstream news media lacks the capacity to disseminate such mobilizing information as journalistic

operational spheres declare that such kind of information is partial and breaks the norm of objectivity. Wojcieszak & Mutz (2009) argues that certain websites like MoveOn.org and TakingITGlobal.org were specifically designed for mobilizing purposes and those who have some emotional attachment or political predisposition usually consume them. On the contrary social media is free from the customary principle of objectivity and is established around personal association rather than political ones.

Kristen & Saxon (2012) while supporting the instrumental nature of social media for trigging protest behavior states that geographically isolated individuals can make their ties strong with the help of social media in order to accelerate the process of social change. According to their findings most of the events remained local due to the geographical constraints and only people who were having face to face contact with one another used to participate in different social causes. Social media even with less budgetary and human resources has the power to initiate global level campaigns to support the social and political cause of any society. With the boom of social media, common people today are well equipped with the media as it is widely used and shared by the masses than ever before and not restricted only to media organizations.

Social Media Driving the Agenda of the Mainstream Media
Today Internet is considered as the most preferred source of seeking and imparting news and information across the world. Meraz (2009) believes that new media has challenged the established conventional media channels as a global agenda setting avenue. According to Robertson et al. (2002), the online communication tools are potential platforms to express opinions freely and connect with like-minded people. By using new media technologies individuals, journalists, politicians and different political organizations discuss different issues that are neglected by the mainstream media and subsequently influence the agenda of the society. According to them social media in terms of agenda setting role has evolved a new mass media replacing the traditional media as the main agenda setter of the society. These issues are later on taken up by the conventional mass media and reach to the whole audience. Hence new media today is on commanding position that drives the agenda of the mainstream media. Mendelsohn and Hutchings (2001) revealed their concerns about the absolute power of the new media technologies and argued that the online media is not autonomous in terms of discussing various aspects of an issue. They believed that selective exposure does exist in this new genre of communication. The question of swinging the gates of new media regarding any information rests upon the bloggers. If they deem any aspect of the phenomenon unimportant then it is excluded from the new media and political discussion (Wallsten, 2007). Likewise issues that are futile in grabbing much attention in online spaces may not be considered worthy for public interest hence losing the charm for journalists to make them the part of mainstream media (Uscinki, 2009).

Social Media and its Effects on Politics and Mainstream Media
It has become known through various researches (e.g., Stelter, 2008; Vargas, 2008) that technological developments of the past have marked significant changes on political culture of the world. As television; soon after its inception; became one of the core

sources of political information for the masses; same like the Internet has evolved an important device for political communication (Hoffman et al, 2013).   In 2008 US presidential elections, more than half of the American adult population used online spaces to get involved in politics (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). This ratio exceeded to three- quarters till 2012s presidential elections (Smith, 2013).   The internet, unlike television not only become a vertical medium which politicians used to interact with their voters but it has also emerged as a reciprocal mean for the citizens to experience their involvement in politics (Lindsay et al, 2013). Keeping in mind the trends of research on classification of off-line political behaviors of citizens, various researchers today attempt to ponder upon categorizing the online political participation and behaviors of the masses in their research. Since the embryonic stage of the Internet; scholars (e. g., Grossman, 1995) have foreseen the democratic nature of the Internet. The cyber-optimists have postulated that the Internet use will enhance the political knowledge of the masses; ultimately bring more people into political process (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006). The studies pointed out that the access to the internet and online political information are the main predictors of voters turn out (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). It also increases the political knowledge of the users that makes them enable to participate in the political process of the country in efficient way (Kenski & Straud, 2006).

The political role of social media most particularly after its impact on Arab countries generated a theoretical debate that how social media influence the political upshots. The new media technologies in general implicate user-generated subjects and disseminate information by using different interactive technological networks. However, different forms of social media due to their different nature create diverse political results. The existing research on social media and its influence on politics have explored three most relevant uses of the Internet and the social media that influence political results.

The first one is 'gate watching' that facilitate the users to contribute in the course of selecting, filtering and disseminating news items. The internet and new media technologies allow the users to choice and screen the news stories in different ways like through twitters, blogs and different social networking sites (Aday et al., 2013). As a result it is noticed that the sole privilege of information gatekeeping that once mainstream media was enjoying, have been, now shared by the new media users. This domain was once exclusively steered by the hierarchy of gatekeepers like professional journalists, news editors, reporters and other media officials (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Burns (2005) declares that the gate watching behavior of the new media users has unequivocally transformed the model of elite gatekeeping. Today; the role of filtering news items for distributing information to friends and followers; is taken by the social media users (Aday et al, 2103). But all the social media users in gate-watching sensation are not equal. Some of the users based upon their implied hierarchies of influence are more important than others in determining which information bears the values of dissemination and which is not. The implicit influential chain of command in the phenomenon of gate watching is evident through links between blogs (Hindman, 2010), number of blog readers (Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010) and number of Twitter followers (Wu, Hoffman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). These metrics of influence including many others

display heavy skewed distribution in which few social media users receive unreasonable attention than others. Though such slanted distributions do not determine the level of social influence but surely these are very important. This is how the networked configuration of many new media technologies systematically affects the flow of particular information among users (Aday et al., 2013).

The second debate is concerned with the concept of 'disintermediation' of new media. This concept is about the diminishing intermediary role of mainstream media in the society. It is observed that the usage of the Internet and new media technologies has reduced the exclusive part of mainstream media in setting the agenda for the society. The rise of the citizens and activist media has shrunk the objectivity and relevancy of mainstream media, hence collapsing the elite gatekeeping system of the old media. The user's created content in an open marketplace are shared horizontally through new media technologies by citizens disinter-mediates the traditional media and reduces its age long role as the principal intermediary amongst citizens and between citizens and the governments (Aday et al., 2013).

Della porta and Mosca (2005) says that computer mediated communication is thoroughly different from the mainstream media, because unlike legacy media it favors disintermediation, as issues are presented themselves to the common masses directly with small budget that assist those who have meager resources. Hermida (2010) believes that this observation specifically fits to micro-blogging that enables the citizens to report an event without using the route of institutional reporting. Castells (2007, p. 248) describes the new media "mass self-communication" as "self-generated in content and self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many". The activist-run informational websites (Della porta & Mosca, 2005), the universal acceptance of Twitter (Hermida, 2010) and self-generated contents (castells, 2007) are often cited as supportive arguments of disintermediation of new media (Aday et al., 2013).

Despite the proliferation of citizen media ubiquitously, the large mainstream media organizations still hold substantial capability to frame political conflicts. Keeping in mind this account, disintermediation has not occurred yet. The contents that non-activist public see over citizen media generally drift through the channels of big mainstream media organizations along with their biased frames and agendas (Aday et al., 2013). It has been identified that the gate-watchers of social media may consume more contents from legacy media than from citizen media; because the offline print and electronic mainstream media are likely to muster a large share of audience attention through online spaces (Hindman, 2010).

The third debate is about the consequences of the Internet and social media for facilitating political participation and mobilization. There is an incongruity; with some arguing that online political conversations lead to political involvement and infuse participation among the social media users (Campbell & Kwak, 2011; Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Price & Cappella, 2002) and others disagreeing that online political

discourse generate political dispassion and a decline in social capital (Wilken, 2011). This discrepancy might be due to differences in methodological usage, selection of the biased case or failure to take notice of the analytical variations between the usage types (Aday et al., 2013). The studies which analyzed the online contents reveal that the new media has strong mobilizing effect whereas the data based on empirical research like surveys; discloses that Internet usage strengthens existing political power arrangements (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2010). Such findings are conceivably rooted in part in case selection approaches that honor the established political organizations and prevailing norms of traditional political behavior such as deliberation (Freelon, 2010; Wright, 2012). Furthermore, declaring the Internet as an undifferentiated medium is unfair itself; ignoring the number of political mobilizations across the world that took place online (Farrell, 2012).

Conclusion
The media scholars have investigated that the social media is a central component of modern politics and activism. The Middle East and North African (MENA) countries are evident that the masses who kept themselves engaged in overt political activities in the form of protests, rallies and demonstrations were heavy users of social media applications and technologies. The academics have attached an instrumental value to the social media and found a relationship between the use of these technologies for political purpose and protest behavior. The increased interaction of the social media users, the construction of identity among individuals through Facebook and other applications provides a genial atmosphere for the users to take collective political actions. Afterwards the disintermediation of social media, substituting the legacy media as the main agenda setter of the society, challenging the established gatekeeping hierarchy of the conventional media add more strength in the power of the social media. Then news consumption, opinion expression and political discussion over online spaces further provoke the users of the social media to adopt protest behaviors if the authorities do not address their concerns. All these factors bear instrumental values for the users and play a crucial role for them in generating debate and devising strategies to take collective actions in order to raise demands to solve their political problems.

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