

ICTs, AN ALTERNATIVE SPHERE FOR SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN PAKISTAN-A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The Internet and other ICTs have tremendous potential to serve as tools for information dissemination and organizing protest along with traditional mobilization methodologies for social movements. The use of new media is becoming increasingly important in developed countries but social movements in developing countries quite often are not accustomed to ICT usage. In this paper we discuss a research framework to investigate IT usage in mobilization and the information dissemination process of Pakistani civil society. We have studied a recent movement in Pakistan and found that people have started using web as a resource for information dissemination and for staging online and offline protesting. This paper emphasize that although there are initial signs that people start to use these technologies, there is growing need to empirically investigate the Pakistani civil society for ICT usage in mobilization process.

KEYWORDS

Social Movements, Cyber Protest, Virtual Campaigning, ICTs

1. INTRODUCTION.

The Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have revolutionized every sphere of life in human communication. ICTs are generally defined as tools used in creation, processing, transferring and sharing of information. Modern ICTs include Computer, Internet/E-mail, software applications, cell phone, Video conferencing etc. (Bergh & Mckenna, 2004). With respect to the worldwide ICT adoption process, a digital divide characterizes the development in different regions. The digital divide refers to the inequality of information and communication technologies (ICTs) utilization (Evers & Greke, 2004). To analyze some effects of this digital divide, we investigate the use of ICT in international civil society represented by the practice of the World Social Forum (WSF). We can compare WSF's European chapter and the Pakistani chapter. The European chapter has its own website and uses different software tools to analyze the data of registration process; its communication process is established by different maintained mailing lists (ESF, 2007) whereas the Pakistani chapter is maintained by only a yahoo group. There are many reasons which deprive civil society organizations to effectively utilize ICT in their organizational settings e.g. unavailability of infrastructure, unavailability of open source tools, lack of IT literate people, public's ICT accessibility and the impact of virtual activities in real life. In this paper we are investigating the use of ICT in the context of an alternative sphere for information dissemination and mobilization in Pakistani civil society.

In Pakistan the term "civil society" is used as a generic term including citizen organizations and initiatives, networks and alliances working in the context of social, economic and cultural fields. These could be formal or informal. The formal category includes political parties, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, professional associations, philanthropies, academia, pressure groups, think tanks, and the informal category includes faith-based organizations, burial societies, shrines, seminaries, neighborhood associations, jirgas (councils of elders) and savings groups. (Sattar & Baig, 2001) Pakistani civil society organizations are involved

in advocacy and lobbying of policy issues/debates, emergency, rehabilitation, relief and service delivery activities. The use of information technology services in Pakistani civil society is very limited, even most of the organizations do not have their own website. The social movements are represented by campaigns run by civil society organizations, and a social movement could be defined as “a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity” (Wright, 2004). Pakistan is confronted by political, social, economic, institutional, and governance problems. Therefore, there is a strong need of advocacy for social and economic justice in the country by civil society. The increased threats of terrorism pose a significant danger for conventional protesting in the country, and in this scenario modern ICTs can serve as an alternative sphere for civil society.

2. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COMMUNICATION.

The success of social movements is dependent on the mobilization of people. Very important and mandatory functions for public's mobilization are information dissemination and communication. According to (Diani, 2000) communication in social movements can be categorized into four forms: Private and direct communication involves face-to-face restricted interactions among movement activists, whereas private and mediated communication is information sharing by the help of some medium. Public and direct communication is carried out on public places whereas public and mediated communication involves mass media.

The technologies have been involved in the mobilization process to communicate with masses (Donk et al, 2004). In the 18th and 19th centuries mainly print media was used as tool, whereas in the 20th century radio broadcasting and the television were used quite extensively by social movements (Langman, 2005). With the advent of new ICTs, new forms of mobilization are taking place using SMS, Emails, online advocacy and online petition campaigns (Surman & Reilly, 2003). ICTs enable to launch campaigns at rapid scale and rapid speed (Diani, 2000) but the physical impact of virtual activities in real life is not so clear and there are fears that the activities carried out in the virtual sphere may not gain their intended purpose. (Diani, 2000) described that the usage of ICT in different social movement networks is dependent on their broader approach to effect social change, and computer mediated communication is instrumental in reinforcing face-to-face contacts. The first signs of virtual resistance emanated when an internet-based campaign was initiated against Multilateral Agreement in Investment (MAI) in 1998. Peter Smith and Elizabeth Smythe pointed out that political delays and disagreements were the main causes of failure of MAI but they concluded that social groups armed with internet technology successfully exploited the political opportunities for their protest activities (Aelstand et al, 2004). The first successful protest mobilized by internet technology was at the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Anheier et al, 2004). Since then the internet is being used regularly to disseminate information and mobilize masses. The Web represents a mass medium which will be getting more important for all political actors like social movements and protest groups (Zeller, 1992).

The objective of this paper is to highlight the need of investigating use of ICTs by Pakistani civil society and presenting a research framework to be followed. The study will provide a general understanding whether the effects of a digital divide exist in Pakistani civil society's usage of ICT as an alternative sphere. The following questions will be answered. How is the civil society in Pakistan using ICTs to mobilize masses? How effective is the cyber mobilization in the context of Pakistani culture and political system? How can the use of ICTs be enhanced in Pakistani Civil Society?

3. ICT INFRASTRUCTURE IN PAKISTAN.

In order to determine the success of cyber culture in Pakistan, it is important to know some basic facts like literacy rate and infrastructure variables. The population of Pakistan is approximately 160 million. According to (Unicef 2000-2004), the adult literacy rate among male is 63% and among female is 36%, while the literacy rate is growing in the country. According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, the cellular phone connections

reached 72.89 million by September 2007. The roots of internet originated in Pakistan with the launch of a UNDP funded project called SDNPK - Sustainable Development Networking Programme in Islamabad in 1993. The objective of this project was to provide email service to general public and support projects related to education, sustainable development, NGOs and other related areas. In 1994-95 Digicom launched online internet service in Karachi, which marked the beginning of internet industry in Pakistan. The 90% of the users are in three major cities of Pakistan which are Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad. According to Internet Service Providers Association of Pakistan (ISPAK), currently there are 3-5 million estimated internet users in Pakistan, and among them are 51,870 broadband internet users. The number of operational internet service providers (ISPs) is approximately 60. Around 13,500 web domains are registered under (.pk) domain. (ISPAP, 2007)

4. PROPOSED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK.

In order to get an initial impression of ICT usage in Pakistani civil society, we analyzed a recent social movement against the government of Pakistan. In this social movement, activists, students, political leaders, lawyers and citizens participated to raise its concerns. The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency on 3rd November 2007 suspending the country's constitution, initiating major changes in judiciary and blacking out all private television news channels. At this point in time people turned to virtual sphere and this has been termed as cyber activism in Pakistan. In this movement it has been visible that private channels and other civil society members used websites to disseminate textual information, live webcasts, and audio news. The use of social networking websites (cf. Web2.0) like "Facebook" and "Orkut" to mobilize individuals was also visible. Different video sharing websites like "YouTube" and "Google Videos" were used extensively to share videos of discussion programs and clips of organized protests. The use of blogs, online petitions, emails, Yahoo groups, SMS and wikis were also seen in this event for coordination and information dissemination about the activities against the protests (aggressive police acts against demonstrations, application of tear gas, arrests of protesters etc.) (cf. Yusuf, H. 2007; Harrington, 2008; DEF, 2007; Kirpalani, 2007; Dutt, 2007). In order to counter the virtual protests government has blocked most of blogs in the country but the people have been using free online anonymizer tools to access these blogs (c-info, 2008).

As the initial impression of this protest movement suggests that modern ICTs were used optimally but there is need of more research on Pakistani civil society to analyze the involvement in cyber sphere. An initial investigation suggests that most of the websites and other ICTs were mostly initiated by the Pakistani people living abroad, so the participation pattern of people inside the country needs to be investigated. Secondly as the majority of Pakistani population lives in rural areas so it is important to investigate whether ICTs are connecting society or creating another digital divide in Pakistan. The study will include quantitative and qualitative research methods and different trends will be generated from collected information. The empirical studies will involve statistical data collection of websites, interviews and questionnaires from the stakeholders. The study will reveal whether the virtual sphere is helping in strengthening civil society or some fractions are being disjointed from the technological aware group, especially the majority of public living in rural areas. The analysis of real life impact of virtual sphere protests needs to be analyzed keeping in mind the socio-cultural background of a region. Another point worth investigating is the effect of digital media on the structure of social movements' formation. Another important aspect is the effect of counter strategies of the government against this virtual protest. In order to get answers to these questions, the empirical results need to be collected and then evaluated.

5. CONCLUSION.

Along with the inherent advantages of computer mediated communication described by Myer (Myers, 1994) such as high speed, reach to distant actors, low cost communication and accuracy of information, there are other advantages for Pakistani civil society: The poor law and order situation, extended vulnerability of terrorist attacks and government's opposition to conventional protesting makes cyber activism much more important for Pakistani

civil society. The results of the prescribed research framework will highlight the weaknesses and strengths and the Pakistani civil society can learn and develop guidelines from success stories of cyber activism from developed countries and can apply those strategies to enhance communication among social activists.

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