

Social Media as a Mediator in Political Communication: A Literature Review to Explore its Effects on Users

Shazia Ismail Toor *

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Abstract

The modes of communication have been evolving, and in the 21st century, we live in a digital world. The world is connected via the internet, and social media has become an integral part of individual life. This paper explores the effects of social media mediation on its users in the context of political communication. The effects range from an individual's political participation to initiating a political movement. The effects are studied in the light of existing literature. Social media has transformed political discussion and debate. It has brought the elite public sphere to the screens of an average citizen. The voicing of dissident opinions is possible under the freedom of expression provided by social media. Individual and collective political views are influenced by social media. It is an exploratory study that aims to unveil various aspects of social media mediation so that they can be further researched upon.

Key Words: Social Media, Political, Users, Effects, Communication

Introduction

Technological advancement has changed the ways of communication. Moving from the stone age to the social and digital age today, human interaction has been modified and shifted on the screens. The advent of the internet in the late 1980s and the launch of Facebook in 2002 was the initial milestones in the great technological developments that we have today (Logicloop, 2018).

Politics and political debates have been shifted to social media platforms. Social media is a tool that has been rigorously employed for political campaigning by political parties for a decade. The new media era started when the infotainment programs started to take the role of opinion leaders, and politicians realized the potential of this medium of communication (Owen 2019).

Social media is defined as the digital technology that enables the production and sharing of messages and content with the masses creating virtual communities (Dollarhide 2020). Communication has grown from interpersonal to mass communication. Within the premises of mass communication, we have a new form of mediated communication that encompasses the technological and sociological impact of communication. Mediated communication presents contesting ideas, dialogues, and debates and challenges the social structure. It is, therefore, political in nature (Calhoun, Rojek and Turner 2005). Technological

* Assistant Professor, Institute of Communication Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: shazia.ics@pu.edu.pk

advancements are continually bringing change in societies and individuals, thus impacting the social and political institutions ([Eijaz, 2013](#)).

In Pakistan, the use of social media for political campaigning was evident in the 2018 elections. The political debate on social media is more democratic and diverse due to freedom of expression, and there is far less censorship than any other medium. Pakistan has the majority of the young population, with more than 64% of the population below 30, and as per PTA, the majority of them are social media users [_\(Khilji 2018\)](#). Social media has enabled citizens to have their own voice and opinion. Social media gave a platform to people to participate in political deliberations and contest their own ideologies in a diverse medium ([Jarral 2018](#)).

This use of social media in political communication has its effects on its Users. Along with its numerous effects, it promotes greater accountability because social media also allows for retrospective analysis and comparisons. This, in turn, provides more room and material for citizen journalism ([Khilji 2018](#)). The new media of Facebook, Twitter etc., has given rise to a modern-day digital revolution that moves the masses towards radical change and reforms. It has created a cohesive force that connects people from all parts of the country to move towards a common goal [_\(Zia 2012\)](#). It is for this very reason that whenever a coercive force takes over the country, they curb the platforms of free expression, either subtly or overtly.

The new media has facilitated the people in bringing about social change and calling for social justice. The political issues are raised on social media that gain momentum to ultimately attract government officials. In this way, the media agenda becomes the public agenda that, in turn, influences the policymaking process ([Eijaz, 2013](#)). The main consumer of social media is the young population. Due to the advent of socially interactive platforms, the youth, as per one research, is using social media for almost 8 hours per day. According to PTA 2019 report, around 44 million internet subscribers in Pakistan use social media for political purposes ([Ida, Saud, & Mashud, 2020](#)).

Keeping in view the shifting trends and demands of new media, almost all the political parties of Pakistan have their social media accounts. PTI has been using its social media platform to gather its large scale young voters, and that led them to victory in the 2018 elections. Twitter now serves as the official portal of authentic press releases and press notes. Government officials all over the globe use Twitter as a formal means of giving statements and making important announcements. In the time of the COVID- 19 pandemic, we have seen greater use of social media in creating awareness and spreading information.

This paper is exploratory in nature. Social media in the contemporary world is a powerful tool in politics and thus have a significant impact on political communication. This paper runs on the assumption that social media act as a mediator in political communication and that this mediating role has its effects on its users. This paper will explore the various effects of social media as a moderator in political communication. The existing literature is used as a reference to draw inferences regarding the various effects of social media mediation in the arena of politics.

Social Media and Political Awareness

Political activities are carried out both online and offline in contemporary times. Online political activities have a profound effect on real-life political choices. Pakistan has a large population of youngsters, and the majority of them are on social media in one way or another. Even in the rural areas of Pakistan, young adults have access to the internet and smartphones. That helps in creating an online platform to discuss, explore and debate the political happenings in the country. The most significant effect is that it helps to create mass awareness, especially among the youth in Pakistan, as per research [\(Ahmad, Alvi & Ittefaq, 2019\)](#).

Political Mobilization and Digital Coordination

Digital media, especially Facebook and Twitter, have moved the political discussions from real-time

drawing-room discussions to online platforms where people from around the globe can participate [\(Khilji 2018\)](#). Social media informs and educates the people on a mass scale, then people comment and debate on the news given to them. It leads to the creation of groups of like-minded people with a common motive that coordinate and mobilizes towards a political cause [\(Gil de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019\)](#). A study by Marcheua (2008) found that there exists a considerable relationship between the use of social media and corresponding movements [\(Ahmad et al., 2019\)](#).

Social media: A Bone of contention between 'Cyber Optimists and Cyber Pessimists'

There were majorly two main groups of scholars that descended at the dawn of the internet. They had two opposing views and perspectives to look at the new technological developments. One of them, the cyber pessimists, views the internet as causing more damage to politics and democracies than good. On the other hand, the cyber optimists view the internet as strengthening democracies. However, with the changing ideas and times, there has been a middle-range agreement between the two groups in which they state the pros and cons of modern social media and evaluate them separately from the others [\(Outhwaite, Turner, & Calderaro 2018\)](#).

Social media and Political Participation

There is an ongoing debate about the advent of social media and its impact on democracies. One factor that is vital to strengthen and uphold the democratic structure is the political participation of the citizens. The use of social media and political participation is not directly linked, but we have to consider individual factors, such as age, social class etc., to determine its effect [\(Fountain, 2017\)](#). However, there is ample evidence of mass political and social movements in the near past that highlights the immense power and potential of social media. The most notable is the example of the Arab Spring, starting in the early 2010s [\(Zhuravskaya, Petrova & Enikolopov, 2020\)](#). A research study in Pakistan reveals that the use of social media, in general, enhances the political knowledge of people, and the use of social media for gathering news improves the political expression of users [\(Affairs et al. 2018\)](#).

Social Media: A Political Tool

Social media provides an opportunity where the users are both producers and consumers of the content. It has a great feature of interactivity [\(Yunus, 2013\)](#) in a permissible environment, making it a valuable tool of political communication. With the shifting trends, politicians realized the importance of social media to reach their target users. Moreover, the political activist's groups that's unable to channel their voice in the mainstream media found relief in social media [\(Yunus, 2013\)](#). This tool is not only used by the politicians and system but can be used against them. A very pertinent example was the Middle East uprising in 2011 that allowed people to speak on social media that eventually led to the ousting of various political leaders [\(Basit, 2019\)](#).

21st Century Research in Political Communication

Research in the area of political communication in the last century was majorly focused on a trickle-down approach that lacked feedback. It was due to the lack of common platforms for the exchange of views and opinions. In the 21st century, with the dawn of interactive forums such as Facebook and Twitter, political communication is no longer treated as one-way communication. It is now viewed and studied as a two-way flow of information and opinions [\(Shah et al., 2017\)](#). The emergence of social media has also brought a tremendous change in mass media research which is now more focused on the uses of media by the people [\(Shah et al. 2017\)](#). So, that two-way flow of information makes political communication more effective.

Social Media: An Alternative Public Sphere

Social media platforms are now the most advanced form of the public sphere that encompasses people around the globe. It also provides an alternative channel to transmit messages when a journalist or political personnel faces a ban on mainstream media ([Michaelsen, 2011](#)). In the past, the public sphere was limited to the elite, and the people from the peripheral regions of the country were unable to participate in that. However, with the arrival of the internet and social media networking sites, we have a more diversified public sphere that has broken the monopoly of the elite and has included in it the people from all spheres of life (Rey & Carlos, 2018). The digital public sphere is unique as compared to the conventional public sphere because of the representation of people from all social classes, and it has a very diverse yet individual subjectivity and motives ([Mahlouly, 2013](#))

Social Media and Political Preferences

Social media is an interactive site for political campaigning. However, these online sources are dependent on individual navigation and control over the content. Individual preferences play a significant role in choosing and following the specific political content on social media ([Stier et al., 2018](#)). The social media developments and progress in technology has better-equipped people in narrowing down their preferences on social media. The users have better opportunities to have their own personalized experience of social media with greater control over the content that they do or do not wish to see ([Vettehen et al. 2020](#)). Moreover, one of the effects of online exposure to opposing political ideology is the increase in greater political polarization among the people, according to research conducted in the United States ([Bail et al., 2018](#)).

Citizens' Use of Social Media as Compared to Politicians' use of Online Platforms

Several studies done in the past has suggested that the use of social media by ordinary citizens is different in approach as the politicians may think. The nonprofessionals use online platform with an already existing idea of gaining and following certain opinions and debates on social media; hence they are very specific in their use of social media. However, politicians often lack that perception and use social media with a mass of users in mind ([Stier et al., 2018](#)). But since social media is a site of free expression and a sea of contrasting opinions, there remains a bright chance that a user will be affected by the unintentional gaining of news and information that they may not want to see on social media. That incidental news exposure and its effects have been examined by researchers, and one of the studies found that if a well-structured and sound news came across a user unintentionally, he/she may be positively affected by it but only if they continue active persuasion of the news that they encountered ([Yamamoto & Morey, 2019](#)).

Politicians are now aware of the fact that the use of social media for gaining citizens' loyalty and trust is vital. Keeping a continuous social media appearance and presence is vital to keep up with the contemporary need to stay in touch with the digital Users ([Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013](#)).

This study is significant for future research as it provides insight for hypothesis building regarding the effects of social media mediation on political communication. It has explored various aspects ranging from individual effects to providing insight on the use of social media as a tool for political campaigns. This study not only highlights the unmatched importance of social media in modern times but also sheds light on the noteworthy impact it has on its users in the context of politics.

Communication Mediation Model

This study is an attempt to jot down the countless effects of social media mediation on its users with respect to political communication. The model of communication mediation supports the main assumption of this paper. The communication mediation model suggests communication mediation is a process in which the intake of news and political debates guide the fundamental social effects on the public's political participation.

(Lee 2017). Social media is a mode of most modern communication, and news consumption and political communication through this medium have their effects on its users and consumers. The communication mediation model treats political communication as a stimulus that affects individual learning.

Habermas Theory of the Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas, a scholar of 'Frankfurt school of Social Research', introduced the 'public sphere' (["Jurgen Habermas And The Public Sphere" n.d.](#)). In the 'public sphere', different issues are discussed, opinions are expressed, and collective solutions are derived. At the present time, the public sphere and mass media are related to each other ([Rashem 2018](#)). Social media is a platform to exchange information and express views. It has taken the public sphere and stretched its boundary to include people from all walks of life to communicate and interact jointly. This interaction leads to various effects, and that idea is supported by the Habermas theory of the public sphere, as mentioned above. The public sphere now shifted on screen has also led to posing a challenge to the status quo and a drive towards achieving greater democracy ([Mahlouly, 2013](#)).

Political Agenda Setting via Social Media

Agenda setting theory has its roots in the work of Walter Lipmann's 1922 book, "Public Opinion". In the chapter, 'The world outside and pictures in our head', the press was regarded as a bridge between the outside world and the world inside of a person's mind. Maxwell McComb and Donald L. Shaw contributed to the idea by conducting research. The main idea of this theory is that by the repetition of certain messages, people learn about the issues "incidentally", and hence making a specific incident an issue of public interest. It also highlights the significance of media in society and the role it can play to uphold issues of grave importance. The application of this theory to the modern digital world suggests that with the advancement in technology and social media, the barriers to communication have been reduced tremendously. With the forfeiture of several gatekeepers once associated with the traditional media, the opinion leaders have a greater chance to influence the users with their agenda ([Gilardi et al., 2016](#)).

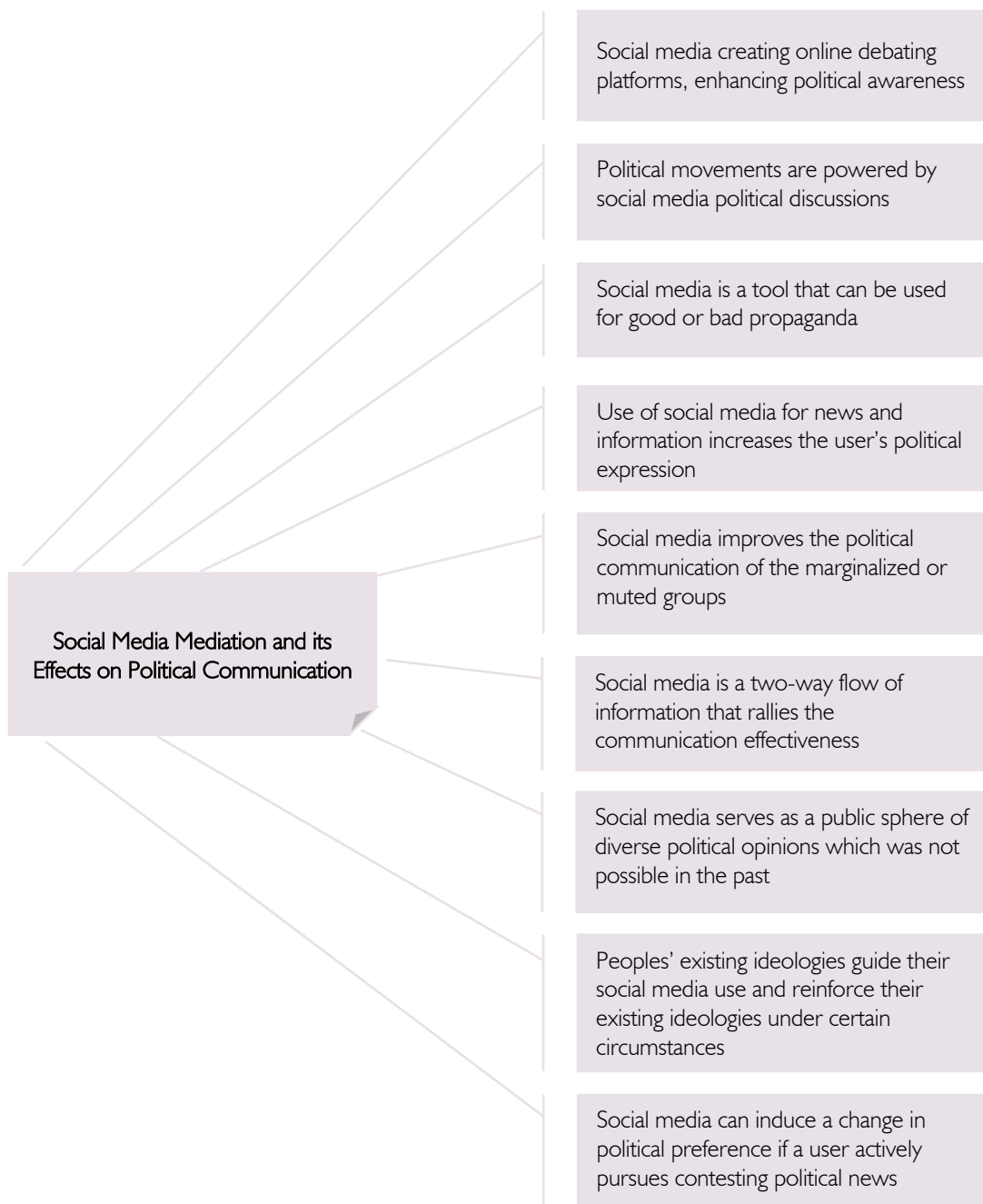
Medium is the Message and the Massage

Marshal McLuhan gave the concept of 'medium is the message and the message' in the 1960s as he studied the impact of electronic media on society and culture. According to him, the technology has a profound effect on users as it acts as the "extensions of man", enhancing its involvement and exponentially increasing the effect of the message. He was a technological determinist, "A person who believes that all social, political, economic, and cultural change is inevitably based on the development and diffusion of technology" ([Davis & Baran, 2014, p. 155](#)). Therefore, the idea of McLuhan can be applied to the social media that we have today and it justifies conducting research on the effects of social media in the context of political communication.

Conclusion

This study has discussed social media mediation of political communication and its effects on the consumers. However, it was not focused to measure the magnitude of these effects. The study has taken references from the previous literature to come up with a list of effects which can be further explored individually in the future research. Social media has enabled mass dissemination of information that has been proved to influence the political knowledge and involvement ([Outhwaite et al. 2018](#)). There are a number of effects of social media mediation on users regarding political communication. It affects their political participation, political preferences, political debates, political awareness and their overall political activities. Internet inculcates political interest in the users which were previously detached from politics ([Affairs et al. 2018](#)). In conclusion, with the help of supporting theories and literature it can be stated that social media mediation

has a significant impact on the users and the political figures with reference to shaping their political debates and discussions.



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