NOREF Report

Social media in Pakistan: catalyst for communication, not change

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Executive summary

This report surveys social media in Pakistan. It identifies five ways in which Pakistan's social media act as communication tools: they break or give greater attention to stories ignored by traditional media; they play a mobilisation role by disseminating information about protests and other social campaigns; they promote humanitarian efforts by co-ordinating and advertising initiatives; they serve as advocates for social causes; and they stimulate communication between politicians and their constituents.

The report discusses why social media tools in Pakistan cannot presently produce large-scale change. One reason is that Pakistan's traditional media outlets already serve as change agents and co-opt social media's ability to serve this role.

A more fundamental reason is a low penetration rate.

The risks posed by social media in Pakistan include their succumbing to the same ideological divisions that afflict Pakistani society and even becoming a haven for extremist online communication. Another risk is that the lack of regulation will produce unethical content.

Europe can help mitigate these risks by sponsoring projects that develop guidelines for appropriate content and by supporting initiatives that promote tolerant online communication. Donors can also assist by strengthening technical capacity (through funding broadband Internet expansion efforts) and sponsoring research on social media.

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Background

On January 17th 2012 Pakistan's Samaa TV channel aired a bizarre live story. Reporter Maya Khan, accompanied by a bevy of middle-aged women, darted around a Karachi park in search of frolicking young couples. With cameras rolling, the women interrogated terrified lovers: Were they engaged? Were they married? Did their parents know about their relationship?

Within Pakistan's social mediasphere, the outraged response was instantaneous. Bloggers lambasted the channel for broadcasting material that smacked of moral policing. More criticism rapidly spread via Twitter and Facebook. Within days, bowing to this intense online pressure, Samaa fired Khan. Many observers lauded Pakistan's social media for having helped engineer Khan's sacking.

The presence of social media is rising in Pakistan. Over a six-month period from late 2010 to early 2011 the number of Facebook users doubled from 1.8 to 3.6 million, while between August 2011 and January 2012 the number of new Facebook accounts increased by a million. (Facebook, according to Internet traffic monitoring data, is currently the most popular website in Pakistan.) Pakistanis are also increasingly taking to Twitter. The micro-blogging platform was the tenth-most visited website in Pakistan in June 2010, compared to 14th the previous year. In June 2012 *Foreign Policy* published a list of the 100 Twitter accounts most worth following, and it included those of Pakistanis such as former ambassador to the U.S. Husain Haqqani, author Mohammed Hanif, journalist Omar Waraich and government adviser Mosharraf Zaidi. Additionally, growing numbers of people have the means to access social media in Pakistan. The number of Internet users has increased by at least several million since 2009. In 2010 mobile Internet usage soared by 161% – this in a country where every other resident uses a cell phone (one of the highest rates in South Asia).[1]

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1 Haider Warraich, "Pakistan's social media landscape", *Foreign Policy* (AfPak Channel), March 18th 2011, http://afpak.foreign-policy.com/posts/2011/03/18/pakistans_social_media_landscape; *Express Tribune*, "Over 6 million Pakistanis on Facebook!", February 2nd 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/330906/over-6-million-pa-kistanis-on-facebook/; Open Source Center, "2010 update: Pakistan – use of SNS for social action limited primarily to elites", June 15th 2010, http://info.publicintelligence.net/OSC-PakistanEliteSNS.pdf; Population Reference Bureau, "2010 world population data sheet", 2010, http://www.prb.org/pdf10/10wpds_eng.pdf.

With blogs, Twitter, Facebook and other social media resources often credited with helping spark mass movements for change across the Middle East, some now wonder whether social media tools can help trigger change in Pakistan as well.

This report examines the role of social media in Pakistan. It asserts that these media are a robust platform for communication, but not a catalyst for change. It describes how social media serve as a spark for communication and explains what constrains their ability to bring change. The report also identifies the risks posed by Pakistan's new media (a term used here interchangeably with social media) and highlights how Pakistan – and Europe – can help mitigate these risks.

An underlying theme in this report is that the Internet and its related technologies and resources – such as social media – are largely beneficial for Pakistani society. While the Internet has its share of risks – from providing platforms to extremists to offering the government pretexts for censorship – the net benefits of the Internet are profound for Pakistan. By providing access to information, it empowers the masses and strengthens democracy. And by offering outlets to aggrieved citizens it can help reduce (at least in part) the potential for militancy. For these reasons, therefore, the report argues that Internet-related projects in Pakistan make for good investments by international donors.

Catalyst for communication

Social media in Pakistan serve as a communications tool in five different ways. Firstly, they amplify – and often break – stories that traditional media are unable or unwilling to cover. These include stories about the questionable behaviour of the traditional media, such as the Maya Khan affair on Samaa TV. They also include politically charged content, such as when Pakistani paramilitary forces in 2011 shot at point-blank range an unarmed young man begging for his life in a public park in Karachi. The fact that the brutal act was caught on camera facilitated its dissemination on social media, which thrives on image-driven communication. Similarly, in 2010 amateur video footage of a mob lynching two young brothers while police idly stood by attracted

attention only after being posted on YouTube. And in early 2012 social media elevated to prominence the explosive revelation, under-reported by the traditional media, that Pakistan's government was seeking Internet filtering technology to block up to 50 million websites in the country.

More recently, in June 2012 a Pakistani journalist appearing on a web-based political talk show made potentially damaging corruption accusations against the son of Pakistan's chief justice. Just weeks later the scandal took on a whole new dimension, thanks to the power of social media. Hours after the Dunya News television channel aired an interview with Malik Riaz, a real estate tycoon who claims to have paid bribes to the chief justice's son, leaked video footage appeared on YouTube. The video featured conversations between the interviewers and Riaz during commercial breaks. The interviewers – two of Pakistan's most prominent television personalities – were seen revealing their questions to Hussain, coaching him on how to respond and even receiving a call from the prime minister's son with further instructions. The affair sparked a firestorm on Twitter well before generating banner headlines in the traditional media.

In all these cases, social media tools have broken stories or brought attention to neglected ones and offered a platform to debate them.

Secondly, social media serve as a communications platform by spreading information about protest campaigns and other social movements, thereby playing a mobilising role. A notable example occurred in 2007-2008, when Pakistani lawyers and journalists led a pro-democracy movement to protest the state of emergency declared by the country's leader, Pervez Musharraf. With the government ordering many private television channels to stop broadcasting, social media took on a critical role, not only by stepping into the resulting information vacuum and broadcasting news, but also by notifying Pakistanis about flash mobs, planning meetings and providing information about other movement-related events. As one analysis concludes, social media in Pakistan performed the same tasks that would later be carried out during the Arab Spring: SMS messaging mobilised protesters;

blogs hosted discussions and produced news; and online networks served as a connecting tool for protesters.[2] A different type of example of social media's mobilising role is Go Green Pakistan, which is an effort to increase patriotism in the country. In connection with Pakistan's Independence Day in 2009, the initiative succeeded in getting more than 10,000 people to convert their Facebook and Twitter profile photos to a green shade (the main colour of the Pakistani flag).

Thirdly, social media's communication role has a humanitarian dimension. They get the word out about charitable opportunities and emergency relief needs, and co-ordinate recruitment drives for donations. This was on full display during the catastrophic flooding that devastated Pakistan in 2010. With Pakistani government relief efforts and international donations woefully insufficient, private citizens appealed for contributions through Facebook and blogs; pinpointed where the needs were greatest through websites that tracked the extent and location of relief efforts; and used online forums to document the collection and distribution of relief supplies.

Fourthly, Pakistan's social media communicate by advocating for social causes. One example is a web-based collaborative led by an Internet freedom group, Bytes For All, and the Pakistan Software Houses Association to promote the online security of young Pakistani women (with particular emphasis on how to deal with Internet stalking and invasions of privacy). Similarly, Gawaahi.org, a project run by two female Pakistani media personalities (one of them a blogger), publishes stories on minority and women's rights and sexual abuse. Much of the site content consists of film and video footage. A newer web organisation, Bolo Bhi, fights against online censorship in Pakistan. Led by blogger Sana Saleem, the initiative has been at the forefront of social media-driven resistance to Islamabad's plan to block websites.

Finally, Pakistan's new media resources stimulate political communication. Prominent Pakistani

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2 Marcus Michaelsen, "New media vs. old politics: the Internet, social media, and democratisation in Pakistan", Fes Media Asia Series, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, 2011, http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08748.pdf.

politicians from across the spectrum have joined Twitter. Imran Khan, the former cricket star who now heads the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, boasts nearly 300,000 followers. Punjab province governor Shahbaz Sharif (a member of the Pakistan Muslim League party) and the country's interior minister Rehman Malik (affiliated with the ruling Pakistan People's Party, or PPP) enjoy about 35,000 followers each. Syed Munawar Hassan, the leader of Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamic political party and a relative newcomer to Twitter, already has well over 3,000 followers. Politicians praise social media for helping connect them to constituents. The PTI's general secretary says that social media allow for cheap and easy campaigning (in June 2012 top PTI officials met with Google chief executive Eric Schmidt to discuss social media platforms in Pakistan); a prominent parliamentarian with the PPP states that she depends on Twitter to get feedback from the electorate about proposed legislation; and one opposition MP reports that his party uses social media to gauge public opinion, e.g. by creating the Twitter hash tag "Lyari" (a violence-stricken area of Karachi) to study people's views of violence.[3]

Constraints on compelling change

Despite the role they play in informing, mobilising, assisting, advocating and politicking, Pakistan's social media users are not in a position to usher in large-scale change. There are admittedly several isolated cases of new media inducing shifts in public opinion or government positions. In 2009 a gruesome video showing militants in the Taliban-controlled Swat region holding down a burqa-clad woman and publicly flogging her was posted on YouTube and immediately went viral. The image, which triggered widespread revulsion, is often cited as a major reason for the Pakistani military's decision (and for the public's support for this decision) to launch an offensive in Swat to wrest control back from the Taliban.

Similarly, video of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto clearly showing that the politician was shot before a bomb blast rocked the area she was in, contrary to the government's official contention, was widely disseminated on the Internet before being picked up by the traditional media. Consequently, Islamabad was forced to retract its earlier position that Bhutto was definitely killed by the blast.

Such examples aside, Pakistan's social media do not serve as a vehicle for change. A chief reason is the country's press environment. In contrast to the Arab Spring nations (which are dominated by several staid, state-run media organisations), Pakistan has many private traditional media outlets, with many of them feisty and even confrontational towards the government. They are in fact often praised for having helped trigger the pro-democracy movement of 2007, despite the broadcasting ban imposed on them by President Musharraf (some media outlets simply ignored the ban altogether). Research suggests that many Pakistanis joined the protests based on information obtained via word of mouth or mainstream media coverage, and not via social media, thereby undermining depictions of new media as a mass mobiliser.[4] In this way, Pakistan's traditional media outlets co-opt the ability of new media to serve as a force for change. Furthermore, traditional media can exploit social media for their own gain. Pakistan's major television channels all boast Facebook and Twitter accounts with tens of thousands of likes and hundreds of thousands of followers. This is not to say, however, that social media are effectively irrelevant in this context. On the contrary, one could argue that the communication spark provided by social media – particularly their ability to enlarge the space for debate and information exchange – helps provide a favourable climate for the mobilisation efforts of traditional media.

A more fundamental reason why Pakistan's social media cannot serve as an agent for change is their low penetration rate. Despite recent increases, the number of Pakistanis using social media remains a tiny percentage of the total population. This is because Internet connectivity rates in Pakistan are extremely low. Current estimates peg the number of Pakistani Internet users – most of them urban-

3   Atika Rehman, "Facebook ban, PTI trolls steal the limelight at Internet report launch", *Express Tribune*, December 14th 2011, http://tribune.com.pk/story/306226/facebook-ban-pti-trolls-steal-the-limelight-at-internet-report-launch/; Taha Siddiqui, "Parliamentarian Twitterati", *Express Tribune*, May 19th 2012, http://tribune.com.pk/story/381100/parliamentarian-twitterati/.

4   Open Source Center, "2010 update: Pakistan", 2010.

based – at between 20 and 30 million people (a penetration rate of about 11-17% of the total population). However, polling between 2008 and 2011 reports even lower figures, ranging from 1% use in rural areas to 7% use across the country as a whole.[5] Pakistan's Internet penetration rate exceeds that of its South Asian neighbours, yet lags well behind those of Arab Spring nations such as Tunisia (36%) and Egypt (26%).[6]

Additionally, even with recent increases, the government's own calculations put the overall broadband Internet use figure at just over a million people, suggesting that the vast majority of Pakistan's Internet users are stuck with slow dial-up connections that complicate efforts to view streaming video and other key features of social media. Little wonder that only about six million Pakistanis are estimated to be on Facebook and only two million on Twitter.[7] Among its South Asian neighbours, Pakistan's Facebook penetration rate (3.4%) is exceeded only by India's (3.8%) and Sri Lanka's (5.8%), yet is significantly lower than that of Tunisia (26%) and Egypt (11%).[8] Comparative figures for Twitter are difficult to obtain, although they likely mirror those of Facebook.

Furthermore, even when equipped with the means to engage social media, many Pakistanis do not do so. For example, despite relatively high rates of cellular phone usage in Pakistan, polling finds that the majority of Pakistanis use their mobiles simply to make calls: relatively few send text messages and only a small minority use them to take pictures or videos or to access the Internet. Additionally, web traffic monitoring sites and public opinion surveys conclude that blogs receive many fewer hits than the websites of traditional media outlets.

Consequently, while Pakistan's social media environment bustles with information dissemination and passionate debate (relatively few people are needed to spread and discuss large amounts of information), this online fervour rarely translates into movements for change offline. From the assassination of Punjab province governor Salman Taseer to the killings of religious minorities, many events in Pakistan spark much noise within the social mediasphere, yet do not lead to protest, much less to actual change. On so many occasions, in the words of one Pakistani blogger, "Twitter was clogged with dissident discourse and Facebook statuses sprung up to register protests and yet it all resulted in absolutely nothing".[9]

Admittedly, this lack of mobilisation may be partly attributable to an increasingly conservative Pakistani society that frowns on public expressions of support for minorities and other pluralistic causes. And it may also be rooted in Pakistan's weak legacy of large-scale, broad-based public mobilisation, which is a consequence of the country's instability, of a populace dependent on patronage and invested in the status quo, and above all of Pakistan's deeply divided society.

The risks

A major obstacle to Pakistan's development since independence has been its many cleavages – divisions that arise from the country's ideological, sectarian, ethnic and provincial differences – and the frequent persecution and violence inflicted by those unwilling to tolerate the country's diversity. Pakistan's social media tools, in fact, risk deepening these cleavages. Some argue that the country's shrinking liberal sphere is retreating to Twitter and Facebook to promote its views, leaving non-liberals and hardliners to shape debate on offline venues such as television news shows and the streets. As a result, social media drive yet another wedge between Pakistan's liberals and conservatives.

However, research finds that these ideological divides are apparent even within social media.

5   AudienceScapes, "The Internet in Pakistan", Intermedia Knowledge Center, n.d., http://www.audiencescapes.org/country-profiles-pakistan-country-overview-internet-research-statistics; Pew Research Center, "Global digital communication: texting, social networking popular worldwide", Pew Global Attitudes Project, December 20th 2011, http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/12/20/global-digital-communication-texting-social-networking-popular-worldwide/.

6   Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, "Asia", n.d., http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm; Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, "Africa", n.d., http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm.

7   Michaelsen, "New media vs. old politics", 2011; *Express Tribune*, "Over 6 million Pakistanis on Facebook!", 2012.

8   Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics, "Asia", n.d.; "Africa", n.d.

9   Salman Latif, "Who is watching the social media wardens?", *Express Tribune*, February 8th 2012, http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/10141/who-is-watching-the-social-media-wardens/.

A study of new media responses to the 2011 assassination of Taseer (an avowedly liberal politician who argued publicly and forcefully for minority rights) reveals that while new Facebook pages in honour of Taseer began appearing soon after his death, so too did pages in support of Taseer's killer, Mumtaz Qadri (one initial pro-Qadri site registered over 2,000 likes early on). Many Facebook users urged one another to use Qadri's face as their profile picture. An Islamist version of Facebook, MillatFacebook, became a favorite venue for pro-Qadri commentary and was regarded as "Pakistani cyberturf's coziest, if not most popular, space for hate-related online content sharing".[10]

Such ideological polarisation highlights another risk: Pakistan's social media scene threatens to become a bastion of online extremist communication. The perception of the country's social media environment as an exclusive haven for liberal, tolerant discourse is inaccurate. In Pakistan, militants convey death threats to journalists via SMS messaging, while many extremist organisations have Facebook and Twitter accounts. Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), an Islamist charity and front for the vicious Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group, often takes to Twitter to spread its ideology. Hizb ut-Tahrir, a global Islamist group that pledges non-violence yet calls for the destruction of Israel and the conquest of India, is a banned organisation in Pakistan. Yet it compensates for its inability to hold public rallies by appealing to young, urban Pakistanis via mobile phones, Facebook and Twitter.

An additional risk posed by Pakistani social media is that, much like with the country's feisty traditional press, unregulated content could spiral out of control and into the realm of the inappropriate and unethical. Pakistan's print and broadcast media often make egregious errors of fact; print the names and phone numbers of rape victims, human rights activists, and other vulnerable citizens; and produce sensationalistic coverage that crosses all bounds of decency (the Maya Khan episode is a case in point).

10 Wajahat S. Khan, "A generally bellicose society's antisocial media: reporting murder & debating God in a nation at war", Discussion Paper Series, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, November 2011, http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d66_khan.pdf.

Concerned observers increasingly point to similar transgressions in social media. For example, Facebook and Twitter users lambasted Khan for violating privacy rights – only to then post and tweet links to private photographs of Khan. Given that efforts to institute codes of conduct and other regulatory tools have lagged in Pakistan's traditional media, similar attempts in social media will likely face major challenges as well.

The role of Europe

Fortunately, Pakistan has the potential to work through these challenges facing both the traditional and social media. In fact, some of these risks can be self-mitigating. For example, social media can bridge the very ideological divides they help widen. On Twitter, conservatives – and even extremist groups like JuD – often engage with moderate and liberal users. While some of the latter refuse to interact with the hardliners and block their tweets, others participate in spirited, although reasoned, discussions – interactions that rarely happen offline in Pakistan, where hard-liners and liberals rarely share the same room, much less a conversation. Another risk capable of being mitigated is the rapid proliferation of inappropriate and indecent content. While many efforts in the traditional media have failed, including a short-lived television programme on the Dawn News channel dedicated to singling out unethical media behaviour, there have been a few success stories. Many small media outlets voluntarily follow the Society of Professional Journalists' code of conduct, while a group called Citizens for Free and Responsible Media monitors national media content. With time, such efforts could be extended to new media as well.

The international community, and particularly Europe, can help Pakistan minimise the risks posed by its social media. Donors can sponsor Pakistani civil society-driven dialogues that focus on how best to formulate guidelines on appropriate new media content, while striking the proper balance between responsibility and freedom. They can also host interfaith and interethnic conferences – perhaps to occur via Skype or other web-based resources – with a special emphasis on online communication that promotes diversity.

Additionally, Europe can play a part in strengthening the technical capacities of Pakistan's social media. Donors can support efforts to boost the number of broadband subscribers, thereby enhancing the quality of Pakistan's online networks. They can also fund cash-strapped Pakistan's Internet expansion projects more generally, and particularly those in rural areas, some of which have zero Internet availability.

Given the economic climate in Europe and donor concerns about Pakistan's poor absorptive capacities, such efforts may appear difficult to justify. In fact, however, the rationale for these endeavours is compelling. With more Pakistanis online and plugged into social media, citizens would have at their disposal outlets and channels for relaying grievances that would otherwise remain bottled up, and if left suppressed, such sentiment could eventually explode and potentially lead to extremist activity. Significantly, given the profile of social media membership (as noted earlier, many political leaders and parliamentarians engage social media), users' grievances, many of them undoubtedly critical of the government, would reach those in the corridors of power. However, given the fact that, as mentioned earlier, social media themselves have a tendency to propagate extremist views, it is important that donors be aware of the risks of funding Internet-related projects without an explicitly moderate or liberal agenda.

As with all resources, Internet availability does not ensure access. Millions of uneducated and illiterate Pakistani citizens lack the skills to use basic computers, much less to navigate the Internet. Therefore, funding rural literacy programmes and technical training seminars would also contribute (even if indirectly) to the expansion of Pakistan's Internet use and hence of social media use.

Finally, Europe can sponsor research on Pakistan's social media, a topic that has so far been studied sparingly. The first (and arguably only) major study of the subject was published in 2011 by the German institution Freidrich-Ebert Stiftung. International donors can encourage important scholarship in Pakistan by funding similar research undertaken by Pakistani organisations and researchers.

Conclusion

Social media constitute an important forum for communication in Pakistan. They serve as a disseminator of information, a mobiliser of protest, a tool of humanitarianism, an advocate for social causes and a facilitator of political discussion. However, due to the realities of Pakistan's media environment, and above all to its limited reach, Pakistan's social media are not an agent for change.

This does not mean that the situation will not evolve in the coming years. Pakistan's social media are slowly acquiring the trappings of a catalyst for change, particularly as the number of users continues to rise. One analyst observes that the ability of the nation's social media to establish public exchanges on marginal issues and to spark participation in such exchanges can be regarded as "a first step towards social change".[11] Given some time, and with assistance from the international community in ways highlighted above, Pakistan's social media could well take additional steps towards reaching this milestone.

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11 Michaelsen, "New media vs. old politics", 2011.