ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN FOSTERING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP: A STUDY OF FACEBOOK USERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The processes of globalization have led to a transformation in citizenship from a more legalistic one to active citizenship. This transformation has been enabled, in parts, by the rise of social media. Therefore, Social Networking Sites offer an online interactive space where users can communicate and share their views and digital resources through decentralized and participatory communication. Facebook is a leading global social networking site given a large number of active users globally as well as in Pakistan. This is a study of selected Facebook users to understand how Facebook enables active citizenship. The in-depth interviews help us to discern the respondents' understanding of the concept of active citizenship and how Facebook creates a virtual space that fosters it. The findings reveal that the selected users consider Facebook as an influential and dynamic forum where they can assert their role as active citizens by educating people through the dissemination of information, participation in political debates and critically evaluating the government's performance. The paper calls for a better understanding of the role that Social Networking Sites are playing in the making of more responsible as well as responsive citizens that ultimately translates into better communities.

Keywords: Globalization, Social Media, Active Citizenship, Facebook, Social Networking Sites.

Introduction

Globalization, presumably, weakens the idea of citizenship as a form of identification as boundaries of a state, political communities and self, increasingly, becoming blurred and fluid. Globalization is, however, intimately tied to information sharing and the emergence of new media has become the main vehicle of its expansion. This enables transformation in citizenship through an increased political and civic engagement using social media. The role of Social Networking Sites (SNS) in providing computer-mediated communication through the internet has greatly helped foster active citizenship. Communication on these sites is multi-directional and is steered by the users who create the content for these SNS called Users Generated Content (UGC). Unlike broadcast or print media where editorial boards and broadcast units have strategic policies for the creation and dissemination of content, the users on SNS have

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relatively more freedom to post and express their opinions and ideas. However, each SNS has its community standards with the possibility of reporting posts by other users and blocking or unfollowing them. The messages on SNS can travel instantly and can be edited, reused, and redistributed by users anytime and anywhere within cyberspace. In Pakistan, Facebook dominates the social media landscape. According to the website Stat Counter (Global Stats), in July 2019 alone, 90.1% of SNS users in Pakistan were Facebook users.[1]

This paper aims to ascertain the role of Facebook, a popular SNS, in fostering active citizenship in Pakistan. It investigates how the selected users consider Facebook as a space of interaction with other people, how this usage translates into active citizenship and what are the outcomes. Users' interaction with their Facebook community helps us understand the concept of not only citizenship but also active citizenship. Facebook users, selected for this study, have at least a master's degree in a social science discipline. Some of them are currently pursuing postgraduate degrees, such as MPhil or PhD. They belong to different provinces of Pakistan but have been residing in Rawalpindi and Islamabad for the last five years or more.

The researchers' Facebook account served as an extension of the research field with respondents as friends. The accounts of respondents were followed on daily basis by tracing their timelines as well as through the newsfeed. Keeping the ethical considerations in view, verbal consent for the study was secured beforehand and the research participants were informed about the privacy settings of Facebook. All participants agreed to set the privacy settings of Facebook to share their posts with the public. The selected respondents explicitly mentioned that they had no objection to the use of their posts for the research as they had posted it for the public.

Theoretical Understanding of Active Citizenship

The classical conception of citizenship refers to the basic form of a reciprocal relationship between individuals and the state, whereby, individuals offer loyalty to the state in exchange for protection.[2] This protection was initially limited to defence from external threats. It, later, expanded to include notions of welfare like protection from sickness or poverty. Today, it is not only seen as a relationship between state and individuals but as a basis for connections between individuals.[3] The broadened concept of citizenship makes it dynamic especially when the citizens respond to the state and interact with other citizens through new forms. This interactive form of citizenship is labelled as 'active citizenship'.

David Blunkett sees the role of the state in the promotion of active citizenship for better governance and empowering citizens by enabling them to acquire a better quality of life by solving the problems of their communities. According to him, "… citizens should be given more opportunity and support to become actively involved in defining and tackling the problems of their communities and improving their quality of life."[4] This understanding veers more towards social development than political dimensions. Others, like De Weerd, Gemmeke, Rigter, and Van Rij, define active citizenship largely in political terms as "political participation and participation in

associational life characterized by tolerance and non-violence and the acknowledgment of the rule of law and human rights."[5] They identify seven indicators of active citizenship including voting in elections, participation in political parties, participation in interest groups, participation in forms of peaceful protest, voluntary work in organizations and networks, organizing activities for the community, and participation in public debates. These seven indicators appear to be integral elements of active citizenship and lead towards the promotion of human rights and democracy.

It has also been argued that active citizenship can be best understood in terms of participation and agency.[6] This argument is drawn from a feminist political perspective that sees active citizenship as central to radical and inclusive forms of democracy and an active citizen must be a radical and democratic citizen.[7] Active citizenship can also be seen as a process rather than status or an outcome and 'citizenship as participation' represents an expression of human agency in the political arena.[8]

Active citizenship is also about inclusiveness and empowering people. Alternative media are recognized as a source of empowerment and active citizenship.[9] The term alternative media is a slippery term. It includes all forms of media that challenge the status quo, counter mainstream assumptions and representations and suggest democratized media production.[10] Alternative media is culturally and politically oppositional in intent but has social change at their heart.[11] Internet and particularly social media offer a similar opportunity of participatory and democratic communication. In this study, the terms alternative media, social or new media have been used interchangeably for SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, etc. These interactive online portals offer new ways of interaction among users from across the globe by sharing and disseminating data in various forms, such as images, words, videos, sounds, etc., creating a hoard of online UGC.

Kellner expounds upon the peculiarities of communication through social media as "... independent of time and space; its messages can be transmitted instantly across the globe, archived and stored multiple sites, and retransmitted and circulated through potentially vast spaces."[12] These dynamic features make SNS thriving forums for content creation and sharing. Unlike the broadcast media, users are not passive receivers of a message; they can perform multiple roles. For example, they can instantly respond to the message or edit its content and further regulate and reset the directions of its circulation for new recipients. In the new media system, a message itself is a medium because the target audience and characteristics of medium are shaped by the message.[13]

On SNS, users also strategize and avail communicative autonomy to mobilize other users. This process of online social mobilization contributes towards active citizenship through participatory communication. SNS provide a pluralistic mode of communication through the participation of users from diverse social classes. Now, minorities and marginalized groups can advance their views at national and international levels. As compared to the broadcast media, these forums are open to all and users have the freedom to communicate without the influence of powerful elites.

They often respond and react to the dominant narratives created through the broadcast media.

Mass media has an influential role in opinion-making. During most of the twentieth century, mass media gained power not only by cementing its institutional status but also by developing a commanding discourse that guided the organization of the public sphere.[14] In this context, we consider social media both as an extension of the broadcast media as well as a challenge to it. Where broadcast media represents a top-down mode of communication and the state and power elites have hegemonic control over the broadcast media, SNS have more freedom of expression and the least amount of control.[15] Having said that, it may also be noted that freedom and lack of control by political and economic elites in the case of SNS have been overemphasized. Global technology companies, such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter, etc., are privately owned corporations following their regulation policies. Also, the state regulators have the power to restrict access to any website. Despite this, in comparison to the broadcast media, social media users have more communicative autonomy because of its interactive construction and the possibility of participatory and pluralistic communication.

In a nutshell, SNS create new ways of thinking and acting for the users. These forums sensitize individuals and groups facilitating them to participate in political processes more democratically than ever before. They mobilize groups and individuals for common goals.[16] Among SNS, Facebook and Twitter are fast-growing networks. Active users of these SNS have access to interactive public communication. These active users are also affecting the balance of power of media system at operational as well as institutional level.[17] SNS like Facebook then in a way are fostering active citizenship where active citizens are understood as self-governing agents who actively pursue their interests in the public domain.[18] These communicative spheres expand their horizons and contribute towards disturbing the balance of power in society by giving space to views from below empowering individuals and enhancing their freedom.[19]

Note on Research Design

This research study uses in-depth interviews and virtual ethnographic methods to generate qualitative data. Six active Facebook users were identified through judgmental sampling. The selection criteria for being an active user was posting a post at least once a week. However, all of them were found posting more than once a week and in some instances even more than once a day. Posting means participating on Facebook by sharing their thoughts on their timelines or sharing, resharing, and/or commenting, and/or responding with options of emoticons that represent liking, annoyance, sadness, happiness, or amazement. The Facebook timelines of the respondents were regularly followed and it was observed that on certain occasions, the frequency of their posts increased manifold during a day. This was often in response to national or local level political changes.

To reflect the diversity of opinion, users with varying political and religious views were selected based on the previous online interaction with them. These opinions

were verified during the interviews and informal conversations where the respondents explained their political and religious positioning in off-line and online worlds. All the respondents had a minimum 16-year of education with a terminal degree in social sciences. The respondents were currently residing in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad and the interviews were conducted in various sessions with follow-up conversations either at their homes or at a place of their convenience. The interviews were conducted in Urdu as well as English depending upon the language a particular respondent felt comfortable with. The respondents frequently switched between the two languages while responding. Verbal consent was obtained from all of the respondents for the interviews and written permissions were taken to use their public data from their Facebook accounts. To ensure the privacy of the respondents their names have been changed.

Based on the detailed data collected from a limited sample, it appears that these Facebook users who are above 25-year of age and are teaching social sciences and/or serving in research organizations related to social development are actively using Facebook to exercise their citizenship. They understand the meaning of active citizenship. They are participating in debates to promote democracy, volunteering for social and communal causes and human rights as well as professing their ideological stances through Facebook. All this points to the fostering of active citizenship through Facebook usage in ways outlined in the following sections.

Participatory Democracy

The participation of citizens in the direction and operation of political systems is a cornerstone of democracy. What guides, governs, or even facilitates this participation? For Kahlid, aged 38 years, it is a combination of multiple things. Foremost, it is exercising active citizenship. For him, the understanding of citizenship flows from an understanding of the constitution. He believes that the constitution of a state is a binding document between the state and citizens, such as the 1973-Constitution of Pakistan. He has approximately a decade long experience in a non-profit organization specializing in projects dealing with governance, budget-watch, and other election-related activities. Explaining his understanding of active citizenship, he asserts that "active citizenship is a combination of two words: Active and Citizen. It means to fully understand one's role as a citizen and it is a modern form of governance. Active citizenship is there even in the absence of democracy."

Concerns with regards to the taxes, budgeting, the procedure for electing parliamentarians following their performance critically, and holding them accountable for their actions, all configure in his conception of active citizenship. He sketched a simple diagram to explain active citizenship, which he calls the cycle of active citizenship.

Figure-1: Cycle of Active Citizenship
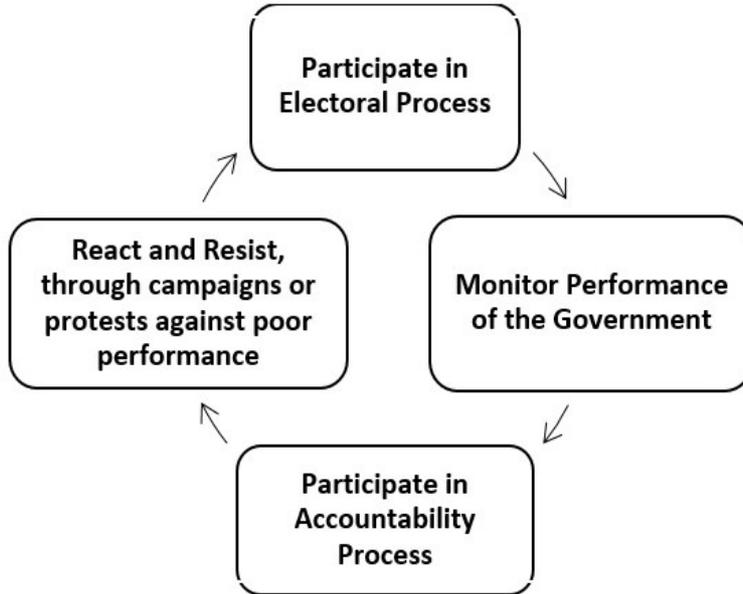
Similar views were expressed by Abrar, aged 37 years, who is a development professional with a master's degree in Political Science and an LLB. He has a decade long experience of working in the development sector, particularly, on projects related to governance, budget, and election watch. He considers citizenship as a two-way relationship between the state and citizens in which both parties are bound by a sociological contract called the constitution. Abrar defines:

> *An active citizen is the one who is not only vocal about his rights as a citizen but also of others. An active citizen engages himself to monitor the proper and well in time delivery of state's provided facilities like street and road maintenance, electricity, and water supply or any other services for which users are paying bills or they are provided through the taxpayers' money. An active citizen takes notice of the improper service delivery and inquire about the relevant department on behalf of all other users. On the other hand, active citizen also looks after the state's property and urges others to care for it as well.*

Allowing public outrage against injustice is a part and parcel of participatory democracy. "Facebook provides me with an opportunity to speak out," says Jamshaid, aged 27 years and a university social sciences student in Islamabad. He takes a keen interest in literature and political science. His journey of Facebook usage evolved over a period of about a decade. For the previous three years, he has been actively using Facebook for political mobilization as it offers him an opportunity to meet and interact with like-minded people. It helps him to be a part of the community that he may have lost in his move from Lahore to Islamabad. It has also helped him find new ways, like the use of satire, to get his message across. He explains that:

> *Facebook has its own sociology especially because of its interactive features of engaging users into social and political debates. For the previous few months, I have quitted extensive debates after realizing the fact that heated debates ultimately result in offending others. Now, I prefer to express my opinion in the form a satire that I believe is the best way to share the message to a larger audience.*

He also believes that while expressing outrage on perceived injustices one needs to find logical arguments. He tries to build a logical discourse through Facebook with his audience. He explains:

> *The Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government donated a huge amount of money to a religious madrassah and there was a huge outcry on social media. I raised a question and tried to offer an alternative perspective for critical debate that the private commercial educational institutions also receive funding from the state but they have never pointed this out. My point was not to endorse the funding of hardliner's madrassah but to offer a critical approach to analyze any issue.*

Abrar mentions that he understands Facebook as an open medium, therefore, he carefully chooses the words. He stated that during heated debates on Facebook, the participants support their favorite parties and often these debates result in hate speech, therefore, he avoids them. He mentioned that his organization has launched a mobile phone application to track the budget allocation of each district. He thinks that it is the best way to be an active citizen to keep a track record of the government's performance through such information technology tools.

Khalid is also aware of the diverse and conflicting political positioning of other users that he interacts with. He says that they are supporting their own ideal political heroes. Because of this, he cannot assess the effectiveness of his message. He is never sure of the level of circulation of his message in the virtual space - how other people will interpret and react to it. He, however, considers it his responsibility to share his learning with others irrespective of how they receive it.

Service delivery monitoring is also quite common on SNS. Abrar asserts that during his 10 years of Facebook usage, the nature of usage has changed from personal to professional. With the advent of mobile internet, his Facebook usage has been increased. His usage has also increased due to professional reasons, i.e., faster communication with different agencies and clients, and now, he is interacting more with regards to wider issues like social service delivery. Abrar recalls:

> *Once I posted a photo of a broken bridge over a canal. There was a warning message by the roads department to cross the bridge carefully. I criticized the government that after placing this warning message, the concerned department has fulfilled its duty and is now waiting for an accident to occur.*

Abrar works for an NGO monitoring transparency in the electoral process. He has been posting all his team's activities on his personal Facebook timeline along with writing on the official pages of the organization and other associated groups. He is an

active participant engaging with the official accounts of his organization which are primarily addressing the roles of an active citizen. He uses Facebook more actively and reflects upon his understandings and takes positions by explicitly criticizing various governance issues.

Social and Communal Causes

Facebook helps to share ideas not only related to governance and politics but also enables users to engage in a variety of contemporary issues both on the local and international levels. Khalid started a page for civic education even though his primary purpose for joining Facebook was to connect with friends and family. For some like Jamshaid, this aim is more explicit. He considers all those as active citizens who talk on a communal or social issue on social media including Facebook without any vested interests or self-promotion. In his opinion, Facebook is an online public sphere where people exercise their active citizenship as they do so in the physical world. He believes that "every human being has a sense of responsibility, thus, feels satisfied when he/she gets an opportunity to fulfill his/her responsibility; this is what academic-training in psychology teaches."

Active citizenship is a sense of responsibility and it is akin to giving importance to citizens participating in the state's affairs. Azfar explains that citizenship is a social contract between the state and citizens. Active citizenship is delegating responsibilities to the citizens by a state. Every human being has a built-in sense to own responsibility. If someone is not assigned a responsibility that individual would feel dissatisfied. As a manifestation of this ignorance, one can feel less important by falling into the symptoms of anxiety or depression. Azfar considers that assigning a role and responsibility to the citizen is giving them importance. In societies where citizens are not allowed to participate in the state's affairs through active citizenship, they end up displaying complaining behaviors. Social media has created an opportunity for users to express their feelings with other users diminishing the feeling of discontent.

Sana, age 37 years, a PhD in social sciences and a university teacher, also believes in owning up to the responsibilities, a state imposes as part of being an active citizen. She thinks that citizenship is about rights as well as the responsibilities of citizens. It is a two-way process in addition to being a basic human right. The first right that a child gets is citizenship. Active citizenship is an awareness of knowing one's rights and responsibilities in a state. An active citizen is paying back to the state by actively fulfilling one's responsibilities as a citizen. An active citizen should be loyal to the state, patriotic, vote for political change and the promotion of democracy, and should protect the state property.

Sana highlights that an active citizen should also be responsible for the cleanliness and environment especially in the public or shared spaces like parks and roads. People should value resources and opportunities they avail and that are granted by the state. She mentions as an example, caring for books borrowed through the public libraries, these should be kept carefully as one keeps one's own books. With this example, she states that an active citizen is responsible for the state property. She

mentions that as an active citizen, she gives awareness to her children and students on social issues.

For Sana, her Facebook account is more official than a personal account. Although she mentions her academic accomplishments or other success stories, she always has in mind to motivate her students for higher education and to do research. She also tends to motivate her Facebook audience by using inspirational quotes and sayings. She says that she uses Facebook to bridge the information gap. She is also a member of several Facebook groups and has liked many pages that provide information regarding academic activities. Sana prefers to participate in academic groups on Facebook instead of political debates. She sums up by stating that she has been using this for academic purposes and social awareness on education and the environment. Sana gives an example that one should refrain from bringing one's vehicle on the road if it is emitting smoke. It should be fixed before polluting the shared road. As an active citizen, one should be careful about the environment.

Ideological Debates

Some respondents of the study saw a greater possibility of using Facebook for advancing their religious and ideological positions. However, interactions on Facebook have brought in many changes in ideological positions they started with. Azfar started as a conservative member of a religious organization, however, he has now become more progressive over the years. He actively engages with other members of the organization advocating electoral democracy. He thinks that the world has changed and there is no room for conventional mechanisms of political change. He believes that with the emergence of institutions like parliament, judiciary, and executive; democracy delivers far more in terms of governance. Azfar thinks that social media is a new virtual society where one can express views with fewer restrictions as compared to the physical world. He does express concern that currently, social media is more about propaganda than a forum where one may express one's inner feelings and thoughts. But he is still hopeful based on his personal experience where he has evolved as a Facebook user. In the beginning, he was conservative but now he has turned progressive based on how his ideologic-thinking has evolved.

Facebook users can also, sometimes, be intolerant. For Azfar, the reason behind this intolerance is the reaction to suppression that they had undergone previously through the control over the medium of expression. Azfar says that some of his students are also his Facebook friends and sometimes they pass derogatory comments on his posts without respecting him as their teacher. To counter this, Azfar uses poetry to get his message across much like the use of satire for political messaging discussed previously. Azfar uses poetry in the service of humanity.

Jamshaid also feels that Facebook has the potential for educating common masses on ideological affairs in addition to political and social ones. His impetus came from an internship in the National Assembly of Pakistan, where he started sharing his learning with his Facebook friends. Other than political ideologies, he became an ardent

proponent of the rights of religious minorities. Belonging himself to the minority, he routinely speaks about such issues that may bring about more harmony in the society.

Almost all respondents speak of issues of privacy and surveillance while using Facebook in one way or the other. Umair, aged 27 years, expresses his concern as: "I do not want to be predictable to the world through Facebook." He started using Facebook in 2007 when it was accessed through only institutional invitation. He exclaims that Facebook and similar SNS are also spying on users and these are the tools of surveillance. He thinks that computer software and algorithms analyze Facebook users' psychology based on their online activities to observe their collective behavior as a nation. After realizing this aspect of Facebook, he has become conscious of this technical misuse and he does not want to be predictable for the world.

Despite this aspect, many are still enamored by the possibilities afforded by SNS. Umair adds that being a citizen is being a shareholder in the power of state and citizenship is always active. Every citizen exercises one's agency of citizenship off and on to figure out the solution to various social issues faced by them. Active citizenship refers to the idea of interacting with state and asking for your rightful share in power and resources.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that all the users have understandings of citizenship as a relation and bond between the state and citizens through the written constitution of Pakistan. For all of them, active citizenship refers to paying back to the state by fulfilling the responsibilities that the state has assigned to them. However, for them, active citizenship also entails critically analyzing the performance of the government. All the respondents are using Facebook for multiple purposes and they believe it is helping them to exercise active citizenship. They are using Facebook for the dissemination of information, promoting awareness, highlighting gaps in the performance of the state, dissemination of information, promotion of awareness on human rights, and sharing political and religious ideologies. They understand that their Facebook accounts are subject to surveillance. The political content that they share can also be misinterpreted. Even then they consider it an empowering tool to access and correspond with the state and play a role in the operations of governance as well as their respective communities.

The policymakers need to be attentive to the governance issues within the role of the state. The state is seen as a facilitator that enables citizens to become agents of change empowering them to solve the problems of their communities. It is also seen as the protector of the vulnerable where it should not let the notions of free expression impinge upon the rights of weaker members of society. And lastly, the state is also a regulator that has the power to control and policing. A better understanding of how social media is fostering active citizenship and that responsive citizens make for better citizens translating into better communities has the potential to lay the foundations of a more inclusive and supportive digital policy.

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