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Using social network systems as a tool for political change

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Social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube play a significant role in the political arena nowadays. They are growing engagement tools that assist in improving the political process by helping electoral candidates in communicating their political programs and thoughts to the community, as well as in rallying their campaign supporters. On the other hand, voters can also use social media sites to unconditionally communicate with the candidates. This paper shows the importance of online social networking in modern society by reviewing the literature on social networks usage in politics, and showing how this usage has grown dramatically in different aspects of political life during the past few years. The growth in the use of social network sites was clearly seen after Obama's 2008 US presidential election win, which uncovered the significance of social media in political campaigns and presented new ideas about the utilization of different web 2.0 technologies in politics. Clarifying the relationship between social networking and political life will also assist researchers to study the political behaviors of society and the motivations behind political participation.

Key words: Political elections, social network systems, political campaigns, politics, web 2.0 technologies, social networking and politics.

INTRODUCTION

Before the origination of Web 2.0 technologies, the web was used mainly to search for information and to acquire knowledge (Lewis, 2006; O'Reilly, 2006). Yet, with the internet revolution which began in the mid-2000s and the development of social networking sites (Agre, 2002), users' participation and interaction took different forms such as commenting, reviewing and ranking content, sharing photos and videos, voting and surveying, building special interest groups, making new friends, etc. (Kim et al., 2010; Lilleker and Jackson, 2012).

The term Web 2.0 describes the second generation of the World Wide Web (WWW), which focuses more on the ability of people to collaborate and share information online in contrast to the first web version, where people were mainly obtaining information (O'Reilly, 2006).

One of the most popular Web 2.0 technologies are the Social Network Sites (SNSs) like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, MySpace, LinkedIn, etc. (Click and Petit, 2010).

A social network is a connection network between a set of actors (organization, users, etc.), represented as graph nodes, and the relationships that tie these actors (friendship, common interests, trading partnerships, etc.) represented as graph edges. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were launched in 2004 and 2006; they allow users to register and create profiles, upload media, contribute to message threads, and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. Each Facebook profile has a "wall" where other users can add their posts. Since the wall is viewable by the user's friends, wall postings are basically a public conversation

centered on an individual user or group.

Candidates and parties nowadays use social network sites for political purposes by communicating directly with the voters, and thereby benefiting from the lower costs of this communication mode when compared to traditional media. Therefore, they make their campaign information easily accessible to everyone especially young people (Smith, 2011), and they can mobilize supporters, gain more votes, get some attention in the traditional media like television and newspaper, and get the attention of other politicians and political journalists (Karlsen, 2012), as well as facilitate fund raising (Carpini, 2000; Vergeer, 2012). Although television remains the leading source of campaign information and election news for many candidates and parties and even for the people (Smith, 2009), some parties utilize the web 2.0 features and SNSs instead of the traditional media because they are marginalized by mainstream media (Lilleker et al., 2011). This paper is part of a research project by the institute of visual informatics IVI in UKM-Malaysia to demonstrate the importance of the internet and social networks in politics generally and in elections specifically, to open the doors for scholars to do further studies around this subject, and to investigate the ways SNSs help in identifying potential voters for an electoral candidate and predicting the winning candidates in political elections.

A review of various resources indicates that Obama's victories in 2008 and 2012, and his extensive use of social network sites before and during the elections had attracted the attention of researchers. This paper is organized as follows: the next section explores the use of SNSs in political elections during the past decade and how it is expected to be used in the future. The following section covers the findings and conclusions of the research.

Social network sites and their political use

There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of social network systems in politics generally and elections specifically. In recent years, much more politically relevant information has become available on social network sites. The usage rate of social media, especially Facebook, by politicians increased dramatically after 2008 (Leuschner, 2012; Williams and Gulati, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2007; 2008). Recently, Facebook ranked first in the most visited sites in the world according to Top (2011).

The increase in politically relevant information on Facebook comes from the fact that Facebook supplies electoral candidates with an enormous opportunity to have contact with the public in a very effective and inexpensive manner, and without any limitations. In addition to that, Facebook allows the public to share their opinions, and participate and engage in the political process freely (Westling, 2007; Williams and Gulati, 2007).

From a political point of view, it is very easy to employ SNSs as a tool to communicate directly with the voters. The increase in the number of supporters and voters using Facebook to get political information has led to the increasing number of politicians using SNSs (Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2008).

Fast, easy, cheaper and with no control, the internet is spreading information make rumors easily created and reach vast audience which can effect on the number of support the candidate gains from the internet generally and from social media specially but still the significant use of internet in the election and campaigns dramatically increased in the last 10 years according to some statistics submitted by Pew Internet and American Life Project (Garrett, 2010). Statistics in the Associated Press (Press, 2012) showed that, the number of active Facebook users has increased significantly over the past few years: At the end of 2004, Facebook had 1 million registered users only, but this went up to 12 million users by the end of 2006 and 100 million by 2008, and this number jumped to 1 billion in September 2012. Other resources show that, Twitter had a similar surge in the number of users, which increased from around one million users in 2008 (Arrington, 2008) to 500 million users in 2012 (O'Carroll, 2012). These statistics on the use of these free media resources can be considered as evidence for the increasing awareness and knowledge of people.

Politicians utilize social networks and smartphones to reach out to as many voters as possible. By observing political candidates' engagements on social network sites, especially on Twitter, Hong and Nadler found indicators that, political events affect the number of people responding positively to candidates (Hong and Nadler, 2012).

A study done by Lilleker et al. (2011) showed that political parties within Great Britain, France, Germany and Poland that stood in the 2009 European parliamentary elections followed a strategy adopting all the features of web 2.0 and the internet to give their supporters the chance to talk to each other or to talk with party leaders directly.

In countries with a restricted media environment, people try to find alternative forms of media to state their opinions and to engage with political issues. In Malaysia, the number of Facebook users is increasing rapidly. Over 50% of Malaysia's population uses Facebook; this rate constitutes 78% of the Malaysian online community (Bakers, 2012). Facebook has become the most popular website in the country since 2010, ahead of the popular search engines Google and Yahoo and the online video sharing site YouTube (Alexa, 2012; Nardi, 1996).

The increase in the usage of the social media can be considered as an indicator of the increased political awareness in Malaysia. Besides, opposition supporters are using this technology as an alternative way to engage in politics and express their opinions freely (Smeltzer and

Keddy, 2010). Using Malaysia as a case study, Smeltzer and Keddy (2010) looked into the potential of Facebook being used as a tool for political change. They examined if, how, and to what extent Facebook usage can support critical political activities inside and outside formal electoral politics in a restricted media environment. Since the start of Malaysia's revolution in IT in the mid-1990s, Smeltzer and Keddy (2010) found that, there is an increasing number of opposition parties and candidates who use SNSs, especially after Obama's victory in the US 2008 election. Many parties and candidates have leveraged on Obama's effective utilization of web 2.0 technologies in politics, especially in the elections, by employing these technologies as tools for increasing the awareness of people, especially the youth, to spread their political views and to attract voters and gain their support. SNSs have helped these politicians to break the barriers imposed on the domestic media by the governing leading parties.

Facebook as a political support tool

Social networks can impact not only the share of the votes, but also the awareness of people and provide an appropriate venue for them to participate in the political process (Mascaro and Goggins, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011), to hold rallies to demand for their rights and to let their voices reach the specialists and politicians in order for change to occur (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012).

Social media plays an expanding role in increasing people's awareness and knowledge about their rights and the necessity of their engagement in the political scene through their participation in SNSs. This has prompted some governments to reconsider policies and to introduce restrictions on the internet and social media. A good example of this was witnessed in Singapore through the changes in policies that started in 2008 and continued until the 2011 parliamentary elections, due to the wide use of social networks (Skoric et al., 2012). They found in their study of 2000 respondents from Singapore that, the ruling party's increasing control of traditional media and newspapers had led to a growing number of people using social media to express their political opinions, and that in turn led to an increasing number of political activists participating in political rallies during the election.

A study that was conducted by Robertson et al. (2009), a group of researchers in Hawaii University aimed at better understanding social networking in the context of politics, showed the linkage patterns of posters which added comments to the Facebook walls of three major candidates: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain in the period before the 2008 U.S. presidential election. This study showed how the posters used links to different information sources to communicate their points or thoughts to others (Robertson et al., 2009; 2010).

Social network tools, especially Facebook and blogs,

play a significant role in changing society's viewpoints, which in turn helps in promoting people's revolution against non-democratic governments, an example of which was clearly seen in Pakistan in November 2007. The government controlled all the television channels and newspapers so, the youth overcame these barriers by using Facebook, blogs and mobile text messages to communicate and pass political information to others (Shaheen, 2008).

Besides that, Facebook recently played a major role in the Arab Spring. This event has attracted many researchers to find out the impact of the political messages posted on Facebook walls on the users' political trends, their political interest, and on the political arena in general (Yousif and ALSamydai, 2012).

To show how the people in Arab countries (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Syria) employed SNSs in politics and how they used Facebook to participate in political discussion, Khashman (2011) analyzed the Facebook pages of users in the countries that witnessed a political unrest during the still-continuing Arab Spring. Focusing on Egyptian pages on Facebook, Khashman (2011) found that there were more negative pages than positive ones within Facebook about the ousted Egyptian President (Khashman, 2011).

Mobile systems like smartphones and tablets help people to access the internet easily from public places. This in turn facilitates the use of social media. These systems played a big role in the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, by making it easier to pass information among the protesters, and to deliver messages faster to vast audiences, especially the youth. The increasing number of Egyptian people using the internet and social media, the people's anger caused by the accumulated likelihoods of unemployment for youth, and the restrictions imposed by the government on local media, made Facebook the most appropriate space to express and discuss opinions freely. This led to calls for participation in a revolt aimed at political change which succeeded in altering the country's 40 years long regime, even though the Egyptian government tried to control the traditional media, and mobile access to the internet (Attia et al., 2011; Skoric et al., 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012).

As a result of Egypt's revolution and the increasing use of Facebook and its effects, many governments, like the Chinese government, have taken precautions such as blocking access to social media sites to limit their impact on their people (Ho, 2011). During the Iranian presidential election in 2009, the government also blocked access to Facebook because the opposition candidates were using the site in their political campaigns (Bazzi, 2009).

Social network sites in recent elections

The United States was the first country to use the Internet on a large scale in the mid-1990s (Leuschner, 2012;

Vergeer, 2012). After Obama's victory in the 2008 US election, researchers paid more attention to social media tools. Numerous studies were done, examining how Obama influenced the electoral politics by using social media tools, and how these technologies secured his victory and helped in raising enough funds to win the elections.

In 2008 Obama used various web-based tools such as the Obama'08 Web site (barackobama.com), Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, E-mails, iPhone application, and the Obama-Biden transition project (change.gov) site for his campaign. Foreman listed some of the reasons behind Obama's winning of the 2008 presidential election: Obama raised more money than his competitors and utilized social media effectively. That facilitated the dissemination of information especially with the availability of smart phones among enthused youths, winning the support of the youths and leveraging on their ability to influence their families and friends to vote for Obama (Foreman, 2012).

Obama used these tools in an ingenious way that converted online participants to fans and supporters who showed their support by voting for him (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012; Lilleker and Jackson, 2012). He established a dramatic increase in the use of ICT in politics (Borins, 2009; Kuusk, 2012; Milliken, 2011). Again, similar patterns led to Obama's more recent victory in the 2012 presidential election.

The 2008 presidential elections witnessed several contrasts between how Obama and other candidates utilized social network sites in their campaigns. Obama's strategy led him to reach electorates and win the 2008 election, but other candidates regarded applying social network sites in their strategy as a less important issue since there were no previous facts to prove the relationship between these technologies and success in a presidential election, nor evidence that these technologies contribute in spreading information about their campaigns (O'Brien, 2012).

Despite the fact that traditional media like television and newspapers still play an important role in political campaigns, many candidates and parties show an increased interest in social media, especially after President Obama benefited from the utilizing of SNSs to mobilize and gain access to a greatest number of voters in the 2008 US presidential election (Milliken, 2011).

Milliken also examined how four of the candidates running in the 2012 presidential election: Michele Bachman, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, and President Obama benefited from employing social media and the Internet on a large scale in their campaigns. These media provided a platform for candidates' words and messages without any kind of filtering or modification which usually happens in traditional media, although each candidate used them in different ways.

European parties used social media as they were influenced by the American success story (Karlsen,

2012). Lilleker et al. (2011) investigated how UK political parties utilized and employed the internet and Web 2.0 in their campaigns during the 2010 UK general elections. He noted that some UK parties were, to some degree, mirroring the strategy of Obama in their campaigns (Lilleker and Jackson, 2012).

Research has continued to ask whether the social networks, especially Facebook, will continue boosting user participation in politics and encourage a strong relationship between the participants, and whether the social networks will make the relationship superficial and isolated from real life. Researchers have found that Facebook is considered by politicians as a chance to attract people to use social networking as a public venue to meet others and to form groups to exchange political information, as well as to communicate with other users who share the same viewpoints. Forming such groups on Facebook helps many users who are seeking political information as noted by Gil de Zúñiga, (2012); Mascaro and Goggins, (2010).

This paper has revealed how the use of social networking sites in politics showed different trends, especially after Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential elections. Previous research showed how users, politicians and candidates used different social media networks for different purposes such as communication, dissemination of information, arrangements for engagement and requests for donations, etc. Several studies showed statistical results that demonstrated a rise in the use of these technologies by politicians and users.

Williams and Gulati (2008) found that 32% of candidates for the U.S. senate and 13% of candidates for the parliament house updated their Facebook profiles at least once for the 2006 elections, and this helped them in gaining extra votes. Furthermore, all presidential candidates in 2008 had social network profiles.

Obama's campaigns were distinguishable in that, he utilized SNSs in a very professional way, and in the 2012 elections, he tried to use each facility available even more extensively than he had in the 2008 campaign. Obama often updated his Facebook page and his web site in the 2008 election, trying to communicate and reach young voters as he believed that the young voters were important, whereas his competitor McCain only updated his Facebook page three times over the election period, and these three updates were made nearer to the election date (Payne, 2009). This lowly administration of social media left a gap between McCain and his followers and giving Obama great opportunity in attracting voters and boosting their attendance (Choy, 2012) (Figure 1).

Subsequent to the 2008 elections, Obama used social media tools extensively again in the 2012 presidential election, gaining more online supporters than his competitor, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Obama's competitor, Mitt Romney, paid more attention to social media and consequently gained a bigger share

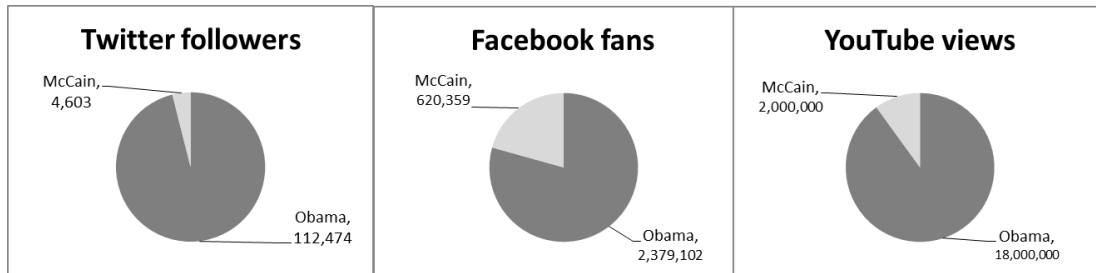


Figure 1. How each candidate used social media in the 2008 US presidential election (Metzgar and Maruggi, 2009).

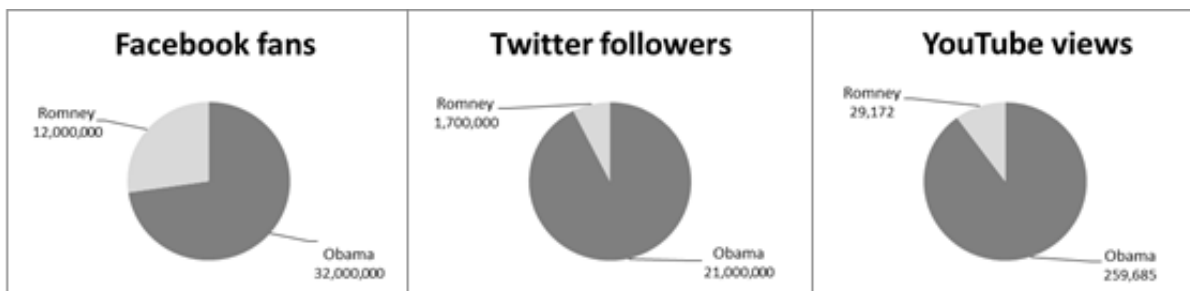


Figure 2. How each competitor in the 2012 presidential election used social media (Burrus, 2012).

of the supporters than Obama's former competitor, John McCain; however, Romney's campaign did not utilize social media as a core and base strategy during the elections as Obama did (Burrus, 2012), and this still left a relatively big gap between Obama and his competitor.

A study conducted in Norway provided statistical evidence that, the younger candidates in the 2009 Norwegian election campaign used Facebook for their campaigns more than the older ones. Over 80% of the candidates aged 25 years and below used Facebook as a part of their campaigns, and 73% of the candidates between 26 to 35 years old used it for the same purpose. There was a lower usage rate of Facebook by candidates between 36 to 50 years old, whilst only a quarter of the candidates aged 51 and above used the site.

In contrast, there were differences in the usage of Twitter, with candidates between 36 to 50 years old using Twitter more extensively than candidates below 35 years old (Karlsen, 2012), and this indicates that micro blogging is more attractive to older people while the content-rich Facebook attracts younger people.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that, social media is used as a continuously expanding communication channel between candidates and voters. The research has discussed the effectiveness of Facebook as a social network site in political elections to rally candidates' supporters, as well

as to make political information available to users of social network systems.

Traditional media like television and newspapers is still significant and important in political campaigns for fast circulation of political information through the internet; this in turn makes rumors easily spreadable. Notwithstanding this, the research predicts that, the number of politicians, especially election candidates employing SNSs in their campaigns will rise after Obama's successful re-election as the US president in 2012 since his campaign focused significantly on employing web 2.0 features effectively to influence potential voters and gain their support.

This paper will give a better insight to politicians, journalists, political analysts, and electoral candidates about how others used SNSs as well as how far they may benefit from these technologies. This will, in turn, make them use SNSs as another source of information for further analysis and understanding of the political process.

This review illuminate the need for further study on the possibility of politicians and specialists' using web 2.0 technologies to predict potential voters for electoral candidates. Consequently, this may lead to predicting the winning candidate in a political election.

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