Social Media Data Mining: An Analysis & Overview of Social Media Networks and Political Landscape

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Abstract

The social media is seemingly becoming a big influence in the politics and a core strategy for political campaigns. Social media has become a coordinating tool for almost all of the political movements globally. The prospective of social media is mainly in their support of civil society and the public sphere. Social networking sites have gradually become integral part of people's everyday life. Internet, through the use of the social media platforms, is now being used to convey messages to a diverse audience more directly. Also, the Internet provides a major technological stimulus to the modernisation and professionalisation of political campaigns. This paper, based on document analysis and insights of data published on the social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, gives a brief discussion on the advent of the social media networks and the politics. Examples of the events where the social media have influenced certain activities or actions in the political landscape across the globe are also briefly cited and discussed in this paper. Some of the events highlighted in this paper which have been influenced by the social media turned out to yield positive outcomes whilst some outcomes are not positive. This paper is concluded with a view that the social media continues to have an influence in the political landscape. Thus, reactions, feedback, conversations and debates are generated online as well as support and participation for offline events. Messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared, which allow new audiences to be reached through the social media. However, this obviously does not mean that every political movement that uses these tools will succeed, because some state(s) have not lost the powers to react through banning them or censoring them.

Keywords: Social media, Political landscape, Social networking sites

1. Introduction

In the past few years, we have witnessed an immense growth in Internet content that is essentially user generated through online tools often defined as social media [1]. Social media is said to be a set of electronic tools that use the Internet to let information to be communicated amongst people [18]. Barbier *et al*. [5] describe social media as primarily Internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings. These are a set of electronic tools that utilize the Internet to allow information to be communicated to and fro citizens from leaders, and vice versa, or among citizens while by passing leaders entirely. According to Bevilacqua *et al*. [8], social media is a fast way of effectively reaching voters. Bevilacqua *et al*. [8] argue that the cost of running television advertisements could put a strain on the political funds. If an inspection of the past few years could be made, it will be realised that the way citizens communicate with one another about politics has been fundamentally altered by the emergence of social media, or what is popularly known as "Web 2.0" [8, 17].

Social Media has rapidly grown in importance as a forum for political activism in its different forms [4]. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube

provide new ways to stimulate citizen engagement in political life, where elections and electoral campaigns have a central role [6]. With social media being increasingly used by companies for marketing and market research [3, 15, 16], it makes a lot of sense to use it for political research, shape political opinions and influence political outcomes. In politics, parties improve the use of professional marketing campaign strategies and increasingly approach voters as consumers searching for a product, and not as loyal partisans [12]. Social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors: regular citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, governments, *etc.* [7].

According to Bevilacqua *et al*. [8] and Shirky [7], political freedom has to be accompanied by a civil society literate enough and densely connected enough to discuss the issues presented to the public. The use of social media tools such as text messaging, e-mail, photo sharing, social networking, and the like, does not have a single preordained outcome [8]. Therefore, attempts to outline their effects on political action are too often reduced to duelling anecdotes. Alujevic [13] argues that opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they get echoed by friends, family members, and colleagues. It is in this second, social step that political opinions are formed [13]. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference. As with the printing press, the Internet spreads not just media consumption but media production as well. It allows people to privately and publicly articulate and debate a welter of conflicting views [7, 20].

Aday *et al*. [2] point out that, in January 2010, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, articulated a powerful vision of the Internet, promoting freedom and global political transformation and rewriting the rules of political engagement and action. According to Aday *et al*. [2], Clinton's vision resembles that of others who argue that new media technologies facilitate participatory politics and mass mobilisation, help promote democracy and free markets, and create new kinds of global citizens.

2. Scope and Objective

Based on document analysis, this paper reviews and analyses the information on social media data and the political landscape globally. It gives the general overview or background of what social media is, its significance or influence on the politics. It also gives a discussion and analysis which is on the examples of the incidents or events where social media has played a role on influencing them on the political landscape. The research paper is intended to give an understanding to researchers, scholarly peers, learners, data miners, companies, politicians or anyone who wish to stay abreast with the social media data and the political landscape. It is an eye opener to those who wish to mine and analyse the social media data, particularly on the political landscape.

3. Social Media and Political Landscape: Examples of Events & Activities

The social media has indeed played a major role in most political movements and campaigns around the world in the past few years. Below are some of the examples of the events or activities which we have seen social media such as Facebook and Twitter, playing a part in influencing and making them a success.

The full impact of social media on politics was not felt until Barack Obama's prolific social media campaign in the 2008 US elections. According to Kimachia [6], this election was dubbed the "Facebook Election" and saw Obama getting 70% of the youth votes [6, 9]. In March 2013 general election in Kenya, President Kenyatta came up with an aggressive social media campaign strategy targeting the youth. By the time of the elections, his Facebook page had over 500,000 'likes', making it one of the most 'liked' pages in Africa [9].

The power of the social media was felt in South Africa's parliamentary and provincial legislature elections in mid-2014. The social media's following of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and that of new parties like the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), was massive and this contributed to them winning some of the parliamentary seats [6]. This was also seen for Botswana's 2014 general elections where the newly formed Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) alliance, got the recognition and followers mostly because, it was led by the youth who marketed their party slogan through the social media (both the traditional and online), Consequently resulting in the party (UDC) getting more elections in the cities and urban areas, and becoming the second voted party for both the councillors and parliamentary seats [19].

The role of social media has been a major theme in the analysis of the turbulent events following general elections in some countries [2], example is the Iran June 12, 2009 presidential elections, the Botswana 2014 UDC victory [19] the South African 2014 EFF victory [6]. Many observers see new media as a necessary cause and influence of the events, and the rise of the protest movements following the elections even though there are some subsequent backlashes which sought to dismiss their significance [2, 11, 14].

Social media is largely credited for the overall success of the protests, campaigns and victories, *e.g.* the aforementioned Obama campaign and Kenya President Kenyatta campaign. In most of all the past uprisings, social media was used to plan and organize protests, and share information with the rest of the world. According to Toivo [4], in view of political developments as diverse as Occupy Wall Street in the United States, the rise of Indignados in Spain, protests in Moscow and Tehran, and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, it has become increasingly clear that social media are now intertwined with political activity.

During the official trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada, on January 17, 2001, loyalists in the Philippine Congress voted to set aside key evidence against him. In less than two hours after the announcement of the decision, thousands of angry Filipinos converged on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a major crossroads in Manila to protest against the release of their corrupt president. They thought there was a chance that he might be let off the hook. The protest was organised, by forwarded text messages reading, "Go 2 EDSA Wear blk" [7]. The protestors (crowd) boomed in numbers. The numbers increased to over a million in the next few days, obstructing traffic in downtown Manila. Consequently this uprise alarmed the country's legislators and they reversed course and allowed the evidence to be presented hence Estrada's fate was sealed, and he was gone by January 20th [4, 6-7].

The power of the social media was also seen during the 2004 demonstrations in Spain. The said demonstrations had been planned through text messaging, which in no time led to the quick ouster of Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, who had inaccurately blamed the Madrid transit bombings on Basque separatists [6-7]. Again, in Moldova in 2009, the massive protests coordinated to a certain extent by text message, Facebook, and Twitter broke out after an obviously fraudulent election which ultimately resulted in the Communist Party losing power. Also, the Catholic Church has faced lawsuits over its harbouring of child rapists, a process that started when *The Boston Globe*'s 2002 exposé of sexual abuse in the church went viral online in a matter of hours [7].What is common to all the afore mentioned protests is that the social media was the pivot and helping organize all these activities or actions.

The Arab Spring is one of the examples which show how social media plays a part in politics. The protests began from a single street vendor in Tunisia in December 2010, but quickly swelled into a countrywide protest [7, 20]. By the following year in January 2011, President Ben Ali had been toppled out of power and into exile. The wave of dissent quickly engulfed much of North Africa and the Arab world. One by one, oppressive regimes were either toppled or forced to implement major changes in governance [4, 6]. Clearly, this was made possible and influenced by the use of social media.

Another example is of an exotically popular blogger in Zimbabwe named "Baba Jukwa". He has used Facebook as a political tool to expose the rot in President Robert Mugabe's government. This blogger has so far posted several sensational exposes on Mugabe's health, massive corruption in government, vote rigging, and government sanctioned murder and assassination plots [6].

Social media increase shared awareness by propagating messages through social networks. For example, the anti-Aznar protests in Spain gained momentum so quickly precisely because the millions of people spreading the message were not part of a hierarchical organization [7]. There were just ordinary users of the online social media tools.

Another example worth noting is of the Chinese anticorruption protests that followed immediately as a result of the overwhelming May 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. The protesters were mothers, who had lost their children in the collapse of shoddily built schools. The country's construction industry had always been an open secret before the earthquake. However, when the schools collapsed, citizens began sharing documentation of the damage and of their protests through social media tools. Then consequently, the government corruption was uncovered, and it now became a public truth [6].

Various protest movements have used social media not as a replacement for real-world action but as a way to coordinate it. Examples of such include a movement against fundamentalist vigilantes in India in 2009, the beef protests in South Korea in 2008, and protests against education laws in Chile in 2006 [10].

Another worth noting protest is the recent Botswana 2016 #IshallNotforget campaign. This campaign was started by angry citizens following an incident where a vulnerable under-aged school girl was sexually defiled by an older man and got pregnant. The campaign trended in social media platforms Twitter and Facebook quiet for sometime including private newspapers and radio stations. This was a huge campaign in which the protestors marched through the city roads and stood by the traffic lights spreading the messages. However, the police deemed that illegally and arrested some mainly because they refused to grant the protestors a permit to march. Many believed that this was a political scandal since the alleged "old man" who impregnated the young school girl was a member of the ruling party, Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) and serving as mayor (district councillor). In less time, the protests were joined by the non-governmental organisations such Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV and AIDS (BONELA) which even stood up and made the investigations so that they can stand up for the victimised girl child. The campaign was also supported by the opposition parties, other movement bodies as well as the entire citizens of Botswana. The protest sent an alarming message, it reached even neighbouring countries.

There are, however, many examples of the activists failing, as in Belarus in March 2006, when street protests (arranged in part by e-mail) against President Aleksandr Lukashenko's alleged vote rigging swelled, then faltered, leaving Lukashenko more determined than ever to control social media. Another incident is the June 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran. The activists used every possible technological coordinating tool to protest the miscount of votes for Mir Hossein Mousavi but were ultimately brought to heel by a violent crackdown [4]. The Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010 also followed a similar but quicker path. The protesters savvy with social media occupied downtown Bangkok until the Thai government dispersed the protesters, killing dozens of people [7].

4. Conclusion

Indeed social media have gradually become integral part of people's everyday life. People use social media to share content on various things for various reasons. As reflected in this paper, social media has been used largely in politics and had an influence

on most political landscapes. Personal communication via social media brings politicians and parties closer to their potential voters. It allows politicians to communicate faster and reach citizens in a more targeted manner and vice versa, without the intermediate role of mass media. This aspect has been shown in some of the discussions of certain events mentioned in this paper. Reactions, feedback, conversations and debates are generated online as well as support and participation for offline events. Messages posted to personal networks are multiplied when shared, which allow new audiences to be reached. As shown in some of the afore mentioned events in this paper, some events were organized faster through the use of the social media, large audience have been reached through the use of the social media sites. However, this obviously does not mean that every political movement that uses these tools will succeed, because some state(s) has not lost the powers to react through banning them or censoring them like other states have already started burning social media platforms such as Facebook. Also, it does not mean everything posted on social media will have good end results. Example is of some of the protests which have been made through the social media, some of them exposed participants to the threat of violence, and in some cases its actual use.

Nevertheless, the adoption of these tools (social media) together with the use of smart cell phones with Internet connectivity as a way to coordinate and document real-world action is so permeating that it will probably be a part of all future political movements. Social media has power over several things including the political landscape. It has greater unimaginably influential power which can either affect something positively or negatively. All in all, social media is defined by people. Without users subscribing to the social networks, they will be no followers of such platforms and hence no sharing of content online.

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