

The Role of Social Media and Citizen Journalism

On 1st May of 2010, Maoist, the largest political party of Nepal, initiated an indefinite strike intending to topple the then government and take over the country. Thousands of Maoist cadres and supporters entered Kathmandu valley armed with weapons ranging from bamboo sticks to swords and took over the streets. Every shop, business, factory, school, college and transportation was forced to close down. As the strike got violent and continued for days, the whole nation came to a standstill. People were scared to go out of their houses. Even media persons and journalists were attacked by the protesters. As the longevity of the strikes increased, so did the possibility of huge confrontation initiating a wave of terror among the general citizens and media.

Despite this, the residents of the valley weren't passive though. Having seen countless protests and strikes before, they didn't react at first hoping the issues would be resolved in a day or two. However, as the strike exceeded 3 days, people got concerned and started getting involved in the discourse regarding the ongoing strike. What facilitated the conversations?? Of course, the ubiquitous Facebook and its counterparts such as twitter and blogs.

On the 7th day of the strike, general people who had come together with the help of the social media tools, organized a peace rally opposing the strike. More than 20,000 people joined the rally and swarmed in the major streets of the valley-unarmed and carrying national flags. Although there were some incidents of protesters attacking the peace rally participants, the rally was largely peaceful and later that day, Maoist announced that they were postponing their strike for an indefinite time. Hence, Nepal averted a huge political crisis that could have turned the country into a state of civil war.

Had it not been for the social media tools like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs etc., the peace rally could not have been coordinated and conducted or executed as peacefully as it was. This incident from Nepal demonstrates how social media tools are changing the way people communicate and interact in a society and how these tools are providing a greater voice to the general citizens in the society as well as media. In this context, this essay will trace back the history of social media in Nepal, present the current scenario and argue that these tools are significantly changing the way people interact and communicate in the society as well as the way these tools are challenging and influencing the role of mainstream media in the society.

Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."¹ Nepal's social media revolution started at a time when mainstream media was at its knees due to excessive censorship and oppression by the then royal regime. King Gyanendra took power after the royal coup of 2001 in which he sacked the then prime minister and dissolved the parliament. Fearing protests he imposed harsh censorship on both print and electronic media curtailing press freedom of the nation severely. Since he failed to curb the web media, blogs and Internet medias emerged as the sources of unbiased and uncurtailed information for the citizens with access to the internet and knowledge of new media.

But it wasn't until 2006 when the media censorship reached its height that social media tools such as blogs emerged as a serious alternatives to the mainstream media. During the people's movement of 2006, mainstream media (both private and state-owned) were turned into mere puppets and propaganda machines of the King. Citizen journalism and social media such as blogs became the

1 Kaplan, Andreas M.; Michael Haenlein (2010). "[Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media](#)" *Business Horizons* 53 (1): 59–68.

preferred source of true information and news. Citizen journalists became the source of the news of actual happenings in the streets. After the April 2006 revolution, which saw the King lose most of his powers leading to be dethroned later on, Nepal's web focused citizen journalism has seen a rapid growth and is increasingly becoming the most favored source of news and information.

As of June 30, 2011 , there are 1,072,900 Facebook users from Nepal² which amounts to 3.7% of the total population. For a country like Nepal whose only less than one-tenth of the total population has access to the internet, the numbers of Facebook users is pretty high. More than 1200 blogs have been listed by a prominent Nepalese blog aggregator³ and some blogs such as Mysansar receive more traffic than the news sites run by media houses. Mysansar, the most popular blog of Nepal is among the top 50 thousand most visited websites in the world. ⁴

Besides acting as alternative sources of news and information, social media tools like Facebook contribute in allowing a the citizens a greater voice in media and issues that concern them in the society. For eg. , Facebook has been a seedbed for initiating campaigns and gathering solidarity for a certain cause or issue in Nepal. Some of the most popular citizen campaigns of Nepal of the recent times were initiated in Facebook. *Gari Khana Deu* , a campaign initiated demanding rule of law, end to impunity and right to earn a living has gained a nationwide momentum and now has been picked up by the mainstream media as well as civil society. *Jyaala Pura Liyau, Aba Sambidhan Deu* (Now that you have taken the full wages, give us our Constitution), is another pressure campaign initiated in Facebook to pressurize the Constituent Assembly to formulate a constitution in time that has now become a nation wide movement after being picked up by the mainstream media and civil society. As Constituent Assembly has been postponing the deadline for formulating a new constitution time and again and

2 <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm>

3 <Http://www.bloggers.com.np>

4 According to Alexa.com

mainstream media has failed to provide enough platform for general citizens to vent their frustrations over the process and the ongoing instability and impunity , citizens are turning more and more towards social media to get together and have their voices heard be it through organized protests or be it through expression of solidarity or be it through participation in intense discourses. Nepal Unites , a campaign initiated to *“bring the 'accountability' back in Nepali politics and the larger society, and contribute to this actively from where ever we (Nepalese) live”* has attracted considerable mainstream media's attention and has generated huge public discourse on the issues of accountability and good governance.

The notable aspects of campaigns initiated through social media is they provide young people with platform to voice their opinions, garner solidarity and act on the issues. As evidenced by the success of Nepal Unites campaign in garnering a strong support base of young people and the success of Aavaz.org to mobilize people, especially the young people around the world to act on the issues that concern them and have a greater involvement in such issues demonstrates the important role social media plays in increasing the access of people to media. With the advent of social media, the world is seeing more and more young people involved in the issues within and outside their society as well.

The advent of social media is truly a major milestone in the history of media. Not only has it changed the way we communicate, opine or get our information but it has also challenged the hegemony of huge media houses and other traditional media by bringing more competition in the sector and increased involvement of the general citizens in the process of information dissemination. The role of social media in the recent Arab uprisings demonstrate the pivotal role social media can play to empower citizens and act as an alternative to main stream media. Social media plays an even greater role in Nepal, especially at the time of political transitions like now to inform and educate the citizens.