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Rising Access to Information: Dynamics & Implication

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Abstract- Access to information is a fundamental condition for enabling citizens' active participation in the modern democratic systems. The availability of sufficient required information to citizens makes the accountability of the government possible. It is the age of information led globalization. Individual and societies are getting far more connected than ever before. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the prominent characteristics of the modern age. The innovative, integrative, easily available and user friendly communication technologies are enhancing citizen's access to information. Consequently, citizens are becoming far more empowered. This phenomenon has profound political, economic and social impacts. Relying on the existing research, this article juxtaposes the findings from different researches and presents them in a meaningful compact way.

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Rising Access to Information: Dynamics & Implication

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Abstract- Access to information is a fundamental condition for enabling citizens' active participation in the modern democratic systems. The availability of sufficient required information to citizens makes the accountability of the government possible. It is the age of information led globalization. Individual and societies are getting far more connected than ever before. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are the prominent characteristics of the modern age. The innovative, integrative, easily available and user friendly communication technologies are enhancing citizen's access to information. Consequently, citizens are becoming far more empowered. This phenomenon has profound political, economic and social impacts. Relying on the existing research, this article juxtaposes the findings from different researches and presents them in a meaningful compact way.

I. Introduction

Access to information is the basic condition for a successful democracy. It is the principle and in actuality a right which was achieved through struggle against the arcane policies of monarchs in 17th and 18th centuries. It also imposes the responsibility upon press to provide objective information. Thus, access to information is part of the enabling conditions of 'publicity' which exposes state before public for scrutiny (Habermas, 1974).

Everyone in a democratic society is bestowed with the right to have access to such information that actually empowers individual to hold public institutions accountable. Informed public discusses and debates issues of common interests and ultimately leads to the generation of public opinion which brings the state and other public institutions in touch with the needs of the public (Crack, 2007).

As Luther used the newly invented printing press to drive protestant movement against the Catholic Church, or the American revolutionaries utilized Benjamin Franklin designed postal service, today's nonconformists' movements have liberty to choose from many of the ICTs devices to shape their viewpoint and synchronize their actions (Shirky, 2011). As the communications composition globally is getting dense, complex, and increasingly participatory, the netizens are gaining enhanced access to information, augmented options for public speech, and a raised ability to carry out collective action (Khan, 2014a).

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The Internet and News networks for example CNN, BBC, Sky TV and Aljazeera that provide information on almost every issue, have no counterparts of their level in entire human history (Tehranian, 2004). Websites, wikis, social networking sites, blogs, and discussion forums are altogether a new form of media commonly termed as social media that multiply individual access to information. Several recent socio-political mobilizations have been primarily organized through the Internet and mobile interactions which shows that power of informed citizenry. In the last decade the public mobilizations in Philippines, Spain, South Korea, Ukraine, Nepal, Ecuador, Thailand and several other countries, manifest the strengths of social media and the new power of social movements to call for solidarity to the world at large for their local cause. The movement against the military rule in Myanmar in 2007 is another case in this regard. Most recent case was the revolutions in Arab world. (Castells, 2008; Gonzalez-Bailon et al., 2011; Moussa, 2013)

This article highlights the significance of access to information for citizens in the age of globalization. The modern communication systems have enabled citizens to gain access to information on unprecedented level. Building upon existing research, the article highlights the dynamics that have facilitated the rising access to information and implications of this phenomenon.

II. Acces to Information

Access to information is imperative for an active public (Coulhan, 1992). The digital public is matchless in this regard as it is facilitated by such communication systems that enable greater number of citizens to access unlimited information (McChesney, 1995). The role of the Internet is paramount in this respect. One can find millions of web pages on almost every subject over the Internet (Dahlberg, 2001). Furthermore, it is increasingly becoming user friendly and any one with some basic computer skills and access to the Internet, can retrieve information of his/her need from the Internet. Speedy and efficacious access to information raises transparency and answerability of the government. Similarly by providing citizens information regarding rights, facilities and services, citizens can be empowered and opportunities for debates can be augmented (Weigel & Waldburger, 2004).

The rapid proliferation of ICTs is enabling better access to information, supplying new spaces for public

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deliberations and paving the way for enhanced civic action beyond territorial confines (Shirky, 2011). ICTs have the potential to generate networks of connected citizens across the world. ICTs can transmit the voice of the unfortunate and marginalized to decision makers in order to insist action from their policy makers to generate permanent fundamental change in policies (Kalas & Finlay, 2009; Khan et al., 2012).

Importantly, today the common citizens are getting far more informed and expecting more of the state, at a juncture when most of the states are less competent to provide (Ferguson, 2006). The ordinary citizens due to ICTs have become 'global citizens'. Drache observes that the 'global citizen' can be seen anywhere in coffee shops, restaurants, the mall, paying through credit cards or voting online (Drache, 2008). He further observes that global citizens sign petitions, create artworks, launch boycotts, break copyright laws, share files, create blog, and engage in elite challenging activities. They are no more living in their self-confined cellars; rather they are interacting with one another, and are not afraid to raise their opinions. He highlights that global citizenship can be observed during the employment of hypertext, access to new communal identities and new ways of comprehending the associations between the local and the global (Drache, 2008).

III. Dynamic for Rising Access on Information

a) ICTS

The term 'ICT' refers to the whole range of devices that are employed to collect, store and share information. These include both conventionally used radio, television and telephone and modern technologies like computer, cell phone, the Internet, satellites etc (Weigel & Waldburger, 2004). ICTs have tremendously facilitated the flow of information in the shape of sound, image and text. The important features of ICTs include speed, interactive facilities, compactness, affordability and integration of different technologies together (Khan et al., 2012).

These features are making rising number of people own one or multiple digital devices to access information according to one's need. It may be said that digital devices are increasingly becoming inevitable part of life of huge number of individuals across the world. These are giving birth to a unique culture of its own type.

The prominent ICTs that have raised individual's access to information include computer, the Internet, cell phone, SNS, wikis, blogs, RSS, bulletin boards, discussion forums and a range of social softwares that enable exchange of information in the shape of text, images and sound.

b) Globalization sensitizing and motivating the needs to have more info

Globalization is a set of ongoing processes, without a beginning or an end, motivated by human instinct for improved style and standard of living, forcing connections among all types of institutions and organizations, resulting in destabilization and integration simultaneously and chronically (Khan, 2014). The global networks that shape the planet affect everything and everyone. The obvious reason for this phenomenon is that all the pivotal economic, communicative, and cultural activities have been globalized (Castells, 2008). The impacts of globalization turn almost everyone susceptible to their effects and create the urge for more information about local and distant societies and institutions.

Moreover, one of the basic characteristics of contemporary globalization is intensified connectivity that also motivates the need to have maximum information for social, political and economic benefits (Held, 2003). Furthermore, globalization like an autonomous process requires exchange of information among individuals and societies in the shape of ideas for its own development (Tehranian, 2004).

c) Rising awareness at local level

With the proliferation of liberal democracies across the world, people are becoming well-aware about the significance of availability of information about public policies, as this is the only mean through which people can hold elected governments accountable and make their voice being heard. This aspect encourages the civic activists, political workers and common citizens to have more and more information about their rights, public issues, policies, political parties and their leaders (Catells, 2008).

Similarly, susceptiblities to the effects of globalization also motivate the need to have maximum information about people in other parts of the world, about their societies, economies and political systems. These urges ultimately emphasize to have mechanisms for access to maximum information.

d) Right to information

Right to information is increasingly being recognized across the world. It is in continuation of freedom of speech. In order to enable individual freedom of speech, freedom of information is inevitable (McDonagh, 2013). The UN and a huge number of international non-governmental organizations have been campaigning for it. Right to information is increasingly been seen as a fundamental right. Consequently, one can see rise in the legislations across the world that ensure individual's right to information. These legislations are also facilitating the rising level of access to information.

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e) Censorship difficult

Authoritarian regimes generally smother communication among their citizens as they apprehend that well-informed and better-coordinated public would limit their ability to act freely (Shirky, 2011). However, important characteristic of new communication systems is that it is difficult to censor.

It is a fact that the Internet has to certain extent been "developed, monitored and regulated by government". Nevertheless, a huge amount of debate occurs online comparatively free of state and market influence (Dahlberg, 2001). The Internet by its structurally complex nature and advanced technologies is difficult to censor. Many dissident movements even terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida have effectively published there contents without concerns of the powerful states including United States with advanced mechanisms to trace and censor.

There are several recent examples which show that in the last decade different governments' efforts to ban or censors particular TV channels or websites remained fruitless. People continue to access Youtube in countries where it has been banned. Similarly, in Pakistan for example, the country's most watched media channel "Geo News" has been banned but people continue to watch its transmissions over the Internet. Thus, it has become extremely difficult for governments to ban or hinder information flows in the twenty first century.

IV. Implication

The access to information is necessary condition for enabling active participation of citizen in the contemporary democratic society. ICT by facilitating this requirement is triggering profound political, economic and social impacts.

a) Political

Modern citizens are equipped not with weapons but with the power of information facilitated by communication technologies. Furthermore, ICTs capabilities to produce networks of knowledgeable citizens reflect their political powers (Castells, 2008). Cyber enthusiasts contend that the Internet can strengthen democracy by connecting people, with utter disregard to territory, and by fostering public spheres and fresh social movements (Min, 2010). The history shows us many examples of the effective use of information and communication inventions for bringing revolutions. Luther use of printing press or the American revolutionaries utilization of postal service to achieve their revolutionary objectives are daring examples of the innovative use of communication technologies, and contemporary nonconformists' movements can choose from a huge variety of digital devices to shape and propagate their viewpoint and synchronize their actions. With every passing day, the 'haves' of digital technologies are increasing in number and in sophistication of their use, consequently the opportunities for public debate and civic actions are multiplying (Shirky, 2011; Khan, 2014a).

The rapid sprouting of political groups and activism over the Internet surely mirrors political uses of this medium (Papacharissi, 2002). At the bottom of all such activism lie the availability of information. The Internet is facilitating public political action globally (Taylor, 2002). Several recent socio-political mobilizations primarily organized through the Internet and mobile interactions (Castells, 2008).

Social media can facilitate disorderly groups by decreasing the costs of coordination. Consequently, larger, looser groups get enabled to take on some synchronized action like launching protest movements or public media initiatives that in past were only possible for formal organizations. In the case of political movements, one of the major types of coordination is 'shared awareness', i.e. the capability of each activist in a group to not only comprehend the situation in sight but also to comprehend that everyone else does, as well. Social media augment shared awareness by spreading information through cyber social networks (Shirky, 2011).

People Power-II movement in Philippines that forced Estrada to leave the office on January 20, 2001 was the first case in history that demonstrated that with the mobile communications thousands of people could be congregated in few hours, who eventually achieved their goal. Likewise the election of South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun in 2002 is another evidence of the potentials of ICTs. His election has been extensively credited to Nosamo, an online group of young supporters of Roh. Triumph of both i.e. the Roh and Nosamo has now turned out to be a textbook example reflecting the potentials of information technology (Hachigian & Wu, 2003). Similarly the massive demonstrations against Iraq war in 2003 were also primarily convened by using cyber technologies and refer to the same phenomenon (Hara & Shachaf, 2008). Similarly, ICTs by facilitating information and interaction among people can help eradicate misperception and condense the discrepancy of information in world politics, thus ensure more security and less violence (Kapitonenko, 2009).

b) Economic

Availability and exchange of information in run time also reflect the economic implications as well. Exchange of information leads to exchange of techniques and technologies to boost productivity, raise the standard of life, decrease prices, and generate new economic activities leading to new employment openings and generation of wealth. The world is experiencing a transformation not due to the fact that computer operators have substituted the secretaries

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and the typists across the world, leading to reasonable hike in efficiency, rather the information technologies have restructured the economy on essentially different basis, commonly called as information based economy (Tezcan, 2006).

Information and innovation are the most important factors for businesses. Businesses have always tried to acquire hold of the information flows for variety of purposes like advertising, innovation in productivity and internal efficiency. However, ICTs have enabled structural changes in economies across the world. These changes have affected the production on the one hand and consumption behaviors on the other as well. New modes of transactions have been invented equipped with the digital currencies. ICTs have facilitated turbocapitalism (Luttwak, 2000). Some argue that the institutions that have benefited most at the infrastructural level owing to ICTs are none but MNCs, now also called as transnational corporations (TNCs). TNCs have evolved global networks of production and marketing that have transformed the economic geography (Taylor, 2004).

ICTs themselves have proved to be a capital like 'human or social' capital. Their impacts on productivity, organizational structures, efficiency, can not be undermined (Reenen, 2010). Globalization of technology connotes that economic gains and powerbase structures of 20th century are being swiftly removed. The ICTs are impressive knowledge leveler. Businesses whether big or small, old or new, are all identical in the cyber world of e-mail, e-commerce, or e-currency (Manivannan, 2008).

c) Social

Availability and exchange of information have built in socializing impacts. Making information available, facilitating its sharing, creating networks of people either already familiar to one an other or strangers, all of these steps of information process entail social powers to encourage civic engagements (Dahlberg, 2001). Moreover, as ICTs operates beyond territorial boundaries so these facilitate civic interactions beyond nation-state territorial confines. Drache terms the transnational activism stimulated by the internet use as the 'digital publics'. He optimistically contends that contemporary era through the ICTs and information flows provide the common citizen limitless social opportunities to innovate and shape discursive communities on a range of issues (Drache, 2008).

Many researchers have highlighted how citizens utilize computers and the Internet for various political and democratic purposes (Min, 2010). So is the case with education. The use of ICTs in general helps eliminate several educational issues in both developing and the developed world, this is especially true for higher education (Nawaz, 2012). Similarly besides MNCs, information flows have also supported NGOs to become as transnational as Exxon (Taylor, 2004).

ICTs offer a variety of tools and services that facilitate availability of information at national and planetary level. The rising flows of information can not only augment civic life, but also resolve several social problems. The year 2011 was marked with dissent, wherein apathy became outmoded, and apparently irrefutable dictators and systems were challenged. Around 88 states saw various types of mass citizen action. The genesis and stimulus of dissent are intricate, but the causes of 2011's protests were interrelated. These protests were motivated by the incapacity of states to deal with the impacts of the economic crisis, resulting in grave income disparities and severe corruption, aggravated by demographic movements that raised more informed urbanized, jobless young citizens. The internet, cell phone and social media played the central role in stimulating civic action, both as a planner of physical dissent and as a civic realm in its own right. The state's approach to economic crisis might be viewed as an encroachment in the essential social contract between state and its citizens, and protest could be comprehended as a mode 'informed' citizens reaffirming the power to mediate a new social contract (Civicus, 2012).

V. Discussions

Some believe that concerns of state and market influence over media can not be thoroughly overruled (Carey, 1995). For the cyber pessimists the challenges that hinder universal access to information actually emerge from the offline social, political, economic and cultural conditions (Dahlberg, 2001). These problems originate from inequalities in socioeconomic resources, disparities in telecom infrastructures, literacy in general and computer literacy in particular, community support and leisure (Papacharissi, 2002). They believe that globalization and ICTs have negatively affected the prospects for availability of information by increasing the disparities between the developed and the developing parts of the world, the rich and poor, whites and blacks, the educated and un/less-educated, and have given birth to information 'have' and 'have not', these divides are commonly termed as "digital divide" (Min, 2010). However, enough evidence exists that gradually 'digital divide' is slowly and gradually disappearing from the globe with rising access to digital technologies (ITU, 2013). Integrative capabilities, decreasing costs, and increasingly user friendly nature of the technologies are enabling the ICTs to proliferate horizontally (Khan, 2014).

Some contend that with every passing day, businesses are increasingly appearing on websites which were previously entirely free from market influence. Advertising over popular social websites is

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becoming commonplace. Many giant websites themselves have turned into commercial arenas. But contrary to this argument, it still remains a fact that the Internet theoretically can be termed as an unlimited space. Dominance of the Internet by the market is only limited to a fraction of it (McChesney, 1995). Even today large spaces over the Internet are virtually free of market or state influence (Dahlberg, 2001).

Sometimes states also strive to exert their pressure on the flow of information by infringing internet traffic or by blocking some websites, penalizing those individuals who write or spread information against the wishes of the state or by not granting licenses to certain technology companies (Crack, 2007).

However, it is imperative to note that cyberspace is a limitless 'space' (McChesney, 1995). Market and states influence will always be only limited over a particular portion of that space otherwise it is almost impossible to entirely control this space and it seems unlikely that state or corporate initiatives would completely dominate the online politics (Papacharissi, 2002). A huge amount of the Internet traffic occurs online relatively independent of state and market influence (Dahlgren, 2005). Furthermore, innovation is one of the basic characteristics of contemporary globalization and modern technologies and it is expected that both of these would lead to such ways that would enable universal access to information.

VI. Conclusion

Access to information is the fundamental condition for democracy. Owing to developments in the last few decades it has become now part of basic human rights. The rise in access to information is a part of the process of proliferation of liberal democracy across the world.

Contemporary globalization and communication technologies are the primary motivators of rising access to information. Globalization provides the rationale and communication technologies provide the means for rising access to information. The rising access to information is having profound impacts on social, political and economic aspects of individual, society and state.

Owing to this phenomenon, networks of well informed citizens are emerging. These nitizens play significant role in the political processes at the national and global level. Similarly, owing to the rising accessibility of information, newer types of businesses are emerging. The shape of political activities is also changing. Individuals are turning out to be far more powerful in the political and economic process as a result of availability of information.

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