

THE INCIVILITY & UNSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Outline: Social Media in the limelight
Advent of social media
Empowerment of people
Arab Spring – manifestation of its power
Community-building tool—a case of Shahzeb

Issues with social media users
Incivility and immorality reign
Anonymity and mob-mentality
Fake profiles of leaders/journalists
Keyboard Jihadists – informal e-brigades of political parties
Elections 2013 – campaigns and reactions
No effective control mechanism
Swift action from PTA on fake profiles and abusive posts
Our responsibility

The advent of social media has revolutionized the modern-day means of communication. Facebook, Twitter along with blogging sites have provided us with new avenues to communicate and disseminate our views and thoughts to a larger audience that was once a prerogative of politicians and journalists only. These blogs and forums, commonly referred to as "Social Media", when hit the internet world, they became the voice of public within no time. The primary reason behind the immense popularity and surge of the social media was that both electronic and print media – newspapers, radio and TV channels – failed to give due space to voices who dissented the authorities or governments. It befuddled many governments and societies through its community-building capacity.

However, as true with other scientific inventions, poor and irresponsible use of social media in our society has turned it into a bane rather than a boon for our social values. Civility is being ebbed away as 'Unsocial attitudes' of so-called warriors on social media are infecting our moral values. Social Media abounds with fake profiles which are involved in spreading misinformation and levelling false and often unfounded accusations against popular leaders, journalists, public figures and even civil servants. This dilemma reveals that the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) is incapable of checking this misuse of technology. Do we need to learn to live with this idiocy and senselessness? This remains a burning question for all the concerned and responsible citizens, social scientists and thinkers. As far as our government is concerned, the main concern for it is to decide whether it should also take the lead of Gulf governments by penalizing the people behind these fake IDs for these clear acts of slander and defamation or not?

Before this social media crept into our lives, people used various means of communication but all of those were different in their nature and in their respective impacts on society. Means of communication used prior to the advent of social media were direct in nature as the parties involved in communication knew

each other and there was no scope of anonymity involved anywhere. Because the identities were known to everyone, it was important for everyone to remain within limits of civility. In case of political debates, our leaders, writers, columnists and political analysts used to express their opinion and dissent through newspapers and readers could comment on those views through letters to the editor. The newspapers kept a check on the views expressed by general masses through their editorial policy. Social media removed these barriers and gave people direct access to such forums where there were no explicit checks. By making wrong use of right to free speech, they started enjoying unbridled power and passing comments and expressing opinions about their leaders, public figures and celebrities. The very nature of social media is such that imposing checks and applying filters in order to assess the veracity of opinions is almost impossible.

This new and greater access, no doubt, led to empowerment of people where everyone had equal access to show his/her sentiments and opinions. The main intent behind the progression of social media was to provide people with such forums where they could express their ideas and opinions with a relative ease and freedom. It also meant that the ones who used to sway the public opinion could no longer assert their views with impunity without being challenged by their audience. It made all public statements issued by political leaders, observations and rulings of the courts, columns as well as comments from journalists and news-anchors subject to instant criticism by an active audience at social media.

This vibrant new society surprised everyone with the power of community-building by organizing people with different races and communities under one common cause. Its greatest manifestation was the Arab Spring where dissenting youth used Twitter and Facebook to unite the like-minded people and to quickly disseminate information in order to plan and organize massive countrywide protests. Even autocratic governments in Gulf had to give in to the pressure of protestors demanding change.

Social media also filled in the vacuum of electronic media where, for vested interests or want of commercial value, the latter ignored just voices of the aggrieved and dejected people. This aspect became evident in Shahzeb murder case from Karachi where electronic media didn't highlight this issue until a massive movement started on social media. It built so much pressure that the apex court had to intervene and suspects were brought to the book.

Where this emergence of powerful social media proved panacea for many ills, it has created bigger problems than those it had solved. Without going into the details of how social media has affected our relationships and how wasting billions of hours purposelessly on social media has made us actually antisocial, let's examine its impacts on our socio-political lives.

The biggest problem with social media is that anyone can say anything to any audience irrespective of the basic norms which ought to be followed while speaking or commenting in public. Ours is a society where dissent is not encouraged in any institution and where argumentation is limited to debate competition on annual functions. Majority of population gets no training as to what should be the conduct during a public debate. In such a scenario, getting unbridled power of indulging in debate and expressing opinions is playing havoc with the moral and social ethos of our society.

Couple this fact with the kind of argumentation we witness every evening on mushrooming commercial current affairs programmes on news channels. Our leaders, unfortunately, are made to demonize each other in these programmes like an act. Ironically, at the end of programme, they greet each other and move to another channel for the similar act. All this nonsense has crept into minds of our untrained youth equipped with keyboards and modem. With such intellectual pollution constantly fed to them, all they learn is inept arguing and incivility which they reflect while interacting on social media.

The most dangerous aspect of this issue is the ability to hide one's identity and pretend to pose as one likes. It doesn't require any identity except an email which may well be a fake one. Thus, you can be anyone from Roger Federer to Imran Khan, and from Nawaz Sharif to the Chief Secretary of a province. From these foundations, emerges the anonymity and mob-mentality where one gets into a position to bash anyone as one likes without a slightest fear of one's real identity being disclosed.

Because there is no effective control mechanism devised by regulatory bodies, what we find on social media is an educated but abusively aggressive youth. They would vehemently tongue-lash anyone they dislike ignoring the civilized limits. Many politicians, sportsmen and journalists face the wrath of these Keyboard Jihadists who believe they are the beacons of moral values, and rationalize coming down hard on any famous person.

Unfortunately, most of the political parties have hired these Tech-warriors in order to wage a 'war' against their opponents. The weapon of this war is propaganda by disseminating misinformation and levelling false accusations against opponents. These social media warriors or e-brigades have become a nuisance for the society as many politicians and journalists find themselves in an embarrassing situation due to "unsocial campaigns" and they have no option but to issue clarifications and tender apologies for no fault of theirs.

The height of this nonsense was observed during the General Elections 2013. Some techno-jingoists used every unfair means to propagate for their parties. But ironically, majority of such campaigns were based on falsehood, fabricated videos, half-truths and fake accounts. From these fake profiles of renowned scholars and leaders, they issued statements in favour of their parties. Ironically, their slogan was 'free and fair' elections. Election results came as a surprise for many; more so for these e-superheroes. Driven by rigging complaints in a few constituencies, these warriors created a chaotic atmosphere trying to sabotage the whole process.

This growing peril demands a swift action from those at the helm of affairs as well as from civil society. Surely, a crackdown against social media, like in case of Youtube, won't be a wise option. Unlike Gulf States, where courts have sentenced people for dissent on social media, we need a crackdown against these fake profiles. Facebook and Twitter may be asked to link user accounts on these sites to mobile numbers used in Pakistan by these users. It would remove the anonymity and facelessness from these warriors and at least they would realize that their real identities are known to everyone and they will have to face the music for their 'shares'.

All the political parties and their leadership should tighten their filter against fake profiles and abusive posts. Political parties especially need to denounce and condemn in clear words any such e-Brigades that are tarnishing their names as well. It is their responsibility to cultivate in their workers a sense to abide by the moral and ethical values and societal norms while professing their political agendas. Moreover, as a society we need to teach our youth that argumentation doesn't imply fighting rather it's a constructive debate based on empirical evidence, objective analysis and logical reasoning. We also need to realize the implications of 'sharing' a post without checking its authenticity. Social media and internet are meant to be a boon. Let us not make it a bane for our society.