Social Media and its Political impact: A case study of Cambodia 2013 election

Sereyvisith Sokhan

2014

Abstract

There have been many examples of political activities involving the use of social media like what was in previous studies in many countries, for instance, the Arab spring. The purpose of this study is to find out the political impacts of social media on Cambodia 2013 election when ruling party was dramatically lost huge numbers of parliament seats to the biggest opposition party though it still leads the government, but it marked a new turning point for Cambodia’s politics with only two major parties won the election. The questionnaire based on Media System Dependency theory was used during the survey with 200 students from four universities in capital Phnom Penh. The finding indicates the effects of social media on their political stance as the majority of the respondents agreed that they decided to choose political party according to the information perceived from social media.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Media System Dependency, Social Media and Politics, Voting Decision, Cambodia 2013 Election
1. Introduction

The Internet has been long argued by scholars as a democratizing medium for its capacity in accessing various information and interaction, bringing individuals into the political process, (Delli, 2000; Morris, 1999). The past survey reports by Smith & Rainie (2008) suggest that the Internet is an important political information source for young adults. For that occasion, social network sites provide users a unique platform for sharing information. Social network sites which can be referred as social media are web-based services that allow a construction of a public or semi-public profile with a bounded system for individual, sharing of their list of connections and those made by others within the system, (Ellison, 2007). In addition, social media has strong associations with characteristics and communication relevant to protest activity such as documentation, motivating information, content relay, and perceived content reliability, (Wilson & Dunn 2011). It enables various forms of interaction between voters and political actors. User-generated content can provide meaningful information that citizens might not be able to obtain elsewhere. Furthermore, the collaborative and open nature of social media can lower the barriers of entry into politics, particularly for the group of less politically erudite, (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). Thus, social media can significantly influence the political arena. For instance, (Effing R. et al, 2011) research during Netherlands national election of the House of Representatives of June 9, 2010 showed that politicians with higher social media engagement got relatively more votes, a positive substantial correlation within nine parties out of sixteen.

Following the previous researches, this study tends to find the political impact of social media on Cambodia 2013 election. It was a surprise to everyone when the election result was announced by National Election Committee of Cambodia that the ruling political party, which has been in power for more than 30 years and holding 90 seats from 2008 general election, received only 68 and the biggest opposition party received 55 seats, which was previously holding just 26 seats. It was a sharply loss number of seats of the ruling political party when it took years to gain 90 seats since the first election in 1993, according to the official results. Notably, there were also an increase in number of mobile phone subscribers, from 19105115 in 2012 to 20264514 in 2013, and number of Internet subscriptions, from 2706923 in 2012 to 3861979 in 2013. These figures were published by Telecom Regulator of Cambodia (TRC) 2015 online reports. Likewise, a report by COMFREL (2013) shows an estimated 1 million Cambodian in the age group between 18 and 30 years used Facebook.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out whether there is any involvement of social media in Cambodia 2013 election. The research questions regarding this matter are to what extent Cambodian people rely on social media? And did social media influence their voting decision? By answering to these questions we can determine the level of dependency of voters on social media for perceiving political information and the effect on their voting decision. In the following section, the brief explanation of social media and
its fundamental features is purposely provided for a hint of what platform can be considered as social media and the way it can be functioned by users.

2. Social Media

Social media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications that developed on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated contents, (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). According to o’Reilly, Web 2.0 is World Wide Web sites that underline user-generated content, usability, and interoperability. Regarding (Kietzmann et Al, 2011), the functionality and implication of social media can be explained by using the honeycomb framework. Figure 1 illustrates the honeycomb conceptual model by (Kietzmann et Al, 2011).

- **Identity**: The identity functional block represents the magnitude to which users disclose their identities in a social media setting. This can include revealing information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, and also other information that portrays.

- **Conversations**: The Conversations part within the framework characterizes the magnitude to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting. Many social media sites are designed primarily to facilitate conversations among individuals and groups.
- **Sharing**: Sharing represents the magnitude to which users exchange, distribute, and receive contents. The term ‘social’ often suggests that exchanges between people are crucial.

- **Presence**: The Presence represents the magnitude to which users can know if other users are accessible. It includes knowing where they are, in the virtual world and/or in the real world, and whether they are available. In the virtual world, this can be known through status lines like ‘available’ or ‘hidden.’

- **Relationships**: The Relationships represents the magnitude to which users can be related to other users. By ‘Relate’, it means that two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. Subsequently, how users of a social media platform are connected often determines the what-and-how of information exchange.

- **Reputation**: The Reputation is the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. Reputation can have different meanings on social media platforms. In most cases, reputation is a matter of trust, however, since information technologies are not yet good at determining such highly qualitative criteria, social media sites rely on ‘mechanical Turks’: tools that automatically aggregate user-generated information to define trustworthiness.

- **Groups**: The Groups functional block represents the magnitude to which users can form communities and sub-communities. The more ‘social’ a network becomes, the bigger the group of friends, followers, and contacts.

The social media sites and services started forming more than a dozen years ago. For example, in 1997, the social network site Sixdegrees allowed users to create profiles, list their friends, and add friends-of-friends to their own lists, (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, it was little known around the world back then. The popularity of social media began in the late 1990s. For instance, weblog, which slowly started in the early 1990s, have become very famous as they are easy to create and maintenance, (Kietzmann et Al, 2011). Since then, social media has changed the life of individuals and corporations alike (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). It can be used for promotional purposes by different kind of companies and organizations. For instance, the use of social media demonstrates by (General Electric, 2008; Procter and Gamble, 2008) that this media has two interrelated promotional roles in the marketplace. First, social media facilitates companies to talk to their customers; and second, it enables customers to talk to one another. Social media also allows customers to talk to companies. When the popularity of social media has dramatically grown over the years, it has also taken the political landscape to the whole new level. It becomes the arena where political parties and movements use for promoting their propaganda and attracting more supporters. Gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action, these increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated public demand change, Clay (2011).
3. Methodologies

This study used qualitative research approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The aims of qualitative research are generally directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world, by learning about people’s social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories, (Ritchie et al, 2013). Thus, it is suitable for using such approach in this study. Besides that, this study relies on Media System Dependency as a conceptual framework.

3.1 Conceptual Framework

The social psychology is the scientific study of how people’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. It is a way of interaction that has an impact on individual behavior and can occur within groups and between groups. It is a fundamental process that affects ways of socialization, conformity, leadership and social change. Social influence takes many forms and can be seen in conformity, socialization, peer pressure, obedience, leadership, persuasion, sales and marketing, Smith et al. (2014).

Base on this definition, Media System Dependency Theory were used as the conceptual frame in this study. It is considerably suitable for this research study as it explains relationship and the effects between three entities, Audience, Media, and Society; in this case, Media is the social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter...etc. According to Rubin & Windahl (1986), this theory was developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) and grounded in classical sociological literature positing that media and their audiences should be studied in the context of larger social systems. Figure 2 illustrates Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur’s (1976) MSD conceptual model.
1) The relationship between the society and the media: Within this relationship, media access and availability are regarded as important antecedents to an individual’s experience with the media. The nature of media dependence on societal systems varies across political, economic, and cultural system.

2) The relationship between the media and the audience: This relationship is the key variable in this theory because it affects how people might use a mass medium. This relationship also varies across media systems. The more salient the information needs, the stronger are the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on the medium. In result, the likelihood for the media to affect audiences becomes greater.

3) The relationship between the society and the audience: The societies influence consumers’ needs and motives for media use, and provide norms, values, knowledge, and laws for their members. Social system can function an alternatives to the media by offering similar services of the media.

Davies (2009) said that individuals have diverse goals for political media use, and different media cover politics with differing emphases; therefore, citizens’ reliance on any one medium or genre should impact whether their voting decisions are based on a candidate’s popularity and likability or on more substantive considerations, such as leadership ability or stance on particular issues.

Although, this theory was introduced since 1976, there are many recent researches using this theory for explanation the impact of media on individual or community. For instance, the study by Hindman (2004), Davies (2009) and Brough & Li (2013); this means that the theory is valid for social research; and in this case, the impact of social media on politics was studied, especially, the voting decision in Cambodia 2013 election; therefore, the MSD is a well-suited conceptual framework for interpreting and explaining the phenomena.

3.2 Data Collection

The survey was used as the instrument for data collection. According to Oates, survey is a systematic way to obtaining the same kind data from a large group of people; it can produce either qualitative or quantitative data. The survey was chosen because of cost and time efficiency and the ability to engage large sample size. The survey started by distributing 200 copies of the questionnaire to four different universities in capital Phnom Penh with 50 each. The university students are adult; and according to (Lenhart et al, 2010), 93% of adult age between 18 and 29 most likely go online; and also, a final assessment and report on 2013 National Assembly Election published by The Committee for Free and Fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL) showed the estimated statistics from The National Institute of Statics that approximately 370000 young Cambodian have reached the voting age of 18 each year during 2008 and 2013 election and a probable 3.5 million out of 9.6 million voters on the voter list are in the
age group between 18 and 30. The report also stated that youth voters had been most likely decisive in this election. Hence, the university students are the appropriate target group. They were randomly selected during the break time and explained the purpose behind the study. They were asked to write their minds on the paper. Each respondent spent an average of 5 mn answering the questionnaire. The questionnaire itself was designed based on Media System Dependency theory and general demographic questions. However, in this study, the relationship between society and media questions were not included because the accessibility of internet and social media and other related matters were not the problem in the country as the 2015 online report from TRC suggested. Table 1 shows the list of chosen questions by category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Type of Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demography</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Gender Male or Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Age (Opened-Answer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Which province are you from? (Opened-Answer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. What is your educational background? (Opened-Answer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Did you participate in 2013 election? Yes or No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationship between the society and the audience</td>
<td>6. How important is it to you to stay informed about political issues? A scale from 1-5, Very unimportant to Very important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. What social media platforms have you used? (Opened-Answer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. How often do you use social media? 2 days per week 3 days per week 4 days per week 5 days per week 6 days per week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Have you ever noticed any political party’s activity on social media? Yes or No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Have you ever searched for political information on social media? Yes or No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. How have you found political information on social media? (Opened-Answer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Effects</td>
<td>12. Did you choose or change your political party based on information from social media? Yes or No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Have you ever verbally spread out the political information to people that don't have social media accessibility? Yes or No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 List of Questions
3.3 Data Analysis

The process of analysis involved, firstly, the data filtering; all data were input into spreadsheet software. The ineligible respondents such as those who have never used social media or did not participate in 2013 elections; moreover, the uncompleted answered papers, were ignored; this procedure was to eliminate unwanted data, which could contaminate the final finding. After this, the quasi-statistical analysis approach was adopted for defining the meaning of the collected data. The quasi-statistical analysis approach uses counting of times something is mentioned in the responses to estimate the frequency. The term quasi statistic is for simple counts of things to support terms such as some, usually, and most. It was introduced by Becker (1970) when qualitative researchers frequently make quantitative claims in a verbal form, using terms such as many, often, typically, sometimes, and so on; Becker argued that numbers have the value of making such claims more precise and conceived. (Maxwell, 1995) stated that quantitative data could constitute an important check on such biases and can provide systematic evidence for diversity that may be overlooked by both the researcher and participants themselves. (Sandelowski, M. et al, 2009) also made a similar point about “quantitizing” qualitative data, stating that this is done in qualitative research “to facilitate pattern recognition or otherwise to extract meaning from qualitative data, account for all data, document analytic moves, and verify interpretations”, (p. 210). In this case, this analytical approach was chosen because it is appropriate for analyzing the collected data that involved hundred of respondents.

4. Result & Discussion

After the filtering process, out of 200 respondents, only 130 were valid for this study as they have been using social media and had participated in the 2013 election. The details of the find is explained and discussed below.

4.1 Demography

The majority of the respondents were female, 73 out of 130, and 57 were male. They were in the age group between 19 and 39. 5 of them identified themselves as Master students, and the rests were bachelor students. They came from different regions across the country. Figure 3 shows the number of respondents by provinces.
This means that the respondents are from nearly an entire area in Cambodia. All the above results show that the respondents reach the study target, as mention above that youth voters was most likely decisive in this election. The noble part is that they are from diverse areas, which make this study more balanced.

4.2 The relationship between the society and the audience

To be able to understand the involvement of politics on social media, the questions regarding politics were asked. The first question was to comprehend the importance of political information to the respondents or how they feel about politics. When asked how important is it to you to stay informed about political issues? Figure 4 indicates the common interest of respondents towards political issues.
This result illustrates that the respondents believe that staying informed about the political matters is vital as the majority of the answers suggested. This can be interpreted that their intention in seeking political information is greater. According to (Chew, 1994), the research has shown that the more an issue is perceived relevant and interesting, the greater the need for information, which increases information oriented media use.

4.3 The relationship between the media and the audience

When asked what social media platforms have you used? Unsurprisingly, all of them responded with various platforms. The trend was already confirmed by “Social Media and Young Adult” study, (Lenhart et al, 2010) that nearly three-quarters (72%) of online 18-29-year-old use social media sites. However, the available social media sites in the market, each of them has its own unique characteristics that attract different users with diverse purposes. Hence, discovering the popularity of social media sites among Cambodian youths is vital, so we can learn about any political activities and strategies used on those sites. Figure 5 shows the list of social media used by respondents.

Facebook is the most popular social media site used by respondents. This trend was already mentioned above that a report by COMFREL (2013) shows an estimated 1 million Cambodian in the age group between 18 and 30 years used Facebook. Therefore, this finding shows the role of Facebook is vital among Cambodian youths. Although, this result cannot confirm the increase or decrease of popularity of other social media platforms as there is no official report upon the number of Cambodian users on those platforms; however, we can see that the usage of other social media platforms such as Youtube and Google+ is fairly high among the respondents. Moreover, the frequency of usage is similarly as important as which site they are using.
because it measures the level of dependency of respondents on social media. Figure 6 illustrates how often the respondents use social media.

When most of the respondents said that they use the social media every day, it means that the level of their dependency on the social media is greatly high comparing with other patterns of using, for instance, two days of using per week. The more often they use social media, the more they rely on it. Base on MSD, the relationship between the media and the audience is the most vital part within the theory because it predicts the influence of social media on audience. At this point, even if, we cannot confirm the political impacts of social media yet, in this result, the likelihood of the social media effect on audiences becomes greater. The next question is to comprehend their interest of political activities on social media. Again, the MSD stated that the more significant the information needs, the stronger the motivation to seek mediated information and the dependency on the media is. Nevertheless, to be able to prove this among the respondents, the next enquiry is to find out whether they have really looked for political information on social media. The respondents were asked whether they had noticed any political activity during the election campaign. The majority of respondents answered yes, 115 out of 130, only a small number of respondents answered no. This result suggests that some political parties already noticed the importance of social media and turned it into the tools for conveying their political messages and policies during the election campaign as it provided more freedom over governmental controlled media, according to Reporter without Borders 2013 report, Cambodia ranked 143rd which had been affected by a lack of transparency and the increase of authoritarianism and censorship. Then, when asked Have you ever searched for political information on social media? 89 out of 130 confirmed yes, only 41 said no. It can be understood that the number of respondents had the intention in seeking political information is higher than those who had no interest in searching for that information. Even though the respondents had the intention in seeking political or not, the result from following question shows that nearly all of them came across the
political information through different sources on social media. This can be confirmed by asking the respondents, how have you found political information on social media?

According to Ruiz & Sanz (2008), the greater the exposure leads to improve relations with the medium when the individual is more aware with it and values its benefits more. By increasing exposure levels to information, it can also fascinate users with low dependency and affinity. If the trend continuously growing the future political impacts of social media on those who previously had no intention in seeking political information is superior. Nevertheless, this result can be interpreted that for those, who had the political goal in using social media, were affected by the information shared on social media sites.

4.4 The Effects

Consequently, when asked about their voting decision in 2013 election, whether they changed their political stance based on the new information perceived by social media, 79 out of 130 respondents agreed that they had chosen or changed their political party accordingly. Although, these numbers are not showing significantly great effects, however, these answers confirmed the existence of direct political impacts of social media on major citizens’ voting decision. Furthermore, it could also have an indirect effect as well when those who used social media spread out the political information to those who had no accessibility of the Internet or lack of technological knowledge. Although, this impact is out of this study scope, nonetheless, it can suggest the indirect political impacts of social media on those voters decision making. Therefore, it is also important to dig it out. When asked about this concerning matter, 90 out of 130 respondents had verbally spread out the political information to people those who didn’t use social media. This suggests that there might have had an indirect political impacts of social media, which need to be learnt. If so the effect of social media is unimaginable.
5. Conclusion

This study started for the purpose to find out the political impact of social media on voter decision in Cambodia 2013 election by answering two research questions: what extent Cambodian people rely on social media; and did social media influence their voting decision; and using Media System Dependency as the conceptual framework. Answering to these questions, the result shows that Cambodian people are significantly relying on social media, and it did impact on their voting decision in 2013 elections. The finding also shows there are many social media platforms used in Cambodia. Among those sites, Facebook is the most popular follows by Youtube and Google+ and others. It means that the use of social media in Cambodia is on the same situation as those described in previous studies from other countries. Mostly, it was used to share information by political parties, activists or normal citizens who think political information is vital. It also shows the sign of impact on citizens voting decision in Cambodia 2013 election; and if the trend keeps growing like this, it will become the target decisive arena for political parties to attract new supporters, especially the young voters, in next general election.

The delimitations of this study is that the samples were randomly selected in urban area where the accessible of the Internet is secured. Although, the respondents came from various areas within the country but the people who were permanently located in rural areas where Internet accessibility is limited were not included; therefore, their understanding of social media and the impact of social media on their voting decisions have not been studied.

However, this study still can be used as an example for those who interested in further research on the similar topic; and it can also be used by the current or future political parties which will participate in next general election as a reference that those social media sites are the places where they should include in strategy planning as the influential political arena for raising voters’ awareness of their leadership and policies. Moreover, this study raises awareness among NGOs whose work is to promote democracy in Cambodia to keep monitoring government activities against freedom of speech on social media or a complete ban of accessibility.

6. Acknowledgements

Thanks and appreciations to persons who influenced my study and supported me with their knowledge and experience my supervisor PhD. Sirajul Islam and examiner PhD. Hannu Larsson, especially, the great gratitude to Swedish Institute scholarship for making this study possible.
References


Corfield, J. (2009). The history of Cambodia. ABC-CLIO.


