

# **Role of ICTs in Creating Awareness about Rights – A Step Towards True Democracy in Pakistan**

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## ***Abstract***

The present study aims at finding out the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights leading towards a true democracy in Pakistan. The study reveals that Pakistani students agreed that ICTs have not only created awareness about human, social and political rights but also informed the users about social and political events, which encouraged them to attend the social and political meetings. The findings show that the perception of male and female students about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights was different. Female students had more positive perception as compared to male on this aspect of ICTs. The results revealed a significant difference among university students who were categorised on the basis of time period of ICTs usage. As the period of usage increased, their level of agreement on this aspect of ICTs increased too, which meant that change in students' perception about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights was inculcated in them with the passage of time. The results of ANOVA revealed that there was a difference in the perception of users of varying periods of ICTs usage about its role in creating awareness of their rights. It may be inferred from the findings that as the usages of ICTs increase the awareness about rights among Pakistani people, it will play a decisive role in strengthening the democracy in Pakistan.

Key Words: ICTs, Rights, Democracy, Pakistan

## **1. Introduction**

The conventional societies have transformed into information societies with the rise of impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs). ICTs have ensured the mass access to the stream of information and knowledge, which has improved the situation and decreased the socio-economic and practical barriers for the masses to get information about rights. The diffusion of the information and communication technologies in the societies especially in Asian societies have improved the situation in a sense that level of awareness is rising with the easy access to the information creating awareness about all the spheres of life including human and political rights. Formal political process and democracy are basically dependent on effective communication and properly conveyed decisions-making about political issues between citizens, politicians and other stakeholders who can be affected with collective political decisions (Habermas, 1996; vanDijk, 2000). Internet has been increasingly used in campaigns and becoming a decisive factor in political campaign for candidates and web users alike with each passing election in developed countries (Bucy & Affe, 2006). The study of (Hansen & Benoit, 2005) investigated the immediate effects of watching presidential candidates World Wide Web (WWW) sites of George W. Bush and Al Gore in the 2000 general election and recorded that these sites have impacts on voters. Currently, the situation in developing countries is not the same as that of developed countries however, with the passage of time and with the diffusion of ICTs, it will change.

The first few years of the new millennium witnessed extremely rapid increases in the use of computer and ICTs in developing countries. During 2000 to 2003, the penetration of ICTs was one-quarter-billion in the developing countries. As a result of this rapid expansion in ICTs, youngsters belonging to developed and developing nations around the globe have got equal access to information and now they can share the ideas with other minds beyond the physical boundaries of their countries. It was estimated that there were 1.4 billion of the web

users by the year 2008. As per report of ITU, there had been 20, 350, 000<sup>1</sup> Internet users since June, 2010 in Pakistan i.e. about 11.5% of the population has reach to the Internet which actually does not represent the whole of the population. These Internet adoptors are usually belongs to urban areas with a better socio-economic and academic uplift and they can help trigger the process of true democracy. It has been observed that the Internet is enhancing the political participation between economically and educationally privileged users (Bonchek, 1997).

Updated information received through ICTs enhances the awareness about surroundings that helps improve one's personal and social understandings. It provides opportunities to suggest new and pragmatic ideas to those who seek help and one can join the international community and become a part of global discussion. The participation in global discussion and debate promote changes and more adoptive approach and users become free from biases based on gender, race or disability that have historically limited opportunities (Lockard, 1997). The idea of eParticipation was discussed by (Sanford & Rose, 2007a) that involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative process mediated by ICTs. ICTs for chating, discussion forums, group decision support systems and blogs are being increasingly exploited by the users (Sanford & Rose, 2007b) that play a role in creating awareness of their rights and help in strengthening the democratic process. "the fundamental culture of politics as a set of typical ways of action and communication will substantially change when virtual democracy would be the dominant practice" (vanDijk, 2000). The formation of nation-states might complicate the emergence of a truly transnational public sphere owing to increasing commercialization of the Internet (Stratton, 1997) and most often, shared narratives become more important than physical nearness (Giese, 1998) and exchange of text may turn into exchange of voice (Iseke-Barnes,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/pk.htm>

1996). In (Katz, 1997) viewpoint, a particular group of Internet users named by him 'Digital Citizen', had been extremely participatory and were more equipped with knowledge, tolerant, civic-minded and radical change lovers.

At present, Pakistan is a democracy without democrats and is hijacked by a small group of feudal lords, political elites, bureaucrats and organisations under foreign influence. Most of the time, democratic election only comit to reshuffling of the same old faces. The representation of the educated middle class is negligible small in the constitutional assemblies of the state. In 2002 general election, condition of graduate degree opened doors of massive corruption in securing bogus degrees from the universities of the country. More interestingly, there had been a scandal of a member of national assembly for getting a bogus degree from an International university. However, a truly educated class in assemblies can play a significant role in tailoring a true democracy.

Vast information about the politics and politicians on ICTs facilitates in chalking out a more politically active and informed masses (Kurtz, 1995) ICTs citizenry takes more interest in politics (Bimber, 2001) and vote with more zeal and zest. The enhanced role of social networking sites demonstrated the extended usage of the Internet as an alternate medium of information exchange and as an effective communication media for the mobilization of people during restrictions on citizens for the exercise of their democratic rights. Internet has performed a role in formulating the social organizations by facilitating their activities and developing a new form of association by creating the virtual community (Yang, 2003).

On 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2007, the Government of Pakistan declared emergency and the country plunged into a mess of political crises. The social networking sites as replacement to the traditional and electronic means of information and communication to exploit their freedom of speech were highly used and served the cause of democracy, freedom of

expression and speech, and increased the level of awareness of their political rights. People expressed their dislike for the ban on YouTube in terms of freedom of expression. Generally, the highly democratic nations like USA, European nations, Australia, New Zealand have highly sophisticated ICTs infrastructure and their citizens enjoy the highest degree of e-democracy (Shirazi, Ngwenyama, & Morawczynski, 2010). (Pina, Torres, & Acerete, 2007) studied the role of ICTs in accountability of public bureaucracies in USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and 15 EU countries and suggested that ICTs arrange the discussion between public and government and make the control of government by the citizens easier.

It is note worthy that highly developed ICTs infrastructure is a mean to step towards strengthening the democracy, however, it is not a guarantee. Some of the Middle Eastern countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates as well as Singapore in Asia have highly sophisticated infrastructure but are ranked below the world average in having democratic freedom. Other countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Tunisia and China impose heavy systematic censorship on the use of ICTs.<sup>2</sup> Pakistani government also uses the tools of censorship whenever it deems fit to curb political freedom and exchange of information. In (Bentivegna, 2006) view, the over ambitious expectations from ICTs to flourish democracy have frustrated but it is not a surprise that politics in virtual world reflects the politics in the real world.

Information is the key to democracy. Empowerment of Information is basic need of the effective democracy (Siriginidi, 2009). The users of information and communication technologies may participate in governmental process of policy and decision making and exercise their influence indirectly for regular check and balance on the government moves in governance. However, this needs a positive and constructive attitude of the governments as well. The notion of free and easy access to information through ICTs is being constrained by

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<sup>2</sup> OpenNet Initiative report 2004, 2005)

the authoritarian regimes either technically sharing the ownership of virtual space or putting restrictions on the free flow of communication and exchange of information. (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010) also studied the politics in Asia especially in China, Singapore and Iran, which exhibited that more often the authoritarian governments targeted ICTs as information superhighway to unwired byways of technology for exercising strict control over cyber media and information channels through regulation and ownership. ICTs can be more effective and multifaceted stream of information than other forms of media; it encompass unconventional potential for the expression of human and citizen rights but the availability or existence of information channels is not sufficient to strengthen democracy, political involvement and activism, rather will of the population is also required to agitate change by fighting for their rights, provided they have awareness about their rights.

Presently ICTs contributed little for social or political change in societies where regimes exercised control over, so a political will is also very much required to stand Pakistan among the comity of nations as a true democratic country. To figure out and calculate ICTs' future use, it is imperative to know and analyse the university students because in Pakistan, they are the primary users. As far as computer and ICTs are concerned, current university students use them more than the general public. All the universities of Pakistan continue expanding the accessibility and offering more and more courses based on computer and ICTs. Ultimately, analysis of the student population enables for an assessment of gender differences in academic institutes which provides both male and female students equal access to ICTs. The objective of the present study is to look into students' perception about ICTs' role for creating awareness about rights that ultimately strengthen the dilapidated democracy of Pakistan. The paper is organized as follow: Section 2 outlines the methodology of the study. Section 3 presents the results and offers an insight into the findings of the research through

discussion. Section 4 gives conclusions. Section 5 brings forward limitations and directions for future studies.

## **2. Methodology**

The study used the survey method for collecting quantitative data. The study involves the categories of gender: female versus male students. It was beneficial for both categories of university students to share ideas how they are using ICTs for getting awareness about rights. This study of the universities' students aimed to get information how young people were using ICTs and finding out relevant themes of:

- Awareness about human rights
- Awareness about political events/ issues
- Attending political/social meetings

Therefore, the study was extended to 854 students and they were asked the same theme in the form of questionnaire and the responses was collected on 5-Lickert Scale from "1" strongly disagree to "5" strongly agree for measuring the following hypotheses:

### ***Hypotheses***

Ho<sub>1</sub> There is no significant difference between the perception of male and female students about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights.

Ho<sub>2</sub> There is no significant difference in the perception of the students with varying period of ICTs usage about its role in bringing change in creating awareness about rights

## **3. Results and Discussion**

ICTs are sources of socio-political information and developments. The university respondents were asked about the role of ICTs in creating and enhancing awareness about socio-political rights. Mean Response Values and Standard Deviation of students' perception were calculated about increased awareness of political events/issues (MRV 3.46 sd 1.31),

increased awareness about human rights (MRV 3.43 sd 1.28) and ICTs' role to encourage people to attend political/social meetings (MRV 3.23sd 1.21). It is apparent from the mean response values that university students agree that ICTs play role in increasing awareness among them about their socio-political and basic human rights. They also show agreement to this fact that the enhanced awareness encourages people to participate in the political and social gatherings. This shows that ICTs are not only creating and increasing awareness of socio-political and human rights but also bringing attitudinal changes. Consequently it yields to peoples' taking part in social and political events. Significantly, new media promotes active involvement of the users and they are not just passive spectators of the political environment (Bucy & Gregson, 2001).

Even in a country like Pakistan where democracy has not deep root penetration, ICTs have provided the users an opportunity to be aware of their socio-political and human rights and they show strong inclination towards attending social and political meetings (MRV= 3.23) as a matter of right. The university students are at the highest seat of learning and have shown their interest in using ICTs for political information. Education has a vital mediating role between ICTs expansion and democracy. An increase in education is positively correlated with ICTs expansion which subsequently positively correlated with democracy (Shirazi et al., 2010).

The Internet renders an immense scope of political information which has been filtered, edited or scrutinized by traditional media and it can be accessed any time and from any where. (Kaye & Johnson, 2002). The ever growing volume of online political information is trusted to create a more highly informed, politically active and influential public (Kurtz, 1995) cited in (Jarvis & Wilkerson, 2005).

The self-efficacy level of ICTs' users increases due to enhanced availability of information, it develops in them a belief that they have the way to pressurise the government officials and

affect the political process<sup>12</sup>. And governments also exploit ICTs to create a culture of transparency by introducing ICTs as anti- corruption tools for societies. Pakistani government, with the use of ICTs, has restructured the entire tax system and department to reduce opportunities of bribes through direct contact of public and tax officials (Andersen, 2009).

Those who are more interested in political activity use ICTs as compared to the common men. Internet users trust greatly on the Information they find online because weblog users valued blogs as highly credible and rated it more credible than traditional media(Johnson & Kaye, 2004). However, this is one side of the picture. In many cases information flux overloaded the users and it became difficult to reach to the right conclusion. So on the other side, ICTs users also show greater distrust in political affairs.

***ICTs and Rights with Respect to Gender***

The role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights was measured by exploring the difference between male and female university students’ perception on this aspect of ICTs.

Table 1

*An Independent Sample t-test for both Male and Female Students’ Perception about Creating Awareness of Rights due to ICTs*

Gender	N	Mean	Mean Difference	t	Sig.
Male	427	3.211	.326	4.291	.000
Female	431	3.537			

Summary of t-test in the Table 1 shows the difference in perception between male and female university students regarding the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights. The value of independent sample t-test was significant at 0.05 level of significance( $p < 0.001$ ), therefore, the null hypothesis that there was no significant difference between the perception of male and female students about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights had been rejected. It means that male and female university students had different perception about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights.

Generally, it has been observed that male students in Pakistan, during their stay at university, become more politically involved. But the data in the table 1 reveals that female students (M 3.5) had more favourable perception regarding the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights. It may be inferred that the perception of Pakistani female students about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about human rights might reflect their serious concerns about their rights. However, both male and female students had shown their agreement regarding the role of ICTs in increasing awareness about their rights.

### *ICTs and Rights with Respect to Period of Usage*

The role of ICTs in creating awareness among university students was measured by exploring the effect of period of usage of ICTs on the students' perception. One way analysis of variance was applied to measure the significance of difference between their perceptions on this aspect of ICTs.

Table 2

#### *Analysis of Variance for Creating Awareness about Rights Based on ICTs' Usage Period*

	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6	13.480	11.148	.000
Within Groups	774	1.209		

The above statistics relating to Table 2, using analysis of variance test, are statistically significant with  $F= 11.15$ ,  $df= 6$ ,  $p<0.001$ . It means that null hypothesis "the period of usage has no significant effect on the perception of the students about the role of ICTs in bringing change in creating awareness about rights" has been rejected.

It also shows that at least one group was different. In order to further understand which of these groups were statistically different from one another, post hoc test was employed.

Table 3

*Summary of Post Hoc analysis for Creating Awareness about Rights*

	No use	Six Months	One year	Two years	Three years	Four years	More than four years
No use	-	.8068*	1.0367*	1.0600*	1.2101*	1.1654*	1.0446*
Six Months	-	-	-	-	.4033*	.3586*	.2378*

The post hoc analysis in Table 3 showed that there was a significant difference between perception of one group of ‘non users’ and six groups of ‘users’, out of total seven groups, about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights.

Also, there was a statistically significant difference between ‘novice’, i.e. new users from those who had been using ICTs for three, four and more than four years. But there were no significant differences between the perception of novice and those who had been using ICTs for one or two years. However, only the non-users (MRV 2.39) had shown their disagreement whereas the other six groups of the users agreed on the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights as evident from the mean response values which were 3.20, 3.42, 3.45, 3.60, 3.56 and 3.44 respectively. It may be concluded that greater the years of using ICTs, greater is the change in perception about the role of ICTs in creating awareness about rights.

It may be inferred from this finding that ICTs can be used to create awareness about rights among Pakistani people who can play a constructive and decisive role in changing the Pakistani society towards a true democratic state. Novice users are more likely to view the Web as a place to go for political guidance than their more seasoned counterparts. The novice users, who were more politically active, were found more interested to bring ICTs into

their use for their political objectives<sup>15</sup>. As ICTs is recent phenomenon in Pakistan so it is also making the Pakistani novice users more politically active. Younger individuals and those who are less politically interested seek guidance from the web. The down-trodden and the marginalized communities can secure potential advantages from digital empowerment (Unwin & de Bastion, 2009).

#### **4. Conclusion**

The users' attitudes and needs towards getting information about rights play an effective role in creating awareness. The most optimistic angle of the ICTs is that citizens have regained their focus out of the the formal political circle which is a significant transition in people's political life (Bentivegna, 2006). ICTs provide users with various options to get and share political information. ICTs have provided citizen with an interactive environment with enhanced civic role instead of their being passive spectator. However, traditionalists suggest such participation through the use of new media a 'pseudo participation' (Kerbal, 1999) but citizens benefit from the awareness which media participation provides proximity to political elites. It serves politics continuously and makes it entertaining. It also provides open-minded reach to a large number of people, enhance the capacity of users to indulge in public affairs and help voters to develop a civic identity and speak their own mind (Bucy & Gregson, 2001).

Pakistani youth is users of ICTs and has started their journey towards awareness of their rights through the 'super highway' that will lead the Pakistan towards a true democracy in the near future. ICTs are facilitating the Pakistani youth as (Kaye & Johnson, 2004) found that personal traits and political attitudes, demographics and ICTs experience influenced the users' motives for online media resources. The political entertainment, escape, social interaction, interpersonal utility, habit, social escapism, information, awareness, convenience and pastime to access political information as motivations for exploiting ICTs and web based

political resources (Kaye & Johnson, 2002) that have great potential reasons to involve Pakistani youth to gratify their political needs will play a decisive role in creating awareness about rights. Other motivations like surveillance, curiosity, learning how to vote, socialization, diversion needs are being served by electronic bulletin boards and satisfaction of social contacts and chat rooms are gratifying personal identity needs that direct the young generation to be aware of their rights. Education and political attitudes are other strong predictors and motivators for users for political purposes. This is the reason that Pakistani users with higher levels of education tend to use ICTs for getting information about their rights with convenience. (Yang, 2003) opines in his case study of China that there is a strong need of cautious approach to this optimistic view for the role of Internet in developing civil society because Internet is a new social phenomenon in China and Pakistan is also stands in this same category. But ICTs have demonstrated the potential to act a supervisory role in politics. On the optimistic front, we will witness a 'critical moment' of transformation to a new digital political regime in Pakistan.

## **5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There is need of interpreting the result of this study with caution, as the sample of the study was university students and they were asked only limited questions. Future research should be conducted at national representative level with an extensive and detailed study. The questions asked on the Lickert scale only give the opinion of the respondents regarding the awareness. There is possibility that the respondents might have attempted using ICTs' new technologies only occasionally for getting political information. To permeate this limitation, there is a need of follow up studies based on more refined measures of regular usage over a span of time.

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