**The power of social media**

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The Russia-Ukraine war has been rightly called the ‘World Cyberwar I’ as it is taking place in a world where social media is ubiquitous, while videos and images can be quickly uploaded and shared worldwide in real time. Video is the king now across all platforms, whether it be on Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, or Facebook, and shared instantly through popular messaging Apps like WhatsApp, Signal, and Line, etc.

Social media users are exposed to information within minutes of the event. Emotions can stir high after watching such videos, real or fake. A peace activist in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv rolled 109 baby strollers into a square last week to represent the children who had been killed in the war with Russia. Within minutes, the image was available to millions on their phones, leading to an immediate call to cease hostilities. Likewise, a ‘deepfake’ video showed Ukrainian President Zelenskyy calling on soldiers to lay down their weapons.

The American political war is fought on Twitter space, which has a subscription of 220 million. In one of the most expensive purchases ever, technopreneur Elon Musk last week purchased Twitter for $44 billion. Musk, who calls himself a "free speech absolutist," will now gain total control of the company. Some US politicians have called the deal ‘dangerous for democracy’.

In the world of politics, former US president Obama has the largest Twitter following with 131 million followers, followed by Donald Trump with 89 million (till he was taken off Twitter), and Joe Biden with 34 million. However, famous actor and wrestler Dwayne (The Rock) Johnson has over 308 million followers on Instagram (more than the combined Biden and Trump Twitter following) and may well announce his candidacy for US president. Outside the US, Indian Prime Minister Modi, for example, has a following of 76 million (an insignificant number considering the population of India is over 1.4 billion), Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has 18 million and Imran Khan 16 million followers on Twitter.

Social media is not just about politics on Twitter but also – and more so – about entertainment, marketing and learning. Its disruptive power is influencing how the youth make decisions. All businesses, large or small, depend on social media marketing through influencers and SEOs. Facebook has 2.9 billion subscribers, YouTube 2.2 billion, TikTok 1 billion, Instagram 500 million and Twitter 220 million people. Because YouTube videos have no time limits, most entertainment, news channels, travel and food vlogs, skill courses, etc are hosted on YouTube.

Vloggers like PewDiePie with over 100 million subscribers on YouTube, and Kim Kardashian with over 300 million followers on Instagram, are influencing the way Gen-Y and Gen-Z think and act. When Cristiano Ronaldo, who has the world’s largest Instagram following of 422m, removed the coke bottles in front of him during a recent press conference, Coke lost $4 billion of its share value. Posting of memes and tweets by finfluencers have been known to increase or decrease stock prices.

Pakistan is catching up fast, with 61 million internet users in January 2021 (increasing by over 11 million just between 2020 and 2021). At this rate, one can easily assume there are currently over 76 million internet users today, which is over 70 percent of the population if one does not include the 0-14-year-olds.

In Pakistan, like in most countries, social media is influencing how the youth make decisions. Forty-three million (20 percent of the population) are Facebook and Twitter users, while 22 million (10 percent) use YouTube. The most popular mobile App to communicate, post and forward videos, images and links is WhatsApp with over 46 million users.

YouTube is popular in Pakistan for news channels, entertainment, travel and food blogs, etc. Among YouTube non-TV news channels, Haqeeqat News leads with 4 million subscribers, while anchor Imran Riaz Khan has 2.8 million. Among food channels, Kitchen with Amna has 4 million subscribers. In the world of business and entertainment, Azad chaiwala who introduces the youth to the world of entrepreneurship, and Irfan Junejo, an influencer, have 1.2 million subscribers each.

Twitter, the popular political platform, is used by 44 million (20 percent of the population), and its following is rapidly increasing among the people. Among the politicians, Imran Khan leads all others with over 16 million followers, Shehbaz Sharif is next with 5.8 million, and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has 4.5 million followers.

In addition to fake news, trolling (bullying or sending abusive remarks) is one of the main negative aspects of Twitter, as is buying of followers, and setting up of fake and bot accounts. This is a menace that needs to be identified and filtered out.

Instagram on the other hand, with over 10 million followers in Pakistan, is used by both influencers and politicians. Politician Imran Khan leads way with a following of 6.9 million, while Maryam Nawaz (480k), Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (223k) and Shehbaz Sharif (90k) each have a reasonable following. In the world of entertainment, Mahira Khan and Minal Khan lead with 9 million followers.

Last, but not the least, TikTok, also known in China as Douyin, is popular for hosting a variety of short-form user videos, from genres like pranks, stunts, tricks, jokes, dance, and entertainment. It has a large following in Pakistan of over 26 million users. The popular TikTokers, among others, are Jannat Mirza (15.3 million), Chaudhry Zulqarnain (12.7 million), and Alishba Anjum (12.4 million). TikTok is currently not popularly used for political purposes and was temporarily banned in Pakistan in 2021 to curb immoral content.

Social media platforms will continue to rapidly grow, change and morph as newer technology using metaverse, web3, 5G and IOT further unravels. Pakistan needs to keep pace with these developments. The population is rapidly becoming aware of the power of social media, and the influence it has on decision-makers. The future clearly belongs to social media which will determine public opinion and market trends.

The writer is a former senator, and former chairperson of the HEC.