

Afghan Twitter users meet face-to-face as web booms

September 22 2013

More than 200 of Afghanistan's most active users of Twitter and Facebook gathered Sunday for the country's first-ever social media summit to explore how the Internet is transforming traditional society.

Two days of panel discussions and workshops are being live-streamed, blogged and tweeted on subjects ranging from the impact of technology on next year's elections to how women can avoid being harassed by mobile phone.

"We have brought together social media users from all around Afghanistan, so that they share their experiences and expand [social media](#) use," said Ahmad Shuja, one of the organisers of the Paiwand ("connection") meeting in Kabul.

"Social media is picking up pace as elections get closer. Some of the possible candidates have surfaced on social media and want to be in touch with their supporters through that.

"Social media users who are young and educated can bring a major change in Afghanistan."

Technology activists, Internet entrepreneurs, government officials, authors and NGO staff are among the delegates at the gathering at the American University in Kabul, capital of the war-torn country of 30 million people.

"There are around 3-4 million Internet users and 19 million people who have access to telephones in Afghanistan," said Aimal Marjan, the head of the government's information and communication technology department.

"Around 10 years ago, there was no TV, radio or other media, but today we talk about the issues that people in Washington talk about."

While much of Afghanistan remains deeply rural, cities such as Kabul, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif are at the centre of busy and vocal Twitter and Facebook communities.

Celebrity gossip and the latest sports news compete with daily updates from the Islamists' guerrilla conflict and grisly [video footage](#) of war casualties, torture, hostage victims and destruction.

"Any news that reporters get, they tweet it first, it is very good to get informed of events and find good sources," said Ali Rezaee, a contributor to the Baztab Facebook page that feeds election updates to more than 16,000 followers.

"They even can bring government officials and criminals to justice through social media. It is very important for transparency in elections. Social [media users](#) can report about fraud on the ground."

Potential candidates in the April election to succeed President Hamid Karzai remain wary of Twitter, though former finance minister Ashraf Ghani has built up nearly 4,000 followers.

Many other officials are highly active on the micro-blogging service, including interior minister Omer Daudzai, women's activist Wazhma Frogh and an array of provincial government spokesmen and NATO military departments.

The Taliban, who previously rejected all modern technology, have used Twitter and Internet sites for several years, breaking news of the latest attacks, though their claims are often wildly exaggerated.

One of their most popular accounts, @abalkhi, has nearly 7,000 followers, slightly ahead of the 6,200 followers of President Karzai's official account.

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Citation: Afghan Twitter users meet face-to-face as web booms (2013, September 22) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-09-afghan-twitter-users-face-to-face-web.html>

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