By RANGAMINI WERAWATTA
Director/E-Consultants

Cyber Politics in Sri Lanka: From Poster to Post

Cyber Politics can be interpreted as the use of cyberspace or the Internet for political activities. This includes journalism, fundraising, blogging, volunteer recruitment, and organisation building. The term, cyber politics, came into being during the campaign carried out by Howard Dean, who contested the 2004 Presidential nomination from the Democratic Party of the US. Before the contest, Howard Dean had not been so well known. However, by using cyberspace to carry out his campaign, he managed to attract the attention of many Americans and become a front runner in the race. This encouraged others to run their political campaigns in cyberspace.

Sri Lanka has experienced a lot of cyber politics lately and the Presidential Election 2015 and the General Election 2015 saw the peak of cyber politics in Sri Lanka. Every politician in Sri Lanka uses the Internet and social media for his or her campaign and many have allocated huge budgets for this particular purpose.

During the Presidential Election 2015, both main candidates Mahinda Rajapaksa and Maithripala Sirisena jade use of social media and the Internet for electioneering. In fact, one of the reasons for Maithripala Sirisena's victory was his effective cyber political campaign. When the Election Commissioner restricted campaigning through traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers, public meetings and posters politicians

Computer literacy rate by sector and province

Sector/Province	Computer literacy rate (%)		
	2006/07	2009	2014
Sri Lanka	16.1	20.3	25.1
Sector			
Urban	25.1	31.1	34.6
Rural	15.1	19.3	23.8
Estate	04.3	08.4	6.2
Province			
Western	23.2	27.7	34.3
Central	14.8	18.0	24.3
Southern	15.6	19.8	25.4
Northern	N.A.	N.A.	17.5
Eastern	11.4	12.9	15.9
North Western	12.6	16.5	22.6
North Central	8.9	14.1	15.3
Uva	9.9	14.7	17.1
Sabaragamuwa	12.3	19.1	22.6

N.A. - not available

Computer literacy rate by province in 2006/07, 2009 and 2014
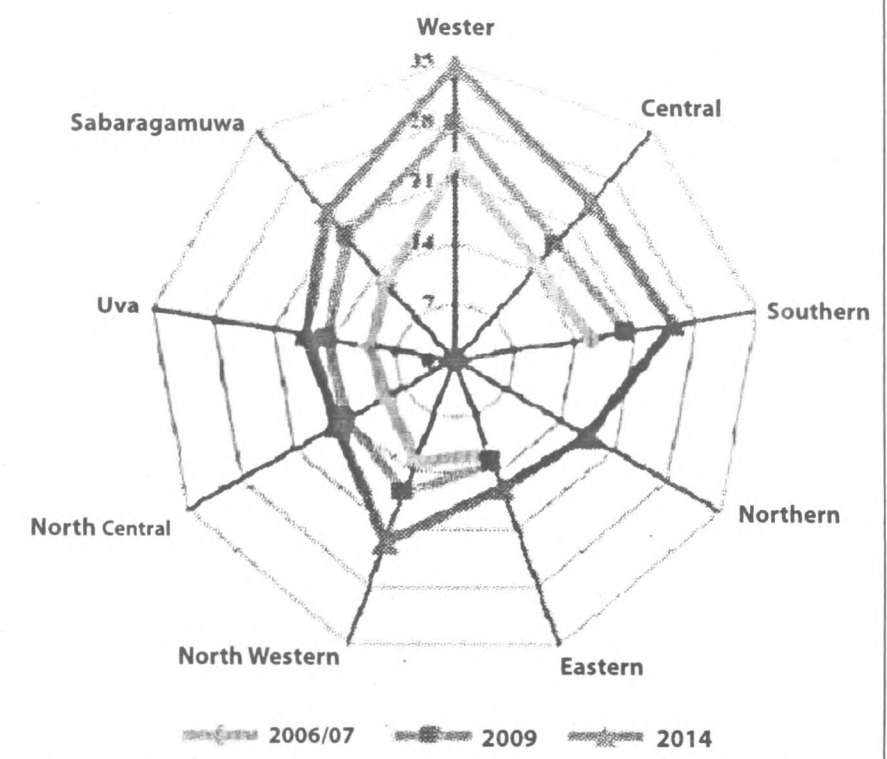
Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2014

The other most important factor is its impact. The social media can reach a very large audience. According to the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, there are over 22 million mobile phone users in Sri Lanka as at December 2014. According to Census and Statistics Department by 2014, 25.1% of the Sri Lankan population are computer literates. A breakdown and a comparison over 2006, 2009 and 2014 years of the computer literacy are given below *(See table)*

According to the figure above, there are over 5.5 million computer literates scattered across the country. Distribution of Computer Literates according to Provinces, ranges from 15% to 34% and this shows that there is a considerable amount of computer literates in each province. This shows that the target audience and the reach of cyber politics are not limited to Colombo and to its suburbs.

However, only 10% of the Sri Lankan population has access to internet. This creates a barrier for cyber politics. Out of the 22 million people in Sri Lanka, only 2.2 million have access to internet. The numbers and percentages of the Internet penetration of Sri Lanka from Department of Census and Statistics are shown below *(See table)*

With the latest developments in Sri Lanka, such as the government signing a MoU with Google to provide Wi-Fi over 'internet balloons', the internet penetration of Sri Lanka will increase soon. Therefore, cyber politics can be mainstreamed and the political sector in Sri Lanka will have a positive facelift.

With the above said constraint set aside, social media has still proven its prowess and effectiveness at the recently concluded parliamentary polls and the Ja. 08 presidential election.

Facebook Pages Stats in Sri Lanka

			Total Fans	Rating
1		Maithripala Sirisena	740 306	9
2		Mahinda Rajapakse	715 017	2
3		Namal Rajapaksa	595 398	1
4		Rajitha Senaratne	357 284	6
5		Ranil Wickremesinghe	316 330	6
6		Ranjan Ramanayake	306 389	6
7		UPFA – A Brighter Future	289 832	4
8		Sajith Premadasa	282 949	6
9		Sujeewa Senasinghe	262 052	7
10		United National Party	241 552	7

Source: www.socialbakers.com, 2015

turned to social media. President Sirisena, thorough his social media campaign, managed to reach out to intellectuals and the youth who voted for him. When the election results were analysed, it was clear that voters in urban areas were in favour of President Sirisena.

His social media campaign was designed in such a way that the intellect was fed information about his campaign exposing his opponent. According to the theory of the strength of weak ties, social media has a ripple effect on the message.

During the Presidential Election 2015, the civil movements as well as their activism was taken to a new level. They played a key role in the victory of President Sirisena.

Social media has become a very powerful tool today and more and more politicians use it in their campaigns. It has also become a business tool and money spinner. There are many companies that provide the services of designing and implementing social media campaigns for candidates who were contesting the general election 2015.

It is very important to understand the positive side of this trend. Cyber politics can be considered an eco friendly green campaign as there are no polythene, no posters or hand bills and no sound pollution. It can be very cost effective too as the social networking sites are freely available of anyone.

Cyber politics is secure and peaceful also. It is free from any violence and there won't be any security risks for politicians during online campaigns.

Percentage distribution of Internet and E-mail using household population (aged 5 – 69 years) by sector and province – 2014

Sector and Province	Household Population (age 5-69)	
	Internet (%)	E-mail (%)
Sri Lanka	10.3	8.3
Sector		
Urban	18.3	15.5
Rural	9.0	7.1
Estate	1.8	1.7
Province		
Western	17.5	14.9
Central	8.9	7.0
Southern	7.7	5.7
Northern	11.2	8.3
Eastern	6.8	5.4
North Western	8.3	6.2
North Central	4.3	2.8
Uva	4.5	3.7
Sabaragamuwa	5.4	4.1