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CITIZENS' USE OF NEW MEDIA IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: A CASE STUDY OF UGANDA

Åke Grönlund

Örebro University School of Business
Sweden

ake.gronlund@oru.se

Wairagala Wakabi

Örebro University School of Business
Sweden

wairagala.wakabi@oru.se

ABSTRACT

By subsidizing the costs of civic participation, the use of the Internet use is believed to stimulate participation but there are fears that intensive Internet use causes withdrawal from public life. This paper investigates the connection between the way individuals participate online and offline in authoritarian, low-income regimes, and the nature of eParticipation among citizens in authoritarian regimes such as Uganda. Based on personal interviews with 116 Internet users, the study found that common drivers of eParticipation, such as low cost, security and anonymity are hard to transplant into the offline world for citizens of authoritarian states such as Uganda. Perceived risks of retribution and intimidation for expressing a particular opinion or supporting a political cause mean that citizen-to-citizen participation is the predominant form but still at low levels, while citizen-to-government participation is negligible.

Keywords: eParticipation, offline participation, online participation, engagement, Uganda, authoritarian regimes

1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet provides easy access to information and swift communications, while enabling flexible options for citizens to engage in civic matters by allowing them a choice of when and from where to participate. These attributes, as put by Weber et al. (2003), “subsidize the cost of participation”, and are widely believed to be boosting citizens’ interest in democratic affairs and enabling some formerly excluded communities to engage in civic matters (Cullen and Sommer 2011, Sæbo et al. 2008, Gustafsson 2012, Chadwick 2006). But there are also fears, captured by researchers such as Quintelier (2008), Wojcieszak (2009), and Shah et al. (2005), that the effect of the Internet on offline participation could be minimal, or indeed negative. Understanding how ICT is affecting participation is even more important in authoritarian states, where the state seeks to maintain overbearing control on information and where citizens’ legitimate actions online can attract reprisals.

This paper investigates the understudied issue of new media use in fragile socio-political contexts, taking the east African country of Uganda as a case study. It focuses on “bottom-up” participation, primarily citizen-to-citizen interactions via digital technologies. In authoritarian countries, citizens tend to have scarce connections to their government and mostly interact with other citizens on civic and political matters. In Uganda, free expression is constricted offline and online, there are widespread fears of monitoring citizens’ online actions (CIPESA, 2013) plus fear of reprisals for criticizing the government. Only 22% of Uganda’s population of 36 million people accesses the Internet, with high access costs, low literacy levels and poor infrastructure spread hampering greater access. All these factors affect the drivers of eParticipation between the oft-studied developed democracies and countries like Uganda. In the context of this paper, activities that constitute eParticipation include seeking news and information, joining online networks, discussing social and

political issues, eActivism, online decision making, citizen education, eCampaigning, and ePetitioning, and derive primarily from models by Tambouris et al. (2007) and Sæbø et al. (2008). The participation is both in organized politics (such as political groups) and in informal citizen-driven forms of participation, including citizen-to-citizen interaction on political issues.

This paper investigates two questions:

- 1) What is the connection between the way individuals participate online and offline in authoritarian regimes?
- 2) What are the drivers of online participation among citizens in authoritarian regimes such as Uganda?

The paper takes primary interest in ordinary Internet users rather than political activists. This is in recognition that different participation processes will be driven by different motivations as expounded in the ladder of online participation by Li and Bernhoff (2007), which lists various online citizens – including creators, conversationalists, joiners, critics, collectors, spectators and the inactive - all of whom have different motivations for how they participate. For instance, anonymity may only be important to spectators, while very active citizens such as activists would overcome the fear and participate in spite of it. The paper's interest in bottom-up democracy is informed by the growing body of literature that has touted eParticipation as a means of facilitating greater citizen participation in the policy making process.

The paper provides empirical evidence to some of the gaps in contemporary literature regarding the connection between online participation and offline participation in authoritarian contexts. The conclusions of this paper are not universally applicable, but they extend the knowledge on the subject of new media use and eParticipation in authoritarian countries.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on the link between use of ICTs and participation as well as on citizens' use of new media in authoritarian regimes. The section begins with a review of eParticipation models so as to establish the range of activities that are generally understood as being part of eParticipation, and the rising importance of online participation. This forms the basis for exploring literature on how new media use affects citizens' proclivity to participate. This leads to the final sub-section of the literature review, which is concerned with the use of new media, notably in authoritarian regimes.

2.1 Common Features of eParticipation

There are various models that explain eParticipation. In this section, we summarise some of the key features of the major models, specifically the participative activities specified by each of the models. Exploring the participation activities that are common among the models of eParticipation is important since these activities make up the core of eParticipation practice. This core forms the basis of our interview questions and analysis. Macintosh and Whyte (2008) define eParticipation as the use of ICTs to support information provision and “top-down” engagement i.e. government-led initiatives, or “ground-up” efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives. Sæbo et al. (2008) argued that the purpose of eParticipation is to increase citizens' abilities to participate in digital governance, including participation in political processes and transformation of digital government information and services. The governance processes that comprise participation may concern administration,

service delivery, decision making and policy making (Avdic et al. 2007) and can take place within the formal political process such as voting, or outside it such as political activism (Sanford and Rose, 2007). Grönlund (2009) examined eParticipation models and found that in practice the term eParticipation was used for many government activities involving contact with citizens and that many of these were not directly, or even clearly, related to democracy as a decision-making system.

According to Kalampokis et al. (2008), participation areas have to do with the specific areas of citizen engagement and involvement in the democratic process. They argue that early studies about citizen participation and the new opportunities that ICT provides focused on access to public life information, public discussions about political themes, and support to electronic voting. However, Kalampokis and colleagues note that new aspects were injected into this approach and new areas of eParticipation emerged. In a literature study, Sæbø et al. (2008) identified electronic voting, online political discourse, online decision making, eActivism, eConsultation, eCampaigning, and ePetitioning as common participation activities.

Meanwhile, Sæbø et al. (2009) argue that, while citizens do not necessarily participate in government eParticipation programmes just because they have been made available, some social network sites (SNS) attract large numbers of users, and apparently sustain a great deal of discussions – though not always the serious political deliberation and discourse targeted by eParticipation services.

Sanford and Rose (2007) state that participation can be generally understood as joining in, either in the sense of taking part in some communal discussion or activity, or in the sense of taking some role in decision-making. eParticipation then is normally associated with some form of political deliberation or decision-making. According to Blaug (2002), eParticipation can be seen as part of the wider efforts to deepen democracy, which are undertaken by political institutions or civil society. Arnst (1996), Rahman (1995), and Blaug (2002) noted that citizen-driven participation was becoming ever more popular and relevant in governance, as “incumbent democracy” was losing favour with citizens. Macintosh and Whyte (2002) similarly observed gradual awareness of the need to consider new tools for public engagement that enable a wider audience to contribute to the policy debate and where contributions themselves are broader and deeper. Such measures would help to address the “democratic deficit” where decision-making lacks transparency and there are communication gaps between citizen and leaders. Castells (1996) argued earlier that the Internet provides easy access to information and offers a sphere for communication that can enhance political interest and pull citizens into the democratic process.

A framework that largely informs this paper was developed by Tambouris et al. (2007) and presents eParticipation and its main democratic processes, including voting, campaigning, campaign financing, public debate and discussion, civics education, and processes within and between political parties, grassroots organizations, information intermediaries and communication between policy makers and the public. According to this model, an eParticipation initiative’s direction can progress from the democratic processes top-down to the technologies or could be technology-driven bottom-up towards democratic processes.

2.2 New Media Use and Participation

Does the use of the internet stimulate participation? The contestations of the role of the Internet in participation have elicited interest in the connection between online and offline participation, such as the work by Cullen and Sommer (2011), which surveyed groups engaged in some form of civic activity in both online and offline group. It concluded that there was a correlation between Internet engagement and offline civic engagement.

Other studies have pointed to the differential use of various media and how it correlates differently to participation. Bakker and de Vreese (2011) found that using the Internet for news had a positive effect on various forms of participation. They also established that, in addition to all kinds of informational uses, non-informational uses of the web such as online communication and visiting non-news websites also correlated positively with various forms of participation. Zúñiga et al. (2012) likewise noted that media use related to information acquisition such as TV news and community building (such as online communities) more positively associated with civic participation. On the other hand, use related to entertainment (such as reality shows and online movies) negatively impacted on participation.

Gustafsson (2012) also concluded that despite claims that new forms of media might be connected to political cynicism and apathy, empirical research had shown that informational use of media might make people more inclined to discuss political matters and in the long run increase engagement and participation levels. Zúñiga et al. (2010) found that both political talk and online political messaging had significant effects among blog readers for online expressive participation, while political talk (but not online political messaging) appeared more important for offline political participation.

In an experiment conducted in Belgium involving 109 participants aged between 18 and 25, Vissers et al. (2011) found that the effects of mobilization media tended to be medium-specific. Web mobilization led to increased online participation while face-to-face mobilization led to increased offline participation. This study found that face-to-face mobilization did not affect online participation, and also suggested that Internet mobilization did not boost offline participation. Afouxenidis (2014) examined the relationship between 165 Greek web users and whether they engaged in political activity offline as a result of becoming relatively active online. He concluded that although online participation may slightly increase political knowledge, this does not mean increased levels of participation which strongly correlate to net use. Afouxenidis considered that active individuals online were those who posted political messages over the net and social media, participated in mailing lists, wrote in forums, and regularly visited web pages of social movements.

However, other scholars have contended that a citizen's online activeness and proclivity to participate depends on the nature of their general involvement in the online world. For instance, Li and Bernhoff (2007) and Bernhoff (2010) describe different citizens' social technology behavior. Creators as those who publish blogs and articles, maintain web pages or regularly upload audio-visual files they create. Conversationalists update status on SNS and post updates on Twitter. Critics comment on someone else's social media posts, contribute to online forums, post reviews of products or services. Collectors collect, aggregate and share information with others. Joiners visit SNS and maintain a profile on an SNS. Spectators are an audience for social content made by others. Inactives are those who do not participate at all.

The discussion on if and how online and offline engagement are similar or different and if they mutually reinforce each other benefits from a look at the aspects of the Internet that are believed to enable and motivate participation in new, better, or potentially more efficient ways. Zúñiga et al. (2010) argued that expressive participation may open a different pathway to participation, as some of the costs associated with this online expressive participation may not be so high. These costs, which can put offline participation out of reach for many people, may encourage a different set of people to engage in online expressive participation and open the political process to a wider range of behaviors. Furthermore, the Internet may decrease risks for individuals that join collective action (Blaug, 2002). Chadwick (2006) observed that the relative anonymity of the online world renders individuals less accountable for their action, so they feel empowered to speak up against more powerful

actors because they have less fear of punishment. This would be truer in authoritarian states where freedom of expression and speech are restricted. One of the strongest proponents of a link between Internet use and increased participation is Weber et al. (2003), who argued that the Internet “can subsidize the cost of participation” by making it easier for citizens to get information about politics vis-à-vis mediating political organizations on the Internet or even direct access to government web sites, not to mention the information sharing involved with e-mailing, Listservs, and chat rooms.

However, Wojcieszak (2009) argued that online political involvement may not always result in positive social outcomes, or in increased participation in the offline life. Quintelier (2008), Jensen et al. (2007), and Shah et al. (2005) contended that the Internet would either have marginally beneficial or even negative consequences for democracy as it tended to reinforce the same structures that otherwise constituted the determinants of political practices offline, and that Internet use would only help facilitate offline political mobilization to a limited extent. Similarly, Komito (2005) reported on previous research that found increased technology usage did not lead to increased community involvement as measured by memberships in formal voluntary organizations or by amount of activity in these organizations. But, significantly, Komito added that new technologies actually facilitated greater informal exchanges and fostered social capital in a community.

Boulianne (2009), who analyzed 38 studies on the effects Internet use had on engagement, concluded that there was strong evidence against the Internet having a negative effect on engagement. Although the analysis also found that Internet use would not have a substantial impact on engagement, it established that the effects of Internet use on engagement were larger when online news was used to measure Internet use, compared to other measures. Wojcieszak’s (2009) literature review found that reinforcing online discussions may boost participants’ self-esteem by inflating their views, thereby encouraging them to express those views and motivating them to stand up against an out-group. Boulianne (2011) found that using online news stimulates political interest, which generates political talk; and also that the use of online news sources transforms people into interested and engaged citizens to a greater degree than online news serves as a tool for those already interested in politics. Quintelier (2008) observed that although some online activities were clearly associated with offline political participation, it remained to be investigated whether this relation was a form of causality. But this discussion may not be complete without pondering the question: what motivates individuals to participate in politics? Brady et al. (1995) argued that interest in politics was not enough to explain political participation. Rather, the resources of time, money and skills were also powerful predictors of political participation.

2.3 New Media Use in Authoritarian States

There is a significant amount of literature which suggests that the Internet holds great potential for improving citizens’ engagement in governance issues at a time when their participation in democratic affairs as measured for example by membership in political parties has dwindled (for example Weber et al. 2003, Chadwick 2006, Cullen and Sommer 2011, Macintosh and Whyte 2002). But contemporary literature is not wholly in agreement on whether the Internet and other ICT tools are actually enabling greater participation. There is, for instance, an issue of whether the Internet attracts new groups of people who have hitherto not been engaged or if it merely provides a new channel to those already engaged. Nor is there unanimity on the perceptions of how the Internet actually is enabling participation, with scholars such as Quintelier (2008) contending that while some researchers have argued that Internet use and the accompanying political resources stimulate political participation, others fear that intensive Internet use is associated with a withdrawal from

public life. Other researchers (Åström and Granberg, 2007; Shah, et al., 2005; Brunsting, 2002) recognize the link between the online and offline environment, but note that few studies address the joint effects these environments exert on participation.

Beyond the online versus offline debate, is the issue of use of ICTs by citizens in repressive regimes. A number of scholars have recently studied how ICTs are used in authoritarian regimes, particularly where there are reprisals against those who criticize or organize against the government. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) note that authoritarian regimes not only discourage individual participation by greatly increasing the punishments for dissent, “but also control the communicative infrastructure in ways that make it difficult for citizens to coordinate effective collective opposition or to express their dissent in the public sphere” (p.3).

In Iran, where the state tries to control internal and external sources of information, citizens often triangulate information from various outlets, including state media and non-state media, such as social media (Wojcieszak et al., 2013). A regularly cited example is the “Arab Spring” during which, from 2011, civilian protests broke out in numerous countries in North Africa and the Middle East. Manrique and Mikail (2011) suggest mobile phones, particularly smart phones that enable connection to the Internet, online forums, blogging platforms, video-sharing platforms like YouTube, and social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook were used increasingly by Arab activists to gather and spread information and weaken the regimes’ control over the political narrative.

Based on an analysis of more than three million tweets related to the Arab Spring, Howard et al. (2011) found evidence that young, urban, relatively well educated individuals used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to “put pressure on their governments”, used blogs to criticize the governments in Egypt and Tunisia, and also utilized Western media sites such as the BBC and CNN to spread “credible information” to their supporters. Similarly, a study by Harlow (2012) found that in Guatemala, Facebook was used to mobilize an online movement that moved offline in demanding justice for the murder of prominent lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg. An analysis of content on Facebook showed that the framing, topics and functions of the online comments prompted offline action by emphasizing protests and calling on others to participate and spread the word. Rather than simply using Facebook as a forum for talking about justice or criticizing the government, “users instead posted comments to mobilize an online and offline movement, organize protests, showcase photos of protests, and actively show their support for the movement”(ibid., p. 15).

Meanwhile, based on a survey of 1,200 participants in Egypt’s Tahrir Square protests, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) found that social media, in particular Facebook, provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests. More than a quarter of the protestors sampled had first heard of the protests on Facebook and, in addition a quarter used Facebook to disseminate pictures and videos they had produced. The study by Tufekci and Wilson found that Twitter, along with blogs, was used by protestors to communicate about the demonstrations as they unfolded.

However, it has also been argued that the role of Twitter and Facebook in instigating and organization, or reporting on socio-political change in uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 was occasionally overstated (Wojcieszak and Smith 2013). Based on a survey of 2,800 young, educated and technologically savvy Iranians in 2009, these researchers studied protests that followed the June 2009 presidential elections in Iran and found that politics was not topping the agenda in the new media sphere; social issues were. They argued that the detected patterns “suggest that mobilization via new media did not continue and/or was not substantial to begin with, and that our sample was more interested in using blogs, text messages, or Twitter to communicate about personal topics, new

technologies and work-related affairs than politics" (ibid., p. 16). An earlier study on Iran (Wojcieszak et al. 2012) had found that although many citizens were using social media in the face of state control over traditional media, respondents expressed greater confidence in new media empowering them personally, rather than it making governmental officials more responsive. Neither the general population nor the Iranian youth sampled were particularly interested in using blogs, text messages, Twitter or Bluetooth to communicate political issues.

In spite of these findings in Iran, many researchers have found evidence of a pivotal role technology, particularly social media, played in mobilizing citizens for social and political change. Harlow (2012) argued that without Facebook, it would not have been possible to mobilize the 50,000 protesters who turned up in Guatemala's protests.

There is also a discussion about the relative importance of ICT channels as compared to physical actions such as actually occupying city squares. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) suggest that the role of the Internet should not be isolated from that of other media such as satellite broadcasting. Moreover, they argue that the value of Facebook as an organizer is lower where one can meet face-to-face, but "those physical meetings are also better for political planning and organizing and building trust and conscripting sacrifice, what is generally referred to as 'strong ties'" (ibid., p. 7).

2.4. Uganda: Country Background

Only 22% of Uganda's population uses the Internet, while mobile phone tele-density (number of phones per 100 inhabitants) stands at 52, according to 2014 figures from the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) which regulates the industry. Alexa.com website traffic rankings indicate that Facebook is the second most popular website in Uganda, while YouTube is the 4th most visited site. Twitter and Wikipedia are 6th and 7th respectively. Low literacy rates, high costs of accessing and owning ICTs, acute shortages of electricity (just about 10% of the population is connected to the national electricity grid), and a lack of usage skills all hamper the use of ICTs in Uganda. Moreover, the use of most ICTs, other than calling and receiving calls, is very much pegged to knowledge of the English language. Furthermore, as has been noted (Gilwald et al., 2010), various issues hinder some Ugandan women from using mobiles and the Internet, including low levels of employment, lower education attainment, cultural norms and practices. Uganda's literacy rate stands at 73%, while gross national income per capita is US\$550, meaning Uganda is a least developed country according to the ranking by the United Nations. Less than 15% of Ugandans live in urban areas. Agriculture is the leading employer.

The Global Information Technology Report's Networked Readiness Index for 2014 ranks Uganda number 110 out of 144 countries surveyed. Led by Finland, Singapore and Sweden, the highest ranked African country is Mauritius at 48 followed by South Africa at 70 (World Economic Forum, 2014). The report states that Uganda, like Tanzania and Zambia, continues to lag behind in developing its ICT infrastructures, promoting higher ICT uptake, and benefitting from the economic yields associated with ICT. Regarding the level of competition for Internet services, international long distance services, and mobile telephone services, Uganda is given the best possible mark, topping the scale alongside 59 other countries. Since the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector in 1998, Uganda has registered notable growth with six mobile telecom operators and more than 30 Internet Service Providers (ISPs). Meanwhile, the Global Competitiveness Report 2014–2015 ranked Uganda 122 out of 144 countries surveyed. In terms of institutions, infrastructure, macroeconomic environment, health and primary education, it was ranked 126.

The high cost of accessing internet in Uganda is partly because being landlocked, Uganda has to build or pay for backhauling costs through Kenya and Tanzania in order to access fibre cables at the Indian Ocean coast. Five telecom companies and the government

jointly have 5,200 kms of fibre optic cables laid around the country. See table 1 below for a comparison of Uganda to world averages.

Table 1: Mobile Penetration and Internet Use by Region (data source: ITU, 2014)

Region	Internet usage (%)	No. of cell phones per 100 inhabitants
Uganda	22	62
Africa	16	63
Europe	75	126
The Americas	61	109
Arab states	38	105
Asia	32	89

Political space is restricted in Uganda, although the country has been governed on a multi-party system since 2005. President Yoweri Museveni has been in power for the last 28 years, having captured power in 1986 via a guerrilla war. Although he has won elections since 1996, he is accused of stifling political dissent and independent media (Freedom House, 2013), and has orchestrated a change to the constitution to remove presidential term limits. Opposition leaders are often arrested, while journalists are often charged in court. Numerous media houses have been closed in the last four years. Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net Report 2013* report ranks Uganda as 'partly free' and in 2013 a cabinet minister announced that the country would establish a social media monitoring center "to weed out those who use it to damage the government and people's reputation" (CIPESA, 2013).

According to CIPESA, the Uganda government has in the past charged a journalist and arrested some individuals over content published online. The Government has also in the past ordered service providers to block access to SMS services, as well as to Facebook and Twitter in order to deny the opposition an opportunity to mobilize supporters for anti-government protests. Peaceful demonstrations are met with brutal force from security services and in 2013 enacted a Public Order Management law that makes spontaneous peaceful demonstration of more than three people a crime (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

The potential for using ICT in Uganda is continuing to grow, fuelled by reductions in mobile tariffs and bandwidth prices, greater availability of fibre optics bandwidth, increased ICT literacy, and supportive government-led ICT initiatives such as the Rural Communications Development Fund. However, fears persist of reprisals from the state to those who use ICTs to criticize the government and these had led to self-censorship by media and independent citizens both offline and online, with "taboo topics" including the military, the president's family, issues of oil, land-grabbing, and presidential terms (Freedom House, 2013).

3 METHOD

The method for conducting the study was by a questionnaire administered face to face to 116 individuals. The questionnaire design and data collection are elaborated after presenting the research questions.

3.1 Research Questions

In order to understand the connection between the way individuals participate online and offline, as well as to gain an understanding of the nature of eParticipation among citizens in authoritarian regimes such as Uganda, we had two research questions, namely:

- 1) What is the connection between the way individuals participate online and offline in authoritarian regimes?
- 2) What are the drivers of online participation among citizens in authoritarian regimes such as Uganda?

3.2 Questionnaire Design

Based on the review of participation models and the activities they entail, notably “bottom-up” participation, respondents were asked questions relating to online participation and the frequency of engagement in those activities. They were asked about participative activities and in which sphere (offline or online) they were more likely to engage, and the reasons for their preference. The questionnaire also explored the factors that inform similarities and differences in offline and online participation among the same individuals. Questions included: In which sphere (offline or online) are you more likely to engage in each of the following activities, and why? How often do you engage in each of these activities online? The activities included looking for political information on the web, visiting a political organisation’s website, discussing politics in a chat group, joining an email discussion about politics, downloading documents (manifestos, politicians speeches) from a political organisation website, sending an email to a politician or political organisation, signing an online petition, donating funds online to a political cause, volunteering online to help with a political cause, and joining a political organization online.

Respondents were asked about their information sharing practices and they rated the level of their knowledge and proficiency in using a range of ICT tools and services, namely search engines such as Google, sharing documents and photos (as attachments), contributing to online discussion groups, use of social media (Twitter, Facebook etc.), SMS on cell phone, blogging, downloading files (documents and media), and video conferencing (Skype, Google Plus etc.). In order to understand how the internet was affecting individuals’ participation, we asked, “How, if at all, is the internet encouraging your participation in the political affairs of your country?” Hindrances to greater eParticipation were explored, through questions such as: “What factors facilitate or constrain your use of ICTs for civic participation/democracy?”; “Do you find it easier to express yourself more frankly offline or online? If so, why is this so?”; and “What makes you decide whether to be active or silent in the online/ Facebook political groups to which you are a member?”

Responses to the survey questions were coded in order to give statistical descriptions of the different data sets representing the various responses given. Qualitative responses were analyzed and interpreted with a focus on what was specific to the question, unique to the respondent or deviant from the other responses received for the same question. The subjective descriptions which were given by respondents in the open-ended questions gave us a deeper contextual understanding of the statistical data generated from quantitative responses.

3.3 Data Collection

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews using a generic questionnaire with 116 individuals in three Ugandan towns – the capital Kampala, the northern town of Gulu, and Kasese in the western region. Because Internet access, incomes, and education levels are much higher in the capital than elsewhere in Uganda, two countryside districts were included. All interviewees were Internet users. Respondents were citizens who may or not be members of online political groups. They were initially identified through searches on eight Ugandan groups on Facebook managed by political organizations and activist groups. The groups were identified through searches on the social network based on keywords including names of political parties, party leaders, and national issues in the governance debate. Groups selected

included those run by the three political parties and party leaders that received most votes received in the 2011 elections (National Resistance Movement, Forum for Democratic Change, and the Democratic Party). The activist groups Save Mabira Campaign (a lobby group against a government plan to convert a tropical rainforest into a sugar plantation); and '31 Million Bafuruki (a pressure group opposed to government proposals to restrict political positions in a certain region to the area's natives) were also chosen because they had been very active on Facebook but also because their campaigns received national offline prominence – and were met by tough action from security forces. After identifying members of these groups based in the three districts of interest, we used snowball sampling to recruit additional respondents.

Face-to-face interviews were necessary to create trust and elicit good responses from respondents who may not have been sure of who was interviewing them if the interview were to be conducted online via survey monkey, email, or Skype. Interviewer-administered questionnaires have the advantage that unclear questions can be clarified to the respondent and open-ended questions can be used to collect a range of possible responses (Williams, 2003). Additionally, the interviewer can ensure all the questions are answered by the respondent. During the research, we found out that conducting the survey via face-to-face interviews was very fruitful as we clarified questions and issues to respondents, thereby getting comprehensive responses which may have not have been forthcoming if the interviews were conducted online, particularly given the sensitivity of some of the issues we were researching.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Profile of Participants

Of the 116 respondents, 54% were male and 46% female. All were above 18 years, the age at which Ugandan citizens can vote in national elections. Most respondents (47%) were aged 25-34 while 39% were aged 18-24. The 35-49 group had 13% respondents. Only 29% of respondents were registered card holders of a political party. All respondents were educated beyond primary level – 63% to Bachelors degree level. Approximately 80% of the respondents had workable-to-excellent proficiency in using search engines, emailing family and friends, sharing file attachments, using social media, mobile short message services, and downloading files. All respondents accessed the Internet daily. The workplace (62%) and mobile phone (55%) were the most widely used access points, followed by home (43%). Community access centers were used least, as 60% of respondents did not use them. Internet cafes were second least popular.

4.2. Information Sharing Behavior

Because sharing information is a key aspect of eParticipation, especially citizen-to-citizen, participants were asked about their behavior and motivations for information sharing. 80% shared information on civic matters online. Friends, spouses, and workmates were those who people mostly shared information with (See table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of sharing information on civic matters online

	Spouse	Neighbor	Workmate	Friend	Children	Parents	Siblings
Always	44%	14%	38%	52%	4%	20%	17%
Often	7%	24%	22%	13%	6%	15%	15%
Sometimes	15%	34%	22%	25%	23%	32%	22%
Rarely	18%	16%	7%	8%	30%	23%	23%
Never	16%	12%	11%	2%	37%	10%	23%
Total	100%						

Several reasons hindered information sharing: Confidentiality of information; security concerns (“there are spies everywhere”); sensitivity of some information; incomplete, inadequate or irrelevant information; differences in political views; and indifference to politics among persons one might wish to share information with. The individuals who respondents most regularly shared information with – friends, spouses, and workmates – may indicate the level of trust which individuals need in order to share information that might potentially put them in trouble with authorities.

4.3. Frequency and Mode of Online Participation

The most commonly engaged in activities were looking for information and participating in chat groups. Joining an email discussion group and looking for political information online were the only online activities engaged in daily (6% of respondents). 65% and 70% of respondents never engaged in signing online petitions or donating funds online to a political cause respectively.

Table 3: Comparison of online engagement in the two most frequently engaged in activities and least engaged in activities

	Registered party member	Non-Registered member	Total
Looking for political information online daily or 2–5 times a week	12	14	26
Joining an email discussion about politics 2–5 times a week	2	2	4
Never signed an online petition	23	56	79
Never donated funds online to a political cause	24	60	84

Approximately 50% of respondents never engaged in joining a political organization online, volunteering or sending an email to a politician or political organization. Downloading documents (manifestos, politicians’ speeches) from a political organization’s website and visiting a political organization’s website were engaged in at least once weekly by 9% and 23% of respondents respectively (Figure 1).

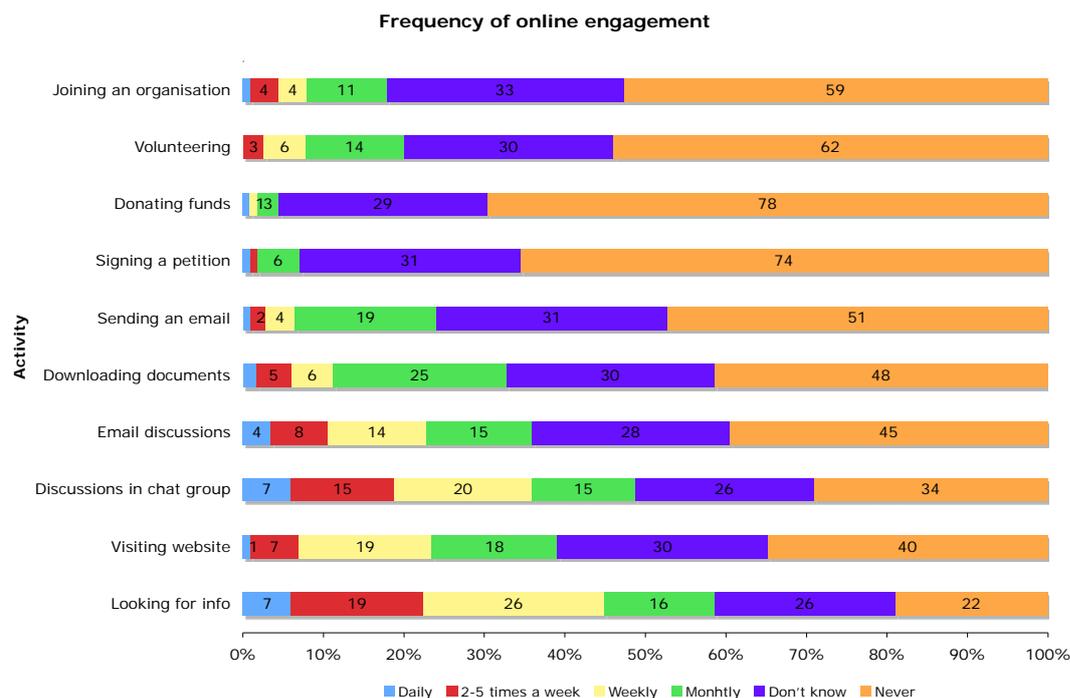


Figure 1: *Frequency of online engagement in various activities*

Did the high proficiency in using ICT and daily access mean the respondents were active e-participants? For 59%, reasons for participation online did not motivate them to participate offline. 71% cited cost and 67% fear of retribution as reasons that stopped them from e-participating. The anonymity enabled by the online world was a key motivation for participating online. Nearly half the respondents belonged to an online civic or political group with the average number of groups an individual had membership to being two. Information, knowledge sharing and interaction with like-minded individuals were the most commonly stated motivations for joining online groups.

Overall, after discussing politics with friends or family, contacting an elected official was the second most frequently engaged in offline political activity – 46% of respondents engaged in this activity at least once a month. Unsurprisingly, registered party members were much more active than non-members.

Table 4: *Most frequent activities online and offline by age group*

Sphere	Activity	Age group			
		18-24	25-34	35-49	50 and over
Online	Looking for political information on the web daily	2%	9%	7%	0
	Joining an email discussions about politics daily	4%	4%	0	0
Offline	Discussed politics daily	28%	24%	0	0
	Discussed politics at least once a week	40%	24%	40%	100%

4.5 Comparing Online vs. Offline Participation

Respondents were asked about ten participative activities and in which sphere (offline or online) they were more likely to engage, and the reasons for their preference. Although there was preference for online participation relative to offline participation on a number of activities, there were some activities where respondents were equally comfortable participating offline or online. These were campaigning, discussing politics, and voting. Reasons for this included the lack or shortage of infrastructure to enable some activities (such as voting) and the relatively low retribution potential of the activities – voting is in secret so nobody knows who you voted for, while campaigning and discussing politics could be only with trusted friends and relatives so as to minimise the potential for retribution. For campaigning, the shortage of ICT infrastructure and poor ICT awareness made offline the preferred sphere. In a country where offline polling and voting is the default, respondents felt that online mechanisms were likely to promote transparency and efficiency, and reduce election malpractice. Even though it was noted that online lobbying could be conducted speedily and was likely to reach more people, lack of trust in online systems was cited in preference for the offline alternative. Trust was also mentioned as lacking in online donations.

Information seeking was preferred online by 66% of the respondents for its low cost, convenience, speed, and “wide array of information available” (Table 5). There was no activity for which a majority expressed a preference for solely offline participation. For communicating with political leaders, offline advocates said that physical interaction builds “bonds” between leaders and citizens and resulted in quicker feedback. However, communicating with leaders online was preferred by many as it overcomes the difference in physical locations between leaders and citizens. Amongst those who felt that there was no difference whether one communicated with their leaders online or offline, one respondent said that either way, “leaders may pretend to be busy” and not respond to citizens’ concerns. For protests, one said that “you can’t show emotion” online. This was complemented with “anger can’t be shown using words or pictures, physical action is the basis of a successful protest”. “My anger is witnessed [physically]” submitted another who preferred offline protest activity. Security concerns were also aired – with online protest being reported as protecting one’s identity and avoiding tear gas, police brutality, and arrests. Other pro-online protest respondents said that the activity is likely to reach a wider population when not isolated by physical location.

Table 5: Respondents’ sphere preference (online or offline) for engaging in particular activities

Activity	Sphere preference		
	Offline	Online	No difference
Discussions/Deliberations	19%	32%	49%
Information seeking	21%	66%	13%
Campaigning	25%	24%	51%
Voting/polling	17%	27%	56%
Petitioning/lobbying	32%	41%	27%
Fundraising/donating	35%	23%	42%
Communicating with leaders/politicians	31%	32%	37%
Protest	34%	25%	41%
Seek membership of an organisation	33%	39%	28%

Those who said the reasons for participating online similarly motivated them to participate offline were 41%. This group said participation online catalyzed and

complemented their participation in the offline world. Nonetheless, it was worth noting that some of the activities they were comfortable engaging in offline (such as voting and discussing politics) could be conducted in safety (e.g. voting by secret ballot or discussing politics with only trusted friends and family). This reinforces the importance of security as a motivator for people to participate, and this held true both offline and online. Some cross-fertilization between online and offline participation was noticed, with the online participation correlating to offline engagement. For instance, information sourced online or in discussions attended in online forums (as preferred methods to attending rallies or visiting party offices) was used in discussing politics face-to-face.

There were activities which participants hugely preferred undertaking online. Information seeking online was preferred by 66% of respondents due to its low cost, convenience, speed, and the wide array of information available. Respondents who preferred offline spheres of engagement placed emphasis on interactivity and the ability to observe emotions and reactions physically.

5. DISCUSSION

Evidently, these results are not generalizable to the Ugandan population. Most respondents in this study were urban-based, educated and averagely high-income earners. It was nonetheless important to study matters of Internet use in an authoritarian context among Ugandan “elites” (young, educated and “wired”), who may be opinion leaders in their communities and may be consequential for the future of the country. In Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, the young, urban and educated actively used Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube to criticize and put pressure on their governments.

This research concurs with Gustafsson (2012) in finding that while online communication might lower the thresholds for participating, or “subsidize the cost of participation”, as Weber et al. (2003) put it, this is mostly for individuals already politically engaged or interested, and does not necessarily turn spectators and the inactive into actively participating citizens. For Ugandan citizens with limited interest in politics living under authoritarian regimes where critical opinion can attract reprisals, having access to the Internet and civic knowledge rarely translates into eParticipation.

ICTs were enabling individuals to access a wide range of information and offering them a possibility to participate in online discussions. But was the Internet actually encouraging participation? Of note is that even for the most active online citizens (both registered and non-registered party members), the range and nature of activities they engaged in was limited. Joining an email discussion group and looking for political information on the web were the activities engaged in most. Both of these are fairly passive activities. However, differences in frequency among different activities to some extent depended on their nature. For instance, most people would look for information more often than join a campaign or an organization.

A great majority of respondents had never engaged in signing online petitions or donating funds online to a political cause. This is a reflection of the overall state of use of technology in Ugandan society, where use of paper-less money is minimal, and the limited use of technology by both citizens and leaders means that online petitions may not be as effective as delivering a physical petition to Parliament. More than half of respondents never engaged in joining a political organization online, volunteering, or sending an email to a politician or a political organization. The results indicated that respondents mostly went for “politics light”, not just “politics safe”. That would be similar to developments in some other countries, where people prefer to participate anonymously and often in campaigns for specific causes rather than actually joining a party and buying into an entire world view.

There was high proficiency in using ICT, regular access to the internet and for most participants membership to online political groups, yet this did not translate into participation for the greater majority. This reflected the repression in Uganda, where security forces regularly arrested opposition politicians, clobbered demonstrators and closed down media houses.

This ‘politics light’ and ‘politics safe’ were evidenced in the offline activities of respondents. Discussing politics with friends/family was the most frequently engaged in activity offline. It was notable that the same individuals that were online but rarely participated in civic and political issues often used ICT for a range of other activities that would deliver direct, immediate, and personal gratifications. Such activities included online research, listening to music or downloading movies, gaming and sports betting, reading news and eBooks, carrying out online banking transactions, and eLearning. This would seem to suggest that personal (rather than community or general social) interests are the major driver for most individuals’ online activity. Furthermore, the possibility for an action leading to immediate and tangible results emerged as a consideration for individuals’ online participation. With most Ugandan politicians and political institutions not having an engaged online presence, in many cases they are not as responsive to online activities as they are to offline ones.

The findings on Uganda are consistent with those in authoritarian Iran (Wojcieszak and Smith 2013) which showed that the majority of connected citizens were not using the Internet for political processes but to discuss personal topics and work-related affairs; and that citizens had greater confidence in new media empowering them personally rather than it making governmental officials more responsive (Wojcieszak et al. 2012).

No doubt, the Internet was potentially subsidizing participation as Weber and others had noted. But the appetite for participation was low; the fear of reprisals very high. The assertion by Chadwick (2006) and others about anonymity of the online world rendering individuals less accountable for their action and feeling empowered to speak up against more powerful actors because they have less fear of punishment was negated in an environment of perceived and real state surveillance of citizens’ online actions. The results suggest that some literature overestimates the link between using ICTs (particularly social media) and participation both offline and online. In repressive regimes, notably one like Uganda’s that is heavily entrenched (Museveni has been in power for 28 years, maintains tight control over the ruling party and the army) and where opposition groups are much weaker, citizens have little belief in ability to cause change, whether through offline or online actions. Even for citizens that regularly use the Internet, are politically aware and have membership to online political groups, eParticipation is not top of their online agenda. Rather, such individuals spend more time on activities that are safe and bring tangible, direct benefits to themselves, and so they relate more with friends and family compared to politicians or those they share political beliefs with.

Looking back at the ladder of participation (Li and Bernhoff 2007; Bernhoff 2010, most respondents were “spectators” and “joiners”. “Creators”, “critics” and “conversationalists” were in extremely short supply as evidenced in the nominal eActivism, political discourse, and campaigning. News and information seeking and membership of political organizations was sought but often anonymously, and most participants remained ‘silent listeners’ rather than active participants.

6. CONCLUSION

The Internet and other ICTs offer great scope for individuals to participate online in various activities. Indeed, this research found evidence that individuals who are not very active in civic matters offline are becoming more active in some online activities. However, the

participation most respondents were taking part in had more to do with communal discussions or activities than playing some role in decision-making, and it tended to be either on the outside or at the periphery of the mainstream political systems and processes. The perceived risks of retribution and intimidation for expressing a particular opinion or supporting a political cause meant that whereas many of the Ugandans online were active netizens, in offline life they were dormant citizens and even online they largely stayed away from citizen-to-government participation.

Ultimately, this research tells that in authoritarian countries such as Uganda, the enablers of online participation, such as security and anonymity, cannot be translated into the offline world. The fear of retribution meant that citizen-to-citizen participation was low but more prevalent than citizen-to-government, which was negligible. Empirical evidence on these matters from the perspective of a low-income country that is also under an authoritarian regime is a key contribution of this paper. Without larger number of Ugandans using ICTs, a decline in offline repression, more government folk using ICT and a diminishing of the fear of online snooping on citizens, it is unlikely the eParticipative habits of Ugandans under the current regime will change.

This research has its limitations, including the small number of respondents, which make it not necessarily representative of the overall situation of all ICT users in Uganda. Moreover, these results are evidently not generalizable to the Ugandan population given the Internet use, income levels and literacy rates of the sample as compared to Uganda's overall population. There is need for larger scale studies in Uganda and similar countries so as to develop a keener understanding of how citizens use ICT more gainfully, with other citizens and with government officials, in low-income, authoritarian regimes. Such a study would benefit from particularly understanding how various segments of online citizens - creators, conversationalists, joiners, critics, collectors, spectators and the inactive - use the digital mediums for a range of participation activities.

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Appendix 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender

- a) Male b) Female

2. Age group

- a) Under 18 b) 18-24 c) 25-34 d) 35-49 e) 50 and Over

3. Average monthly income (UGX)

- a) Less than 200,000
 b) 200,000 – 500,000
 c) 500,000 – 1,000,000
 d) 1,000,000 and above

4. What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- a) Primary b) Secondary c) Vocational d) Tertiary e) Bachelors f) Postgraduate

5. Where and how often do you access the Internet from?

	Daily Never	Weekly	Monthly	Less than once a month
Home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Café	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Community centre	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mobile phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)				

6. Please rate the level of your knowledge and proficiency in use of the following technologies:

	None	Poor	Workable	Good	Excellent
Google and other search engines	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Email family and friends	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Sharing documents and Photos (as attachments)		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contribute to online Discussion groups	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Use of social media (Twitter, Facebook etc)		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SMS on cell phone	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Blogging	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Downloading files (documents and media)		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Video conferencing (Skype, Google plus etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>				

7. How many online groups that in any way have political discussions or activities are you a member of?

8. What motivated you to join these online political groups?

9. Would the motivators (in 8 above) also make you join political action in real life?

a) Yes b) No

Please explain your answer:

10. Are you a registered or card-carrying member of a political party?

a) Yes b) No

11. How often do you engage in each of these activities online? *(Please tick wherever applicable)*

	Daily 2-5 times a week	Weekly	Monthly	Don't know	Never
Looking for political Information on the web <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visiting a political Organisation's website <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussing politics In a chat group <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Joining an email Discussion about politics <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Downloading documents (manifestos, politicians speeches) from a political organisation website <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sending an email to a politician or political Organisation <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Signing an online petition <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Donating funds online to a political cause <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Volunteering online to help with a political cause <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Joining a political Organisation online <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (please specify)					

12. How often do you engage in each of these activities offline?

	Daily 2-5 times a week	Weekly	Monthly	Don't know	Never
Discussing politics With friends/family <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contacting an					

elected official	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Engaging in strike/protest Activity	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Donating money to a Political cause	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Attending a rally	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Joining a political Organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Actively campaigning for a Political organisation	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Signing a petition	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Others (please specify)						

13. In which sphere (offline or online) are you more likely to engage in each of the following activities, and why? *Please tick the medium where you are more likely to take part in the particular activity.*

	Offline	Online	No difference	Reasons
Discussions/Deliberations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Information seeking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Campaigning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Voting/Polling	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Petitioning/lobbying	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Fundraising/donating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Communicating with Leaders/politicians	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Protest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Seek membership of an organisations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Other (please specify)				

14. What factors facilitate or constrain your use of ICTs for civic participation/democracy?

	Yes	No
Literacy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Costs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
[Lack of] awareness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Security concerns	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please specify)		

15. Please list any other constraints you encounter in using ICTs for civic participation

16. Do you find it easier to express yourself more frankly offline or online? If so, why is this so?

17. How, if at all, is the internet encouraging your participation in the political affairs of your country?

18. What makes you decide whether to be active or silent in the online/ Facebook political groups to which you are a member?

19. What other activities/ tasks do you undertake online besides those outlined above?

20. Do you share the information you get on civic matters with others?

- a) Yes b) No

21 A. If yes, which people and how often do you share the information with?

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Spouse	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Neighbour	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Workmate	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Friend	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Children	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Parents	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Siblings	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Other (please specify)					

21 B. When you decide not to share information, why is that so?