Motivating eParticipation in Authoritarian Countries

av

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Abstract


Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can enrich the ways in which citizens participate in civic and political matters. Indeed, many theorists on online participation, or eParticipation, proclaim the potential of digital technologies to empower citizens with convenient ways to participate in democratic processes and to hold leaders to account. However, it is not clear if and how digital technologies, notably social media, can contribute to a more democratic system and engaged public in a country where open expression is limited. This thesis studies Social Networking Sites (SNS) as Information Systems (IS) artefacts, including individuals’ motivation for using them, how their features enable participation - or not - and the impacts of their use in an authoritarian country.

Through personal interviews and focus group discussions in Uganda, this thesis finds that the common enablers of online participation in often-studied, mostly Western democratic countries are rarely translated into the offline world in an authoritarian country with one president for the last 30 years. The thesis proposes ways to increase eParticipation in authoritarian contexts, citing the social accountability sector (where the thesis shows evidence of eParticipation working) as a pathway to greater citizen participation and government responsiveness. Findings also contribute to the Information Systems artefact discourse by illuminating the political, social, technological, and information artefacts in SNS when used for eParticipation. Moreover, the thesis shows how, in contexts with a democracy deficit, resource-based theories such as the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) fall short in explaining what motivates political participation. It also explains how social networks contain the various constitutive aspects of the IS artefact – social, technical, informational and political - and how these various aspects need to be aligned for eParticipation to work.

Keywords: Civic voluntarism, IS artefact, Uganda, eParticipation, citizen participation, social networking sites, authoritarian regime, ICT4D.

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