The Current State of Social Media Research for eParticipation in Developing Countries: A Literature Review

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Abstract

While there is an increasing interest for conducting research on the importance of social media within the eParticipation area, more emphasis is still needed within the context of developing countries. We address this need by presenting a literature review on social media within eParticipation in developing countries, to add to the understanding of how these technologies influence the political environment. We discuss trends, contributions and challenges within this area, and propose a future research agenda. Furthermore, we propose a model of social media for eParticipation from a process view perspective to guide future research in this field.

1. Introduction

In the past two decades, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being introduced to better involve citizens in political decision-making [47], with the intent of recapturing declining interest [69]. This area of interest, termed eParticipation, focuses on processes and structures through which ICT supports relationships amongst citizens, governments and public organizations [68]. EParticipation initiatives may change the political landscape [58] and introduce opportunities for communication, consultation and dialogue between public organizations and citizens [47]. The consequences, challenges and opportunities for those being involved is a matter of serious interest to researchers [18] and the role technology plays in political activities must be examined to understand how ICT influences online deliberation [21] and explore how and by whom technology use is initiated [3].

For the last few years social media has entered this scene, providing content-sharing capabilities [52] and rapid exchange of information amongst users [48]. Most social media studies refer social media as a group of Internet based technologies that allows users to interact and create, edit, evaluate and/or link to content, or other creators of content [34, 74]. Others defined social media as Internet tools that can add value to the audiences from collaborative information sharing and exchange. More research is needed on the management and use of social media for eParticipation purposes, to better understand the use of multiple technologies and platforms to ‘communicate with a wider range of heterogeneous citizens’ groups, having different cultures, values, concerns’ [27].

While social media initiatives are found promising in promoting citizen participation, there is a further lack of research aiming at understanding the phenomenon and eventually accessing its impact on decision-making processes in the context of developing countries [76]. ICT, including social media, is considered important in terms of achieving the millennium development goal, introduced by the United Nations (UN) to fight poverty, improve healthcare, provide better education, foster gender equality, and extend global partnerships for development in developing countries. Social media, especially accessed through mobile devices, have rapidly gained importance as an element of political communication and as a topic of scholarly study [44], and could be viewed as an alternative source of political information that may potentially have large impact on the democratic progresses in developing countries [22]. Nevertheless do existing research report how numerous projects involving ICT innovation in developing countries fail to achieve the anticipated benefits due to poor management, resistance to change, and complex power structures [73].

Developing country is usually associated with low income countries, countries where stagnation and high rate of poverty is present [67]. The concept of development is often referred to as growth of national income per capita. However, development should not only be assessed in terms of economy. Research should also pay attention to changes in attitude and mentalities, cultural changes, political changes and...
the transformation of rural societies and process of urbanization [67]. In a broader sense, development is an integrated process of expansion of substantive freedoms, hence economic growth, political change, and technological advance should be judged in their contribution to the expansion of human freedoms. It is important to study how developing countries overcome the problems arising from development and how technology comes into play in order to successfully entangle ICT innovation in developing countries. Development is the consequence of interplay between socio-technical components [78] and technology needs to be designed to be able to operate in a complex social, political, economic, and cultural context. Thus, it is important to examining the current state of social media for eParticipation within the developing countries to better understand how and why social media technologies can influence eParticipation initiatives.

In this paper we focus on the use of social media for eParticipation purposes in developing countries by examining existing research within this field, aiming to develop a much needed structure and conceptual clarity by synthesizing relevant research. The objectives of this paper are therefore to:

(1) Provide an overview of the current state of eParticipation research using social media in developing countries, and:

(2) Identify important research issues and findings to open future research avenues for researcher in the same area of research.

2. Research Method

The selection of papers was identified through searches on Google Scholar and portals such as EBSCO and Taylor Francis online. We also examined papers from The Electronic Journal of Information System in Developing countries and Information Technologies and International Development Journal, which are two prominent ICT4D journals.

Several combinations of keywords were used, including e-participation and similar terms such as e-dialogue and e-democracy. As an outline concept, we focused on six types of social media [9] including collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. Definition of social media varies among scholars and the term Web 2.0 and social media are therefore used interchangeably. Likewise, varying concepts of developing countries are present. The term usually refers to low and middle-income countries. Here, we use the list of developing countries by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The paper search, adding up to 1993 references, was conducted between January and March 2015. We include only papers on which full text were available, and include only articles where the combination of the three key terms was present. This method yielded a library of 121 references which were scanned to determine content related to the outline concept of social media, e-participation, and developing countries, resulting in a final list of 86 papers included in this review.

Grounded Theory approaches are useful to produce literature reviews focusing on concepts. A five-stage Grounded Theory analysis were followed as a review method [79]. In so doing, we to construct a firm foundation for advancing this emerging area of research. Grounded Theory with its inductive nature enables salient concepts emerge from the literatures yielding genuine value from the selected studies [79]. Likewise, the aim of using Grounded Theory to literature review is to create a thorough and theoretically relevant analysis of a topic [79]. Applying this theory may help researchers to make sense of a seemingly unstructured data to allow for new ideas and concepts to surface. The analytical processes that Grounded Theory invokes are useful to create robust results for theory building [79].

Following a five-staged Grounded Theory we first randomly picked 13 papers and performed (individually) open coding, discussed the results to gain agreement and continued by performing axial and selective coding of all the papers. Identified categories then were integrated and refined by comparing, linking and relating each themes and sub-themes. The preliminary key concepts were used as guidance to perform constructive reading of all the papers, which were analyzed in intertwined manner to develop a classification of categories and concepts.

The analytical coding for the 86 texts was constantly revised and modified due to interpretation by both researchers. The findings of this study in the form of classification scheme are presented in the next section.

3. Findings

The findings are organized and presented based on the categories emerging from the coding process, including the identification of current contributions and research gaps for each category. The relationship between the categories is later discussed.
3.1. Actors

Various actors’ roles as stakeholders in e-participation differ across developing countries and include citizens, governments, and politicians.

3.1.1. Citizens. A majority of social media research for eParticipation is citizen-centric, with youth as the main focus of attention [23]. Young people are categorized into groups such as students [58], politically apathetic youth [77], and educated youth, being disappointed by the socioeconomic and political conditions [33]. Young people dominate the use of social media, but few of them are harnessing social media for political participation due to political apathy [26, 37, 77]. Despite the interest of the communication between young people and politicians, there is still a lack of significant impact on political changes from such activities [1, 42]. Other scholars argue that the main role of the youngsters are to initiate social media usage by the government, influences on policy makers’ shift from traditional media to social media [33, 58, 62].

Governments provide e-participation initiatives through social media to increase the inclusion of citizens. However, this may also cause e-participation exclusion due to formal and informal constraints, such as limited Internet access [42, 50, 64], low technology literacy [59], demographic [11], illiberal government [1], legal and ethical barrier [36], government censorship and social media blockage [1, 30, 33].

3.1.2 Governments. Governments in developing countries have the role as e-participation service-providers who deliver government services through social media, for instance as an integrated part of parliamentary websites [39, 65], on the municipal level [17], or for national parliaments [11, 55]. Interaction and two-ways communication are focal points for future e-government initiatives. Thus some governments have already established social media strategies to involve citizens in governance-related activities [5, 28, 55, 63] whereas others are still in the initial phase [12, 43], or not yet providing innovative and well defined strategy [11, 38]. Governments may use bottom-up (citizen-centric) approach rather than top-down manner (government-centric) to better engage with citizens [55]. Top-down policy-making initiatives are found to have greater chances of achieving real policy change [8], and the impact to political process can only be achieved when there is a pre-existing active community [19, 50]. After all, a main motivation for governments to adopt social media is to restructure government service delivery towards efficiency and excellency as social media offer three major opportunities; promoting democratic participation and engagement; facilitating collaborative project between government and citizens, and providing crowdsourcing solutions and innovations [4].

3.1.3 Politicians. Politicians’ roles are usually considered at the group level, rather than the individual [13, 25, 54]. eParticipation initiatives might be more effective if initiated by politicians as an effort to better engage citizens through less complex e-services [54]. Politicians often use social media as a supplementary venue to existing e-participation initiatives for engaging with citizens [17, 39, 54], as information sharing channels, for opinion gathering, for law-making process, interactive campaigning process [62], and mobilization of electors [25]. Restrictive access and the policies may hinder the usage, and hence politicians use has been largely limited to disseminating information and reproducing unidirectional communication manner [29]. Politicians may also employ social media for personal campaigns, as demonstrated by the example from the Colombian presidential election in 2010, where the winning candidate appealed to young voters through social media [62].

3.2. Social Media Technologies

Social media’s affordabilities, such as widespread accessibility, less government control [23] and two-way communication [55], make social media an attractive alternative to traditional media. Nonetheless, in order to make impacts, social media need to coexist and cooperate with multiple traditional social channels [55, 58, 70] otherwise the overall impact is very limited [1]. Social media will not create cooperation and participation unless there is a pre-existing active community [19]. The affordability provided through social media attract a wide audience, promotes basic ICT skill, communicability, interactivity, visibility, collaborative ability and anonymity [4, 6, 14, 65].

Constraints include citizen exclusion, misuse of information, security threats, data leaks, and privacy issues [14, 49, 61]. Insulting statements and anonymity abuse [75] are some challenges for social media use in eParticipation. Although current research discuss social media as a technology [14, 23], more research is needed for more thorough understanding on how and why these technologies influence eParticipation with special reference to developing countries [7, 55, 58].
3.3 Contextual Issues

Contextual issues, including type of governance, infrastructure, and citizen characteristics, may influence on the encouragement or discouragement of social media use.

3.3.1 Type of Governance. Social media have been influencing the political environment more in democratic regime [20, 31, 50, 66] than in authoritarian regime [30, 80]. The use and application of social media within eParticipation is considerably distinct between democratic and authoritarian countries. Protests, grassroots activities, social and political movement using social media were reported in several illiberal and autocratic regimes, instantiated by the social media movement and protests through the Arab Spring [2, 11, 23, 24, 33, 42, 57]. Whilst in democratic countries, social media have been used for opinion gathering [25], political campaign [62], to increase transparency and civic engagement [31] and in decision-making processes.

3.3.2 Infrastructure. Poor ICT infrastructure, the lack of widespread accessibility of Internet, and low rate of technology literacy impede the development of social media adoption for e-participation in developing countries [53, 59, 64, 72]. Strong ICT diffusion and high penetration of social media occurred in the Arabian countries after the Arab Spring [30]. However there is a peculiarity reported from Indonesia where 60% of the population lives in the remote areas where Internet diffusion is not widespread, and yet there is a high social media penetration [49]. Organizational and constitutional engagement are greater barriers to the inclusion of social media in policy-making than technological barriers [8].

3.3.3 Cultural Characteristic. Social media needs to be combined with traditional media to work as an adequate tool for political changes [11, 50]. High corruption index, ethnical diversity, language and policies issues, as well as low ICT literacy and education are challenges to online citizen engagement in policy-making [29]. Likewise, while social media-based communication with politicians gain significant interests among youth, such activities may not result in significant impact on political changes [1, 42]. Since social media technologies are dynamically being developed, online social inequality is still a main issue, especially for people with disabilities whom are often excluded from participation in the political discourse [36].

3.4 Objectives

3.4.1. More Civic Engagement. The inclusion of young people in the political sphere is important for the emergence of democracy [58]. While some argued that citizens who use social media effectively and efficiently are more likely to participate in political discourses [60], contradictory result indicates that social media do not substantively encourage political talk among the political apathy youth [77] but may contribute to the broader democracy goal with a good support system from other stakeholders [15]. Politicians and citizens should establish a two-way relationship where both sides are responsible for the sustainability of the engagement [54].

3.4.2. Better Government Services. Social media use, especially through mobile devices [64, 66, 72] may improve public service delivery [41]. Applying citizen centric approaches may be effective in information gathering and processing [63]. Qualities of information, system management and service delivery strongly influence citizens’ satisfaction in eParticipation services [43]. A majority of the initiatives generated impact within a limited context, without reflecting on how to eventually adjust to achieve similar effects in contexts with different infrastructure and characteristic, social media may promote good governance in developing nations [77].

3.4.3 Transparency and Accountability. Effective use of social media may help government to sustain transparency and accountability [56]. However, many governments in developing nations have not utilized social media effectively in disseminating information. While social media (e.g. parliament websites) in wealthy democracies are deficient in providing basic information of their elected members to citizen [31, 66], some non-democratic states in contrast display a relatively high level of parliament transparency and social media connectivity [31]. Social media are potential tools to promote public participation against corruption [51].

3.4.4 Provide Information Dissemination. Social media contribute to information dissemination [41] and enable exchange of immediate information that helps in organizing and managing demonstrations and political campaigns [46]. Likewise, social media may help to close the bureaucratic barrier in eParticipation since these technologies provided opportunities for direct communication between the parties, civic groups and electorate [35].
3.4.5 Civic Mobilization for Social and Political Movement, Social media play a participatory role within social and political movements in facilitating actor’s interest, identity and agency [30, 75], and challenges the role of traditional media in mobilizing people for social and political movement [58]. For instance in Egypt, social media have become the main mobilization platform where young and educated people, who were disappointed from socioeconomic and political condition discuss and exchange information [33]. Besides the capabilities in accommodating socio-political movement, social media also have constraints related to false information dissemination and access refusal to the protestors [30]. Successful transition to stable democracy requires that all citizens have free and equal to the political sphere as possible [23]. Social media have been used to achieve freedom of speech [23], and have been a principal agent of political change in several countries [11, 33, 58].

3.5. Research Methods

Qualitative case study is the dominating research method (45%), while 19% use mixed method approaches and 8% quantitative approaches. Only one paper was based on proactive research [19]. 28% of the papers do not explicitly state their study approach.

3.6 Theoretical Approaches

40% of the papers do not explicitly employ any theory, concept, model, or framework in their study, whereas 14% explicitly mention the use of theory such as Actor Network Theory, Technology Acceptance Model, Theory of Planned Behavior, and Affordance Theory. Eleven additional papers propose models to explain their findings, without externalizing their findings to a larger phenomenon or population. Concept and models guided the remaining studies without explicitly informing about the theoretical underpinnings.

3.7 Legal Issues

Very few papers discusses legal issues like legislative control over freedom of press and expression in authoritarian regime [1, 80]. Vagueness of regulation and lack of particular legal framework on social media technologies may give rise to slower adoption of social media for civic participation [11, 14]. Legal issues are not discussed in any depth, but

are mainly acknowledged by giving suggestion for future research directions to examine issues on intellectual property, privacy, security, and trust [10, 36]. Since social media create possibilities for unique technological behavior and social crimes, it is also suggested to put more attention on legal consequences of using these technologies. Existing ICT laws need to be constantly strengthen to address potentially new avenues for crime in the future [14].

4. Discussion and Research Agenda

In this section we summarize and discuss the use of social media in eParticipation initiatives within developing countries.

There is a rapid uptake of social media use within eParticipation in developing countries. Relative affordability, collaborative ability, ease of use, inexpensive access, widespread accessibility and reduced government control (hence more citizen control) are among the identified motivations for social media adoption within the eParticipation area. Whereas technology is considered the main element within most research on social media, the importance of the social and information parts are less emphasized.

Taking into account that many studies capturing social media phenomena as a snapshot within a particular context, we here propose a model (figure 1) taking into account the timeliness (the process view), where social media is seen as an information system with inputs that may lead to a transformation to produce outputs.

Social media, consisting of elements such as actors, contextual issues and legal issues, is introduced to achieve some objectives. When objectives are achieved, it will lead to some output. The output would be heterogeneous depending on when, where and how these technologies are used and what objectives are achieved. The ultimate output is to contribute to better democracy.

The added value of our model is to provide a thorough understanding by synthesizing current research on how and why social media influence eParticipation initiatives in developing countries.
Based on the identification of patterns, focus areas and challenges within existing research within this field, we provide the path of future research trajectory by discussing and reflecting future research agendas, addressing the same categories presenting above.

**Actors:** Examine actors at individual levels, providing more attention to politician

The focus of actor in eParticipation shifted from focusing on government as the main actor [47], to a more citizen centric view in the more recent years.

Most of the studies included here examine actors at the group level, not at individual level. Hence, there is a need for future studies focusing on individual eParticipation actors to better understand such phenomena and add value to the research field.

Citizens are acknowledged as a group of students or youth. While the amount of research focusing on youth steadily increases, more research is still needed to examine why interest of youth in political discourse via social media impacts political changes.

**Social Media Technologies:** Focus on constraints and how to overcome them, and on the informational and social elements of social media.

Even though some studies aim to identify challenges for introducing social media, few (if any) discuss how to overcome these. Most papers are supportive, with fewer concerns on the constraints and challenges social media may elicit. Acknowledging more the challenges in social media use within the eParticipation field may help government to design more sustainable and effective services.

Future research could look more into the informational and social perspective of social media. A promising conceptual framework is to frame social media as an IS artefact. The concept of IS artefact consists of the three subsystems of the technology, the information and the social characteristics, where the whole system is greater than the sum of its subsystems [40]. Hence, social media could be considered an IS artifact by investigating the social interaction, the technological component and the informational components that altogether ensemble the IS- artifact perspective.

**Contextual Issues:** Examine cultural, organizational and constitutional aspect of citizen engagement via social media

Findings show that a majority of the studies focused on technological infrastructure of social media. Cultural, organizational, and constitutional aspects are less emphasized, although arguably such aspects may provide greater barriers to citizen engagement. Furthermore, social inequality for IT-illiterate people and people with various disabilities are only scarcely focused on. Overcoming such challenges will increase awareness and capacity within the field.

**Legal Issues:** Investigate legal aspects of introducing social media within the eParticipation field.

Legal issues such as intellectual property, privacy and security issues, freedom of speech impediments and trust issues are important elements, yet scarcely investigated within the field. The legal aspects will become more important when the use of social media continue to grow. More research is needed to better provide recommendations to policy-makers and citizens on how to utilize social media effectively within existing legal framework, as well as change needed within the legislation when social media is entering the scene. Further research into this area could provide better insight into whether or not for policy makers should strengthen existing legal frameworks to protect stakeholders using social media.

**Research Method and Measurement:** Bring in more theories and better theoretical foundation within the research field.

Despite the increasing awareness of introducing theories, concepts and models within such research, the field is still dominated by researchers using concepts, frameworks and models without explicitly introducing, nor reflecting on, the underpinning theories for the study. We argue that the lack of empirical data introduced in the papers (such as
interview excerpts and survey findings) it is often difficult to understand how the studies came to the conclusions drawn. Future research should pay more attention to the linkage between empirical data and conclusions, to inform the reader and hence increase validity and reliability of the study conducted, and discuss the added value of the work in light of the theoretical framework introduced.

More research based on pro-active research approaches is needed. Arguably, proactive research has a wide array of approach to involve stakeholders within the design and management of eParticipation services. Action research may accommodate the gap between relevance and rigor in a research as its primary goal is to improve practice without neglecting rigor. We challenge future researchers to introduce different types of proactive research in social media study to increase the dynamicity of the field.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have provided an overview of current state of social media research within eParticipation in the context of developing countries. Social media are important in today’s world, especially among young people in developing countries. Hence the presence of social media technology could potentially increase these youngsters’ interest in participating in the political discourse. Nonetheless, how such interests impact on political changes should be examined further.

Limitations of our study firstly includes the fact that the analysis process, identified key themes from the literatures are (as always) subject to debate, as several terms appeared differently while referring to the same meaning. Secondly, due to page limitations, we only picture findings over interview in a very succinct manner. The categorization and findings introduced here needs to be further explored in a more detail way.

The main contribution of this paper includes firstly the provision of a coherent overview of social media research in eParticipation in the context of developing countries. Our review provides an overview of the current state of eParticipation research using social media in developing countries by analyzing key issues, trends and challenges of social media use. Secondly, we identified important research issues to open future research avenues by proposing a process view model of social media technologies within eParticipation area to guide future works. We also identified important research issues and contributions from previous research and propose several issues for further research. Our results can be taken into account by practitioners, policy-makers and government institutions to further develop knowledge within the field.

6. References


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