

Chapter 57

When Citizens in Authoritarian States Use Facebook for Social Ties but Not Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

Numerous researchers have found a correlation between citizens' use of social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook and their likelihood for eParticipation. However, SNS use does not have the same effect on all citizens' political engagement. In authoritarian countries, Facebook offers a platform for citizens to challenge the power of the state, provide alternative narratives and mobilise for political change. This chapter examines how using Facebook affects the participative behaviours of Ugandans and concludes that in low internet use, authoritarian contexts, the Civic Voluntarism Model's postulation of the factors that explain political participation, and the benefits Facebook brings to participation in Western democracies, are upended. Overwhelming detachment from politics, low belief in citizens' online actions influencing change and fear of reprisals for criticising an authoritarian president in power for 30 years, severely dulled the appetite for eParticipation. Hence, Facebook was growing citizens' civic skills but hardly increasing online participation.

INTRODUCTION

Several researchers have over the last two decades sought to establish the causal relationships between digital technologies and political participation. This interest has been fuelled by the belief that the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can boost the participation of citizens in governance processes. Amidst pessimistic approaches about the future of representative democracy, the role of the Internet in affecting participatory behaviour has become central in political participation debates (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016). But this scholarly interest is not new. Two decades ago, Castells (1996)

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explained that the internet provides easy access to information and offers a sphere for communication which can enhance political interest and pull citizens into the democratic process. Macintosh and Whyte (2002) observed that over the previous decade there had been a 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 both broader and deeper. Besides this interest in the link between ICT and political participation, various studies have investigated whether use of one or the other media increases the proclivity of individuals to participate in civic and political processes. Such research, including that conducted earlier on the popularity of television (for example Cummings et al., 2002), and what was conducted more recently on the internet and social media (Bachmann et al., 2010; Friedl & Vercic 2011; Räsänen, 2008; Tworzecki & Semetko, 2010; Cullen & Sommer, 2011; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011), mostly concluded that there was a correlation between media use and the likelihood for political participation. Many of the studies concluded that there were no universal effects of media use on political engagement across all citizen groups (Holt et al., 2013). Some scholars therefore urge caution when it comes to statements and assumptions about the direction of causality that underlies the relationship between social media use and participation (Theodoridis & Lowe, 2016).

Zúñiga et al., (2012) 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. Meanwhile, in drawing the link between media use and participation, Cullen and Sommer (2011) pointed to the role of ICT as a communications channel and an enabler of online networking; while Gustafsson (2012) identified the proliferating social networking sites (SNS) as a great source for political news and a way of influencing contacts for politically-inclined individuals. However, contemporary research is not wholly in agreement about the effects of using social media on participation nor does it always succinctly explain the link between use of particular media and the resulting likelihood for participation.

This paper investigates the reasoning of Facebook users in Uganda in relation to political content and discussion. It examines how using the social network affects the participative behaviours of individuals that are active in political or interest organizations and those that are not active in organized politics. The paper uses the Civic Voluntarism Model as a frame of analysis.

The research questions of this paper are:

- What effect does the use of Facebook have on the online political participation behaviours of individuals in an authoritarian state?
- What factors are important predictors of online participation among individuals who use Facebook in an authoritarian state?

Notably, most of the research published on this subject discusses developed, democratic countries. Whether in countries such as Uganda with different conditions - low internet penetration, high rates of illiteracy and authoritarian governments - the use of social networks such as Facebook is playing a role in shaping people's proclivity to participate becomes a legitimate subject of inquiry. While the next section provides a contextual background to Uganda, the ones that follow it review literature on the link between the use of social media and political participation in authoritarian regimes.

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