

Chapter 8

Citizen–Government Collaborative Environment Using Social Networks: The Case of Egypt

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ABSTRACT

Electronic democracy is a concept which is used in some countries around the world with mixed success. Social networks helped in facilitating democracy and democratic change in several countries suggesting that they could be utilized as an e-democracy tool. This research proposed a new model of how the decision-making process for local governments could be improved via social networks. Quantitative approach was used to investigate how the use of a social network amongst people living in the same suburb could improve decision making on the local level. Findings showed that awareness building, deliberation, and consultation factors could be used to affect the decision making for their local governments.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

Electronic democracy (e-democracy) is a way to engage citizens and politicians with their government through Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) (Tambini, 1999; Riley & Law, 2003). Its main objective is to change citizens from being passive to become active and to engage in the democratic processes in their governments (Lee & Berry, 2011). Web 2.0 is one of the technologies that could potentially have an impact on achieving e-democracy (Chadwick, 2008; Hull et al., 2010; Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6367-9.ch008

Different web 2.0 technologies such as social networks, wikis, and blogs are available for governments to interact with citizens for very cheap costs (Hull et al., 2010). Nevertheless; some governments lack the motivation to adopt new web 2.0 technologies. On the other hand, citizens are moving from using the traditional bureaucratic means of information sharing to use new web 2.0 technologies such as social networks. This movement towards the use of social networks is hard for governments to control (Murugesan, 2007). Social networks help people to group their opinions and improve the public policy decision making which will lead to improving the democratic process and to reshaping public services (Chadwick, 2003; Flak et al., 2005).

This paper is proposing a model of how governments can use social networks to listen to citizens' opinions so they could enhance their decision making. Accordingly, the paper is aiming to answer the following research question: How social networks support the local government decision making to enhance e-democracy? The paper structure starts by presenting the theoretical background for understanding e-democracy followed by proposing the suggested e-democracy model. This is followed by the methodology used in research and ended by the discussion section.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are several benefits which could be achieved from e-democracy. E-democracy helps to increase citizens' participation in the political life (Riley & Law, 2003; Thomas and Streib, 2005). Citizens are empowered to say their input to the decisions made by their governments which lead to having two ways of communications rather one way only (Stahl, 2005). Small governorates or states are more responsive to e-democracy than larger ones (Riley, 2003; 84) while young citizens are more responsive to e-democracy compared to elder citizens (Hull et al, 2001).

Williamson (2007) develops a new model that explains the lifecycle of e-democracy. The model combines two models to understand how e-democracy develops on the local level. The first is the trans-theoretical stages of change that explores how change and awareness occurs in a society and consists of five awareness stages that depend on the level of an individual motivation:

- **Pre-Contemplation:** A person doesn't recognize the need for any change
- **Contemplation:** The person considers the change but is still resisting it
- **Preparation:** The person accepts the need for change and considers how it is to be carried out
- **Action:** Implementing the change and adopting to it
- **Maintenance:** Maintain the change and ways things are done after it

The second model is the social movement lifecycle model that talks about the actors in a social movements, and divides them into four categories. Each of these individuals has to exist in a society for a social movement to start and continue (Williamson, 2007):

- **Citizens:** The general public in a society
- **Reformers:** Are those who have the power to implement the change
- **Change Agents:** Individuals who would spread awareness of the issues rebels are challenging in a society and support the change they call for
- **Rebels:** Individuals ready to challenge established conditions

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