

Chapter 11

Development of an Inclusive Participatory Democracy System

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ABSTRACT

Barriers such as unequal access, lack of digital skill, low income and disability constitute limiting factors for technology-mediated citizens and government interaction in developing countries. It is against this backdrop that this work explores the integration of Voice, Web and SMS technologies, in Nigeria's democratic process. The proposed system takes advantage of the ubiquitous nature of mobile devices to explore the plausibility of increasing the level of citizens' participation in democratic practices, particularly, those in rural areas with no Internet access and the physically challenged electorates. The server module for the e-democracy system was developed in PHP. Ozeki SMS server and Voxeo Voice server were used for SMS transaction code and VoiceXML code respectively. The prototype e-democracy system shows that developing nations can take advantage of their present level of technological development to give voice to the voiceless and improve their democratic system.

INTRODUCTION

The Global public management efforts since the 1980s have been revolutionizing the relationship between citizens and the State. The revolution focuses on governments being more responsive to the populace and requires new strategies to rebuild the relationship between citizens and governments and to promote more citizen participation in public administration (Kettl, 2005; Oni, et al., 2014). The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in enhancing citizens' political participation has been identified as key to the revolution and a solution to the problems of representative democracy,

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particularly, the disconnection between representatives and citizens and the decline of political interest amongst the populace (Kang & Dugdale, 2010; Azeta, et al., 2015). E-participation initiatives have served as means for two-way communication between government and citizens. To the government, it serves as information provisioning tools and to the citizens as an avenue to voice their opinions, deliberate on policy issues, and give viable contributions to policy options. ICT has been persuasively argued to play a key developmental role in developing countries (Sahay & Avgerou, 2002; LeBlanc, et al., 2004). Leveraging on the capability of the internet and mobile technology, e-participation has the potential of creating new forms of engagement, deliberation, and collaboration in the political process to make democratic processes more inclusive and transparent (Coleman & Gotze, 2001; OECD, 2003b; Shirazi, et al., 2010). It has the potential to transform uncompetitive industries and dysfunctional public administration and to provide unprecedented opportunities for the information-intensive social services (Sahay & Avgerou, 2008).

Most countries have leveraged on ICT tools to foster new relationships between citizens and the State in order to alleviate the crisis of democratic legitimacy. The use of ICT is therefore, capable of bridging the disconnect between citizens and their representatives. Contrarily however, in developing countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries, e-democracy implementation is still in its introductory stage, though most governments have embarked on e-government implementation strategies. In these countries, e-participation in democracy is mostly centered on private organizations' initiative. Considering the prevailing challenges of poor governance, lack of accountability and transparency, these governments mostly need to join their world counterpart in promoting citizens participation public decision making and explore the capability to put in place adequate infrastructure for e-democracy implementation.

After the start of the democratic era in Nigeria and the election of a democratic government dated as early as the 1990's till now, the elected government formed the National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), the National e-Government Strategy (NeGST) and the National IT policy. Among others, the objectives of the Nigeria Information Technology (IT) policy include to improve accessibility to public administration for all citizens and to bring transparency to government processes. The strategies, among others, involve bringing the government to the doorsteps of people by creating virtual forum and facilities to strengthen accessibility to government information and facilitate interaction between the governed and the government leading to transparency, accountability and strengthened democracy (NITDA, 2001). Despite the establishment of strategies and national policies since 2000, Nigeria government is yet to fully explore the potentials offered by ICT to transform its political landscape. Given the proliferation of smart phone and mobile data access, Nigeria stands to benefit from using this technological development to advance its democratic system.

The exponential growth in the use of internet, mobile phone and especially mobile data in Nigeria within the last decade stand as platforms through which citizens can be engaged in public participation given available e-participatory channels. Nigeria was referred to as the fastest growing telecommunication country in Africa (Ayo et al., 2007). The number of internet users in Nigeria has continued to be on the increase. The number has grown from 200,000 Internet users in the year 2000 to 43,982,200 i.e., 28.3% of the country's population and 70,300,000 (39.7% of the country's population) in 2014 (www.internetworldstats.com/africa). The increasing numbers of internet users in Nigeria from 0.1% in 2000 to 39.7% of its population in June 2014, revealed that the use of internet in the country is growing at a sporadic rate and still has the potential to grow higher. The 2012 World Internet statistics also revealed that internet usage in Nigeria increases with increase in population. Likewise, mobile technology has gained wider acceptance all over the country. Mobile phone usage statistic of March, 2014 revealed that

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