

## Chapter 56

# When SNS Use Doesn't Trigger E-Participation: Case Study of an African Authoritarian Regime

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### ABSTRACT

*Numerous scholars have concluded that there is a correlation between use of social network sites (SNS), particularly for news and information acquisition or community building, and the likelihood for e-Participation. This paper examines how the use of Facebook affects the participative behaviours of individuals active in political and interest organizations and those not active in organized politics. Through focus group discussions involving 56 Ugandans, we conclude that in low internet use, authoritarian contexts, the Civic Voluntarism Model and the benefits Facebook brings to participation in Western democracies are turned on their head. Besides overwhelming detachment from politics, even for politically-inclined citizens, low belief in citizens' online actions influencing change and fear of reprisals for criticizing an authoritarian president in power for 29 years, severely dulled the appetite for e-Participation. This high cost of participation means Facebook is growing citizens' civic skills but it is hardly increasing online participation even for politically interested citizens.*

### INTRODUCTION

Starting off from the belief that Information Communication Technology (ICT) holds great promise for increasing the participation of citizens in governance, many researchers have over the last two decades sought to establish the causal relationships between digital technologies and participation. In more recent times, studies have investigated whether use of one or the other media increases the proclivity of

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individuals to participate in civic and political processes. Such research, including that conducted earlier on the popularity of television (for example Cummings & Kraut 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.

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 Summer (2011) pointed to the role of ICT as a communications channel and an enabler of online networking; while Gustafsson (2012) identified the proliferating social networks sites (SNS) as a great source for political news and a way of influencing contacts for the politically-inclined individuals.

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. This paper compares to a similar research conducted in Sweden by Gustafsson (2012), using the Civic Voluntarism Model as a frame of analysis. Sweden is a democratic, developed country with one of the world's highest internet usage rates. Uganda, on the other hand, is a developing country with a poor democratic culture, low per capita income of US\$ 584, and with only 23% of the population having access to the internet.

The overarching position of enquiry 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.

## **CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND TO UGANDA**

Access to ICT is low in Uganda, with 23% of the population using the internet, while mobile phone tele-density (number of mobile phones per 100 inhabitants) stands at about 52. However, there is multiple cell phone ownership, implying that the actual number of people that actually use a phone is much less. Facebook is the second most popular website in Uganda, while YouTube is the 4th most visited site. Twitter and Wikipedia are 6th and 9th respectively (Alexa, 2014). Only 10% of the population is connected to the national electricity grid while less than 15% of Ugandans live in urban areas. Up to 19.7%

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