Chapter 13
Social Media and Citizen Engagement:
Two Cases from the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Increased access and the convenience of participation to and through the internet encourage connectivity among citizens. These new and enhanced connections are no longer dependent on real-life, face-to-face interactions, and are less restricted by the boundaries of time and space (Frissen, 2005). In this chapter, two cases from the Philippines are documented and assessed in order to look at online citizen engagement. The first case looks at how people participate in promoting tourism in the Philippines through social media. The second case involves their use of social media for disaster response. Previous studies on ICTs and participation in the Philippines have looked at the role of intermediaries (see Alampay, 2002). Since then, the role of social media, in particular that of Facebook and Twitter, has grown dramatically and at times completely circumvents traditional notions of intermediation. The role of Facebook, in particular, will be highlighted in this chapter, and the authors will analyze its effectiveness, vis-à-vis traditional government channels for communication and delivery of similar services. By looking at these two cases and assessing the abovementioned aspects, it is hoped that the use of social media can be seen as an integral part of e-governance especially in engaging citizens to participate in local and national governance.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide a new arena for citizen engagement. More specifically, the Internet has provided a new media for people to get information and be involved in issues affecting society. Frissen (2005) argued for this specific role of the Internet in promoting new and diverse forms of citizen engagement. As such, the use of the Internet provides a venue for people with the same advocacies and interests to get connected and facilitate their collective actions toward the same objectives. There is increasing use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for people to interact and transact with government. In the Philippines, this need to encourage greater use of ICTs for dealing with citizens was recognized nearly a decade ago with the passage of the e-Commerce Act in 2000. This Act called for government institutions to make services available online. Through the use of ICTs, services will be faster, more reliable, and can be more accessible, aside from other benefits.

This chapter looks into how citizens used a form of ICT-enabled interactive social media, the Facebook, to amplify and support government programs and services. In particular, two cases from the Philippines are documented to look at the citizen engagement through Facebook. The first case deals with the tourism program of the Philippine government that promotes the country to be "more fun". The second case describes how citizens were able to mobilize for disaster response. Through these cases, the facilitative role of Facebook is highlighted and compared with traditional government channels.

This chapter used literature review and content analysis of user generated information and material in the Internet during specific periods when the government campaigns or interventions occurred. Review of existing literature on e-government and citizen participation provides the background and foundation for the discussions on this chapter. Content analysis looked at online discussions pertaining to the two cases in order to gather themes about citizen's comments and opinions. Specific themes revolved around the positive and negative feedbacks of internet users in the tourism program, and "calls" for assistance and subsequent actions generated by different users in the case of disaster response.

LITERATURE SURVEY

This section tackles literature survey on the roles of ICTs, the concept of governance, citizen participation, and intermediaries and their roles. The specific role of ICTs in providing information and its importance in promoting citizen participation and improving the process of governance is highlighted. The different roles of the intermediaries in harnessing ICTs in service provision are likewise given significance. Under the broad concept of e-governance, this literature survey also dove-tailed the concepts of citizen participation, intermediaries, and ICTs in looking at a new paradigm of improving government service provision.

ICTs, Governance, and Citizen Participation

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) touch many aspects of society including how society is governed. In particular, ICT's role in the aspect of governance is gaining ground. ICTs have been used to affect changes in and transform how government works. As identified by Malkia, Anttiroiko, and Savolainen (2004), one of the major factors that affect transformations in governance is the utilization of new ICTs, along with the changing role of knowledge, and forms of social organization and co-operation, along with globalization. These factors interplay with each other, with ICT as a catalyst in providing relevant knowledge and information among the citizenry

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