The Role of Social Media in Citizen's Political Participation

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Abstract. Social media is becoming important tool for political participation and engagement. Interaction in social media has a strong influence on the propensity to participate in politics. In this research, we argue that IS is in the right position to improve understanding of social media influence in political communication and participation. In this study, the role of social media for political participation is discussed and the result shows that social media plays great role in terms of replacing traditional media, facilitating political engagement, strengthening strategic collaboration as well as the potential to influence governments decisions in relation with politics. We employed qualitative research methodology and concept analysis technique to transcribe interview that can help to identify and arrange the ideas and views of interviewees. Our study explored how citizens engaged in politics through social media. Thus, the media industry, political consultants, politicians, and citizens will need to adjust their behaviors to leverage this new competitive environment abstract should summarize the contents of the paper in short terms, i.e. 150–250 words.

1 Introduction

In recent years, there is a rapid development of a new information network and information technology which is commonly known as social media. Among the different social Media sites available, the widely used sites are Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, each of which are used by hundreds of millions of people (Alalwan et al. 2017; Dwivedi et al. 2015; Greenhow and Gleason 2014; Kapoor et al. 2018; Shiau et al. 2017; 2018). In past, social Medias are used for interpersonal communication and collaboration using Internet-based platforms. Based on the rapid growth of social Medias, users started to create contents on their own and express their opinion, engaged in political discussion or search for politically like-minded individuals (Dang-Xuan 2013; Dwivedi and Kapoor 2015; Grover et al. 2018; Hossain et al. 2018). Political parties feel responsible in participating political discussions with citizens when the country is democratic. Very recent phenomenon is the rise of social media as a medium for political communication. For example, In the Netherlands, during the national elections (2010), politicians with higher Social Media engagement got relatively more votes within most political parties (Effing et al. 2011).

Political participation is defined as a behavior aimed at influencing the government and affecting their political decisions (Skoric et al. 2016). Social media are also becoming an important part of the research for scholars interested in studying this new

political phenomenon on the role of social media and interpersonal discussion in local participation (Kim et al. 2010); the effect of social media on political participation (Stanley and weare 2004; Habermas 2006; Mcclurg 2003); the effect of digital access on the prevalence of democracy (Rhue and sundararajan 2014; Rose and Sæbø 2005); New Media and Internet Activism (Kahn and Kellner 2004); To date, Information Systems (IS) studies have investigate the role of Information system in social media use with engagement and its three sub-categories, that is, social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. (Boulianne 2015). Hofmann (2014) examine government rationale for using social media in case of Germany parliament member. Another studies (Oh et al. 2013; Wattal et al. 2010) studied social media services during large scale social movement and revolutionary political change. Studies investigating social media and its role in political and participation are fairly limited or nonexistent in the extant IS literature (Wattal et al. 2010; Maghrabi and Salam 2013).

This study observe developments in social media in the context of recent social movements and revolutionary political change occurring in many of the Middle Eastern and North African countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia, Syria. In Ethiopia, the recent December 2015 ongoing Oromoprotest by students and farmers on the new master plan of Addis Ababa and around Oromia regions made headlines in the world news. This all have in common social networking. Ethiopian government blames opposition parties for facilitating and organizing the protest via Facebook. Recently Ethiopian government sent Zone nine bloggers into jail for accused of committing crime. But international organizations like Amnesty international (http://www.amnest yusa.org/news/press-releases/ethiopia-free-all-jailed-bloggers-and-journalists-before-obama-visit) describes that blogging is right and not a crime and call Ethiopian government to unconditionally release bloggers and journalists in prison and to respect freedom of speech. We can understand from this social networking becomes hot issue and starting affecting Ethiopia political system.

Identifying the theoretical implications of social media use and political participation is challenging for IS research. So it is critical for IS research to explore the role of social media for citizen's political communication and consequent revolutionary political change. These changes have significant implication for business organizations and their strategy as well as larger social and political relations. Thus, the goal of this study is to understand the role of social media for citizen's political participation and political communication. Particularly, this study will answer research question to how social media is used for citizens' political participation.

This paper will makes a number of important contributions to both research and practice. The primary contribution of this paper is to articulate a vision for and a roadmap of the productive a read for researchers to begin looking for and testing fundamental theoretical differences introduced by social media. As previous studies have shown, in the last few years social media have become an important political communication channel. It enables political institutions and citizen's to directly interact with each other. Therefore, political activities might gain more transparency and citizens might be more involved into political decision-making processes. The media industry, political consultants, politicians, and citizens will need to adjust their behaviors to leverage this new competitive environment.

2   Literature Review

Social media are new class of information technology that build on web 2.0 which support interpersonal communication and produce interactive user-generated content using Internet-based platforms (Greenhow and Gleason 2014). The quick development of social media is starting to displace traditional media and influence social and political action in which information are used to engage in participation.

The study by (Tank 2013) shown that social media has produced changes in the way people communicate than working in traditional Medias. Among the changes produced by social media, those who write and comment often use nicknames or pseudonyms. States the ability to stay unknown enabled people to overcome their psychological fear barriers to engage in a free exchange of their view (Maghrabi and Salam 2013) and sometimes it can also avoid responsibility. In addition, what is different in social media is the richness, variety and spreading speed of information as well as the society's most influential figures have merged and social media become public space.

Despite the popular adoption of social media, their application for organizational purposes, the economic impact of social media on business could exceed $1 trillion, most of which is gained from more efficient communication and collaboration within and across organizations (Greenhow and Gleason 2014). The impact of social media on and for organizations, therefore, represents an important area for information systems research.

The relatively free domain of social media creates new opportunities for citizens to become involved in politics. Political science is one area in which information system's deep understanding of the effects of technological system, creation, use and management can be great value. Social media can be classified into different categories including collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social world's. The most frequently researched social medium is the social networking site is Facebook (Hofmann 2014). Political parties' perceived use Facebook to afford facilitation of direct communication to promote political interests and enable dialogue (Jenson and Dyrby 2013).

As the study is interested to explore how citizens are using social media for the political participation, studies related to social media and political communication were reviewed.

Rhue and Sundararajan (2014) examined the effects of digital access on the prevalence of democracy and its diffusion via trade, geographical and migration networks across 189 countries between 2000 and 2010. Digital access can be facilitated by both media freedom and internal political institutions, and that different digital technologies may have varying impacts while affecting diffusion via different political networks. They conclude that different forms of information technology are likely to impact democracy in different ways, perhaps mediated by different political networks.

Social media enable governments to provide the public with up-to-date information (Jaeger and Bertot 2010) since social media are close to real-time communication channels. Furthermore, Social Media is one of the fastest growing marketing platforms in the world (Coursaris et al. 2013). Although, in contrast to private sector companies,

governments do not depend on selling goods, they can still 'advertise' their services and increase their reputation e.g. creating a sense of belonging among the citizens. However, until now the potentials of political discussions in social media could not be exploited sufficiently (Wattal et al. 2010).

Another study (Hofmann 2014), examined the challenges that influence governments' decision to use social media. One of the main obstacle for using social media in governments were privacy regulations or uncertainty about these regulations as well as missing personnel to maintain the social media sites. Before launching a social media site, governments observe and learn experiences of other government agencies social media activities. Social media can also be a "balancing force" to the traditional media (Lin, Bagrow and Lazer 2011).

Social media can provide an ideal environment for political expression and dissenting opinions. Other research by Skorick et al. (2012) examines the relation between social media use and perceived constraints in a semi-authoritarian system in context of the 2011 Singapore general election. The study show that if government control the traditional media there will be more production and consumption of social media content, as well as increased visits to opposition party websites and Facebook pages. This relationship is stronger for younger citizens. The interactivity of social media and their relative freedom, citizens are motivated to use social media for political content production, consumption or for information about opposition parties. In addition, Wattal et al. (2010) examine the influence of the Internet on politics, specifically, on the 2008 US election campaigning using Internet-based technologies such as Web 2.0. The study discussed how these technologies can change the nature of competition in politics and replace or complement traditional media.

Although, all of this studies are helpful, they face some limitations. Previous studies focused on the influence of social media in election result and campaigns which is a single measure and cycle in time. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude the impact of social media in political participation and discourses. Again, those previous studies examines how a particular technology or web 2.0 can change politics. Another studies are needed to conclusively demonstrate the role of these new technologies in political communication and participation.

3   Research Method

Studies examining both social media usage and political participation generally employ a qualitative based research design and observation. In keeping with this methodology convention, the researcher will conduct semi-structure interview which helps to provide flexible and to deal deeper into interviewee responses and observations. Interviewees were selected based on their potential to meet the research objective. Interview request were sent to bloggers who have many followers and most of them were show willingness and interviewed face to face and some of them responded online for our questions. Currently, Ethiopia is facing political crisis in different directions from Amhara, Oromiya and Gambela regions. Due to this some of the interviewee were fear to share their experience and beliefs confidentially.

Most of the interviewees are students in Addis Ababa University. Study by Correa et al. (2010) show that since young citizens are highly using social media since they are grew up with these digital age. 14 Students and 2 politicians are selected and interviewed since they are young's, simplicity to meet and deal with them, peoples are always fear to discuss about political issues. Addis Ababa University is located in Addis Ababa city, capital of Ethiopia. In Ethiopian history, Addis Ababa university students have a unique place in Ethiopian politics and student's movement. Semi-structured nature interview were conducted to interviewees face to face to investigate their motivation and usage of social media for political issues and participation. Each interview were takes 10–15 min in average. Each of the interview were recorded and transcribed. Concept analysis technique is applied to transcribe interview in order to identify and arrange the ideas and views of interviewees.

4   Result

In this study a total of 16 interviewee have been approached and the socio-demographic data is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Socio-demographic data of the interviewee

Job of interviewee	No. of interviewee	Sex	
		Male	Female
Natural science stream student	7	4	3
Social science stream student	7	5	2
Politicians	2	2	0

The recent research work by Pew research center (Duggan et al. 2015) describes that, among the many social Media sites, the most widely used site is Facebook. Based on our observation in campuses and Internet cafe's, we can proved the same is true for Ethiopians also. Our analysis revealed four distinct themes that identify the role of social media specifically Facebook in politics.

4.1   Social Media Replacing Traditional Media Outlet

Social media are used for getting political related news leading to local traditional media such as FM radio's and TV channels. The interviewee with the code A3 share the following history

"I got news from local media and Facebook but most often I got political related news from Facebook. Thus, for political information and news, No need of going to websites, buy newspaper, radios and televisions, the only thing expected from me is login to my Facebook address and see posts"

when the student says "for political information and news, No need of going to websites, newspaper, radios and televisions, the only thing expected from me is login to my Facebook address and see posts" - both social media and the local traditional

medias are used by the citizens for news sources. When we comes to politics issues, traditional media and social media is separated. For political news and information citizens are preferring social media rather than the local traditional media. When we take the phrase "No need of going to websites, buy newspaper, radios and televisions" - shows social media provides news faster and less- costly than other mediums. Other interviewee also echoed the same opinion. Facebook is a preferred news medium for political and related issues.

4.2   Social Media for Political Engagement

Social media is becoming a way of political engagement in different ways for Ethiopian citizens. One of the student code B4 relayed the following history:

"I am following many political activists in my Facebook account. I did not post political articles whether good or bad about government. Politics is not medicine. Thus, am forced to stay by liking and commenting my sentiment in others post and sometimes if the posts inspiring me much, I click the 'share' button"

Other interviewee also share the same history. The student use Social media for 'follow' political activists and get their updates. They did not post their thoughts but react the other posting by 'like' and 'comment' and also promoting or sharing other posts by using the 'share' button'. In another way, interviewee explained that Social media is created convenient environment for expressing views and thoughts about political issues. This sentiment mostly expressed by social science students. The interviewee with C3 said the following:

"I myself write and post my political thoughts about different issues in regular basis. By some means I would like my voice to be heard. You do not feel insecure to write and post political issues because one can use pseudo names for instance "Enat Hagere" ".

Students are using Facebook for participating and engaged in the political situations by posting their thoughts. It is also possible to stay unknown and post in Facebook, this helped student's to get confidence to post and share their thoughts.

4.3   Social Media for Strategic Collaboration

This is another theme of social media which is citizens building connections and strategic collaborations. Social media helps peoples to get distant families, friends may be separated for long time. The student with the code C1 speaks as follow:

"I find old friends may be from home town, previous work area in order to keep our friendship and connections. So that you can share your experience and discuss on communal issues"

When the interviewee said "I find old friends may be from home town………
discuss on communal issues". Social media is a cornerstone to strengthen connection based on their commonalities or interests.

4.4   Social Media Influence Government Action

Social media have the potential to empower people to implement and exercise political reforms in response to people need. For example the student with the code 3a said:

"You can observe the current situation in Ethiopia Oromo protest, which is organized and catalyzed by social media. Following the Protest, Ethiopian government forced to withdraw the master plan"

It is known that Ethiopian government announce the rejection of master plan which was the main reason to promo protest.

5   Discussion

Social media become a common media for political news and become replacing traditional media such as newspapers, TV channels and Radios. The interviewees agreed the overriding reason of social media for political news over traditional media is a potential to provide a simple, less-cost and real-time news and information from online user generated content. The necessary question here is why these media become different from traditional media only in politics issues. State Television called EBC (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation) in its 24 h transmission talk about development in daily basis siding with the ruling government. Most of the time political critic's news and issues is not transmitted in the channels. International organizations like Amnesty international and world Human right watch accuses Ethiopian government to freedom of expression. Ethiopia is one of three countries in the world with the highest number of journalists in exile (https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/ethiopia). Before Facebook is become active in Ethiopia, peoples preferred and listen radio's which broadcast from outside the country such as VOA (Voice of America) and Amharic-German radio which is broadcasting from Germany. But in nowadays, anyone can use his/her mobile or tablet to get any news from the social media. Even those traditional media are also available in social media by having Facebook pages. Anyone can get those local traditional media news as well as political activists and Diaspora based media which is always eager and interested to transit news by protesting the current Ethiopian government. Thus, Social media in Ethiopia become a preferred media outlet which can present political news from the government supporters as well as from opponent of government. The news and information broadcasting by social media are supported by multimedia like picture, video and audio. This may help peoples to enrich with adequate information and one can take the best over it.

Social movement is not individual action rather it is a collective action of peoples who have mutual interests (MaAdan 1982). Social media have the potential to build this connection. Most of the peoples and Ethiopian government also agreed that social media facilitates the current protest by using the hash tag #OromoProtest and "Say No" slogans. We observed that, those peoples in Oromia region were moving on streets by handling and shouting slogans to slogans on the web specifically Facebook. Facebook users were changed their profile picture and post the "Say No" slogans during the protest. In Protest, social media had made power to many well educated men and women to insist political and social changes in the country and become the new-

fangled influencer. For instance, we can notice many face book posts that were directly blaming federal polices and government in general, and videos that encourage all Oromos to stand for his right. Most of the posts have words like "we Oromos" "Stand Oromo" to call their friends worldwide to break silent and speak out against social injustice and brutality. Thus, social media used to support increased mutual understanding and collaboration in political discourse in a society. Protest activities in social media is more likely to produce a positive effect. Again, within the area of protest activities, many different kinds of activities demonstrations, boycotts and petitions are shown, making. This study shows social media plays a positive role in citizen's political participation. Ethiopian government was described that the protest is catalyzed by propaganda in social media.

The connection and collaboration may be based on ethnic group or political attitude or other interests. Which can simply lead to protests or social movement. The government was said the protest in not about political and not asking justice it is just terrorists action against our country for disturbing the peace. But after the issue become world news like Aljezira, CNN AND BBC world. The government responded that the master plan case is postponed and it is just in the discussion phase for the implementation by following the reports started out from European Union (EU) and the United States government call Ethiopian government to peacefully solve the problem. Finally, as the protest in the social media gets stronger and the protest behavior is changed time to time the government finally announce that the master plan case is rejected. Social media can have the power to change government decisions.

6   Conclusion

The relationship between information technologies and politics has begun to be explored. Previous IS researches in this area has investigated the role of social media during events like voting or crises generally ignored or very limited in the role that IS play in general politics.

This research explore to what extent social media is used by citizens for political participation and engagement. Thus, the study revealed four main distinct themes that indicates how citizens are using social media for political communication and participation, such as, social media is replacing traditional media for political news, facilitates citizens political engagement, strengthening strategic collaboration, and also social media influences government decisions. This identifies the role of social media specifically Facebook in citizens political participation. The study employed qualitative approach for understating social media role in getting political news, participation as well as strengthening connection and collaboration and also influence government actions and decision making. There is still much to learn about IS impact on e-politics. This study provide a step toward a better understating of political engagement in social media. The primary purpose of this research is to lay the base for much needed study on the role of social media in political engagement, especially, for Africa continent democracy and freedom of speech is still in the infant age. The interactions through the internet contribute to the emergence of democracy in society (Wattal et al. 2010).

Future IS researchers will investigate the bigger role of Information Systems and Technologies in politics in order to make business organizations advantageous and benefit the larger society.

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