

EFFECT OF ICT ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract

This paper reflects on citizens' participation in government's decision making. Using documentary review, it ponders on the efforts being taken to ensure that the citizens effectively participate in governmental decision-making. Attention is specifically directed at exploring the position of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in fostering participatory decision-making by drawing experience from various studies on citizens' participation in government activities. In examining the efficiency of the studies on participation that have been undertaken since our nation embarked on government reforms, it observes that both the policy makers and researchers have accorded limited attention to the role of ICTs in facilitating inclusive decision-making at the grassroots. The paper shows that these actors have continued to focus on physical interactions rather than looking at other platforms for interactions such as e-participation and the extent to which ICTs are utilized or can be used to facilitate decision-making at lower levels. Against this backdrop, the paper stresses the need for government stakeholders to accord more attention to the potential of ICTs in ensuring effective citizens participation.

Keywords: ICT, E-Participation, Governmental, Decision-Making, Citizen.

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) innovations have offered a number of doors for the quick exchange of information among stakeholders. By acting as a breeding ground for diverse forms of networks that interact and affect decision-making, ICTs have profoundly challenged the traditional hierarchical method of communication within the context of public administration. ICTs have greatly changed how information is obtained for making decisions by widening the doors for bottom-up, horizontal, and vertical communication.

The advancement of information and communication technology has given public officials and decision-makers new ways to engage with the public within the framework of the governance paradigm, which among other things emphasizes inclusion and democratic decision-making. (Edwin 2017).

Despite ICTs' promise to increase public engagement and facilitate decision-making,

there are still instances where these benefits are not completely taken advantage of. In order to ensure that citizens effectively participate in governmental decision-making, it is crucial to assess the degree to which online communication is prioritized by decision-makers (Edwin 2017).

Based on the aforementioned, this essay considers the initiatives being made to use ICTs to encourage citizen participation in municipal governments. The many ICT channels that could increase public participation in governmental decision-making are highlighted. ICT provides a number of opportunities for residents to participate in local decision-making. Intranet (particularly in metropolitan areas), blogs, SMS, and social media like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc. are a few of these. Thus, mobile phone users have access to phone calls, SMS messages, and the internet. For instance, it is through access to internet that citizens have formed Whatsapp groups

where they exchange various information. These media could serve as effective tools for effective exchange of information within citizens if given due attention.

Enhancing citizens' participation through the use of ICTs is currently dominating the debates among development theorists and information system researchers (Ghosh, 2014). Integrating ICTs is thus one of the major projects among developing countries as they struggle towards installing and institutionalizing e-governance systems (Puri & Sahay, 2007). Alonso (2009) correctly observes, the ICTs era has redefined the anatomy of participation among actors as traditional hierarchical structures are being substituted by a variety of networks comprised of individual and collective actors with different degrees of institutionalization.

The role of ICTs and E-participation in governance

Enhancing citizens' participation through the use of ICTs is currently dominating the debates among development theorists and information system researchers (Ghosh, 2014). Conceptually, e-participation entails several aspects as it could, for instance, refer to the use of ICTs by a government to enhance openness and transparency by the provision of information online. The same concept could also entail the use of ICTs by citizens to participate, collaborate or/and deliberate in decision-making processes (EU Parliament, 2016). As such, e-participation involves three interactions between governments and citizens namely: e-information, e-consultation, and e-decision-making.

E-participation is potential in enhancing citizens' participation in policy-making, ensuring learning processes, collecting innovative ideas and increasing political legitimacy and trust (European Parliament, 2016). This concept is used concurrently with e-democracy, a concept entailing the use of ICTs to support democratic decision-making processes. E-participation is thus an

innovation that is meant to improve interactions between citizens and their governments at lower levels by making these interactions more practical. In underscoring the practicability of this improved interaction, the OECD (2002) identified three practical ways through which these interactions could be bolstered namely: information which is a one-way relationship in which the government disseminates information on policy-making based on its own initiative or citizens access information upon their demand and consultation, which is a two-way relationship in which the government asks for and receives citizens' feedback on policy-making; and active participation where citizens engage in decision-making and policy-making (EU Parliament, 2016).

Citizen-Government Relationship

According to Augustine (2009), the use of the internet has created a positive impact between citizens and governments. Using the information presented above as a foundation, this essay considers the initiatives being made to use ICTs to encourage public participation in local governments. The many ICT channels that could increase the involvement of individuals in governmental decision-making are given consideration. Citizens can participate in grassroots decision-making using a variety of ICT channels. One of these is the intranet (particularly in urban areas), along with blogs, text messages, and social media like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc. Users of mobile phones can thus communicate via phone calls, SMS, or the internet.

Empirical Evidence on ICT and Democratic Governance

Scholars have advanced different explanations on ICT and democratic governance. Ducombe and Heeks (2003) argued that ICT is an electronic way of information dissemination that promotes an interaction between providers and users of information through application of information processing system in the country.

Because, the input mechanism of device can assist the decision makers to arrive at a decision that can promote interpersonal relationship between the government and the people which can be regarded as e-government, e-administration and e-participation at all levels of government. The emergence of ICT for e-governance according to Nwabueze and Osioko (2007) indicates that there is a strong link between information Technologies and the length of socio-economic development in a country. Therefore, the mass media are regarded as an aid to socio-economic and political developments. Nwabueze and Osioko (2007), still believe that the emergence of information Technologies (ICT) enable the citizen to directly communicate to the government through Mobile Communication and Internet Service in order to voice out and suggest developmental project needs of the people at a local level in a state. With this expressions, it can be concluded that role of ICT cannot be ignored in our daily engagement between the government and the citizen in order to provide a better public service delivery.

Public Sphere

As a space of opinion and will formation, the public sphere is an essential condition for liberal democracies. Communication media, the public sphere and democratic life are interconnected in many ways. This becomes obvious when we consider the profound political changes that new communication infrastructure has made possible since the introduction of broadcasting (Chadwick, 2013). With regard to digitalization, this chiefly concerns the facilitating of public voices or user-generated content. While broadcasting and the printing press afforded privileged access to public speech to professionally trained journalists and the social elite, digital media has introduced many-to-many communication services, which, at least in principle, give a voice to everyone and create the foundation for “networked publics” (Varnelis, 2008). Social

networks, the blogosphere and messenger services have formed a communication infrastructure, which both enables and shapes the present type of “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2009).

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The Role of Citizens in Democratic Governance

In line with its predecessors, digital democracy implies various new notions of democratic governance. These notions include initiatives for Open Government (Noveck, 2015) or Open Democracy (Landmore, 2020) at one end of the spectrum and managerial data-based modes of governing the population at the other end. Open government and open democracy projects aim to make policy processes more responsive and transparent. By empowering citizens to directly engage with public administrations, policies can be tailored more closely to their needs. The concept of *open democracy* extends to all levels, from local

collaborations to nationwide digital town halls or international agreements such as the Open Government Partnership (Schnell, 2020). Some open government projects explicitly pursue strategies to sideline political parties and traditional hierarchies. The reimagining of government as a digital platform (O'Reilly, 2011) or "wiki" (Noveck, 2009) intends to achieve horizontal forms of civic collaboration towards the undistorted realization of the common good.

Despite all hopes for effective steps towards a digitally enabled direct democracy, concepts of mass participation have been facing organizational limits (Landemore, 2021). For this reason, open government initiatives used to primarily focus on improving "accountability through transparency" (Hansson et al., 2015) and exchange between citizens and government institutions (Coleman, 2017). In the meantime, new decision-making systems and models for active mass participation have emerged, accommodating a broader understanding of citizenship. Notwithstanding the avant-gardist status, in most of these projects citizens are no longer perceived in their role of voters or (critical) spectators of democratic governance. Instead, citizens are meant to become actively involved in consultation as well as decision-making processes (Simon et al., 2017; Deseriis, 2020a; De Blasio & Selva, 2016). Again, the city of Barcelona exemplifies the development of a well-thought-out participation strategy that has translated into a highly praised experiment of digitally empowered municipal self-government (Morozov & Bria, 2018). In contrast to these participatory initiatives, digital technologies also facilitate more technocratically-oriented notions of responsive governance. The concept of "data democracy" (Susskind, 2018), for example, imagines digital democracy as a science and management project geared towards perfecting the information base as a condition for effective policies.

Decision Making

Computer networks offer new channels for voting both in elections and in referenda or official opinion polls. A distinction should be made between electronic machine voting and electronic distance voting. The last kind of e-voting is discussed here. It offers new opportunities for people who live far from a polling station, have a lack of time or are handicapped. However, most evidence in the few instances where online e-voting is already practiced mainly among expats- shows that these opportunities do not, or only scarcely result in a higher voter turnout.

The Barack Obama campaign has shown how important eCampaigning can become for elections. With his Internet applications he gathered more than 500 million dollars of funds and organized an army of campaign volunteers as participants in his campaign. E-mail, YouTube, social networking sites and an extended own website were very frequently used. Citizens themselves can use eCampaign means too in order to put pressure on governments. This also happens outside election times. On the Internet we have thousands of European pressure groups trying to influence government decision making. However, currently the most important applications of eCampaigning for citizens are *E-voting guides* that are very popular in several European countries. They are decision-support systems offered by more or less independent public policy and research institutes helping voters to choose the best party, candidate or referendum option on the basis of a number of positions and statements (Jan & Dijk (2013).

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned, this essay considers the initiatives being made to use ICTs to encourage public participation in local governments. The potential for increased citizen involvement in governmental decision-making is highlighted by a number of ICT pathways. Involvement of citizens in local decision-making is possible thanks to a

number of ICT channels. Among these are intranet (particularly in metropolitan areas), blogs, sms, and social media like Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, etc. Thus, mobile phone users have access to the phone, text messages, and the internet for communication. Researchers as well as those who develop and implement policies have been neglected. The adoption and institutionalization of ICTs receives very little push from the former, and research on the place and function of ICTs in local decision-making receives relatively little attention from the latter. This circumstance demonstrates how governance stakeholders have failed to adopt a new perspective and see ICTs as a viable means of enhancing grassroots engagement.

Recommendations

In the light of this, numerous suggestions are offered. ICTs must be included in research on citizen involvement in governmental decision-making as a reflection of ongoing efforts to institutionalize most government, to

start. There is a vacuum in the literature when solely physical interactions are studied in research. Therefore, research uptake must go hand in hand with contextual analysis, which includes a summary of how ready government leaders are to promote the use of ICTs. Secondly, it would be necessary to look at every participation option in order to gain a complete view of the makeup and status of involvement. The assessment of the literature revealed that researchers still don't pay enough attention to e-participation. This raises the question of whether or not the use of ICTs would be beneficial. Thirdly, it's crucial to give essential factors the attention they deserve, especially those that, for decades, weren't considered normative in the public sector, like ICTs. This is particularly true given that the potential of ICTs to encourage grassroots participatory decision-making appears to have been largely overlooked in the implementation of the digital literacy reform.

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