Chapter 87

Are ICT/Web 2.0 Tools Influencing Civic Engagement in Modern Democracies? An Exploratory Analysis from India

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ABSTRACT

Web 2.0 tools, while mobilising citizens to make informed choices, may also manipulated public opinion. This hypothesis forms the central theme of this research investigation through the historiography lens. Based on concurrent research from decade, the authors take a closer look at citizen-to-citizen engagement, so as to trace the role of web 2.0 tools, in perhaps manipulating public opinion or enabling democratic governance through reversal of some existing defects in the Indian context. Specifically, they raise these questions: Has ICT enabled civic engagement manipulated public opinion in this developing democracy? Has it succeeded in reversing apparent defects in the electoral system, which is regarded pivotal in democracies? Focusing on the elections, the authors present a synopsis of the use of web 2.0 tools which were seemingly efficiently and prolifically used during the elections albeit to reach out to the large population base in this country.

INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is crucial for sustaining representative democracies. The seminal allusion in modern democratic governance highlighted the criticality of citizen participation, in today’s representative democracies, particularly in the pivotal elections process wherein “…citizens elect representatives in a free and fair electoral system, to make policies for them and to ensure sustained development direction” (Norris, 2003). In theory, the electoral process allows citizens
to have equal weight of their preferred choice of a representative in the conduct of governance.

In modern times, there is increasing advocacy for participatory democracy (Kramer, 1972), a process that highlights broader participation of constituents in governance processes. While the etymological roots of any form of democracies imply civic assignation, the advocates of participatory democracy strive to create opportunities for all citizens to make equal and meaningful contributions (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2007b).

The influential work of King (2006) asserts that electronic governance is often expressed through the use of technologies to provide new avenues for voting – a crucial process in selecting representatives through elections. Since 2001, Web 2.0 tools including social networking utilities, have progressively been deployed in e-governance, particularly during elections – to mobilise citizen participation. These tools including e-voting, weblogs, YouTube, Google and lately Twitter. As Gaynor (1996, p. 1) pointed out, “the ritualistic capability for expression increases the participatory nature of democracy in cyberspace…through the power of citizen-to-citizen (lateral) communications which benefits themselves and their communities.”

Previous body of research (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2007, 2008) explored the role of ICTs and particularly Web 2.0 tools, in the pivotal elections process, within developed economies of France, Australia and USA. The findings revealed extensive use of Web 2.0 tools as an anti-apathy approach in e-governance in these developed nations, where there is an effort to re-engage apathetic citizenry in the elections process thus enabling them to participate in their governance. Concurrently, a preliminary examination of developing democracies had revealed that they are often confronted with intricacies of equal distribution of wealth, may it be access to electronic communications, ignorance, non-acceptance of ICTs etc., resulting in furrowed citizen participation. The lack of infrastructure, accessibility combined with low literacy rates in developing nations made the effort to reach out to as many citizens using ICTs, rather debatable.

However, at the beginning of this decade, when the ICTs were gaining momentum in the e-governance processes, Unnithan (2002) explored its drivers and initiatives in India, the self-professed largest democracy in the world. The preliminary findings found that India was on a conduit towards a revolutionary change, leveraging the pervasive power of ICTs in e-governance. Subsequently, Fraunholz and Unnithan (2009) found that the accessibility using cybercafés coupled with many government services becoming electronic (Dogra, 2005) had helped India to reach out to its large population base. Ostensibly, India had pioneered e-voting to reduce the costs as well as to engage more of its large voter base in the population. In the 2004 federal elections, over 1 million electronic voting machines were used to engage approximately 672 million voters, which constituted a large literate/semi literate population (Ace, 2004) with an almost 50:50% spread between the two sections (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2006). While the semi-literate population was the outcome of government initiatives in literacy using ICTs, the literate population of voters were the ‘digerati’ generation (Bagga, 2004) mainly situated in the metropolitan cities as professionals – riding the BPO boom. The election results in 2004 indicated no doubt, an increase in informed citizenry. As Wilkinson (2005) contend, perhaps these techniques had reversed the defect in the electoral process, as the literate voters became better engaged, while the semi-literate made an effort to participate by voting in the elections. A concurrent analysis of presidential elections in 2007 (Fraunholz & Unnithan, 2009) revealed increased citizen-to-citizen engagement including Internet based debates, speculation and partisan opinion exhibited via Blogs. Nevertheless, the question remained as to whether Web 2.0 tools, while mobilising citizens to make informed choices, had also manipulated public opinion?
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