Chapter 22

From Politics to E–Politics: Updating Saul Alinsky’s Community Organising Model to Meet the Challenges and Opportunities of Politics in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

ICTs are slowly being acknowledged as effective tools for political mobilisation in the information age. Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign and the Arab Spring are typical examples of how ICTs can foster political change in the face of challenges that were considered insurmountable before the information age. The secrets behind such success stories are not readily available to local change leaders at a time when authoritarian states are devising ways of entrenching the status quo in the information age. This emphasises the need to inform activists about the relevance of updating pre-information age models in order to address the challenges of politics in the information age. It also calls for more academic analysis on how to conceptualise the role of earlier political models in the information age. This chapter presents a systematic approach for renewing traditional political models to the e-world by proposing how to update Alinsky’s (1971) community organising model used by Obama 2008 campaign. The relevance of this chapter to a book on politics in the information age is that it prepares strategists and scholars to update their tried and tested strategies to a new era as Obama did.

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INTRODUCTION

The forces of globalisation such as the diminishing of the territorial state (Herz 1957) and the concomitant virtual phenomena such as the global village or the networked Society allegedly fuelled by the overarching role of information technologies (Gabberty and Vambery 2007) define a profound departure from pre-information age approaches to political mobilisation. This new era has been dubbed as network politics (Solo and Bishop 2011). While this could be assessed from other aspects of the globalisation phenomena, we focus on the information component and particularly how it affects local level political activism. Our approach is influenced by the central role of information in networking and defining the contours of socio-political and socio-economic life under globalisation. We argue that the practice of politics in the information age will inevitably be characterised by an increasingly innovative use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as well as a broadening of the political space that affects local political dynamics. We however warn against the expectation of wholesale change by positing that while out comes may be phenomenal, at the conceptual level the models simply need updating. As a result we present a framework for updating models that are already understood by political actors as highly significant. We demonstrate this updating Alinsky’s community organising level by drawing lessons from aspect of Obama’s 2008 campaign.

The practice of politics in the information age should therefore be understood by unpacking the role of ICTs in facilitating power dynamics in an increasingly globalised world. This will be proposed here as a process of automating the information, knowledge and communication components (McNamara 2003) of pre-information age political models. Instead of analysing the impact thereof, this chapter is concerned with the formulation of models that address the challenges and opportunities emanating from the advent of new information tools and the changes in political power structures under globalisation.

In view of the foregoing, our challenge as scholars and practitioners is to establish how globalisation will transform traditional political models into the sphere of e-politics. Our concern with updating traditional political models to the information age should not imply that e-politics does not exist. While we acknowledge the existence of e-politics, we emphasise the need to migrate other political models and sub-disciplines (e.g. political mobilisation) to meet contemporary challenges. We draw lessons from commerce whose e-commerce sub-domains like e-customer relations, e-money and e-auctions emigrated from classic versions to meet the challenges of the e-world in both theory and practice. While this may be due to the quest for economic progress and profitability, we contend that the shifting power dynamics under globalisation call for similar shifts of political models to e-politics versions.

At this juncture it is essential to define a few terms used in this chapter. By e-world we refer to the electronic space characterized by the automation of their earlier versions. This should not be confused with Apple Inc.’s now defunct online platform. E-politics therefore refers to the practice of political activity over electronic media. Likewise e-money is electronic money, e-auctions refers to electronic auctions i.e. auctions conducted over the internet and e-customer relations is the electronic version of a discipline meant to manage the customer loyalty.

The challenges of analysing complex social issue against a dichotomy of upgrading to the e-world or not doing so is worsened by the existence of a several exogenous issues that come into play in investigating the multi-dimensional phenomena that surround political change. These dynamics beg several analytical questions that affect our understanding of politics in the information age. For instance it compels us to question whether