The Use of Social Networks in Achieving e-Democracy in the Arab Spring Countries

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ABSTRACT

Electronic democracy (e-democracy) is a way to engage citizens and politicians with their government through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) tools. Although the concept of e-democracy has been growing during the past years, few studies have examined how to achieve success of e-democracy via social networks. This research is answering the following question: How social networks support the local government decision making to enhance e-democracy? To answer the research question, a proposed model was introduced and a survey method was employed. Findings showed that governments could use social networks to facilitate awareness of information among citizens and support citizens in building their communities. Furthermore, social networks would help to facilitate deliberation among citizens. However, this should be supported with appropriate level of involvements from the government side in the discussion to provide support. Through this, governments could enhance their decision making.

KEYWORDS
Arab Spring, e-Democracy, Egypt, Social Media, Social Networks

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 is one of the technologies that has an impact on achieving e-democracy (Chadwick, 2008; Hull et al, 2010). The different web 2.0 technologies such as social networks, wikis, and blogs are available for citizens to interact with their governments for almost no cost (Hull et al, 2010). Accordingly, citizens are moving from using...
the traditional bureaucratic means of information sharing to the use of new web 2.0 technologies such as social networks to express their opinions. For example, citizens in the Arab spring countries, specifically in Egypt, demonstrated how the use of social networks could be used as tools of democracy and political change. Protestors used social networking sites, mobile phones and text messaging to do changes in their political systems in their country (Arthur, 2011; Shenker, 2011; Murugesan, 2007).

Social networks help people to group their opinions and improve the public policy decision making which will lead to improving the democratic process and to reshaping public services (Chadwick, 2003; Flak et al, 2005). The main problem is that some governments until now are lacking the motivation to adopt new web 2.0 technologies. Accordingly, citizens are not able to express their opinions to the governments leading to a gap between governments and their citizens.

This research is presenting a model that investigates how governments could make use of social networks to enhance e-democracy. The paper is aiming to answer the following research question: How social networks support the local government decision making to enhance e-democracy? The paper structure starts by presenting the theoretical background for understanding the literature review about e-democracy and social networks. This is followed by proposing a suggested e-democracy model. The methodology used in research is discussed in section four while the results and discussion of the research are presented in sections five and six.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

E-democracy is a mean of providing a system that empowers citizens to say their opinions regarding government issues using ICT (Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005). Several benefits could be achieved from e-democracy. It enhances participation and inclusion of citizens in the political life (Riley and Law, 2003; Thomas and Streib, 2005). Citizens can have their input into the decisions made by their government which shifts the communications methods from one way of communications to become two ways (Stahl, 2005).

There are different classifications of e-democracy (Paivarinta & Saebo, 2006). Partisan e-democracy is one of the e-democracy classifications that focuses on the implicit and embedded citizen participation and contribution in the decision-making process. Another type is the direct e-democracy which focuses on how the network-based groups takes over or replaces traditional institutions which could lead to losing their power against the network-based groups. Liberal e-democracy occurs when citizens participate in the decision-making processes with agendas that have been set by the government itself. Finally, deliberative e-democracy which considers that both citizens and government are connected in the decision-making processes. Accordingly, politicians and citizens share their ideas in a dialogue to form a shared political opinion. Deliberative e-democracy represents a perfect model for e-democracy as the co-operation between citizens and politicians represents and explains the display of power for both sides.
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