The Impact of Internet Connectedness on Voluntary Social Activity in UAE

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ABSTRACT

The Internet plays a great role in various fields in Arab societies, including social voluntary work, which represents a symbol of solidarity and cooperation among individuals in a community. In this paper, the author examines the role the Internet might play in promoting social voluntary work. It examines Internet connectedness among a sample of United Arab Emirates’ Arab residents, and how it might influence their social voluntary work. The results reveal that interpersonal utility and entertainment, news-seeking, and paying are factors that determine Internet usage goals among UAE residents. No significant difference between high- and low-level Internet connectors in terms of social civil involvement was found. Although, there was evidence found that the Emiratis are more socially involved in volunteer work than other Arab nationalities in the UAE. Education, age, income, and occupation were predictor variables of ICI and Civic Social work.

Keywords: Civic Engagement, Internet Connectedness, Internet Usage, Media Dependency, Social Civil Involvement, Social Voluntary Work

INTRODUCTION

Voluntary social work is considered one of the most important forms of civil duty as most volunteer and civic organizations, either governmental or non-governmental, provide their members with the opportunity to develop independent skills of organization, teamwork, communication, and relationship-building, which are essential to increase the quality of life in their local communities.

Various forms of civic engagement activities are considered the means for developing skills and capacity, increasing tolerance among peoples, building community, supporting collective action on common goals, and girding democratic governance through representation of interests (McBride et al., 2006).

On the other hand, Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001) argued that the Internet is a form of social-capital-building technology, because the existing social networks can exploit the information-distribution aspects of the network to become more effective at connecting communicators. In United Arab Emirates, the Internet is considered a credible source of news for most Emiratis. Mohamed (2006) indicated that Emiratis depend on the Internet to get detailed information about current events, although

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they believe that traditional media (TV and newspaper) are more credible than the Internet.

The main concern of this study is to explore the role of Internet connectedness in making Arab residents in UAE involved in voluntary social work. Accordingly, this study examines the Emirates residents’ use and connectedness of the Internet. It provides a better understanding of Internet connectedness among Emiratis and Arab residents in UAE. Thus, it helps to identify the extent to which people’s Internet connectedness promotes their offline Social voluntary work and participation in their civil society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet connectedness and social capital approach, with emphasis on social civic engagement, form the theoretical framework of this study.

INTERNET IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The Internet has captured the attention of various segments in the Arab societies over the last few years. The adoption of personal computers has led to a dramatic increase in online activities.

People in the Emirates live in a very robust communication environment where adaptation of high-tech communication devices is very rapid and available to most of the people. Furthermore, UAE has witnessed the integration of the Internet into the daily lives of the general public.

According to the Internet World State 2009, United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the Arab countries that rapidly adopted new computer-based technologies used in everyday life. The use of the Internet is widespread in all the institutions in UAE; so, it can be claimed that most of UAE residents are connected with the Internet. Emirates is allocated the fifth rank among the Middle East countries in Internet users (2.9%) after Syria (3.6%), Israel (5.3%), Saudi Arabia (7.7%), and Iran (32.2%). It is also the third ranked among Arab countries after Syria and Saudi Arabia for user growth from 2000–2010 at 414.0%

On the other hand, there are 3,777,900 Internet users as of September of 2010 in UAE, which is estimated as 75.9% of the population as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 illustrates that there is tremendous growth in internet usage among UAE residents throughout the past 10 years.

It was reported that the UAE has a well-developed and technologically advanced telecommunications infrastructure and has high mobile telephone and Internet penetration. Majority government-owned Emirates Telecommunication Corporation Ltd (Etisalat) operates, maintains and develops the national and international fixed-line network, mobile telephony, Internet access and cable TV services but its monopoly has been cancelled. The company has been increasing its presence in numerous countries. Broadband Internet connections are available by Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) and cable, with DSL line numbers growing quickly (http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/ae.htm).

SOCIAL VOLUNTARY WORK IN UAE

In UAE, there is no official census that includes the number of social volunteer and charity associations. There is, however, an indication that there have been more than 114 associations from 1981 to 2001 which are concerned with social voluntary services, welfare, and charity programs (Al-Katamy, 2002). These associations have increased in number throughout the past few years. Some of them are government-run and others are NGOs, but all of them are non-profit centers and organizations. Examples of these associations are Zayed Foundation for Charity and Humanitarian Works, Emirates Foundation for Philanthropy, Zayed Charity.