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## Exploring the Democratic Potential of Online Social Networking: The Scope and Limitations of e-Participation

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### Abstract:

The availability and promise of social networking technologies with their perceived open philosophy has increasingly inspired citizens around the world to participate in political activity on the Web. Recent examples range from opposing public policies, such as government funding cuts, to organizing revolutionary social movements, such as those in the Middle East and North Africa. Although online spaces create remarkable opportunities for various forms of political action, there are concerns over the power of existing institutions to control and even censor such interaction spaces. The objective of this article is to draw together different insights on the online engagement phenomenon, highlighting both its potential and limitations as a mechanism for fostering democratic debate and influencing policy making. We examine recent examples from Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. Finally, we summarize the implications of our work and outline directions for further research.

**Keywords:** social media, citizen engagement, institutions, online social movements, e-participation, Web 2.0, public sphere

**Editor's Note**: The article is based on a panel presentation at the International Conference on Information Systems, held in Shanghai China, December 2011.

## Exploring the Democratic Potential of Online Social Networking: The Scope and Limitations of e-Participation

### I. INTRODUCTION

The last few years have seen an explosion of interest in social participation and collaboration on the Internet enabled by the development and take-up of Web 2.0 applications such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing sites and mashups. These networking technologies provide users with Web-based platforms to interact, collaborate, and share multimedia resources in ways that mark an evolution of the Internet from an information storage and retrieval source (cf. Web 1.0) to a platform for participation and collaboration. What opportunities are enabled by the new technologies, how are they constrained, and in what ways do the new forms of engagement challenge our understanding of what it means to participate, to organize and to oppose?

Despite their relatively short history, there is already much research on the personal and leisure use of online social networking (OSN) platforms [Griffiths and Light, 2008; Hampton et al., 2011; Light and McGrath, 2010], due in no small part to the popularity of Facebook as a virtual social space. There is also a significant body of work on how individuals and organizations use these channels to connect with other professionals in their area [Li et al., 2010; Toledano, 2010] and to market products and services to customers [Foster et al., 2010; Kozinets et al., 2010]. This article is concerned with a more recent phenomenon, namely, the use of OSN platforms as mechanisms for citizen engagement, for example, in mainstream and activist politics, trades' union activities, and civic society participation as, say, 'citizen journalists' [Grant et al., 2011; Kim, 2011]. Specifically, we focus on the utilization of social media platforms to engage and mobilize political activists in a variety of national and transnational social movements and examine the scope for such grassroots engagement to influence public policy making.

The relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and politics is a multidisciplinary research area which has attracted limited attention to date within the IS field. E-politics encompasses studies ranging from political campaigning and electioneering [Wattal et al., 2010] to citizen engagement in public policy making [Macintosh, 2004]. Currently, scholarly opinion is mixed on the contribution of ICTs to politics. While some observers suggest that public authorities are marginalizing the democratic potential of ICTs [Chadwick and May, 2003], there is recent evidence that existing political participation activities are increasingly being pushed on the Web (e-participation), owing to the availability of promising technologies [Saebo et al., 2008]. This article contributes to this debate by exploring both the potential and limitations of OSN platforms to engage and mobilize political activists in a variety of social movements. Our case studies address concerns as diverse as the organization of collective action in an international trade union federation, opposition to oppressive regimes in parts of the Middle East, and support for sustainable development and the environmental education agenda in Latin America.

This article develops a panel presented at the International Conference on Informatiom Systems, held in Shanghai China in December 2011. Our research acknowledges the range of contexts in which political activity on the Web is currently taking place. To that end, we focus on the different agencies providing the supporting technologies, the range of concerns to which they are applied, and the diverse expectations of various interested parties (e.g., politicians, government agencies, activists, and members of the public).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In the next section, we present the conceptual framing for this research in terms of Habermas's [1989] three key criteria of a democratic public sphere and three counterpoints drawn from the work of Calhoun et al. [1992]. In the following two sections, we draw on our ongoing research to present five case studies analysed in terms of our conceptual framework. We illustrate the issues raised through the use of empirical examples drawn from our own ongoing work and secondary data available from government publications, academic journals and other documentary sources. Finally, we summarize the practical and theoretical implications of our research and outline directions for further study.

### II. FRAMING E-PARTICIPATION

Our examination of the scope and limitations of e-participation is focused around three key criteria of a democratic public sphere [Habermas, 1989]—openness, inclusivity and the opportunity to debate issues of common concern. For Habermas, the public sphere is an arena where individuals can meet, identify, and freely discuss matters of mutual interest, away from the influences of business and state, and through their discussion influence political action. He sees the emergence of these discursive spaces in the British coffee houses and French salons of the eighteenth century, which started as centers of art and literary criticism and developed to include economic and political controversies. Habermas [1979] presents the public sphere as an 'ideal type' of forum in which rational

discourse takes place in a cooperative process that enables the 'force of the better argument' to prevail. While few expect this ideal to be fully realizable in practice, protagonists of a Habermasian perspective see potential in ICTs to act as a leveller of public discourse—also referred to as 'communicative action' [Habermas 1984, 1987]. Such views are premised on the concept of an ideal speech situation [Habermas, 1979], in which social media are perceived as enabling democratic discourse because they foster full inclusion, equal voice for participants and non-coercive procedures of discourse.

At present, OSN are helping to mobilize support, nationally and transnationally, for a wide range of social movements reflecting common concerns; for example, protests about government austerity cuts in the UK and other parts of Europe [Coughlan, 2010; Taylor et al., 2010], and prodemocracy civil unrest in North Africa and the Middle East [Baumont, 2011; Blomfield, 2011]. The new media are enabling inclusion where existing institutional arrangements, such as established norms and power structures, or personal characteristics, like age and illness, would normally limit the opportunities for civic engagement. Although activists are increasingly aware that governments can also mobilize the potential of the new media to monitor and thwart their activities, this has tended to strengthen support for these movements.

While Habermas's criteria for a democratic public sphere are useful for conceptualizing the way that OSN enable citizen participation, critiques of his position (e.g., contributions to Calhoun's [1992] edited volume) help frame the other side of the argument, suggesting a number of limitations to such use of social media. We draw from these critiques to highlight three further themes. First, as a counterpoint to openness, we raise the theme of third-party interests, reflecting the way that OSN are developed and administered by commercial or public sector organizations. In this way, they remain bounded by existing institutions which may attempt to regulate and constrain online interactions or influence online movements according to their own interests. Second, in contrast to the criterion of inclusivity, we raise the theme of the digital divide. Issues of access and technological competency mean that large parts of the population in many countries are excluded from the discursive space opened up by social media. In fact, online participation might even amplify existing inequalities [Lindner and Riehm, 2011]. Third, as a counterpoint to providing a space for debating common concerns, we raise the theme of enacting citizen engagement. Specifically, even in situations where institutions encourage citizen participation online, limited progress has been made enacting this engagement from the grassroots in formal political structures [Panagiotopoulos and Elliman, in press]. Policy making is fundamentally different from campaigning (e.g., Anduiza et al., 2009), so the fact that citizens use OSN to organize ad hoc around single-issue movements does not necessarily translate into meaningful, sustainable participation in public decisions unless institutions adapt accordingly. Hence, it is not unreasonable to question the extent to which benefits such as openness, inclusivity and enhanced democracy are actually materialized in practice.

## III. EMERGING DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL

In this section we present two empirical examples that highlight the emerging democratic potential of OSN. The first case addresses the way that social media are being used by the affiliates of an international trade union federation, UNI Global, to organize collective action. The second case discusses the role of social networks in the Green Party candidate's performance in the 2010 Brazilian presidential elections. Each case focuses on the potential of OSN with specific reference to the outlined themes of openness, inclusivity and the opportunity to debate issues of common concern.

### International Collective Action by Trades' Unions

This case focuses on the potential of OSN to foster participation and the organizing of collective action within the labour movement. A leading effort to promote these aspects is that of UNI Global, an international trade union federation which unites over 900 unions in 140 countries and across a variety of sectors of the economy, such as finance, tourism and media. Trade unions are the official form of collective representation in the workplace, which also encompasses more ad hoc movements to foster solidarity among workers. UNI Global was founded in 2000 to address the consequences of globalization for the labour movement (e.g., Lévesque and Murray, 2010). To this end, the organization's mission is to encourage sharing of unionism practice, train union leaders in developing economies, coordinate international campaigns and engage in collective bargaining with multinational corporations. For example, UNI Global has established, or is in the process of negotiating global agreements with corporations such as Tesco, IBM, Vodafone, Santander and Walmart [UNI Global, 2011]. Furthermore, UNI Global provides solidarity to numerous more localized campaigns and industrial actions organized by its affiliate members around the world.

Motivated by the potential of online engagement, in 2007 UNI Global developed the Communicators' Forum to act as a network of practice or community of professionals who share material, knowledge, practices and concerns [Vaast, 2004]. The Forum brings together union communicators who collaborate about their experiences of online

tools and attempt to associate them with their traditional practices, capacities, emerging risks and opportunities. This community is truly international, with participating members from all continents who represent countries such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Spain, Switzerland, Tunisia and Zambia. This diversity shows the relevance of online engagement across the different sectors and socio-economic environments in which these unions exist.

Most unions are motivated to participate in the Forum not simply to improve their communications, but mainly because they are facing challenges inherent to most contemporary representative relationships, namely, a low level of engagement and difficulty in approaching and motivating new audiences. In fact, studies have indicated the existence of representation bias in unions (e.g., in terms of gender), as well as a universal decline in unionization especially among the young (e.g., Visser, 2006). Therefore, the use of OSN tools in this context focuses on enhancing participation in union democratic processes and the transparency of collective representation.

Certain emerging issues from individual contributions to the Forum exemplify the benefits that unions perceive in their practice of online engagement. Many of these organizations have addressed aspects of *inclusivity* in terms of reaching and involving marginalized audiences. For example, in 2009 the Greek Federation of Bank Employee Unions developed an initiative to improve access and IT infrastructure for small communities of bank employees in the Greek islands. Such communities are naturally isolated from many offline participation channels for geographical reasons. Activities such as videoconferencing offer them the opportunity to connect with officials more regularly and raise their voice about union processes. Unions have also striven for a more inclusive membership by sensitizing new workers to the importance and role of unionism in their workplace needs, for example, in terms of benefits, social security, wages and protection. The Dutch Union http://www.unie.nl/ is an example of using OSN for specifically targeting internship trainees so that they are more likely to join the union after they become professionals.

Further complementary efforts address *openness* and focus on the dissemination of unions' positions in society. For example, the Bankers' Union of São Paulo has developed initiatives to provide live broadcasting and coverage of events related to union life (e.g., workshops, negotiations about collective agreements) through YouTube videos and Twitter updates. Similarly, unions in Italy and other European countries have emphasized the importance of achieving integrative presence on different Web tools for disseminating the union's positions, for example, in terms of linking content on video sharing platforms with Twitter updates and discussions on Facebook groups. Another noteworthy initiative is the German strike.tv (streik.tv) website which is a hosting platform exclusively for videos related to union events, mainly strikes, industrial disputes, interviews with leaders and reports on working conditions.

Furthermore, unionists participating in the Forum have extensively addressed issues of transnational collaboration. One example to facilitate such efforts is UnionBook, a social network which: (i) hosts more than 200 communities focusing on various union organizing issues (e.g., regional networking activities, training material, collective bargaining processes) and (ii) lists active international campaigns and industrial actions. UnionBook allows unionists to be connected without their identity being exposed to employers, as might happen in more generic OSN platforms. Hence, they are enabled to *discuss issues of common concern* and coordinate action in an adequately protected environment.

Another prominent example of *openness*, as well as the ability to unite people in collectively addressing *issues of common concern* is the Your Rights at Work campaign organized by Australian unions and reported in detail by Muir [2010]. This campaign aimed at informing and mobilizing Australian workers (not exclusively those registered with unions) against new government legislation that promoted a major deregulation of industrial relations laws, which in turn directly threatened the existence and influence of unions. Your Rights at Work was successful in combining dissemination in traditional media with online organizing centered around: (i) a dedicated website; (ii) over 170,000 subscribers to e-mail news updates; (iii) 6000 online donations; and (iv) dynamic OSN presence in popular platforms such as YouTube and MySpace. Eventually, the campaign achieved significant change in the proposed legislation and is thought to have been a contributory factor to the success of the new Labour government elected in the November 2007 Australian general elections.

In addition to sharing experiences and advice on how each online tool can be tailored technically and organizationally, the Forum has also focused on the implications of new media on mobilization and collective action. In September 2007, with the support of UNI Global, the first 'virtual' trade union demonstration was organized against IBM in Italy. This pioneer event in Second Life attracted wide media coverage and was attended by about 1850 participants from thirty different countries. The demonstration eventually resulted in the resignation of the CEO of IBM Italy and a new collective agreement being established. Also, recognizing that Second Life had become a workplace for online commuters, an international partnership of unions organized the Second Life Union Island as a virtual space for unionists and activists. This initiative was active for two years from the beginning of 2008 and

hosted training sessions, discussion groups, social events and campaigns. It was abandoned due to inadequacy of resources and difficulty in sustaining an audience.

As Blodgett and Tapia [2010] explain, the Second Life strike managed to (i) lower the traditional costs of protesting and (ii) remove barriers related to geography and time. Furthermore, it proved to be an appealing form of engagement for the young amongst whom union membership and participation in traditional union activities is declining. The demonstration event, the Second Life island initiative and UnionBook illustrate that online spaces can bring together people who are truly interested in union activities, even though they do not have the immediacy and extensive membership of Facebook or Twitter. Therefore, they do act as positive evidence for the labour movement with the potential to generate interest among key target audience groups and then engage with them through new forms of action.

Certainly, international efforts to integrate online engagement in union activities do not imply a wider transformation of the established field. The adoption of new technologies by not-for-profit organizations such as trade unions generally tends to be slow, ideologically driven and constrained in terms of expertise and resources [Zhang et al., 2010]. However, the international diversity and plurality of examples presented do indicate that online tools have significant potential to enhance collective representation in the workplace. Not only do they expand unions' capacities to reach and mobilize new audiences, but they also promote openness of unions' positions and enable transnational networking and collaboration. Furthermore, in the examples presented here and in many other initiatives by unions involved in the Communicators' Forum, it is possible to observe that OSN tools have been transitioning from promising experiments to more established forms of communication and membership engagement. This is due to the fact that their use has been consolidated over several years of practice, and a relevant audience has been sustained. Interest in OSN certainly remains at the forefront of the field's agenda, with an increasing number of labour organizations developing their presence in online spaces.

## Emerging Citizenship in the 2010 Brazilian Elections

For the first time in Brazil, the 2010 presidential campaign had the formal presence of social media. The 2010 experience blazed a trail for important changes: (i) the use of digital political marketing in support of candidates; (ii) the emergence of the spontaneous voices of militants and sympathizers on social media platforms, referred to as 'the voice of many'; and (iii) the inversion of media agency by means of 'hashtag storytelling' [Antoun and Malini, 2010], in which social actors appropriate social media for making their own accounts of matters of interest, leaving behind their traditional role of 'audience'.

The campaign of the Green Party in the 2010 presidential elections is particularly important to understand the emergent relevance of social media as a means of favouring debate in the public sphere in Brazil. Against the odds, the Green Party candidate, Marina Silva, was able to obtain 19 percent of the votes—in spite of the small size of the party and its lack of resources—to oppose the leading candidate, Dilma Roussef (PT, Labour Party), who had the support of the very popular president, Lula da Silva[1]. The Green Party candidate's success—mainly in winning the centre-oriented votes—has been associated with the way her party and supporters used social media to overcome a situation in which media companies have historically had more control of the political debate.

In Brazil, candidates have a prescribed amount of time to campaign on television and radio, as defined by legislation. The distribution of time is proportional to the number of seats the parties of each coalition have in the Congress. In 2010, Dilma Roussef had the right of campaigning on these two media for 10 minutes and 38 seconds per day, while Marina Silva could use these channels for 1 minute and 23 seconds [O Globo, 2010], since she belonged to a coalition of small parties. In this scenario, the use of social media became important for spreading Marina's ideas during the campaign.

In addition, media companies in Brazil have the right to cover political campaigns and interview candidates and supporters during news programmes. Although they are expected to be fair in the distribution of time, bearing in mind the standing of each candidate, there is always the risk that they may favour their preferred choice. A candidate without strong support from large parties may find she gets little coverage in the main media channels, including news programmes, newspapers and magazines. Again, the opportunity of using social media changes the power relations, allowing even candidates from small parties to diffuse ideas, directly or through their supporters.

In the case of Brazil, social media channels help to overcome a situation of path dependency, in which parties which historically have had more votes keep getting more votes because they are able to mobilize more time and space on the traditional media—television, radio, newspapers and magazines. Social media allow the emergence of new

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[1]   Lula da Silva had between 67 percent and 78 percent voter approval at the end of his administration.

understandings more quickly. The relevance of a topic emerges from the value people attribute to it in a moment in time. In other words, a topic may become relevant independently of how many seats its proponents have in the Congress or whether it is deemed important by media companies.

Social media are much diffused in Brazil with 85 percent of Internet users connected to at least one kind of social medium, mainly Facebook, Twitter, Orkut, blogs, instant messaging, and YouTube. These sites support 45.6 million unique visitors every month from an Internet-user group of 77.8 million people who are above fifteen years old, as at September 2011 [IBOPE Nielsen Online, 2011]. Such a sociability level is related to the characteristics of Brazilian culture. Specifically, Brazilians interact in a convergent way, using their creative potential to recreate techno-aesthetical solutions (remixes) based on the use of the Web and the 2.0 platforms. With this in mind, the Green Party candidate defined her campaign strategy to make the most of particular social, political and economic conditions in the country, namely (i) cultural behaviours that favour the use of social media, (ii) a social and economic panorama in tandem with the ascending middle class, and (iii) a growing concern with the environment. Marina Silva got 20 million votes—19 percent of the total, vis-à-vis the 47 percent of Dilma Rousseff—establishing new propositions in the political agenda of the country.

Focusing on sustainable development and ethics in politics, topics which have attracted increasing attention from voters, the site www.minhamarina.org.br was created to aggregate the operations of communication and monetary donations to the Green Party. In parallel, platforms to particular audiences were set up in Orkut (Pentecostals), Facebook (women), and Twitter (opinion leaders on the Web). All digital actions had the goal of supporting an *in loco* initiative of the candidate Marina Silva, giving flesh to her virtual profile. Among these channels, Twitter can be considered the locus of the biggest discursive participation of both candidates and voters. Table 1 shows this intensity during the presidential year of 2010. Marina Silva had many followers and a substantial number of tweets, considering the small size of the Green Party. José Serra was the second favourite candidate, from the neoliberal-oriented PSDB.

| Table 1: Tweets by Presidential Candidate During 2010 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| CANDIDATE | Dilma Rousseff | Marina Silva | José Serra |
| FOLLOWERS | 472,298 | 404,080 | 628,483 |
| TWEETS | 393 | 2,109 | 4,086 |
| LINK | http://twitter.com/#!/dilmabr | http://twitter.com/#!/silva_marina | http://twitter.com/#!/joseserra |
| Source: Twitter | | | |

Hashtags had great relevance during the election period. Citizens could access content and express their opinion about a candidate and the related political proposals through following topics on Twitter and feeding Twitter with particular hashtags. In the case of Marina Silva, hashtags focused either on her as a candidate (for example, #marina43 and #euvotomarina, which used her name in the tag) or on her campaign themes, such as her project of having a sustainable economy in Brazil (for example, #ondaverde). These hashtag-storytelling movements were strong in Brazilian social media spaces during the campaign, allowing people to connect to particular topics. Although Marina Silva was the least mentioned in publicity from the media organizations, she had the biggest growth in followers on social networks during the election period, with positive spontaneous manifestations and big turnovers to each call for hashtags.

Viewing the case in terms of Habermas's ideas about a democratic public sphere [Habermas, 1989], social media have brought an opportunity for *openness* to Brazilian citizens for two main reasons. First, this openness was possible because Brazilian culture fosters the appropriation of new forms of socializing. The Internet may be accessed by any person in Brazil, and the adoption of social networks, and social media in general, has spread quickly. Second, the appropriation of social media for political goals has benefit in Brazil, owing to the fact that the country has a solid democracy and citizens may express their opinions freely on the Internet, naturally subject to the legislation which protects people from calumny and defamation.

In terms of *inclusiveness*, many Brazilians have access to the Internet and social media channels, facilitating the emergence of an electronic public sphere. As cited above, 77.8 million people above fifteen years of age access the Internet in Brazil; this is 48 percent of the population in this age range in the country. Although this is a significant penetration, diffusion rates vary across the country. For example, the Internet is more diffused in the richer states: Southern states have around 25 percent Internet penetration against 12 percent for the Northern States. In order to improve inclusivity, there is a need to increase the number of Internet users in Brazil and to achieve a more uniform adoption of the Internet between rich and poor states.

The adoption of social media in the 2010 Brazilian presidential election is an example of citizens using these channels to *debate issues of common concern*. Drawing on the freedom of debate, supported by Brazilian legislation, citizens are embracing social media to participate in public debate, using social media to influence friends and broader audiences. For the first time in Brazil, citizens have taken more control of the political debate through social media, vis-à-vis a previous situation in which media companies would have much more power in framing the discussion in the available spaces (public spheres). A network of political activism is emerging in Brazil, repeating a pattern of reconfiguring the role of the media in the process of intermediation of political voices, as observed in other countries [Castells, 2007; Antoun and Malini, 2010].

## IV. THE POWER OF INSTITUTIONS

In this section we present three further empirical examples, which focus on the limitations of OSN as a phenomenon subject to institutional forces and manipulation. The first two cases consider virtual communities in Brazil with an interest in environmental education and the use of blogs in Iran to debate the alleged fraud of a government minister. The final case discusses the use of social media in the recent Egyptian revolution and then reflects on the progress to enact grassroots engagement in the months following the revolution. Each case frames its arguments in terms of the critiques to Habermas's work suggested by the themes of third-party interests, the digital divide and enacting citizen engagement.

While social media offer remarkable opportunities for fostering citizen participation, more attention needs to be paid to the way that powerful actors influence the kinds of virtual interaction that take place. The first two cases in this section focus on the role of institutions, specifically the third parties that control access to and interaction within online spaces and thus have the power to influence the outcomes from citizen engagement in such spaces [Hercheui, 2011a][2]. In contrast to Habermas's [1989] ideal model of a democratic public sphere, Internet interactions may become instruments of surveillance and control of citizens in specific environments in which authoritarian institutions are pervasive [Castells, 2001; Dahlgren, 2001; Garnham, 1992; Sassi, 2001]. Indeed, one may argue that online behaviour tends to reproduce institutionalized social structures observed offline and that institutions have mechanisms for influencing the way that people behave through electronic channels. To illustrate this argument, two case studies are presented below, showing the relevance of the institutional environment in framing online behaviour, despite the initial appearance of having new social structures in the virtual spaces.

### Environmental Education in Brazil

The first case is a study of online communities in Brazil, undertaken in 2006 [Hercheui, 2009, 2011b]. These four communities are voluntary organizations concerned with environmental education, in which people participate for the main purposes of sharing information and influencing governmental policies. The research focused on the governance structures of these communities, because they have the declared aim of being network organizations with a horizontal and very democratic process of decision making.

The case explored how the communities make decisions which affect the collective in their attempt to build the so-called network governance structure. Findings (revealed in interviews with community members during the pilot study) showed that decision making in these communities is centralized among a few actors (called here 'leaders'). In the main, these actors were governmental officers, academics in powerful positions, and leaders in nongovernmental organizations. Thus, the more powerful social actors in the field of environmental education have also assumed the leadership in the virtual communities, centralizing decision making when the process was supposed to be more inclusive.

This centralization was possible owing to the way that discussion lists have been appropriated by community leaders. All four communities have two discussion lists: one for general information, which is shared with all members, and another solely for those members who participate in centralized decision making. Thus, members are classified into two categories: those who are allowed in the segregated lists of decision makers, called 'leaders', and the others, called 'ordinary members', who may participate only in the general discussion lists.

In these communities, relevant decisions—such as who would represent the community to outsiders and who would coordinate projects—would generally be done through the segregated discussion lists, without the participation of ordinary members. Ordinary members could discuss topics related to decision making, when the discussion is shared in the ordinary list, but even in these cases the most powerful members would have more weight in defining the outcome of the debate. In other words, those actors with more power in society—either because they belonged

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[2] More broadly, institutions are defined as resilient social structures that influence people's behaviour through their power to define the rules and norms of acceptable practice and sanction those who do not behave accordingly [DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott, 2001].

to governmental offices, or universities, or relevant NGOs—would reproduce in the online environment the social structures which permit them to keep control of decision making in the virtual communities.

In addition to their mechanisms for centralizing decision making, community leaders also have instruments for framing the debate among ordinary members. Generally, leaders would moderate discussion lists, eliminating inadequate content and retaining the right to expel members who consistently would not accept their arguments about specific topics. Ordinary members would not have a say about the rules of moderation, about who should be moderators, and about whether someone should be a member. These mechanisms have helped leaders to keep a certain degree of control about the content discussed in these virtual communities, despite the original goal of having a democratic space for discussion. Indeed, the virtual space which was expected to promote free debates has become a space of surveillance, allowing some to control the content of discussions.

## Alleged Political Fraud in Iran

The second case study was undertaken in Iran in 2008. This case involves an Iranian news website that mobilized its readers in an online public debate about the allegedly forged qualifications of an Iranian minister, leading eventually to his impeachment. In August 2008, the news website, Alef, started questioning the validity of the Honorary Doctorate of Law degree from Oxford University held by Ali Kordan, who had been appointed as Minister of the Interior. The news agency Alef (http://www.alef.ir), headed by Ahmad Tavakkoli (a member of the Parliament), not only questioned the validity of the degree but also published that the University had no record of Ali Kordan as a Ph.D. student.

Alef began the campaign by asking readers to verify the authenticity of the certificate. Alef's readers, mainly through anonymous contributions, provided evidence that confuted the degree. Although Alef did not attack the government or the Iranian institutions, the General Prosecutor of Tehran ordered the filtering of the website (12 August 2008), arguing there were multiple legal actions filed against Alef. Iranian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) complied with the filtering, but not all providers were able to implement the filtering immediately. Alef responded by continuing to publish content related to Kordan and permitting members to access the website through other proxies (mirror websites such as alef.com and alef-1.ir) thus avoiding the censorship. However, Alef finally complied with the order to stop publishing (19 August 2008) until clearance was received from the head of the Judiciary, who allowed the website to resume activities without filtering.

The campaign against Ali Kordan gained momentum until finally the Iranian parliament dismissed the minister. The dismissal of Kordan may appear to be a significant victory, since citizens were able to populate online spaces for debating the case and prove that the presented documents were forged. However, we need to examine other details of this case to understand the complexity of the social interaction and the role of institutions.

The news agency Alef used the Internet to challenge the nomination of an individual, Ali Kordan, without ever challenging the State and Iranian institutions. Indeed, Alef requires legal authorization to operate in Iran and is under permanent State monitoring, thus it was not in its interest to question Iranian institutions and lose its licence to work in the country. In addition, Alef moderated all readers' contributions to the discussion on Kordan's case. The published online messages were filtered through a particular political perspective. Specifically, many of the published contributions reiterated trust in the Iranian State while questioning Kordan as an individual, thus isolating the campaign from opposition to State institutions. Some criticisms of the government as a whole were published as well; however, they were few in number and always followed by other commentaries which would defend the State and focus the discussion solely on the wrongdoing of an individual.

Alef tried to ignore the governmental filtering of the website in the first instance (around one week), but very soon the news agency accepted the filtering, stopping its activity until the Judiciary confirmed that it could operate legally. This is not a surprise, considering that Alef's owner is a member of the Iranian Parliament: Ahmad Tavakkoli would have no interest in risking his position as a law-abiding citizen.

In the end the minister lost his position, once the fraud had been proved, but overall the whole movement took place within the Iranian legal framework, not least because Alef could not operate in the country without State approval. The discussions did not question Iranian institutions directly, although, for sure, there was an implicit level of challenging, because Ali Koran was nominated by the government, and the government was not happy to have the case discussed in public spaces. Overall, Alef was very careful to conduct the whole debate within the institutional legal framework, not allowing the discussions to cross institutional boundaries.

## The Constraints to Democratic Debate

Both of these cases show the relevance of avoiding generalizations about the potential of online social networks and other social media in fostering democratic debates. Although social media enable citizen participation and can foster open, inclusive discussions, different appropriations and outcomes emerge in accordance with particular institutional contexts. Critiques of the Habermasian model of a democratic public sphere [Calhoun, 1992] suggest the following:

We need to understand the *third party interests* behind the public space of debate. In the case of the Brazilian online communities, the leaders were responsible for creating the discussion lists, for controlling the rules by which items were referred to a specific list, and for hosting the content of the lists in particular servers. Leaders had instruments to control the discussions, especially when the content went against their interests; they exerted their influence either to frame the debate in terms that suited them or to undermine the position of those who opposed their ideas. In the case of Alef, the news company was responsible for the online content in the discussion lists and for the servers hosting the debate. The selection of citizen contributions was done by Alef, respecting the interests of the news agency and its owner, a member of the parliament. In both situations, citizens participated in the debate, but they did not control communication channels.

In terms of the *digital divide*, participation in both cases did not demand sophisticated skills, although participants needed to have access to the Internet—which is not universal in either country—and understand the use of forums and discussion lists. However, a more important obstacle may be the skills to understand the hidden online social structures and the risks of interaction mediated by the Internet. In the case of Brazilian online communities, the case revealed that many ordinary members did not understand that leaders had a parallel (segregated) discussion list. It is not clear, though, if they failed to realize this fact through lack of digital skills or through other difficulties in understanding social relations. In the Iranian case, Alef allowed anonymous contributions in order to motivate more people to participate in the debate. However, considering the institutional context in Iran and the risks of prosecution and imprisonment in cases of opposition to the Iranian institutions, citizens may have avoided entering the debate if they did not feel confident about protecting their anonymity. In this case, knowing, for instance, how to have an unidentified IP address may have played a role in the participation.

It has not been possible to observe from the cases a substantial change in the way citizens participate in public decisions in the respective contexts. In the Brazilian case, leaders have pressured the government in the name of online communities; however, these leaders have not necessarily taken into consideration the opinions and interests of the broad collective, which should include ordinary members. Without having a democratic process to decide actions in the name of the community, leaders appropriate the community as a resource to reinforce their political perspective. It is not clear whether the communities have changed the way politics are done in the particular field of environmental education. In the Iranian case, the action has focused exclusively on questioning one individual, Ali Kordan, without further change in the way Iranian institutions work. The emergence of a polemic issue such as this case may foster change in the way citizens understand their role in society. However, the case has not evolved directly to a broader questioning of Iranian institutions. Indeed, it has never been the intention of Alef to aim for an institutional change, such as motivating a more participatory citizen engagement. Thus, there is *no* evidence that *grassroots engagement has been enacted* in formal political structures.

Overall, institutional forces underpin the observed phenomena in both cases. On the surface, citizens used discussion lists and forums to empower themselves, enabling extensive participation in debating topics of common interest. However, both cases reveal that social actors appropriated the technology in ways that reproduced, to some degree, the institutionalized relations in society. In the Brazilian communities, the very same offline powerful social actors controlled the online space of interaction. In the Iranian case of Alef, the movement questioned an individual, not the State and Iranian institutions, and the content of the debate respected the limits imposed by legislation, selecting citizens' contributions which were within this institutional framework (acceptable content). In short, both spaces complied with broader institutional frameworks which were not visible at first glance.

## The Limits to Inclusivity in the Political Process

Social networking systems may be classified according to their source, as either commercial open systems or in-house developments for business/public sector organizations. This section focuses on commercial systems such as Twitter and Facebook and their use in political activism, in particular the case of the Egyptian revolution. These systems are developed, governed, and owned by *third party* organizations whose *interests* are to increase and retain their customer base in a competitive business environment, in which Facebook has achieved a valuation of over $100 billion [Blodget, 2012].

Providers of social networking sites strive for commercial success under increasing pressure from both governments and consumers. Counter to the view that the sites are open spaces for democratic debate, providers receive

frequent requests from different governments to ban groups or pictures or to delete messages. For example, Google's 2011 biannual transparency report shows that (i) U.S. government requests to Google and YouTube to take down pictures and video footage rose by 70 percent on the previous period [Halliday, 2011b]; and (ii) Brazil made the most content removal requests in the first half of 2011, followed by Germany, the U.S. and South Korea. In addition to content removal requests, governments may also block access to social networking sites for a variety of reasons. For example, in response to the riots that broke out in the UK in August 2011, the UK Prime Minister announced to Parliament that the government was looking at banning suspected rioters from using social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook [Halliday, 2011a]. Elsewhere, the Chinese government has banned most 'western' social networking sites, and Pakistan banned Facebook for several days in 2010 and took out a High Court order in 2011 to permanently block access to Facebook for allegedly hosting a competition featuring blasphemous caricatures [*The Express Tribune,* 2011].

In Egypt, the former political regime cut off the Internet from the entire country in a desperate attempt to suppress the people's revolution in 2011. This regime also forced the UK mobile phone company Vodafone to send SMS messages containing propaganda to its customers during the days of the revolution [CBS News, 2011; *Computer Weekly,* 2011]. In this case, the service provider Twitter took a business decision to continue its services and provide local telephone lines to post Tweets over the phones. This act supported the revolutionists, allowing them to continue their mobilization on the ground and post images and videos of mass killing and torturing and the inhuman treatment of the dead. These images provided live evidence that countered the propaganda of the old regime and mobilized the world to support the Egyptians in their struggle.

These examples show that service providers take business decisions that have implications for advancing one political argument over another, and that governments continue to play—to different degrees—a gate-keeping role. Counter to the view that social networking sites foster open inclusive debate, inclusivity becomes partly the business decision of service providers to include and/or exclude particular parties and partly governmental decision to allow or not allow particular posts. In light of these cases, consumers have begun to question the role and intentions of the social networking site providers. For example, in 2011, Facebook deployed a new software upgrade that dismantled existing groups unless they got a special software-key from the company. The lack of criteria for granting the software-key instigated fear among political activists that the change and the granting of access was politically motivated and aimed to filter groups [Munro, 2011].

Furthermore, OSN seems to be contributing to the formation of new types of censorship and surveillance [Mosco, 2004] and new political struggles [Lorana et al., 1993]. The political struggle in the online social networking age is digital struggle. For example, the top reformist leader and prominent presidential hopeful in Egypt, Mohamed Elbaradei, who uses online social networking to reach out to his supporters since his ban from national television and newspapers, has had his Twitter account hacked and his posts about the ruling military council picked up and deleted. In response to this incident, Mr. ElBaradei tweeted on Thursday, 22 December 2011, that 'the truth never dies'. In the posts before the hacking, Mr. ElBaradei strongly criticized Major General Abdel Moniem Kato of the military Morale Affairs department, who announced earlier that the protesters (many of whom were killed and over one thousand of whom were injured and tortured in December 2011 by police and military forces) are 'some street bullies who deserve to be thrown into Hitler's ovens'. This hacking incident shows that political struggles continue within oppressive regimes, but move away from arrests and physical torturing to digital hacking. In this context, participation relies not just on being able to use the new digital media, but also on having the skills to understand the hidden online social structures and the risks of interaction mediated by the Internet (a concept of the *digital divide* discussed in the previous section).

Online social networking sites (SNS) provide tools for mobilization [Rheingold, 2003]. This has been exhibited in the recent phenomenon of flash mobs: 'a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phones that perform a pointless act and then disperse again' (*Oxford Dictionary of Current English,* 2009). Examples, which are easily found on Flicker and other SNS, include pillow fights organized every year in European and American cities such as Madrid, London, Paris, New York and Los Angeles, and the creation of the World Pillow Fight Day on 3 April. Mobilization has also been exhibited in smart mobs and social movements and uprisings. However, there is a difference between mobilization and ongoing political debates and processes. In ongoing political debates and processes, use of the Internet and SNS emphasizes the *digital divide* in societies. People who do not have access to the Internet and cannot use computers are increasingly removed from a particular side of the debate. This is especially the case in developing countries characterized by a high rate of illiteracy and low Internet penetration. In this context, the educated 'elite' tend to debate issues and form opinions using social networking sites while the majority is an easy target for propaganda.

In the case of Egypt, illiteracy is around 40 percent of the population and Internet penetration is less than 23 percent [Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2011]. The majority of social networking users comprise

the educated youth, professionals, and thought leaders, while the majority of Egyptian society have no access to the Internet and hence less understanding of the progressive ideas and evidence that are communicated through SNS. This majority succumbed to the widespread propaganda instigated by the old regime against the revolution's youth and thought leaders. This strong propaganda centred on portraying the youth and thought leaders as thugs, looters, spies and paid protagonists who wanted to destroy the society. The revolution's youth realized that their exclusive use of social media as a way of communicating was weakening their societal and political position. They had to counter attack the strong propaganda machine of the old regime through using other communication tools. Since they are allowed very little opportunity to appear on national television, they organized small public protests in several places to show ordinary people that they are not thugs, looters, or terrorists, as their opponents claim. In short, online social networks are inclusive media only when people are alphabetically literate, digitally literate and have the means to access the Internet.

OSN provides quick and up-to-the minute participation in social debates, enabling interactions in a continuous 24/7 way. People participate on Lively SNS—such as Twitter and Facebook—from mobile devices, while on the move, or from fixed devices. This intensive and speedy debating can reach conclusions much faster than any institutional forum, limiting opportunities for non-electronic social networking users to participate, and hence jeopardizing other democratic avenues. This speedy formulation of ideas is also beyond policy makers' temporal ability to react and make decisions. Such temporal difference between policy making and electronic SNS discussions can be a source of constant frustration to users of OSN. This gap in temporality is manifested in Egypt following the 2011 revolution. For example, a very well-respected and trusted finance minister was appointed as part of the transitional government. Two days after his appointment, a thread emerged on Twitter discrediting the minister and accusing him of being very slow in making decisions on the ground. By midnight, thousands of messages had been posted, expressing discontent with a situation in which this minister was perceived to be doing nothing. After his fourth day in office, the minister had to appear on national television to explain that he needed to study matters and that issues are complicated and need to be considered in a holistic manner and not dealt with on a micro day-to-day basis. This action broke up another cynical/capricious thread about the slow-moving government and its hesitation to do anything at all! In short, *enacting grassroots engagement* in formal public policies is a lengthy process and more complicated than mobilizing around a single issue in an online discussion forum.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

OSN provide users with Web-based platforms to interact, collaborate, and share multimedia resources in ways that expand the opportunities for citizen engagement while challenging our current understanding of what it means to participate in a democratic process. Our article has examined the scope and limitations of OSN for advancing a political agenda in three diverse geographic regions—Europe, the Middle East and Latin America. Our work on e-participation may be seen as part of the wider multidisciplinary field of e-politics which encompasses studies ranging from political campaigning and electioneering [Wattal et al., 2010] to citizen engagement in public policy making [Macintosh, 2004]. Such research area has attracted limited attention to date within the IS field. Moreover, scholarly opinion is mixed about the contribution of ICTs to politics. Indeed, we framed the debate about e-participation in terms of Habermas's ideas about a democratic public sphere and some major critiques of this position emanating from the works of Calhoun [1992] and colleagues. We presented several rich case studies on both sides of this debate, providing examples from Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

Summarizing our position in terms of the future prospects for e-participation, we see some promising examples of the potential of OSN to engage citizens about issues of common concern. In particular, OSN enable the fast mobilization of people and the exchange of immediate information that helps in managing field situations, such as demonstrations, and campaigning to elect political candidates. However, the political process in society entails far more than the mobilization of people in one direction or another. Key questions need to be tackled regarding the nature of the observed phenomena and whether citizen engagement in the political process in such a speedy and pulsating manner brings about well-thought-out choices or just an avalanche of decisions that result in rapid promises which, in the end, could lead to constant societal frustration. Furthermore, institutions retain the power to monitor and control the interaction spaces. The removal of content through hacking or requests to providers, and the censorship and banning of social networking sites are limitations with the potential to reproduce existing power and control mechanisms.

In the longer term, key questions remain about whether (and how) e-participation will influence formal political structures and policy decision making. One may argue that such concerns set the stage for a further co-evolution of the technologies and the engagement process in an effort to achieve desired outcomes. Further research might explore this proposition by examining empirical examples from similar or contrasting contexts, as well as cross-country comparisons of how and to what effect social media contribute to citizen engagement in the political process in society. Work is also needed on the theoretical implications of the new media, specifically the ways in which the emerging forms of engagement challenge current understandings of participating, organizing and opposing. In this

article, we questioned the concept that e-participation occurs in a democratic public sphere [Habermas, 1989], but our findings suggest further scope for expanding this challenge beyond the three counterpoints adopted in this work. Key issues relate to the monitoring and control of the interaction spaces, the concept of time, the nature of decisions, the effects of immediacy and pulsation, the role of institutions, and the concept of 'audience', amongst others. Such work would contribute to information sharing amongst researchers across the global research community with interests in how social media can contribute to citizen engagement in public policy making.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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*Editor's Note*: The following reference list contains hyperlinks to World Wide Web pages. Readers who have the ability to access the Web directly from their word processor or are reading the article on the Web, can gain direct access to these linked references. Readers are warned, however, that:
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