

MAKING ALL
VOICES COUNT

Voice or Chatter? - Using Structuration Framework Towards a Theory of ICT mediated Citizen Engagement

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have had a significant impact on citizen engagement processes. By providing the basis for continuous dialogue and opening up greater possibilities to contribute to public discourse, digital technologies have restructured the terrain of everyday civic-political life. As systems of civic action and governance are resocialised through technology, this arena of rapid change has attracted considerable research interest.

A survey of current literature suggests that new ways to forge engagement – through non-traditional collaborations – may not often be disruptive for citizenship. Despite the openness it facilitates, technology is certainly not a panacea. And yet gaining an understanding of how ICT mediated engagement can be truly empowering for the citizen and by extension transformative for the outcomes of governance, is vital.

Statement of Problem

Citizen-engagement does not automatically lead to 'inherently democratic' outcomes such as increased accountability of government agencies or fairer reconciliation of competing claims in policy processes¹. Institutional changes and political will are needed to convert commitments to participation into something tangible² for citizen empowerment through engagement.

In countries of the global South with a relatively shorter history of democratic institutions, digital technologies present a new opportunity for innovations in 'the technology of governance'. Horizontalisation of communications³ and decentralised community networking⁴ have heralded new deliberative cultures and citizen action possibilities. Unconventional collaborations deploying online spaces blur traditional boundaries⁵, suggesting a disruptive frontier for citizen engagement. But e-participation is no magic bullet⁶, nor is 'open-

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- 1 Gaventa, J. and Barrett, G. 2012. Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement. <http://lwnvncsd.org/files/Gaventa.pdf>. Also see the discussions summarised in Green, Duncan. 2015. Some healthy skepticism about Citizen Engagement. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/internationaldevelopment/2015/03/25/duncan-green-some-healthy-scepticism-about-citizen-engagement-and-why-im-excited-about-moocs/>
 - 2 Cornwall, A. cited in Davies, A, Simon, J, (2012), The value and role of citizen engagement in social innovation, A deliverable of the project: "The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe" (TEPSIE), European Commission, 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research. <http://youngfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/value-and-role-of-citizen-engagement.pdf>
 - 3 Frissen, P.H.A. 2002. "Representative Democracy and Information Society – A postmodern perspective", Information Polity, 7(4), pp.175-183
 - 4 Cindio, F. and Marco, A.D. 2006. Deliberative Community Network: enriching e-Participation by supporting e-Deliberation.
 - 5 Ae-Chun, et al, Government 2.0: Making Connections between Citizens, Data and Government. <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1858986>
 - 6 World Bank. 2015. When and How do Digital Technologies Strengthen Citizen Voice and Collective Action. World Bank Brown Bag Lunch Series.

government' a measure of citizen empowerment⁷. According to an NDI (2013) study, “making (citizen) voices politically stronger and (such) spaces more meaningful is a harder challenge that is political and not technological in nature⁸.”

Scholarship up until now has been in the nature of descriptive studies about citizen agency, which while important cannot be extended to infer generalisable insights for governance practice. Not enough is known about the conditions that make ICT mediated citizen engagement transformative for democratic governance.⁹ Studies that do focus on agency-end impacts¹⁰ do not explain adequately how continuities/discontinuities between legacy and ICT mediated governance regimes redefine citizen engagement in its relationship with outcomes of democratic governance. Also, since ICT mediated citizen engagement may or may not further the democratic governance agenda, there is a further need to explain and tease out contextual differences.

This study attempts to address these knowledge gaps. Arguing that citizen engagement is more than just 'technique', it hypothesises that a grasp of the social practices of governance (where the citizen-agent is one actor) provides a more effective way to arrive at usable best practices and other deliverables. Using Anthony Giddens' structuration framework (1984), the study will investigate how values are renegotiated, new rules evolve to legitimize new forms of participation and power is re-distributed between government and citizens, thus tracing *how* interactions among actors continuously shape and reproduce governance institutions.

Rationale

The privileging of agency (vis-a-vis structure) in current studies of ICT-mediation means the question of '*how ICT-mediated citizen engagement facilitates greater democratization*' is not answered adequately. Agency-centric frameworks tend to construct digitally-mediated citizen engagement as a *technique/tactic* of participation. With the result, the radical shifts in governance *regimes* – including citizen engagement – enabled by ICTs, and their consequent *impacts* on democratic governance, become an analytical blind-spot.

The proposed research seeks to address this critical gap in existing knowledge about how digital technologies can be leveraged for citizen engagement towards government accountability in ways that are 'transformative'. It therefore shares the foundational assumption of *Making All Voices Count's* (MAVC) theory of change on the lack of existing evidence for shaping future directions of governance practice, donor-aid policy formulation and civil society efforts.

7 Davies, T. and Bawa, Z. 2012. The promises and perils of Open Government Data. <http://ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/929/955>

8 NDI. 2013. Citizen participation and technology. <https://www.ndi.org/files/Citizen-Participation-and-Technology-an-NDI-Study.pdf>.

9 Aichholzer, Georg and Doris Alhutter. 2011. “Online forms of political participation and their impact on democracy”. http://epub.oeaw.ac.at/ita/ita-manuscript/ita_11_02.pdf, Retrieved 24 August 2015.

10 For example, the normalization process theory and the actor-network theory proposed by Science and Technology studies are fore-runners in according agency to non-human actors. While the latter is more descriptive, the former is explanatory – revealing agentic contributions and explaining how new ways of thinking, acting and organising, become embedded as routine processes in existing knowledge and practices. Also, political development such as the Arab revolution, the Occupy movement and readings of these as political phenomena have contributed to this privileging of the agency-end of things.

Statement of Research

Building from empirical specifics of eight case studies from various countries, which will be chosen keeping in mind contextual diversity and institutional maturity, this study will use an analytical framework to address the following questions;

RQ1: How do processes of signification, legitimation and domination in ICT-mediated citizen engagement give rise to new governance regimes?

RQ2: Under what conditions can ICT mediated citizen engagement support and promote democratic governance?

In addition, the study will attempt to develop an index on Transformative Citizen Engagement to evaluate the impact of citizen engagement on democratic governance, testing its efficacy. It will attempt to *explain* changes to governance systems and develop a layered index (tentatively, Transformative Citizen Engagement Index) that will be tested to *evaluate the impact* of citizen engagement on democratic governance.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws upon structuration framework proposed by Giddens (1984). Specifically it applies structuration to the following categories:

Institutional-mediation structures: Vision, priorities, norms, external and internal pressures underpinning the design and development of ICT-mediated citizen engagement initiatives and continuities/discontinuities in rules of democratic governance.

ICT-mediation structures: New informational and communicative structures opened up by digital technologies, institutional norms for ICT access and use in governance, ICT related capabilities of governance institutions and individual citizens.

The analytical framework will map the shifts along these two categories both from the 'government-end' and 'citizen-end', distilling citizen engagement in emergent meanings, norms and powers. It will also probe tensions – between voice, which may translate as noise on ICT channels, and deliberation that can, without the corresponding right to be heard, end up as discourse dissipation.

Cognizant that 'democratic governance' is a complex notion, the research will, in addition to the above theoretical framework, use the broad principles of democratic governance proposed by UNDP¹¹ covering dimensions of voice and participation, transparency and accountability, rule of law, equity and inclusion and gender equality to create a tentative index, to be tested by the findings of this study.

Methodology

11 See UNDP (2012): Discussion Paper, Measuring Democracy and Democratic Governance in a post-2015 Development Framework, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/OGC/Post2015%20governance%20metrics%20_14%20Aug.pdf

The proposed project seeks to obtain generalisable insights around the conditions under which ICT enabled citizen engagement can be meaningful. A case study methodology has been selected as it is the most appropriate for abstracting broad theoretical insights from specific contextual experiences¹². Across eight countries in Asia, Africa, South America and Europe, one case study per country in the area of ICT-mediated citizen engagement will be investigated in depth.

Using the lens of structuration, and drawing upon existing approaches in the field of political science, development studies and e-democracy, the study will explore the specific cases. Inquiry at government-end and citizen-end of the engagement spectrum will reveal how meanings are renegotiated, new rules shape participation and power is re-distributed in emergent architectures.

Conceptual pegs in the 4 quadrants (as below) - at the intersection of the twin axes of government-end/citizen-end analysis and ICT mediation/institutional mediation structures will inform development of case-specific probes.

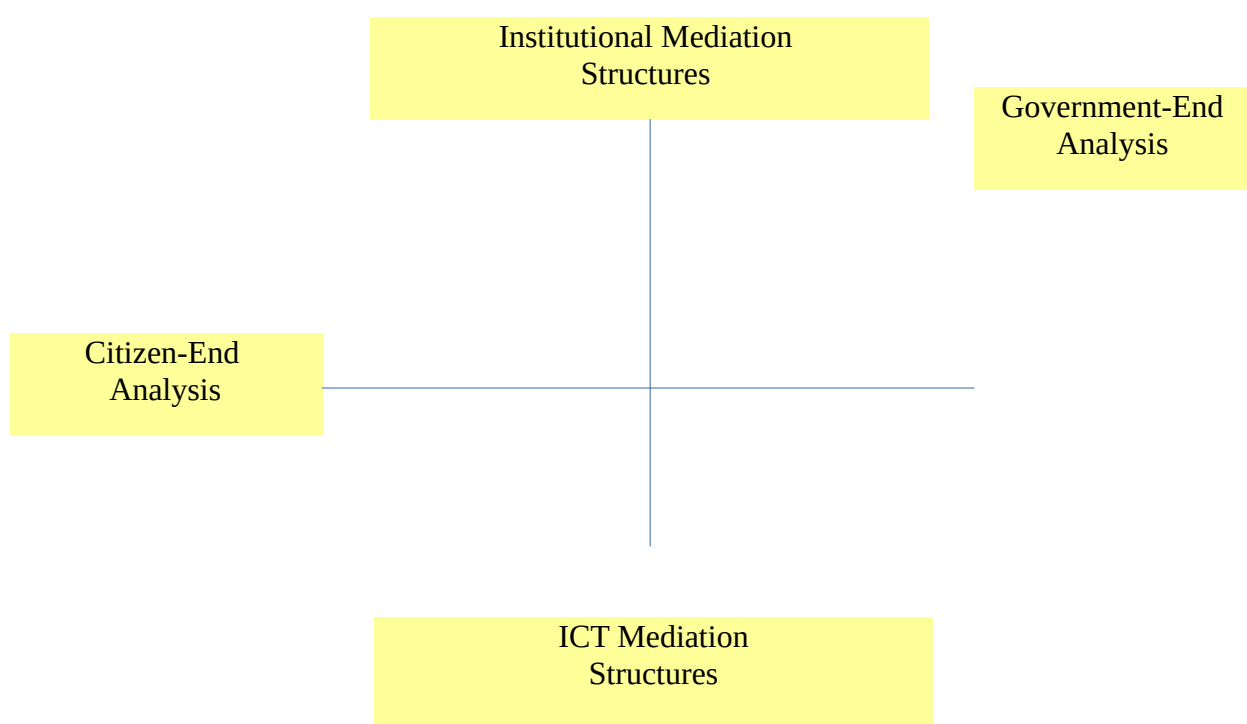


Figure 1: Analytical Framework of Study

Data Collection

Microlevel data collection. Microlevel data collection will include; 1. in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the visioning and implementation team, technical staff and key informants (of implementing agencies and citizen groups, and associated civil-society/private sector/technology actors), 2. a literature review of vision- and supporting-documents (including MoUs, data-security agreements), 3. narrative analysis of the citizen

¹² As proposed by scholars P.V.Young and Deborah Padgett.

Research supported by Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Making all Voices Count (MAVC) consortium engagement platform/space, its communications and data architecture (including algorithms) using web-analytics and qualitative methods.

Macro-context analysis. This will be undertaken through document review, literature search and key informant interviews with government/technology/private sector/civil society/actors and research-scholars to map; 1. shifts in policies on ICT mediated citizen-participation such as National ICT Plan, e-government road-map, information laws, open government policy, digital literacy policy, and 2. broader civil society changes such as emergence of new democratic movements, new citizen-led collaborations.

Implementation

IT for Change's Principal Researcher will work collaboratively with country-level research leads. Through a webinar, the Principal Researcher, country-leads from the eight sites, and research advisers will refine the analytical framework, strengthen the methodology, and develop a plan for monitoring, learning and research uptake.

Research stage 1. Case selections and contextualisation of probes by country-leads will be reviewed jointly. Following a state-of-the-art country overview that will gather key insights for the selected case-study and its macro-context, country level workshops will be convened to firm up data-collection plans.

Research stage 2. Using the data-collection methods specified above, country-leads will complete field-work for the cases. Research review processes for feedback from external reviewers and ITfC will be systematised. Country-teams will meet via monthly skype sessions with the Principal Researcher to track progress.

Collation and analysis. State-of-the-art document and case studies will go through iterations (through internal review, country-level workshops and cross-country sharing of findings) before finalisation.

Final Phase

IT for Change will synthesise the country findings from the various case studies. Insights from the cases will also be used to build and test a 'Transformative Citizen Engagement' index. Indicators for different dimensions of 'democratic governance'¹³ will be crystallised from the structuration analysis and used as evaluative measures of the impact of ICT-mediated citizen engagement. A webinar to obtain feedback on the synthesis and the index will be also held with country teams and advisers.

Engagement with Stakeholders

13 See UNDP (2012): Discussion Paper, Measuring Democracy and Democratic Governance in a post-2015 Development Framework, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/Democratic%20Governance/OGC/Post2015%20governance%20metrics%20_14%20Aug.pdf

Research supported by Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Making all Voices Count (MAVC) consortium

Perspectives of key stakeholders will be obtained early on for refinement of the analytical framework. Country-level stakeholder meetings will be held to share case-study findings, discussion on ICT-mediated citizen-engagement and validation of the project's contributions. This will include government, civil society, private sector and technology stakeholders. The index on 'Transformative Citizen Engagement' will be debated for its relevance to governance practice. Participation in the meetings will be an indicator of interest generated by the research.

Country teams will also produce short pieces for web-based publishing that will spell out how citizen engagement transforms democratic governance. These will include policy-briefs and think-pieces that will be published and shared with government and the donor-community. Interest evinced by policy makers in institutionalising key insights and potential replication will be a good indicator of the project's influence.

Implications

The contribution this research study attempts to make is the abstraction of analytical insights from specific micro-level initiatives. Offering a comprehensive analytical framework, the study will adopt interpretive approaches to explain the shifting terrain of governance in these times of flux, drawing attention to policy issues and governance practices that matter for meaningful citizen engagement. The study's attempt to synthesise the conditions under which ICT mediated citizen engagement promotes and strengthens democratic outcomes is aligned with the 4th thematic in MAVC's Call for Proposals on *examining what happens to citizen engagement and voice when it is aggregated, mediated or represented through technological innovations, questioning assumptions and exploring risks*.

By recognising the need to move from the '*descriptive*' to the '*analytical*' in mapping TAI initiatives and emphasising concrete actionables, the research seeks to offer insights to integrate a '*citizen good*' perspective in policy frameworks and technological innovations. A range of strategies will also ensure the uptake of key findings by governments, citizen groups and other critical stakeholders.

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