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Civic Engagement: Connecting Adolescents' Voice through Social Media and the Implications for Government Policy-Making

BEVAOLA KUSUMASARI, Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia

Abstract

Citizen participation, in simple terms, is understood to mean taking part in the government decision-making process. The development of social networking seems to afford a new way for the youth to engage in government decision and policy making. This study aims to determine whether social media is an effective policy-making tool and means of community political participation by examining the way teenagers use social media to participate in politics. The study involves a survey of 120 teenagers drawn from the 13-19 year-old age group in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and the observation of the teenagers' status inputs on Facebook and Twitter. The findings show that there has been a shift in the way teenagers participate in communication. It is evident that social networking has the potential of becoming a major means of teenager participation in politics owing to its practicality, flexibility and ability to enable them to express their political and social concerns in personal ways. The findings also highlight the importance of social networking as a space which the government can use to engage teenagers' voice in policy formulation. This article ends by describing the contextual issues teenagers encounter in their lives, and reviews the literature on adolescents' participation in politics.

Introduction

Social media has become an embedded part of modern childhood. Research has established that teenagers who use social media tend to have a wider circle of real-life friends, a higher sense of identity and belonging, and a better development of essential technical skills that citizens need in the digital age than others. Moreover, teenagers who use social networking sites have been shown to have a higher confidence level than traditionally held. By using social media, teenagers tend to find computer-mediated communication more comfortable than making face to face encounters. They also experience benefits associated with practicing social skills in a less threatening environment.

This study examines the patterns of teenagers' political participation through social media. Considering that during the adolescent period teenagers are in constant search of identity, as well as endeavoring to find out who they are, understanding the way teenagers articulate their opinions on political issues is vitally important. In addition, research which explores the idea of the digital footprint of teenagers has far-reaching policy implications for government. The survey, which is the main subject of this article, assessed teenagers' interest in political issues in a very general way. Consideration of the outcomes leads easily into a discussion of the use of social media as an aid to participation in policy-making, as well as into discourse about government morality and issues like corruption and the conduct of elections.
Teenagers: Who are they?

Adolescence is a term that comes from the Latin word, ‘to grow up’. Adolescence, which is closely associated with teenage years, is a transitional stage of physical and psychological human development generally occurring during the period from puberty to legal adulthood. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines teenagers or adolescents as young people between the ages of 10 and 19 years. Other scholars, such as Chavda et al. (2005), have identified teenagers as young people of the ages of 11 to 16 years although Wee (1999) divided the teen years into three stages: early teens (13 to 14 years), middle teens (15 to 17 years) and late teens (18 to 19 years).

By categorizing teenagers according to their age group, Piaget (1970) was able to see that teenagers progressed to more adult-like thought patterns and were capable of complex thought about concrete and hypothetical objects and situations. Roedder (1981) noted that teenagers under the age of 19 years can be grouped into the reflective category, which means that they have the ability to make their own decisions in anadaptive manner, and can employ rational and sophisticated influence strategies in the right situations when giving answers to objections from adult.

Thomas Tan Tsz Wee (1999) gives several common characteristics of teenagers. Firstly, teenagers are adjusting to a physically maturing body including awareness of sexual feelings and physical courage. Secondly, adolescents have ambivalent feelings toward the dependency and security of childhood and the independence of adulthood. Thirdly, there is a growing importance of peer groups as far as their opinions and values in regard to winning acceptance are concerned. As a social group, teenagers have similarities in taste, language and attitude (Ong 1996; Wee 1999).

Social Media and Teenagers

Today’s teenagers are the first generation to know more about technology than their adult counterparts. Connecting and communicating through social media cites hardly any fear for this age group; it has, in fact, given teenagers global reach as they connect with persons from various parts of the world. What initially took center stage in the 1990s with the development of online newsgroups, forums and chatrooms, has subsequently evolved to include discussion boards and social networking websites (O’Reilly et al 2012). These online spaces are a conduit for social activity and represent electronic versions of “town forums,” defined, not by a common geography or physical location, but by a commonality of interest and involvement in products, services, issues or lifestyles (Kozinets 2002).

Teenagers have grown up using the internet, email, mobile phones and computer games (Clarke 2003). Technology has made them very well-informed. Through the internet and social media, teenagers are plugged into cyber relationships with other teenagers in space that is characterized by easy access to knowledge and information. Consequently, teenagers have a broader worldview and deeper understanding of global issues than is traditionally perceived. Teenagers actively strive to connect with each other across the world and their global communication can change the course of events.
The expansion of social media nowadays is having a significant influence on teenager behavior, and this has led to teenagers being categorized as a media-savvy generation (Gray 2009). This age group puts so much emphasis on social media because, at this stage of their lives, they are very conscious of how others think about them or assess them, as they constantly search for acceptance and identity. They also have an increased concern for others, their independence and their self-reliance. Teenagers’ sense of who they are, and their search for identity are therefore key aspects of their lives. The need for autonomy, identity and a sense of belonging can obviously be found in the status inputs of these young people on their Facebook or Twitter sites.

The teenagers’ quest for identity underlies a claim for individuality which is, in fact, highly conformist in terms of their adaptation to social media. This age group is at a time in their personal development when they are asking: “Who am I?” or “Who do I want to become?” By having and getting involved in social networking such as Facebook and Twitter, teenagers have the opportunity to develop their self-identity. Social networking helps them find out what they are passionate about, and it gives them access to people all over the world who can share ideas with them. By this means they can gradually build their online reputation. Moreover, they can sign up to campaigns or join groups and make their voices heard.

Methodology

The data presented here were collected from a survey of teenagers at three different school levels. The purpose of the survey was to gain deeper insight into the mindset of today’s teenagers with respect to issues of serious concern such as values, social media habits and political participation. The question set covered issues such as social networking usage (length of usage, frequency, purpose) and attitudes towards social networking (usefulness, reliability and limitations). The participants were students enrolled in junior high school (grade 9), senior high school (grades 10, 11, 12) and first year university in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In Yogyakarta, teenagers constitute 20 percent of the estimated 388,088 population living in the approximately 88,464 urban households.

A questionnaire, which was based on Wee’s categories, was administered to 120 teenagers under the age of 19 years between November and December 2011. Teenagers such as those surveyed form an important segment in the population, and they have a great drive to use social media as a way to communicate with others and express their thoughts, perspectives and even sentiments.

Prior to distributing the questionnaire, the researchers requested permission from respondents to add them to their Facebook and follow them in Twitter. By becoming their online friends, the researchers were given access to information that allowed them to observe the status of the respondents, thereby enabling them to gather the data for this project. The observation exercise took 30 days.
Social Networking Usage

The internet is central to these teenagers' search for information on many subjects. However, less obvious is the fact that this new virtual sphere has also become an alternative to the more traditional meeting places for teenagers such as the school yard (Peattie 2002). For many, social media is the primary way of communicating and it often renders face-to-face interaction unnecessary (Forrester Research 1999).

Media, including music, television, the internet and social networking through such websites as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are important in the teenagers’ lives. The survey results showed that 74.2 percent of teenagers surveyed had at least a Facebook and Twitter account. However, only a few were actively involved in other social networking sites such as LinkedIn. The results indicated that the frequency with which they access social networking sites varies among teenagers. It was found that more than 50 percent of teenagers accessed social networking sites every day, less than 34.2 percent accessed them between 1-3 times a week, while less than 12 percent visited these sites less than once a week (Table 1). The teenagers in their first year at the university had the highest frequency of Facebook and Twitter usage, which was daily.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every day</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 times a Week</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a Week</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, although 70 percent of the teenager respondents accessed social networking sites after school hours, 30 percent acknowledged that they were connected to their peers through Facebook and Twitter even during schoolhours. Teenagers in the 16-20 year-old age group constituted the largest percentage in this latter category. It was also evident that teenagers spent an estimated 3-4 hours per day engaged in social networking while at the same time attending to another form of social media. For instance, while chatting on Facebook or Twitter, they may also have been sending instant messages on mobile phones.

The survey also asked teenagers about their purposes for accessing social networking sites. The results showed that more than 50 percent of the teenagers accessed the sites daily in order to update their status (48.3 percent), obtain information relating to sociopolitical issues (21.7 percent), make comments on other people's status inputs (19.2 percent), and upload photos (10.8 percent).
Attitudes towards Social Networking

The rapid development of social networking has played a crucial role in the teenagers' learning processes and has influenced their political participation. As teenagers are characterized by change, the ultimate effects of the social network engagement will depend on the extent to which positive possibilities can be harnessed and negative influences minimized. According to Clarke (2003), the change can be seen in their expressed aspirations, the language they speak and/or what they consume. Teenagers grow from the stage of being cooperative and entertaining, to one of searching for an identity and finding out who they are. To this end, their form of communication also changes. Teenagers actively seek new ways to express their aspirations, for example, by showing a sense of apathy towards politics and politicians, taking a stance on what is going on in international issues such as the wars in Iraq and Palestine, to expressing mutual love and respect for someone, or even conflict or disagreement (McMahon 1996).

The survey found that social networking sites have become the media for teenagers to share their problems. The problems shared relate to personal matters, lifestyle, education, business, work and other similar issues (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Boys [%]</th>
<th>Girls [%]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Issues</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-Related</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings indicated that many teenage girls cited problems relating to personal matters and education, particularly with regard to their school tasks and expressions of personal feelings (love and hate) about their parents or friends. By comparison, teenage boys frequently discussed issues relating to lifestyle and actual world issues. They shared about national football and sports players, national leadership, religion, corruption, political parties, television and movies; they even shared sarcastic humor. Based on most of the posted inputs, teenagers reflect on, for instance, the content of the television news concerning corruption, national leadership and bickering within the Indonesian national
football association. This latter situation was an adverse influence on the teenagers as it portrayed violence, unfairness and a lack of positive role models. In contrast, their status on Facebook or Twitter also served as a venue for valuable information on education and such key issues as health, including mental health, violence prevention, religious and political activities, organization activity at the school or university level, and international current affairs. In short, the conclusion that can be drawn portray that the problems teenagers post on their social media reflect a form of serious interaction with their peers.

The research results clearly showed that the teenagers were enthusiastic in using social media sites to discuss political issues. Of the participating teenagers, 54.2 percent argued about political matters at the school/university level, 36.7 percent examined politics at the national level, and 9.1 percent discussed politics at the local level. In order to better understand the teenagers' political participation through Facebook or Twitter, the survey categorized the political issues that were most frequently shared. The categories varied from issues relating to elections, political appointments and political behavior, to politics at school or university (Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political-Related Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Election</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political appointment</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political behavior</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics in school or university</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey also exposed the reasons behind the teenagers' posts on their Facebook or Twitter social networking sites. Posts that related to political issues were in response to news broadcasts on television and in newspapers: many expected friends to comment, while others attempted to trigger discussion with friends. There were some other reasons as well (Table 4). Notably, respondents in the research were motivated by positive responses they frequently received from their friends whenever they posted comments about political issues. In addition, writing using the online networking sites instilled a sense of independency in the teenagers, and courage in expressing their concerns.

**Teenagers’ Voice and Political Engagement**

The traditional measures of political participation such as engaging in voting, campaigning and donating money are seen as the cornerstone of democracy (Dahl 1989; Putnam 2000). However, many studies have demonstrated that this type of political participation seems
Table 4. Intentions Behind Teenager Respondents’ Social Networking Posts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responding to the news</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expecting comments</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triggering discussion</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

to be declining particularly among young people (Harris et al 2010; Zukin et al 2006). Today, for them, political participation is conducted in various ways, and in ways that young citizens find more practical, flexible, and personal in addressing social issues. To this end, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide evidence that supports the notion that teenagers use social networking sites to express their political and social concerns (Schlozman et al 2010).

The results of this study corroborate the findings of previous research on the subject of teenagers, social networking site use, and political participation. Teenagers in this study were highly likely to post political content on their social networking sites. Hence, they showed a tendency to use this media for traditional political activities. This finding is easy to explain: Facebook and Twitter serve as an important public space for teenagers to express their ideas about political issues with fun, simply and without fear. This new pattern also highlights the increasingly important influence of teenagers in political engagement. Various types of political talk and activities on social networking sites are a manifestation of the political participation of teenagers who may feel unwelcome in traditional political space (Schlozman et al 2010). The findings of this research also lend support to the argument by Seongyi & Woo-Young (2011) that the lifestyle of teenagers today tends to encourage them to learn more about social issues, and to nurture cognitive abilities through the new media, more than the adult generation does.

Participation is an important prerequisite for effective democracy. It is participatory democracy that accords citizens equal and sufficient opportunities to influence each stage of the political process, from issue formation through policy implementation (Dahl 1989). The eagerness shown by the teenagers through the intensity with which they post or write comments on any political issues can be considered as manifestation of the existence of political talk among them. In line with this, Barber (1984) and Dahl (1989) identified political talk as central to the process of influence as it spurred teenagers to engage in political activities. Posting, commenting and mentioning political content on Facebook and Twitter for sharing with peers, helps teenagers develop their own opinions, understand alternative perspectives and become more receptive to political differences (Mutz 2002). Without such dialogue and participation, teenager voices would be ignored or misunderstood, and decisions of political leaders would be highly unlikely to reflect the will of teenagers.
Teenagers and Everyday Political Participation

Many studies on democracy have found that traditional political participation among young people is in decline. Compared to other age groups, young people are less likely to show interest in political participation. Teenagers tend to be less satisfied with the government than older citizens and show little trust in other individuals (Bennett 2008). The trend of political engagement among teenagers is characterized by the decision to choose to participate in ways that are less obvious, less recognized and less frequently measured. Scholars have recognized that there are conditions in which young people need alternative forms of political participation (Bang 2005; Bang & Sorensen 1999). The emergence of social networking provides an alternative form of participation: it is one which is part of the daily life of a teenager and so can be seen as a way to fill this gap.

The research results underscore the fact that teenagers in Yogyakarta are well aware of the existence of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and use them effectively as media of political participation. The contents of the discussions on the sites examined showed the concerns of teenagers and their knowledge about current local, national and international issues. This reality seems adequate to qualify as strong participation in democracy as portrayed and described by Barber (1984), who emphasizes that political participation is a way to make any group of citizens feel obligated to participate, to hold independent beliefs and opinions, and to engage in political activity in order to address their own concerns and needs. To this end, the activity of writing and posting status inputs about current issues on Facebook and Twitter may serve as a form of self-expression and engagement for teenagers, and also as means of addressing social needs through political action. Bennett (2008) describes this type of teenagers as actualizing citizens or citizens who want to be involved in immediate ways. Their preference for engagement may lead the individuals to participate in an expanded range of political activities.

The teenagers in this study were aware of the fact that their everyday activity on Facebook and Twitter had political significance. This is why the sites are used as a vital media and space for expressing interests in a wide variety of political topics and activities. Furthermore, in this research teenagers' perceptions were used to capture their definition of politics. The research findings indicate that teenagers understand politics as being any government activity, whether it be corruption, incidents of conflict affecting political parties or the national football association, elections, or even matters relating to the issue of Palestine. The political participation of teenagers can be observed from their discussions of the issues that are mentioned in their status updates. Milbrath (1965) describes this kind of political participation as spectator activity. This level of activity is a very basic form of political participation as it requires the least involvement and is only through such activities as discussions but does not involve, for example, attending a political rally or donating money.

Communicating about politics should be understood as a form of political action (Carpini et al 2004) and political action should be understood as a form of expression and communication because it is often publicly visible (Hayes et al 2006). Data used in this research support these ideas: teenagers' motives for posting about any political issues in their status inputs seemed as much related to self-expression as to getting involved in
the traditional type of political action. Teenagers acknowledged the importance of Facebook and Twitter as great forums where friends can get involved and collectively voice their opinions about current political issues. It is also worth noting that some teenagers also used Facebook and Twitter to disseminate their vision and mission for the purpose of school election exercises. The observations on the teenagers’ status inputs provided strong evidence that such actions were beneficial in mobilizing potential votes from their friends. In particular, the language used and the function of the posts generated strong responses in terms of acceptability and political participation among teenagers. Since Facebook and Twitter friends typically know each other from other contexts, it seems reasonable to suggest that political interaction in these sites bears a greater resemblance to the conversations that take place between friends or family members than those between anonymous individuals (Ellison et al. 2007). Such casual conversations are in fact an important part of political participation (Kim et al. 1999).

Change and Self-Identity

Experts on teenagers observed that during teenage years most of them are calm, predictable and purposeful most of the time. At this age, they are also characterized by change and their search for self-identity. Social networking sites, through the processes of creating profiles and communicating with others, offer the teenagers one way to manage their identity, change and choices (Boyd 2010). The survey data and exhaustive observation of the 120 teenagers that was part of this research support the notion that political expression on Facebook and Twitter constitutes part of the teenagers’ identity management. Some teenagers acknowledged that the way they reacted and responded to political contents, and participated in political discussions on Facebook and Twitter had implications on their relationships with their peers. Moreover, such activities ensured that they were up-to-date with current political issues at the local, national and international levels. In light of this, activities on social networking sites quite evidently have a significant influence on whether or not a teenager’s identity is accepted and acknowledged by their friends.

Social networking has an immense capacity to spread information on current political issues among teenagers. This is not surprising. Boyd (2007:119) for example, notes that social networking has the power to reach unintended audiences. To quote Boyd: “Everything you say is going to be heard by a lot of people. In fact, it’s going to be heard by more people than if you stood out on campus on the stump and said something on the bullhorn. You’re not going to reach as many people as you would if you posted on Facebook.”. This study found that the teenagers’ political activities on the two social networking sites had social meaning and importance for their experiences in other contexts: political participation on Facebook and Twitter was not an isolated experience. Political talks and conversations can affect other political conversations elsewhere, so teenagers were learning and practicing important rules of political conversation and engagement through their participation on Facebook and Twitter. Interestingly, the findings of the research show that actively writing posts on Facebook and Twitter about any political issue has positive implications on the capability of teenagers to make an effective articulation of political opinion and argument. The acquisition of such skills offers advantages for teenagers’ development in interpreting change and understanding their self-identity.
Empowering Teenagers' Participation in Policy-Making

Within the broad definition of government there is an evident relationship between communication and action on social networking, and it has a positive influence on the participation of teenagers in politics. However, further questions arise on how to design, measure, and describe teenagers' participation in politics and relate it to government policy making. It is worth acknowledging that traditional definitions of political action are not entirely useful for understanding politics as it occurs on Facebook. The observation of teenagers' Facebook and Twitter status inputs in this research encountered difficulty identifying the number of users who were actively involved in traditional political activity such as attending political party meetings, signing petitions or donating money. Simply measuring the number of teenagers who are involved in the social networking activities does not reveal much about the meaning behind their status inputs. Teenagers consider social networking sites simply as a means of expression and interaction.

Although political posts and activities on social networking sites are not necessarily comparable to traditional political activities but can be considered a form of teenagers' political expression, the government could use their ideas, opinions and expressions as input to the policy-making process. Unfortunately, the limitations of this study make it difficult to determine how the government could accommodate feedback from young people in the formulation of policy. Policy formulation and implementation for young citizens are, by and large, discussed from an adult point of view. The government spends little effort in managing and accommodating the voices of teenagers expressed through social networking. This is the case, despite the fact that social interaction through Facebook and Twitter is a vital part of the political landscape and can serve as the media to obtain feedback from a significant group of citizens. In fact, the government could use status inputs to learn lessons; this could be done by capturing personal concerns about some issues which it then incorporates into the process of making the right decisions, especially decisions that benefit teenagers.

This research found that issues such as corruption, conflict, elections, and the deviant behavior of leaders can be interpreted both as teenage acceptance and rejection of the current conditions in the country. To this end, the government could possibly arrange and create a dialogue for the purpose of educating teenagers, and also provide space for their voices to be heard. The observation of teenagers' Facebook and Twitter accounts undertaken for this study underscores the lack of discussion on political and policy issues conducted by this means. There is evidence of need for a comprehensive dialogue. Such a dialogue is needed in order to equip teenagers with the capability of defining and differentiating between "good" and "bad" political attitudes. This dialogue is one of the ways the government could use social networking to collect citizens' contributions. In other words, the dialogue becomes an important process through which individual citizens can have an impact on the collective decisions in the policy process (Dahl 1989).

Current Changes and Trends in Citizen Participation

Communication plays the role of connecting citizens and government, a role which is essential in maintaining government functions. The development of information and
communication technology (ICT) has changed policy framework as well as created a digital government. By opening opportunities through more information, ICT reinforces the government-citizen relationship and raises the levels of citizen participation. To this end, the government can take advantage of the rapid growth of social media today to create and exchange information in innovative ways, and to increase citizens' accessibility to government policies. Social media can accelerate the dissemination of information related to policy-making. Macintosh (2004) developed three levels of citizen participation using technology. Firstly, there is e-enabling: this focuses on enabling citizens to have access and understanding of government information. Secondly, there is e-engaging, which relates to top-down consultation using technology so citizens can make a deeper contribution and have a higher level of deliberative debate on policy issues. Lastly, there is e-empowering, which supports active participation with a bottom-up perspective, and is a means of influencing policy agenda. Research results of this study suggest that teenage citizens in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, are at the first level of participation; they are using technology that is e-enabling. This implies that citizens are using information and communication technology to express their voice but have yet to influence the policy-making process. The findings also highlight the importance of the growth of citizens’ awareness and the demand for participation in policy-making. Social media websites enable citizens to take part in the debate and express their opinion. At the same time, social media is a new common: it is a virtual space for citizen communication.

The development of social media as a mode for citizens to express their voice has generated opportunities for a more egalitarian public discourse. David et al (2002) draw attention to the internet and the availability of social media afford ordinary citizens the ability to short-circuit political elites and deal directly with one another as well as with public officials. Hence, political participation is very much evident. This research, which involved the observation of teenagers' status on their Facebook and Twitter accounts, revealed certain patterns of behavior of the young generation pertaining to current issues. In addition, the study identified the activities of young people who were articulating their concerns for government, and trying to influence policy indirectly. The government can use such phenomenon to initiate a regime of equal voice for each citizen in the policymaking process, to determine the preferences, concerns and needs of all citizens and thus implement one of the basic principles of democracy (Scholzman et al 2011).

Voice and Government Policy-Making

It is widely argued that increased community participation in government policy-making generates many important benefits. Findings of this study indicate that teenagers, who are also citizens, have used social media as a medium to show their keen interest in contributing to the government policy process by collaborating with their friends, and in some ways, reaching a consensus to bring about positive social and environmental change. The language teenagers use to express their opinions in their status inputs underscores the fact that they are well informed about current social issues in the country. Policy-making is usually the responsibility of representatives of citizens in some organizations. However, the shift in the traditional policy-making process as shaped by the development of the internet and technology should be anticipated. Social media websites are used by citizens,
particularly teenagers, to articulate their opinions. Accommodating teenagers’ participation will ensure that policies that are formulated are more realistically grounded in citizens’ preferences, and the public will become more sympathetic evaluators of key decisions that government administrators make. In any case, increased public support might create a less contentious public policy regime and one easier to govern and regulate (Irvin & Stansbury 2004). The advantage in understanding the citizens’ voice is the belief that citizen involvement in democracy will produce more public-preferred policy-making on the part of administrators, and a better appreciation of the larger community among the public (Box 1998). Furthermore, King & Stivers (1998) note that improved citizens’ voice can increase public trust toward the government policy-making process. Therefore, the debate swirling around citizens and voice is no longer one of representative of government versus citizen participation, but what type of citizen participation process is best (Konisky & Beierle 2001).

The argument for enhancing citizen voice through a new medium such as social media focuses on the benefits of the process itself and can be indicated as a transformative tool for social change. In addition, teenagers and other age groups can be expected to produce better decisions and thus more efficiency benefits to the rest of society by sharing their contribution about daily social matters through social media. Irvin & Stansbury (2004) present the advantages of citizens’ participation in government policy-making in Table 5.

### Table 5. Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Policy-Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy-Making Process</th>
<th>Advantages to Citizen</th>
<th>Advantages to Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Education (learn from and inform government representatives)</td>
<td>• Education (learn from and inform citizen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Persuade and enlighten government</td>
<td>• Persuade citizen, build trust and allay anxiety or hostility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain skills for activist citizenship</td>
<td>• Build strategic alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain legitimacy of decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>• Break gridlock; achieve outcomes</td>
<td>• Break gridlock; achieve outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gain some control over policy process</td>
<td>• Avoid litigation costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Better policy and implementation decisions</td>
<td>• Better policy and implementation decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In terms of decentralization, connecting the community’s voice and public service delivery will result in better use of resources if policy-making and policy implementation reflect the needs and priorities of those most affected. This belief is based on an important assumption that citizens’ voice has an influence on the decisions the government makes concerning resource use and service delivery. In any case, it is well established that
representative democracy is a vital instrument for establishing citizens' needs and preferences. However, many studies have shown that policy-making usually occurs behind closed doors with citizens playing a minimal role (Devas & Grant 2003). In other words, participation and accountability mechanisms are often dominated by local elites, hence exclude the citizens' voice of any age group. The traditional model of local government, in which representatives are the only force that makes policy on behalf of the citizens, is still the one that prevails in many countries. Moreover, mechanisms representatives use are often found to marginalize women, minorities, and vulnerable groups such as teenagers. Thus, notwithstanding the reality that local governments have provided space for consultation and participation in a systematic and inclusive manner, there is still the need to consider social media as a source of information. There is also a need for bureaucrats and administrators who have the requisite ability to use technology to gather public voice. Moreover, they should base their decisions on sufficient knowledge of the range of views of the citizens. In addition, policy decisions affecting teenagers should incorporate their views and priorities. Establishing such teenage-friendly policy will go a long way to enhancing accountability; and strengthening citizens’ voice through enhanced accountability will help improve and increase the responsiveness of government to citizens.

Conclusion

Participation is the main means by which citizens can express their needs. In the transition age, teenagers require new, simpler, flexible, and personal media as an alternative to the traditional means of political action. Consequently, Facebook and Twitter have become an essential space for political engagement for teenagers to express their ideas and concerns about political issues. Moreover, social networking sites provide space for young people to talk about politics. Political talk at this stage of their development helps teenagers to understand change and self-identity better. Study results presented here show that current issues in the country have become interesting topics of discussion on Facebook and Twitter. As a conclusion, an argument can be made that social networking sites play a significant role in increasing the engagement of teenagers in local, national and international political issues and discourse. To this end, the government should not ignore teenagers’ political engagement, but should instead use it as an input in the policy-making process.

Rapid development of communication and technology means that citizens today have the opportunity to choose from a wide variety of options in exercising their political voice. Lessons learnt from this study underscore the need for the government to adopt various mechanisms in the governing process which should include various initiatives that have the capacity to accommodate the diversity of the citizens’ voice. Instituting changes in citizen participation in the policy-making process, will help increase citizens’ understanding and trust of the government. However, to achieve public support through satisfying citizens’ expectations, the government should at the same time endeavor to increase transparency and accountability. In short, information and technology development, increased citizens’ awareness and demand for participation, together serve as requisite conditions for bureaucracy to change the context and mechanisms used in the policy-making process. The expectation is that changing the mechanisms of understanding citizens’ voice will help in creating more accountable government-citizenship arrangements.
References


Biosketch

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