Social Media and e-Democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu

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Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the extent social media is enabling e-democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The study conducts an interpretative case study approach interviewing active social media users, political actors, civil servants, civilians, civil society actors and tertiary students. The study also conducts a content analysis of popular "political social media" Facebook pages in these three countries. The findings of the study suggest that social media is playing a role in facilitating citizen engagement with governments, making governments accountable and providing a means for citizens to be informed, to discuss and share views on political matters. However, social media usage is evolving quite differently in these three countries and factors such as high levels of militarism (Fiji), high levels of corruption (Solomon Islands) and also rapid ICT development (Vanuatu) have contributed towards shaping the potential of social media as a democratic enabler and political tool in these countries.

Keywboards: *Social Media, e-Democracy, Melanesia, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu*

Introduction

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Wikis have become important political tools for citizens in countries with limitations and restrictions on media and freedom of speech (Khondker 2011). In the Pacific, the citizens of Melanesia employ social media sites to voice their opinions, criticize policies, engage with their governments and even expose corrupt practices (Cave 2012; Logan 2012). Countries in Melanesia such as Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are the richest in terms of natural resources in the South Pacific but have been characterized as failed states because of corruption, political instability and poor governance. One of the last great frontiers, the Pacific is experiencing an ICT (Information, Communications and Technology) revolution. An unintended consequence of this revolution is the growth of "political social media pages". Social media while primarily used as a social networking platform has become a popular means for Melanesian citizens to discuss political issues, air dissent against politicians and government policies and even expose government corruption. Social media is thus increasingly playing an important role in how citizens become aware of information, how citizens engage in the political process and even to some extent how governments feel accountable to the public. This is especially so as the Pacific is undergoing an ICT revolution with a number of major ICT

developments. The most notable development is Tonga-Fiji Submarine Cable that became available in August, 2013 (Madigibuli 2013). The underwater fibre optic cable will significantly improve the quality, accessibility and cost of internet services. Other countries such as Vanuatu, Samoa and the Solomon Islands also have the opportunity to connect to this cable. The increased availability of the internet and mobile access is spurring the use of social media in the Pacific. Cave (2012) finds that five Pacific Island Countries (PICs) ranked in Facebook's top twenty growth markets, as a percentage of population during April to September 2012.

While the Pacific region has lagged behind most of the world in terms of ICT, these current developments will reduce the digital divide. The growing digital society in the Pacific has the potential to have significant social, economic and political implications. Cave (2012) finds that ICT, specifically social media, is being used to enhance accountability and transparency by exposing negligence, poor service delivery and corruption. Cave (2012) suggests that ICT has significant potential to assist PICs achieve development objectives especially democracy and governance. Logan (2012) outlines the potential impact of ICT in PNG politics. She finds that ICT is increasing transparency and changing citizen's political participation. Given that social media is a relatively recent phenomenon in the Pacific, there is a dearth of literature on the impact of social media and e-democracy. This study seeks to contribute to extant literature by examining the use of social media and its impact on e-democracy in three Melanesian countries. The study's research question is "What factors have led to the differences in how social media has facilitated e-democracy in these three countries?" To answer the study's research question, the study conducts an interpretative case study with the unit of analysis being the three Melanesian countries of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Data for the case study was collected from interviews with key informants and a content analysis of social media pages that focus on addressing political issues.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: The following section provides a literature review of social media and e-democracy; the section following outlines the study's theoretical framework; the section following discusses the study's research design; the section following analyzes the data collected and discusses the key findings; and the final section concludes the paper.

Literature Review

Social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan et al. 2010, p.61)." Social media tools include social networking sites such as Facebook, micro blogging sites like Twitter, Wikis and video sharing sites like YouTube. Social media studies are a relatively young but growing field (Kaplan et al. 2010). Social media studies that interface with politics and democracy have largely been conducted in developed countries (Kushin et al. 2010). These studies have examined issues such as social media as a campaign tool by political candidates (Stieglitz et al. 2012) and the offline political effect of online political discussions (Bimber et al. 2013; Conroy et al. 2012).

The Arab spring in the Middle East is an example of the impact of social media in politics (Maghrabi and Salam 2011). Social media played an important role in the Arab Spring by enabling political activists in these countries to air their grievances, organize and coordinate protests and also to share their plight with the world (Khondker, 2010). Thus social media is playing an important role in the facilitation of e-democracy. E-democracy (electronic democracy) is defined as "concerned with the use of information and communication technologies to engage citizens, support the democratic decision making processes and strengthen representative democracy" (Macintosh 2003). In order for an effective e-democratic system to exist there needs to be a high level of citizen participation, government engagement and unrestricted flow of information exchange (Watson et al. 2001).

Studies that have examined the potential for social media to facilitate democracy have produced mixed findings. Some authors argue that social media has significantly changed how democracy is achieved (Shirky 2011). A few studies have cited the example of how social media was able to implement democratic change in the Middle East (Maghrabi and Salam 2011; Howard et al. 2011). Social media has provided a mechanism for public dissent to be communicated. This is especially the case in countries absent of free media, civil society actors and formal mechanisms for citizens to engage in the political process (Kaplan et al. 2010). In these countries information that is published by the media is usually censored and comprises of government propaganda. Social media allows citizens to discuss, share and

communicate issues that are censored from traditional media. Social media also allows citizens to criticize government policies and hold government officials to account. Social media has also been used to expose corruption and engender greater transparency (Cave 2012; Logan 2012).

A number of studies have also examined the internet, social media and its impact on media, politics and democracy in the Pacific. Walsh (2010) provides an analysis of Fiji's political blogosphere. A political blogger himself, Walsh identified 72 political blogs in Fiji. A number of blogs were run by expatriate journalists like him while with most blogs the administrators were anonymous. Walsh (2010) suggests that the proliferation of political blogs in Fiji has created a cybernet democracy. Walsh (2010) believes that these blogs have the potential to lead to greater democracy. However, this potential has yet to be realized as the blogs "are little more than agents of uncritical dissent (Walsh, 2010, p. 174)". The Fiji Government in response "have fought online fire with online fire (Ley 2013)". The Fiji Government have setup their own social media pages which include Government Facebook Pages and twitter accounts. It is reported that the Fiji Government paid Qorvis communications $US40,000 a month to among other things, manage social media accounts (Welch 2012).

Given the diversity in the nature of social media use around the world it is important to examine social media and its impact on democracy in different contexts. Studies suggest that social media usage is context dependent (Kaplan et al. 2010; Shirky 2011). Furthermore, rapid ICT developments suggest that the Pacific will be a region with increasing use of social media (Cave 2012). Social media could thus play a significant role in the political, social and economic development of Pacific countries.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs the Technology Affordances and Constraints Theory (TACT). The framework has been used to study how individuals and organizations use Information Systems and how Information Systems affect people and organizations (Majchrzak et al. 2013). The central tenet of TACT is that "uses and outcomes of information systems and technology are best understood in terms of relationships between individuals or organizations and technology features (ibid, p.1)." Technology Affordance refers to "an action potential, that is, to what an individual or organization with a particular purpose can do with a technology or information system (ibid, p.1)." Technology Constraint refers "to ways in which an individual or organization can be held back from accomplishing a particular goal when using a technology or system (ibid, p.1)."

In this case social media affords citizens the potential to become aware of political issues, discuss political issues, expose corruption and organize political groups. This is because social media or more broadly the internet provide richer information and facilitate communication with citizens (Bimber et al. 2013). The internet also affords citizens the ability to compare their government performance with other governments, "which alters the expectations and criteria that citizens use to evaluate their own government—shaping satisfaction accordingly (Bailard 2012. p.333)."

There are also constraints of social media as a political tool. These constraints include lack of access to the internet or devices that can access the internet by citizens, fear of punishment for posting anti-political comments, source and information credibility. These limitations can hinder the action potential of social media in enabling citizens to freely discuss political issues. This theory will be used to explain the differences and similarities in the impact, the use and perceptions of social media as a political tool by citizens of Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Research Design

An interpretative case study approach was employed to examine the extent social media was facilitating e-Democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. An interpretative case study approach seeks to understand the shared meanings and interpretations that people place on information systems. Both attempting to understand how humans are affected by information systems and how information systems affects humans (Walsham 1993). The approach is used to better understand the complex interaction between information systems, people and society. Table 1 below summarizes the demographics of people interviewed for this research project.

Group	No. of people interviewed	Fiji	Solomon Islands	Vanuatu
Political Actors (PI)	3	3	-	-
Civil Society Actors (CSA)	6	4	1	1
Active Social Media Users (ASMU)	12	6	3	3
Tertiary Students (TS)	34	16	10	8
TOTAL	**55**	**29**	**14**	**12**
		53%	**25%**	**22%**

Table 1. Interviewee Demographics

Interviewees were identified based on their potential to contribute towards the study's research objectives. Interview requests were sent to political actors active on social media pages, however, none from Solomon Islands and Vanuatu responded to our requests. Even political responses from politicians from Fiji were very low. This could be due to a number of reasons such as their lack of understanding of social media, apprehension to discuss sensitive issues or they are just busy people. This is also a big year for both Fiji and Solomon Islands as elections will be held this year. Currently, Vanuatu is facing a political crisis as there is a proposed vote of no confidence for its current Prime Minister: Moana Carcasses.

Most of the interviewees were tertiary students from the University of the South Pacific (USP). USP is a regional university of the South Pacific has the largest population of Melanesian student in the world. USP's main campus is located in Suva, Fiji. Tertiary students from the three countries were approached via email for interview request. The interview request gave students the option to be interviewed in person or to submit their responses online. Face to face interviews were semi-structured in nature, providing the interviewer the discretion and flexibility to ask impromptu questions to probe deeper into responses given by the interviewee. Each interview lasted on average 15-20 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcriptions to identify common patterns and key themes.

A content analysis of the three most popular political Facebook pages in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu was also be conducted. The three pages were determined based on the number of members which is a proxy for the popularity of a Facebook page. From this measure the following pages were identified as the most popular as presented below in Table 2.

Country	Facebook Page	Membership	Population	% of Population
Fiji	Letters to the Editor Uncensored	7,222	874,742	.83%
Solomon Islands	Forum Solomon Islands – International	6,716	549,589	1.22%
Vanuatu	Yumi TokTok Stret	12,056	247,262	4.88%

Table 2. Top Political Facebook Pages (determined on 28/02/14)

A brief description of each page is presented below:

Letters to the Editor – Uncensored

Letters to the Editor was a popular section in The Fiji Times (Fiji's National Newspaper). This page is a Facebook spinnoff that provides citizens in Fiji greater freedom to express opinions than the newspaper version.

Forum Solomon Islands International (FSII)

A Facebook page created by Solomon Islanders who live abroad, the page was explicitly created to expose government corruption and hold the Solomon Islands Government to account. The page was later registered as a Civil Society Organization.

Yumi Tok Tok Stret

The page was created to provide a forum to discuss political, social and economic issues affecting Ni-Vanuatu. The page is primarily used by citizens but government officials as well also use this forum to defend themselves and sometimes proactively to promote themselves.

Results

The following key themes were derived from the interviews and content analysis of Facebook pages conducted. The key themes are discussed below.

Greater representation from minority groups

A political candidate in the upcoming Fiji elections stated that she was using social media to engage more with Youths and Women. She had this to share:

"Fiji is still a very ageist and masculine society. I myself have been discriminated and harassed on social media for running in the elections. Women and Youth have been neglected but represent an important part of society. Social media is providing a means for Women and Youth to be me more involved in the political process." (PI1)

Other interviewees also echoed the same sentiments. Most commenters on FSII are people who have left Solomon Islands and who are commenting from outside of their country. This is another feature of social media in that it allows all individuals to participate irrespective of gender, age or physical location. This is especially useful for countries in Melanesia. These countries consist of hundreds of islands scattered over a large body of water. This geographic situation presents practical challenges in including everyone in the decision making process. However, from another perspective while social media is including certain groups, it is also excluding other groups. These groups include individuals that lack access to ICT and do not feel comfortable using such technology.

Perceived government action

Another theme was the perceived effect social media was having on government action. A student relayed the following story:

"The [Vanuatu] government had been very late with sending our allowances. A student complaining about delayed allowances on the Facebook page posted a picture of three loaves of bread with the captions: "Breakfast", "Lunch" and "Dinner" on Yumi Tok Tok Stret. The post made front page on the Daily Post [Vanuatu national newspaper]. The government sent us the allowances the following week." (TS3)

It is uncertain whether the Vanuatu government was actually responding to this, however, the student certainly thought so. Ley (2013) discussing media engagement in the Pacific, suggests that social media has taken the role of traditional media. Social media has led to the rise of civil journalists most of whom are professional journalists but are unable to freely publish their views. Using the case of Vanuatu, Ley (2013) discusses how the Facebook page Yumi TokTok Stret is changing political engagement.

Another interesting case relating to FSII was Gordon Darcy Lilo's (Solomon Islands Prime Minister) trip to Indonesia with a delegation of staff. Information was leaked that the trip would cost the Solomon Islands Government SBD$1 million (Solomon Star, 2013a). The Prime Minister assured the public that the costs were borne by Indonesia but evidence revealed by a FSII actually found that 99% of the trip was funded by taxpayers of Solomon Islands. Civil society actors stated that the trip was a waste of taxpayers' money and called for the Prime Minister's resignation. The Prime Minister responded in the local daily by stating that those criticizing him are the ones with "stains on their hands and challenged media and social media to be fair (Palmer 2013)." The leader of the Malaita Ma'asina Forum, another civil society group,

described the response as childish but then goes on to say "I will see to it and ensure your whole body is dirty (Solomon Star, 2013b)." Such is the politics in Solomon Islands that politicians focus on personal attacks than on the issues at hand (Bennett 2004). The Indonesian government has reportedly refunded $1.2 million (Solomon Star, 2013c); however a journalist – Alfred Sasako – reported that the refund might not have come from Indonesia and that the money has yet to be transferred to the treasury (Sasako 2013).

Citizen engagement

Some interviewees felt that social media was allowing them to engage more with government officials. These sentiments were expressed mostly by Ni-Vanuatu interviewees and by Solomon Islanders. One Ni-Vanuatu tertiary student shared the following:

"On Yumi TokTok Stret, politicians such as Ralph Regenvanu are posting and responding to comments on Facebook. I feel this means that they are taking our opinion into account and hopefully this will influence their policy choices." (TS11)

Using the TACT, social media affords citizens the ability to form groups with similar interests and discuss and debate political issues on an online forum. For some political pages in Melanesia such as FSII and Yumi TokTok Stret, government officials have even engaged in political discussions to defend themselves such as in the case of the PM's Indonesia trip where some of the government officials that accompanied the PM to Indonesia attempted to defend the trip and their per diems to a post criticizing the trip. For Yumi TokTok Stret, Ralph Regenvanu, current Minister for Lands and Natural Resources for the Vanuatu Government, proactively posts government policy decisions on the Facebook page. Mr. Regenvanu also engages with citizens in discussions and debates on policy issues. However, in Fiji, something of this nature occurring is unheard-of. Most interviewees from Fiji did not believe that social media was leading to greater citizen engagement. This is in line with Ley (2013) who states that the Fiji Government "have fought online fire with online fire (Ley 2013)". The Fiji Government have setup their own social media pages which include Government Facebook Pages and twitter accounts. It is reported that the Fiji Government paid Qorvis communications $US40,000 a month to among other things, manage social media accounts (Welch 2012). Most interviewees in Fiji did not perceive social media as playing an important role in giving them a voice in the political arena. Some stated that they feared speaking out against the government because they may be taken to the military camp. The high level of militarism is a constraint that hinders social media's potential to enhance democratic participation of citizens.

Media Censorship

Media censorship to varying degrees exists in all these three countries with Fiji being the most extreme. Most journalists in Fiji who have criticized the government have been kicked out and in retaliation have created their own anti-government blogs (Walsh, 2010). Even in Vanuatu, a journalist named Gratien Tiona was arrested for making a comment on Yumi Toktok Stret praying for a plane carrying the Vanuatu Prime Minister and his cabinet to crash into the sea (Ligo 2013). The Vanuatu Prime Minister: Moana Carcasses is also a member of Yumi TokTok Stret responded on the page by accusing Mr. Tiona of instigating terrorism. Mr. Tiona later apologised on the Facebook page but was still arrested and charged with terrorist activity, seditious publication and making threats (Radio Australia 2013). The charges were later dropped and Mr. Tiona released.

Some interviwees felt that traditional media has failed and that social media was providing an alternative to traditional media. A Solomon Islander student shared his view on the role of social media in his country.

"Exercising the rights of citizens to question their leaders, the social media has become an interface for people who thought their voices and crys will never be heard and this has become an opportunity to express themselves without fear because they know so many people have the same problems as theirs and they will be supported. The cry of the nation can now be heard by leaders and all citizens." (TS 20)

Government Response

It is interesting to observe how governments in Melanesian countries are responding to social media as a political tool. Governments in Melanesia are making various attempts to regulate and suppress online

expression. PNG ministers raised concerns in parliament over social media, claiming that it was being abused by faceless people to bully and defame others (PACNEWS 2013). These PNG members of parliament are calling for laws and regulation to control social media sites. Belden Namah, PNG's opposition leader has shunned traditional media, claiming that PNG's traditional media are biased towards the government (Somare-Brash 2014). He has stated that he will hold the government to account via social networking sites in which he has made various allegations against the government and the Prime Minister (ibid). Mr. Namah's comments were fuelled when PNG's local daily ran a front page story titled "Namah behind the sale of land (Hill 2013)." Namah is suing the local daily for running the story. Namah is also under investigation by the PNG fraud squad and is also being sued by PNG's prime mister: Peter O'Neil for defamation (Callick 2013).

In Solomon Islands, civil society groups are the most active Facebook dissenters of the Solomon Islands Government. The Government attempted to deregister certain civil society groups, claiming that their activities had become too political in nature (RNZI 2014). This was after the members of the civil society group had called for the Prime Minister to resign amidst allegations of corruption and abuse of power. Melanesian governments thus perceive social media activities as a threat to their power. These governments are trying to create laws or even apply laws to control, regulate or punish individuals and groups that criticize or express dissent against the government. A civil society actor had this to say:

"I am aware that the Government is trying to clamp down on social media. But I hope they don't as it provides an important function to people in my country." (CSA2)

Discussion

Although these countries come from the same ethno-classification regional grouping and have a shared history and culture, social media has evolved quite differently. The factors that have led to these differences relate to environmental, institutional and technical factors. In Fiji, for instance the high level of militarism and censorship on media make most individuals afraid to openly criticize the government. In Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, a more vibrant and free media exist. In comparison to Fiji, Vanuatu has a very small paramilitary force whereas Solomon Islands do not even have a military force. There is also low level of citizen engagement in Fiji. As stated by Ley (2010) "the Fiji Government has fought online fire with online fire." The Fiji Government have opened their own social media sites on Facebook and Twitter but do not engage with citizens rather these pages focus more on informing citizens of government announcements. Vanuatu's Yumi Tok Tok Stret can be seen as a model of e-Democracy. The page has the highest percentage of registered members of the three Facebook pages (Refer to Table 2). Not only is it used by citizens it is also used by politicians. Constructive debates are held on this page between politicians, citizens and even a group named "Vanuatu Opposition Party." The page has become so popular that posts on this page regularly appear as stories on Vanuatu's national newspaper, the Daily Post. In Solomon Islands, the main political social media page became a Facebook page and then registered as a civil society organization. The page expressly states its main objective is to expose government corruption. A sort of Melanesian WikiLeaks, this page has been credited for exposing a number of dubious and corrupt practices by politicians in Solomon Islands.

In terms of government responsiveness, most interviewees from Vanuatu and Solomon believed their governments were responding to these social media pages. They felt that these pages were enhancing transparency and making governments feel more accountable. Responses from citizens in Fiji were mixed but most citizens felt that social media does not play a major role in influencing government action. For most Fijians social media for political purposes is just a means of venting frustration and providing a forum to discuss and be informed about political issues.

The findings of the study have a number of important implications for research, practice and policy makers. Firstly, the study contributes to the burgeoning literature on social media and its impact on society. Furthermore the study is conducted in a region where ICT is only now making its way to becoming available to masses of users. Secondly, the study also demonstrates the potential of social media as a tool for facilitiating e-democracy and using the cases highlights enablers and impediments of social media as an e-democratic tool. Lastly, the findings of the study are of interest to civil society actors, political candidates and policy makers in the Pacific. The findings of the study illustrate the growing

power and use of social media in the Pacific and its potential to effect positive change. This study would also assist Governments in the Pacific who are discussing developing policies to regulate social media use.

Conclusion

The advent of technology and the rise of social media are changing the political landscape in Melanesia. Social media is empowering citizens to voice their opinions, participate in the political process and allowing some Melanesian Governments to engage with citizens in a more responsive and interactive manner. The role and power of social media in Melanesia is just beginning but social media has the potential to transform Melanesian political processes, to foster greater engagement with Governments, to develop new forms of enhanced transparency, democracy and accountability and usher in an era of political change in Melanesia. The study examined the impact of social media on e-democracy in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The study finds that the extent to which social media is facilitating e-democracy varies in these three countries and is influenced by environmental, technical and institutional factors. Some of these factors affords the democratic potential of social media while some are constraints to e-democracy. By better understanding these factors, interventions can be undertaken to improve the governance of these countries through greater representation, strengthening government accountability and enhancing citizen engagement and political participation.

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