Citizen-to-Citizen vs. Citizen-to-Government eParticipation in Uganda: Implications for Research and Practice

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Abstract: The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is growing globally, as is interest in the use of digital technologies to improve citizens' participation in governance. In African countries, where ICT use remains low and where there is a democratic deficit, the nature and extent of citizens' participation via ICT is unknown. Based on a print questionnaire with 322 internet users in Uganda, this paper compares citizen-to-citizen (C2C) participation and citizen-to-government (C2G) participation, examines the factors that hinder greater C2C and C2G online participation, and explores the implications for greater eParticipation in future. For effective eParticipation, the majority of Ugandan internet users need to become more active as creators of online content, as well as conversationalists and critics. Results show that regardless of whether it is engagements among citizens or between citizens and leaders, most citizens are spectators.

Key words: Uganda, eParticipation, citizen participation, online participation

1 Introduction

Growing recognition of the role that Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can play in social, political and economic transformation is not always matched by research on the utility of digital technologies, notably in African countries. The state of the art of e-government in Africa is poorly documented, and only such research has only been conducted in a quarter of the countries on the continent [1]. Likewise, empirical evidence on the use of ICT in governance in East Africa is limited despite growing interest and investment in this area [2]; and throughout sub-Saharan Africa, there are few examples of direct political action facilitated by mobile devices and networks [3].

Similarly, a review of literature on ICT and participation in Africa concluded that although there was much excitement and optimism about the role of ICT in governance, the evidence of actual impact was thin [4]. In America and Europe, research abounds on how ICT is enabling citizens to participate in various governance processes. The growing ICT use in Uganda could offer an avenue for addressing aspects of the country's democracy deficit. However, numerous obstacles to eParticipation in Uganda have been identified by previous research such as [3], [5, 6]. This creates the need for research to understand the nature and extent of, and obstacles to, online participation becomes imperative. This paper investigates the differences between the ways ordinary citizens engage online with other citizens and with political leaders, as well as the primary impediments to greater use of ICT by citizens to engage with political leaders and with other citizens. The research fills a gap concerning the nature of and challenges to eParticipation in a developing country with a democracy deficit, distinguishing between citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-government

engagements. It is important to make this distinction because with the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms supporting eParticipation, citizens have the potential to become the main actors of eParticipation activities, which necessitates a research shift of focus from government to citizens and other stakeholders [7]. Moreover, in authoritarian countries, citizens tend to have scarce connections to their government and mostly interact with other citizens on political matters [8].

2 Background and Motivation

Internet access in Africa stands at 20%, while mobile access is 69%, according to 2014 numbers from the International Telecommunications Union. Growing use of ICT makes it worth exploring its role as a tool for participation. eParticipation is defined as the use of ICT to support information provision and "top-down" engagement i.e. government-led initiatives, or "ground-up" efforts to empower citizens, civil society organizations and other democratically constituted groups to gain the support of their elected representatives [9]. The purpose of eParticipation is to increase citizens' abilities to participate in digital governance [10]. Governance processes that comprise participation may concern administration, service delivery, decision making and policy making [11] and can take place within the formal political process by means such as voting, or outside it by means of political activism [12]. A literature review of various models on eParticipation [10], [12, 13, 14, 15], shows that common features of participation include Informing, Consulting, Involving, Engagement, Empowerment, and Collaboration. Seeking news and information, joining online networks and political conversations also constitute eParticipation activities [16]. In drawing the link between media use and participation, the role of ICT as a communications channel and an enabler of online networking has been noted [17], while social network sites (SNS) have been noted as a great source for political news and a way of influencing contacts for the politically-inclined individuals [18].

With 27 African countries under an authoritarian regime, 13 under regimes that have both democratic and autocratic elements, and a further nine characterized as flawed democracies [19], the possibility to advance democratic governance and citizen participation through eParticipation becomes compelling. However, there is a paucity of literature on the nature and utility of eParticipation in Africa. Equally, there is a grey area regarding security concerns in using ICT in political processes. Given the poor state of democracy in many African countries, there is widespread self-censorship by citizens due to fear of reprisals for expressing opinions that state authorities find objectionable [5], [20, 21]. Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net Report* 2013 report ranks Uganda, the focus of this study, as 'partly free'. An example of the limits of freedom is that in 2013 a cabinet minister announced that the country would establish a social media monitoring centre "to weed out those who use [the web] to damage the government and people's reputation". Moreover, citizens in Uganda have become skeptical about their ability to impact political change, as seen in a decline in voter turnout [3]. President Yoweri Museveni, who grabbed power via a guerrilla war in 1986, has been president for 29 years, and is accused of condoning corruption, stifling the opposition, and harassing independent media. The Government has in the past ordered service providers to block access to SMS services, Facebook and Twitter in order to deny the opposition an opportunity to mobilize supporters for anti-government protests.

Indubitably, ICT is increasingly being used in political processes in Africa, including for promoting human rights monitoring [4], in election campaigns and for monitoring elections [3], [22], and for promoting transparency and accountability in

government operations [6], [23]. ICT is helping to amplify citizens' voices, increasing civic awareness and empowering citizens to monitor the delivery of services [24, 25, 26]. The spread of mobile phones, crowdsourcing technologies, and social networks have particularly enabled messages to be amplified, information flows to be accelerated, and new spaces to be opened up for the involvement of individuals and communities [27]. In Kenya, social networks act as communication spaces that promote democracy through individuals' "articulation of democratic ideas" [23]. Research has found that in Uganda and East Africa, some social accountability initiatives that use ICT are giving voice to individuals who otherwise would not participate in community affairs, improving citizens' civic skills and helping to hold local leaders and service providers accountable [4], [28, 29].

Many obstacles stand in the way of meaningful eParticipation in Africa, including low levels of literacy (both informational and ICT), high costs of accessing ICT, shortages of electricity. In Uganda, where the present study was conducted, only 23% of the population uses the internet relative to 19% for sub-Saharan Africa, 65% in the Americas, 75% percent in Europe, 41% in Arab States, 32% in Asia and the Pacific [30]. Information illiteracy hampers the efficient adoption and utilization of ICT on the continent [31].

However, Gagliardone et al noted that in spite of the refrain common in literature on eParticipation in Africa that access to ICT will spur particular democratic behaviours and political and democratic outcomes, it evades to evaluate how particular cultural and sociological contexts drive ICT use [4]. A study has found that Kenyan citizens had no trust or confidence in using mobiles for communicating with government and service providers [32]. In Uganda, citizen-to-citizen participation is the predominant form but still at low levels, while citizen-to-government participation is negligible [5]. This is primarily due to perceived risks of retribution and intimidation for expressing a particular opinion or supporting a political cause. An analysis of citizens' motivations for utilising ICT in citizen participation and democracy showed that despite widespread awareness of ICT-based tools for participation, a significant proportion of Ugandan citizens preferred non-ICT spheres for engaging in democratic processes [33].

There is under-utilization of ICT for the provision of efficient government services in Africa [34], while bandwidth is insufficient to spur efficient online service delivery. Also, most eGovernance initiatives in many countries are largely dependent on external funding, which put their sustainability into question [35]. Lack of financial sustainability, as well as bad design, poor implementation, and political interference were noted as primary factors that prevented ICT-for-governance projects in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda from moving beyond the pilot phase [6]. A study on the participation platform Uganda Watch found that user concerns that hindered greater use by citizens were related to costs, trust, and safety [3].

In South Africa, too, the public has a generally poor opinion of government services [36]. An analysis of the Facebook pages of South Africa's two leading political parties found that the parties did not participate in political discussions online and when they posted information on the sites, it was to impart knowledge and information, and not to engage in a conversation with the public [37]. Meanwhile, a survey of 1,044 South African students found that although they had a considerable social relation engagement online, they did not engage politically online [38].

Ochara argues that under the alienating conditions of digital exclusion in Africa, there is an evolution of public administration towards a technocracy and increasing the efficiency of government bureaucracy through "managerialization",

which reinforces digital exclusion and thus hinders effective eParticipation [39]. Drawing on data from 20 African countries, Isaksson argued that the "lack of resources" hypothesis does a poor job at explaining (the lack of) political participation in Africa, as poorer citizens and people with little time on their hands were more likely to participate [40].

This brief literature review shows that the nature of eParticipation in Africa is not well studied. It also shows that many factors hamper eParticipation in Africa, and that in countries where there is a democracy deficit, the activities which citizens participate in are likely to be constrained. Generating knowledge on these issues is the focus of this paper. It is particularly concerned with Uganda, as the nature of participation and the role of social media in enabling participation in authoritarian, developing country contexts remains an under-studied issue. The Arab spring, for one, provided some evidence of the role social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can play in creating safe communication channels for citizens to coordinate collective opposition, to express their dissent in the public sphere [41, 42, 43], and to gather and spread information to counter the propaganda and apparatus of the repressive state [44, 45]. Social media generally serve to reduce transaction costs for protest organizers and present rapid and powerful channels for disseminating messages and images [46]. Nonetheless, it has been suggested that the role of ICT in instigating, organizing and reporting on socio-political change in the Arab uprising may have been overstated [46, 47, 48, 49].

3 Research Questions and Methodology

In order to understand the nature of participation and the factors that motivate engagement among citizens and with public officials, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the difference between the way individuals engage online with other citizens and with political leaders?
2. What are the key impediments to greater use of ICT by citizens to engage with political leaders and with other citizens?

A survey was conducted between June and October 2014 through physical administration of a pre-tested questionnaire among 322 internet users in nine districts of Uganda – Lira, Gulu, Iganga, Mayuge, Mbale, Mpigi, Masaka, Kabarole and Kasese. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions, which were based on the review of participation models and the various activities they entail. Respondents, who included both people who were members of online political groups and those who were not, were asked about their informational and ICT skills and needs; and frequency of use of different ICT tools and services. These included Google and other search engines, Email (including for sharing photos and documents as attachments), contributing to online discussion groups/ chats, use of social media such as Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, and MySpace, SMS on mobile phone, blogging, downloading documents and media, and video conferencing.

There were also questions on the perceived usefulness of ICT for monitoring of government programmes and public services delivery and whether respondents used ICT to monitor or report on public services delivery. Other questions related to the ways and frequency with which respondents use ICT to engage with other citizens and with duty bearers (government officials, public services organisations) on issues of community or national concern (social, political, economic).

Interviewer-administered questionnaires have the advantage that unclear questions can be clarified to the respondent and open-ended questions can be used to collect a range of possible responses [50]. Furthermore, since our research was about a subject many people found sensitive, having face-to-face interviews helped create trust about the identity and intentions of the researchers, which may have been difficult if the research was conducted through email, Skype or online survey tools. However, in a society where citizens fear that expressing certain political opinions could attract reprisals, and since the research was about a politically related issue, this may have affected the nature of some of the responses relative to those that could have been provided via a more anonymous survey. This was minimised by assuring survey respondents about the anonymity of their contributions.

Responses to survey questions were coded to generate statistical descriptions of the different datasets representing the various responses received. Qualitative responses were analyzed and interpreted with a focus on what was specific to the question, unique to the respondent or deviant from the other responses received for the same question. The subjective descriptions given by respondents in the open-ended questions provided a deeper contextual picture of the statistical data generated from quantitative responses.

4 Results

Profile of respondents and proficiency in using ICT

Fifty-nine percent of the respondents were male, 41% female. Ages 18-24 comprised 41% of the sample while 38% were in the 25-34 age bracket. The majority (66%) were educated to university level holding either diplomas or degrees. The mobile phone was the primary tool for access to the internet for 45% of those surveyed, followed by desktop and laptop computers at home or work (29%).

Respondents were asked about their knowledge of ICT tools and services and proficiency in using them. Social media emerged as the top tool most survey participants (79%) had good or excellent knowledge and proficiency in using, followed by Short Messaging Services (SMS) at 76%, and search engines at 73% (Table 1).

Table 1: Rate the level of your knowledge and proficiency in using the following technology tools and services:

Tool/Service	Knowledge and proficiency in use				
	None	Poor	Workable	Good	Excellent
Google and other search engines	3%	9%	15%	41%	32%
Email (including sharing photos and documents as attachments)	3%	8%	17%	44%	28%
Contribute to online discussion groups/chats	11%	10%	21%	38%	20%
Use of social media (Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, Myspace, etc)	5%	4%	12%	40%	39%
SMS on mobile	3%	8%	13%	35%	41%
Blogging	38%	18%	19%	17%	8%
Downloading files (documents and media)	7%	12%	18%	38%	25%
Video conferencing (Skype, Google plus etc)	20%	20%	19%	29%	12%

Usefulness of ICT for social accountability

Eighty eight percent of respondents agreed that it was faster, effective and more productive to use ICT for monitoring government programmes. In a separate question about the use of ICT to contact government officials, 68% of respondents agreed that ICT would make it easier to communicate with public officials; only 15% disagreed. These results showed a high perception about the potential of ICT to enhance interactions between citizens and leaders. It followed then that when respondents were asked whether the "use of ICT "ICT makes monitoring of public services easier and simple", 78% agreed. However, only a third of respondents (31%) were actually involved in social accountability, which indicated a disconnect between the positive perceptions most respondents held of ICT use and whether they went ahead to engage in ICT-enabled social accountability.

How citizens use ICT to engage with other citizens

Forty-three per cent of the respondents engaged with other citizens on issues of community and national concern through posting social media updates on Facebook and Twitter. This was followed by 39% who shared concerns through text messages and seeking information and news (Table 2).

Table 2: In what ways and how often do you use ICT to engage with other citizens on issues of community or national concern (social, political, economic, etc.)?

Form of engagement with fellow citizens	Frequency of engagement				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Emailing information (including forwarding documents)	23%	20%	25%	15%	17%
Posting social media updates (Facebook and Twitter)	43%	18%	21%	9%	9%
Participating in politics-related online discussions	13%	14%	20%	25%	29%
Mobilizing via SMS	26%	16%	21%	19%	19%
Participating in radio/TV debates (live call ins, SMS strips)	13%	8%	21%	24%	34%
Writing in the local press or community newsletters	9%	10%	13%	22%	46%
Seeking information and news	39%	21%	22%	11%	8%
Commenting on other's posts	33%	26%	25%	8%	9%
Sending/Receiving text messages	39%	19%	20%	12%	10%

How ICT is used to engage with political leaders

Table 3 shows that seeking information and news was the most frequent form of engagement with duty bearers (54%). Social media was the second most commonly used form of engagement with duty bearers at 43%. Among the least forms of engagement were participating in live call-in and SMS strips on radio and TV debates, commenting on political websites, and participating in online discussion forums.

Table 3: In what ways and how often do you use ICT to engage with duty bearers on issues of community or national concern (social, political, economic)?

Form of engagement with duty bearers	Frequency of engagement				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Email requesting information/ documents	18%	17%	25%	17%	25%

Following duty bearers on social media (Facebook and Twitter)	22%	18%	26%	18%	16%
Engaging via social media (Facebook and Twitter)	26%	17%	29%	13%	15%
Participating in online discussion forums with leaders/public officials	11%	10%	21%	27%	31%
Participating in radio/TV debates (live call ins, SMS strips)	11%	9%	22%	24%	34%
Commenting on political websites	9%	8%	26%	24%	32%
Seeking information and news	33%	21%	24%	11%	12%

Factors hindering greater use of ICT to engage with citizens and duty bearers
The main factors that most hindered greater use of ICT to engage with fellow citizens included literacy (66%), language (62%), cost (59%), and lack of awareness of availability of tools. 69% of respondents stated that security concerns did not hinder use of ICT for engagment with citizens. Regarding hinderances to greater use of ICT to engage with duty bearers, security concerns emerged top at 61%, followed by low confidence in receiving feedback and responses (45%). Cost emerged as the third factor (38%).

5 Discussion and Conclusions
The results showed a high belief in the utility of ICT to make it easier and simple for citizens to engage with leaders and with citizens, with nearly half of the respondents (88%) agreeing that ICT could enable swift and more effective social accountability. This was because most respondents had experience of using ICT and had first-hand experience of its potential to improve the ease, speed and efficiency of interactions between scattered individuals and groups. But most respondents feared reprisals for expressing political opinions, particularly those against a president in power for 29 years, and whose government has stifled freedom of expression online and offline. This fear factor, combined with the widespread perception that leaders are extremely unresponsive to issues raised by citizens, worked greatly against eParticipation.

There was markedly high proficiency in using technologies, with 79% reporting good or excellent proficiency in using social media, plus very frequent use of Facebook, in particular. Relative to other social media such as Instagram and Twitter, Facebook has a longer legacy in Uganda, which partly explains its position as the most popular SNS in Uganda. Another factor that works in its favour is that subscribers on two of Uganda's biggest telecom services providers – MTN and Orange Telecom – can use the so-called 'Facebook Zero' which allows a subscriber free access to a text-only version of this social network, update their status, and read and comment on posts. The user is only charged if they make downloads, stream audio or video, or upload pictures. Facebook and Twitter were the most used tools for eParticipation.

There were notable differences in the way individuals related with other citizens and with leaders. For citizen-to-citizen communication, posting social media updates was the most pursued activity, followed by seeking information and news, emailing information (including forwarding documents), and commenting on other citizens' posts. The least interest was paid to participating in politics-related online discussions, participation in radio and TV debates, and writing in the local press or in community newsletters. There was much less engagement between citizens and leaders. Seeking information and news, following leaders on Facebook and Twitter,

and engaging via social media were the most prominent activities. Worth noting is that the first two activities are unlikely to expose one to reprisals or even to show their stand on a political issue. Many citizens therefore had trust that they could engage in them without compromising their safety. It was also telling that commenting on political websites was the least engaged in of the activities respondents were asked about, followed by participating in online discussion forums with leaders, and participation in radio and TV debates. Thus, where in C2C we see more actively engaged citizens (postings SNS updates, seeking and sharing information, commenting on other citizens posts), in C2G the citizens tend to be spectators or followers, engaging on fewer ICT platforms and in less active areas.

These results show a desire to engage with the leaders on the one hand and, on the other, a detachment from them and from politics. The reasons for not engaging were telling too: with leaders it was security concerns first, then lack of trust in the engagement resulting into any change or citizens receiving a response to issues they raised; and third, was cost. With C2C, security concerns were less prominent – in fact, 69% stated that security concerns did not hinder their engagement with other citizens. The implication here is that for as long as leaders remain unresponsive to issues raised by citizens, and provided citizens have a fear of reprisals for expressing opinions online, eParticipation will remain minimal, in particular as concerns the citizen-to-government relation.

The major reasons cited by previous research, such as by Hellström [3], Grönlund and Wakabi [5], and Zanello and Maassen [6], such as high cost and low trust, were validated by this research. Other common factors cited in the literature that are related to accessibility, affordability, and illiteracy were also borne out by this research. The place of unresponsive government officials, fear of reprisals and self-censorship are not well articulated or studied in the previous literature but emerged as the major impediment to eParticipation in this study, notably by those for whom access and ICT skills were not problematic. A fear of reprisals was entrenching a widespread culture of self-censorship (as previously found by Gagliardone et al., CIPESA, and Laverty [5, 20, 21]) and this was further negating participation in both the C2C and C2G contexts. Moreover, the engagement of ordinary citizens with leaders depends not only on the citizens' wish to do so but also on the availability of engagement mechanisms (not just lack of awareness of their existence). With Ugandan political leaders having a negligible, and often perfunctory, online presence, C2G engagement cannot go far.

For effective eParticipation, the majority of Ugandan internet users need to become more active as creators of online content, and as conversationalists and critics. These results show that regardless of whether it is engagements among ordinary citizens or between citizens and leaders, most citizens are inactive, and either they are spectators or engage in passive activities. Only a few citizens fall in the active participation category yet these would be the ones to push most of the needed citizen-to-government participation that would enhance good governance.

6 Conclusion

This research has found that ICT has enabled only a fraction of connected Ugandans to participate and they are doing this in a few domains, and rarely with political leaders. The much-touted benefits of eParticipation in amplifying voices and raising civic awareness as advanced by Subhajyoti [24], Arpit [25] and Woro and Supriyanto [26] or enabling citizens to "articulate democratic ideas" as was found by Ochara's study in Kenya [39], are hardly visible in the Ugandan case. And with few citizens engaging

with political leaders, ICT is not living up to its potential to raise government transparency and accountability, to promote human rights monitoring, and to accelerate information flows between citizens and leaders.

This research has produced empirical evidence on the nature of eParticipation in Uganda, a developing country with a democratic deficit. It has developed an understanding of both citizen-to-citizen and citizen-to-government participation. The results tell us that citizens see more benefit in engaging with other citizens than with leaders. It is safer, more fulfilling in terms of the gratifications which citizens derive from engaging with other citizens, as opposed to the non-responsiveness of leaders and other duty bearers to concerns raised by citizens. There is also citizens' perceived inability to change the status quo even if they engaged public officials, which has dulled citizens' appetite for C2G engagements.

Furthermore, this research has produced empirical results on the factors that make citizens shun eParticipation even when they are aware of the benefits which could result from their online participation. On the balance, the fears and frustrations that citizens have outweigh the benefits of eParticipation. In most instances, these fears are not lived but are based on perceptions or the experiences of others. The sum total of this is that if these fears are not addressed, the great majority of Ugandans, including those with ample access to ICT, and who are aware of the benefits of online participation, will for many years remain out of the fold of eParticipation. Citizen-to-citizen participation will likely grow, as it faces fewer hurdles that are also easier to navigate in the short term relative to the hurdles to engagements between citizens and the government. In the circumstances, what are the implications for eParticipation in Uganda? More efforts are needed to deepen citizen-to-citizen engagements because if citizens' skills, trust and experience in this area is cultivated, in future these skills and experience will form the basis for their eParticipation with government.

Going forward, there is need for more research to understand better the needs and motivations of the more active citizens, particularly those who, in spite of the factors ranged against C2G engagement, still participate. That could help find ways to bring into the actives fold many citizens who currently are inactive. Other research that helps to bring more citizens to participate, in spite of the obstacles observed in Uganda, would be welcome. Larger scale studies in Uganda and similar countries to develop a keener understanding of how citizens use ICT more gainfully with other citizens and with government officials, in low-income countries with a democracy deficit is equally needed.

Acknowledgements

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