



**THE USE OF MEDIA, INCLUDING SOCIAL MEDIA,  
TO ENHANCE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRACY**

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**Background**

1. Good governance requires more than a democratically elected parliament, it requires an ongoing relationship between civil society and parliament. To foster this relationship, it is crucial that democracies provide opportunities for ongoing citizen engagement in the policy-making process, as failure to do so can fuel public cynicism and apathy and, in time, could create conditions for democratic failure.
2. Citizen engagement has been broadly defined as referring to activities whose primary purpose is to raise awareness of the parliament among the public and facilitate a two-way flow of information, ideas and views between them, requiring both listening and interaction on the part of both the institution and citizens. Effective citizen engagement can serve to renew and deepen representative democracy by narrowing the gap between government and the public and improving the legitimacy of the decision-making process.
3. Citizen engagement can be fostered by parliaments or individual parliamentarians. It can take a variety of forms ranging from meeting face-to-face, providing information about parliament, soliciting input from citizens, facilitating coverage of parliament in the traditional media and interacting through social media.
4. Parliamentarians the world over are struggling to understand the implications of rapid changes in the media environment. While many people still rely on traditional media, the development of online news sources and social media, particularly in the industrialized world, is altering the ways in which people keep up with and define the news and communicate with each other. These changes also have implications for citizen engagement.
5. Traditional media include newspapers, radio and television. Social media include the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to interact online, contribute user-created content or join online networks. The Internet services commonly associated with social media include:

- Blogs, which are online journals.
- Status-update services or microblogging services such as Twitter.
- Wikis, which are collective web pages that can be edited by users. One well-known example is Wikipedia.
- Social bookmarking sites, which allow users to organize and share links to websites. Examples include Digg, StumbleUpon and Reddit.<sup>1</sup>
- Social networking sites, which are online services that allow individuals to construct a profile, share user-generated content, and view other peoples' profiles and content. Examples include Facebook, MySpace, Google Plus+ and LinkedIn.<sup>2</sup>

6. Traditional media do not require people to have computer skills to access them, are considered by many to be more reliable than social media and in the case of radio and television, are accessible to those with low literacy skills. Furthermore, in most countries newspapers are still affordable to most people and almost every household has a radio or television. Traditional media also employ professional journalists, who are generally guided by a code of ethics. However, print and broadcast media provide limited opportunities for public feedback and are in some circumstances closely controlled by media professionals and corporations.

7. Social media provide an efficient way of reaching people, particularly young people. In developed countries, Internet access may in some cases be more affordable than cable television. At the same time, the lack of infrastructure in rural areas limits access to high-speed Internet for some. In developing countries, low Internet penetration may be attributed to low computer literacy skills and the inability of low-income earners to afford the costs associated with accessing both computers and the Internet.

### **The evolving media landscape**

8. The rapid growth of information and communication technology (ICT) has changed the environment within which parliaments operate, particularly in developed countries. However, due in part to the low penetration of ICT in developing countries, traditional news sources, such as newspapers, radio and television, remain popular and influential information providers and points of connection between the public and parliaments.

9. For instance, the IPU notes that radio broadcasting is the principle source of information in many parts of the world and many parliaments are effectively using it, particularly in Africa, the Pacific Islands and parts of central Asia. Furthermore, according to the IPU, radio is often the only medium available to the vast majority of people living in rural areas where literacy levels are often low.<sup>3</sup>

10. According to the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA), "there are nearly twice as many newspaper readers as Internet users globally."<sup>4</sup> Daily newspaper circulation peaked at 540 million copies in 2008, but has since declined by nearly 4 per cent.

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<sup>1</sup> eBizMBA, Top 15 Most Popular Social Bookmarking Websites | July 2012, <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-bookmarking-websites>.

<sup>2</sup> eBizMBA, Top 15 Most Popular Social Networking Sites | July 2012, <http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites>.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Global Parliamentary Report: The changing nature of parliamentary representation*. Available from: <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/gpr2012-full-e.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, *World Press Trends 2011*, <http://www.wan-ifra.org/articles/2012/04/17/world-press-trends-2011>.

Though circulation declined in North America and Europe, it actually rose in Asia and Latin America.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, declining circulation in the West does not mean that people do not have access to information, for according to WAN-IFRA, “[w]hile print circulation is declining, newspaper audiences are larger than ever before, thanks to expanding digital media.”

11. Another factor influencing online media use is the existence of digital divides—the differences experienced by various groups in accessing and using Internet technologies. On a global scale in 2011, 79 per cent of North Americans and 61 per cent of Europeans were Internet users, compared with 40 per cent of Latin Americans and 14 per cent of Africans.<sup>6</sup>

12. Even in countries where Internet use is high, there are many who do not have access to the Internet or social media. Persons in the highest income bracket were significantly more likely to have Internet access, with 97 per cent of persons in the top income quartile having access, compared with only 54 per cent in the lowest quartile. Access was also higher in metropolitan areas (81%) than outside urban areas (71 per cent).<sup>7</sup>

13. What might the increased use of online news sources mean for citizen engagement? Although more information is available than ever before, research indicates that this increase tends to reinforce existing digital divides.

14. According to an article by Jennifer Brundidge and Ronald E. Rice, “New information resources provided by the Internet are more likely to be used by people with high socio-economic status and political knowledge—those individuals who are less subject to the framing and agenda setting functions of the media and who are already likely to participate politically. These tendencies help to explain why the Internet has exerted little effect on individual level political participation—this, in spite of the vast array of democratic opportunities that the Internet provides.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The use of traditional media to enhance citizen engagement and democracy**

15. For years newspapers, television, magazines and radio have served as key intermediaries between political actors and citizens. Today, few citizens attend political meetings and therefore have little personal contact with politicians. Instead, constituents usually learn about the world of politics from the traditional media, which represent the single most used source of access to the political system for citizens, and their news coverage influences how political issues and politicians are perceived. As a result, political actors have an interest in attracting favourable media attention for their issues, as having a voice in the media constitutes a key political strategy to gain legitimacy and power in the political process.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Internet World Stats, *World Internet Usage And Population Statistics*, 31 December 2011, Miniwatts Marketing Group, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada, *Canadian Internet Use Survey*, 25 May 2011, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110525/dq110525b-eng.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Brundidge and Ronald E. Rice, *Political engagement online: Do the information rich get richer and the like-minded more similar?* in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N. Howard, eds., *Routledge handbook of Internet politics*, Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, 2010, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Tresch (2009) Politicians in the media: determinants of legislators’ presence and prominence in Swiss newspapers. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 14 (1) January, p. 67.

16. In terms of enhancing citizen engagement, these media publish news stories about parliament, transmit notices about parliamentary activities such as committee hearings, and publish advertisements from parliamentarians. To the extent that they improve citizens' knowledge of parliament, they help enhance citizen engagement and democracy.

17. Fisher (2002)<sup>10</sup> submits that, arguably, the traditional media can play a positive role in a political system if there is an enabling environment for them to do so. Journalists need to be equipped with the appropriate skills for the level of in-depth reporting from which a new democracy can benefit. They should also be accountable to the public and follow ethical and professional standards. The independence of the media is essential and can be guaranteed if media organizations are financially viable, free from intervention and operate in a competitive environment. The media should also be accessible to as many people in society as possible. Some analysts have suggested that efforts to assist the media should be oriented towards:

- the protection of press rights,
- enhancement of media accountability,
- building media capacity, and
- democratization of media access.<sup>11</sup>

18. In some countries, the media are self-regulating, whereas in others they fall under statutory regulations. Whichever the case, regulations should be consistent with the right to freedom of expression, which is included in international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Under these instruments, the right to freedom of expression can be restricted under certain circumstances, such as "to protect the rights and reputations of others or to protect national security, public order, public health or morals."<sup>12</sup>

19. In new democracies, the expectation is that the media would help develop a "civic culture" and a tradition of discussion and debate which was not possible during the period of authoritarian rule. According to Almond and Verba<sup>13</sup>, "civic culture" refers to a society characterized by an acceptance of the authority of the State and a willingness to participate in the political system.

20. In most countries that have undergone a democratic transition since the 1980s, the press is an important player in the political system. Journalists are sometimes feared because they uncover corruption and abuse of power. Additionally, bad press can mean the end of a political career. In some countries, policies have been changed, reforms initiated and some individuals ousted in part because of media scandals. In many new democracies, an aggressive press is part of the political process.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Fisher (2002), *Political Culture*. Available from: <http://malroy.econ.ex.ac.uk/fisher/polsoc>. (Accessed 1 October 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Education Association *Freedom of Expression*, [http://hrea.org/index.php?base\\_id=147](http://hrea.org/index.php?base_id=147).

<sup>13</sup> Almond & Verba (1963), "The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations". Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

<sup>14</sup> Coronel, S., (2008), *The role of media in deepening democracy*. Available from: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan010194.pdf> (accessed 22 May 2012).

21. However, despite constitutional guarantees and, in some cases wide public support, the media in emerging democracies have been affected by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership and in some cases even brute force.<sup>15</sup> State controls, however, are not the only constraints. In both developing and developed countries, serious reporting is difficult to sustain in media markets that place more value on sensationalist stories. The competition for the market has meant that the media often succumb to the pressure of simplifying the news. This is often the case in television, where reports on crime and entertainment are given more attention than other potentially more important news stories.<sup>16</sup> In addition, media content may sometimes be controlled by paid advertising.

22. The result of this is that the public discourse is negatively affected and both officials and citizens respond to the "infotainment" type of news they are exposed to rather than engaging crucial issues more deeply. Additionally, in many newsrooms, even in more developed countries, limited budgets do not allow more time and resources to be invested in conducting solid journalism. In some cases, journalists lack the appropriate experience and training to do the level of in-depth reporting that democracy needs. Even if the necessary skills existed, the narrow political interests of some media owners can limit the freedom of journalists to expose certain truths. In many countries, ownership of the media is controlled by a few vested business and political interests, which only worsens potential limits on certain types of journalism.<sup>17</sup>

23. According to the Open Society Foundation<sup>18</sup> and the Hansard Society,<sup>19</sup> print media (newspapers) reaches fewer people directly. In addition, the media has been accused of sensationalism and superficiality, particularly because of the selection of stories that are covered and the way the information is presented to the general public. Despite this, the idea that the media can be a watchdog, a guardian of the public interest and a channel of communication between leaders and the people they govern remains firmly entrenched in many places across the globe.

24. However, some media outlets do not live up to this ideal. Where a desire exists for a more meaningful presence, stringent laws, monopolistic practices and sometimes even the threat of brute force can hinder the ability of the media to play a positive role. In some cases the competitive nature of the information market can force even the most disciplined media outlets to begin relying on sensationalism and other tools for captivating attention and new audiences. In other instances media can even be used as proxies in political clashes. In some cases the media is used as a tool of propaganda to sow the seeds of discord through the dissemination of hate speech. In such cases, media can lead to democratic decay.<sup>20</sup>

### **The use of social media to enhance citizen engagement and democracy**

25. Social media have the potential to enhance citizen engagement because they allow for interaction and the creation of networks. Citizens and parliamentarians can comment on each other's online content, and this two-way interaction may provide citizens with the chance to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Open Society Foundation, *Country Report: Mapping Digital Media: South Africa*, <http://www.soros.org/sites/default/files/OSF-Media-Report-South%20Africa-04-16-2012-final-WEB.pdf> (Accessed on 5 July 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Hansard Society (2011b) *Connecting Citizens to Parliament: How Parliament can Engage More Effectively with Hard to Reach Groups*, <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/files/folders/downloads/entry3192.aspx> (accessed on 18 June 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Coronel, (2008).

contribute to decision-making.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, a study in Britain found that for persons already online, “the Internet makes it easier to take part in democracy and half of the general online sample would prefer to use the Internet to do so.”<sup>22</sup>

26. In recent years, there has been significant growth in the uptake and engagement with some of these platforms by African citizens due to improvements in infrastructure, the arrival of wireless access technologies and lower tariffs.<sup>23</sup> For example, the social networking site Facebook has been widely adopted as a communicative tool across the African continent, with approximately 40 million registered users as at 31 March 2012. However, this number is low when compared with Europe, which has more than 200 million registered users and Asia, with more than 100 million users.<sup>24</sup> Blogging, including the micro-blog service Twitter launched in 2006, has also been embraced by African citizens. A study conducted by a social media monitor, Semicast, found that, as at July 2012, more than 500 million people used Twitter worldwide.<sup>25</sup>

27. The United Nations Human Rights Council<sup>26</sup> for the first time adopted a resolution (20/8) by consensus on “The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet” during its 20<sup>th</sup> Regular Session held from 18 June to 6 July 2012. The Resolution<sup>27</sup> affirms that human rights in the digital realm must be protected and promoted to the same extent and with the same commitment as human rights in the physical world.<sup>28</sup> During the Council’s panel discussion on this right, participants noted there should be no restriction on the flow of information on the Internet, except when international human rights laws are threatened. They further expressed their concern over States that filtered and blocked access to the Internet to unduly limit freedom of expression.<sup>29</sup> The adoption of this resolution is a step in the right direction, as countries that have been sanctioning the use of the Internet would somehow be forced to relax their laws regarding the use of the Internet, thereby increasing the reach and adoption of some of these platforms.

28. In many countries, the various social media platforms outlined above play a key role in facilitating the interactive relationship between citizens and political representatives, as they allow citizens to engage with their political leaders at the local and national levels. These communication platforms also offer innovative opportunities for political actors, political institutions and the public to communicate, collaborate and openly share information, thereby

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<sup>21</sup> Amanda Clarke, *Social Media: 4. Political Uses and Implications for Representative Democracy*, Publication no. 2010-10-E, 22 March 2010, Library of Parliament, Ottawa, Canada, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/ResearchPublications/2010-10-e.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> Andy Williamson, *Digital Citizens and Democratic Participation*, Hansard Society, 2010, p. 15, <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/edemocracy/archive/2010/02/10/digital-citizens-and-democratic-engagement.aspx>.

<sup>23</sup> Internet World Stats (2012). Internet World Stats information emanates mainly from data published by Facebook, the International Telecommunications Union and World Wide Worx.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> SAPA News24: Nigeria (2012), Twitter clocks over 500m users. Available from: <http://nigeria.news24.com/SciTech/News/Twitter-clocks-over-500m-users-20120731> (Accessed on 31 July 2012).

<sup>26</sup> The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body within the UN system responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights. It consists of 47 UN Member States, which are elected by the UN General Assembly.

<sup>27</sup> The resolution was presented by Sweden.

<sup>28</sup> “UN Council backs right to free online expression in landmark resolution, *National Post*, (Toronto), 5 July 2012, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/07/05/un-council-backs-right-to-free-online-expression-in-landmark-resolution/>.

<sup>29</sup> The United Nations Office at Geneva (2012), *Human Rights Council holds panel discussion on the promotion and protection of freedom of expression on the Internet*. Available from: [http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(hhhpNewsByYear\\_en\)/EA35EABE5BAA8642C12579B300535CC6?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(hhhpNewsByYear_en)/EA35EABE5BAA8642C12579B300535CC6?OpenDocument) (Accessed on 7 July 2012).

empowering citizens to make political contributions. For example, some parliaments use Facebook and Twitter accounts to inform, share and reach out to people and communities that would be less likely to visit the parliamentary website. Through these platforms parliament is able to reach younger people that generally do not engage with parliament in any other way, communicate personally with a wider range of people and be dynamic and forward-thinking as an institution.

29. Although increasing numbers of parliamentarians are using social media, research suggests that they tend to use social media as they would traditional media and are not engaging with citizens in an interactive way. Parliamentarians are constrained by, among other things, lack of skills, resources and time, their positions in political parties, and the patterns of social media use among the electorate.<sup>30</sup>

30. However, Chatora<sup>31</sup> (2012) submits that social media platforms have the potential to facilitate citizens' engagement with institutions. A good example is the Mzalendo<sup>32</sup> initiative in Kenya, which plays an oversight role with respect to Kenya's Parliament. Mzalendo has a detailed website that keeps track of the activities of Kenya's members of parliament. The information on Mzalendo's website is streamlined on its blog, Facebook and Twitter accounts. The website provides information on parliamentary motions, bills, MPs' profiles and parliamentary activities. There is extensive user engagement on the Mzalendo platform's accounts, allowing users to post comments and provide links to stories relating to parliamentarians.

31. Initiatives such as Mzalendo can potentially assist parliaments in gauging the issues and perceptions that the public has regarding parliament and MPs.

32. Social media can also play a watchdog role, insofar as citizens can easily share information with each other. By interacting with each other, citizens are also able to create networks to motivate each other.

33. Social media are being used by politicians to identify and mobilize supporters, raise funds, and foster civic engagement. In the 2008 United States election, presidential and congressional candidates made extensive use of social media to interact with voters. Barack Obama's social media campaign was particularly effective, especially in convincing young people to vote.<sup>33</sup>

34. One example of the impact of social media on public engagement relates to the mass uprisings witnessed in the Middle East and North Africa. Researchers at the University of Washington reviewed more than 3 million tweets, many hours of YouTube videos and gigabytes of blogs to establish whether the Internet and social media services, such as Twitter and Facebook, actively played a role in the revolutions that took place in the Middle East and North

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<sup>30</sup> See Andy Williamson, *MPs Online: Connecting with Constituents*, Hansard Society, 2009, <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/files/folders/1688/download.aspx>; Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, *Tweetocracy: How and Why Congress Uses Social Media*, <https://www.utexas.edu/lbj/news/2012/tweetocracy-how-and-why-congress-uses-social-media>; Tamara A. Small, *Canadian Politics in 140 Characters: Party Politics in the Twitterverse*, *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2010, p. 39, [http://www.revparl.ca/33/3/33n3\\_10e\\_Small.pdf](http://www.revparl.ca/33/3/33n3_10e_Small.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Chatora, *Encouraging Political Participation in Africa: The Potential of Social Media Platforms*, *Institute for Security Studies situation Report*, 15 March 2012, <http://dspace.cigilibrary.org/jspui/bitstream/123456789/32998/1/15Mar2012SocialMedia.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Mzalendo is a non-partisan project started in 2003 and its objective is to oversee the Kenyan Parliament. For further information, see Mzalendo's website at: <http://ifo.mzalendo.com>.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta, *Barack Obama and the Facebook Election*, *US News and World Report*, 29 November 2008, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>.

Africa as many have claimed. According to the study, online discussions about revolution had often begun before the actual revolutions took place. The study found that social media served as an outlet for citizens of the region to share their stories of revolution, which played an inspirational role for neighbouring countries.<sup>34</sup> Professor Philip Howard of the University of Washington, who led the study, noted “our evidence suggests that social media carried a cascade of messages about freedom and democracy across North Africa and the Middle East, and helped raise expectations for the success of political uprising”. He added that, “people who shared interest in democracy built extensive social networks and organized political action. Social media became a critical part of the toolkit for greater freedom”. In Egypt, Howard and his team discovered that the number of tweets that mentioned revolution in that country exploded from 2,300 per day to more than 230,000 per day. The number of videos, Facebook updates and blog posts about government opposition also rose dramatically.<sup>35</sup>

35. Given that Twitter users can send updates from any mobile phone, Howard argues that, as a platform, Twitter offers the “clearest evidence of where individuals engaging in democratic conversations were located during the revolutions,” since many people in the region do not have standard Internet access, but most have cellular phones. The study also found that government efforts to disable access to Internet and cellular phone services likely caused an increase in activism, especially in Egypt where access was discontinued for five days before being restored. Professor Howard noted that, “recent events show us that the public sense of shared grievance and potential for change can develop rapidly”. He added that “these dictators for a long time had many political enemies, but they were fragmented. So opponents used social media to identify goals, build solidarity and organize demonstrations.”<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

36. The use of media, including social media, as tools to enhance citizen engagement and democracy is a reality, but it requires the careful balancing of the rights of people to freedom of expression and the need to hold the media, journalists, and participants on social media to account.

37. To these ends, guidelines and mechanisms for holding the media and participants on social media to account need to be developed. At the same time, the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights must continue to be respected, most particularly the right to freedom of expression,.

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<sup>34</sup> Coutts, A. (2011), Study confirms social media’s revolutionary role in Arab Spring. Digital Trends. Available from: <http://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/study-confirms-social-medias-revolutionary-role-in-arab-spring/#ixzz1w9loZe2K> (Accessed 28 May 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.