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Abstract

Political engagement among young activists in the Philippines has changed since new media technologies have gained critical mass. This article reports on how engagement has been redefined by the young and how information and communication technologies (ICTs) have contributed to the amplification of their voices in political life. Activists and ordinary youth were interviewed through unstructured individual and group conversations, and they were asked about their definitions of political, civic, and social engagement. The expression of opinions online is highly valued as a political activity and is believed to be a politically consequential action. Young activists strategically use ICTs and social networks to gather support for their causes and to gain the attention of the traditional media and politicians.

Keywords

Activism, civic engagement, ICTs, Philippines, political engagement, youth

The Philippines has a rich history of civic and political activism, a tradition of engagement that continues to this day. It has experienced successful, peaceful revolutions, and since the 1986 People Power Revolution that deposed a dictator, the public has unseated an additional corrupt president through collective mass action. In spirit and practice, the constitution protects free expression and participation in practically every respect. Protests and other forms of collective political and civic action are a regular occurrence during key political events, such as State of the Nation Addresses and certain sessions of Congress.

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The public is becoming increasingly connected through the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs), cellular phones, and the Internet. While the diffusion of expensive equipment tends to move slowly in this developing country where poverty rates are high, recent dramatic drops in the costs of access and hardware have broken down many barriers to entry. Market innovations, such as pay-per-use business models for both mobile phones and the Internet have made ICTs available to large sections of the population.

This article on the Philippines, ICTs, and political engagement among the youth seeks to examine whether engagement has been redefined as a result of ICT utilization among highly active groups of the youth and to what effect the redefinition has occurred. By investigating how young, active people use ICTs in civic and political activities, we gain an understanding of whether and how today's digital activists use ICTs to engage and mobilize their otherwise disengaged peers. We explore the role of ICT in potentially amplifying the influence of the young in formal social sectors and institutions. During the process, we seek to understand how disengaged peers define political and civic engagement in the digital age and to find out how their online lives intersect with politics and community life. To what extent are activists able to capture the interest of otherwise uninterested individuals through ICT use? Special attention is paid to new social media (i.e., social network sites and blogs) and their role in democratic participation among young people in the Philippines.

Background

Examples of successful efforts in civic and political activism in the Philippines are plentiful, testament to the importance of public opinion in governance. In addition, the Philippines has an encouraging environment that allows civil society organizations (CSOs) to flourish, particularly those that seek to directly influence policy and political decisions. Filipino youth are both formally, through institutionalized mechanisms in government, and informally, through volunteerism, encouraged to participate in civic and political activities. Some have suggested that fewer young people take to the streets to join mass demonstrations, but a growing number of youth engage in political activities online. ICT use grows in popularity and accessibility. Increases in the use of social media, Facebook, and Twitter in particular and the increased availability of Internet access in general are seen as major factors in the perceived shift from traditional forms of political participation to more novel and web-based forms of political and civic engagement. The new generations of young Filipinos are growing up in an era in which new ICTs are widely available, relatively affordable, and embedded in their daily lives.

High levels of active engagement in politics and matters of the state are generally considered desirable in democratic societies. The idea is not without critics, however. Lippmann (1922) was famous for his disapproval of mass engagement, stating that it resulted in a public that was uninformed, misdirected, and at times, erroneous. Mass opinion has the potential to repress minority rights, can easily be manipulated, and can be tyrannous (Price, 1992). When opportunities for and interest in participation are not equitably distributed throughout a citizenry, public engagement might support only the

interests of those who have the means to participate (Burns et al., 2001). However, assuming that there are equal opportunities for engagement, it is still reasonable to conclude that engagement is necessary for effective and equitable governance. The youth is a particularly challenging sector with regard to political participation. As a segment, they appear to be politically less engaged than their older counterparts in many developed countries, such as the US (Bennett and Xenos, 2004; Levine and Lopez, 2002) and the UK (Johnson and Knock, 2005).

Recently published cross-country research shows that the Philippines stands out from its Asian neighbors because it provides a diverse set of opportunities for engagement among the young (Hutter, 2008). Forms of engagement are varied, ranging from large-scale institutionalized organizations embedded in the government to small faith-based groups that enable volunteerism among high school and college students. Government policies support a parallel system of representative governance for the young, including the Sangguniang Kabataan (Youth Council), the National Youth Commission, and youth sectoral councils in different government commissions. In addition to government volunteer opportunities, the young are able to volunteer and become involved in civic activities through faith- and school-based organizations (Hutter, 2008: 46–48).

ICTs in the Philippines

Scholars in the Philippines have remarked upon the ‘transformative’ potential of modern communication technologies, enabled by Filipinos’ readiness to adopt technological innovations from the West (Pertierra, 2003) and the expansive English-speaking population.

The Philippines is among the world’s most frequent users of short messaging systems (SMS); mobile carriers report that over 600 million text messages are sent daily (Alampay et al., 2007; Pertierra, 2009). Figures from 2005 indicate that between 1992 and 2005, the number of mobile phones in the country climbed rapidly from just over 56,000 to 35 million; practically every other person owns a personal mobile phone (Alampay et al., 2007). By 2009, 80% of the population had mobile phone subscriptions, which was a dramatic leap from the 40% who subscribed in 2005. This has been largely attributed to market innovations in the provision of cellular service, specifically the introduction of prepaid subscription and the retail sale of “load” or minutes. In addition to personal messages, calls for political action are communicated via SMS (Alampay et al., 2007), and many believe that through these messages, a large group of Filipinos successfully organized a political rally in the streets, which led to the resignation of President Joseph Estrada.

Internet access experienced a much more sluggish expansion in the country than mobile phones. Even though ownership of personal computers remains very low today, access to the Internet has increased substantially, again, as a result of market innovations such as prepaid subscriptions and Internet cafes, as well as technological innovations, like affordable Netbooks, the availability of free wireless network access across many urban centers, and cheaper technologies for delivering mobile broadband. Around a quarter of Filipinos use the Internet (*source*: internetworldstats.com, 2009), but growth has been and continues to be robust (Townsend and Alampay, 2011).

These levels of access and the tradition of public engagement in politics point to a greater potential for the application of new technologies in various forms of political activism. The government and politicians are now using ICTs to communicate with constituents. Political candidates have established strategies for online campaigning (Mirandilla, 2010), large get-out-to-vote organizations seek to increase turnout among the young by educating them through social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., youthvotephilippines.com), and the Commission on Elections in 2010 adopted a completely automated voting system that relied on the electronic transmission of the results through the Internet. These examples of how ICTs now play an important part in Philippine democracy lead us to question whether it has a role in bringing young people closer to matters of the state.

ICTs in democratic engagement

Debates about whether ICTs positively or negatively influence democratic engagement are as old as ICTs themselves. Some predicted that ICTs would increase many types of participation, amplify the public's voice, and enable communication between citizens and the state, while others believed that it would not make the uninterested suddenly interested and engaged (DiMaggio et al., 2001; Norris, 2001; Sunstein, 2001; Xenos and Moy, 2007). Pessimism about media technologies enabling participation in social and political spheres are anchored in arguments that parallel those made by Putnam (2000) who was famous for attributing part of the decline of social capital in the US to television. Meanwhile, many communication scholars have illustrated that Internet use is related to political engagement (Johnson and Kaye, 2003), attention paid to political information online increases campaign knowledge and interest (Drew and Weaver, 2006), and access to online election news is positively correlated with voting and other types of participation (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003).

Still, the direction and conditional nature of the relationship between ICT use and political participation needs further investigation. More recent studies find, for instance, that while the Internet has a direct effect on increasing knowledge, its effect on acts of political or civic engagement are contingent on a number of factors (Xenos and Moy, 2007). Further, evidence that ICTs' ability to enable the expression of views can encourage traditional forms of participative behavior has been accumulating (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2009; Gustafsson, 2010; Nah et al., 2006; Puig-i-Abril and Rojas, 2007; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009).

ICTs are a wide-ranging set of technologies that offer a variety of features, not all of which are relevant to political and civic engagement. In this article, we have a specific interest in ICTs that may be consequential to engagement, including SMS on mobile phones, websites, SNSs, and convergence technologies that allow access to Internet-based content through cellular phones. SNSs are websites that build networks of contacts from individual or group profiles (Boyd, 2008). Presently, the most popular of these sites include weblogs, Facebook (FB), and Twitter.

More recent scholarship about ICTs' role in engaging youth proposes the idea that the digital generation's level of interest and involvement in politics and civic life should no longer be measured using traditional forms of activism, such as attending rallies or

writing to newspaper editors (Bennett, 2008). Theorists argue that perhaps the digital generation defines responsible citizenship in a different way; therefore, by applying traditional measures to a non-traditional populace, it is no wonder that we find declining engagement (Bennett, 2008). In order to accurately gauge how this set of young people may influence politics and civic life, it is imperative that the research first acknowledges that their notions of citizenship and politics may be different; in addition, the new, networked, online world may be the venue in which citizenship is expressed.

What is engagement according to the digital youth? Are there new ways of becoming part of public life that are displacing the traditional ways democratic citizens get involved? Bennett (2008) describes an engaged youth paradigm in which the central activity is the creation of social identities through the construction of peer networks and online communities. These communities are in turn connected to each other in a vast web of online social lives. He argues that within this loosely networked society, new types of civic action that take advantage of technology's ability to enable individuals to become responsible for both the production and management of political identities have emerged. Empowered identities are created in collective spaces where the young can engage (Bennett, 2008).

This article seeks to contribute to the understanding of how young people have adapted their citizenship in an ICT-rich world by examining the efforts of activists who conduct their engagement online. This is done through an examination of the activities of young Filipinos who have displayed sustained online or offline activism efforts and a description of how they use ICT to further their goals. We interviewed ordinary youth or youth who are not particularly interested in politics or civic life. They are the activists' targets for persuasion and, therefore, can provide insight into the extent to which Internet- and mobile phone-based activism is able to entice young people into involvement.

A number of research questions are asked about the behaviors of youth who are involved in political participation through ICTs. What are ICTs' functions in their engagement? Are ICTs used to persuade other individuals, to expand social networks, to voice personal opinions, or to influence institutions? Do they perceive their engagement through ICTs as effective?

Method

Two sets of participants were interviewed for this study: young people who are heavily engaged activists and have an online or offline presence and ordinary young people who have normal levels of engagement. The latter were sought largely through universities, and the former were selected by searching for political bloggers, members of CSOs, or members of university-based political institutions. All the participants were 15–30 years of age. While most participants were college students, some were young professionals. Activists were interviewed individually, and non-active youth were interviewed in a group-discussion setting. Potential interviewees were formally invited to participate in the study through email, SNSs, SMS, or personal exchanges. They were informed about the purpose of the study and the types of questions that would be asked. Participation was voluntary, and each participant was asked to sign a consent form prior to his or her interview. All the interviews were conducted from December 2009 to March 2010, and

except for two online interviews that were conducted through chat rooms, interviews were conducted face-to-face.

A total of 29 individual interviews were conducted, with an average age of 24, and 14 of the interviewees were female. Twenty-two of the interviewees said they had paid a great deal of attention to news about politics and government in the last week, and all but two participants said they were very interested in politics. The least-used source for news about politics and government was the radio, and on average, activists listened to the radio only 2.6 days per week, they watched news on television 4.3 days per week, and read the newspaper 4.6 days per week. The Internet was the most heavily used source of news; on average, the participants reported reading the news online 5.7 days per week, and all but four of the participants reported using the Internet daily.

Eight focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a total of 87 individuals, 28 of whom were female, and the participants' average age was 20.4 years. When asked how much attention they paid to news about politics, the most common response was 'some' attention. As a group, these participants followed much less news content than the activists, watching news on television about 3.4 days per week, reading newspapers 1.9 days per week, listening to news on the radio 1.6 days per week, and reading news on the Internet 3.4 days per week. Internet use in general was still heavy; on average, the participants stated that they were online daily (6.1 days/week). Most FGD participants stated that they were somewhat interested in politics.

Interviews for this study were done in the months leading up to and immediately following the national presidential election in May 2010; FGD participants acknowledged that their level of interest and involvement may be artificially inflated because it was an election year. The participants stated that during a normal year, they would not be as interested or would not seek out political information as much as they reported they had during this time.

Interviews and group discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. An examination of response patterns was conducted by inserting relevant comments into a matrix to organize the findings according to the research objectives. Respondents gave informed consent for the interviews and recordings, and they were assured of the anonymity of their responses outside the project team.

Results

Results of the interviews are reported by first discussing how much young Filipinos are engaged in digital activities, followed by a description of those who are disengaged from politics and civic life, and then finally by a presentation of the efforts of those who are engaged activists who try to attract the attention of other young people.

The digital life

Both mobile phones and the Internet make up a significant portion of young people's media consumption. Although many participants from the public university said they do not have Internet access at home, they frequent cafes or have mobile devices that allow them to constantly be online. A large number of participants who have laptops rely

on mobile broadband almost exclusively and find that it is the most cost-effective way of staying online for most of the day. Mobiles are at the center of their communication spheres although smartphones are still not very widely used because the cost is prohibitive, and most of the participants are able to use even the most basic phones at full capacity. In contrast, the participants who are working professionals and students from a private university said they travel with multiple devices and are online constantly on smartphones, laptops, and desktops.

Every single participant is part of at least one SNS, the most common of which is Facebook. They maintain social networks by posting about things that interest them, telling others about their day, and following what other people are up to. It makes them feel more connected to a larger set of people that they would not otherwise have contact with.

In addition to building and maintaining social networks, the Internet has become the central source of information and entertainment for many of the study's participants. Entertainment is obtained through sites such as YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, and blogs. The participants said they download movies, music, and television content through Torrents and similar services. Through online local news sites, the participants avidly follow celebrities, sports, and fashion. In fact, for many participants, these are the primary types of news they follow, as opposed to news about politics or public affairs.

The creation of online social identities makes up a significant portion of young people's online activities. Through FB pages, youth connect with online communities that share their interests, they share news stories they find interesting, or they write notes containing personal information. Many participants had started blogging at some point, but only a few remain active. These blogs are mostly about personal lives and opinions or about hobbies like photography.

Life online among young activists takes up a significant portion of their day. Almost all of them start the day by checking email, logging onto FB, updating blogs, and following Twitter feeds. It is part of daily life and has become the primary medium through which they are kept informed, their opinions are shared, their advocacies are promoted, and their activities are organized. Today, it is easy to make connections and spread information for many types of activities.

Defining engagement in the digital age: The disengaged

Even though information about politics and social issues abounds online, the participants express little or no interest in following this type of news for their entertainment. They regularly visit news websites and completely bypass national political events to check the sports section. With traditional media, such as newspapers, they exhibit the same behavior, reading only the lifestyle or entertainment sections of the newspapers that arrive at home for their parents. What ordinary young people know about politics and public affairs, they learn through social networks or through incidental exposure when it piques their interest as they look for other types of content. The findings suggest that the use of ICTs is not able to foster a more active engagement with government among those who are not ordinarily interested in politics. It appears that they do not attract new engaged young people without some active recruitment from the engaged segments of the young population.

There is a general, deep-seated cynicism and a shortage of a sense of self-efficacy in the government, which has likely contributed to these participants' disengagement from it. The most that they do is express opinions through social networks. There is a common belief that this form of political expression is not effective and will not lead to change either because the government is not listening or because the people in government cannot be trusted. Young people are keenly aware of the history of activism in the Philippines, but there is little desire to become involved in traditional methods of political action, such as joining rallies or organizing social movements. Since daily life is so thickly permeated with opportunities for self-expression online, this form of engagement is the most popular, the cheapest, and the easiest.

Since the disengaged are largely inactive, the standard for what they believe counts as engagement and their interest in things political and social is low compared to the standard that activists apply to themselves and others. Facebook and Twitter are viewed as important venues for political self-expression, and generally, speaking and sharing opinions are highly valued as participatory behaviors. The uninvolved consider political activity and involvement to be stressful and full of negativity. They are frustrated by the feeling that there is nothing they can do to effect change in a governance environment that they perceive to be riddled with corruption. These are serious barriers to direct engagement with and interest in government.

The online lives of the disinterested intersect with politics and community life in an incidental manner and mainly through their social networks. Knowledge about public affairs is gathered through incidental exposure when individuals open a Yahoo mail account and in the process see a news feed, or they open the Yahoo search engine and see whatever is posted on the news there. In addition, these individuals are led to news stories when friends post and comment on them on FB. They will also sometimes follow links to news stories offered by the celebrities that they follow on Twitter. The disinterested find out about political issues through their social networks when they are digitally connected with people who are politically active online. This is primarily how the disengaged can be enticed into becoming more involved in politics, and to a limited extent, it is effective. Specifically, it is effective in terms of gathering digital votes for advocacies and issues (e.g., likes on FB, shares, and retweets) among those who are not informed. When videos, photos, notes, or stories go viral or become memes, they move through a social network that is heavily populated by the disengaged. The level of political activity is low, commitment is superficial, and the continuity of interest in political matters unlikely for the disengaged. Even though the activity encouraged through ICTs appears fleeting, it is more than what may have been possible in terms of the speed and breadth of issue awareness when it is compared to offline activities.

Sometimes, there are issues that find their way onto FB that resonate deeply with the young, such as relief efforts after a huge storm or the attempt to levy taxes on imported books. Small, specific events can gain their attention quickly because online communities are arranged around existing social networks and shared interests, and the types of content the online community members are interested in tend to be similar. The young are likely to become more heavily involved in these types of issues, and they care more and invest more of their time getting their peers involved.

The expectations of a digitally competent government are high, and the young easily dismiss efforts of the state when it is technologically unsound. Some of this attitude is based on the same cynicism that already exists with regard to the government; there is no belief that formal institutions consider the opinions of citizens even if there are feedback systems created to establish a direct line of communication (e.g., texting opinions and problems to government offices). It will, therefore, take more effort on the part of the government to involve young people in matters of the state.

There are instances when the young add politicians' FB pages to their own page or follow a politician through Twitter. These are typically local politicians, such as mayors or congressmen or women, with whom they feel a closer affinity, not national politicians. They also tend to be younger politicians, those whose pages appear to be constantly updated, and those who the young people think personally maintain their own page as opposed to delegating it to a staffer. Some have attested to leaving comments on pages and getting replies, which makes them feel more connected to their elected officials. Through these venues, even generally disinterested young people are made aware of more obscure political developments and programs.

Defining engagement in the digital age: The engaged

Activists interviewed for this study consider both civic and political engagement to be important to their self-worth and to the contributions they make in an effort to improve the country. They view their efforts as a way of stepping in for the failures of the government. Almost all the activists that were interviewed classify the expression of political opinions as political activity or engagement. Therefore, publicizing one's own beliefs about politics to try to influence other people is an effort to change government and is, thus, a political act. This includes blogging, sharing news online, issuing political statements through FB, or issuing statements to support or oppose something in the government.

The participants are involved in a wide range of activities, both online and offline, designed to further their activist goals. For almost all of them, ICTs play an important role in attaining political goals through self-expression; individual influence; or in rare cases, institutional influence. ICT-based campaigns and advocacy efforts are considered critical to the success of activities and are viewed as the most effective method for broadening youth involvement and information dissemination and for fostering a sense of belonging in the governance arena. They have been largely engaged politically or civically from the time they were in high school and before they had access to technologies that would enable Internet activism. They are, therefore, able to assess the degree to which ICTs have affected the nature of engagement by the youth. This assessment is mixed.

Many are excited about ICTs' ability to bring more young people to political awareness and involvement. Digital activism is a new type of activism, and it can produce results. Through ICTs, many young people who would otherwise be completely disengaged are influenced by their peers and informed through FB statuses and other forms of unsolicited news content. People have found new ways to volunteer online, and for the inactive, they feel an urgency to act because they see others in their circles acting. The Internet has helped make activism easier by enabling communities to be built around

political interest groups and by allowing people who normally wouldn't know how to contribute to find ways to participate.

However, some say that while ICTs have increased youth engagement in civic and political matters, the quality of this participation has declined. Those who share this view say that purely ICT-based activities are not as effective in creating change as marching in a rally or talking face-to-face with local officials. Internet activism, in a sense, creates a false sense of having participated in an important way. Those who are skeptical consider offline engagement to be more indicative of a greater commitment to the cause than those whose engagements are purely online:

You can measure your online campaign's effectiveness based on the number of people who actually show their support. Actual support means giving money or goods. Actual support means creating noise on the streets because it is the only way you can sway politicians. FB is one way – you can make many accounts to raise that. But history tells us that it is the number of people in the streets that can create change. (Interviewee, 3 March 2010)

Engagement through information. The most basic purpose of ICTs for these young activists is to provide easier access to information and news about institutions, which is widely believed to be a condition for any kind of effective engagement. The Philippine government has been slowly posting information online, but progress has been very sluggish. Participants who do some form of lobbying or those who track legislation rely on the Senate and the House of Representatives' websites for full-text versions of the bills being filed in the legislature and for updates on the progress of those bills. Those who seek to support or oppose bills will post links and files on SNSs or email files to contacts with the hope of gaining greater public awareness about these issues. Positions and statements about policies that are being considered or have been institutionalized by government are circulated through FB fan pages, websites, blogs, and tweets.

Today, many say that ICTs are more important for breaking news than television and newspapers. Two important events were cited as common examples: the developments and information about the relief efforts during the aftermath of Typhoon Ondoy, which submerged and destroyed large sections of Manila, were largely transmitted and organized through FB and Twitter, and news about the Maguindanao Massacre¹ and the ensuing declaration of martial law in the province was mostly monitored by the interested and engaged individuals through tweets and retweets:

I love 'Boto Mo Ipatrol Mo' and before that 'Bayan Mo Ipatrol Mo'. It is a very clear example of how they have empowered ordinary people who can't blog but can text. Blogging is still in Level 5 for the Filipino masses, but texting they can do. They can report by texting. They can put their camera phones on themselves [and report] 'This is what is happening in Ondoy'. During [typhoon] Ondoy, the only things that really worked were the social networks and media. If there was no Twitter, if there were no people who retweeted, a lot more people would have died. I feel that media, both traditional media and new media, are the ones that are most open and most receptive. They have actually encouraged people to really participate. (Female blogger, interview, 18 December 2009)

Stories about the recently concluded national elections were circulated for the engaged through SNSs and blogs. Some expressed dissatisfaction with the way the traditional media cover events because there is little opportunity for feedback and there are few ways to seek out information that is not available from regular newscasts and papers. All of these shortcomings are present on news websites of both established news agencies and traditional news sources. Study participants are in the habit of leaving comments about stories and opinion pieces, sharing stories they find online on their SNSs, and encouraging more famous bloggers and commentators to disseminate alternative content. Young people learn political facts from SNSs, internet portals, alternative online news sources, and mainstream news sources that have an online presence. Through fan pages on FB, they are able to build and expand online communities, raise funds, find a stronger voice, and gather direct feedback.

Activists are fully aware that the SNS has the potential to democratize, being a source of news and information. They are members of groups that are not ordinarily covered by traditional news media. By engaging the young through online strategies, they are able to become louder voices in the debate. If an FB group supporting a particular policy position is big enough or if an entire online campaign is effective, the story is picked up by traditional media.

Advocacy and organizing work. Much of young people's political and civic involvement, at least for the participants in this study, focused on advocacy campaigns and organizing work for advocacy campaigns. Many of them are in the business of engaging their peers, consolidating them, and keeping them connected and updated, attracting more public attention to certain issues and encouraging public expression of their views. For most of these activities, the goal is to capture the attention of formal institutions through a louder voice.

Some of the participants refer to an online activity called blasting, which means sending out messages through blogs, websites, email, Twitter, and similar sites. The SMS equivalent before the Internet was widely accessible was called a text brigade, which entailed sending messages to large numbers of followers. Blasting has been met with mixed success, depending on the issue. Reactions and feedback from the audience are gathered through comment boxes, discussion forums, direct emails, and online petitions. When the issues are newsworthy and when online public attention is significant, these issues are covered by large traditional media outlets. At this point, many of those interviewed are able to call their campaigns a success. One important factor for the success of these online campaigns is the interest of online political celebrities. These are bloggers, political pundits, and commentators who have a strong online presence, are politically relevant, and have the traditional media's attention. Young activists ask these highly visible political elites to retweet messages, copy statements on their blogs, or write about a particular issue.

For young activists, lobbying has also moved to ICTs. A couple of interviewees have direct online connections with the younger members of Congress, politicians' chiefs of staff, news reporters, and mid-level managers in the government. Through their blogs or FB pages, study participants have been able to engage these political elites in discussions about issues. In earlier years, small organizations had to spend money on a press

conference if they wanted to issue a statement to the press, but now, all they do is post statements on institutional FB pages and websites and tag journalists who are part of their network. Most of the interviewees recognize the limitations of ICTs in terms of reach; however, ICTs have become an important means of engaging the young.

In one example, a male interviewee said that he was able to generate resources for a political candidate through online means alone. A female interviewee also said that her organization was able to raise funds for victims of Typhoon Ondoy primarily through an FB page:

We made money for [a] Governor recently. We sent emails to people and media picked it up. We were able to put pressure on COMELEC who decided not to grant a writ of execution to kick the Governor out. We don't have the capital, so we put pressure on the people, we emailed them and then they donated money, so we were able to pay for a full-page ad in the *Philippine Star* newspaper and another one in the *Abante* tabloid. (Female activist, interview, 21 January 2010)

Most ICT campaign efforts, and even individual activities, such as maintaining a blog or writing on FB about politics, are expended in the hope of eventually influencing and affecting institutions of government. Direct communication with government offices is widely considered fruitless because it is still believed that governance is largely practiced with little aid from ICTs and because bureaucrats do not know how to apply technology in their work. Those who have initiated and organized online petitions are not convinced that online petitions will be able to change how institutions behave or make decisions. Any form of direct communication with government institutions is thought to be ineffective. The recourse has been to garner public support for issues through online means in order to attract the attention of the media, and in these efforts, the targets are typically their uninvolved peers.

Where ICTs are viewed as highly effective is in the ability to organize civic volunteer efforts, those that do not seek to create direct influence on government and instead create collections of people who would pick up a shovel and address social problems. Regular citizens' willingness to contribute time for civic work has been more effectively harnessed through ICTs because they allow for efficient organization, even on a massive scale.

Engaging disengaged peers

The connectivity that SNSs make possible is believed by many activists to have increased the proportion of young people engaged in politics. Through FB page status updates, for instance, disengaged young people, who would otherwise be generally uninformed, read about news and current affairs. ICTs have allowed access to information, and more importantly, they have allowed for the expression of personal views, which in turn encourages participation. SNSs have become the central venues for political discourse among the young.

Blogging, sharing news on FB, and disseminating information through Twitter are considered by many interviewees to be important forms of political engagement.

Conveying messages about politics is viewed as a way to influence others' interest and opinions, and in some cases, this encourages them to act. The ability to freely and easily express opinions online, even if they are not political elites or are not followed by many, makes young people believe that their voices matter. This encourages them toward other forms of participation. One female participant said that FB helps her feel connected politically:

I use it to feel connected and also to stay politically active. If someone posts a statement or campaign, I repost it. My friends observed that I'm reposting statements. They say that I'm still an activist, even in that way. I don't repost just to catch attention or just to show activism [intention is to influence friends]. (University student, interview, 21 January 2010)

The FB fan page feature is often used to build communities around ideas, positions, and organizations that have specific agendas. Through these fan pages, young people are brought into political conversations online; they feel a sense of belonging and a sense of being part of the system. These fan pages are used by politicians to connect with constituents; they are used to mobilize and to spread news.

SNSs create a feeling of being heard and of having a voice; respondents state that this has empowered the youth by making it easier to participate. Social networking has expanded membership in youth organizations to individuals who may not be politically active beyond the computer, giving them the ability to bring issues to their network of peers and influence opinions. Personal SNS spaces are being used to organize, arouse interest in political matters, and catalyze action. Young people for whom Internet sites are the primary means of communication use technology to take part in social activism. They interact, discuss, deliberate, and express their views.

Activists who conduct campaigns online, either as an individual or as part of a formal institution, value the simple forms of participation from the otherwise uninterested youth sector, such as liking a page, supporting a cause, commenting on political statements circulating through Twitter, and other similar acts. Given that the usual goal of young activists is to create the perception that their position or cause is widely supported by a large constituency, recorded online expressions of support like these serve their goals well. The more people follow activists' Twitter feeds and the more people that like a page, the more likely activists are to be perceived as significant political players and the more likely they are to garner attention from national media institutions and politicians. Even if the form of participation young activists are able to generate from the uninvolved digital youth is fleeting and, arguably, superficial or uninformed, it is nonetheless valued because it amplifies the youth's influence in formal social sectors and institutions.

Conclusions

The findings from this study suggest that ICT-based engagement can lead to other forms of engagement in civic and political matters, which is supported by the results of other studies (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2009; Gustafsson, 2010; Puig-i-Abril and Rojas, 2007; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). This new generation of politically engaged young Filipinos has a different toolkit available to it, and the youth believe that having ICTs has

helped their efforts immensely in a number of ways. To begin with, the many SNSs have become spaces for discourse with peers and political elites. Through the expression of views and the dissemination of information on SNSs, young activists find that they are able to generate interest about political matters among their peers. Through comments on FB status messages, individuals hear opposing views, engage in debates with their cohorts, network with other similarly minded individuals more freely, and gather popular support for their issues more easily.

The expression of opinions through blogs, tweets, and FB statuses is highly valued as a political activity, and it is an activity that many interviewees believe to be politically consequential. The ease of use and the accessibility of ICTs have given the youth a way to send messages to political elites, an opportunity that appears to have encouraged political interest. Being heard has encouraged the youth to pay attention, so to speak. Interpersonal networks and communities surrounding specific issues have been created through SNSs, and when the youth join these networks, it fosters a sense of belonging to a politically active community.

Much of the civic and political work conducted by young activists through ICTs is aimed at gathering public support through information dissemination and awareness building. ICTs help them amplify their voice. Although the long-term goal is to influence institutions, the route that many choose does not include communicating directly with institutions but gathering public support to attract the attention of big media institutions. If traditional media pick up the campaign, then its members believe the politicians will pay attention.

ICTs have a demonstrated effectiveness for organizing and mobilizing the young. ICTs are being fully utilized by the interviewees in this study to reduce the costs of political activism and, in the process, engage more people. The nature and strength of political and civic activism among young people in the Philippines is changing as a direct result of ICTs. While institutions of government, the targets of activism, have not learned to respond and manage this type of mobilization, they will be required to do so very soon because young voters will become increasingly reliant on ICTs for political information and engagement in the near future:

The personal, interactive, informational and rapid diffusion provided by the new media challenge existing bureaucratic and political structures. Hierarchies of communication so central to traditional flows of power are disrupted by the new media with its [*sic*] open networked informational flows. While the inability of the Philippine state to provide its citizens with basic services is an aspect of everyday life, the new media opens [*sic*] up discursive spaces that explore this incapacity, linking it to particular factors such as corruption, nepotism and incompetence. (Perterra, 2012, personal communication)

Activists aside, the most prominent factor that appears to influence young people's political interest and engagement is their sense of political efficacy and their level of cynicism. Regardless of the access to and availability of ICTs and the breakdown of technological and spatial barriers to engagement, young citizens who do not believe that any involvement on their part will change a system widely perceived to be corrupt and ineffective will refuse to participate.

Given the new digital environment in which the next generations of citizens and leaders operate, how can formal institutions of both the state and civil society utilize ICTs to take advantage of the kind of engagement the youth are willing and able to offer? It has been clear for some time now that large institutions, which are notoriously sluggish in adopting technological innovations, need to catch up by strategically implementing the ICTs that are the most heavily used by their target constituents. In other words, catching up will entail skipping over the many modifications these technologies have already undergone because they have been rendered obsolete. Today, the most relevant ICTs are social network sites and already-networked online communities.

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Note

1. This was an election-related violent incident in a conflict-prone province of Mindanao where 57 people were ambushed and killed during a convoy trip to file for candidacy. More than two dozen journalists were killed, along with many women.

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