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A critical appraisal of forms, features, factors and variables of democratic e-participation with a focus on social media^{*}

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role and importance of e-participation in the political process. The internet has introduced new ways and forms of political communication and citizen participation in social and political life. In the era of digital democracy, the capabilities of citizens in terms of participating directly in politics have been enriched significantly. Accordingly, the internet and the technologies of Web 2.0 in particular have been invested with increased democratic expectations for the renewal of democratic institutions. However, academic research broaches the democratic potential of social media with reservation and highlights the loose connection between online and offline political participation. In this paper, we explore the variables and factors that influence online political participation, taking into consideration the new communicative codes introduced by social media. The analysis of the paper is based on a literature review performed on recent studies in the field, which reveal a plurality of variables and factors that should be analysed thoroughly and combined for the articulation of valid conclusions in relation to the features and the political characteristics associated with the new forms

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of political participation. Finally, we aim to proceed to the formulation of sustainable arguments for the political stake of democratic e-political participation, which continues to be the active involvement of citizens in shaping politics.

Keywords

Political participation, e-participation, social media, digital democracy

Topic

Political science, media, communication studies

Una opinión crítica sobre las formas, los distintivos, los factores y las variables de la participación ciudadana electrónica centrada en los medios sociales

Resumen

Este documento pretende aportar un análisis detallado del papel y la importancia de la participación electrónica en el proceso político. Internet ha introducido nuevas maneras y formas de comunicación política, así como la participación de los ciudadanos en la vida social y política. En la era de la democracia digital, se han enriquecido de manera considerable las capacidades de los ciudadanos que participan directamente en política. En consecuencia, se ha invertido en internet y en las tecnologías de la web 2.0 en particular, con mayores expectativas democráticas para la renovación de las instituciones democráticas. Sin embargo, la investigación académica aborda con cautela este potencial democrático de los medios sociales y destaca la poca conexión entre la participación política electrónica y presencial. En este documento pretendemos explorar las variables y los factores que influyen la participación política electrónica, teniendo en cuenta los nuevos códigos comunicativos que los medios sociales han introducido. El análisis del artículo está basado en una reseña literaria sobre estudios recientes en este campo que revelan una pluralidad de variables y factores que deberían de analizarse minuciosamente, así como combinarse para articular unas conclusiones válidas relacionadas con los rasgos y las características políticas que se asocian con las nuevas formas de participación política. Finalmente, aspiramos a formular argumentos sustentados a favor de la apuesta política por la participación política electrónica democrática, que siguiendo la implicación activa de los ciudadanos a la hora de configurar la política.

Palabras clave

participación política, participación electrónica, medios sociales, democracia digital

Tema

ciencias políticas, medios de comunicación, estudios de comunicación

Introduction

New media and especially social media have a dynamic in-built feature, which allows for bidirectional communication between users. Social media offer new forms and alternative ways of “digital” activity and political participation. Due to these innovations, the modern concept of political participation should be appraised from a different angle, by evaluating these new forms of participatory politics. As democracy has become increasingly digital, democratic procedures have also acquired their digital equivalent. New terms such as e-voting, e-deliberation, e-rulemaking, e-consultation and e-government are the components of the new digital democracy. Similarly, citizens have attained a digital status and can be identified as “digital citizens” or “netizens”, a common term used in the literature.

Given the central role of social media in modern political culture, a significant number of studies focus on the characteristics of these e-participation activities. At the same time, the task to explicate the relationship between online and offline political participation becomes critical. It is challenging to investigate how these new forms of internet activity, especially on social media, are associated with political effects and if they can fulfil the essential content of political participation.

Certainly, the most common measurement of political participation is related to the participation of citizens in the established institutions of democracy (political parties, elections, etc.). The democratic non-institutionalized forms of political participation occur in the democratic informal associations of citizens, the “civil society” as it is known, or they can be manifested in an online democratic activity. Studies show that, nowadays, due to the decline in trust from citizens with respect to traditional political institutions, such as political parties, these forms of non-institutionalized participation seem to be more compatible with the younger generation of citizens and may be less demanding in terms of time and commitment (Marien, Hooghe and Quintelier, 2010, p. 3). In both cases, the main interpretation and significance of political participation is the intention of political actors to influence political decisions. Thus, *meaningful* political participation is associated with an intended outcome on the political process. We should also clarify from the beginning that we refer only to participation in the context of and within democratic politics.

Since we have stressed the intentional and aim-centred scope of political participation, it would be useful to cite

some of the main actions that regularly aim to produce a political result: a) support for a political / ideological opinion; b) expression of opposition to a political / ideological opinion; c) introduction of a new political proposal; d) action undertaken for the purpose of having an impact on the decision-making process; e) influence on the existing distribution of power. Obviously, this list is not exclusive, but indicative, since the political outcome of an action may vary from occasion to occasion.

Undoubtedly, the internet has expanded the ways in which citizens can express their opinions and participate in the political process. At times, the electronic dimension to political participation is seen as a democratizing factor, arguing that the unmediated access to the public sphere of the internet benefits the condition of equality as it is open and free to all without any special formalities. This position, however, is not fully verified since the relevant literature accentuates several independent variables and correlations which affect this “openness”. Within the “overstretched” political involvement in electronic activity in which many democratic aspirations were invested lurks the danger of a vague “expansion” of the term “participation” with many new meanings. This contemporary polysemy of the concept of “political participation” demands a complex variable analysis.

To avoid the pitfall of a profuse polysemy of the term, we should clarify at the outset that, in the following analysis, *an act of political participation is defined as one which is associated with an intentional action on behalf of the subject and the purpose of the participant is for this act to produce some kind of political result(s) in the context of democratic politics* in the short or long term. Certainly, we should be aware that the political intent of an action is not always easily detectable and nor is the exploration of the possible political effects over time. Nevertheless, the ability to change the political situation, or the expectation and belief that this would be achieved through participation (political efficacy), has been identified as an important variable for involvement in the political process (see Zhang *et al.*, 2010, p. 81).

The above considerations form the context of our analysis. In particular, in this article we will: a) provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of offline and online participation; b) critically discuss some of the main features of e-political participation as they accrue from recent studies in the field (2009-2015); c) elucidate and distinguish between the factors, variables and conditions of e-political participation; d)

critically evaluate forms of online political activity of citizens in relation to their prospective to produce political results.

1. Political participation and e-political participation

Political participation is traditionally associated with electoral politics and, at a broader level, with the decision-making process. The well-known typology of an eight rung ladder of "traditional" (offline) political participation provided by Arnstein (1969) demonstrates the close relationship between forms of political participation and power redistribution. The ladder shows degrees of political participation which present the difference between the "empty ritual of participation" and the dominant decision-making role achieved by the citizens. The last level of the ladder corresponds to "Citizens' Control" in which full consideration of citizens' participation is guaranteed in policymaking.

In the realm of e-participation, Macintosh (2004, p. 3) distinguishes three levels of electronic participation by using as a criterion the degree of active citizenship via the internet. The first level is defined as "e-enabling" ("electronic activation") and refers to the ability to access, use and comprehend the information provided via the internet. The second level refers to the use of technologies in order to engage citizens ("e-engaging") mainly through consultation with official policy actors (top-down consultation). The third and last level ("e-empowering") describes an integrated form of political participation. Citizens acquire more power and are able to influence the political agenda and policy decisions dynamically (bottom-up influence).

When approaching e-participation, we begin with the question submitted by Jenkins, which, in our opinion, illustrates the general scepticism surrounding the relevant discussion in a vivid and understandable way. The question posed by Jenkins, "*Political participation in what?*" (Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013, p. 272-273), proposes two levels of analysis: 1) the involvement of users *in* social media; 2) participation in politics *through* the agency of social media.¹ The first level is a logical prerequisite for the second, but it does not necessarily imply the transition to the second level. We could also add a third level, in line with what we

have already said:³ political results *from* participation in social media.

The first level (participation *in* social media) refers to the process in which users are engaged in web-based activities but we cannot adjudicate for the political impact of these actions. Even if a user frequently visits Facebook pages with political content, we cannot identify this act as political participation because the feature of deliberate influence in the political sphere is not evident. The frequency of browsing web pages with political content is an indicator of political interest, at least at a preliminary stage. However, the time spent on the internet is not commensurate with increased political participation rates (Quintelier and Theocharis, 2013, p. 286). An empirical study on young people in Belgium confirms a disproportion between the time spent on the internet and the political activation of the user. The latter is more likely to be a dependent variable on the type of online activity (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008, p. 423).

The second level (participation *through* social media) refers to the political participation of citizens who simply use the internet as a means to actualize their interest. This happens presumably either because: i) of the appropriateness of the internet itself as a medium; ii) the particular citizen is more familiar with the function of the internet; or iii) because this action can take place only through the internet. More specifically, for case (i), we can refer to email communication between a user and a politician, just because it may be considered as a more convenient way to get it touch than visiting their office. For case (ii), we could mention the example of young people and their familiarity with the internet, which increases the possibility to choose a form of online participation than a "traditional" approach of a politician. In case (iii), where participation can take place only through the internet, we can give as an example an online consultation in which participation can take place only by using the specific e-platform.

The third level attempts to assess the possible impact of online participation. This approach is essentially moving in the opposite direction. By recognizing and valuing the political result of an act, if any, we can then identify this act as a political one.

Attempts at measuring e-political participation in the field of academic research and international organisations have

1. A similar distinction is made by Carpentier (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, p. 274) but with a different interpretation.

made significant achievements, but they have received strong criticism, especially when the results do not take into account the social context. As such, the UN e-participation index, which actually counts the possibilities of interactive participation of citizens provided on government sites with an emphasis on consultation issues, was criticized because it fails to assess efficiently the democratic values that exist in several countries and how democratic a government of a state actually is. This issue is discussed intensively by Gronlund (2011, p. 28).

There are different democracy models, each attributing participation different roles. Adding the “e” to either or both terms has not made this relation clearer but rather confused it by adding the technology dimension without much discussion of the fact that technology is a malleable medium able to serve many types of participation, including bogus types designed to, in fact, prohibit real participation. So far, eParticipation has taken off on a technology track. It has not connected to government in any clear way. This means measurement on eParticipation criteria is potentially dangerous as the models are not validated. (Gronlund, 2011, p. 28)

Summarizing the above considerations, we would say that in general the communicative aspect of political participation was stimulated by the internet, yet the connection of e-participation with “real politics” is still pending. Indeed, social media offer the possibility of dialogue, interaction, direct communication, file-sharing, discussion in real time having a comparative advantage over asynchronous forms of communication (eg. email). Online polls can also be a form of maximizing the political impact of online activity. The question that remains is whether all these forms of internet-based activity find their equivalent and are taken into account in official fora where decisions on policy issues are ultimately made.

2. Forms of e-political participation

The internet offers the possibility of direct communication between citizens and has expanded the boundaries of the public sphere while creating multiple public spheres. The typical networking effect has created online communities

in which citizens can contribute their opinion in discussions. Moreover, the cost of access to the internet is significantly lower nowadays and, to some extent, this has helped to detach electronic participation from economic dependency. All of these reasons, and the fact that the internet is a huge deposit of knowledge to which everyone has access, can lead us to an initial positive assessment of the internet's contribution to democratic procedures. Public awareness and acquiring objective knowledge for political issues remain crucial prerequisites of effective democratic political participation. Scholars, however, stress the weak link between the use of digital media and the increase in political knowledge (Dimitrova *et al.*, 2014, p. 110).

For the purpose of evaluating the importance and several aspects of e-participation, we will first proceed with a brief analysis of the main forms in which it manifests itself. Possible online actions in which we can recognize a political incentive are: a) communication by email (to a person or political party or other organization of political interest); b) participation in political blogs; c) browsing of political content websites (websites of politicians, parties, organisations, etc.); d) participation in online political discussions; e) participation in online consultations; f) participation in electronic referendums; g) electronic applications (e-petitions). Moreover, the convergence of media technologies introduced a further example: h) “hybrid” political participation models such as the case of “internetized television” (see Fortunati, 2005), which is the combination of television and internet formats.²

At the institutional level, e-political participation has been associated with initiatives of “open governance” as a guarantee of transparency in decision-making (Deligiaouri, 2013). E-consultation and e-deliberation applications such as the deliberative polling of Fishkin (1991) are conducted by many organizations in the USA and Europe in order to enable citizens' involvement in policymaking. Consultation, as a participative process, plays a major role in the EU and it is a key procedure in electronic participation activities (European Commission, 2009, p. 11, 15).³

Online platforms and consultation services have been used for a more citizen-centred lawmaking procedure in

2. A relevant TV broadcast was aired in Greece during the national elections of 2007 called “Skai You Tube Debate” (see relevant Deligiaouri and Symeonidis, 2010)
3. For a detailed report on initiatives taken by the EU in the field of e-participation, see E. Dalakiouridou *et al.* (2012).

which e-public participation takes place with comments on draft laws (known as e-rulemaking). Ideally, the Deputy Minister should evaluate and integrate the results of public consultation to the final bill. E-rulemaking is one of the most important applications in the field of electronic consultation and political participation with the potential to generate immediate and practical results concerning the implementation of policies by the State (Schlosberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 39).

In the next chapter, we examine in more detail several aspects and factors of political activity and how they are associated with some kind of political impact or result.

3. The political characteristics, factors and political stakes in online participation

The "civic potential" of the internet (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 2003, p. 129) and, in general, the role of ICTs in the political procedure is a debatable area of research in political communication.

Basically there are two approaches to the political use of the internet: "mobilization theory" and the theory of "reinforcement" (Norris, 2000). The first theory argues that internet technologies have created the conditions for the connection of citizens or groups with politics who generally were not interested in politics. The second theory, which approaches the "political potential" of the internet with reservation, claims that the internet will not change anything important in the participatory levels of citizens. Conversely, the internet may reinforce existing inequality observed among underprivileged sections of the population (for further analysis for both approaches, see Oser *et al.*, 2013, p. 91-92).

This distinction is also known in the literature as the utopian versus the dystopian position. Some scholars underline the strong influence of the internet on the political activation of citizens (eg. Norris, 2001) and others argue that the internet has produced no significant effects in relation to citizens' involvement in politics (eg. Bimber, 2001). A more moderate stance argues that the role of the new media is complementary to the traditional media (Bimber and Davis, 2003) or that the internet is contributing to the activation of citizens, but we will have to see to what extent and how

important this contribution is (Boulianne, 2009, p. 205). It has also been suggested that online political participation is a distinct form of political participation that is not directly related either to the theory of mobilization or to empowerment, but has its own distinctive role and rationale.

We should emphasize that the study of online political participation is multifactorial. Academic research displays a number of factors and variables that affect the form, level and the political impact of e-political participation.

We could classify these factors and variables in three levels:

- a) *Personal/individual level*, which concerns the individual and individual characteristics (eg. age, education, economic status, marital status, personality). Personal variables could include the attitudes of a person towards politics or the political beliefs of an individual in general. Zhang *et al.* (2010, p. 81) add to these variables, political interest, political efficacy, political trust and identification (or otherwise) with a political party.
- b) *Institutional level*, which refers mainly to political institutions and their operation, e.g. operation of democratic institutions, characteristics of the democratic system, legislation, party system, electoral system, "participatory" opportunities of citizens in the institutions.
- c) *Social / cultural level*, which refers to issues such as: education system, family, culture, socio-economic status, the characteristics and the needs of a specific society, social and economic development level etc.

A more thorough review in recent studies demonstrates even greater attention to detail regarding the variables involved. More specifically we can identify:

- a) Different forms of political participation (dependent variables):
 1. Web political activity: While the majority of research in the literature refers to digital media in general, specialized studies proceed to an important horizontal segmentation between different forms of use of digital media and their results (see Dimitrova *et al.*, 2014). Dimitrova *et al.* underline that only specific web actions have sufficient impact on political knowledge and participation of citizens, such as browsing online news

sites and websites of political parties (2014, p. 110). Holt *et al.* (2013, p. 30-32) stress the positive impact on political participation for users who frequently watch news either on traditional media (TV, etc.) or in a digital environment.

2. Social media political activity:

i) The different structure and communication process that takes place in various social media is of particular significance. It is noted that Facebook is more likely to distract young users from politics since its function and structure is different. Research conducted for the US presidential elections in 2008 for Obama, where generally there was intense excitement about the use of social media, does not confirm the overall impression that Facebook contributed to the political mobilization of voters. Voters engaged in limited political activity through Facebook in 2008 elections (Carlisle and Patton, 2013, p. 891). While Twitter and Google+ seem to encourage young people to become active in politics, even in offline forms of political participation, the use of YouTube, as the first results show, affects the political mobilisation of users neither negatively nor positively (Towner 2013, p. 537-538). We should also underline that, over the last few years, we have experienced an increased role of Twitter in political communication.

ii) In relation to younger voters online, "friending" candidates or political parties may initiate political participation. In fact, "friending" is associated with more offline civic engagement than other variables (Rice, Moffett and Madupalli, 2012)

b) Factors and independent variables affecting online participation

1. Age is an important factor differentiating the results in most studies. It has been observed that political interest and political participation levels increase with age (Holt *et al.*, 2013, p. 29-30).
2. Education remains a debatable domain. Young people, as expected, have better online literacy. Educational advancement increases political participation. In particular, post-secondary education seems to establish a positive causal effect on political participation (Mayer, 2011).

3. Gerber *et al.* (2011) analyse the *Big Five* personality traits in correlation with political activity (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness). Extraversion and emotional stability are positively associated with political activity and more specifically with voting (Gerber *et al.*, 2011, p. 703-704). Agreeableness as a character trait leads to forms of e-political participation in which the user is not exposed directly but can be anonymous, in order to avoid confrontation with peers (Quintelier and Theocharis, 2013, p. 286). In the latter case, therefore, it is most likely for the citizen-user to avoid involvement in political debates and controversies in a circle where he is recognizable.
4. The role of the family and other political socialization agents may have a greater or lesser impact on the formation of a political participation attitude especially during adulthood. Quintelier analyses these factors and underlines the effect of family discussions, peers and voluntary associations in increasing and stimulating the levels of political participation (2015, p. 65).
5. The so-called digital divide continues to affect online political participation (Norris, 2001; Sreberny, 2009). Social inequalities have their "digital" equivalent (Deligiaouri, 2011) or, in other words, they can be reproduced digitally (Hargittai 2008 as cited in Morris and Morris, 2013, p. 595). Socio-economic status and level of educational attainment matter in youth engagement in politics as well (Sloam, 2014, p. 677-681). Online political participation remains stratified by socio-economic status and has not changed much the inequality patterns existing in offline politics (Schlozman *et al.*, 2010). Research reveals that the higher socio-economic classes are more likely to develop political participation activities than less privileged ones and, as a result, governments seem to respond more readily to the demands of the privileged classes (Gilens, 2005, p. 793-794). On the other hand, access to the internet can reduce the gap in political knowledge and consequently increase participation levels between privileged and underprivileged social classes (Morris and Morris, 2013, p. 597-598). Studies demonstrate that: a) access to the internet can work towards balancing discrimination at a socio-economic level; b) social contexts that are information-rich and allow a good flow of information between their

members may reduce the lack of political knowledge usually found in social groups with a low level of education (Fraile, 2013, p. 119, 138).

c) Organizational settings of media and communicative codes

1. Reservations are voiced concerning the role of the administrator in the management of an electronic platform. Actions such as the removal of comments and agenda setting of topics for discussion, seem to affect to some extent at least, the process of online political participation. Features similar to the communicative model of the gatekeeper have been observed by scholars (as mentioned in Crivellaro *et al.*, 2014) suggesting that, in the aforementioned cases, the "openness" of electronic participation may be in danger.
2. The functionality of a specific social media platform and the possibility of providing a multimodal discourse with various forms of expression has proven to be a decisive factor. Crivellaro *et al.*, (2014) in their research on Facebook indicate that multimodal discourse offered by Facebook and the ability to communicate in many ways (photos, hyperlinks, text) allows the creation of a diverse cultural environment of expression wherein speech articulation may occur in different ways. In this way, participation is enhanced because of the various ways that can be employed by individuals in order to express themselves.

In relation to the consequences of online participation we may discuss the following points

1. The wealth of information found in communication avenues should not lead to the erroneous conclusion that the amount of information is in direct proportion to its quality or that the plurality of available information results in a deep and comprehensive knowledge of things. Networking and the easy exchange of views on the internet should not be considered as a necessary factor contributing to pluralism nor does it always entail diversity and a multifaceted treatment of issues. Online communities are characterized by fragmentation and instability (Deligiaouri, 2011).

Moreover, the propensity of internet users is to discuss with like-minded users, to form groups of common interest and be exposed to content that is compatible with their own opinion (Sunstein, 2001). Once again the theory of "selective exposure" to media content is confirmed.

2. Regarding online discussions it is important if they take place between people who know each other ("strong-tie network") or between people with loose coupling ("weak-tie network").⁴ The participants in discussions in weak-tie networks are exposed to a variety of information from people who they probably do not know. This lack of intimacy is a feature that enhances their electronic participation (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012, p. 176-177), probably because they feel more comfortable talking to people they are not related to. On the other hand, agreement rather than disagreement affects significantly online political participation which confirms the strength of discussion networks among the like-minded (Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012, p. 177). However, this fact weakens the characteristics of heterogeneity and diversity which are considered a positive asset for a political discussion
3. The difference between political activity and political participation in the aforementioned sense is evident in studies. Hence, while people that comment on online articles with political content show greater interest in the political events, it is possible that, in the end, they will prefer not to go and vote (Kruikemeier *et al.* 2013, p. 12, 13).
4. Political mobilisation and political involvement online are factors which indicate political interest (Carlisle and Patton, 2013, p. 891). Conversely, citizens who are already active and politically motivated are more likely to be engaged in e-participation activities in comparison to citizens who are not politically active (Deligiaouri and Symeonidis, 2010).
5. The study by Oser *et al.* demonstrates that there are groups of citizens who prefer electronic forms of political participation without necessarily having the same willingness to participate in offline politics (2013, p. 98-99). Thus our earlier argument for online

4. For a brief analysis of the two types of networks, see Valenzuela *et al.*, 2012, p. 167-168).

participation being a “distinct type of participation” seems to be supported to some extent. This is mainly the case with young people who have a loose connection with “traditional” politics (eg. political parties). Young people usually engage in alternative forms of political activity (eg. protest politics either online or offline) as they tend to prefer non-electoral forms of political participation.

The above analysis based on the discussion of recent studies reveals some important variables and factors which influence online political participation. It is evident that, due to the multivariable nature of e-participation, studies in the field are becoming increasingly detailed. What is also obvious from the study of the results is that, in many cases, the conclusions remain conflicting and ambivalent. Thus, any analysis of e-participation should maintain a sceptical approach.

Conclusions

E-politics inaugurated a new era in democracy. In particular, social media have revealed new ways of communication, socialisation and participation in the political process. Digital democracy was associated with initiatives of open governance and direct democracy in an attempt to re-establish the role of the citizen in decision making and consequently redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The initial euphoria about the political stakes of the internet and its democratic potential seems not to have been verified by the studies, at least to the expected degree. Broad scepticism is observed in academic research regarding the impact of online political activities on actual political procedures and, most importantly, on the decision-making process. The comparative analysis of recent studies

conducted in this article highlights a large number of variables and factors that should be taken into account when analysing the political proponents of online activity. The importance in drawing the lines between participation in social media and participation through social media was evident in the studies quoted.

Our analysis also identified the different rationale, intention and possible political impact of different forms of electronic political participation. Respectively, the logic and the structure of online platforms create a different context and potential for users, which can have a mobilisation effect or produce no effect at all.

The age, educational level, personality, socio-economic status of users remain crucial variables as they are in offline political participation. Of particular interest are the research results for young people who constitute the main body of internet users. The advanced online literacy of young people and the increased time spent in front of a computer screen does not always translate into their political participation. Instead, users of all ages who are already interested in politics find in internet technologies an alternative way to participate in politics.

In conclusion, we could argue that when analysing e-participation several factors should be analysed thoroughly and in detail in order to reach justified conclusions.

The conclusions of this study are certainly not generalizable as, for our analysis, we have drawn inferences from a selection of papers published in the field. Even though our findings are not generalizable, they indicate that causality between online activities and political results remains controversial and loose. As such, academic research still addresses with considerable caution the political potential of the internet noting, however, its positive contribution in several aspects.

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