Digitally enabled crime-fighting communities: Harnessing the boundary spanning competence of social media for civic engagement

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Digital technology is increasingly being recognized as a catalyst for national progress and social transformation. Using an in-depth case study of social media-enabled crime-fighting communities in Malaysia, this paper explores the use of social media in bringing societal change through civic engagement. We adopt the notion of boundary object to conceptualize how social media could be enacted to serve different boundary spanning purposes toward facilitating civic involvement. Overall, this paper contributes to the growing literature that aims at exploring (1) the use of technologies in advancing civic engagement and, more generally, (2) the power of technologies in addressing societal challenges.

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1. Introduction

Recent development in information, communication, and connectivity technology is unleashing new possibilities in nearly every aspect of our lives [23,55]. This paper considers the digitally enabled (and more specifically, social media-enabled) change in the context of civic duties and public engagement. Today, digital technology is increasingly being recognized as an important catalyst for national progress and social transformation [50]. The emerging use of social media, in particular, is establishing new opportunities for citizens around the world to participate and contribute their power in solving important public issues [52]. Several recent events have highlighted the power of social media in supporting civic behaviors. In countries such as Egypt and Libya, for example, citizens rely heavily on social media such as Facebook and Twitter for civic expressions during times of dramatic political uprising [34,51]. The Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring are just few powerful exemplary initiatives in recent years that demonstrate how social media allows communities to spark debate, effect change, and build movements like never before [33,44].

Taken together, the eager adoption of social media in public sphere is bringing a new form of civic participation [52]. Unlike the traditional, restricted model of civic engagement, social media-enabled civic engagement fosters “openness, inclusivity and the opportunity to debate issues of common concern” [52]. Social media helps to stem the tide of civic disengagement by lowering the barriers to civil participation and collective action [10]. It allows the bridging of like-minded individuals [10] and provides a fertile context for the formation and expansion of networks [44]. Social media thus serves as a flexible means for large-scale, decentralized organizing, and represents a remarkable new opportunity for civic participation and collective actions [10].

However, despite the increasing use of social media in civic life in recent years and its demonstrated potential [39], research on social media-enabled civic engagement is still at a nascent stage [20]. Existing studies have so far tended to study the impacts of traditional media on civic engagement [20]. We know remarkably little about how emerging technology such as social media could be used to facilitate civic goals [52,53]. This study is motivated by this knowledge void and set forth to further an understanding of the civic use of social media. By using an in-depth case study of social media crime-fighting communities in Malaysia, this paper aims to contribute novel insights on how social media is being used to catalyze civic engagement and to accomplish civic goals.

To conceptualize the dynamic use of social media in civic engagement, this study adopts the notion of boundary object [73]. The theoretical concept of boundary object helps to capture the