



Social Media a Two-Edged Sword to E-Governance: The Role of Social Media in Cameroon's Democracy

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of the paper is to provide information about the application of social media tools in e-governance of Cameroon. The review of the literature shows that social media tools have a huge potential to be used in the context of e-governance and it offers several benefits such as transparency, easy and wide dissemination of information about the activities of government and many others. However, there are still some countries which have not taken full advantage of benefits offered by social media in the context of e-governance. Although there are a number of countries including Cameroon which has adopted usage of social media tools in e-governance, the interaction and engagement of customers to e-governance systems is rather limited and needs further development. This paper aims to provide information about the current state of e-governance in Cameroon which is explained by the framework of social media policy which consists of eight important elements.

1. Introduction

The dynamics and phenomena of governance have greatly changed, since the creation of the modern state from Westphalia in 1648 to the actual democracies of the 21st Century. The actors have generally remained the same (the governors and the governed) and new actors that serve as buffers between these entities such as non-governmental organizations, multinationals and individuals have emerged as important actors of modern governance. The concept of classical liberalism or western democracy is made up of core elements such as freedom of speech and human rights, political alternation through free and fair elections. Such representative democracy inculcates a culture of accountability from the leaders to the people. No doubt the introduction of mass communications (television, radio, newspapers, internet, etc.) greatly shaped the public's perception of political participation and democracy. Electronic governance or E-governance though having a multitude of definitions is defined by UNESCO as "Governance refers to the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country's affairs, including citizens' articulation of their interests and exercise of their legal rights and obligations. E-Governance may be understood as the performance of this governance via the electronic medium in order to facilitate an efficient, speedy and transparent process of disseminating information to the public, and other agencies, and for performing government administration activities."¹ E-governance is thus a broad concept which is related to other concepts of E-government, We-government and E-democracy, which seek to use information and

communications technologies (ICT) to increase citizen's participation in collaboration with an effective government that is accountable to its taxpayers (Clift, 2003; Bedi, Singh and Srivastava, 2001; Holmes, 2001; Okot-Uma, 2000). E-governance generally leads to 4 main types of interactions between stakeholders which are; (G2G) Government to Government, (G2C) Government to Citizen, (G2B) Government to Business, (G2E) Government to Employee (Palvia, S. C. J., & Sharma, S. S. 2007). In order to limit the scope of this work, it shall focus

The introduction of ICT in human relations was further revolutionized in the 21st century with the advent of social media that poses a unique dimension in political and democratic discourse. Social media is a loose term attributed to those applications that make use of web 2.0 platforms "whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With an estimated 2.46 billion users of social media in the world as of 2017, data show social media playing an increasing role in E-governance and E-democracy in the world. World leaders such as Donald Trump and Barack Obama used social media in their historic electoral victories while other unfortunate leaders saw their regimes toppled as was seen during the Arab springs in North Africa (Tufekci, Z. and Wilson, C. 2012). The growth of Social media in Cameroon is proportionate to the advent of the internet, with an estimated 6,128,422 internet users out of a population of 24,513,689 and a 25.0 % penetration as of 2017 are positive numbers for

¹http://webarchive.unesco.org/20161021003528/http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=4404&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

the existence of social media.² The most popular social media sites used by Cameroonians include Facebook (93.92%), Pinterest (3.64%), Twitter (1.03%), YouTube (1.14%), LinkedIn (0.11%), Tumblr (0.03%), Google+ (0.05%), StumbleUpon (0.01%), VKontakte (0.02%) as of December 2017.³ Thus Facebook inc retains Lion's share with an estimated population of 2,100,000 users (8.6 % of the population) and therefore the designated social media for this research paper.

2. Cameroon's Democracy

The Republic of Cameroon gained its independence from France on the 1st of January 1960 and use with the British Southern Cameroons on the 1st of October 1961 (Ngoh, V. J. 1996). The initial republic was a federal one with two distinct political systems (Centralized French "Jacobin" system and a British federal system). The democratic process was mostly guided by traditional mass media (Newspapers and radio) which were usually pro-government or violently repressed when they criticized the government⁴. A press law was introduced in 1966, known as Law No. 66/LF/13 of December 21, 1966, which was amended five times by Decree No. 69/LF/13 of November 1969; Decree No. 73/6 of December 1973; Decree No. 76/27 of December 14, 1976; Decree No. 80/18 of July 14, 1980. and Decree No. 81/244 of June 22, 1981. These laws were more repressive and cumbersome to any meaningful free media. The first and for a long time only television station, Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) in the 1980s and 1990s served as the official and sometimes only means of communicating information and orientating the democratic process⁵. With the end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin wall, there was a wind of democratization in Cameroon and the re-introduction of multipartyism (Since 1966 marked the banning of multipartyism and the imposition of the one-party system) into mainstream politics. The law of 1990 guarantees the liberty of association. This wind of liberty led to the creation of the National Council on communications in 1991, having as a mission, the role of advising government and guiding the usage of mass media communications in the democratic process. This organ created and dependent on government could not really claim to be independent and neutral. The concept of freedom of expression was further consolidated in the preamble of the 1996 constitution that guarantees the right to freedom of thought. With the advent of ICTs in the early 2000s in Cameroon, the government created a law that codifies the role of the multimedia organization. However, with the spread of social networking services which were first adopted by the youths for entertainment, but gradually started becoming a major instrument of information and political awareness. With the growing usage of social media as a tool and as a threat, the government took some pre-emptive actions to criminalize some cyber deviances that could pose a threat to the stability of Cameroon. This was seen with the introduction of the law of 2010 section. Moreover, the role of social media in Cameroon's democratic process started taking effect as from 2016 with the recent/resurgent Anglophone crisis and other social events that have posed more of a threat to the regime of Yaoundé.

Similarly, to other African countries, the government of Cameroon spent more than 30 years to establish and maintain its power as well as to centralize the government. By following this strategy, the government was able to dominate all aspects of life including public and private through the help of media. Once Cameroon achieved its independence, it was considered as a supreme mission of all Cameroonians to use their every resource in order to build a great nation. In this regard, media was

considered as a critical tool which can disseminate the information about the development that had been undertaken (Huang, 2010). Precisely, journalists were required to use their talents to their best while media's main role was to explain the important policies of the government to the population with the aim of involving them to take active participation in the process of uniting nations, their integration and development. However, it should be mentioned that the government of Cameroon maintained the strong and rigid control over the media through Ministry of Information and Culture. The government of Cameroon strived to act as a nation-building and they believed that only way to achieve this was through central intervention. Thus, the role of media was mainly concerned to disseminate the information about the latest changes and developments. One of the Presidents of Cameroon, Biya, who came to power in 1982 described the role of media as being related to animation, control and orientation. The point of view expressed by Biya is closely similar to the one provided by Ahidjo who mentioned that the main role of media is to open up the minds of people to keep them informed about what is taking place in a modern world (Ottoum, 2011). In other words, in the case of Cameroon, media was considered as an auxiliary for the government. Generally, it can be mentioned that public media is considered as a critical component of civil society. The government of Cameroon regards the media as a critical part of government institution rather than referring to it as a separate institute. As an example, it can be mentioned that most of the journalists are employed by the government and people in higher positions are chosen by President (Ngambouk, 2013).

3. Theoretical Framework

There are several reasons that prevent governments to adopt social media practices in their operations. For instance, limited knowledge about e-services, the interest of citizens, support of the government and low usage rate of government websites. Moreover, another important factor that prevents most of the government to adopt new technologies is trust. Particularly, the communication process which is established between people and government is regarded as the most critical criteria to increase the trust towards e-governance (Moriera, 2009). There are several benefits of the social media that can be applied in the case of e-governance. For instance, collaboration, empowerment and time can be considered as the strengths of the social media. As a result, e-governance enable the people to get information about the activities of government, provided services by government and it establishes the collaboration between stakeholders by involving the participation of government agencies, agencies work and information. Moreover, usage of the internet is expected to realize the complete potential of e-governance operations. In this regard, it is worth to consider the benefits of social media offered to e-governance. E-governance can benefit by application of social media not only by improved services of monitoring and cost reductions but also improvements in quality (Crowe, 2010). Particularly, using their websites governments can publish job announcements, promote their services, receive feedback from the customers and establish means of communication with their partners in geographically dispersed areas. On top of that, usage of social media networks is essential to increase the transparency of activities of government which in turn impacts on building the trust towards the government. The review of the literature shows that usage of technology can be studied by dividing them into three main ways. They include electronic government, government 2.0 and open government. Electronic government involves the application of ICT

² <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>

³ <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/cameroon>

⁴ Nyamnjoh, Francis Beng: How to kill an underdeveloped press: Lessons from Cameroon. Gazette 46: 57-75, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990

⁵ http://asseja.net/index_en.php?pg=actu&ppg=4&pp=4&id=163

tools in process of governance and it is considered as one of the widely and commonly used practice. The literature defines the investment process into the e-governance as government 1.0 which resulted in more transparent government activities and at the same time accelerated the social political and economic development. However, it is worth to mention that e-government was considered as a limited instrument since consumers can be only connected with the government instead of being engaged.

In the literature, the concept of "governance" does not have one commonly accepted definition since there are no defined phenomena which can be used for the definition of "governance". Generally, governance consists of various institutions and processes which are responsible for managing the interdependency between various actors (Ottoum, 2011). The definition of these can be found from two different perspectives including economic and political science. The literature has also provided the evidence of social media governance which consists of formal and informal frameworks that are responsible for regulating the actions of communities within the web. Thus, this term needs a more specific explanation to analyze the current practices. As it was discussed above, social media tools have led to the creation of various opportunities for government to collaborate and engage with publics in different projects that they undertake in the form of online debates, e-participation and etc. However, several risks which are posed by social media in the government practices such as isolation, misuse of information, threats related t security and violation of security should be taken into consideration (Nica, 2011). Thus, there is a strong need to formulate the framework which can help the government organization to establish the main guidelines which should be followed in applying social media for government practices.



Figure 1: Eight essential core elements of a social media policy

The first element of social media policy is accessed. Employees have an access to use social media at work for various purposes including to carry out their daily tasks and develop professionally as well as personally. Thus, to increase the productivity of employees at work and prevent them from using excessive usage of social media, various forms of filtering can be used. The implications of these practices are essential to improve the effectiveness of e-governance practices. Precisely, blocking the accessibility of several numbers of websites and providing limited access

for an only limited number of employees can be essential to improve the practices of e-governance. Account management is regarded as another important element of social media policy in the case e-governance. Precisely, it is responsible for keeping the record of accounts created and also establishes several procedures in order to run these accounts. The procedures of account management should be delivered to each employee. Acceptable use is mainly concerned not only with the usage of social media but also with the usage of Internet and other necessary technologies (Isbulan, 2011). In other words, this policy can be in charge keeping the record of online hours, monitoring the websites visited by employees and formulating penalties for the violation of penalties. Another important element is employee conduct is mainly concerned with employee behaviour in online and offers penalties for the violations of the regulations. It is important to reconsider and review important points included in the employee code of conduct. Content posted on the social media is also considered to be important (Ottoum, 2011). Precisely, content posted in the social media should be consistent according to the policy.

4. Discussion

The social media policy can be also applied to the case of Cameroon. Since social media plays a critical role in order to disseminate information about the activities of the Cameroon government and it is considered one of the means through which trust of the people is built towards the government. Employee access to the social media is strictly regulated by the government of Cameroon. This is mainly done in order to improve the effectiveness of the employees in the workplace. Moreover, the government of Cameroon has established the strong procedures that should be followed by employees who are creating social media accounts. Acceptable use also is a critical element of social media policy in the case of Cameroon government. The government of Cameroon provides clear points which should be followed by the public while using different websites (Ottoum, 2011). Employee conduct in the case of Cameroon government is strictly regulated since it is important to ensure the content and quality of materials posted by employees to social networks. Security of social networks is important to take into consideration as it will contribute to ensuring the safety of government data.(Bulerica, 2010) Legal issues are followed in Cameroon since usage of social media should be strictly according to regulations and laws (Satapon, 2017). Especially, recently the government of Cameroon has established the law which is directed to regulate the usage of information technologies by the government and individuals. As a result of the application of social media practices to government activities, people can be easily engaged in the activities of the government. Thus, there is a strong need for the creation of regulations and policies which control the interaction process of people with government activities especially in the case of e-governance. However, there is still a number of elements in the social media policy of Cameroon that should be improved to the greater extent (Crowe, 2010). For instance, there are not enough and well-developed policies which can reduce the potential risk or which are devoted to risk management. Precisely, the policies mention about the existence of risks but do not provide enough guidelines and strategies on how these risk can be overcome, mitigated or avoided. The same applies to the formulation of proper risk management plans (Magro, 2013). Moreover, the social media policies which are developed for the case of e-governance in Cameroon fail to develop necessary training and short courses which focus on developing the necessary skills and talents of employees working in different organizations and government institutions.

5. Conclusion

Due to the number of benefits of social media including collaboration, participation, and empowerment, many governments were attracted using the social media and apply it to their daily operations. The reason is that social media helps governments to promote their services, improve the transparency of their operations and increase the trust on the activities undertaken by the government (Harb, 2011). However, a number of external risks which are posing threats in areas of government such as isolation, exclusion, and privacy violation and misuse of information as well as various threats related to security. Therefore, there is a strong need for the adoption of several regulations and laws which monitor the efficient usage of social media tools in order to improve activities and ensure smooth application of social media tools for the case of e-governance. Social media policy which consists of several important elements is one of the critical steps which are undertaken by the government of Cameroon in order to ensure the effectiveness of social media and improve the practices of e-governance in the case of Cameroon. However, it is worth to mention that in order to apply social media practices for the case of e-governance strong business justification might be required which can be used to address a number of risks associated with security and privacy. In this regard, it can be stated that policies and actions undertaken by the government of Cameroon are consistent and accordingly in order to ensure the privacy and safety of government data. However, there are still some important elements in the social media policy of Cameroon which were not correctly addressed and should be elaborated more in the future. Also, it is worth to mention each element of social media policy can be improved and updated to a certain extent in order to ensure the efficiency of e-governance activities.

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