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EXTENDING THE DEBATE ON ICTs FOR CIVIL AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: RUPTURES BETWEEN OLD AND NEW CIVIL SOCIETY IN A HIGH-TECH CITY

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Introduction and theoretical overview

This paper examines the issues confronting civil society actors as they leverage the internet to create spaces for citizen participation in public affairs. In particular, the paper focuses on the complexities arising from the intersections between the online and offline spaces of civic engagement. The creation of new online spaces of activity is discussed within the current literature on the relationship between ICTs and civil society for greater democratic engagement (see Rao, 2013).

This paper draws upon the rich body of work that studies how political activists, journalists, academics, politicians, and ordinary citizens in urban centres have leveraged new technologies for civil and political engagement (Castells, 2012; Chadwick & Howard, 2009; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Foth, Forlano, Satchell & Gibbs, 2011; Hands, 2012). The use of ICTs by youth, sexual and political minorities, other traditionally marginalized groups for greater civic and political engagement has also been well documented (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Bennet, 2008; Mehra, Merkel & Bishop, 2004; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). In recent years, studies have begun to focus on the increased use of ICTs among conventional and newer civic and political actors, including both elite and marginalized groups, in developing Asia (Hassid, 2012; Rao, 2012; Soriano, 2013, 2014; Sreekumar, 2013a; Zhang & Lallana, 2013). This paper examines the efforts of a new type of civil society actor in Bangalore city, India, whose extensive use of ICTs distinguishes him and his activities¹ from the more conventional civil society actors in the city.

This is premised on the notion that Bangalore's IT base has contributed to the rise of a new type of ICT-enabled civic action by tech-savvy actors. Bangalore, as a technology and knowledge hub, has been associated with the rise of a professional and transnational civil society, working in tandem with IT entrepreneurs to reform governance and renew citizenship (Benjamin, 2010; Dasgupta, 2008; Ghosh, 2005;

¹ The key players in Praja.in are almost exclusively male.

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Heitzman, 2004; Sreekumar, 2013b). The role of this new class in urban India has been both admired (Angell and Ezer, 2006) and critiqued (Benjamin, 2010). It is within this context that the paper examines Praja.in (henceforth known as *Praja*), a citizen interaction platform co-founded in 2007 by three IT professionals keen to use their technical expertise to make civic engagement easier in Bangalore.

Praja (meaning “citizen”) comprises of an online platform for discussion and collaboration and the nonprofit organization (NPO), RAAG (Research, Analysis and Advocacy Group) that operates around it. While *Praja* was originally conceived of as a purely internet-based platform, its increased visibility in public affairs mandated a shift towards offline action. RAAG, as the “advocacy arm”, has undertaken prominent projects in the areas of public transportation, such as commuter rail, bus, and cycling.

Method and analysis

Praja was chosen as a case study (Yin, 2003) by dint of its active online platform, its use of a variety of new media platforms, its increasingly prominent role in the city’s offline and online public sphere, as well as its linkages with civil society groups and government actors. Fieldwork was conducted in Bangalore city in two phases: May-July 2011 and December 2011-January 2012, with follow-up data collection via telephone or Skype thereafter. The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996), supplemented by unstructured observation (Nørskov & Rask, 2011) of blog posts, observations in the field, as well as other secondary data sources. A total of 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with *Praja* members (10), government officers closely associated with its activities (3), and members of two prominent civil society networks in the city (10). Data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis methods underpinned by an inductive approach in general (Mason, 2002; Thomas, 2003), with an emphasis on coding and memoing to identify categories, relationship between categories, and emerging themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Richards & Morse, 2007; Saldana, 2009).

Main Findings

Ruptures between Praja and “traditional”, activist civil society

Praja was created with the aim of using the internet to overcome the limitations of traditional civil society actors such as non-government organizations (NGOs), resident welfare associations (RWAs) and the more hard-core or radical activist groups. Key RAAG members distinguished *Praja* from these civic actors in the following ways:

Structured, citizen-driven advocacy: The platform was designed for analytical discussions, with emphasis on data-driven collaborative interactions, achieved partly through strict moderation. Thereafter, discussions on a topic were compiled as a report and forwarded to the government via offline channels. This structured system of providing research-based solutions was distinguished from the cacophony of traditional forms of engagement.

Ideology: Praja members saw themselves as focusing on solutions and data rather than ideology, whereas activists were seen as rigidly adhering to ideology at the cost of flexibility and improvisation. A co-founder described Praja as “not ideology neutral”, but pluralistic, balancing between members’ ideologies and advocating the most suitable solutions to the government.

Collaborative approach: RAAG’s approach of collaborating with government as distinguished from the confrontational approach of some civil society actors. Another aspect of the collaborative approach was Praja’s attempts to get traditional civic actors to use the site, so that there could be a seamless interaction between the two realms of activity. However, this idea did not gain traction as the latter expressed reservations about engaging deeply with ICTs for civic activities.

Attitude towards and use of the internet: This sceptical attitude towards the internet for civic activity distinguished traditional civil society actors from Praja. Rao (2013) shows how civil society actors’ perceptions and worldviews/ideologies influence whether and how the internet is used, even in a new media-rich environment like Bangalore. The reluctance to use the internet was also explained by the typically older demographic of RWAs and NGOs, as well as the absence of an internet culture or facilities in government offices, which limited citizen-government interaction online.

Conclusion

The paper has shown that even creative and strategic use of the internet to facilitate citizen-government interaction is limited by the ruptures between newer and older forms of engagement. Praja originated from the felt need to enhance citizen participation by overcoming limitations of traditional civil society-government engagement. At the same time, key RAAG members were aware of the crucial role of these actors in the civic sphere, and keen to partner with them on issues of common interest. However, attempts to connect online and offline spaces of activism were hindered by various incompatibilities, including differing opinions regarding the utility and value of the internet for civic activities. The inability to overcome these ruptures has proved to be a serious limitation, and highlights the complexities arising from the intersections between older and the newer, internet-enabled spaces of activism.

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