Enhancing Political Participation in Jamaica: The Use of Facebook to “Cure” the Problem of Political Talk Among the Jamaican Youth

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Abstract
Youth participation through political talk appears to be shifting to the online public sphere in many parts of the world. Many attribute this shift to online social networks such as Facebook. Emerging research seem to suggest that this may be a cure for the problem of political apathy among the youth. This study explores such a possibility in Jamaica. In all, 752 youth ages 15 to 24 were surveyed to ascertain whether Facebook encourages political talk among this age cohort, and what if any are the primary factors that discourage this practice. The findings suggest that (a) Facebook is an extension of offline political talk among the civically engaged and politically charged youth of Jamaica; (b) Facebook does not substantively encourage political talk among the politically apathetic Jamaican youth; and (c) fear of political victimization is the primary factor that discourages many Jamaican youth to engage in political talk on Facebook.

Keywords
good governance, political participation, political talk, online social network, e-participation

Introduction
From Aristotelian times, political communication and specifically “political talk” has been seen as a form of democratic participation. Over the years, scholars have seen it as communicative action mediated in the public sphere (Habermas, 1984) and a good indicator of a healthy system of governance (Gamson, 1992; Kim & Kim, 2008; Mutz, 2006) which itself has been recognized as critical for achieving development in the developing world (United Nations, 2008; World Bank, 2006). However, in the last two decades, there has been much concern about the low incidence of political talk in many parts of the Western world (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Powell, Bourne, & Waller, 2007; Powell, Lewis, & Seligson, 2010; Putnam, 1995, 2000). In fact, many see this as a threat to good governance, especially in developing countries, and a danger to their development goals (Almond & Verba, 1963; Sen, 1999; Siegle, Weinstein, & Halperin, 2004). Of concern has been the decline of the youth voice in political talk. This apprehension is based on the notion that the absence of the youth in political talk threatens other forms of political participation and this has wider implications for the intergenerational transfer of democratic governance (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; United Nations, 2008). Recent observations in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East may indicate that youth participation through political talk appears to be shifting to the online public sphere. (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Farag, 2010; Feezell, Conroy, & Guerrero, 2009; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kann, Berry, Gant, & Zager, 2007; Krueger, 2002; Lenhart, Pucell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Norris, 2001; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism [RISIJ], 2011; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Vitak et al., 2010).

Online social networks (OSNs) such as Facebook have played a key role in this migration process as the youth around the world now populate this space, which facilitates among many things political talk. This is an encouraging trend certainly for a developing country such as Jamaica, which has seen a steady decrease among the youth regarding many aspects of political participation, including political talk. The potential of Facebook for addressing the problem of political apathy, enhancing political participation, and

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consequently promoting good governance and development for Jamaica therefore demands investigation. With this in mind, this study sought to ascertain whether Facebook, an OSN, encourages political talk among usually apathetic youth in Jamaica 15 to 24 years of age (an age group that is defined in Jamaica as youth). The research therefore centered on the following questions:

**Research Question 1**: Does Facebook encourage Jamaican youth age 15 to 24 to engage in conversations about political parties, leadership of these parties, political processes, political institutions, politicized agents of government, leaders of government, and so on (political talk) online?

**Research Question 2**: What is the primary factor which discourages Jamaican youth age 15 to 24 from engaging in conversations about political parties, leadership of these parties, political processes, political institutions, politicized agents of government, leaders of government, and related issues (online political talk) on Facebook?

The research is guided by the conceptual framework purporting to connect good governance and economic development (Gisselquist, 2012; Resnic & Birner, 2006). It is a model which recognizes that political talk is an indispensable component of political participation, which itself is a subcomponent of the larger paradigm “good governance” (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007; Leftwich, 1993; Mansbridge, 1993; United Nations, 2008), and a determinant of economic development among emerging economies. In the next section, I will expand on the discussion regarding good governance and development, thereafter I will locate political participation as a moment of achieving good governance, then highlight the role of political talk (offline and online) as an important component of this moment.

**Political Talk, Political Participation, Good Governance, and Development: Exploring the Conceptual Connections**

Development today has been twined with the achievement of good governance (Gisselquist, 2012; Resnic & Birner, 2006), and encouraging political participation is one of the many ways that this can be accomplished (World Bank, 2006). Political Participation is the practice of providing avenues to facilitate “members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision making and policy forming activities of organizations or institutions responsible for policy development” (Rowe & Frewer, 2004, p. 11). It is an important element of democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963; Sen, 1999) and has been historically represented in the works of James Madison, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Dewey. Political participation includes, among other things, political activities, such as participating in representative government, voting, consultations, interacting with political officials, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, public relations, volunteering for or contributing to a campaign, managing public services, representation on managing bodies and managing public services (such as a government board, committee, or commission), freely participating in a protest (whose purpose is to influence government), and talking to and/or deliberating with political actors and/or organizations/institutions (Dahl, 1989; Gastil, 2000; Linz, 1975; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In this research, we focus on the latter of these activities—political talk.

Participation through political talk is dialogic interaction through talk/argument, text, or representation in music, other extralinguistic auditory signs between and among individuals or within a group operating in different networks, their elected representatives, or other affiliated actor(s) or institutions—and can be seen as public opinion. Such talk can contribute in some way either directly or indirectly to good governance. Political talk can be about social, economic, or political problems that groups, individuals, or an entire country faces. The process (the process of talking about politics) can also include proposals regarding solutions to these problems, attempts to persuade or win a debate/argument, concerns about what is being done, disadvantages and advantages about proposed solutions, and/or an attempt to understand these problems and related solutions. Talking about politics can occur in homes, offices, churches, schools, and neighborhoods. Barber (1984) has concluded that “everyday political talk undertakes the essential functions of a strong democracy” (p. 54). I too agree with this and support Barber’s position that “conversation gives life to a notion of citizen” (p. 184). A similar view was presented in the work by Kim and Kim (2008) who suggested that through this everyday political talk, citizens produce communicative reasons and achieve mutual understanding of self and others. It is through this everyday political talk that people come to understand what their own interests are, what others want, and what fits the common good; without this understanding, citizens may not be able to participate in instrumental deliberations in a meaningful way to make rational decisions. In a nutshell, informal everyday talk—which, at its essence is dialogic deliberation—is the prerequisite to purposive and rational deliberations. (p. 54)

Kim and Kim (2008) further suggested that “everyday political talk might be one of the most readily available opportunities for ordinary citizens to construct the concept of the sociopolitical self in their daily lives” (p. 58; see also Gamson, 1992; Mutz, 2006). Everyday political talk therefore also gives rise to community, representative thinking (thinking together), communal rationality, and the formation of habits; forms public opinion; fosters attitudes and
interests; encourages the exercise of social and political behaviors; and initiates problem-solving thoughts and actions as well as an understanding of political processes, events, objects, and subjects occupying the political space. There are many who also share this view (see, for example, Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Price & Cappella, 2002). Political talk is essentially the starting point for civic engagement and civic life. More recently, it has been used as a serious means of validation through online consultations on blogs or OSNs such as Twitter and Facebook (Zuniga, Puiig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009).

Online Political Talk

Political talk is defined here as “non-purposive, informal, casual, and spontaneous political conversation voluntarily carried out by free citizens, without being constrained by formal procedural rules and predetermined agenda” (Kim & Kim, 2008, p. 53). Political talk is a critical component of political participation, which stands as one of many pillars necessary for promoting or preserving good governance (Gastil, 2000). Political talk can take place in privacy, among friends and family, or between elected representatives and citizens about political objects, subjects, events, processes, and phenomena. The issue has been well recognized and represented in the global literature and policy space as the hallmark of democracy (Asen, 2004; Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Neblo, 2005). Over the years, empirical research and academic scholarship have come to realize that political talk is an indispensable component of political participation, which itself is a subcomponent of the larger paradigm “good governance” (Duchesne & Haegel, 2007; Leftwich, 1993; Mansbridge, 1993; United Nations, 2008), and a determinant of economic development among emerging economies.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a general concern about the existence of political talk in many Western countries including Jamaica (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Powell et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2010; Putnam, 1995, 2000). This concern is fueled by what many believe to be the possible implications of what a decline in political talk, especially among the youth, can mean for the maintenance or preservation of good governance in a nation-state (Delli Carpini et al., 2004; United Nations, 2008). In particular, many have pointed to a declining youth voice in political talk. More recently, however, some scholars have observed a shift in political talk among the youth from offline to online (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Farag, 2010; Feezell et al., 2009; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kann et al., 2007; Krueger, 2002; Lenhart et al., 2010; Mossberger et al., 2008; Norris, 2001; RISJ, 2011; Shah et al., 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). In the last decade or so, young people around the world have been connecting to the world wide web, particularly on blogs, and OSNs such as Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter to “talk” about politics. The youth of the world are using these spaces to express themselves, to talk and deliberate between and among themselves or with other political actors and/or organizations (see also Mossberger et al., 2008; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001; Xenos & Moy, 2007). This phenomenon has led many to represent the Internet as a tool to engender, promote, or encourage political participation of the youth, and address the problem of political apathy, which has been a concern for many political scientists and practitioners since the mid-1980s.

The Internet, it is generally believed, broadens the public sphere by facilitating the extensive participation of people, especially youth in politics through a real-time, convenient, relatively cost-effective network. It allows people to interact freely among themselves as well as with governing actors in the form of everyday formal and informal communication. Essentially, this electronic network enables young people to talk politics online. OSNs such as Facebook and Twitter are arguably slowly emerging as the new public sphere and a place for political talk and deliberation especially for the youth.

OSNs are virtual communities that allow “individuals to present themselves to other users utilising a variety of formats, including text and video” (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009, p. 4). Facebook, which is considered the largest online social networking website, facilitates interpersonal interaction and the dissemination of information among people via the sharing of personal profiles (Valenzuela et al., 2009). The site is used for a myriad of purposes and activities. These include making friends; posting status updates on one’s profiles (telling people what you are doing, feeling, eating, about to do, etc.); posting comments, videos, and/or pictures on other persons’ profiles (on people’s wall); linking other persons’ status; sending messages to people; playing games or quizzes; posting links to events, news, or websites; inviting people (posting web links); creating events and extending invitations; creating groups for people (some of whom share common interest) to join as well as posting links to these events. According to Valenzuela et al. (2009), young people around the world “are motivated to join these sites to keep strong ties with friends, to strengthen ties with new acquaintances, and to a lesser degree, to meet new people online . . . (and to) exchange news and discuss issues” (p. 1).

For many, Facebook is represented as a cure for political apathy (Vitak et al., 2010). Feezell et al. (2009), for example, in an empirical study of Facebook’s contribution to political participation among undergraduate students at a public university in California found that “increased online political group membership predicts increased levels of offline political participation” (p. 4). In addition, the Centre for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) in a longitudinal study of high school students in the Unites States of America, found that “youth who pursue their interest on the Internet are more likely to be engaged in civic and political issues” (CIRCLE, 2011, p. 1). Valenzuela
et al. (2009) in an empirical study on Facebook’s impact on “attitudes and behaviours that enhance public life and civic action” (p. 2), while not denying the relationship between intensity of Facebook use and civic engagement, warned that the relationship was only moderately positive and “that online networks are not a panacea for democracy” (p. 34; see also Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Farag, 2010; Vitak et al., 2010). These findings appear consistent with the experience of the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential Elections, which showed significantly increased participation by registered youth voters who, many believe, were influenced by the political parties’ use of OSNs such as Facebook and Twitter. In Europe, the findings of a study published by the RISJ at the University of Oxford also support these observations in the United States (RISJ, 2011). The study revealed that Facebook and Twitter contributed to “unprecedented levels of participation” and voter turnout at the 2010 election especially among the youth (RISJ, 2011, p. 1). There is also emerging research from other spaces such as the Arab world (Fauad, 2009; Ghanna, 2011) regarding the potential of OSNs for encouraging an important aspect of political participation—political talk.

The evidence around the world is indeed encouraging, particularly for developing countries around the world such as Jamaica, a small island state in the Caribbean with a population of 2,700,000 people which has seen a decrease in all forms of political talk among the youth in the last 50 years (Powell et al., 2010) and according to Social Bankers, a sharp increase in the use of young Facebook users in the last 10 years—255,448 users in 2012 ages 18 to 24 (see statistics and growth trends from http://www.socialbakers.com/).

Given that the youth in Jamaica are either logging on to Facebook via notebooks and desktop computers from their homes, schools, and public spaces or on the relatively inexpensive smartphones which are accessible across the island, the prospect that Facebook can encourage political participation is indeed welcoming. However, the empirical evidence so far has generally been limited to the industrialized countries of the West and the developing countries of the East. There is indeed a gap as it relates to the developing countries of the West. This study will attempt to address this gap by investigating whether Facebook, an OSN, promotes political talk among youth in Jamaica. This is done through Research Questions 1 and 2.

**Research Design and Method**

A survey (the Survey Methodology) was conducted of 752 youth ages 15 to 24 in the urban centers of Kingston, the capital of Jamaica by 40 surveyors. The sample size was representative of the youth population in the parish of Kingston, which was 17,403 at the time of investigation (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2011). The confidence level used was 95% and confidence interval was 3.4. The quota sampling technique was utilized to select the participants based on age, social class, location, and gender. Surveyors were given a tally sheet with specific quotas and this was used to identify the sample in the major towns and cities across the island. The instrument that was used to collect the data sought to measure the existence of online political talk among youths who do not normally discuss general political issues (POLITICS—political parties, political processes, political institutions, political leaders, and political issues) with their friends and/or family either at home, work, school, and so on—offline. Below are the results of the study.

**Results**

**Political Talk on Facebook Among Jamaican Youth**

To ascertain the “existence” of political talk in Jamaica among its youth, the following questions were asked of the participants. The first question sought to capture the presence of political talk online while the latter, political talk offline.

a. Do you talk about or comment on POLITICS generally with your friends and/or family on Facebook? (Politics was described to the respondents as political parties, political processes, political institutions, political leaders, and political issues.)

b. Do you talk about or comment on POLITICS generally with your friends and/or family offline whether at home, the office, in public places? (Politics was described to the respondents as political parties, political processes, political institutions, political leaders, and political issues.)

Of the 752 persons surveyed, 61.2% \( (n = 460) \) claimed that they talk about politics offline and 36.8% \( (n = 277) \) claimed that they did not talk about politics at home, the office, or in public places. A total of 16.9% \( (n = 127) \) of the respondents claimed to talk about politics on Facebook while 45.5% \( (n = 342) \) of the sample stated that they do not talk about politics on Facebook. This is depicted in Table 1 below. What this suggests is a greater willingness to talk about politics offline rather than on Facebook (online).

Interestingly, of the 460 persons who claimed to speak about politics offline, only 22% \( (n = 101) \) asserted that they do speak about politics on Facebook while 40.7% \( (n = 187) \) stated that they do not speak about politics on Facebook. The remaining 37.4% \( (n = 172) \) represented missing data. It was also observed that of the 277 persons who claimed that they do not speak about politics offline, only 9% \( (n = 25) \) claimed to engage in political discussions on Facebook while 53.4% \( (n = 148) \) claimed not to speak about politics on Facebook. The remaining 37.5% \( (n = 104) \) was represented as missing data.

A chi-square test of association was performed to examine the relationship between political talk offline and
political talk on Facebook. The relationship between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 461) = 23.12, p = .000$. This suggests that the majority of those persons who generally are engaged in discussions about politics offline were those persons who also engage in discussions about politics on Facebook. There were no statistical differences in terms of gender, social class, and/or location.

Much of the content of the “political talk” of this very small sample of 127 Jamaican youth who do speak about politics on Facebook consisted of the following:

- Sending messages, reading, or commenting on the Facebook wall of political representatives regarding issues affecting their lives
- Sending messages, reading, or commenting on the Facebook wall of a political party
- Viewing, sharing, commenting, or tagging friends in politically related images
- Viewing, sharing, or commenting on politically related videos

Despite being very small in number, the data suggest that was very active. Table 2 below represents the frequency of political talk of this group of people. Based on the table, the majority of these persons, 89.7% ($n = 114$), have some form of conversation about politics on Facebook 3 or more times per week.

### Table 2. Frequency of Political Talk on Facebook.

| Frequency of political talk on Facebook | $n$ | % |
|----------------------------------------|-----|---|
| Daily                                  | 93  | 73.2 |
| Three times per week                   | 21  | 16.5 |
| Weekly                                 | 10  | 7.9 |
| Once per month                         | 3   | 2.4 |
| Total                                  | 127 | 100 |

Discussion

Generally speaking, the findings suggest that (a) the Jamaican youth seem to have a stronger preference for face-to-face political talk as compared with political talk on Facebook; (b) the majority of those persons who generally are engaged in discussions about politics offline were those persons who also engage in discussions about politics on Facebook, in other words, Facebook merely supplements offline political talk among the civically engaged youth of Jamaica; and (c) Facebook does not substantively encourage political talk among the politically apathetic Jamaican youth. The findings are similar to those of Valenzuela et al. (2009) who in a study of 2,603 college students across Texas discovered that “Facebook seems to attract students who are more civically engaged” (p. 889).

This study also sought to go beyond the existing quantitative approach to examining the connection between Facebook, youth, and political participation. Much of this research merely attempts to establish the negative or positive correlation between the use of Facebook and the political behavior and/or values of young people (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Such an approach has generally overlooked the factors that are critical to addressing the problems of political participation and which may threaten good governance. Furthermore, the study also sought to identify the primary factors that explain the behavior of the youth being investigated. This was explored through the following research question.

What, if any, is the primary factor which discourages Jamaican youth age 15 to 24 to engage in conversations about political parties, leadership of these parties, political processes, political institutions, politicized agents of government, leaders of government, and so on (political talk) on Facebook?

This particular question was motivated by a qualitative exploratory study that the researcher previously conducted in Jamaica as part of a larger investigation on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for good governance. This study revealed that the “fear of political victimization” discouraged political engagement online by Jamaicans from all different age groups.

### The Fear of Political Victimization

As indicated in Table 3, 62% ($n = 212$) of the respondents stated that they did not speak about politics on Facebook because of a fear of being politically victimized. This was
Table 3. Factors That Discourage Jamaican Youth to Engage in Political Talk on Facebook.

|                                    | n  | %  |
|------------------------------------|----|----|
| Fear of political victimization    | 212| 62 |
| Political apathy                   | 89 | 26 |
| Lack of political knowledge        | 18 | 5.3|
| Other                              | 9  | 2.6|
| Missing                            | 14 | 4.1|
| Total                              | 342| 100|

identified as the primary factor that discouraged Jamaican youth age 15 to 24 from engaging in conversations about political parties, leadership of these parties, political processes, political institutions, politicized agents of government, leaders of government, and so on (political talk), on Facebook.

In Jamaica, as in many other parts of the world, political talk is not only public but also private. People speaking about politics in spaces such as homes and offices, between friends and colleagues, can be viewed as engaging in private talk about politics because only relatively few persons hear and see what the speakers are saying. There is some level of control; it is informal, the positions adopted are fluid, and interpretations can be contested and revised. Recall can be questioned, and for the most part, there may be an absence of any sense of seriousness depending on the content and context. In contrast, people speaking about politics on the radio, the Internet, on a platform, or on television can be viewed as engaging in public talk about politics. Such talk is archived in a public space. Here precise recall is possible and there is a sense of seriousness surrounding content and context. In addition, what is said is received by many, and the speaker has limited or no control over who receives what is communicated. Both private and public spaces can be said to be of critical importance for the enhancement of democracy in a country. Over the years, both spaces have helped in developing the citizens’ knowledge base by opening channels for discussion and by providing them with information at a low cost (Scheufele & Eveland, 2001). This learning component of political talk has contributed to fostering skills that encourage a more substantive understanding of issues, events, ideas, people, objects, phenomena, and processes. This is evidenced by the daily political commentary on talk-show programs, letters to the editor in newspapers, and the robust political dialogue the researcher has been exposed to in many Jamaican private and public spaces. Political talk has also produced public reasoning and collective decisions about issues, events, ideas, people, objects, and processes among many Jamaicans. Kim and Kim (2008) referred to this as dialogic deliberation. Dialogic deliberation is dialogue “through which we construct the concept of the self and other, the sense of community, and public reason” (p. 66). This is different from “instrumental deliberation,” which is a set of procedural tools, “through which we negotiate and make decisions” (p. 66). Taken together, dialogic deliberation and instrumental deliberation are components of deliberative democracy.

Interestingly, in Jamaica, freedom of speech prevails alongside a fear of freely speaking about politics (particularly about political parties—their membership, structures, institutions, objects, and processes) in public. Arguably, this has been one of the rules for deliberation which has emerged and crystallized over the years. It has been a sort of democracy-buster which has been ingrained in the culture and history of the country. This is evidenced by the fact that although Jamaica has a rich and passionate history of talking about politics privately, not many Jamaicans speak about politics publicly. In instances where the typical Jamaican talks about politics publicly, especially on radio talk-show or television programs, there are measures to conceal the speaker’s identity. It may even be argued that this project in anonymity goes beyond radio and television. For example, the two major newspapers provide space for comments on news features and columns on their websites. Analyses of the two websites indicate that in instances where persons comment on political issues, aliases are invariably used. However, this is not the case when commenting on nonpolitical issues.

Although the Jamaican society has been represented, and can be viewed as democratic, it is also politically charged and polarized. This polarity and politics has been viewed as a challenge to democracy in Jamaica for decades (Ryan, 1999; Stone, 1983). Because of this mix of political passion and polarity, many Jamaicans (though certainly not all) are deeply cautious of being identified and/or associated with a political party or adopting a political position associated with the ideology of a political party (Sives, 2010). Their reasons can range from fear of losing their jobs to the possibility of personal harm (fearful of being physically attacked or of an attack on their families). Unlike the United States—where persons can easily identify themselves publicly on radio, television, in newspapers, online or offline with a particular political party or a specific political ideology—there is a general fear among a majority of Jamaicans who speak about sensitive issues such as politics publicly. This has been influenced by a history of political victimization and violence such as the destruction of property and the loss of life and employment because of being identified with a political position, party, or ideology. Historically, there have been some examples of this captured in the limited scholarly work about this gray area of Jamaica’s political culture (Gray, 2004; Lacey, 1977; Sives, 2010; Stone, 1983). And even though it is slowly changing, based on the data analyzed, it is clear that there are many who still believe in the likelihood of political victimization and are wary of its implications. Generally speaking, and based on lived experience, Jamaicans are taught “never to talk about politics” because politics in this country is a “bad thing.”
Representations of this practice can be found on radio talk-shows, on television programs, on blogs, and in the print news media. In 2010, for example, it was reported in a local newspaper that the organization responsible for the electoral process in Jamaica, the Electoral Commission of Jamaica (ECJ), recommended to the Jamaican Parliament that the names of campaign donors should be concealed. According to the article, this was “meant to protect party financiers from possible repercussions should their identity be disclosed to the public.” And, “donors, often the more affluent in the society, have for years expressed concerns about ‘repercussion’ if their names are published, given Jamaica’s intolerant political culture” (Henry, 2010, p. 1). In January 2010, the Opposition party in Jamaica, the Peoples National Party, accused the Prime Minister of Jamaica of being partisan, stating that the decision not to renew the contract of a senior government employee was “politically motivated.” In a controversial article titled “Get them Out,” a senior member of the ruling political party in Jamaica, the Jamaica Labour Party, publicly declared that he supported the removal of supporters of the Opposition political party from government services (The Sunday Herald, 2010). These and other representations of political victimization have helped to contribute to the view among many Jamaicans including Jamaican youth about the dangers surrounding public utterances about “politics”; and, at least to some degree, Facebook can be viewed as a public place.

For the most part, Facebook is essentially an extension of one’s social being. It presents the world with sensitive, historical, and detailed information about a person (his or her family, friends, habits, patterns, likes, dislikes, tastes, and even minute emotions captured in text, images, videos, and sounds). It is the ultimate global public sphere capturing your most private information. Through Facebook, users make friends, express themselves, and allow people to historically see who they are, with whom they interact, and what they are “talking about.” Unless so intended, through alternative profiles, or restrictions, anonymity can be challenging on Facebook especially because people are connected by 2 to 10 degrees of separation with other people who can identify them. People do not normally set up their Facebook profiles with the intention of talking about politics but rather to talk generally. When presented with an opportunity to do so, the typical Jamaican may be a bit hesitant as his or her information would have already been made public on a social level. Unlike the newspaper websites, Facebook users cannot create temporary disconnected profiles to make comment. The configurations and mechanisms which compose Facebook do not guarantee any real anonymity. People behind texts can be tracked using many techniques that the researcher has used for personal purposes.

It would therefore not be the best place for Jamaicans to execute any real or imagined project on political microactivism. On Facebook, ideas are public, permanent, and open to contradictory interpretation. Speaking about politics online would mean entering a formal discussion as the language that is used on Facebook is more formal and can reveal a person’s political ideology and party affiliation.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Facebook can be used as a viable means of facilitating political talk among young people in Jamaica. However, it cannot cure the existing problem of limited political talk and by extension “political apathy” in the country. Jamaica, like many countries around the world will still need to address the deeper systematic sociocultural and political challenges that have historically threatened this aspect of political participation and by extension democracy. In the case of Jamaica, the underlying problem is political victimization. Obviously much more work needs to be done on this emerging area of political communication. Generally speaking, what the findings actually suggest is that any analysis of the Facebook phenomenon must go beyond the existing surface-level approach, which merely attempts to establish the existence of a relationship (whether positive or negative) between use of Facebook and the political behavior and/or thought of youth. This study and its findings—particularly the public versus private and online versus offline dichotomies of political talk and global difference in the place and space for talk—certainly opens up new ground for debates about political talk, political participation, democracy, and governance in Jamaica. It also makes contribution toward global discourses on the evolution of political communication.

Certainly, as more and more developing countries become connected, the Internet becomes more accessible for the citizens of these countries. As “online” becomes the norm and public sphere increasingly becomes a virtual place, Facebook and other OSNs will become an integral part of political communication, engagement, and interaction. Based on this study, there are indeed many issues, which need to be thoroughly addressed for political scientists and policy makers to address possible emerging or existing threats that ICTs may have to good governance in these countries on their road to economic and social development.

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