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

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### ABSTRACT

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

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dynamic nature of technological artifact and its efficacy in enabling interaction and collaboration between disparate groups of individuals [12,73]. This concept emerged as an appropriate perspective that could capture the unique enactment of social media in alleviating challenges toward enabling civic engagement, that is, it helps to explore how technology acquires different boundary-spanning competences when it is enacted to serve different purposes in practice [17]. Taken together, the present study aims to address this research question: how does social media catalyze civic engagement?

The contribution of the study is twofold. First, we bring attention to the area of social media for civic engagement, which remains largely underexplored in information system (IS) research. Although social media has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers from a diversity of domains, questions regarding how social media might play a part in addressing difficult societal issues such as civic engagement are still largely unanswered [64]. Second, by delineating the utilization of social media as boundary objects, we unveil the underlying dynamics of practical enactment of social media. In this regard, we inform existing literature by portraying how social media can be flexibly enacted as boundary objects in practice to fulfill different situated needs.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we review the literature of civic engagement with a particular emphasis on the emerging roles of social media. Next, we present a review on the theoretical background – boundary object. Next, we provide details of our research methodology followed by a case description. Then, we present an in-depth discussion of our findings. Finally, we conclude the paper with theoretical and practical contributions, followed by limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review: digitally enabled civic engagement

Digital technologies are increasingly permeating a broad range of social and institutional contexts, unleashing new opportunities and avenue for research [55]. In recent times, a growing body of research has begun to explore the dynamics and implications stemmed from the continuing development of digital technologies in a plethora of contexts. On the one hand, a great part of these works explored changes brought about by the advancement of digital infrastructure in the context of organizations. These studies mainly focus on examining the organizational and technological complexities associated with the increasingly interconnected digital infrastructure found in contemporary firms today [31,55,82]. Digitization is seen to transform various aspects of organizational practices and norms, from knowledge creation and sharing within organizational innovation networks [48] to the coordination of interfaces among organizations [74]. On the other hand, a simultaneous body of research has started to explore the digitally enabled changes that unfold in the social context. In recent decades, “our society has experienced remarkable change because of digital technology” [83], p. 734). Digitization has brought about significant societal transformation, ranging from resolving poverty to achieving development outcomes [50]. These emerging phenomena of digitally enabled change are intriguing and warrant further research attention [50,80].

Against this backdrop, the focus of this paper encompasses the emerging digitally enabled changes in civic engagement arena. “Civic engagement” is an umbrella term referring to the process that stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, make important decisions, and orchestrate available resources [30]. It is the process in which citizens embrace the responsibilities to actively participate in public life to help shape or strengthen the local community [1]. People can participate in civic life in myriad ways, from spending time in volunteering work, working on community project, to participating in neighborhood

meeting [70]. The end goals of civic engagement often involve greater social cohesion, greater sense of empowerment, and an increased capacity for collective action [26].

Civic engagement has been an important yet difficult task for several reasons. First, resources to enable and manage large-scale civil participation are often scarce. Second, pathways for participation are generally limited. The voices of young generation, for example, are seldom heard in the conventional model of civic engagement given the lack of participation channel [13,46]. Fortunately, in recent years, technological advancement is creating new opportunities for civic engagement. The creative application of technologies in the public sphere to promote awareness and civic engagement has started to fill the void in conventional civic engagement model. This paper focuses on the rise of social media – an emerging technology that is bringing transformative implications in civil participation.

Social media – one of the emerging information, communication, and connectivity technologies – is generating far-reaching impacts in organizations and social worlds [2,54]. In recent years, social media has emerged as a participatory media that presents catalytic potential in overcoming the built-in barriers of social change and unlocking social progress [28]. Social media is “fundamentally changing the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create” [2]; p. 3), giving rise to new forms of behaviors, activities, and engagement that are yet to be explored. More recently, an increasing body of work has contributed insights on the power of social media in transforming the dynamics of communication, participation, and connection in different contexts (e.g., [22,35,38,49,69,75]). For example, Sawyer and Winter [67] suggested that the increasingly ubiquitous technology could enable more voluntary and open participation. Leonardi [41] explored the implications of increasing communication visibility afforded by social media and suggested that such enablement could encourage collaboration and foster innovation. Furthermore, Huang et al. [35] proposed that the use of social media in supporting communication could widen participation and encourage interactive dialogue. Overall, social media is seen to afford new forms of association, to enable emergent connections and to support social connections [38].

Social media, with these unique affordances, is increasingly being recognized as an important resource that could enable and support civic participation [62]. In the context of civic engagement, social media empowers citizens to ignite and participate in civil actions. It helps to lower the entry barriers of civic participation by allowing, for example, individuals to “post, at minimal cost, messages and images that can be viewed instantly by global audiences” [47]; p. 316). This helps to overcome the long-standing barriers in knowledge sharing and coordination of actions in addressing joint concerns. In nations where leaders are struggling to meet development goals, social media helps to minimize requirements on resources and enable more effective and consistent social participation [64]. Social media also helps to digitally “blow the whistle,” amplify citizen interest, and create more pathways for participatory communication, networking, and development [10]. Indirectly, social media-enabled collective action allows citizens’ voice to be heard, and makes authorities more responsive to critical demands and therefore more accountable for their actions [26].

Taken together, social media serves to build people’s capacity in participatory processes, to gradually raise the collective consciousness, and to hold people accountable toward promoting a sustainable, civically engaged community [15,63]. However, the emerging, multifaceted role of social media in igniting social change is still largely under researched [27,64]. In the IS field, only a few studies have started to examine the roles of social media in civic engagement. For instance, Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. [13]

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