



Whither Social Media for Digital Activism: The Case of the Caribbean

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Authors PB and EA designed the study. Authors PB and EA jointly managed the analyses of the study. Author PB wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors PB and EA managed the literature searches and edited the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/BJESBS/2015/18733

Editor(s):

(1) Madine Vander Plaat, Department of Sociology and Criminology, Saint Mary's University,
Canada.

Reviewers:

(1) Anonymous, Ming Dao University, Taiwan.
(2) Muhammad Kristiawan, PGRI University of Palembang, Indonesia.
(3) Rohaiza Rokis, Sociology and Anthropology, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia.
Complete Peer review History: <http://sciencedomain.org/review-history/9983>

Review Article

Received 7th May 2015
Accepted 10th June 2015
Published 29th June 2015

ABSTRACT

The use of social media as technological conduits of democratization has taken centre stage in several academic discourses. Much of this debate has focused on socio-political movements in emerging societies, particularly, North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. In this conceptual paper the experience of Caribbean SIDS¹ is analysed from an interdisciplinary perspective by examining the extent to which ICTs are being used as instruments of empowerment for change. Based on an assessment of prevailing conditions in the Caribbean, a view posited from the research is that path dependent uses of social media have contributed to their not playing a

¹ This article is not intended to be an expository discourse on the semantic definition of small island states, rather it refers to those states in the Caribbean Community that describe themselves as Small Island Developing States: Antigua and Barbuda, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname.

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pivotal role in [re]shaping and influencing political behaviour. Another factor that could be credited—or blamed—for the silence of focused political national conversations via social media is a leaderless presence that has not been able to collectively organize and focus disparate and priority demands towards consensus to affect policy change. Likewise we argue that the poor quality and unsustainable intensity of civic literacy necessary for digital activism has hindered and demotivated subscribers from continuing online and offline participation. These along with the lack of an enabling legal and policy framework facilitative of change are also acknowledged as moderating and contingent reasons. We hope the ideas expressed in this paper will generate future empirical research focused on social media as tools of change in the democratic process in the region.

Keywords: Digital activism; social media; Caribbean; political change; governance; democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following successive World Economic forum protests, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, the ubiquitously accessible diffusion of social media, and particularly their impact in digital activism, has become a trending topic of intense discussion for the media and academia. Social media integrates the use of a cluster of application technologies that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 [1]. Through social media, people or groups can create, organize, edit, comment on, combine, and share content enabled by scalable communication technologies that have resulted in their becoming an integral part of modern society [2]. They include but are in no way limited to blogs, microblogs (e.g. Twitter and Tumblr), social networks (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn), wikis (such as Wikipedia) and multimedia (e.g. Flickr, YouTube and Pandora). Because of their ability to allow for interactive participation using the “wisdom” of crowds to collaboratively connect online [2] they have also become conduits through which conventional socio-political movements can improve their global reach facilitating and fomenting digital activism². However, the extent and role of social media as forces precipitating tectonic transformational political and social change has initiated and mushroomed several conversations. This ongoing global debate gained prominence from Gladwell’s [4] riposte to Shirky’s [5] initial claim that these new, spontaneous networks of social interaction

have impacted profoundly and are responsible for eroding and transforming the existing hierarchical structures. The contrarian Gladwell [4] questioned this emancipatory assumption as a faulty generalization and instead proffered that these revolutions were galvanized by kindred relationships and shared experiences of personal qualities such as being courageous, determined, selfless, disciplined, being steadfast and having a charismatic ability to inspire and lead others in moments of great historical importance rather than the number of people joining a Twitter and Facebook campaign.

This debate polarized academic and public commentary into “dueling anecdotes” [6] between the so-called cyber-optimists and the cyber-pessimists. The former advocate social media’s emancipatory promise [5,7] and view the ability of such technologies to synchronize and mobilize frustrations, ideals, reactions against institutions, and support for causes without restrictions surpassing planning and predictions into “instant insurgent communities” [8-10]. The cyber-pessimists caution against such superficial accounts that are selective in their *cause celebre* by glossing over much of what is important [11, p.103], amplifying the marvels of communication technology as a new system of political communication [4] whilst diminishing the deeper historical roots of rebellion fuelled by core causes such as unemployment, censorship, and authoritarian regimes, in the pre-Internet era [Anderson, 2011; Aouragh & Anderson, 2011, cited in 12, p. 316; see also 10,13,14].

² *In pith, digital activism, also known as cyber activism, e-activism, or even social media activism, describes how citizens can use social media platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter and other ICT artefacts like smart phones and even systems that collect and process data obtained from sensors, cameras and devices connected within networks to affect socio-political and economic change [3].*

For those of us analysing these theatres of conflict from afar it raised the hypothesis that if social media are such powerful tools in mobilizing successful anti-government mass protests, then following this logic to its conclusion would strongly suggest that other regions with similar volatile environments would be able through spontaneous

collective action to achieve similar results. This, however, has not been the case in several African, Caribbean, Latin American, and the irony of all, advanced western democracies.

Although there has been a rush to ascribe the events of North Africa to the internet and social media, the contagion effect demonstrated by the "Venezuelan crisis of democracy," and similarly that in Zimbabwe, demonstrations of resentment for the African National Congress Party and their leader Jacob Zuma, the dismantling of the social welfare state by Governments in the Caribbean, the favela/vinegar riots in Brazil, the Occupy Wall Street movement and the British Summer Riots of 2011 have not been accorded similar euphoric analysis by the same evangelists of social media. In addition to the earlier expressed hypothesis, the citation of these examples begs the question why these events did not precipitate and escalate into full blown Twitter and Facebook revolutions towards correcting democratic deficits and leading the affected peoples of these countries to a life of liberalism, and hope?

As tempting as it may seem, it is not our intention in this paper to provide the ultimate answer on the role of digital media in such political events. For sure, we know there is a connection between the use of digital media, and political change. But it is complex and contingent [15, p. 360, see also 16, 17, 18] and it takes many forms. Our view also is that such narratives have been geographically narrow, focusing on news-worthy and research-worthy regions that have created false dichotomies of thought, social media vs social capital, which need to be [re]examined, conceptually and empirically. While we too accept the disruptive potential of social media, there is a considerable mismatch between the commercial logic of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and the needs of activists using social media [12, p. 317].

While scholars have examined this question in other contexts [19- 21], our goal in this paper is to explain this mismatch and complexity within the Caribbean. In this regard, our approach will consider *inter alia* the interplay of tensions between activists, governments, and firms' commercial interests and the civic and political consequences that may instigate or deter local and regional change. Our core intention is to ensure that a reasonable discussion about social media and digital activism should present more nuanced perspectives regarding the different socio-economic backgrounds and regional contexts of users, and beyond this, the current challenges

they face in attempting to promote democratic purposes.

2. AN ONLINE CHECK IN THE CARIBBEAN

With the advent of social media, the twenty-first century is witnessing new ways through which individuals engage in politics. In the last decade, use of various sites such as Facebook and Twitter and more recently Instagram has escalated across Latin America and the Caribbean [22,23, p.1] because of the variety and use of mobile devices and ubiquitous computing within a maturing web ecosystem that facilitates the interaction, engagement and coordination of crowds towards social and political activism [24, p.1]. [see Fig. 1, 25, p.213].

The Caribbean can boast of its information and communication technology infrastructure when compared to other parts of the world. The post-independence period in the region led to the introduction of social policies accompanied by a period of prudent management of the political and macroeconomic processes that led these countries to stable democratic rule and successful economic modernization. It can be argued that this growth was achieved under highly protectionist policies formalized under such conventions as the EU/LOME agreements which encapsulated countries of the African, Caribbean and Pacific region. Nonetheless, economic prosperity allowed countries in the region to rapidly adopt an ecology of ICTs from as early as the ending of the 19th century when Cable and Wireless laid its first cables in the region. Over the last 10 years, the region has witnessed significant changes in telecommunications development as a policy response to the intense global competition in attracting foreign direct investment. Critical to that undertaking was the strong political will within governments of the region to drive the process by:

- enacting appropriate legislation
- negotiating with incumbent providers to end exclusive monopolies
- establishing independent regulators to oversee the telecommunications sector development
- strongly advocating lower rates for businesses, more choice, and improved availability of service and quality [26].

Currently, over 50% of the population of more than half the fifteen countries comprising this region, use the Internet. Telecommunications is now considered a utility not just a lifestyle extra: use is ubiquitous and access is expected [27]. As the region's mobile networks continue to expand while upgrading to 4G the diffusion has enabled the region to leapfrog to computer-enabled Internet connections which incidentally, have also coincided with the rise of social media [28,24] which has become increasingly essential to the region's online experience (see Fig. 2, [29]).

technologies with the 20-39 age range being the most active on social media channels, with females edging past males in their usage (See Fig. 3, [29]).

Most people in the Caribbean use one or more of its manifestations every day. According to Media Badger Public Affairs Ltd, the primary countries of the region most active in social media after factoring in overall population and internet penetration are The Bahamas, leading Jamaica, then Trinidad and Tobago, descending to St. Kitts and Nevis as depicted in (see Fig. 4, [29]).

As in other parts of the world, the youth of the region are the fastest adopters of the new digital

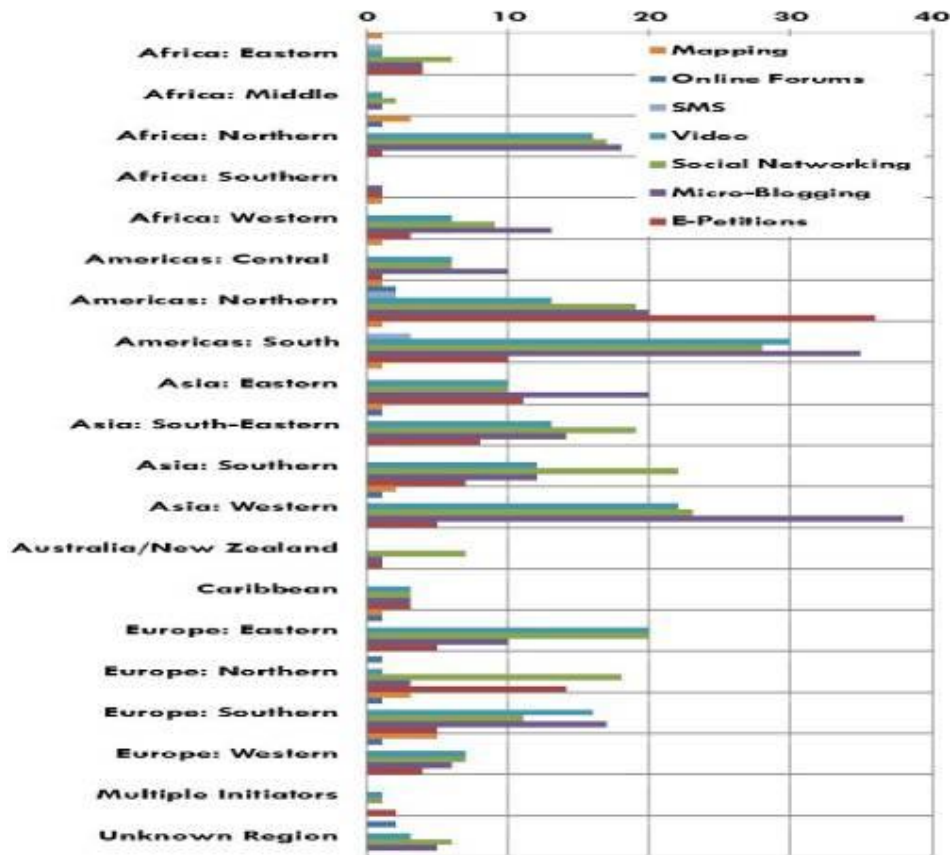


Fig. 1. Digital activism tools around the world (25, p.213)³

³ Edwards, Howard and Joyce (2013:13) digital activism and non-violent conflict, available at < <http://digital-activism.org/download/1270/>> last accessed, September 1st 2014.

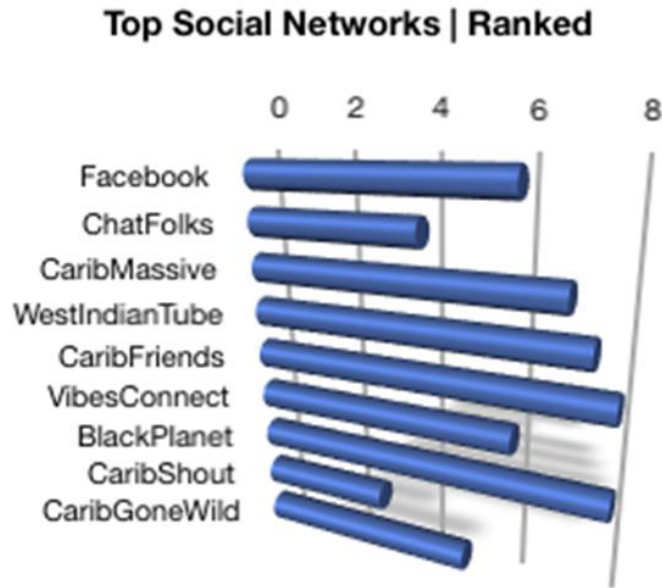


Fig. 2. Social networks ranking [29]⁴

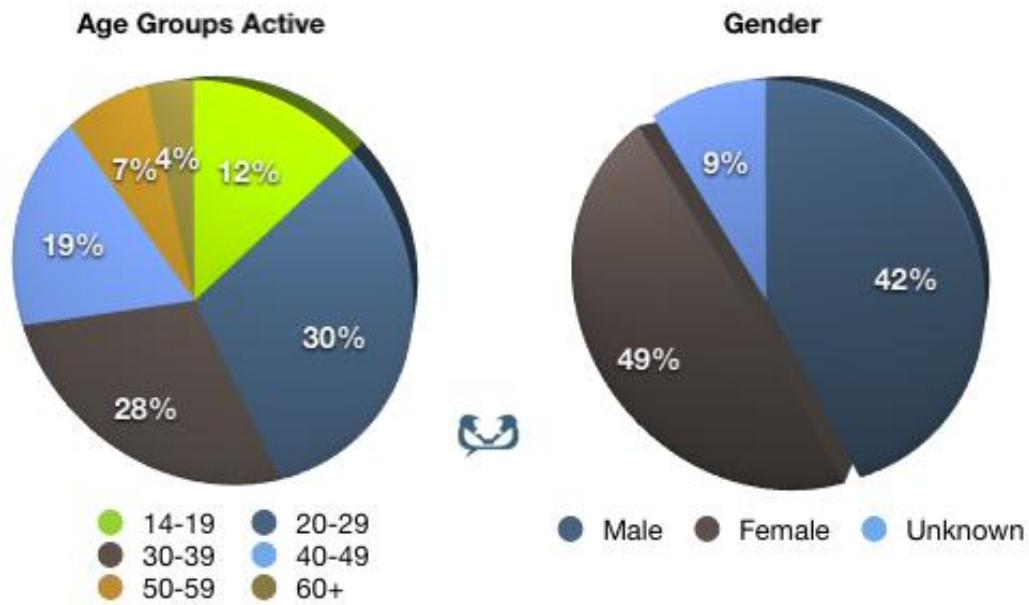


Fig. 3. Active age groups [29]⁵

⁴ Media badger public affairs ltd. (2011a).

⁵ Media badger public affairs ltd. (2011b).

Riley [30] provides insight on social media use in the Caribbean by noting that they are being used as social tools for:

- reconnecting old friends,
- making possible online high school reunions,
- enabling love connections
- exposing people to new ways of spending their time – playing games, watching videos, live streaming of events
- changing their interaction habits – in how they share themselves with their friends and the rest of the world – daily updates on Facebook, joining other social networks,
- sharing information on magazines and books they are reading, their photos, music, videos, beliefs via quotes, where they are (FourSquare check ins) and with whom
- finding new ways to express themselves – blogging (Jamaica Blog Awards), video blogs
- facilitating continued learning – online workshops, seminars, conferences, classes
- facilitating a fresh way of marketing their businesses, interacting with potential customers, gathering feedback, managing their relationships with customers, building communities around their brands, selling directly to people who want, really getting to know who their customers are and what they really want.

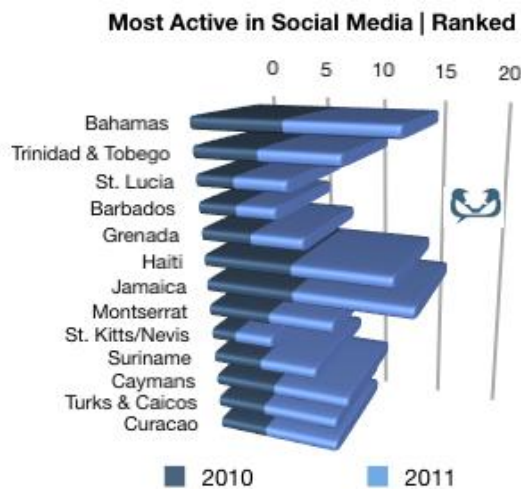


Fig. 4. Most active in social media [29]⁶

⁶ Media badger public affairs ltd. (2011c).

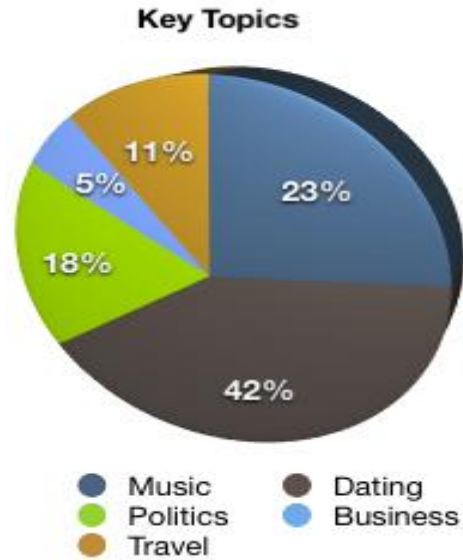


Fig. 5. Key topics on social media [29]⁷

Her findings and observations were also supported by Debbie Ransome – the former head of the defunct BBC Caribbean Service - and Media Badger Public Affairs Ltd. who stated that the predominant themes of use were cricket, travel, politics and community support, dating and romance, and music as seen in Fig. 5 [29].

Across the region, governments and multilateral institutions are also using these tools, with varying degrees of success. For example, the Barbados Government Information Services (BGIS) has introduced a social media channel to their web portal to give the diaspora a forum in which to express their opinion and outline their expertise on national issues. As Government pursues its stated policy of forging wider ties with its citizens in the diaspora, the introduction of social media will bring those citizens even closer to home, and help them to participate more in national discussions and to maintain their links to their homeland. This initiative therefore provides an opening for further interaction between Government and its citizens abroad [31]. Similarly, the government of Jamaica is in the process of formalising its use of social media through the implementation of an appropriate social media policy to more effectively engage ordinary Jamaicans in decision-making. The government is of the view that its use of social media offers new opportunities for transforming their society by allowing more Jamaicans to

⁷ Media badger public affairs ltd (2011d).

participate in their democracy [32]. Likewise more than 42 % of Trinidad and Tobago's 18-35 year-olds spend more than 11 hours a week consuming digital media [33]⁸ and by 2012 the country had an internet penetration rate of 52.3%. This meant that over 660,000 citizens in the country regularly use the internet which is particularly noteworthy considering that the worldwide internet penetration rate is 32.3% [2]. (See Fig. 6, [33], on social media accounts of young T&T).

From this overview of the Region's usage indicators, it is evident that social media have become invaluable for increasing the awareness of general informational issues. This tentative conclusion however does not accurately square with the view expressed by [23]⁹ writing on social media use in the region, with both stating that although Latin America and the Caribbean are different in some dimensions from the regions affected in the Arab Spring, social media around the world has gained traction as a medium capable of translating the voices of individuals into well-organized and collective movements for political change. The increasing rates of general social media use and the examples set by previously successful uses of social media for political activism suggest that this trend will continue for the foreseeable future [23, p.5].

In fact, *AmericasBarometer* [23]¹⁰ survey supports a similar view by noting that those who engage in politics via online social networks are more likely to engage in grassroots and other forms of political participation. Contrary to these views of social media's expanding use for activism, Riley [34] perceives that "rather than the emergence of... grassroots and other forms of political participation... three (3)

trends...happening in social media that we should be aware of in the Caribbean should be... consumer power and what influences their buying habits; the rise in demand for Caribbean Content Online by worldwide audience and how businesses are using it to compete and stay relevant." In other words much of the effort expended on social media sites continues to be used and will be used to boost service provision by marketers [35]. This is understandably so since research findings purport that firms are spending over US\$60 billion annually on social media advertising [36].

This urgency for the use of social media as a marketing tool has also found favour within the Jamaican establishment whose authorities are urging the use of:

"the plethora of new media platforms and distribution channels to empower [the] vast army of young people to become independent income earners... to challenge ...the media fraternity to increase awareness of the enormous business opportunities that are on the Internet... and to quickly exploit ...[them] to help turn around [their] struggling households" [37].

Further to this, according to a national survey conducted in Jamaica on Caribbean broadband and internet usage, the troubling fact behind the findings was not only the relatively low levels of Internet penetration, but in the pattern of use with 77 per cent of Jamaican's using the internet for sending and receiving email [37]. Similarly, in another national study in Jamaica conducted by Johnson et al. [38] to explore the frequency and type of social media used amongst most-at-risk populations (MARPs), specifically sex workers and men who have sex with men (MSM) to inform communication programs, usage even amongst this group was for flippant purposes as seen in Fig. 7.

3. LOCKED INTO CULTURAL PATH DEPENDENCY: TOOLS OR TOYS?

That the region has not grasped the potential use of social media for digital activism to affect change can be ascribed to several factors. Prominent among them is a cultural path dependency. One of the central ideas of path dependence is the notion that the first actor/s to come to market has/have first time advantage in setting the terms and conditions by defining how a product or service could and should be used.

⁸ Results based on a survey commissioned by Caribbean Ideas, the digital business solutions company which was behind the Caribbean Digital Expo conference, on the Digital Habits and Practices of Young Trinidad & Tobago.

⁹ Cited in, Brunelle, J. (2013:5) 'Political Social Media Users in the Americas are Tolerant and Pro-Democratic,' in *Americas Barometer Insights: 2013 Vol. 92 Latin American Public Opinion Project Insights Series*; available at www.americasbarometer.org last accessed, 29th August 2014.

¹⁰ Cited in, Brunelle, J. (2013:5) 'Political Social Media Users in the Americas are Tolerant and Pro-Democratic,' in *Americas Barometer Insights: 2013 Vol. 92 Latin American Public Opinion Project Insights Series*; available at www.americasbarometer.org last accessed, 29th August 2014.

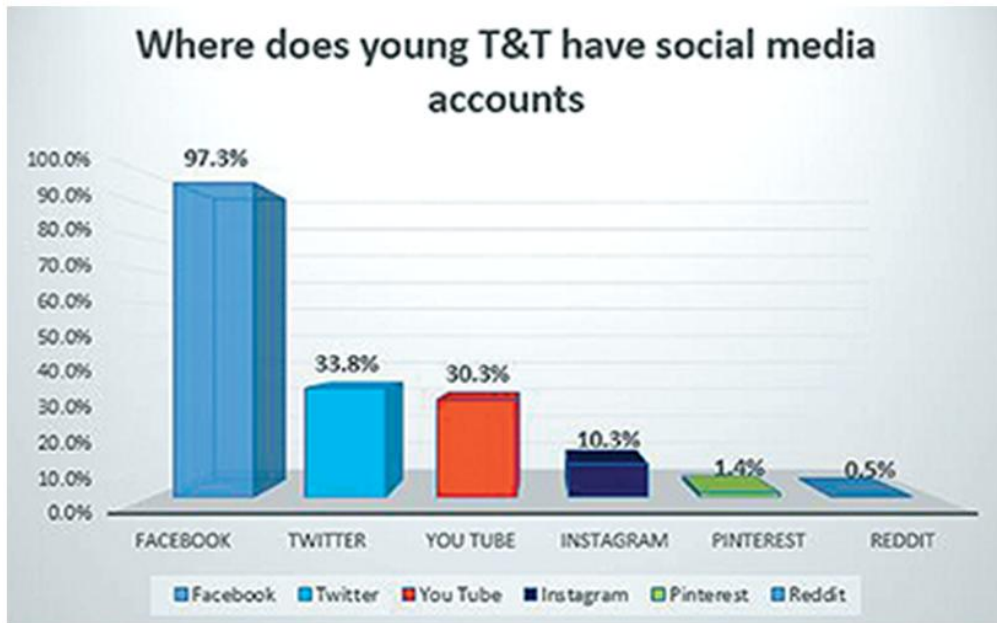


Fig. 6. Location of young T&T social media accounts [33]¹¹

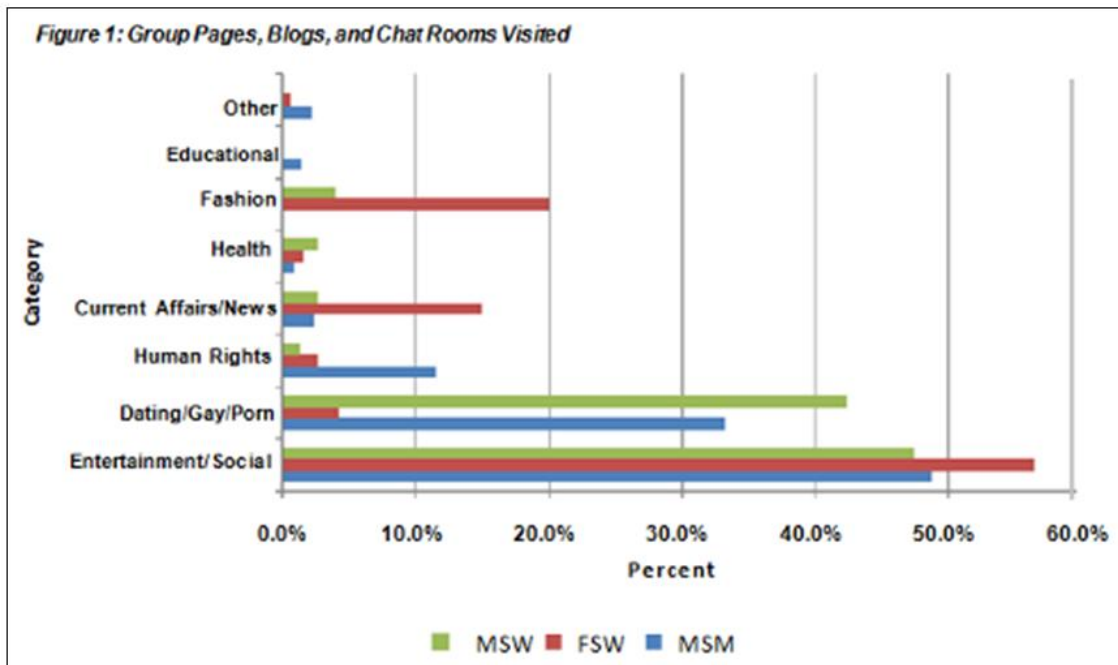


Fig. 7. Social media use among most-at-risk populations in Jamaica April 2012 [38]¹²

¹¹ The Guardian Newspaper, Trinidad and Tobago 2014.

¹² Johnson, R. et al (2012) MPH from C-Change/FHI 360.

Once the market has adopted a technology and its affordances widely, it is much easier to stay with the original choice or a cluster of actors with similar choices [32]. In other words, history matters because competencies that were built in the past define the option range for present usage. In addition, new approaches in particular those based on technological progress emerge gradually. Therefore, if subscribers were initially exposed and acculturated by the marketing usage of social media as entertainment novelties, seeing alternative uses for civic engagement will be insufficient to radically alter their initial perception and *modus operandi*.

If this logic is transferable then path dependency can be seen in the use of social media tools. The emergence of social media platforms was inherently designed as “a group of internet-based applications to allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61 cited in 1). They were not introduced or perceived within the region as constructive tools for digital activism and the generation of revolutionary rhetoric. Rather they were seen and marketed as toys, digital applications for social play. In this regard, some of the principal reasons for the design and proliferation of these sites as identified by Whiting and Williams [29 pp.366-367] through the uses and gratification theory¹³ that keeps users returning to social networks, were:

- **Social interaction** – social media allows people to be social. They meet new people and keep in touch with friends, acquaintances and family.
- **Information seeking** – the process of finding information about products/services, keeping up to date with real-world social events, and learning new things.
- **Passing time** – whether at home, at school, or in the work place.
- **Entertainment** – games, music and videos accessed through social media. Watching streams of updates is also a form of entertainment – whether intentionally, humorous or not.

- **Relaxation** – whilst people find others’ updates humorous, they also find them relaxing. Social media is a way to alleviate stress and escape from reality.
- **Expression of opinions** – expressing thoughts and opinions, criticizing others and blowing off steam.
- **Communicatory Utility** – like the daily newspaper, social media provide subject matter for people to talk and gossip about with others.
- **Convenience** – social media is readily accessible, even more so as mobile devices become ubiquitous. Furthermore, people can talk to several people at the same time.
- **Information Sharing** – people can use social media to broadcast things about themselves. By publishing updates, videos and pictures, people market their own personal brand or business.
- **Surveillance/Knowing about others** – social media allows a window into the lives of others. By checking out other profiles, they can be nosey or “keep up with the Jones”.

It is not uncommon for subscribers to use multiple social media platforms that are able to provide all or most of these features (see also 20, p. 302 for similar parallels). That there has not been a transferal or translation within the Caribbean of social media used as new virtual public spheres for protest and denunciation of government policy, but more for the comfortable, effortless, even lazy, asynchronous “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” [4,40,41,12] and other low level interaction as identified earlier can therefore be attributed to a path dependent perception that these platforms were designed and introduced into the region as toys and not working tools. For any change of focus to occur subscribers will need to see how these are applied, how they can improve performance, deliver results, and lead to the promised political and social changes, all of which are very unlikely, particularly when the institutional and cultural constraints such as the legal framework have become deeply embedded, circumscribing the latitude and flexibility within the region at this time.

4. AN ECOLOGY OF PROHIBITIVE REGULATORY POLICIES

Those who may wish to use social media for high-risk meaningful political activism to

¹³ The basic premise of uses and gratifications theory is that individuals will seek out media among competitors that fulfills their needs and leads to ultimate gratifications (Lariscy et al., 2011). Studies have shown that gratifications received are good predictors of media use and recurring media use (Kaye and Johnson, 2002; Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979) cited in [36, p. 363]

accomplish political and social change are also stymied by the absence of a genuinely free and open environment to promote discussion and engagement. The Caribbean public sphere does not remotely parallel the austere authoritarianism with the omnipresent intrusions of the state like those in North Africa. Citizens have become increasingly empowered to participate actively in the public sphere. Most of all, the Internet has helped change the balance of power and the levels of freedom among actors because it is more resistant to state control and censorship than most traditional forms of mass media [42,43, Howard, 2010 cited in 44]. In fact, one of the most striking effects of the diffusion of ICTs in the region has been the impact of these digital tools on accountability and transparency in governance. In the absence of reliable sources of information from the traditional media the blogosphere has become an alternative source of “news.” There are a number of prominent examples of the way in which the social media are being used to shed light on negligence, poor service delivery, corruption and governance [28]. As a result there is much chatter on social media with an element of meaningful debate comingled with trivial exchanges through for example such sites as *Barbados Underground* and *Barbados Freepress*. These “newspaper” sites have been successful for intentionally and unintentionally testing public opinion through the provision of commentary that can monitor and control the actions of otherwise unaccountable local officials, allowing bloggers free reign to comment on, or even castigate, official actions [44], and at times brainstorming ideas.

The region as a whole continues to comply with the basic conditions that guarantee freedom of expression and media freedom [45]. However, what is important to consider are the heterogeneous ecologies of extensive national regulatory frameworks comprising libel and slander laws to prevent defamation of character. These are also supported by telecommunication policies that counteract social media use for digital activism. Thus media pluralism has been limited by the commercial sector’s hegemony with high levels of ownership concentration. While there has been progress in strengthening public media and community, media regulatory gaps and severe difficulties are occurring. There is still a lack of independent regulators, in a context that requires renovation and updating of regulatory frameworks [46]. The UNESCO 2014 report “*World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development*” highlights: “state

harassment of journalists, challenges to reforming outdated media laws, media concentration, lack of journalistic resources and training, a rural-urban divide in journalism quality and drug-related journalistic deaths as some of the major problems facing journalists in the region” [44]. The report also points out governments’ frequent persistence in trying to control how and where data is accessed, stored, and collected [44]. Similarly there has been uneven application of freedom of information laws in the region with only four countries in the English-speaking Caribbean — Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago — having passed the legislation, with the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, and Guyana in discussion on their own draft legislation. The laws all provide for a general right by citizens, residents and sometimes even non-residents to demand information on the activities of governments as reflected in official records [47].

The implementation of FOI acts has not been without its challenges. Some expressed concerns were the low number of requests, the need to make the public more aware of the existence of the act and the accountability of public officers or advisers for decisions [48,47]. Moreover, several countries have still retained criminal defamation laws (as against civil defamation) which allow for the intrusion of police into media houses and provide for the arrest and detention of journalists [49,50]. This has led the President of the Barbados Association of Journalists to comment at the Inter-American Press Association “We dream that our journalists can work in an environment that is freer and more friendly towards journalists – with a Freedom of Information Act that is fact and not draft, with integrity legislation that will allow us to uncover that which has traditionally been hidden and a more liberal Defamation Act that will finally allow us to use the public interest defense” [51].

The imposition of “cryptic” media censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly has seen several sites being hosted outside their respective country giving them greater freedom from government scrutiny. A key justification for the restrictive media policies by policy planners is that some blogs purported to be promoting transparency and accountability lack editorial and administrative discipline [28, p. 10] and serve as catalysts for spreading and fomenting dissent. Because of the restrictive and punitive media regulations and policies, in addition to state

ensorship, two other discernible types of censorship have emerged within the region undermining progressive social movements. Self-censorship, which keeps most journalists, civil society organisations, bloggers, ICT groups and social media enthusiasts [28] from even contemplating aggressive coverage, makes it difficult for them to coordinate effective collective opposition or to express their dissent in the public sphere [1]. Citizen/grassroots journalists have been especially vulnerable since they lack the (albeit limited) protection of institutional affiliation (Khamis and Vaughn, 2011 cited in 12, p. 319). Company-imposed censorship concerns the extent to which a company assents to local censorship laws in order to conduct business in a particular state. In this instance content is mediated through, and can be suppressed by private intermediaries, such as internet service providers, especially those regulated by government.

Regulatory policies mutually reinforced by a technological infrastructure not only foster censorship, they further create a perception and/or reality of the risks of online surveillance. Anonymity, as well as the overarching concern of privacy, is of central importance for activists using social media. Allowing anonymity in social action is essential for the protection of basic rights such as liberty, dignity, and privacy by both state and private sectors (Kerr, Steeves and Lucock, 2009, pp. 439–440 cited in 12, p. 319). Paradoxically, the same structure makes absolute censorship extremely difficult for while the Internet's communication structure allows for some anonymity, absolute anonymity and security online are extremely difficult to guarantee [52]. Moreover, the integration of new technologies can streamline surveillance for government agencies. These same agencies can data-mine particular keywords to spot likely subversive activity much more efficiently than by intercepting "snail mail." Data from relevant sites can provide information about a particular person's connections; social media can therefore facilitate the uncovering of an entire dissident network rather than just one person. Cell phones and GPS systems make it much easier to track people (1, p.145).

The inherent fear and practice of online surveillance is credible as manifested in the damaging excerpts from US diplomatic cables on

the Caribbean by WikiLeaks [53]¹⁴. This case in particular shows how social media is playing a role as an important source not only for civilians, but also for governments in gaining potential diplomatic information. Generally, discussions on online privacy have revolved around consumers, or website visitors, and the protection of their personal data. Although organizations definitely have their part to play in ensuring that their customers' personal data is safeguarded, the ongoing revelations of surreptitious and indiscriminate spying and surveillance by organizations like the National Security Agency (NSA) is precipitating a continuous revisit of this issue, and whether boundaries have been crossed. To varying degrees, Caribbean countries would have been somewhat removed from the full effects of the leaks but what it emphasized was that personal communication is no longer private [54].

We must proceed with caution in drawing some of the obvious conclusions that can flow from these observations. It is a truism that severe restrictions on press freedom have encouraged a sophisticated censorship apparatus. Although involvement in discussions is a significant feature of active citizenship, the quality of online discussions is also an important issue that should be taken into consideration [55]. Bizarrely enough, at times there is an element of legitimacy to the complaints registered by policy planners who can contest the narrative-crafting and information-controlling capabilities of ordinary citizens as well as the pernicious behavior of some activists behind the veil of anonymity. Within this new context of citizen journalism problems of accuracy and anonymity have surfaced. Social media can facilitate interaction between users sharing content, but while the anonymity provided by the Internet has allowed for previously unheard individuals to express their dissent without fear of state victimisation, there is also the possibility for abuse of this anonymity. Too often the privilege of anonymity can encourage "trolling," and the uncivil use of discussion fora to provoke, degrade, and distract others which has [12, p.319] the potential to diminish the usefulness of these social media platforms as accountability tools [28]. Moreover, our obsession for more accountability and transparency through the constant call for detailed submission of personal data and

¹⁴ *BBCCaribbean.com* (2010) 'Wikileaks: Caribbean' available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/caribbean/news/story/2010/12/101202_wiki.shtml last accessed September 4th, 2014

information, questions the individual's sense of integrity [56]. It can also have a number of unintentional side effects, such as more intrusion into privacy, the very basic right that many activists clamour for, as well as opening the door to a range of new challenges that include the integrity (or lack thereof) of technological equipment. For organisations (and even governments) that value confidentiality, and have made concerted efforts to protect the data under their care, the allegations that the NSA has hacked end-user devices and created back doors [54] is likely to prompt some pause for thought. In 2010, the WikiLeaks scandal showed in extreme how the quest for openness and transparency may also clash with other political and administrative principles that divert attention from the practice of statecraft [56]. Inevitably, the result is more compliance with tighter accountability mechanisms, and perhaps a preoccupation with toeing the line as British Prime Minister David Cameron advocated in a call to Parliament after the British Summer Riots of 2011:

"Everyone watching these horrific actions will be struck by how they were organised via social media. Free flow of information can be used for good. But it can also be used for ill," said Cameron. "And when people are using social media for violence we need to stop them. So we are working with the police, the intelligence services and industry to look at whether it would be right to stop people communicating via these websites and services when we know they are plotting violence, disorder and criminality." [57]

These scenarios also raise concern about internet governance and control. Too lightly, many activists who use social media for advocacy are uninformed enough about government's policies that monitor (and can end) the use of social media. If the Caribbean is serious about new media as a tool of democratization, there will be a need to address government's policies on censorship both on and offline and the systemic denial of freedom of speech on the web that is too often ignored in our discourse about digital activism. From a policy maker's perspective, implementing the appropriate institutional strengthening is a critical activity that should be undertaken but, equally, additional considerations include capacity building of the judiciary with the requisite legislative framework to guard and monitor against abuse [58]. The confluence of an

extensive regulatory framework, the fear of censorship, breaches of anonymity and privacy and online surveillance can reinforce and have reinforced a culture that is averse to the use of social media, particularly if users know full well the stakes are high if the wrong move is made.

5. CHANGING TECHNOLOGICAL ECOLOGIES AND THEIR IMPACT

This paper posits the view that when we evaluate the methodological approaches and assumptions as to why digital activism is less expansive in some regions than in others, we find that much of the analysis has overlooked the complex and rapidly evolving technological ecology and its capacity to enhance participation as well as the broad, interrelated impact it has had on the type of democracy desired. Laudon [52] argues that the relationship between ICTs and democracy is central when analyzing political 'modes of organisation' because persons (who have access to the information potential and who control its flow) determine the models of democracy implicit within each. Thus, there are essentially three classes of technology. Data transformation technologies such as the computer which 'serves as a tool for the collection, storage, manipulation and retrieval of very large sets of information' are typically organised around experts and lead to managerial (or technocratic) models of democracy.

Mass participation technologies such as the traditional broadcast media (radio and television) and inter-active technologies such as the Internet 'which allow for horizontal communications flows among individuals and organised groups' are most appropriate for organised sub-groups and lead to implicitly pluralist models of democracy. What Laudon did not foresee at the time was rapid interoperability of ICTs through the Internet, integrating both mass participation and interactive technologies that has made it possible for radio and television to be now part of the infrastructure of social media, transmitting information from one central source to many, encouraging plebiscitarian modes of organisation that concentrate upon populism. For example, while mainstream television and newspapers have maintained their independence, paradoxically they have co-opted and embraced all of the social media platforms as part of their content channels, making them ubiquitously accessible and enabled by scalable communication techniques.

This digitization facilitates the ability of anyone to tweet, blog, SMS, provide news feeds, comments, tags, photos, videos, provide status updates and content in participatory systems [24, p.6]. Thus radio, newspapers and television still remain potent forces in shaping public opinion [44, p. 214] in their ability to direct and delimit topics of conversation in the public sphere [15, p.365] by being able to “guide” the Internet conversations and vice versa. In this regard the personal commentary of Facebook and twitter feeds and email have become depersonalized as the media engages in “reverse agenda-setting” by directing attention and selecting those topics [19, p. 365] which in their opinion are “newsworthy.” And rather cynically, while unprecedented levels of citizen “broadcasting” helps to increase the circulation and awareness of issues, paradoxically this technological integration could help counter and dilute the original intention for the activism by demotivating participation. In other words for the TV sloth, why bother to tweet and post messages on social media when someone, somewhere else is saying it for you.

Our concern is that too much of the research has focused too narrowly on the *nouveau* and the sexy dedicated platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This orientation offers oversimplified conclusions that place too much weight on selective social media platforms as the litmus test for successful quantitative or qualitative overtures of digital activism to the exclusion of the more traditional social media. Moreover it fails to take into account the more nuanced perspective that all media is “social.” Laudon argues therefore that when examining the political implications of ICT in a democracy, it is the differences in access and control which lead to differences in “who benefits and who loses influence, who decides to participate in what decision, when and how” [59, p.19].

The end result of this kind of analysis is that it creates an analytical divide that favours segments of the population and their behavioural patterns whilst ignoring others. Case in point, older technologies such as SMS and emails that older people may use to communicate more effectively, based on their individual capability whilst protecting their choice for independence and ownership of information, are often excluded from the analysis and are considered not worthy as weapons in digital activism even though mass texting (or mass emailing) operates in a manner similar to social networking sites by facilitating

the immediate [re]distribution of information, to a large audience, including that from social media sites. Besides there were no research articles titled “the revolution will not be emailed,” or “The revolution will not be SMSed”! In this regard the behavioral approaches and assumptions of online media research particularly about the validity, viability and legitimacy of some of the tools of activism can be questioned regarding their role in some social movements.

The Caribbean is also confronted by another uncomfortable factor when considering the use of social media for digital activism, that is, the prohibitive costs to some sections of the population of gaining access to the technological ecology. The 2009 Digital Activism Survey¹⁵ found that digital activists, particularly in developing countries, are more likely than the population at large to be paying a monthly fee for home Internet access, to be able to afford a high-speed connection, and to work in a white-collar job with access to the Internet in the workplace. In short, digital activists are likely to have economic resources offering them a significant digital advantage [53, p. 73, see also 61, 62]. These initial findings are also in consonance with other studies conducted in the Caribbean which indicate that the costs of broadband communication packages are only affordable to higher income populations [26,30,63].

Moreover, the Caribbean has performed poorly with regard to broadband subscriptions penetration. Throughout the region as at 2013, voice communication delivered by mobile/cellular networks still predominated [54]. In the Caribbean, large sections of the populations have access only to pay-as-you-go packages¹⁶ (PAYG) which allow the subscriber to buy a service for a set fee. PAYG services are hindrances to the extensive use of social media, unless the activist is totally dedicated to the cause, because the intensive calling, messaging, e-mailing, downloading data and accessing the internet necessary for activism can be costly per minute and may cost more than with a fixed contract. In addition, resorting to a full contractual package comes with its own credit burdens, as some ISPs lock users into purchasing expensive

¹⁵ DigiActive, is an organization dedicated to helping grassroots activists around the world use digital technology.

¹⁶ Pay-as-you-go (PAYG) allows the subscriber to pay for mobile phone calls, texts and services such as emails and internet access, in advance. The subscriber is not tied into paying for a certain amount of calls and texts each month and can terminate the service at will.

handsets and other services such as accessing the internet may be more expensive. The findings of DigiActive and the Pew Research Center, indicate that digital technology often mirrors rather than undermines preexisting divides in economic resources [60, p.73]. A reasonable discussion of social media and political change must therefore [re]image some of its analysis of how technological connectivity has changed in recent years and how social media and political change are mediated and moderated and used by individuals from different backgrounds.

6. OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: THE IMPACT OF THE DIASPORA

That the mainstream media is reshaping the activists' agendas and their use of social media also questions who are actually using social media. Such was the case with an online campaign in Jamaica on social networking sites, and via email, against the excessive rates demanded by their national power company. The activists asked the public to wear black T-shirts and/or completely switch off the electric supply at their premises on a particular day. The power company, utility regulator and government were engaged in dialogue to determine how best to address the concerns raised. However, on the day in question, news reports indicated that the public's response to wearing the black T-shirts was "underwhelming", although the protest appeared to have had considerable support online. It turned out that there was a wide disparity between the level of agitation recorded online and those who physically demonstrated. Why? The Jamaican diaspora (similar to other Caribbean countries) is considerably more involved online than local users and their impact on matters occurring in Jamaica should not be underestimated. To varying degrees, Jamaicans overseas are keen to participate in local current affairs, especially when injustices have been alleged [63,35]. In this instance, it shows it is easy to record large numbers of activists online but when a specific entity, in this case the impact of the diaspora, is factored out of the analysis it provides a sobering perspective of local online users of social media.

7. DIGITAL LITERACY WITHOUT CIVIC LITERACY EQUATES TO BAD CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

One aspect that cannot be overlooked in this analysis is the *digital divide*, which in this case

involves not only access to the technological ecology but more so the ability to successfully access communities of practice through the Internet. While the Internet has created new forms of individual power, social inclusion and mass participation, it also amplifies existing forms of social and economic exclusion for those without the ability to read, write and comprehend (52). In the case of digital activism perhaps the most important aspect to consider is what McClure (64) refers to as network literacy. He opines that for a person to function in the networked electronic environment, the person must be digitally literate and must possess:

"knowledge: an awareness of the range and uses of networked resources; an understanding of the role and uses of networked information in problem solving and 'basic life activities; an understanding of the system by which networked information is generated, managed and made available; and skills: retrieval of specific types of information from networks; manipulation of networked information by combining, enhancing, adding value; use of networked information to help make work-related and personal decisions. Such knowledge and skills should be seen not as "supplemental" to traditional literacy but rather as part of a reconceptualized notion of literacy [64]."

Digital literacy must also leverage the application of civic literacy, including critical thinking, writing, and political literacy to be able to express ideas, and in order to reach a wider audience and engage with diverse people and ideas [see 65, 66]. This is because digital literacy and cyberactivism tap into a community's distributed intelligence consisting of a community, each offering individual skills, collaborating on a unified cause or project [67].

The interplay of digital and civic literacies across distributed intelligences has implications for democratic participation, particularly how constituents will engage these new technologies using persuasive and pedagogical skills for political discussions [64,55]. Organizing this information methodically for analysis requires the ability of the less academically educated elements to sift through and make sense of detailed content streams in the immediate term regarding what news they read, what they discuss, what they like, and what they think is authoritative all of which are informed by what links are forwarded to them by their friends on

Facebook, or by Twitter [14, p.10]. Hofheinz [14, p.10] refers to this as a “copy and paste” trend that can in fact have political consequences. This is because of the tendency of social media to distract persons from important issues due to the sheer volume of information available via the Internet and 24/7 news cycles. This combination of factors makes social-media platforms less efficient and productive as easily steerable tools towards formulating complex, strategic political action [68]. Internet access is crucial but it does not ensure participation in a digital culture. Rather the degrees of access, literacy, engagement, intellectual maturity to know what to do, and knowing how to use social media skilfully will have to be considered according to the state of advance of these factors in a particular country. Thus, nurturing and investing in the capacity of social media by government, businesses and individuals, ensuring that an enabling environment is created where purposeful use of the Internet and of technology can be fostered and encouraged, maximizes and enhances any chances of engaging a wider, diverse audience overall¹⁷.

7.1 No Messiah in the Crowd

The use of social media is also circumscribed in the region by two interrelated and mutually reinforcing factors, the missing messiah (leaderlessness) and a lack of an institutional outlet for change [68]. The plethora of social media platforms can create confusion by promoting and amplifying different grievances in different places particularly when there is no leader. In an analogue world there is generally a centralized leadership structure and clear lines of authority aiming to build consensus and setting goals. The movement is therefore identifiable by a leader; a strong, passionate, articulate, visible face and voice of the movement. In the digital world however, social media has dispelled centralization. A result of this is that the seriousness and sense of purpose is undermined by vague or convoluted information and causes that can be hijacked by a small band of passionate but misfit intellectuals and vagabonds [74]. As an example of this, Gladwell [4] notes that Al Qaeda, which engages in a very extreme form of activism, “was most dangerous when it was a unified hierarchy,” rather than a loosely affiliated network of cells. He further notes that as a conservative force social media distracts

people from “real” activism by deluding them into thinking that they are effecting change when in reality they are not. In his words, “it makes it easier for activists to express themselves but harder for that expression to have any impact.” [1].

Throughout their history Caribbean populations have often responded to the charismatic leader to advance their cause. There have always been those individuals willing to decide that enough is enough, and to take the risk of imprisonment, torture or death to stand up to the powers that be and publicly voice their dissent [75]. Social media movements serving as potential oppositional forces, have a tendency to lack organized, institutional leadership. There are no formalized mechanisms of representation – or decision making [68] such as political parties, trade-unions or interest groups that have control over, or the ability to galvanise the concerns and speak on behalf of users. For the most part, social media activism is faceless and leaderless.

This in turn raises the question where there is no strategic thinking to develop a coherent and delimited set of policies to take the movement forward how does one make difficult choices about tactics, strategy or philosophical direction if and when everyone has an equal say? It is here that we see the Internet as a “tool without a handle” [13] for though it can be seen to possess enormous liberating potential, the task of harnessing this potential and translating it into political reality has proven far harder to accomplish [see also 17]. Further to this, since activism can be a game of high risk politics, who will be blamed or held liable for treason or civil disobedience if the movement is upended by the state? This is a question that should resonate within the mind of any social media user planning dissent.

8. WHEN APATHY COLLIDES WITH PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE

Such a plausible scenario presented above resettles the activist into a general state of apathy or social malaise with the *status quo* or an inherent frustration institutionalized in pluralistic ignorance both of which can detract from the use of social media for digital activism. “Pluralistic ignorance,” is a term that refers to a group that might feel the same way but pretends the opposite so as not to stand out, or be the first to revolt. This pluralistic ignorance is a key factor in keeping unpopular regimes in power [76]. In

¹⁷ For similar discussions on the role of digital literacy and civic literacy to civic engagement see also [69,70,71,72,73] for variations on this theme.

other words, many people keep their true preferences private, or speak only with a few trusted people, thinking either that they are a minority or that if they speak up they will be one of only a few and thus meet with massive repression. Both an inherent apathy and pluralistic ignorance are contributing causes to participation, or lack of, in using any form of medium.

Both cognitive stances are supported by the view that asks why protest in the Caribbean when there are equitable and diverse social welfare policies to mitigate the challenges of poverty and social exclusion. It is true that in the region there are some social, political and economic warts such as the contribution of weak domestic security to narco-trafficking and the violence and lack of opportunities resulting from high unemployment. The West Indian Commission in their Report [77] saluted the Caribbean for its democratic practices. It indicated that the Caribbean enjoys "a rare degree of democracy and freedom" and that "we must keep strictly in place what is one of the strengths, indeed one of the most attractive human features, of our Community". These strengths are the openness of the societies, and the practise of democracy based on the rule of law and the protection of human rights. CARICOM countries measure their democratic credentials primarily in terms of regular, competitive elections. This characterisation of CARICOM is far from the authoritarian and restrictive policy regimes of North Africa, further legitimising the need to retain the *status quo*.

Perhaps the best illustration of this apathy was manifested at the time of writing this paper. Globally there were marches across the world to mark the significance of climate change on society. For a region that is currently feeling the effects of climate change on their physical and economic landscape, there was not a single march held in any of the countries to raise awareness in solidarity with the global community. Although it was a triumph of online activism to mobilise such crowds aimed at bringing an awareness to climate change "from an environmental concern to an everybody issue," it went unnoticed in every Caribbean capital. The key conceptual issue here is that although social media is important for prompting and initiating involvement in discussions as a significant feature of active citizenship, the quality of online discussions is also an important issue that should be taken into consideration. This

approach has not been completely institutionalized in the Caribbean and without civil discussions online users will not be motivated to continue online participation [55].

9. LEST WE FORGET: LAST BUT NOT LEAST, MARKETS DO MATTER

Social networking sites have shown themselves to be invaluable for increasing awareness of issues. They are inherently designed to share information, and many subscribers are eager to. At this time, however, when comparing the usage of the Caribbean with other regions of the world as in Fig.1 25, p.4 which prompted the initial idea for this paper, we must pause and reflect on the methodological composition of such data. When compared to regions such as the United States of America, Western Europe and Asia, the Caribbean overall represents a tiny fraction of the global market for the use of these platforms, and to be compared alongside such numerically large regions must be placed in a larger context of technology and political activism, and more inquiries about time, usage and attitude to provide a sounder foundation upon which to build. In addition, as new groups enter both old and new social media networks there is also increasing drift and exiting across the various platforms to meet their needs. Some of the frenetic behavior of moving from one platform to the other has been the result of incessant complaints for corrections to breaches of privacy, cyberbullying, phishing scams and identity theft on some sites that have gone unnoticed or undealt with by the specific platform because the region is too insignificant to [re]shape or influence their operational policies.

10. CONCLUSION

Crucial to the region's development will be the extent to which it can harness these media as a positive complement to conventional political participation. Social media when harnessed for political engagement has the potential to enhance the quality of democratic culture and politics in the region. This has not been the case however, within the Caribbean region. In this paper we argued and offered a few clear conclusions from the real-world examples, such as a prohibitive ecology of regulatory and legislative policies, a nullifying media information infrastructure, the impact of a technological ecology, the lack of an institutional apparatus for corrective changes after activism, a culture of

path dependency and a lack of civic and digital literacy amongst others. While some may contest this analysis and its implications as normative we confess that this conceptual paper was not intended to be a statistical roll out of data. Neither was it this paper's intention to analyze every aspect of social media and their use, or not, to a single cause, neither were those reasons proffered exhaustive. We run the risk in our preoccupation with overthrowing governments and with regime change of overlooking the complexity of the socio-cultural factors that are involved when focusing on the use of social media for digital activism. Instead, at the core of this paper is an attempt to understand the complex topic with a special focus on the Caribbean, of why the association between social media and digital activism has been accorded success in one country while it faltered in another. One must be reminded that the paper was intended for discussion on a rapidly developing field of research. The challenge remains whether consumers of social media within the region will observe and [re]orient their focus from general entertainment towards new ways of organizing for political change: however, as of now, this is where this nascent phenomenon stands.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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