# ICT and political engagement among the urban poor

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## I. Introduction

Research about the democratizing influence of information and communication technologies (ICT) in national economic and social development has revolved around many different aspects of ICT impacts. One particularly rich area of inquiry is in what has been called "e-participation" where new communication technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet are believed to catalyze greater civic and political engagement (e.g. Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Nyiri, 2010; Olsson et al, 2010; Shah et al, 2005; Skoric, 2012). The debate over whether ICT brings in new cohorts of citizens into the public sphere continues, but there is no doubt that at the very least, citizens with a history of political engagement find new ways to debate, organize, mobilize, and deepen their public engagement through emerging media technologies. *This proposed study is about whether and how ICTs enable civic engagement among the poor, with the end-goal of helping enhance their representation in government and empower them to organize to solve local problems through the use of new media.*

High and equitable levels of engagement in politics and matters of the state are generally considered desirable in democratic societies (Livingstone, 2005). Thus, scholars and activists alike have long been interested in the various social cleavages that are present in political engagement or participation. These include investigations into how factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, education and income may impact on people's interest in and awareness of issues of public concern (Couldry et al, 2007). When opportunities for and interest in participation are not equitably distributed throughout a citizenry, public engagement might support only the interests of those who have the means for and access to participation (e.g. Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001). Equal opportunities for engagement are necessary for effective and fair governance, and therefore any mechanism that enables equitable distribution of political and civic participation can only be good for democratic governance.

Perhaps the most concerning form of inequality in political participation, representation, and voice is class inequality. Specifically, the inequalities of participation *among the poor* in developing and underdeveloped countries. Those mired in poverty are especially vulnerable to marginalization in governance. Income and education, which together can determine and perpetuate a person's social class stature, are crucial not only in determining people's access to the public sphere, but also for shaping their interest, or lack thereof, in issues of public concern (Couldry, 2003; 2007). ICT for development, as a movement, must address the issue of poverty as a source of inequality in reaping the benefits of new media.

This study is interested in how technological and informational literacy, which is shaped in large part by access and use, relates to people's knowledge, interest, and action in the public realm. To what extent do poor people in urban areas have access to and knowledge of ICT in developing countries? How are ICTs used for political learning and organization among the poor

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in different countries? In what ways are ICTs "empowering" and "equalizing", if at all, when it comes to political dialogue and representation for low-income or poor people? This study hopes to closely analyze how structural divides in income and education rebound to divides in access and opportunities for political participation in the technological and symbolic spaces of new media.

Specifically this research interrogates a particular subgroup of the poor, those who are young and are living in urban areas. Current estimates place the urban population as comprising more than half of the world's inhabitants, and around 1/3 of all people living in cities in developing countries lives in slum conditions (Winchester & Szlachman, 2009). Moreover, forecasts place growth rates of urban areas in Africa and Asia at a high enough rate as to double the population between 2000 and 2030. It is in these areas that ICT access is more likely in terms of infrastructure, technological literacy, and affordability and where the opportunities for political uses of ICTs are ripe. Young citizens communication through mobile phones that are internet-enabled or through pay-per-use Internet cafes.

Over the last five years, emerging communication technologies and applications (e.g., social media through Internet and mobile phones) have introduced a variety of "new" ways that ordinary citizens can engage in politics. The degree to which the availability and use of these technologies has affected the divides between the rich and poor in political participation and representation remains to be systematically examined. While there have been attempts to bring ICT to the poor in hopes of generating "leapfrog" gains in development through improvements in livelihood and economic opportunities (see for example, Jensen, 2007, and his account of the role of mobile phones in the development of certain Indian fishing markets, as well as Richardson, 2007 and his account of the role of ICTs in farming), little, if any, has been done in the area of political representation.

This proposed research project will examine the extent of use of ICT by the young urban poor in political participation in comparative context. Focusing on the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa, we aim to provide comparative data on the different practices of mediated political engagement across countries with diverse histories, political structures, and media landscapes. Results would speak to the role of ICTs, if any, in amplifying the voice of the poor in civic and political life and how this can impact on their importance in political elite decision-making. It takes off where a prior project of the IDRC, PanEGov's Youth and ICT Engagement, leaves off by applying what has been learned in that project about the redefinitions of political engagement by the digital generation (Zhang, 2011). Since the current project is interested in the youth as well, it will add significantly to the body of knowledge generated by the IDRC projects on youth and new media.

 Political engagement is conceptualized to include a broad range of behaviors ranging from active seeking of information pertaining to public issues to direct action within or against government. While the interest is primarily in political expression and action, the project will examine civic, community, and social engagement as well (Couldry et al, 2007). This is in anticipation of the likelihood that such forms of engagement signal an overall interest in public issues and inevitably, political ones. Both the "political" and the "engagement" are understood to be continua of interests and behaviors that capture various degrees of orientation toward issues of public concern (Dahlgren, 2000). Similarly, the project will observe not only ICT-based political engagement, but "analog" engagement as well, to provide a benchmark against which a comparison can be made for effectiveness of engagement through ICT media.

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The research would revolve around the broader question of the role that ICT plays in political and civic participation/engagement. The rationale is to enhance participation among the poor in urban areas, whose forms of participation prior to ICTs might have been present but less effective. We would start with addressing the question of what the class differences are in political and civic engagement (e.g., attitudes, opinions, concerns and actions). These questions would be explored within issues of the "hows" and "how well" of participation and definitions of successful engagement. Then we would figure out how ICT figures into political participation of the poor. We ask the two broad research questions: Do ICT facilitate communication between the poor and political elites? Are the poor excluded from the ICT-based forms of political engagement?

Findings from this project will provide research-based recommendations for policymakers, Civil Society Organizations, government, and similar other stakeholders. An accurate picture of the behaviors and orientations of the urban poor about public issues in ICT will greatly inform the design of programs that seek to improve their representation and voice in politics and decision-making.

## II. Theoretical perspectives

This study is situated at the intersection of two key sets of literature. On the one hand, we draw on the increasing number of works--ranging from those that have been commissioned by various international agencies committed to improving their development strategies to those that have bee undertaken by scholars who are generally independent of these agencies--that that critically reflect on the ICT4D paradigm in general and/or ICT4D projects in specific. Through these works, we identify the emerging consensus about which aspects of ICT4D projects need rethinking. We focus particularly on the many issues that have been raised as regards how these projects have defined the ways in which they should facilitate marginalised people's (a) access to ICTs, (b) political knowledge through ICTs, and (c) political engagement through ICTs.

On the other hand, we draw on works in media studies that seek to nuance the relationship between ICTs and ordinary people's practices of engaging in democratic forms of participation. From these studies, we hope to add complexity to the way we think about access to ICTs, political knowledge through ICTs, and political engagement through ICTs. In so doing, we also hope to map out the ways in which our study might be able to provide empirical data that can help recast how ICT4D projects are conceptualised and implemented.

## A. ACCESS TO ICTs

Any discussion about whether and how ICTs might be harnessed as tools for fostering democratic political engagement cannot but begin with the issue of access to these technologies. This principle is clearly reflected in many works that operate within the ICT4D paradigm. Many of these works posit that if one is to promote more inclusive democracies, then the first issue that needs to be resolved is the digital divide, which pertains to the "immense [ICT] gap...between developed and developing countries...[and] similar divides within individual countries" (UNCTAD, 2006: iii). This stems from the belief that the task of enhancing the capabilities of and increasing the possibilities for marginalised peoples to engage in political matters are both premised on the ideal of universal access to ICTs (see Batchelor et al, 2003; Mudhai and Banda, 2009; Unwin, 2009).

Works that have sought to critically reflect on ICT4D projects affirm the primacy of the task of addressing access to ICTs in relation to fostering democratic political engagement. These same works, however, also question the manner in which ICT4D projects have addressed the persistent problem of the digital divide. For example, Graesholm argues for the necessity of providing those in the social margins access to ICTs. He talks specifically about the case of Kenya, where he claims that access to the mobile phone "reduces barriers to collective action and social groups...enables greater ease of participation in the public sphere...allow[s] for micro-contributions to collective action across structural barriers...[and] contribute[s] to reproducing a social network through greater connectivity" (Graesholm, 2012: 225). At the same time, however, Graesholm also questions how NGOs working in the Kenyan slums do not seem to understand the existing social dynamics in these areas. Since they work primarily with formal institutions rather than with ordinary people, their tendency has been to work within the logics of formal governance network and, as such, to work towards integrating Kenya's marginalised in this formal political framework. In contrast, they have done very little to legitimise the alternative social arrangements that are emerging in these places. Many NGOs thus end up falling short of promoting the social and political inclusion of those in the margins, as people construe their help as being imposed from the top-down and therefore meet this with a tremendous degree of resistance.

Such emerging critical reflections on ICT4D projects raise two interrelated questions about how the digital divide might be addressed. One, they ask about how such projects might be implemented in a manner that is more sensitive to the social context of marginalised groups. Together with this, they also ask about how such projects might avoid reinforcing existing cleavages in society. The potential contribution of media studies scholarship to answering these two questions lies in how this literature can go beyond the ICT4D paradigm's traditional variables for characterising the digital divide and, as such, allow for projects that might be more reflexive of their position within the society wherein they are being implemented.

Expanding ICT4D's notion of the digital divide is crucial because, for the most part,  the approach that this paradigm takes has been heavily influenced by diffusion theory, which posits the degree of acquisition of and access to ICTs as the most important measure for whether or not the digital divide has been surmounted. Take for instance how the ICT4D paradigm tends to measure the digital divide amongst countries through indices such as the Network Readiness Index (defined as the propensity for countries to exploit the opportunities offered by information and communications technology), the e-Readiness Index (defined as the ability to use ICTs to develop one's economy and to foster one's welfare), and the Digital Opportunity Index (defined as a composite measure of a country's ICT capabilities in infrastructure, access path and device, affordability and coverage, and quality) (NCSB, 2006; UNDP-APDIP, 2006; UNPAN, 2005).

Whilst still acknowledging the importance of acquisition and access, media studies scholars have sought to expand definition of the digital divide. As Tsatsou points out, these scholars have widened the remit of this phenomenon to include the role of "skills, knowledge, literacy, capabilities and breadth of use" (Tsatsou, 2011: 323), as well as of the "engagement with technology and cultural, societal and economic parameters" (ibid.). One study that exemplifies this more nuanced approach to the digital divide is de Block and Buckingham's work that explores not only the diverse ways in which the marginalised migrant youth in Britain access and use ICTs, but also the complex manner in which these youth's social experiences

shape the practices they have in engaging with such technologies (de Block and Buckingham, 2007). There is also Livingstone's instructive reflection on the notion of children as "digital natives" vis-a-vis adults as "digital immigrants", wherein she questions the assumption that increased access to ICTs necessarily translates to an increased understanding of how to navigate these and, vice versa, that a lack of access to ICTs necessarily translates to a lack of understanding in how the navigate these (Livingstone, 2009).

Beyond these developments in media studies, Tsatsou argues for the need to further complicate the dynamics of the digital divide. Here she is referring to the current lack in studies that problematise the role of those who seek to provide access to ICTs. She contends that they should be made part of the equation, most especially as regards how their "problem-solving and other practices meet and interact with ordinary people's attitudes and life cultures" (Tsatsou, 2011: 327). For example, one of Tsatsou's previous works on this reveals that decision-makers in Greece often have contradictory and inconsistent policies about addressing the digital divide because of their need to negotiate amongst "their narrow professional interests" (ibid.: 326) and "the demands of populist voices in society and to a range of societal traits (e.g. traditionalism and techno-phobia in Greek society)" (ibid.). Another interesting case in point is Arora's study that underscores the way in which many ICT4D projects immediately assume that access to ICTs are important only because they contribute to a narrowly defined notion of human and social development. He points out that, crucially, this definition excludes being able to use technologies for entertainment and leisure. Because of this, Arora claims that such projects often "miss the actual engagements and ingenious strategies that the poor employ to cope and escape from their current plight" (Arora, 2012).

## B. POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ICTs

As we have mentioned earlier, one of the key reasons why ICT4D projects are concerned with universalising access to ICTs is their belief that this will lead to greater political knowledge. Works within the ICT4D paradigm generally define this political knowledge as information that will allow marginalised people a greater understanding of public life and how they might be able participate in it. Broadly defined, this includes forms of information about public institutions, such as:

- "official structures (e.g. departments, courts, hospitals and schools);
- formal consultation processes (e.g. community meetings and citizen juries, etc.) for national or local planning (e.g. Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers - PRSPs);
- traditional structures (e.g. governance systems and institutions, religious systems and institutions);
- formal media (e.g. print press, internet, TV, telephone, national radio, community radio);
- informal media (e.g. theatre, music, dance, puppetry, soap operas, public address systems, notice boards etc.);
- elections, referenda, opinion polls, surveys, public protests, etc" (UNDP, 2003).

There is also a specific interest in official information about the state, such as how to avail of government services (Muthaura, 2007), how to get in touch with government officials (Souter, 2009), as well as how to monitor government processes like the procurement of supplies (Kanungo, 2004), the development of legislation (Campos and Syquia, 2006), and the interpretation of legal provisions (Acconcia and Cantabene, 2006). The hope is that once

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marginalised people gain access to this, they will become informed citizens who can more actively participate in democratic political processes (SIDA, 2009; UNDP, 2003).

The key critique raised against this political knowledge thrust of ICT4D projects is that it does not do enough to reflect on the kind of information it valorises. One of the most explicit articulations of this can be found in the work of Beardon. She contends that without a proper assessment of the information being disseminated via ICTs, ICT4D projects run the risk of:

1. endangering cultural diversity, as "new technologies will compete, changing the way people access and process information, and so devaluing traditional methods of storing and sharing information. So not only are people in different cultures at an initial disadvantage, but over time traditional cultures of communication will increasingly lose their value and eventually may be lost" (Beardon, 2004: 5);

2. contributing to economic exploitation, as "a semi-skilled, computer literate workforce allows developing countries greater participation in the global economy, though not on an equal footing. They have the lowest rewarded and least powerful jobs, and are vulnerable to decision- makers with different priorities and allegiances" (ibid.); and

3. entrenching existing power inequalities, as "Information is not neutral. The very power attached to it makes it a valuable commodity which is not shared fairly or equally. People hoard information, or spread misinformation to gain a competitive advantage. Those who are most marginalised are most likely to suffer the consequences of a lack of timely, reliable and quality information, leading to a vicious cycle" (ibid).

Works from the field of media studies can help ICT4D projects address the critique above by providing a much more nuanced account of the way various forms information might contribute to enhancing marginalised people's political engagement. Indeed, a lot of these studies allow for an examination of ordinary people's media consumption that does not merely valorise institutionally conjured forms of engagement, but also accounts for people's own understandings of how they might enact their engagement (Haagen, 1999). These studies therefore allow us to  "pay attention to whatever it is that the audience do seem to think is 'real,' 'important' and/or 'serious,' rather than berate (or ignore) them, when their choices are at odds with our presumptions" (Morley, 1999: 201).

The above is most especially the case with those works that emphasise the need to be attentive to how ordinary people can engage with seemingly non-political media content in ways that nevertheless open them up to the political. Livingstone points out that even before ordinary people begin engaging with public matters, they first need the ability to imagine the wider society to which they belong. And whilst it may be that explicitly political media is better suited to address the former, it is primarily the entertainment media that builds the foundations for the latter (Livingstone, 2005). Coleman provides strong empirical support for this on his work about Big Brother viewers. He contends that those who watch this programme should not be immediately dismissed as entertainment junkies who are beyond the pale of political involvement.In fact, these people tend to have a voter turnout that is as high or even higher than the non-watching population. Because of this, Coleman urges us not "to dismiss or disdain

formats, methods and strategies that have the potential to generate a connection between the political democracy and popular culture" (Coleman, 2006: 478). Instead, he says,

> "The success of Big Brother in generating the kind of participatory enthusiasm amongst its interactive audience that most politicians would wish to engender amongst the people they claim to represent ought not to be read as evidence of a terminal political malaise. On the contrary, the convergence of popular and political communicative styles could have an invigorating effect upon democracy, releasing civic energies which have atrophied over the long years of separation" (ibid.)

## C. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH ICTs

The ICT4D literature's concern with first, access to ICTs, and second, political knowledge through ICTs, are both prerequisites to its most important concern: political engagement through ICTs. This is because democracy, in its diverse manifestations across cultural contexts, requires not only the functioning of formal institutions that guarantee basic rights and safeguard against the monopoly of power, but also the active participation and engagement of citizens. For Dahlgren (2009: 12), "It is the engagement of citizens that gives democracy its legitimacy as well as its vitality, as something propelled by conscious human intentionality, not just habit or ritual".

While political engagement is the ultimate objective of many ICT4D projects, the literature within this field often understands "engagement" in general and abstract terms. And as we have mentioned earlier, this literature often understands "engagement" as the direct, unilateral result of providing access to ICTs. There is a need therefore to specify and nuance our understanding of not only "political engagement" in itself, but also its relationship with information and communications technologies.

First, it is crucial to note that generally there is a convergence in the definitions of political engagement in both ICT4D and media studies literatures. In the ICT4D camp, Chatora (2012) defines this as "citizen acts to influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives". As a "fluid concept", political engagement (interchangeably used with "political participation") include citizens' engagement in grassroots politics, signing petitions, and attending civil protests. This is similar to Dahlgren's (2009) definition of political engagement in media studies, though he is careful to keep this in tension with the related term of "civic engagement". While "political engagement" refers to activities oriented toward influencing government action, "civic engagement" would refer to voluntary activities aimed "toward solving problems in the community and helping others" (Dahlgren 2009: 58). Nevertheless, Dahlgren stresses that a concern for political engagement requires attentiveness to the civic as well, and that different cultural contexts might differ in their understandings of civic versus political activities. He gives the example of how charity work acquires contested understandings of "civic" and "political" in North American versus European contexts (ibid.).

Whereas we could observe similarities when it comes to ICT4D and media studies definitions of political engagement, differences are more stark when we attend to how these two approaches understand the relationship of political engagement and media and communications technologies.

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An implicit assumption in some ICT4D projects is that political engagement is a direct consequence of ICT access. For instance, Allen and Gagliardone's (2011) review of political participation in different African countries reveals an assumption that the integration of ICTs in news gathering techniques of journalists is positively indicative of political participation. The assumption is that the increased use of the internet and social media would lead to ordinary citizens contributing stories, offering commentaries, or debating the elections, such as in the election crisis in Kenya (Allen & Gagliardone, 2011; Makinen & Kuira, 2008). However, due to the macro focus on national media structures and statistics of ICT access and measures of press freedom, the ICT4D literature has less to say about the diverse ways that citizens may participate politically and the heterogeneity of media use in the first place.

Chatora's (2012) review of ICT4D programs for political engagement in Africa also reveals an understanding of media and ICTs' transformative, unidirectional, and positive impact on democratic systems and processes. His celebratory review of ICTs contribution to the "Arab Spring" suggests that ICTs are examined here as "enhancing the public space, facilitating social interaction, and information sharing" (2012: 10), providing a potential model for a future "African Spring" (2012: 6). Although he acknowledges other research that have argued that social media are also compatible with authoritarian, and not only democratic, forms of governance, he nevertheless argues that "engaging with [social media] platforms will allow citizens to circumvent the wide range of tactics used to stifle public opinion" [emphasis ours] (2012: 6). Such a romanticized understanding of ICTs' role in political engagement is contradicted by media studies and sociological literature on political engagement, which have in fact stressed negative consequences of media and ICTs to political mobilization and voter turnout in Euro-American contexts (Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Putnam, 2000), or at least cautioned about overstating their direct and unilateral impact on political processes (Couldry, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Silverstone, 2005). In Ong's (2009) review of the impact on television on political engagement, he identified how many studies reveal unintended consequences of this medium on the political process, just as categories of age and class are perhaps more crucial in the decision to use a medium for political purposes. In the context of the Arab Spring, we are convinced by the argument is that, in fact, the revolution was not Tweeted, and that accounts of mediated political participation were grossly exaggerated given the elite-centred character of some of these protests (Couldry, 2012: 130-131).

The media studies literature allows our study a more nuanced conception of the relationship between media and their users in everyday life. This is primarily because these works posit a dialectic, or a "conversation", whereby the particular logics of media and ICTs shape users and their practices, just as users creatively and unpredictably domesticate these new technologies into existing cultural frameworks. This model of media and social change is often summed in the term "mediation", or "mediatization" (Couldry, 2012; Livingstone, 2009; Ong, 2012; Silverstone, 2005). Below, we discuss three key aspects of political engagement that is highlighted by this perspective: that of (a) mediated political discussions, (b) political mobilization using ICTs, and (c) new forms of political participation.

### 1. Mediated Political Discussions

One of the key promises of ICTs to political engagement is its reconfiguration of political discussion and deliberation: through the provision of virtual spaces of interaction, a more "direct" and "participatory" public sphere might be found online. The assumption here is that, because of ICTs' low barriers to entry and their capacities for many-to-many communication (markedly

different from old media's strict gatekeeping and one-to-many mode of address), ordinary people are empowered to participate in various aspects of politics. Today, the crowdsourced Constitution of Iceland is an exemplar of participatory democracy, whereby individuals at home actively contributed to determining legislation and shaping governance structures (Lessig, 2012). In the US context, Lauterer (2006) has emphasized ICTs' contribution to "community-building" and "community journalism", where people come together in online spaces to propose solutions to local problems. The vast literature on online political deliberation has also explored: how minority voices come together online to present alternative opinions absent in mainstream spaces, such as in India (Mitra, 2001), how diasporas and exiles contribute to shaping political dialogue back in their authoritarian homeland, such as in Burma (Brooten, 2011), and how online interactions with politicians through Facebook and Twitter generate trust and combat cynicism, such as in the US (Valenzuela et al, 2009).

A compelling reason why we selected the study of the young urban poor in three different cultural contexts is that we aim to examine how age, class, and cultures likewise shape political discussions online. Social psychological and media studies literatures on young people's use of ICTs caution against hopeful accounts of civic cultures online, where young people who have grown up with ICTs supposedly use them to avoid uncomfortable discussions and "bail out" from their responsibilities to others (Gershon, 2010; Turkle, 2011). Turkle's pessimistic account of young people's ICT use in the United States is entitled Alone Together, and evokes the image of young "digital natives" who are maladjusted to social situations and are in fact more isolated and distant from the public realm. It would be interesting to explore whether and how this applies to young people in Brazil, Philippines, and South Africa–contexts with less intense ICT use and penetration as well as less individualistic than United States culture.

Indeed, cultural differences would be interesting to explore when it comes to mediated political discussions across these three countries. In the Philippines, social media use is argued to be heavily based on norms of reciprocity and positive exchange (Madianou & Miller, 2011). In Madianou and Miller's study, they characterize Filipino Facebook discussions as about avoiding disagreements and public embarrassments, following local cultural codes of hiya (shame) and utang na loob (debt of gratitude). In the context of political discussions particularly, the authors' previous study indicates that political debate among Filipino migrants is carried out within heavily classed social networks, with rare instances of political debate between individuals of different social classes (Ong & Cabanes, 2011). Such forms of online political deliberation centered around talk, and rarely translated to offline action and mobilization.

## 2. Mobilization through ICTs

Although political talk is crucial to a vibrant democracy, scholars nevertheless argue that "conversation is not the soul of democracy" (Schudson, 1997). Public talk, which would include expressions of indignation, denunciation and pity (Boltanski, 1999), nevertheless feels incomplete without the physical, cooperative, and performative acts of voting, protesting, organizing, and face-to-face problem solving. For the purpose of this study, we characterize such acts as constituting the second aspect of political engagement: mobilization.

Online platforms such as Facebook, by virtue of being constituted for the most from within one's existing (offline) social network, tends to be an ideal platform to gather like-minded people (given that networks converge around those with similar educational backgrounds, geographic locales, and by extension, social classes). Indeed, Mutz (2006) has argued that like-

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minded groups are more ideal for mobilizing people, for engendering committed participation around a pre-established common cause, but not necessarily deep deliberation. This would be curious to explore in the context of our study, which would hold political discussion and political mobilization in tension through our bottom-up research.

While ICTs have been recognized to have played a central role in protest actions in the Middle East during the Arab Spring (Hofheinz, 2011), they have also been blamed for facilitating riots, such as the 2011 public riots in the United Kingdom. Curiously, while the Iranian and Egyptian revolutions have been examined as elite-led protests (Couldry, 2012), the UK riots were primarily comprised of white working-class males (Vis, 2012). The framing of these different street protests was remarkably different, and argued as fueled by class discrimination. In Bauman's (2011) sociological analysis, the UK "riots" were not simply isolated cases of opportunistic looting and barbarianism, but were symptomatic of deep-seated antagonisms and social anxieties in increasingly unequal Britain. What we wish to explore more deeply in our study is to see how political mobilization through ICTs among the urban poor would follow trends of media demonization, such as in the UK case, or would be framed positively, such as in the Arab Spring case. Indeed, existing accounts of ICT-led protests in Uganda and Zimbabwe rarely pay attention to class as a significant category; ICT-led protests are routinely celebrated in the development literature, with little critical reflection on existing social configurations that shaped the conduct of these protests (see Chatora, 2012). Through our bottom-up work, we are better suited to understand more deeply the interaction between individuals' particular socio-cultural contexts and the contexts of ICTs in shaping their effects on political mobilization. In addition, we are able to compare and contrast different democratic contexts (with different histories and traditions of media regulation) that might shape how ICTs are encouraged or controlled in public life. Indeed, even the development literature admits that different national contexts on occasion curtail ICT use, such as when Cameroon suspended Twitter and SMS services during the Arab Spring protests (Chatora, 2012).

## 3. New Forms of Political Participation

According to Chouliaraki (2010), the new genres, platforms and social architectures that have been introduced by different ICTs have led to a "technologization of action", whereby the click of the mouse, the visiting of a website, the "liking" and "subscribing" of causes and interest groups are fast becoming the primary vehicles of public action. Her thesis is not the well-rehearsed argument that virtual activities and commodities are "less real" than their offline counterparts, such as the idea that our Facebook friends are not our "real friends" or online interactions are less significant than offline ones (see Miller, 2010 for a critical review). Indeed, in our study, we do not have this prejudgment of authenticity in relation to these new forms of political participation, but are more significantly concerned about their consequences, both in the short and long term.

To return to Chouliaraki, what we find interesting is her argument that "technologized action" through ICTs have a subtle yet powerful impact on users' political and civic commitments. Rather than focus on how ICTs are "effective" or not in raising money or awareness for particular civic causes–questions that have been well explored in the development literature as well (Arora, 2007; Chatora, 2012)–Chouliaraki is concerned whether technologized action, characterized by low forms of commitment and investment that she names "light-touch participation", engender utilitarian and neoliberal logics of civic and political action (2010: 117). New forms of political participation through ICTs seem to follow market logics

of easy consumerism, where individuals' motivations for action are egocentric rather than other-centric, and personal benefits and a desire to be follow trends would rule. This argument about individual motivations for political participation and how they have been transformed by ICTs has yet to be explored in the ICT4D literature, and is one issue for exploratory investigation. Chouliaraki's study opens itself up for the kind of user-focused research that we aim to do, as she develops her arguments through textual and discourse analysis rather than how users actually interpret these new forms of political activities for themselves.

One popular instance of a political campaign centered crucially around "technologized action" is the Kony 2012 campaign. Premised on "making famous" the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, who headed the LRA army which operated in Northern Uganda (and since 2006 in the wider region), the campaign consisted of a website through which users could view a 30-minute video, and where one could purchase Kony 2012 merchandise (such as t-shirts, bracelets, and posters). Another key feature of the website was a list of links to several celebrities' Twitter accounts, as users were encouraged to write to celebrities such as George Clooney and Rihanna to generate momentum and political pressure on the issue. Madianou's (2013) critical study of this campaign argued, qua Chouliaraki, that the new forms of political participation invited by this campaign were premised on narcissistic desires for the viewer: that "you must participate and donate because you are one of these empowered people" (Madianou 2013: 11), while "one is left wondering what is the cause in the first place when it hasn't been explained properly" (ibid.: 13). They were also "one-off acts" rather than "persistent involvement", and involved a "fetishization" of technologized action.

These Western-centric and text-centric projects in the media studies literature provide us a set of questions for bottom-up empirical investigation. Given that these studies on political and humanitarian action have focused on the motivations and responses of Western audiences, it would be interesting to explore how "neoliberal"/"utilitarian" logics for public action apply (or not) in the contexts of the young urban poor in the developing world. It would be valuable to explore as well how different cultural contexts fetishize (or not) particular kinds of technologized action, especially when enacted by vulnerable groups.

## III. Project objectives

The review of the ICT4D literature above reveals a field that is populated by action research and programs that have specific poverty reduction goals through sectoral programs such as health, education or governance. Many of these are designed in a top-down manner, where loan agencies, program planners, or other entities external to a community introduce technologies to the poor then necessitate training and persuasion for adoption. While there are efforts along this vein that work well, particularly in the context of service delivery by government, many flounder because of low adoption and acceptance by target beneficiaries.

What appears to be missing across many of these programs is a systematic effort to find out and understand exactly how technologies have been used by the poor for local purposes and how these patterns of adoption evolved naturally. Why would this knowledge be important? There is tremendous practical value in the anticipated findings of this research, namely in producing knowledge about how the poor have utilized ICTs for their own purposes and how their skills and natural behaviors can be leveraged to design policies for access that have greater likelihood of impact and sustainability.

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Simply put, we believe that not enough poverty alleviation intervention programs through ICTs have really taken honest account of how the target beneficiary populations themselves have used and adopted ICTs for their own ends. More and more of the poor are already using ICTs, already on social media, and already utilizing their online presence to engage with their government or politicians. A thorough understanding of whether and how these technologies have been adopted by the young urban poor has the potential of improving upon policies and programs aimed at increasing representation and political visibility of the poor in developing nations. In a networked political world, efforts of the poor to amplify their political voice may be rendered more effective if policymakers knew what these efforts are and how the poor are findings ways to engage politically online.

Research Objective 1: To explore whether and how the urban poor utilize ICT for political engagement.

· To describe ICT utilization for political engagement among the poor.
· To examine program community and civil society initiatives to bring ICT-enabled political participation to the urban poor. (can include community-organized, spontaneously organized, private sector or NGO-based initiatives)

Research Objective 2: To characterize cross-country similarities and differences in political engagement through ICT among the urban poor and examine how ICT access circumstances in a country constrain or enable their engagement.

## III.    Method: Research Activities

This comparative research project is conceptualized as a three-country study across three continents (tentatively the Philippines, Brazil, and South Africa). There are three main components to the research design: semi-structured interviews, case studies, and unobtrusive longitudinal observations.

1.    Interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs) with constituent groups among the poor and disadvantaged (15 interviews and 5 FGDs/country). Interviews will be divided among the ICT-enabled and and non-enabled politically active participants.

2.    Case studies of successful cross-class political engagement campaigns, comprised primarily of systematic content and features review and analysis of at least 3 websites, social network sites, or mobile-based applications per country, designed for the purpose of some form of political and civic engagement by the poor. These will be augmented by interviews with members of the organizations running such sites or hosting venues for ICT-based engagement among the poor. In selecting case studies we are interested in looking at both organizations that promote engagement as well as spontaneous organizing around civic issues.

3.    Unobtrusive observations of the online social network behaviors of 35 individuals per country (overlapping with the 15 interviewees in #1). This set of study participants will have a longer involvement in the project. They will be invited to be a participant for 18 months, allowing for collection of longitudinal data. Participants will be asked for consent to join their social network pages and track their behaviors within these pages. Behaviors pertaining to political and civic engagement will be coded and analyzed. Changes can be observed over time as developments in local country politics develop. In order to minimize the likelihood that

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participants will change their behavior as a result of being observed, once the project page is included as a part of their network they will see no activity emanating from it. Secondly, while all participants will be given a general idea of what the project is about they will not know exactly what types of behaviors are of interest to the research team.

Research partners will be identified in Brazil and South Africa to do participant recruitment and interviewing. In addition they will manage the process of transcribing interviews, translating, and other data collection activities. Country-based researchers are necessary because of language issues, but one of the investigators will visit the country to oversee data collection during times of fieldwork. All analysis will be done in the Philippines by the project investigators. Country partners, depending on their interest, can contribute to the analysis and writing of country findings and will provide inputs in designing research instruments and participant identification strategies in order to account for country-specific circumstances that would impact on the fieldwork.

Prior to identification of participants and case studies, the project team will first examine data contained in the Global Impact Study (globalimpactstudy.org) which have information about public access sites for Internet. In these datasets and studies are information on reasons why people use public access sites, their activities online, conditions of the venues, and skills of users. Both Brazil and the Philippines were part of the study and analysis of the existing data will inform instrument design, coding scheme formulation, and participant recruitment.

Parameters for participant recruitment:

To identify poor and disadvantaged groups, indicators will include a combination of income (person living on less than $2/day), educational attainment (high school education or less), and dwelling (location of house, ownership status, and floor area per resident). The research team will strive to achieve an equal participant distribution between males and females. Participants will be between the ages of 18 and 30 and will live in urban poor communities. All activities of the project will comply strictly with the ethical rules and guidelines of the IDRC, the project investigator's home institutions, and the country researcher's institutions. Most importantly, all identifying information of project participants will be anonymized and any personal information held confidential. No entities outside of the project team will be allowed access to the names, contact information, or other information that may reveal participant identities.

Observing political engagement

It was mentioned in the earlier parts of this paper that the definition of what comprises political engagement behaviors through ICTs will be led in part by the participants themselves, and in part by the existing literature. The guidelines for observing actions that may constitute political behavior will draw heavily from the valuable findings of the "ICTs and Youth Engagement" project which was part of the IDRC and IdeaCorp's PanEGov suite of projects. It included a rich set of questions that asked young activists how political engagement is defined by the youth given the current digital context. There were many tools and behaviors named, all pointing to a general finding that political engagement has been effectively redefined by the young to mean something that encompasses political expression, persuasion, action, and finding solutions to issues of public concern, and going beyond government. As such, the observation tools to be designed for this project will hew closely to this broad redefinition.

A coding scheme will be designed and pretested to capture data on political activities of the participants on their social network sites. These activities would include expressions of opinions, "liking" a page, "retweeting" a tweet, reposting a news story, or leaving a comment on a page. Through careful observation of these we would be able to glean the types of political issues the young poor are interested in, the forms of expression they use, their exposure to political information and opportunities to hear dissenting opinions. Hired coders will observe these behaviors and code them (capture them in data form) on a biweekly basis for the duration of the observation period, all data will then be consolidated and analyzed for trends and overall patterns. The analytical strategy will be longitudinal and comparative, examining changes over time brought about the specific political events and seasons, as well as similarities and differences in behaviors across different countries.

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