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This is my contribution to the paper:

A number of predictions about the effect of online communications technology on democracy in the Pacific seem to have borne fruit in recent elections in three Pacific Islands nations.

In 2012 Cave declared that the Pacific Islands were undergoing what she describes as an information and communications technology (ICT) revolution, based on mobile phones, which she argued, could have major implications, particularly for democratic governance and the region's development. It would provide, she said to demand better governance.

Writing in 2004, Lee noted that:

“The ‘long distance’ Tongan nationalists are becoming increasingly vocal, as they become more concerned for the future of their homeland, and they are likely to seek ways to be more directly involved. In the not too distant future it would not be surprising if at least some of the overseas population unites to demand more of a say in the nation building process.”

The role played by internet communication in the recent elections in the Cook Islands, Tonga and Fiji suggests that to a large degree those implications have been realised.

During the 2014 elections in Tonga, the Cook Islands and Fiji all campaigns featured a strong online political presence.

Elements in the elections were the role of the internet in reaching diasporic groups, in moderating family influence on voting behaviour and a clear understanding by politicians and campaign strategists of the importance of the internet to younger voters.

This does not mean that traditional electioneering tactics were abandoned, but it does mean that politicians have recognised that certain demographic groups have to be reached in new ways.

Quite how effective the internet has been in voting outcomes is a matter of debate. There is extremely strong evidence to show that the internet and online news services and diasporic Facebook pages allowed the Tongan diasporic community in Auckland to play a part in the elections in the island kingdom, even though they cannot vote.

Approximately 60 per cent of Pacific Islanders now have access to a mobile phone and this figure continues to climb. Mobile Internet is leapfrogging obvious barriers to Internet access such as geographical remoteness, financial cost and availability. A boom in mobile phone use has facilitated the rise of social media in the Pacific. (Cave, 2012)

Finau et al (2014) echo Cave when they say that the ICT revolution in the Pacific has led to a growth of online sites dedicated to political issues “where citizens engage in the political process” and it is worth keeping in mind that these pages, blogs, Facebook groups and online news services were all well entrenched before the elections.

In Fiji, for instance, online media had served as sites for discussion of political issues since the 2000 coup. However, Tarai et al (2015) reported that political parties turned to Facebook during the 2014 elections as a means of reaching a younger demographic:

“Political parties and candidates were compelled to transform their campaign strategies and accept new methods of campaigning to appeal to the youthful voters. Social media became the modern vehicle for political campaigning.” (2015)

As we shall see, however, other academics, such as Vakaoti and Mishra-Vakaoti (2015) are far more sceptical about the impact of the online campaigns and the political awareness (and, by implication, effectiveness as a bloc of voters) of much of the young cohort at which the campaigns were aimed.

Cook Islands

The Cook Islands has a population of 11,000 inhabitants living on 15 islands. According to Cave there was a fivefold increase in mobile penetration rates from 8.34 per cent in 2002 to about 66 per cent in 2011. About a third of those phones can access the web.

This meant that a significant number of mobile phone users could be reached by the online campaigns launched by the islands’ political parties during the 2014 election.

Facebook, which Cave cites as the largest network in the Pacific, played an integral part of election campaigns in the William Numanga, who led the Cook Island Party’s online media campaign told Radio New Zealand Facebook pages had been used to catch the attention of younger voters.

He said the Prime Minister’s page attracted lots of attention and said the 18-40 demographic. As in the rest of Polynesia, the party sought to persuade swinging voters with its online presence. As in other parts of the rest of Polynesia, voting patterns in the Cook Islands are heavily influenced by family and friends. (Momoisea, 2014)

“We’re actually utilising this for a lot more younger people to help them make their own decisions, not necessarily a family decision, because you know, sometimes families tend to be party selective, and the children become the same. So by using the internet we feel that it’s actually, probably an additional way,” Cook Islands Party’s campaign manager Piltz Napa told RNZI. (Momoisea, 2014)

However, because internet access is limited to certain areas of the country, radio campaigns and old fashioned door knocking are necessary in the outer islands. (RNZI, 2014)

The CIP Facebook page contained videos and promotional material and was generating an average of 10 likes and multiple comments from party supporters.

Independent candidate Teina Mackenzie used Facebook to reach potential voters.

“Facebook is regularly viewed by many people on Rarotonga, in the Outer Islands, and interestingly many overseas who want to be just as informed as the rest of us,” he said. “If we can encourage more people to participate in positive debate on what is being posted then we at least will have them thinking about how important their opinion is,” Napa said. (Samoglou, 2014)

Tonga

In recent years Pacific Islanders from the diasporic Polynesian communities have used metropolitan centres as points from which they have participated in democratic campaigns that combine traditional social structures and extended family functions, augmented by digital media.

Tongan politicians conducted part of their recent campaign in New Zealand because even though Tongans living in New Zealand cannot vote in Tonga, they used new media to influence relatives at home, aided and abetted by diasporic media located in New Zealand’s largest city. These trends reflect

the development of online media as political fora noted by Georgiou (2004) and on the growing influence of diasporic media on their home countries predicted by Karim (1998).

According to Kailahi (2015) Tongans living outside the kingdom have connected and formed a new 'public sphere' online through Facebook. What we see happening with the diasporic media in Auckland, the creation of online communities and the elections and political processes in Tonga, reflect - at least in embryo - of Castell's vision of a global (or, because it is diasporic, globalised) civil society in embryo. (Castells 2008)

If we accept that participation in the public sphere is a vital part of democracy, then Tongans certainly take part in democratic campaigns. To criticise members of the royal family, to try to hold them to account for their behaviour on the internet, is a democratic act. To try to influence the media by sending them images and stories that attack government inefficiency, corruption and malfeasance, is to be part of the democratic process.

The size and influence of the Tongan diaspora in New Zealand has meant that it has begun to exercise an influence on life in the kingdom. Many people in Tonga are heavily reliant on remittances.

The period before the election was marked by upheavals in the Democratic group, much of it carried out in the open in the pages of Pohiva's newspaper, *Ke'lea*. There was great disquiet in the party when Pohiva appeared to support a candidates' list drawn up by his son-in-law.

The New Zealand Tongan Development Society proposed their own Democratic Party candidates for the election. The New Zealand Tongan Development Society said it would support those MPs who were loyal to the Party.

Under the Tongan electoral system non-resident Tongans cannot vote. However, if they have maintained a presence on the Tongan electoral role and have lived in the kingdom for three months prior to an election, they may stand for Parliament. Many Auckland Tongans would like to vote in the Tongan elections and have suggested that they be able to do this either online or by voting at the official Tongan residence in Auckland, 'Atalanga.

Tongan politicians used the Tongan diasporic media to carry their messages during the election. Stories and documents were leaked and statements released to the media Auckland-based media were targeted as much as the domestic media.

Latu said Tongans in New Zealand had been actively interested in Tonga's politics since the 1990s, especially in supporting 'Akilisi Pohiva and the democrats. This led to a growing influence from Tongans in Auckland and attempts to influence their family in Tonga on the way to vote in 2014. (Latu, 2015a)

After the Tongan election, Pohiva travelled to Auckland where he spoke to about 500 people at Lotofale'ia Methodist Church hall. (Latu, 2015b) During the meeting he was asked many questions about domestic matters, including employment of civil servants, religion and the role of China in Tonga. Tongans in Auckland clearly feel they had a right to a say in what is happening in the kingdom. According to Latu, this is because Tongans in Auckland think differently about politics to their families at home because they live in a country where dissent is expected and tolerated.

Tonga's democracy is still in its early stages while New Zealand had it many decades ago. Tongans in Auckland look at politics as one of the avenues that brings them fortune and greater opportunities in New Zealand. In Tonga people look at politics as something that could bring good governance, transparency and accountability to the nation. (Latu, 2015c)

Pulu agreed, saying that Tongans in Auckland were different from their relatives in the kingdom. He said they came to New Zealand and discovered that it was permissible to disagree. (Pulu, 2015)

Fiji

If diasporic communities were a focus of internet attention by Tongan politicians, in Fiji it was the 18-35 age group. As Tarai et al point out, the voting age had been reduced to 18 years, which meant nearly half the voters were under 35 and nearly three quarters of them had not voted before. It also meant that for a significant part of the population, democracy was an exception in their lives, rather than the rule. They were, as one commentator put it, “the coup babies.” (Tarai, 2014)

This was also the first time Fijians had voted on a common roll, rather than a racially-based one. (Fiji Elections Office, 2014)

More than a third of Fijians use the internet and the expectation appears to have been that the majority of those would be in the target demographic. The Fiji Electoral Commission issued guidelines on using social media during the elections. (Fiji Electoral Commission, 2014) During the final stages of the election there were 298,000 Facebook users. (Bola-Bari, 2015)

Political parties seem to have intended that much of their online work was to begin by engaging with younger potential voters. The president of Fiji's oldest party, the National Federation Party Raman Singh said young people were not engaged in politics and this interest needed to be cultivated. (Round, 2014)

Independent candidate Roshika Deo told RNZI half of her manifesto came from connecting with young people via the internet. “People are definitely very much engaged,” she said. (Round, 2014).

All the main parties used Facebook, although research indicated that some parties seemed very uncoordinated in their approach and others seemed to have setup a page and then done nothing further. The Fiji Labour Party, for instance, had two pages that appeared “to be duplicates of one another and at times appeared incoherent.” (Tarai, Romitesh et al, 2015)

Conversely, the Social Democratic Liberal Party (Sodelpa) pages were run by volunteer university students who presumably were more familiar with the technology and its possibilities than other groups.

Analysis of Facebook use indicated that particularly during September 2014, the majority of Facebook users were in the 18-35 bracket, the main target of the online campaigns. Total audience figures for the Facebook campaigns showed former coup leader Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama's FijiFirst party gaining a total audience of 80,835, SODELPA with 19,786 and independent Roshia Dedo with 14,391. (Tarai, Romitesh et al, 2015)

As in Tonga, the internet allowed wider participation and as in the Cook Islands, this had an effect on the family influence on voting, as the internet allowed people to extend “conversations beyond their immediate family and community environments.” (Vakaoti and Mishra-Vakaoti, 2015)

They noted, however, that much of the online conversations consisted of instant responses and personal reactions rather than considered analysis – in other words, much like many conversations about politics.

Since the 2000 coup the internet has been a vital tool in opposing the military regime and promoting democracy, with a number of blogs dedicated to political issues. However, Vakaoti et al are sceptical about the role of Facebook in the 2014 election, saying it was unclear whether the internet helped provide a public sphere “for freedom of expression and participatory democracy.”

They cited a number of posts, including one which declared “Social media doesn’t help them progress just changes the way they express self. Significantly, they noted that all the would-be politicians using the net assumed that the younger voters who were vital to their success were both technologically and politically savvy. This, they maintain, was not and is not the case:

“Unfortunately, interaction on social media is not simply mediated by technological savviness but also by a user’s location, class, education level and level of political consciousness (Strandberg, 2013)...(the evidence) suggest that the majority of young people, even if they access social media, do not have the political awareness to activate themselves offline and eventually online.”

However, they hope that social media will become popular as a democratising tool as internet connectivity increases and more young people become more meaningfully engaged. (Vakaoti et al, 2015).

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