Coping with gatekeeping in digitalised political participation research: a Zimbabwean experience

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Abstract

Globally, the upsurge in internet and social media usage has prompted new ways of gatekeeping and coping strategies significantly transforming the character of political participation research and practice with far-reaching implications for consolidation of democratic governance and social development. Social networking sites and mobile instant messaging platforms have triggered new forms of both political mobilization and resistance calling into question the efficacy and sustainability of the traditional gatekeeping in research. There is little doubt that the nuances and dynamics of digitalized gatekeeping have a profound capacity to facilitate and inhibit the research process. Through a combination of a critical review of documentary information and snippets of practical experiences drawn from Zimbabwe, the article examines the various gatekeeping mechanisms in digitalized political participation research and delineates the possible circumvention interventions. The main dimensions of digital user surveillance and profiling technologies at various levels of the research process are not only mutually reinforcing but also largely panoptic. Since gatekeeping mechanisms in digital research are situated at the meeting point of internet freedom and surveillance, they inadvertently evoke methodological and ethical challenges.

Keywords: digital technology, networked gatekeeping, political participation, social media, surveillance