

# Research Proposal

for a Master Thesis at

TU Ilmenau

Institute of Media and Communication Science

Empirical Media Research Media and Political Communication Research Group

Prof. Dr. Jens Wolling

Working Title:

## **Online Political Participation in Change.org Indonesia E-petition Platform: Activism or Slacktivism?**

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Please do not hand in anonymous or non dated exposés. Follow the suggested structure: working title, name, contact details, date, and preferably also the number of the version

The expose should not be longer than 6 pages plus front-page, time table and references.

Version 1

02.07.2014

## 1. Introduction

Signing petitions to change the decision maker's opinion or policy is not a new form of political activism. With the advance of technology and the Internet, signing petitions becomes easier. Several websites serve mainly as to provide online petition services, commonly known as e-petition. Names such as Change.org, Avaaz.org, and PetitionOnline.com are not unfamiliar to people who take the advantage of the service for pursuing their goals in influencing the decision makers.

People can create and share e-petitions to have a greater impact. Realizing the potential of the medium, the concept of e-petition is also used by governments. Several countries including Germany, the USA, and UK have provided e-petition platforms for their citizens as a channel to state their opinion to the government. Although there are some conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for the petition to be discussed in parliament, it is still a medium that can accommodate the voice of the people. Unfortunately the Indonesian government has not provided that medium yet. Therefore the public utilizes other media to be heard. One of these media is Change.org Indonesia's e-petition platform site.

Change.org Indonesia is not the only e-petition platform available in Indonesia. However, it is the only e-petition platform site that gains recognition by the Indonesian public in general with nearly 50,000 members in the first three months of its operation since the beginning of June 2012. Moreover, its popularity increases significantly with the help of its famous members including rock stars, artists, journalists, activists, etc. With hundreds of petitions that have been made and numerous victories that have been won, Change.org Indonesia becomes an interesting phenomenon for research in the field of political participation. Thus, this study will focus in Change.org Indonesia and its contribution to the Indonesian online and offline political participation.

Elaborate on the relevance of your topic by providing concrete examples, events, quotes.

Do not explain just the general relevance of your topic, but highlight the relevance of your specific research interest (here: The contribution of Change.org Indonesia to Indonesian online and offline political participation).

In the end of the introduction you should formulate a precise and concrete research aim or research question.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Internet, Political Participation, Activism, and Slacktivism

"Political participation involves taking part in activities related to politics such as donating to a campaign or attempting to convince others how to vote" (Kenski and Stroud 2006, p. 175). Not only that, "political participation is also defined by activities such as contacting officials, attending a rally, or signing a petition" (Tolbert and McNeal 2003, p. 177). Those activities used to be conducted only offline. However, currently with the Internet, all of those activities can also be conducted online.

Outline in short how your theoretical base will look like. It is not necessary to elaborate on the theoretical base in detail. Important is to present central assumptions and to make plausible why the theory or theoretical approaches are appropriate in order to answer your research question.

Empirical findings about the influence of the Internet on political participation have been mixed: Prior studies have found that the Internet contributes to an increase in political participation (Weber et al., 2003). In a survey of Web users Quan-Haase et al. (2002) found that “the internet supplements political activities but does not change people’s level of involvement” (p. 312). On the other hand, Norris (2001) found that the Internet will only exacerbate the divide between the “tuned-in and the tuned-out, the activists and the disengaged” (p. 13). Furthermore, individuals who access political information on the Internet are likely those who are already interested in politics, therefore the Internet does not increase political involvement (Norris, 2001).

In relation of the Internet with activism, “scholars tend to view the internet’s role in social movements as two-fold: the internet can facilitate traditional offline activism, enhancing a movement’s existing repertoire by adding email campaigns, online petitions and even virtual sit-ins to activists’ existing toolbox, or it actually can create new forms of activism and resistance” (Harlow 2011, p. 229).

Vegh’s (2003) classification of online activism includes: (a) awareness/advocacy, and (b) organization/ mobilization. In terms of awareness and advocacy, the Web allows a social movement to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. Furthermore, according to Vegh (2003), the internet facilitates organization and mobilization by three means: a) calling for offline action via email or a Website; b) calling for online actions for something typically done offline, such as sending emails to Congress members instead of letters; and c) calling for online action that is possible only via the internet, such as a computer spam campaign.

In relation with social movements, van de Donk et al. (2004) argued that the internet will complement, not replace, existing social movement tactics. In fact, it is the widely lauded simplicity of online activism that scholars have suggested could undercut a movement’s value, creating a half-hearted, meaningless activism, or ‘slacktivism’. The origin of the term slacktivism is debated. However, Fred Clarck takes credit for using the term in 1995 in a seminar series to shorten the words slacker activism, which refer to bottom up activities by young people to affect society on a small personal scale used. In the usage of the term during the time, the term had a positive connotation. However, “today the term is used in a more negative sense to belittle activities that do not express a full-blown political commitment” (Christensen 2011, p. 3). The concept generally refers to activities that are easily performed, but they are considered more effective in making the participants feel good about themselves than to achieve the stated political goals (Morozov, 2009).

Like in all scientific texts, your assumptions and statements need to be referenced by using an appropriate citation style. We recommend APA.

To sum up, Christensen (2011) highlights that “the critique of Internet activism involves two central issues: 1. Internet activities are not effective; and, 2. Internet activists do not engage in other activities” (Christensen 2011, p. 4). In other words, Internet activism will not positively influence people for offline activism and therefore it is considered as not effective. However, it is important to note that “the precise impact of Internet activities on political participation is still a matter of dispute, there is no evidence for negative effect of the Internet on off-line participation. Even the

most skeptical scholars at most find a weak and non-significant linkage, but none find a negative impact” (Christensen 2011, p. 6).

In analyzing Avaaz.org, Christensen (2011) does not consider the Web site for connecting citizens and decision-makers around the world as an example of slacktivism because the site also tries to mobilize users offline and therefore reaches beyond virtual world. Change.org on the other hand is different with Avaaz.org. Change.org is an e-petition platform site, focusing only on online activities of making, signing, and sharing e-petitions without offline mobilization activities. Therefore, according to the Christensen’s explanation, the users of Change.org are considered to doing slacktivism. However, in terms of the result, Change.org might contribute more to the decision making and social change compared to Avaaz.org because it is locally-organized by one representative in each different country. Therefore more petitions are exposed to the public in each of their country websites.

“E-petitions make for an interesting research object for two reasons. One is that e-petition are becoming an increasingly popular tool for political participation online, whether as a tool used by the government as an easily quantifiable aspect of e-democracy” (Riehm and Trelin in Jungherr and Jurgens 2010, p. 134), or employed by political activists to marshal and express popular support for political issues (Mosca and Santucci 2009). In this study, further research on the success of an e-petition platform site will be conducted that provides a valuable insight to find out whether e-petition platform sites are able to evolve and mobilize its users into doing other forms of online and offline political participation activities which eventually consider the use of e-petition platforms either as activism or slacktivism.

## **2.2. Political Efficacy and Political Cynicism**

Campbell et al. (1954) described the concept of political efficacy as “the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change” (p. 187). Several scholars have noted that political efficacy appears to be made of two different constructs: internal efficacy and external efficacy. According to Niemi et al. (1991), internal efficacy refers “to beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics” (p. 1407), while external political efficacy refers “to beliefs about the responsiveness of government authorities and institutions to citizen demands” (p. 1408). Although political efficacy is frequently discussed and studied as an overall concept, Kenski and Stroud (2006) argue that “internal and external efficacy items typically fall into two unique dimensions, and these dimensions interact differently with other political variables” (p. 175). Furthermore, by combining internal and external efficacy into a scale, “this makes it difficult to sort out the influence of the Internet on these two distinct notions of political efficacy” (p. 177). Therefore in analyzing the variable of political efficacy, the research at hand will differentiate the variable into two: internal political efficacy variable and external political efficacy variable.

Regarding political cynicism, Agger et al. (1961) describe it as “the extent to which people hold politicians and politics in disrepute, the extent to which these words symbolize something negative rather than something positive, is a matter of some concern to political theorists concerned with the relationship of the governed to the governors as well as to political reformers and professional

politicians interested in changing or maintaining the relationships” (p. 477). Miller (1974) explained that cynicism “refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations” (p. 952). Political cynicism reveals a feeling of distrust in politics, politicians, and governmental institutions by the public (Strama, 1998). It has been similarly defined as a lack of confidence in the political systems (Bandura, 1986; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). “Low political trust (or conversely, high political distrust or political cynicism) could be seen in responses to items tapping negative attitudes toward the government; this distrust potentially stems from discrepancies between the output produced by the government and citizens’ expectations” (Moy and Scheufele 2000, p. 745). Cynical voters are fond to believe that the political system and governments are corrupt and problematic and they cannot be trusted (Capella and Jamieson 1997). The more cynical voters become, the less likely they are to engage themselves in political activities. Ultimately they may distance themselves from political process (Pinkleton & Astin, 2004).

### 3. Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Research Model

Based on the previously reviewed literature and findings, this study will analyze the relation between the usages of Change.org—the current biggest e-petition platform website in the world—with online and offline political participation in Indonesia, in order to find out whether the use of this e-petition platform evolves and expands into other online and offline political participation activities. If the end results show that there are positive relations with online and offline participation, then it can be concluded that the use of Change.org e-petition platform is considered to be activism. However, if it only influences the online political participation and does not include also the offline political participation, then the use of e-petition platforms can be considered to be slacktivism. Furthermore, this study assumes that the relations between e-petition platform use with online and offline political participation are influenced by political efficacy and political cynicism. Thus, this research leads to three research questions and eight hypotheses as presented below.

Your expose should include one (or more) precise research question. If possible and adequate you can also state hypotheses.

#### **RQ1: Does e-petition platform use influence online and offline political participation?**

It is assumed that the more people use e-petition platform sites, the more people will be exposed to current social issues and problems. It is expected that it eventually increases the online and offline political participation. Thus it leads to two hypotheses below:

- H1a: The use of the e-petition platform is positively associated with online political participation
- H1b: The use of the e-petition platform is positively associated with offline political participation

#### **RQ2: Does internal and external political efficacy influence the relation between e-petition platform use with online and offline political participation?**

It is assumed that internal and external political efficacy are able to modify the relation between e-petition platform use with online and offline political participation. It is expected that people with high internal and external political efficacy will result in higher online and offline political participation. In addition, the previous gap of online and offline political participation activities—between people with low and high internal and external political efficacy—will widen by using the e-petition platform site. According to Sylvester and McGlynn (2010), “Internet usage increases political participation by providing information that can increase one’s political efficacy” (p. 70). Therefore it is assumed that both people with low and high internal and external political efficacy will have an increase in online and offline political participation after using the e-petition platform site. But people with higher political efficacy will have a more significant increase because with many victories of e-petition, they become more encouraged to make a difference and influence the decision makers. Thus it leads to four hypotheses below:

- H2a: Internal political efficacy is positively associated with the relation between e-petition platform use and online political participation
- H2b: External political efficacy is positively associated with the relation between e-petition platform use and online political participation
- H2c: Internal political efficacy is positively associated with the relation between e-petition platform and offline political participation
- H2d: External political efficacy is positively associated with the relation between e-petition platform use and offline political participation

**RQ3: Does political cynicism influence the relation between e-petition platform use with online and offline political participation?**

It is assumed that political cynicism is able to modify the relation between e-petition platform use with online and offline political participation. It is expected that people with high political cynicism will result in lower online and offline political participation. In addition, the previous gap of online and offline political participation activities—between people with low and high political cynicism—will be slightly widened by using the e-petition platform site. According to Kaid (2003), prior research has suggested that the Internet does not reduce cynicism. Therefore it is assumed that people with low and high political cynicism will tend to have the same level of online and offline political participation, even after using e-petition platform site. However, people with low political cynicism may have slightly higher online and offline political participation after using the e-petition platform site, believing that the government can be convinced to eventually change the decision making. Thus it leads to two hypotheses below:

- H3a: Political cynicism is negatively associated with the relation between e-petition platform use and online political participation
- H3b: Political cynicism is negatively associated with the relation between e-petition platform use and offline political participation

To visualize the research at hand, the research model is provided below (Figure 1)

If possible try to visualize how the relevant concepts of your research are related to each other. Make clear what you want to explain! What are the causes? What shall be compared?

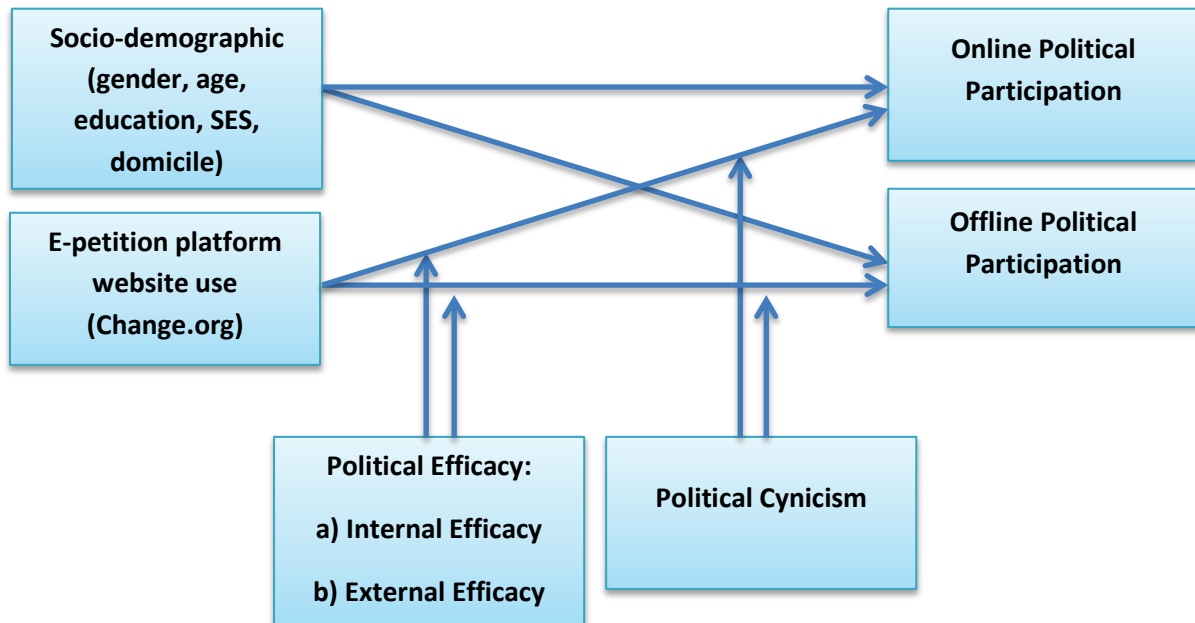


Figure 1: Research Model

#### 4. Methodology

In conducting the research, the study will compare between two groups—users and non-users of Change.org Indonesia. The term of ‘non-users’ in this research consists of people who do not use the e-petition platforms and people who use other e-petition platforms than Change.org. The analysis will focus on the comparison between those two groups and find out the differentiation in the two groups’ levels of online and offline political participation and whether Change.org Indonesia usage influences and contributes more or not to those differences.

This study uses a longitudinal approach to investigate Change.org users’ and non-users’ level of online and offline political participation by comparing their past and present online and offline political participation activities. The analysis will focus on the two groups’ online and offline political participation activity in 2012, which is the year when Change.org Indonesia established, and 2013—in order to find out whether there are changes or not in

The methodology part should outline how the research question will be answered. Which methods will be applied, how the sample will be gathered... Most important is that the empirical research does not need resources (time, money) that exceed to capacities of a master thesis. Limit your research to the aspects which are really necessary to answer your research question

the level of online and offline political participation from one time to another. In addition, because Change.org Indonesia was established in the middle of 2012, it is expected that there will be people who are non-users of Change.org Indonesia in 2012 and became users in 2013. Thus, it will also be an interesting insight to analyze their online and offline level of political participation and to investigate whether the usage of Change.org Indonesia plays a significant role within it.

The research itself will be conducted by an online survey through the distribution of online questionnaires to the users and non-users of Change.org Indonesia. But due to the limitation of time and budget, the sample will be conducted in a convenient sampling, which is drawn from snowball sampling. It is expected that each respondent will share the online questionnaire to other people he or she knows, either the users or non-users of Change.org Indonesia.

The snowball sampling will start in two ways. The first way is through Change.org Indonesia’s social media channels: the Facebook and the Twitter account. Change.org Indonesia will post the online questionnaire in both of the channels. The second way is through several universities in Indonesia. According to Portal Nasional Republik Indonesia, Indonesia is the largest archipelago country in the world that spans 1,904,569 km<sup>2</sup> which consist of 17,508 big and small islands. Those facts become challenges in gathering the sample that reflects the population of Indonesia. Therefore it is expected that the online questionnaire from the universities across several different regions in Indonesia will result in a wider spread of the respondents.

Please elaborate a time table and a to-do list. You can use these schedules for orientation whether you are on time. You don't need to exactly "fulfil" the time plan. However you can use it in order to recognise potential problems and to contact in these cases your supervisors.

### 5. Master Thesis Timeline

THINGS TO DO	October				November				December				January				February		
	W 41	W 42	W 43	W 44	W 45	W 46	W 47	W 48	W 49	W 50	W 51	W 52	W 1	W 2	W 3	W 4	W 5	W 6	W 7
Introduction																			
Theoretical Framework																			
Methodology																			
Create, Revised, & Approved questionnaires																			
Share questionnaire, data collecting																			
Data analysis, syntax confirm																			
Result, Findings																			
Conclusion																			
Discussion																			
All necessary revision																			
<b>SUBMIT MASTER THESIS</b>																			



THINGS TO DO	CALENDAR WEEK
Introduction	41-45
Theoretical Framework	41-45
Methodology	41-45
Create, revised & approved questionnaires	44-45
Share questionnaires, data collecting	47-51
Data analysis, syntax confirm	51-1
Result, Findings	1-4
Conclusion	1-4
Discussion	1-4
All necessary revision	5-6
SUBMIT MASTER THESIS	7

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Please put your list of references at the end of the exposé.

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