



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

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of internet freedom and surveillance, they inadvertently evoke methodological and ethical challenges.

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

Introduction

Globally, the emergence of digital technology particularly at the turn of the new millennium, through the use of social networking sites (SNS) and mobile instant messaging platforms has prompted new forms of both political mobilization and resistance calling into question the efficacy and sustainability of traditional gatekeeping that has historically characterised offline research. Social media has given birth to a ‘new digital democracy’ (Zúñiga , Veenstra, Vraga & Shah, 2010)—a hybrid of participation that combines the virtual and real-world realms of political engagement and action. Given that political participation is multi-layered and complex, researching the phenomenon inevitably creates both challenges and opportunities. The traditional definition of ‘gatekeeping’ no longer seems useful as the roles of ‘gatekeepers’ and the ‘gated’ have become more fluid and interchangeable (Helberger, Kleinen-von Konigslow & Van der Noll, 2015). The internet’s multi-layered interactivity coupled with the proliferation of alternative channels circumvents traditional gatekeepers and exemplifies a new form of political engagement (Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, cited in Zúñiga et al. 2010, p. 38). In the context of digitalized political participation, researchers, gatekeepers and the ‘gated’ have continuously designed new ways of outwitting each other. There is little doubt that the nuances and dynamics of digitalized gatekeeping have a profound capacity to facilitate and inhibit the research process.

Political participation, both formal and informal, is undoubtedly one of the distinguishing features of a democratic society. The traditional dimensions of political participation include voting, campaign activity, collective activity and contacting officials (Zúñiga et al., 2010). However, with the emergence of new digital democracy, all these except voting have largely been realised

in the Zimbabwean cyberspace providing citizens the opportunity to express political opinions and engage in political talk or conversations online. The basic premise of democracy as the rule of the people requires as a minimum equal and voluntary participation by citizens including through digitalized or online platforms (Rottinghaus & Escher, 2020). Social media use politically mobilizes citizens in cyberspace, especially among young voters, where governments find it difficult to impose restrictions on political expressions (Tariq, Zolkepli & Ahmad, 2022). However, in most countries, this has largely been mediated by an intersection of the quest for the protection of human rights, and individual freedom and the introduction of institutional and extra-institutional surveillance and censorship. Digital censorship and surveillance create a securitised climate that impinges on scholars' rights to unimpaired access to information and the ability to conduct unobstructed research (Tanczer, McConville & Maynard, 2016).

Scholarly debates on the link between digital political participation and internet gatekeeping, and their combined effects on the dynamics of online research particularly the credibility and legitimacy of the findings are not new (Broadhead & List, 1976, cited in Singh & Wassenaar, 2016; Buchanan, Boddy & McCalman, 1988; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018). Although extant literature has not been starved of scholarly and journalistic material on online political participation, those specifically addressing the management of gatekeepers during online political participation research, particularly within the Zimbabwean context have been scarce. Through a combination of a review of related literature and snippets of practical experiences, this article extends knowledge on the subject by examining the different gatekeeping mechanisms in digital political participation research and delineating possible ways of circumventing them. Many studies measuring social media use in politics have constantly found positive political participation effects (Bachmann & Zúñiga, 2013, Chibwe & Ureke, 2016; Ekstro'm et al., 2014, cited in Knoll et al. 2020, p. 136; Robles-Morales & Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). Vaccari and Valeriani's (2018) observation that informal political talk on social media platforms was positively associated with institutional and extra-institutional political participation corroborates these. As a

consequence, this has motivated both liberal and non-liberal states across the world to put in place various information censorship and surveillance structures. This pattern has been widely acknowledged in African countries such as Lesotho, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where the power of digital participation prompted authorities to institute digital authoritarian control measures to suppress online political participation on the pretext of curbing cyber-crime and terrorism (CIPESA, 2022).

Social media is a ‘form of information activism’ (Halupka, 2016), that breaks the traditional political orientation boundaries and collapses contexts (Boyd, 2006; Vitak, 2012). This context *collapse* allows ‘users to quickly diffuse information across their entire network and facilitate interaction across diverse groups of individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to communicate’ (Vitak, 2012: 451). Online political participation or engagement is both collective and connective (Halupka, 2016) with relatively uninterested or seemingly apolitical users *incidentally* getting *exposed* to political information (Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2020). Social media technologies tend to collapse multiple contexts thus bringing together distinct audiences across the socio-political, economic, religious and cultural divide. For example, in the Zimbabwean context, ordinary political party followers and critics, usually using pseudonyms for fear of retribution, have been exposed to digital political engagements on micro-blogging platforms (<https://twitter.com/zimlive/>) with powerful individuals in society including the State President ([#mnangagwa-/Twitter](#)) and some prominent officials ([#mangwana-/Twitter](#)), sharing opinions on political matters. Cyberspace offers SNS users the opportunity to choose their affiliation to communities without imposing relationships as normally obtaining in non-virtual communities.

Although online political participation provides an opportunity for researchers to overcome the traditional gatekeepers, it has also triggered heavy-handed responses from authorities seeking to mute online political activism. For example, the Zimbabwe government enacted digital information control legislation and created supporting architecture to

reinforce surveillance and censorship such as the 2007 Interception of Communications Act (Chapter 11: 20), providing for the lawful interception and monitoring of certain communications in the course of their transmission through a telecommunication, or any other related service or system. This was in addition to other laws that for many years restricted the general access and conduct of requesting information such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) (Chapter 10:27) of 2002 (repealed in 2020 and replaced by the Freedom of Information Act (Chapter 10: 33). Although the legislation gave effect to the constitutional rights on freedom of expression, media freedom and access to information, its gains were effectively wiped away by other restrictive laws especially those governing use of digital technology. Overall, the Freedom of Information Act tends to be more about the protection of information than freedom of access to information. With the emergence of cyberspace, the restrictions were reinforced by the introduction of compulsory SIM registration in 2013 (CIPESA, 2022) and the enactment of the 2021 Cyber and Data Protection Act (Chapter 12: 07). In particular, the Act provided for investigation and collection of evidence of cybercrime and unauthorised data collection. The legislation augments the already existing traditional institutional gatekeeping mechanisms namely the University Ethical Review Boards and Research Act (Chapter 10: 22). It sought to protect ordinary citizens who might have been accidentally exposed to sensitive information such as politics without the intention to participate. However, although the original intention of internet censorship may have been to police political discourse, in today's digital knowledge era, the scope of impact certainly goes beyond the political domain (Mou, Wu & Atkin, 2016).

The legislation has implications for the management of digital archival surveys and virtual interviews. Perhaps the pursuit of digital authoritarianism by authorities is partly justified by the existence of similar gatekeeping mechanisms in other states. For instance, in countries such as North Korea, Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter accounts sites are often blocked or cut off as they are considered to host sensitive information. Regimes in these countries have effectively used the Internet to

suppress free speech, hone their surveillance techniques and disseminate propaganda that pacifies their populations (Sinpeng, 2020). Similar restrictions on internet freedom have also occasionally been observed in Zimbabwe (CIPESA, 2022). For example, during the January 2019 riots in Zimbabwe, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp were cut off (Nyoka & Tembo, 2022). Such extra-judicial mechanisms for monitoring and control of information flow have far-reaching implications for the ordinary research practice.

The rest of the article is organised into four parts. The first part provides a conceptual and theoretical foundation of digital and networked gatekeeping. The second part considers the connection between social media and political participation. In particular, it discusses how digital conversational affordances have attracted various dynamics of institutional and extra-institutional gatekeeping. In the third part, the article examines the different gatekeeping mechanisms and the possible strategies for circumventing them. The fourth and final part reflects on the methodological pathways and ethical issues associated with the management of gatekeepers in online political participation research.

Conceptualising digital and networked gatekeeping

Gatekeeping is an integral but sometimes difficult part of the research process (Kawulich, 2011) and includes the societal structures of all knowledge production (Pellander, 2016). A gatekeeper is variously described as someone or something that controls access, monitors, selects and can withhold information (Bryld, Kamau & Sinigallia, 2013; Neuman, 2012; Reeves, 2010; Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). Gatekeepers are points of contact for individuals outside the organisation, linking the organisation with the outside environment, and internally playing liaison and co-ordination roles (Haas, 2014). The traditional ‘gatekeeping’ concept and metaphor originated from Kurt Lewin’s (1943) gatekeeping theory and has been effectively used in contemporary studies of how the media filters what is newsworthy (DeJuliis, 2015; Roberts, 2005; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The metaphor is also used to characterise the filtering roles of scholarly editors of publishing

houses as intermediaries between the production and consumption of printed materials (Coser, Kadushin & Powell, 1982; Sato, 2012).

This article focuses on digital gatekeeping and networked gatekeeping. Digital gatekeeping is based on the idea that ‘every individual and every algorithm *could* be a gatekeeper, whereas only a few of them *are* for any given subject’ (Wallace, 2018 p. 279, cited in Dovbysh, 2021). In this article, the concept of ‘gatekeeping’ has also been adapted from the ‘Network gatekeeping theory’ (NGT) (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1493–1512) which is built upon the principle of ‘information control’. Based on this premise, gatekeeping activities include, among others, selection, addition, withholding, display, channelling, shaping, manipulation, repetition, timing, localization, integration, disregard and deletion of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008 p.1498). Thus, networked gatekeeping is best conceptualized through information control lenses, and carries three main goals: (a) ‘locking-in’ of the gated inside the gatekeeper’s network; (b) protecting norms, information, and communities from unwanted entry from outside and (c) maintaining on-going activities within network boundaries without disturbances. Networked gatekeeping inverts the previous top-down model of gatekeeping and highlights the active role of those who gatekeeping is being exercised upon (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008, p. 1494). According to the NGT, the traditional gatekeeping literature ignores the role of the ‘gated’ thus failing to recognise the dynamism of the gatekeeping environment. The ‘gated’ are active influencers of gatekeeping decisions, rather than merely a receiving entity. Thus sociotechnical affordances of social media tools enable non-elite, networked publics to direct and influence the flow of information (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2016, cited in Dovbysh, 2021 p. 4).

According to the NGT, online gatekeeping is the process of controlling information as it moves through a gate, and the gatekeepers are the institutions or individuals that control this process (Laidlaw, 2010). Concerning digitalized political research, direct communication with research subjects and participants through electronic network platforms such as emails, LinkedIn, text messages, and websites, WhatsApp, Instagram and

Twitter can be an effective strategy in dealing with troubling traditional gatekeepers. Scholars such as Roberts (2005), Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011), Bro and Wallberg (2014), and Kovacs (2017), found digital sources to be effective information-gathering instruments without physically labouring past the traditional gatekeepers. In a networked world or virtual communities, the community itself may prove to be one of the most powerful gatekeepers, since it can use self-regulation mechanisms of gatekeeping.

Due to the deteriorating ability of formal regulators and institutions to enforce power on both the researcher and the gated in the context of cyber-political participation, there is an advertent delegation of control to networked community leaders and administrators. However, this level of gatekeeping plays a dual role of guarding the communities and at the same time exploiting power and manipulating information to adapt to their interests (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006). Similar to offline research, one challenge for online researchers is the ability to identify the right gatekeepers. The researchers may be unaware of the existence of gatekeeping mechanisms given that these are often hidden and invisible. As argued by Laidlaw (2010), the emerging 'Internet Information Gatekeepers' can be difficult to identify given their multi-faced outlook and their tendency to perform and vacillate between various and seemingly isomorphic roles. NGT suggests a dynamic and contextual interpretation of gatekeeping, referring to gatekeepers as stakeholders who change their gatekeeping roles depending on the stakeholders with whom they interact and/or the context in which they are situated (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006). Concerning digital political engagement, gatekeepers control access to networked communities and individuals and facilitate and restrict political content to be discussed or talked about, to be received and sent out. The gatekeeping mode includes the act of 'filtering' and the 'switchman' who decides on what should be let in to protect protocols against 'side-stepping' and 'gate-crashing' (Raven, 2014).

Social media and political participation

The strong association between social media use and political participation is predicated on Knoll, Matthes and Heiss' (2020), *social media political*

participation model (SMPPm). The key aim of the SMPP model was to predict under which conditions exposure to social media fostered political participation. The model holds that political content on social media can only affect offline political participation when the content is appraised as relevant. Certain conditions increase the chance of social media users being accidentally exposed to shared political exposure and thus increase political participation. This model reinforces Zúñiga et al.'s (2010) observation that the internet and blogosphere were discursive media with the potential to provide more politically oriented expressive platforms as well as serve as an additional conduit for participation. One key asset of social media is that citizens can get exposed to political information via networks, without intentionally looking for it. Good examples include WhatsApp groups created based on religious affiliations, professional associations or social connections like former college-mates and young farmers' clubs who unintentionally end up engaging in political talk.

Social media political participation is largely in the form of ad hoc and unstructured informal talk, extemporaneous and sociable conversations (Schudson, 1997) and permits self-paced, asynchronous communications that may promote deeper reflection than face-to-face interactions (Sha, 2016, p.14 cited in Vaccari & Valeriani, 2020, p. 2). Social media has prompted the culture of political expression, developed political efficacy and created new forms of sociability (Chen & Chan, 2017, cited in Tariq, 2022). As Dovbysh (2021) found out in a related study on SNS in a selected Russian province-, a new form of gatekeepers was emerging - 'city public groups' (*gorodskie pabliki*, local newsgroups on social networking sites). In this situation, the gatekeepers were owners and moderators of local SNS groups based on user-generated content that combines news posting and citizen discussions, reporting on local affairs and gossip, and entertainment. In Zimbabwe, similar examples include following online news and posting replies via email on local community platforms such as <https://mbaretimes.com>, <https://zimcommunitynews.com> and <https://www.iharare.com>.

The role of social media in fostering political expression and participation has been widely acknowledged (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2020;

Zúñiga, Molyneux & Zheng, 2014; Nickerson & Rogers, 2014; Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández, 2019). At an international level, digital technology brought new forms of activism that have transformed the political space. For example, the ‘Twitter Revolutions’, code-named the ‘Arab Spring’ that toppled dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and the #RhodesMustFall movements in South Africa can arguably be considered watersheds marking a strong association between social media and political activism in Africa. In Zimbabwe, during and immediately after the 2008 Presidential elections, a period Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015), cited in Nyoka & Tembo (2022) coined ‘Mugabeism’, a new dimension of political activism was nurtured through the ‘Baba Jukwa’ Facebook page, although widely believed to be a product of the ruling party. Since then, several counter-hegemonic and anti-government social media movements have been born namely Pastor Evan Mawarire’s 2016 #ThisFlag and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, and @Hopewell Chinóno’s Twitter accounts that incessantly thrived on unearthing alleged corrupt activities by ruling party leadership and senior government officials. All these movements were accused of inciting violent demonstrations mainly in Harare, in July 2018 and January 2019 inviting state clampdowns on what was considered social media ‘abuse’. However, the (ab)use of social media has not been restricted to anti-government voices as pro-ruling party activists and government officials have also gone on Twitter and Facebook to ‘crash’ factional opponents.

Although the COVID-19-induced restrictions imposed in 2020, could have significantly reduced offline political activities, digital technology provided an opportunity for increased political engagement. All such events showed how digital technologies facilitated grassroots engagement and resonated with Ross’ (2011) argument that connection technology was an autonomous actor that takes power away from nation-states and gives it to individuals. Therefore, the potency of social media to protect and mobilize citizens for offline political action cannot be underestimated. Digital political activism serves as a stimulant for offline political action. Online participation behaviours and offline political engagement are interwoven (Zúñiga et al., 2010; McLoughlin & Southern, 2021, cited in Nyoka & Tembo, 2022, p.7).

Robles-Morales and Córdoba-Hernández (2019) corroborate with this view demonstrating how digital media intersect conventional and non-conventional political participation dynamics and the extent to which Web 2.0 has strengthened the political role played by citizens.

Since social media are embedded in citizens' daily routines, they can facilitate unintentional encounters with political content among users who may ordinarily not be interested in political material. Although relatively unorganised, informal talk about politics on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp tends to mobilize users for political participation. However, even in cases of weak-tie networks gatekeeping is still obtained through self-censorship and 'negative reinforcement' by way of non-responses from other platform group members and discussants. The patterns of online participation reflect both the ability to participate through knowledge and networks or acquaintances and also cognitive mobilization such as political interest and political efficacy that compel someone who can engage to participate (Rottinghaus & Escher, 2020). Opportunities for participation are not equal as personalized invitations to participate can be influenced by one's social and economic status.

Political use of social media is also largely determined by demographics and predispositions (Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2020). Hence, some authors (Stark, 2019, Steinbrecher, 2009; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018, all cited in Rottinghaus & Escher 2020, p.265), have found online political participation to be also differentially gendered. Similarly, in the Zimbabwean context, men tended to be more interested in engaging in digitally networked political participation and less interested in health and consumerist matters than women. Thus, the various mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from participation are also contingent on the different structures of censorship and surveillance. Although social media have come as a blessing for academics, some scholars (Tancer, McConville & Maynard, 2016; Unver, 2022), have intimated on how the same have often been covertly used for political censorship and surveillance.

Gatekeeping mechanisms in the digital age

Regarding political participation, different stakeholders have increasingly become aware of the potency of both intentional and accidental exposure to mediatized or digitalized information in fostering both individual and collective behavioural changes. This has motivated the emergence of various forms of controlling the information flow, content and accessibility (Laidlaw, 2010). This article follows different scholars' categorisation of the bases of gatekeeping mechanisms. For example, Barzilai-Nahon (2006) split the gatekeeping mechanisms into '*authority*' and '*function*' dimensions. Legislation, institutional censorship and security mechanisms constitute the authority dimension while the functional dimension is composed of mainly network or internet service providers such as ZoL, NetOne, TelOne and Econet Wireless, portal providers, account providers and network administrators. The digital gatekeepers may be state and non-state and include the internet information gatekeepers (IIGS) and service providers (ISPs) (Laidlaw, 2010). Helberger, Kleinen-von Königslöw and Van der Noll (2015 p.52) also categorise the gatekeepers into two major types that can be roughly distinguished into; (i) gatekeepers who control access to information and (ii) gatekeepers who have facilitating roles through control of critical intermediary resources or services that are necessary to link users and content, to mediate between the different players in the information chain, to produce, transport and distribute content.

Under the '*authority*' dimension, cyber-security legislation and supporting state-sponsored security architecture remain one of the strongest gatekeeping mechanisms that severely affect digital political participation research. As earlier submitted, the Cyber and Digital Protection Act (Cap. 12: 07) which became operational in 2022, became the first piece of legislation directly targeted at social media technology. Overall, the legislation potentially subverts both digital democracy and academic freedom (cf. sections 61 and 62 of the Zimbabwe Constitution). Mass data collection and analysis by institutional and governmental actors pose risks to the research community. Both researchers and participants as social media users may be discouraged from online participation by the mere knowledge that every website visited,

web search performed and message sent may be collected, stored and analysed. In the Zimbabwean context, many citizens have been wary of the mystical operations of some state security institutions such as those responsible for gathering and analysing information related to national security, including political, military, and economic intelligence. Over the years, particularly under the Robert Mugabe era, there have been myths and controversies around the way such state-sponsored organisations conducted their business. Despite the lack of empirical evidence directly linking them to alleged human rights abuses such as the extra-judicial killings and disappearances of journalists and political activists, many ordinary citizens feel threatened by their existence.

Perceptions of massive surveillance contribute to an online spiral of silence and a significant drop in the amount of web traffic (Tanczer et al., 2016). Unver's (2022), observation on the association between 'interoperability' (the ability of different ICT systems to exchange information and use that information) and gatekeeping adversely affects both online political engagement and willingness to participate in online political research. Further, the introduction of a mandatory SIM card registration created a centralised subscriber database posing risks to the research community, especially in the absence of water-tight and democratic data protection laws. This can lead to 'self-blocking' or 'self-censorship' as both message senders and receivers exercise restraint by limiting their online political participation and consequently willingness to participate in researches that focus on sensitive topics such as political violence. For example, the widely publicised arrest, detention and subsequent trial of two Zimbabwean Twitter account holders and journalists, @Hopewell Chinóno and @Jacob Ngarivhume on charges of inciting public demonstrations in the 2018 influence online political participation research. Such incidents are intimidating to both researchers and participants and consequently a hindrance to effective research. Unlike journalists, academic researchers can be risk averse and may be scared of data confiscation which may lead to purposeful or accidental destruction of data by law enforcement agencies. The academic community

are not easily persuaded to engage in potentially career-threatening research assignments.

Gatekeeping can also occur at the level of building digital archival material. Although digital archival research has been considered effective in circumventing the traditional restrictions in offline research, it is also susceptible to digital gatekeeping. Digital archival research methods involve the analysis of digital texts including electronic databases, emails, and web pages. Although researchers can easily gain access to particular archives even those belonging to political organisations, the material can also be largely censored. This is corroborated by Subotic's (2021) study which demonstrated how archives could ordinarily contain only material deemed 'legitimate' and 'worthy history' by 'gatekeepers' such as heroes but excluding diaries, letters, accounts, and testimonies of minorities and victims of political violence. Kim (2022) reinforces this position arguing that archives were locations of power. Survival, transfer, digitization, reinforcement at the level of data collection and source biases at the level of record creation were symbols of how archives were not impartial repositories but rather institutions of power (Kim, 2022). Gatekeeping decisions are made by elites (DeJuliis, 2015). Therefore, digital archivists are effectively gatekeepers in their own right serving the same role as offline research.

Numerous user surveillance and profiling technologies tend to discourage participation in online research. For example, non-neutral activities performed by Internet Service Providers such as 'filtering' of messages can pose serious challenges. In addition, state-sponsored internet content filtering and blocking through the application of firewalls at national and service provider levels have been reported in Zimbabwe (CIPESA, 2022). However, as Sinpeng (2020) observed in Southeast Asia, the standard methods of internet filtering-blacklisting and blocking- are not as effective at identifying and limiting content hosted via Web 2.0 applications (Sinpeng, 2020). Perhaps using digital ethnography could successfully mitigate the effects of 'filtering' as it can aid in gathering consent from research participants, especially when there are sensitivities around what has been experienced.

This can also allow researchers to become more accessible and transparent with the involvement of new means for data collection such as blogging and video recordings (Knoblauch, 2012) and digital archival research (Kim, 2022).

The most common ‘function-based’ gatekeepers in digital research are blog authors and owners, Webmasters, WhatsApp group administrators and members, and Twitter account holders. They are particularly useful during the sampling process in non-probability online surveys such as River and Panel Sampling (Lehdonvirta, Oksanen & Pekka Räsänen, 2021). River sampling (known as intercept or real-time) means recruiting respondents by inviting them to follow a link and complete online surveys via Google Forms or SurveyMonkey placed on a web page, email, or somewhere else where it is likely to be noticed by members of the target population. The concept of ‘river’ refers to the idea of researchers dipping into the traffic flow of a website, catching some of the users floating by. Online panel sampling includes placing advertisements on websites or social media and distributing invitations to newsgroups and mailing lists (Lehdonvirta, 2021). When acting as managers of platforms these ‘gatekeepers’ can potentially prioritise traffic and delay certain unaffiliated ‘content’. Since they are the ‘custodians’ and ‘guardians’ of the links they influence researchers’ access to users. However, they do not influence the consent to participate as both the river and panel surveys are based on self-selection.

Gatekeeping circumvention strategies

The strategies for coping with digital and networked gatekeeping are not mutually exclusive. Their effectiveness also depends on both the researcher and participants/respondents’ ability to balance issues of internet freedom, protection of human rights, ethics and surveillance. Circumventing digital censorship and surveillance is complex and delicate. Online gatekeepers are also sometimes invisible and hidden. One of the recommended strategies is the use of strong passwords and anonymizing online traffic through Onion Router (Tor) (Tanczer et al., 2016). The encryption of data on computers,

cloud services, and removable media data devices is a way to elude censorship or surveillance thus ensuring data integrity and protecting intellectual property. However, installing encryption software on researchers' computers and online communication demands technical knowledge on the part of the researchers.

Since digital political research occurs mainly among network platforms it is critical to circumvent throttling and filtering of data by ISPs. This can be mitigated by bypassing censoring filters and monitoring systems through (a) routing of connections over less restrictive network paths and (b), modification of data before transmission to prevent eavesdropping and the identification of activities. In addition, one can use a Virtual Private Network (VPN), which prevents others who are also part of the network from intercepting and modifying network traffic, avoiding the so-called man-in-the-attacks (Desmedt, 2011 cited in Tanczer et al., 2016 p. 350). It also helps hide the data that is being transmitted.

To protect research subjects and participants, communication can be conducted through Off-the-Record (OTR) particularly when using instant messaging services and multiplatform and videoconference applications, especially during interviews. Researchers may also arrange virtual focus group discussions and Skype interviews using university learning management systems such as Google Classroom, blackboard and WebCT which often meet stringent ethical requirements (Turney & Pocknee, 2005). This enhances anonymity and confidentiality on the part of participants. This can be complemented by the use of alternative operating systems such as Tails especially when dealing with potentially sensitive issues (have no trace on the computers)-can be booted via a DVD, USB or SD card. This enhances the secure retention of research records and prevents their destruction (Greenberg, 2014 cited in Tanczer et al., 2016, p. 351).

Methodological issues: Complimentary or transversal pathways

Digital technology has consequences at both ontological and methodological levels. Since gatekeeping in digital research is situated at the meeting point of internet freedom and surveillance it inadvertently evokes ethical dilemmas.

Digitalization has had profound effects on the right to privacy and academic freedom (Tanczer et al., 2016) and gatekeeping entails both unfair outcomes and transformative effects (Unver, 2022). Digital gatekeeping poses challenges to autonomy and informational privacy. For example, the ability of different ICT systems to exchange information and the statutory requirement for ISPs to intercept information flow on behalf of law enforcement institutions creates an ethical quagmire. Although the recruitment of research participants could be independent and free from the troubling traditional gatekeeper, the fact they are unaware of the surveillance mechanisms renders the whole process panoptic. Similarly, when researchers become aware or suspect the existence of such gatekeeping, they may persuade researchers to engage in surreptitiously or covertly amoral data collection practices.

Social media can be used as both a research instrument and intermediary requiring more innovative ways of surveillance which inadvertently raise numerous empirical and ethical issues. For instance, gaining access and consent from Web participants may not follow the conventional protocols common with traditional gatekeeping but may potentially raise ethical issues. Gelinas et al. (2017) listed these as: (i) the ethical significance of compliance with website “terms of use”; (ii) the ethics of recruiting from the online networks of research participants; and (iii) the ethical implications of online communication from and between participants. Digital technology has also dwarfed the efficacy of Belmont's 1979 pillars/principles of ethical considerations (informed consent and treating people with dignity), beneficence (researching to maximize benefit and minimize harm) and justice or fairness (avoiding prejudicial treatment of subjects).

The emergence of blog authors and readers as a new and significant force in the political world may make them difficult to reach in large numbers using conventional sampling methods. While traditional research approaches situate probability and non-probability sampling techniques as transversal and incommensurable, digital research allows for epistemological and ontological pluralism by not only triangulating them as complementarities but making them substitutable. For example, non-probability sampling

techniques namely chain-referral, respondent-driven and self-selection which have been traditionally applied in offline qualitative sampling and largely used in hard-to-reach populations, have proved to be potentially effective in online quantitative surveys despite the large sampling frame and volumes of Web traffic involved. Although respondent-driven and self-selection sampling techniques have been commonly applied in offline research to circumvent troubling gatekeepers, they can also be used in online surveys. These are appropriate particularly in hard-to-reach populations or underground communities whose members may be reluctant to self-identify and for whom no sampling frame is available or can be constructed (Raifman; DeVost; Digitale et al., 2022). This can be reinforced by combining information collected through digital ethnography with that from offline surveys and interviews.

The explosion in the usage of the internet and social media inevitably creates opportunities as well as challenges concerning Big Data management. Apart from allowing large samples, Big Data collection reduces respondent burden and avoids non-response bias. However gathering, analysing, and interpreting Big Data requires technical expertise not traditionally gained from survey or social science research training (Callegaro and Yang, 2018; Monroe, 2013). These may include database skills (NoSQL, relational DBMS), programming skills for mass data processing (e.g., MapReduce), data visualization expertise, as well as analytical techniques not commonly taught to students dealing with survey data (e.g., random forests) (Callegaro and Yang, 2018). Acknowledging the complementarity between Big Data and surveys is critical as it enhances the validity of research conclusions and inferences.

Notwithstanding the efficacy of various gatekeeping circumvention strategies in digitalised political research, there are some challenges regarding data validation. For example, while in traditional offline qualitative research, data validation strategies such as participant or respondent validation and peer-briefing are widely revered they face hurdles in digitalized research. In addition, computer-based validation software that may be required can often

be expensive and lead to delays in data dissemination. Since opportunities for 'tracking and tracing back' the data to the sources are limited, it is critical to ensure data quality and integrity at the stage of collection, analysis and storage. Even digitalised trace data (DTD), whether generated by machines and calibrated instruments or by human actors, should be treated as highly susceptible to data quality issues (Vial, 2019, p.3). As part of member-checking key informants instead of research participants and respondents may be involved. While key informants may enhance the trustworthiness of results through either challenging, checking or confirming the accuracy of texts, they may also act as 'gatekeepers' by intercepting the truth and advancing their agendas and issues (Livari, 2018).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to examine the different gatekeeping mechanisms in digital political participation research and delineate ways of circumventing them. The emergence of digital technology calls into question the efficacy and sustainability of the traditional gatekeeping and information-controlling mechanisms that have historically characterised offline research. The digital gatekeeping mechanisms have two main dimensions; authority (judicial and extra-judicial) and function (gatekeepers who control access to information and those who have a facilitating role as intermediary or service providers respectively). Gatekeepers can act as both facilitators and inhibitors to the democratic discourse and research freedom. The different surveillance technologies identified in this article significantly affect both online political participation and the willingness of the gated to participate in online political research.

Although the growing literature on the role of digital technology in political participation tends to frame it from a determinist approach, this article has demonstrated that the internet is an autonomous actor that reassigns agency and power to individuals. Surveillance and censorship can protect participants/subjects against sidestepping/gate-crashing by online researchers. The various user surveillance and profiling technologies at different levels of the research process are not only mutually reinforcing but

largely panoptic. Since gatekeeping in online political participation research is situated at the meeting point of internet freedom and surveillance it inadvertently evokes methodological and ethical challenges.

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