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Panel 9 Playing Politics with Information Technology: A Global Perspective

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PANEL 9

PLAYING POLITICS WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:
A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Chair: **Celia T. Romm**, University of Wollongong

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Despite the proliferation of information technology (IT), its role in enabling political maneuvering at the organizational, national, and international levels is just starting to be acknowledged by managers and information systems practitioners. This is surprising given the rich body of research on the use, potential or real, of IT for social manipulation. A review of the literature in this area reveals three major themes. First, information technologies are seen as enhancing work-related cooperation. Second, information technologies are seen as having a democratizing effect on organizations. Finally, information technologies are seen as potentially having dysfunctional effects on group cohesion and harmony.

It is only in recent years that researchers have started to look at the role of IT as a mobilizer of groups in conflict. Much of the research in this area has focused on public access systems. There is, however, some research on the social and political aspects of intra-organizational networks. This research has uncovered several uses and abuses of communication technologies, including their potential use for managerial control, coalition building, industrial relations, and gender relations.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this panel is to explore and debate a range of issues that are related to the use of IT for political manipulation. For the purposes of this panel, political manipulation is defined as a situation in which "an actor is attempting to influence another, using informal means of persuasion." Political manipulation with IT is defined as instances where IT is used by one or more actors to achieve political objectives. It is expected that the majority of such instances will involve communication technologies such as e-mail.

Previous research by members of the panel and by other researchers around the world seems to suggest that the use of IT for political purposes is very much determined by culture. While some cultures are reluctant to use IT for political manipulation (South East Asia), others embrace technology as a means for political manipulation with enthusiasm. While some cultures seem to prefer the use IT for political manipulation on a one-to-one basis (case studies from the US document such examples), other cultures are more inclined to use IT for political manipulation at the organizational and/or the national levels (Australian and Israeli cases). This state of affairs raises some interesting questions as to how IT-supported political behavior is shaped by culture, which is the main focus of the panel discussion.

Reflecting this focus, the major issues to be discussed by the members of the panel are:

1. What role do the technical features of a technology play in facilitating political use and abuse?

2. What social and psychological factors affect the political dynamics of computer mediated groups?

3. How do communication technologies support political action on a local, national, and international scale?

4. How do socio-cultural issues affect the use of technologies for political manipulation?

5. What should be the role of the IS profession and society as a whole in monitoring and legislating the use of technology for political manipulation?

FORMAT

After a ten minute introduction by the chair in which several case studies from around the world (Israel, Australia, and the US) that used IT for political purposes in distinctly different ways, each panel member will be invited to discuss for about ten minutes *how* IT is used politically in his or her culture. Panelists will be encouraged to enrich their presentation with anecdotal and case study examples. They will also be invited, based on their understanding of their culture, to offer explanations on *why* IT is used politically in the way that it is in their culture. While discussing the possible explanations for IT-supported political practice in their culture, panelists will be addressing the five issues listed above. Since the panelists represent six different cultures (Australia, USA, Israel, Hong Kong, Eastern Europe, Denmark), it is expected that they will address the above issues in different ways, reflecting their unique national and cultural perspective.

The remaining time will be dedicated to an open discussion, with the audience invited to address members of the panel. An attempt will be made to encourage a debate between members of the audience, as well as between them and the panel members on all issues addressed by the panel.