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### Clubhouse and Voice in Public Affairs

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This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/clubhouse-and-voice-in-public-affairs/>



## Clubhouse and Voice in Public Affairs

For government institutions to remain responsive to their citizens and try to meet their needs and expectations, citizens should be given VOICE, and be empowered and enabled to express their level of satisfaction about the government's performance and the quality of its services. In places when media is suppressed, political parties weakened and citizens repressed, governments work in isolation from their citizens and makes decisions on their behalf. Meanwhile, a tense race is always occurring in non-democratic countries between governments trying to block websites and deny social media access, and those savvy techies coming up with new ways to enable citizens of the world to overcome hurdles and have their voices heard.

Citizens' voice is a much-studied concept in public administration, and a much-needed accountability mechanism for keeping governments in check. From here stems the interest in the mobile app, Clubhouse, and the reason for reflecting on its usage and potential within the domain of public affairs. It is perceived as having unprecedented potential for enabling people to connect and have more VOICE. The app is providing a new platform for public mobilization and expression.

Many of us have started using the app Clubhouse; some more intensively than others. It is the current rage, perceived by many as starting to take the world by storm. For those who are not yet familiar with Clubhouse, it is a relatively new mobile application. Officially launched in April 2020, it is mainly for Iphone users, although some Android users still manage to log in. The number of people who downloaded the app increased from 2 million in January 2021 to more than 10 million in March 2021 and part of the reason for the sharp rise in the number of users was that a number of celebrities have joined the exclusive clubhouse, including Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg, Tesla founder Elon Musk and Oprah Winfrey, the famous American anchor person.

The app allows users to establish profiles through sharing their phone numbers and posting a picture and name. Some use their real names, which is recommended by the app, and some pick a nickname to go by. To get onboard the app, you have to receive an invitation first, and then based on the frequency and intensity of usage, you are allowed to invite more members. Once in the Club House you either create your own room, or choose to enter other rooms based on their announced titles. You also choose the languages to converse in. You tick your main interests from a general checklist and decide whom to follow, so as to get notifications when the people you follow start participating. Each room can accommodate up to 5000 participants.

A unique feature of the app is that participation is only vocal and there are no cameras, and more importantly, no saving of the discussions that occur in the different rooms. It is different from Facebook, Twitter or Instagram where the postings a member makes continue to exist, and can be retrieved by those who have access at any point in time. Why are these features important? Because they are giving people around the world more voice and space to express themselves with much more confidence and less inhibition than what happens with the other social media apps, knowing that you do not have to open your camera, and that what you say cannot be retrieved or saved. This is of course except if somebody uses another device to record a discussion, and then decides to share its contents through other social media apps. It is also different from Zoom or Skype or Audio Calls, where there is a need to schedule a meeting time beforehand, and share links and passwords. On Clubhouse, the room you start can be opened to the public, and anybody can decide to drop in, listen or participate in the discussion.

The discussions going on at the Clubhouse are expectedly very diverse; some tackling serious topics, and others just taking place for amusement purposes, and for passing time. Some examples of interesting rooms on the Clubhouse app are the political discussion rooms where heated debates take place between different opinion holders, covering various issues; the religious rooms sharing reflections on sacred texts; the dating rooms; the mental health and well-being rooms; the rooms wherein people share and analyze marriage problems and/or child rearing issues; rooms immersed

in COVID-19 related discussions, including what precautionary measures to adopt; and rooms initiated by international news agency representatives asking members from all over the globe to share an important piece of news from their own country.

Clubhouse is proving to be a very interesting app providing voice to the voiceless. It may be conceded that some of what is communicated may be just noise at the moment, and that the overall reach of the app, although growing, is still relatively limited. However, the potential forceful power of ICT in providing citizens with voice, Clubhouse being a case in point, remains strong and heartwarming.