Chapter 69
From Town Hall to the Virtual Community:
Engaging the Public with Web 2.0 and Social Media Applications

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ABSTRACT
Engaging the public is a vital component of the public policy process. Traditional strategies for civic engagement include town hall meetings as well as citizen surveys, 311 call systems, and more interactive meetings for public deliberation. Each of these approaches has their limitations, leading many to consider new ways of engaging the public and the role that technology can play in the process. The authors focus on a discussion of the traditional citizen engagement approaches that are widely used by government to communicate with and interact with the public. Focusing on new interactive media, they discuss what is meant by “Web 2.0” and present the capabilities and potential applications of social media in the public sector. Highlighting government programs that utilize these technologies and interviewing subject-matter experts on this new form of communication, the authors present some of the adoption concerns and implementation strategies that public administrators should consider as they adopt Web 2.0 technologies. They conclude with a discussion of the potential that these new civic engagement techniques can offer the public sector as strategies to communicate, interact, and engage the public.

INTRODUCTION
We don’t have a choice on whether we do social media, the question is how well we do it (Qualman, 2010).

Public administration theorists and scholars have long debated how public administrators should engage the public in the policy process. Early public administrators operationalizing the orthodox principles of the day, for example, assumed the
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role of a technical expert who was insulated from
the public. Their more contemporary counterparts
working in the eras of reinvention and new public
management, and with demands of accountability
for results are reconsidering the ways in which
they engage the citizenry. Rather than relying on
traditional methods for citizen engagement such
as open public meetings, some are breaking new
ground as they implement strategies to determine
what matters to the public and how they can im-
prove services and deliver desired results. More
recent strategies include citizen surveys, 311 call
systems, public meetings with deliberative exer-
cises to determine citizen priorities, and citizen
assessment of government services with hand-held
tracking devices. This chapter examines govern-
ments that are using new forms of engagement
such as social media technologies.

Social media technologies such as Facebook,
MySpace, Twitter, and other Web 2.0 capabilities
have emerged as a widely used tool for sharing
information, reconnecting with friends and family,
and frequently updating friends on one’s where-
abouts and activities, or status. More recently, these
networking tools have gained notable attention
by the media and politicians. Calling on citizen
journalists, for example, the media utilizes social
media technologies to find more information about
unexpected or catastrophic events. Professional
associations use social media Web sites to cap-
ture the interest of new members and find ways
for professional networking opportunities. These
applications are useful in the political arena as the
most recent presidential election demonstrated the
ability of social media technologies to generate
supporters and share information on policy posi-
tions and proposals.

This platform for communication is receiv-
ing more attention among public administrators
in federal, state, and local governments. This is
a new frontier for public administrators, lead-
ing practitioners and academicians to ask such
questions as: How can social media technologies
promote the good works of government? How can
these networking mechanisms be used to inform
citizens of government actions? How can social
media facilitate some form of interaction between
citizens and their government to inform manage-
ment decision making? How can social media be
applied to improve government performance and
show results?

The demands for government to show results
to its citizens are persistent and urgent consider-
ing its recent attempts to stimulate national, state,
and local economy, generate jobs, and ultimately
increase trust in government decisions and actions
through results and transparency in the policy
process. Some governments at the federal, state,
and local levels are receiving attention for their
attempts to utilize social media as a tool to improve
performance and to communicate with and interact
with citizens. While there is a spate of research
that presents strategies to bolster government
performance and results, as well as techniques for
engaging the public in the process, there is little
known about how social media is incorporated
into government practices to improve results and
interact with citizens.

The aim of this chapter is to advance our un-
derstanding of Web 2.0 social media capabilities
and to explore how government is utilizing social
media technologies. In particular, this research
is designed to address the following questions:

- In the context of public administration,
what are the potential applications of Web
2.0 and social media applications?
- In what ways can social media inform
management decisions and improve gov-
ernment performance?
- What should public administrators consid-
ber as they adopt these technologies?

We begin with a brief discussion of the tra-
ditional approaches that are widely used by gov-
ernment to communicate with and interact with
the public. Making the transition to new forms
of communication and interaction, we define
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