ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of citizens’ socio-economic characteristics on the presence of social media in county-level government. E-government is ostensibly citizen-driven and therefore variation in an area’s demographics would likely impact a government’s utilization of emerging technology, such as social media. Despite its transformative potential and widespread adoption, e-government development beyond basic stages has been sluggish. Social media is transforming the nature of interaction among individuals and organizations and has the potential to overcome some of the restrictive challenges of e-government. Understanding if, how, and to what end governments are harnessing social media will help make e-government a citizen-driven, democratic, transparent, and trustworthy platform. County governments are challenged by their size, resource scarcity, heterogeneous service area (urban and rural), and varying population density; thereby preventing them from gaining a critical mass of online users. By exploring social media’s role in e-government as related to citizen demographic factors, this study reveals an important paradoxical role of social media in government: operational ineffectiveness as a necessary precursor for exception events. Additional results reveal the presence of digital divide - counties with higher median household income and educational qualification tend to have social media presence in their e-government sites, which is also not related to population growth of the counties.

Keywords: Citizen Demographics, County Government, E-Government, Social Media, United States

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1. INTRODUCTION

At over 20 years old, electronic government, or e-government (EGOV) is a transformative force and global phenomenon of strategic importance (Norris & Lloyd, 2006; Oyedele & Koong, 2005; Borras, 2004). EGOV is the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the public sector as a means to deliver government services (Marchionini, Samet, & Brandt, 2003) and to improve service quality, integrated service, and market development (Grant & Chau, 2004). The tradition of EGOV research grew from its beginnings as a nascent field (Norris & Lloyd, 2006) to the increased rigor and development of theoretical constructs (Rana, Williams, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2011) and integrated theoretical models (Rana, Dwivedi, & Williams, 2013). Common components of the EGOV artifact in this tradition of research are (1) the technology behind EGOV, (2), the behavior and perspective of involved stakeholders, and (3) the outcomes - successes and shortcomings - of EGOV initiatives (Chiang & Liao, 2009; Morgeson & Mithas, 2009; Srivastava, & Jiang, 2008; Roy, 2006; Grönlund & Horan, 2004).

The successful interaction of these three components is considered to have far-reaching transformative potential: from one-way non-interactive information services to two-way transactions, being a one-stop portal for all government services, empowering citizens by increased participation and public discourse, and reducing corruption by increasing transparency and citizen trust in government (Teo et al. 2008; Grönlund & Horan, 2004; Macintosh, 2004; Ho, 2002). Despite the transformative potential and available technologies, governments seem unable to move past the most basic EGOV functions (Bonsón et al., 2012). As Cumbie and Kar (2014) revealed, local level EGOV websites are frequently non-existent or non-inclusive which limits their transformative potential. Social media (SM) has emerged as a potential technology to advance the development of EGOV and bridge the divide of interaction between citizen and government.

1.1. Social Media in Government

As the ICT environment continually changes, governments are embracing SM as part of their EGOV strategies. SM has become the platform for user-generated content published online, micro-blogging (e.g., status updates and tweets), establishing public and private communication networks, and extends to mobile computing to incorporate location-based services. These allow users to have both a high degree of connectivity and access to selective information and to generate and share multimedia content in near real-time. The qualities of SM seem like a natural fit with EGOV goals of information provision, collaboration, and participation. Because SM is seen as a vehicle to increase effectiveness and legitimacy by communicating with internal and external stakeholders (Mijer & Thaens, 2013), researchers have explored the adoption and use of SM in government (e.g., Hong, 2013; Mijer & Thaens, 2013; Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013; Oliveira & Welch, 2013; Reddick & Norris, 2013; Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Bonsón et al., 2012). Past research concluded the same patterns for SM as EGOV in general: SM is present, can and has produced positive outcomes (Mijer & Thaens, 2013), but is largely in an early and experimental stage of development (Bonsón et al., 2012) and expectations fall short of reality (Haahr, 2013).

1.2. Local Government

Local government is an important part of the overall government landscape with its high degree of contact between government and citizens and greater likelihood of citizen participation. Though local governments are connected and responsive (Fan, 2011) they generally face financial problems and geographical constraints due to smaller citizen base and operational size. For instance, governments that provide service to larger population service areas tend to have more resources and a larger customer-base. Therefore, developing an online transactional service such as automobile registration renewal would be more attainable for larger governments because the costs of developing and
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