Enhancing User Engagement with Elected Officials: Contextual Predictors Influencing the Use of Social Network Applications on Municipal Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

Keenly aware of the growing number of people using social networks to communicate, governments have begun to provide this popular form of communication on their own websites in an effort to promote engagement among residents and public administrators. Yet despite the growing popularity of social networks on government websites, it is unclear whether municipalities have begun providing links to social network sites on their homepage that allow users to discuss salient issues directly with elected officials. Furthermore, for cities that do offer this heightened level of engagement, it is unclear if an implementation strategy was followed. This exploratory study examines the factors impacting U.S. local governments to provide social network applications that allow users to communicate directly with elected officials on the government website. The study then explores the benefits and challenges elected officials face when determining the extent of their public communication efforts. Finally, a social network application strategy is developed to assist elected officials when deciding whether or not to use social networks to communicate with the public.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Government-To-Citizen Communication, Social Network Applications, Social Network Strategy, User-Centric

INTRODUCTION

Currently, regardless of education, income-level or age, individuals are becoming more efficient users of various forms of technology, including the Internet. Not only are individuals better and more comfortable using the Internet, it is likely they believe and accept that using the Internet generally makes it easier for them to conduct business and retrieve various types of information (Wangpipatwong et al., 2008).

When public sector organizations use information and communication technologies to deliver services, communicate with the public and improve effectiveness, it is commonly referred to as e-government (Norris &
Moon, 2005; Holzer & Kim, 2003; Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2003). E-government may be described as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that allow government to communicate with residents in an effort to improve service delivery, openness, and productivity (Jun & Weare, 2010; Carrizales, 2009; Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Holden, Norris & Fletcher, 2003; Barber, 2001). Simply providing a platform whereby residents are able to pay fines and apply for licenses, however, does not provide a forum for government-to-citizen communication (Carrizales, 2009). Commonly referred to as the fourth stage of e-government, digital democracy occurs when ICTs are utilized in an effort to increase citizen engagement in the political and policy processes of government (Carrizales, 2009; Lau, 2007, Moon, 2002; Nugent, 2001). West (2005) suggests that the digital democracy stage is the most advanced stage of e-government. It is in this phase that information technology is used to enhance interactive democracy by utilizing features that improve accountability (West, 2005; 2001; O’Looney, 2002). According to Nugent (2001), digital democracy refers to the ability of governments to practice democracy without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions. O’Looney, (2002) claims that unlike a traditional democracy in which communication is filtered through representatives, digital democracy allows residents, public managers and elected officials to have more direct communication with each other.

Currently, one of the fastest growing trends among all individuals is the use of social network applications (SNAs), such as Facebook and Twitter. In addition to private use, government too has begun to offer residents the opportunity to communicate with public administrators through SNAs. Ameliorating the ascent of digital democracy as a viable tool to enhance citizen engagement has been the use of SNAs. Many elected officials have taken note to the overwhelming popularity of SNAs and have created platforms for interaction between themselves and the public. Transforming communication through the use of SNAs appeals to many users who are interested in an increased level of engagement with government. This research aims to explore the socioeconomic and organizational factors that influence US mayors who have a social network “presence” on their municipal government web sites. Additionally, various features of digital democracy are also included as variables that may predict whether the mayor may choose to use SNAs as a means to communicate with the public. Based upon the belief that the majority of individuals seeking information regarding their local government are likely to visit the official municipal website, this paper does not explore mayors who have a personal social network presence not on the municipal website.

The purpose of this study is to identify the social network presence on the official government webpage primarily because it is likely to yield the most visitors and users.

This paper begins with a description of social network applications and their relevance to public administration from a user-centric perspective. Next, the benefits and challenges facing mayors, and other elected officials, who choose to utilize SNAs are explored. The methodology and research findings follow next. The subsequent section provides a SNA strategy for elected officials to consider when deciding whether, or not, to utilize this form of communication. The paper concludes with a discussion on the value a SNA strategy has on the sustained growth and effective use of SNAs as a tool for elected officials.

**SOCIAL NETWORK APPLICATIONS**

Boyd and Ellison (2008) describe social network applications (SNA) as “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 2). In terms of public
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