Assessing the Social Media Presence and Usage Patterns of Major Greek Municipalities: Towards Local Government 2.0?

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ABSTRACT

Social media tools can enhance governments’ abilities to interact with and engage citizens as well as to meet their expectations for transparency as they have the potential to make policy processes more inclusive and thereby rebuild the long lost confidence between governments and citizens. Little is known about how Greek local authorities capitalize on the potential of social media as communication channels. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore if and how 52 major municipalities all over Greece (administrative capitals of the corresponding prefectures) utilize Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for managing their external communication with citizens during the April-June 2014 timeframe, which covered the period of municipal elections in Greece that took place in mid-May 2014.

Keywords: Facebook, Greece, Local Government 2.0, Local Government, Social Media, Twitter, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of evidence worldwide indicates that online citizen engagement is possible and is being undertaken by governments in national and local level (Macnamara et al., 2012).

Drawing on the existing literature of social media use in governments all around the world it becomes clear that social media have the potential to introduce new forms of digital interaction between governments and their stakeholders (Bertot et al., 2010) as well as to increase democratic engagement, thus reaching a wide audience that has been traditionally characterized by apathy (Mergel, 2013).

Social media are also considered to enable governments in their effort to evaluate their own work and, as Noveck (2009) mentions in this line of thought, they also deliver a potential for playing an important role in the implementation of open government, so much so that they are

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widely used and adopted by the general public. These Web 2.0 platforms enable government agencies to ‘crowdsource’ useful fresh ideas from large numbers of citizens concerning possible solutions to social needs and problems, new public services or improvements of existing ones, or other types of innovations (Chun et al. 2010; Linders, 2012; Nam, 2012). This can lead to the application of open innovation ideas in the public sector (Hilgers & Ihl, 2010), and gradually result in ‘co-production’ of public services by government and citizens in cooperation (Linders, 2012).

This argumentation seems to be valid both for central government and local governments alike (Rutter, 2014). More and more local authorities are using social media as a means to increase transparency and accountability, in an effort to regain citizens’ trust (Azyan, 2012; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011). Social media comprise a powerful tool for local governments looking for new and cost-effective ways to engage their citizens only if adopted with due consideration and planning. This means having clear objectives, knowing the target audience, selecting the right social media for the task, and taking the time to develop the right policy that needs to be supported by traditional media channels. Social media evolves quickly, so it is a good practice for the social media policy to remain platform neutral, and to review and revise it frequently to meet the changing environment.

The growing adoption of social media platforms by government agencies around the world (Bertot et al, 2012; Snead, 2013) as more citizen-centric and participative forms of public policy-making characterized by a stronger interaction between government agencies and citizens is considered to allow the former to exploit the knowledge and the creative ideas of the latter concerning the pressing social problems, and also to increase transparency and trust.

The objective of the research reported in this paper is to assess the current presence of major Greek municipalities on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), as well as the extent and patterns in which these municipalities use social media. Towards this end the following research questions will be raised:

**Research Question #1:** To what extent are Greek municipalities present on social media?

**Research Question #2:** To what extent are Greek municipalities present on social media actually using them?

**Research Question #3:** To what extent does this use of social media move from one-way communication between municipalities and citizens to two-way interaction between them?

**Research Question #4:** Do the actual patterns of social media-based interaction between citizens and municipalities correspond to actual objectives of the local government 2.0 agenda? Are social media used as tools for interactive political communication between municipalities and citizens in an effort to strengthen active citizenship?

**Research Question #5:** How have social media been used by municipalities during the Greek 2014 local elections?

Research questions #1, #2 and #3 will be approached from an outcomes-based perspective, attempting to investigate in practice whether the information disseminated by municipalities on social media does correspond to the interest of the public, raising social actions such as likes, comments and shares, as well as whether the comments of the public are eventually replied and discussed, thus laying the grounds for using social media as a public space of dialogue.

Research questions #4 and #5, on the other hand, will be explored through manual inspection and processing of social media posts collected during the research timeframe, with a view to checking their relevance to civic participation issues as well as to the Greek local elections agenda.
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