Social Networking Sites (SNSs): Smart Platforms for Public Service Innovation?

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that social networking sites (SNS) can be exploited as smart platforms for fostering public service innovation. Exploring and discussing SNSs in public service innovation through the complexity lens, the paper shows that SNSs enable new opportunities and pose new threats, depending on the perspective. The paper speaks for open and democratising innovation, which accentuates that not all ideas and knowledge critical to innovation reside within an organisation, but are dispersed in the organisation’s external environment.

KEYWORDS

Complexity Thinking, Facebook, Public Innovation, Social Networking Sites, Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNS) refer to web-based services that facilitate the formation of the relationship between online users and sharing information and content for such relationships. Facebook, Twitter and Google+, to name just a few, have over a short period of time changed the ways people interact with each other. SNSs are not confined to the relationship between users who share similar interests, but they can also be exploited in the communication within organisations and across organisational boundaries. Presumably this increase innovation potential as well. Studies show that organisations beneficially use SNSs, among other things, in marketing and promoting brands, improving personnel satisfaction, opening up their innovation processes and increasing organisational agility (e.g. Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Standing & Kiniti, 2011; Berthon et al., 2012).

Despite such research, there appears to be a knowing-doing gap with regard to how SNSs can be effectively used in engaging citizens in public service innovation. The reasons are probably as numerous as there are interpreters. SNSs divide minds and breed opinions in which SNSs are either embraced or despised. From the positive perspective, social media is not an alternative to real life, but an irremovable part of it. It has been argued that SNSs have introduced significant although unanticipated consequences to society, politics, economics and culture. Congruently, the argument goes on that only organisations that recognise the need for sharing knowledge openly with their customers, partners and employees through SNSs will survive. The counter argument is that there is nothing exceptional and fundamentally new in SNSs. From this perspective, SNSs are just another communication channel among many others. This critique argues that the implementation of SNSs does not necessarily lead to more social, open or participative communication than more traditional methods (Denyer et al., 2011).
The paper asks: can SNSs be understood as smart platforms for engaging citizens in public service innovation? The paper is based on the understanding that the effective use of SNSs in a public service innovation context requires a theoretically sound interpretation of the potential benefits and problems related to SNSs. Using the metaphorical reading of complexity thinking (e.g. Richardson, 2008), the paper discusses the pros and cons of SNSs in public service innovation. The paper focuses primarily on the early phases of innovation, i.e. initiation and idea generation. It is supposed that SNSs enable citizens to create, share and comment on issues in an uncontrollable way. For public authorities, SNSs provide insight and weak signals about citizens’ needs. In the spirit of complexity thinking, interaction is deemed as the prime mover which enables seeing and doing differently, i.e. innovation. Interaction produces emergent behaviour which cannot be understood on the basis of what is known about the actors involved in that interaction. The only way to comprehend it is to look at the interaction processes. In so doing, this paper contributes new knowledge to the discussion on how public authorities and citizens can co-operate in addressing and solving complex problems.

THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC SERVICE INNOVATION

Special expectations are being directed towards public service innovations, by which new types of service concepts traversing traditional sector boundaries are referred to, as well as new ways to generate and combine existing services. Typically, transitions in policies, civil opinion, legislation or – more widely – in social needs act as an initiator of public service innovation (Halvorsen et al., 2005). Public service innovation fixes the attention on the problems and developmental needs of public services; not only amongst researchers but also amongst practical actors and policymakers.

Testifying to the strength of public service innovation is understandable and logical, as there are innumerable pressures for change amidst public services which target either the productivity of the services or the question of how the services fit new types of needs, as well as those that are rapidly changing. In the background of the goals linked with the productivity and influence of services, concern above all over the future of the welfare society is exerting an impact under the circumstances in which the skewing of the population’s age structure is simultaneously causing both growth in the demand for services, and problems in the production of services with regard to staff sufficiency. Changes in service needs can be connected with the increasing complexity of social problems as well as the current trend in which the aim is to offer citizens more and more influence over the modes of service production and the content of services. It is typical to find strong trust in the usefulness of innovations in the discussion on innovation. The presupposition is that the problems linked with the generation and influence of services are resolved when the actors involved are adequately innovative. Indeed, the concept of innovation is linked quite generally with an explosive charge in positive values.

Trust in public service innovations can, however, also be regarded as worrying and problematic – for the reason that despite the increased interest, service innovation is still incompletely theorised, researched too minimally and is, as a result, a poorly understood phenomenon (Dörner et al., 2011). This particularly concerns public service innovation (Moore & Hartley, 2008). Despite the strong growth of the economic significance of the service sector, redeeming the expectations targeted towards public service innovations and the role of citizens requires more research data that is both scientifically and practically oriented.

Compared to companies, public sector organisations are characterised as bureaucratic actors assessed as lacking, for instance, nimbleness and the ability to take risks in developing innovations. It has also been asked rhetorically why public organisations in essence really need to be creative and innovative. The foundation of the existence of businesses crystallises ultimately in their ability to generate products and services for the market which customers are ready to pay for, whilst the continuity of the functions of public sector organisations is based on handling the social tasks assigned to them. Although an emphasis on innovation policy in supporting the functional prerequisites of enterprises is quite understandable, this development has, at the same time, meant that our understanding of the
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