Participative Public Policy Making Through Multiple Social Media Platforms Utilization

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the research concerning the systematic, intensive and centralized web 2.0 social media exploitation by government agencies for widening and enhancing participative public policy making, which is conducted as part of the research project PADGETS (‘Policy Gadgets Mashing Underlying Group Knowledge in Web 2.0 Media’) partially funded by the European Commission. The proposed approach is based on a central system, which publishes various types of policy-related content (e.g., short text, long text, images, video) and micro-applications in multiple social media simultaneously, and also collects from them and processes data on citizens’ interactions (e.g., views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.). This poses difficult research questions and challenges, both technical (analysis and exploitation of social media application programming interfaces (APIs), appropriate design of the central system architecture, processing and integrating the large amounts of collected citizens’ interaction data) and also non-technical (investigation of the value generated by this approach, preconditions for its effective application by government agencies), which are researched in the project. Some first findings on them are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Electronic Participation (E-Participation), Public Participation, Public Policy, Social Media, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable research on the exploitation of the rapidly growing web 2.0 social media by private sector firms (Constantinides, 2009, 2010; Evans, 2010; Dwivedi et al., 2011). This has generated a considerable body of knowledge on how social media can be used by firms for supporting and strengthening various important functions of them, such as marketing, customer relationships, new products development, etc. It is widely recognized that social media already play an important role in many industries, and this is expected to increase tremendously in the near future. On the contrary, the exploitation of these powerful channels by government agencies has been much less researched (see following section for a brief review of this research).

Government agencies have been for long time interested in establishing a communication with the citizens they serve concerning
the public policies they design and implement,
and this has lead to the development of public
participation ideas and practices, which were
initially based on traditional ‘off-line’ (i.e., non
electronic) channels (Barber, 1984; Organiza-
tion for Economic Co-operation and Develop-
ment (OECD), 2003; Rowe & Frewer, 2000,
2004). This trend has been strengthened due
to the increasing complexity of societal prob-
lems and needs, and therefore of public policy
formulation, in the last 30 years. The societies
tend to become more heterogeneous and plu-
ralistic in terms of culture, values, concerns
and lifestyles, and this makes public policy
formulation problems ‘wicked,’ lacking clear
and widely agreed definition and objectives,
and having many stakeholders with different
and heterogeneous problem views, values and
concerns (Rittel & Weber, 1973). This increases
the complexity of public policy making, and
the need for extensive consultation with vari-
ous stakeholder groups, so that a synthesis of
their views can be achieved. At the same time
the speed of economic and social evolutions
has increased, resulting in rapid changes and
discontinuities, to which government has to
respond with timely and appropriate policies;
this necessitates a more intensive interaction
with citizens, in order to identify timely such
events, and collect relevant information and
knowledge about them from the society (i.e.,
crowdsourcing) (Brabham, 2008), in order to
design effective responses.

The emergence and increasing penetra-
tion of the Internet lead to its exploitation for
supporting and widening public participation,
giving rise to the development of e-participa-
tion (Organization for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD), 2004; Sanford & Rose,
2007; Saebo, Rose, & Flak, 2008; Loukis,
Macintosh, & Charalabidis, 2011). The ‘first
generation’ of e-participation was based on the
development of numerous ‘official’ e-participa-
tion spaces operated by government agencies
of various levels (e.g., Ministries, Parliaments,
Municipalities), usually parts of their official
websites, offering to citizens information on
government activities, decisions, plans and
policies, and also capabilities for expressing
their opinions and suggestions on various topics.
However, the usage and outcomes of this first
generation of e-participation were below the
initial expectations (Chadwick, 2009a; Ferro &
Molinari, 2010). Governments expected citizens
to visit these official e-participation spaces in
order to participate in public debates on various
proposed public policies or legislations, and get
adapted to the structure, language and rules of
these spaces; but this happened only to a limited
extent. At the same time many of the topics
discussed there were defined by government and
very often did not directly touch citizens’ daily
problems and priorities. Also, most of the ICT
tools used in these government e-participation
spaces were not sufficiently user-friendly and
appropriate for wide citizens’ participation.

The rapidly growing web 2.0 social media
offer a big opportunity for addressing the prob-
lems and proceeding to a ‘second generation’
of wider and more inclusive e-participation,
characterized by more intensive interaction
with the citizens. In many of these social
media there is already significant ‘bottom-up’
political activity initiated by the citizens and
not by government agencies (Chadwick, 2009b;
Honeycutt & Herring, 2009; Agarwal, Lim, &
Wigand, 2011; Larsson & Moe, 2011); many
political discussions are taking place there,
political information and news are exchanged
and propagated, and also off-line political events
and initiatives (e.g., movements, demonstra-
tions) are organized and promoted. Therefore
government agencies cannot be absent from
these important electronic spaces, and should
organize their presence in these social media
and exploit them intensively and systemati-
cally, in order to communicate their positions
and plans, justify their decisions and policies,
and at the same time ‘listen’ to the citizens,
solicit their opinions and comments and in
general gain a better understanding of their
needs and opinions. Instead of inviting the
citizens to interact with government in the of-
ficial e-participation spaces in accordance with
their rules and structures, government can go
to the web 2.0 electronic spaces where citizens
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