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 led to the development of public participation ideas and practices, which were initially based on traditional ‘off-line’ (i.e., non-electronic) channels (Barber, 1984; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2003; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004). This trend has been strengthened due to the increasing complexity of societal problems and needs, and therefore of public policy formulation, in the last 30 years. The societies tend to become more heterogeneous and pluralistic 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 various 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 penetration of the Internet lead to its exploitation for supporting and widening public participation, giving rise to the development of e-participation (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-participation 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 problems 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, demonstrations) 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 systematically, 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 official 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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