An Exploratory Study of Social Networking Services as a Potential Vehicle for E-Participation in the City and County of Honolulu

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of Social Networking Services (SNS) by policymakers in the City and County of Honolulu. Interviews identified policymakers’ main reasons for using SNS, examined how SNS was integrated into the policymaking process, and also highlighted issues faced in deploying SNS for government services. The City and County informally initiated use of SNS in 2008, and use remained at an early stage of integration into business processes and operations at the time of this study. Government-operated SNS was primarily used as a one-way-information-based service. In this early stage, SNS was not being used to directly promote e-participation initiatives, although potential future uses were discussed. Government officials noted a spectrum of desired expectations regarding future development of SNS. The authors recommend an agency-wide use policy be created to provide for consistency of use across administrations and that a formal pilot study, addressing the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, be initiated.

Keywords: E-Democracy, E-Participation, Local Government, Policy, Social Networking Services

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), as potential catalysts for increased political participation and democratic enhancement, are increasingly part of academic discourse. Advancements in online media and further analysis of ICTs’ influence on public participation are shifting such research from theoretical context to pragmatic understanding, investigation, application, and empirical research (Boyd, 2008). In particular, social networking services (SNS) like Facebook and Twitter provide valuable insight into the practices and theories of citizen engagement (Sæbø, Rose, & Nyvang,
While there has been a great deal of discussion about the potential for SNS as a tool for citizen engagement, the success of these technologies in engaging citizens, particularly at municipal levels, is undetermined. This study provides a case example of a large city in the United States in the early stages of employing SNS for government services.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Public Administration and Development Management (2008) suggests that modern e-government systems should assess the potential application and associated benefits of moving towards connected governance, which offers a systematic approach to the collection, reuse, and sharing of data and information. As governments further examine providing a greater interactive participatory quality to the modern online public sphere, e-government systems will inevitably need to be designed to help mold patterns of communication, influence social values, and ultimately benefit the public (Brewer, Neubauer, & Giselhart, 2006).

In its early form, e-government was generally understood as a provision of government services by means of ICTs, allowing public administrators to provide traditional public services in a new and more efficient way, while at the same time offering new forms and types of services (Arjuna, Pradovani, & Nesti, 2007). E-government systems deliver services electronically to focus on citizens’ needs by offering information and enhanced services that enable stakeholders to influence government operations (Lappas, 2008). More recently, the promise of e-government has expanded to not only include the provision of quality government services and delivery systems, but also to the engagement of citizens in government (Bertot, Jaeger, & McClure, 2008).

ICT-enabled developments in the public sector raise important empirical questions about the impact that emerging information and communication environments have on the relationship between government and citizens (Lips, 2010). As government bodies evaluate the move toward SNS it is critical to garner how, if at all, new information/communication exchanges impact the existing relationship between government and citizens.

In democracies, municipalities support state institutions through implementing national government policies as well as by responding to the needs of local residents (Nachmias & Rotem, 2007). The public sector use of ICTs to enhance citizen participation has seen continual development through the deployment of public-involvement programs at national, regional, and local levels (Scott, 2006). SNS, as widely accessible two-way communication vehicles, are being increasingly recognized by practitioners as key tools for a subset of e-government called “e-participation” (Sæbø et al., 2009). However, the potential for SNS as a tool for e-participation in the policymaking process has only recently gained attention in research, and little focus to date has been placed on the potentials for local governments. In order to further understand SNS as portals for e-participation, it will be important to understand the barriers of implementation and use by practitioners. The implementation of modern e-government practices produces unique challenges to local authorities who must consider balancing attention to residents’ needs and opinions with maintaining strong governance without slowing down the local policy process (Nachmias & Rotem, 2007). Particularly, in reviewing local governments’ interaction with ICTs, Kling (2000) found that, due to the combination of equipment, people, and governance structures, ICT policies differed from one city to the next. This sociotechnical approach is also adopted by Sæbø et al. (2009), who argue that growth in SNS is driven by technical, social, economic, and institutional forces. While local governments share some of the e-government requirements with those at the national level, they also maintain specific requirements that are either unique to their contexts or stipulate greater examination (Löfstedt, 2005). Similarly, Mann, Grant, and Mann (2011) compared elements and services of city e-government initiatives and concluded that the scope of each
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