Evaluating the Presence of Greek Tourism-Related Public Sector Entities in Online Social Networks

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have become one of the most popular tools in promoting the tourism product. This applies to National Tourism Agencies, as well as tourism-related general government bodies (GGBs) and local authorities (LAs). This study examines such organizations alongside selected chief administration officials (CAOs) that are related with the tourism sector and attempts to evaluate their presence in three social networks: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. In order to do so, this article builds upon and expands on existing social networks' metrics, incorporating them into metrics of online followership. The quantitative analysis results in a ranking of best performers, from which the authors select three good performers in order to follow with a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews. By merging the quantitative results with the feedback from the interviews the authors propose a basic normative social networks management toolkit for tourism-related public entities, found to be comprised of six thematic axes.

KEYWORDS

Facebook, Management, Online Engagement, Online Followership, Online Social Networks, Social Media, Tourism, Twitter, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

The Spread of Social Networks

Moving from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 has, undoubtedly, revised the internet user's passive relationship with the websites' material, allowing greater interrelationship via social networks and other User Generated Content services (O'Reilly, 2007; Bertot et al., 2012). For this reason, social networks (social media) have manifested massive rates of proliferation among internet users (Qualman, 2010; Fuchs, 2017). This trend seems to be strengthened by the wide use of other forms of computing – apart from the classic personal computer (desktop or laptop) – like for example tablets, pads and smart-phones. According to the Global Web Index (2015), the average global user spends around 28% of his internet time at social networks. If we add to this the corresponding shares of micro-blogging and blogging (13% and 9% respectively), then we reach a quota of 50%. Therefore, it would not be farfetched to propose that the average user spends almost half of his/her internet time on some sort of

social network. In reality, social networks provide for a new form of communication and networking between agents, helping them to: create and sustain social bonds (Ellison, 2007; Riva et al., 2016), exchange information and experiences (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Osatuyi. 2013) and socially interact with each other (Whiting & Williams, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

In the same time, the deep digital penetration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in modern households and users all around the world, offers inevitably a number of opportunities for both the private and public sector (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). On the one hand, the private sector seems to have found a novel, direct and quite economical way to promote its products, addressing them also to younger and more dynamic audiences (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Scott, 2015). Furthermore, firms have a chance to actively involve consumers in the co-formation of the final product (Heinonen, 2011; Sashi. 2012; Rathore at el., 2016). Especially in terms of marketing and operational research, consumers seem to adopt a more active role in co-creating the marketing content (Hanna et al., 2011; Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). In other words, social networks are increasingly treated by corporations as separate - to the production - ecosystems that act both as promoting services and as mechanisms of appropriating co-created value (Pitelis & Teece, 2010).

On the other hand, the public sector can use social networks, in order to communicate public policies or increase their smartness (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016). The interesting with social networks is that citizens not only receive information regarding public policies, but can also respond to it, expressing their opinion regarding the policy in real time (Porter, 2008). In this line of thought, Bertot et al. (2012) suggest that social networks can provide three general capabilities to the Public Sector: (1) enhance democratic participation and citizens' engagement, promoting in this way the public sector-citizens dialogue (McClurg, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Papaloi et al., 2012; Bonson et al., 2015; Knox, 2016), (2) assist the co-production of public policies, allowing policy-making to be both a top-down and bottom-up process (Sabatier, 1986; Linders, 2012), and (3) lead to innovation and crowd-sourcing solutions, under the necessary condition of open availability of (non-sensitive) data on the part of the State (Haklay et al., 2014; Carfagno & Parnell, 2016).

The relevance of the above capabilities extends from social networks to all forms of Web 2.0 functions that could enhance communication between citizens and government officials (i.e. open governance, public consultation of laws, etc.). For these reasons, social networks are used more and more by public entities as e-governance and open government enablers (Osimo, 2008; Bertot et al., 2010; Bonson et al., 2012; Magro, 2012; Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013; Snead, 2013; Zavattaro, 2013; Boulianne, 2015). In this context, Bonson et al. (2012) propose that the two major benefits of social networks for Public Entities are transparency and citizens' engagement.

Social Networks and Government Agencies

The use of social networks by government agencies has boomed during the last years, as they have provided a new form of government-citizen communication. The penetration of social networks has been supported by the introduction and prevalence of ICTs in government over the past decades that have improved transparency, accountability and have mitigated the feeling of the democratic deficit (Hague & Loader, 1999; Bertot et al., 2010; Bertot, et al., 2012a). In this context, social networks have been regarded by government agencies not only as another tool to provide information and services to citizens, but also as a mean to allow them to participate in the production of public policies (O'Reilly, 2007; Linders, 2012). The overarching opportunities that social networks offer to the government-citizen relationship are highlighted by Medaglia & Zheng (2017) as the ability to foster "community building." Indeed, social networks enhance the creation of social capital both on a bonding (i.e. emotional) and bridging (i.e. novel information, tangible outcomes from social networking) level (Putnam, 2000; Ellison et al., 2010).

The adoption of social networks by government agencies is not, of course, an automatic process, but instead passes through various stages until it reaches an adequate level of diffusion and embracement. Mergel & Bretschneider (2013) propose a 3-staged process model that describes,

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