Chapter 4

Measuring the Impact of Social Media use in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on eGovernment performance has provided limited proof for the impact the use of technology has on citizen participation, engagement or generally satisfaction with government activities. Social media applications have the potential to improve responsiveness, reach, and efficiency, and even cost savings in government. The current Government 2.0 initiatives launched by all executive departments and agencies of the U.S. Federal Government as a response to President Obama's Transparency and Open Government memo show that government agencies are implementing social media applications as additional information and communication channels. This chapter provides a comparison between traditional eGovernment measurement techniques and the current practices, highlighting the current practices of measuring social media impact in the public sector. The insights are based on data collected in 2010 from interviews with social media directors in the most innovative executive departments and agencies. The results show that the current standard practices mostly include quantitative impact measures instead of the qualitative measures needed to better understand the sentiments of citizens.

INTRODUCTION

"I would call it 'Return on Ignorance' rather than 'Return on Investment' – we are not really measuring what we do." Anonymous interview partner in the U.S. federal government

Over the past two years agencies and departments in the U.S. government's executive branch have started to use social media applications, such as

Facebook fanpages, Twitter updates, YouTube videos, blogs and RSS feeds. This development was triggered largely by President Obama's "Transparency and Open Government" memo (2009b) published one day after his inauguration on January 21, 2009. In this memo he highlights three distinct areas of open government: Executive departments and agencies have to increase participation, collaboration and transparency.

While every administration in the past forty years has developed a variation of Open Government, the Obama Administration has clearly

defined information as a public asset that needs to be shared with the citizens. Moreover, the memo specifically urges executive departments and agencies to "harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public." (Obama, 2009b). In subsequent speeches and blogposts, President Obama has even urged students to be as innovative and creative as the founders of Google or Facebook (Obama, 2009a).

The initial memo was followed by a series of necessary changes, such as the Terms of Service Agreements with social network services providers prepared by the U.S. General Services Administration (Aitoro, 2009; GSA, 2010), the National Archive and Records Administration's social media records keeping guidelines (Franks, 2010; Sunstein, 2010), supported by the Library of Congress' decision to archive all tweets (Library of Congress, 2010), as well as the recent changes in the cookie policy that allow government agencies to collect user data (Orszag, 2010) (see Figure 1).

The result of these regulations was that executive departments and agencies felt backed up enough to start using social networking applications. Most of them now maintain an account on Facebook, YouTube, or even Twitter, to add new information and communication channels for the distribution of information without replacing the existing information channels, such as the core website, TV ads, paper mailings, email newsletter, or press releases. Given the rather disruptive

nature of these information channels and the innovativeness of increased and direct citizen interaction, it is necessary to understand how and why agencies use these tools and what their potential impact might be (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000).

In this chapter, I start with a brief discussion of the conventional measurement mechanisms used to collect user data and measure performance of e-Government activities and why it is necessary to reevaluate these measurement activities when government organizations are starting to use social media applications. Following this overview, I present the findings of interviews with social media directors of the most innovative agencies and departments in the executive branch of the U.S. federal government that were instructed to harness new technologies in order to become more participatory, collaborative and transparent. The findings are used to demonstrate the gap between the currently available measurement techniques and the information requirements social media directors have expressed in interviews that I conducted in 2010. I conclude with a set of recommendations and future research directions.

AN UNLIKELY PAIR: PUBLIC SECTOR AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The public sector is still in the middle of figuring out what the extension of the use of Internet

Figure 1. Library of congress announces acquisition of Twitter archive[1]

@librarycongress
Library of Congress

Library to acquire ENTIRE Twitter archive -- ALL public tweets, ever, since March 2006! Details to follow.

14 Apr via web ☆ Favorite ↻ Retweet ↩ Reply

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