

Chapter 6

Local Governments and Social Networking: Do You Speak Our Language?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that Web 2.0, a valuable tool used to expand government-citizen communication opportunities and bring citizens as a group closer to government, widens a communication opportunity divide between local government and its citizens. Web 2.0 access is almost exclusively English-language based, benefiting that segment of the population and leaving others behind, especially the fastest growing language minority, Spanish speakers. While local governments continue to take advantage of the ability to interact with citizens through social networking (Aikins, 2009; Vogel, 2009), McDonald, Merwin, Merwin, Morris, & Brannen (2010) found a majority of counties with significant populations of citizens with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) did not provide for the translation needs of these citizens on their Websites. The chapter finds that Web 2.0-based communication is almost exclusively in English and that cities are missing opportunities to communicate. It concludes with recommendations based on observations of communities employing Web 2.0 to engage non-English speaking populations.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the communication between citizens and local governments. Historically, one-way communication between citizens and their government has predominated on the World Wide Web; however, Web 2.0 is expanding both one-way and more importantly two-way communication. The literature on government-citizen communication has not kept pace with the rapid changes in technology and other key aspects of this two-way communication. The uniquely important local government-citizen linkage viewed in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and democratization makes it imperative to expand the field-based literature on how local governments employ Web 2.0 in their citizen communication. The chapter follows on the authors' earlier work by exploring the uneven impacts of Web 2.0 in government, that Web 2.0 is expanding rather than contracting the digital divide that exists between English and non-English speakers. With so little research on city usage of Web 2.0 tools, the study reported herein is necessarily exploratory in nature.

BACKGROUND

There is little doubt Web 2.0 is here to stay; it will continue to provide a foundation for important further evolution in the manner we conduct digital business (Hof, 2006; How Web 2.0..., 2009; Cordis News, 2009). Web 2.0 may in fact fundamentally change personal and business interactions of the future. The concept and term—Web 2.0—is variously dated; however, most literature dates the term to 2004 and Tom Reilly (O'Reilly, 2005b; Sander, 2008). Web 2.0 is defined in a variety of manners, all of which certainly hold truths and are keys to our understanding of this important new concept. Some authors sum up Web 2.0 as difficult, maybe impossible, to define; its technological, social, and other impacts are just too far reaching to totally grasp at this

time (Madden & Fox, 2006; Kumar, 2008). This perspective certainly contains a kernel of truth; yet, understanding of this important concept and its far reaching ramifications requires definition, even if we fall short of perfection.

Numerous authors define Web 2.0 in terms of tools or applications (i.e., technology) (Newsgator, 2009; Eggers, 2006). Herein, we employ “tools.” The social impacts of Web 2.0 are often seen as fundamental to its definition. In short, 2.0 has changed, and is changing, the way we interact with one another and with our social groups by permitting two-way conversations between individuals and between individuals and institutions that are both instantaneous and direct, but also capable of spanning geographical and time differences. It also allows targeted communications with individuals and groups instead of the broadcast-style distribution more typical of Web 1.0. Another definitional perspective involves how organizations—especially private sector organizations such as businesses—communicate internally, with other businesses and with customers. More recently, scholars, government officials, and others are advancing the definition of 2.0 a step further. Web 2.0 is viewed as a fundamental democratizing agent, as a force multiplier making government more effective and more efficient, and as a key to future governmental success (Ostergaard & Hvass, 2008; Webb & Pollack, 2009; Schrier, 2008). Finally, Web 2.0 is viewed by expanding groups of practitioners and scholars as exhibiting such important and far reaching impacts that it may be paradigm-shifting. Web 2.0 is more than changes in magnitudes; it is fundamental change in the way we do things—interact with one another and our institutions, especially governments (Baumgarten & Chui, 2009; McCartney, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005a). Web 2.0 provides a method for individuals to express their opinions directly to a large group of people who have a stated interest in the subject being discussed. This ability alone makes it a democratizing force.

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