

Chapter 69

From Town Hall to the Virtual Community: Engaging the Public with Web 2.0 and Social Media Applications

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ABSTRACT

Engaging the public is a vital component of the public policy process. Traditional strategies for civic engagement include town hall meetings as well as citizen surveys, 311 call systems, and more interactive meetings for public deliberation. Each of these approaches has their limitations, leading many to consider new ways of engaging the public and the role that technology can play in the process. The authors focus on a discussion of the traditional citizen engagement approaches that are widely used by government to communicate with and interact with the public. Focusing on new interactive media, they discuss what is meant by “Web 2.0” and present the capabilities and potential applications of social media in the public sector. Highlighting government programs that utilize these technologies and interviewing subject-matter experts on this new form of communication, the authors present some of the adoption concerns and implementation strategies that public administrators should consider as they adopt Web 2.0 technologies. They conclude with a discussion of the potential that these new civic engagement techniques can offer the public sector as strategies to communicate, interact, and engage the public.

INTRODUCTION

We don't have a choice on whether we do social media, the question is how well we do it (Qualman, 2010).

Public administration theorists and scholars have long debated how public administrators should engage the public in the policy process. Early public administrators operationalizing the orthodox principles of the day, for example, assumed the

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role of a technical expert who was insulated from the public. Their more contemporary counterparts working in the eras of reinvention and new public management, and with demands of accountability for results are reconsidering the ways in which they engage the citizenry. Rather than relying on traditional methods for citizen engagement such as open public meetings, some are breaking new ground as they implement strategies to determine what matters to the public and how they can improve services and deliver desired results. More recent strategies include citizen surveys, 311 call systems, public meetings with deliberative exercises to determine citizen priorities, and citizen assessment of government services with hand-held tracking devices. This chapter examines governments that are using new forms of engagement such as social media technologies.

Social media technologies such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other Web 2.0 capabilities have emerged as a widely used tool for sharing information, reconnecting with friends and family, and frequently updating friends on one's whereabouts and activities, or status. More recently, these networking tools have gained notable attention by the media and politicians. Calling on citizen journalists, for example, the media utilizes social media technologies to find more information about unexpected or catastrophic events. Professional associations use social media Web sites to capture the interest of new members and find ways for professional networking opportunities. These applications are useful in the political arena as the most recent presidential election demonstrated the ability of social media technologies to generate supporters and share information on policy positions and proposals.

This platform for communication is receiving more attention among public administrators in federal, state, and local governments. This is a new frontier for public administrators, leading practitioners and academicians to ask such questions as: How can social media technologies promote the good works of government? How can

these networking mechanisms be used to inform citizens of government actions? How can social media facilitate some form of interaction between citizens and their government to inform management decision making? How can social media be applied to improve government performance and show results?

The demands for government to show results to its citizens are persistent and urgent considering its recent attempts to stimulate national, state, and local economy, generate jobs, and ultimately increase trust in government decisions and actions through results and transparency in the policy process. Some governments at the federal, state, and local levels are receiving attention for their attempts to utilize social media as a tool to improve performance and to communicate with and interact with citizens. While there is a spate of research that presents strategies to bolster government performance and results, as well as techniques for engaging the public in the process, there is little known about how social media is incorporated into government practices to improve results and interact with citizens.

The aim of this chapter is to advance our understanding of Web 2.0 social media capabilities and to explore how government is utilizing social media technologies. In particular, this research is designed to address the following questions:

- In the context of public administration, what are the potential applications of Web 2.0 and social media applications?
- In what ways can social media inform management decisions and improve government performance?
- What should public administrators consider as they adopt these technologies?

We begin with a brief discussion of the traditional approaches that are widely used by government to communicate with and interact with the public. Making the transition to new forms of communication and interaction, we define

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