Chapter 90
Social Media and e-Participation:
Challenges of Social Media for Managing Public Projects

Sebastian Vogt
Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany

Bernadette Förster
Institute for Futures Studies and Knowledge Management (IFK), Germany

Rüdiger Kabst
University of Paderborn, Germany

ABSTRACT

e-Participation has advantages over traditional modes of public participation: independent of time and place, information can be provided and updated at reasonable costs. A broad range of citizens can be involved regardless of demographics, family or work situation, thereby broadening the basis for public participation. Thus, public authorities seek to employ social media for the purposes of project management in terms of e-Participation. Nevertheless, social media presents challenges that need to be resolved to be suitable for e-Participation, such as user-friendliness, technical requirements for information preparation, and data protection requirements. Reviewing the literature, it is concluded that although common social media solutions are successful in generating attention for participation projects, they are not necessarily appropriate for conducting the project itself. Therefore, the case of a reference company offering a specialized platform and social network is introduced. It was identified as good practice in recent reports published by the European Commission.

1. INTRODUCTION

Active participation by citizens constitutes the core of every democratic form of government (Arnstein, 1969; Creighton, 2005; Dahl, 2006; Pateman, 1975). Individuals are more likely to support realization of projects or the implementation of new regulations if they had been involved in the decision-making process (Potapchuk, 1996). Traditional modes of public participation

include attending town meetings, which are often dominated by a small number of vocal and personally affected individuals who do not necessarily represent the opinion of the majority (Kingston et al., 2000). Such town meetings often restrict attendance to certain groups of citizens due to location and timing.

Moreover, Web 2.0 applications are increasingly popular with the public, including for political activities (Lysenko & Desouza, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010). Therefore, internet use has likewise spread among politicians. Politicians develop websites to reach potential voters (Papagiannidis, Coursaris, & Bourlakis, 2012) and governments use websites to inform citizens (Bonsónet al., 2012; Scott, 2006), offer services (Anthopoulos, Gerogiannis, & Fitsilis, 2010), and apply social media to advance services and to communicate with citizens (Diederen et al., 2007; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). This development, paired with the challenge of growing citizen disenchantment with politics and their lack of interest in political affairs, has led to the more frequent application of information and communications technology (ICT) to improve upon traditional participation methods (Agre, 2002; Komito, 2005; Panopoulou, et al, 2009). The use of ICT to supplement traditional participation is understood as e-Participation (electronic participation, also known as eParticipation) (Medaglia, 2007; O'Donnell et al., 2007; Panopoulou, et al., 2009; Sanford & Rose, 2007). The advantages of e-Participation with respect to improving upon traditional participation are straightforward (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Kim, 2008; Macintosh, 2004, 2008; Sanford, 2012): It is a cost-effective method of distributing information, which can be updated in a timely manner and presented in an understandable format, to a broad range of individuals. Thus, participation in e-Participation projects has been demonstrated to be higher than in traditional ones (Peixoto, 2009). An increasing number of local authorities,

administrative districts and federal states recognize the benefits of e-Participation and employ e-Participation tools (Macintosh, 2004). The technology employed is supposed to foster participation and ease the search for and distribution of relevant information (Sæbø, Rose, & Skiftenes Flak, 2008). ICT enables social media services (SMS) with user generated content and almost real-time interaction (Bertot et al., 2010). SMS such as microblogs (such as Twitter), discussion forums, and social networking services (e.g., Facebook, MySpace), are used by local authorities to realize e-Participation (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Sæbø, et al., 2008). SMS are collaborative and participatory (Bertot et al., 2010) and enable a dialogue from many-to-many (Porter, 2008). These social media formats have demonstrated their ability to mobilize citizens and to provide them with a platform to state their opinion (Bertot et al., 2010; Lysenko & Desouza, 2010; Triga, 2011) and are frequently used by politicians for marketing or informational purposes (Kavanaugh, et al., 2012). Two famous examples might be pointed out: the revolution in Egypt (Attia et al. 2011) as an example for mobilizing citizens and the election campaign of United States' President Obama (Jaeger, Paquette, & Simmons, 2010) as success story of politicians utilizing SMS. Nevertheless, when it comes to managing e-Participation projects, these solutions raise legal problems, such as failure to conform to European data protection regulations (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Kosta et al., 2010; Weichert, 2012). Bertot et al. (2012) outline policies and their requirements regarding privacy and accuracy, as well as guiding and governance, for the usage of social media as formulated by United States' Federal Regulations. Several challenges are inherent to these requirements, such as the need to include the entire public in the activities, the need to provide data security and to archive opportunities, and the necessity to provide information to those who do not utilize internet services (Bertot et al.,

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