

# A Framework for Using Crowdsourcing in Government

Benjamin Y. Clark, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

Nicholas Zingale, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA

Joseph Logan, O-1 Leadership Development, Boulder, CO, USA

Jeffrey Brudney, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Wilmington, NC, USA

## ABSTRACT

Crowdsourcing is a concept in which the crowd is used as a source of labor, idea generation, or problem identification. Crowdsourcing originated in the private sector; though with any good private sector practice it is increasingly being utilized in government. This paper provides an overview of the concept of crowdsourcing, gives examples of its use in the private and public sectors, and develops a framework for how governments can begin to strategize and think about crowdsourcing to solve problems when engaging with citizens. The authors' framework is illustrated with a number of cases from current or past uses of crowdsourcing in government. They conclude with important considerations about how governments should strategize their crowdsourcing efforts.

## KEYWORDS

311, Citizen Engagement, Coproduction, Crowdsourcing, Smartphones, Wikis

## INTRODUCTION

Governments on all levels in the U.S. are beginning to use or contemplate the use of crowdsourcing as a tool to implement policies/programs, engage the public, collect information, or enhance services in some way. The extent of the projects range in size, outcome, collaborative extent and, in many cases, efficacy. Nonetheless, a techno-engaged public capable of shaping how government functions and responds seems to be here to stay and many local, state and federal agencies are taking it seriously. For example, a consortium of about 40 federal agencies have utilized crowdsourcing to develop the U.S. Public Participation Playbook (<http://participation.usa.gov/>). The Playbook "is a resource for government managers to effectively evaluate and build better services through public participation using best practices and performance metrics" ("U.S. Public Participation Playbook," n.d.).

Crowdsourcing is a general term used to describe a variety of ways that organizations, particularly in the for-profit sector, take advantage of the thoughts, inputs and ideas of the public. Daren Brabham (2013, p. xix) defines crowdsourcing as "an online, distributed problem-solving and production model that leverages the collective intelligence of online communities to serve specific organizational goals." We argue for a slightly broader definition of crowdsourcing that can include the coordination of information via the telephone, as well as slightly less advanced technology that can still gather information from the crowd widely and effectively through information technology.

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Crowdsourcing is new to many in the public sector, thus guides, like the Playbook, are important for its use. Much of the discussion of crowdsourcing in the public sector has been largely empirical and not grounded in the literature or theories of public administration and policy. By more closely linking crowdsourcing to the public administration and policy literatures we hope to expand the dialogue on crowdsourcing in the public sector.

Crowdsourcing has been discussed as an innovative approach to share knowledge and engage the public. So we enter into this project with an image of a group of public sector managers sitting around a table, discussing ways that technology can be used to improve government services, do more with less, engage the public, and leverage existing resources that are not yet accessed or utilized. We will examine crowdsourcing by looking into what is already understood about knowledge generation and expertise, particularly as they relate to the public sector.

This article provides a framework for public managers to begin strategizing crowdsourcing approaches when engaging the public and implementing new programs. The framework provides a way in which to consider the benefits, potential applications, and determine which crowdsourcing approaches might be most appropriate for a particular case or goal.

Brabham (2013) classified crowdsourcing into four problem-based approaches for governance: knowledge discovery and management, distributed human intelligence, broadcast searching, and peer-vetted creative production. His typology provides a suitable framework for applying crowdsourcing to a specific problem type, but it says less about the decisions and pressures facing public administrators in the management of transactions costs while blending a diverse pool of knowledge developed by the crowd with administrative expertise (or in depth knowledge of a topic). Thus, we take inspiration from Brabham (2013), but our approach goes well beyond what he attempted. This article aims to extend Brabham's typology and provide a foundation of crowdsourcing in the public administration and policy literature by arguing that crowdsourcing may take a variety of distinctive forms, and that each has a different production function requiring varying degrees and types of administrative expertise—at different costs and benefits for governments.

We first describe crowdsourcing and mass collaborations. Next, we provide a brief background on Brabham's typology and explore the literature that forms the basis of our framework for examining crowdsourcing in government. We then offer a number of public sector crowdsourcing case examples to provide context to our proposed framework and discuss how crowdsourcing may shape the role of the public sector. We conclude by elaborating on those conditions or factors that make different forms of crowdsourcing useful for public organizations when making decisions, creating policy, and understanding social problems.

## **WHAT IS CROWDSOURCING?**

The traditional firm or organization-based collaborative group is purposeful and organized—a group of people who are consciously working together and who have a shared organizational identity driving the collaboration. Contrast this idea to a crowd of people who are all in the same physical location but lack a common purpose or goal and who are not unified by a formal organization. The ambiguity as to what motivates the crowd and how its power can be harnessed is a fertile field for academic study—particularly as it relates to the study of government.

We argue that crowdsourced collaborations are typically less organized and less purpose-driven than those firm-based workgroups or research centers that have traditionally been the source of innovation in the public and private sectors. Crowdsourcing has tended not to seek answers to big questions; rather, it is a production process that seeks a large number of small contributions, ideas, revisions, or corrections to projects and products. Such a mechanism results in a project that might be owned by a company but sourced by the crowd. Also, we are not arguing that crowdsourcing is unorganized or lacks a clear purpose, rather that the formal structures of these collaborative endeavors

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