

Chapter 3

Facebook Contradictions in Municipal Social Media Practices

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the emerging social media practices of governments and citizens. The study takes on the status of an exploratory case study and draws on a grounded research approach. The case study shows an emerging social media practice that is embedded in and driven by a diversity of contradictions. The study identifies the following three contradictions as the most significant: communicative contradictions between service administration and community feeling, organizational contradictions between central control and local engagement, digital platform contradictions between municipal website and social media. The chapter presents a single-case study, which is a small contribution to the initial understanding of the social media practices of governments and citizens. The analysis indicates how a local municipality in its social media practices on Facebook is embedded in and driven by contradictions, and hence offers insights into a new way of understanding the challenges and opportunities of government social media.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media use by government organizations and citizens has undergone a significant uprise during the last decades and produced a manifold field of emerging practices. This uprise in government social media use has opened a highly interesting research area for understanding what is at stake in these emerging practices.

A special issue on social media in *Information Systems Research*, Vol. 24, No. 1, March 2013, points to opportunities for organizational innovation, but also to unexpected challenges, for example that involvement of communities in design innovation processes can lead to devaluation of the obtained results. The editorial concludes that many questions are not only unanswered, but unaddressed (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013).

Likewise, a special issue on social media in *Government Information Quarterly*, 29, 2012 points to great expectations for emerging practices in government social media practices, and for example includes a typology for citizen co-production (Linders, 2012) and a maturity model for social media based public engagement (Lee, Kwak, Gwanhoo, & Young Hoon, 2012). However, in the very same issue, empirical data document a low deployment degree of social media in local municipalities in the European Union (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Florese, 2012), and likewise, a low level of activity on a government-run health portal (Andersen, Medaglia, & Henriksen, 2012). The special issue thereby points to a discrepancy between research highlighting expectations and best practices on the one hand, and empirical evidence of low use of social media on the other hand.

The discrepancy between the expectations of co-creation on the one hand, and the low degree of deployment on the other hand, illustrates what Andersen, Medaglia, and Henriksen (2012) point to in the very same special issue of *Government Information Quarterly*, namely that the first wave of research of emerging phenomena often reflects an enthusiasm for the innovation, while the actual practices lag behind or are never achieved.

This paper investigates an alternative route for understanding what is at stake in emerging social media practices. We suggest to understand emergent government social media practices less as a matter of progression than as a continued wrestling with inherent contradictions. The paper is therefore guided by the research question: *How is contradiction present in government social media practices?*

The paper thereby prolongs the dialectical tradition for studying contradictory drivers and effects in digital innovation (Robey & Boudreau, 1999). As empirical foundation for examining how these inherent contradictions are constitutive in the context of emerging government social media practices, the paper traces and analyzes contradictions in a case study of municipal social media practices.

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