

Chapter 72

Social Media and Public Participation: Opportunities, Barriers, and a New Framework

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents social media as a legitimate form of citizen participation in government decision making. The chapter details the power of social media and the opportunity it presents for citizens to inform government decision making as well as for public agencies that require citizen input. The chapter also details barriers to social media legitimacy in participation, including current laws and public organization behaviors. Using Arnstein's ladder of participation as a theoretical foundation, this chapter proposes a new evaluative framework of public participation – a Social Media Participation Range. The framework offers a new evaluative tool for researchers and practitioners to analyze citizen participation via social media.

INTRODUCTION

A distinction of American democracy is its citizen participation in public issues, particularly at the local level. In his famous 1835 work, *Democracy in America*, de Toqueville marveled at the prevalence of local associations and citizen participation in America as compared to Europe, typified by New England town meetings. There is little dispute, at least from a comparative perspective, about the abundance of opportunities available for such participation in the United States (U.S.) today. Through the years, American law has institutionalized citizen participation in governmental decision-making processes. The 20th century saw a number of federal laws enacted that set requirements for citizen participation in rule-making ("Administrative Procedure Act," 1946), the operation of agency advisory committees ("Federal Advisory Committee Act," 1972), and federally-funded major projects ("National Environmental Policy Act," 1969). At the local level, many planning commissions require public hearings for zoning issues.

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Despite the intentions of these laws to support citizens' rights to participate in their government, prescribed methods are outdated and insufficient, stymieing participation, particularly amongst younger generations. For example, National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations make no mention of social media and instead emphasize public meetings and hearings. Yet, social media networks, chock full of debate of public issues, are today's town halls or public squares of yore. Researchers and practitioners should be concerned that engagement via social media is not treated as legitimate citizen participation. Too often, citizen engagement via social media fails to lead to informed decision-making, or better public policy and service delivery. And this concern should extend beyond what is found in law; organizational barriers also prevent social media from being treated as legitimate citizen participation. Current laws and agency practices result in important voices of our citizens not being heard.

The objectives of this chapter are to offer social media as a legitimate form of public participation by examining the power and potential of social media in modern society. In addition, barriers – both legal and organizational – are identified so that factors that contribute to a lack of legitimacy for social media are made clear. Finally, this chapter presents a new framework for evaluating the legitimacy of public participation via social media in order to form a basis for future analysis of social media in public administration.

BACKGROUND

Social media refers to web-based communications platforms that allow users to generate their own content and interact with one another and is based on collaboration, information sharing, and feedback (Transportation Research Board, 2013). Social media includes blogs, micro-blogs, social networking platforms, and media sharing. Social media platforms whose adoption is commonly measured by researchers include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Pinterest. (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wagenen, 2012; Transportation Research Board, 2013)

Researchers have sought to describe the range of public participation that citizens and government experience and organize it into different types and qualities of application. A seminal work by Sherry Arnstein (1969) sets out a framework of public participation – a “ladder” with eight rungs or levels. The lowest rung represents a state of “non-participation” whereby the public is not afforded participation opportunities or, in the worst case, is manipulated by government. Ascending up the ladder, the next levels represent a state of “tokenism” whereby the government provides public participation that amounts to “consultation” or “informing.” It is only at the highest levels of this ladder that citizens share any power, from a state of “partnership” all the way up to the highest level, “citizen control.” Figure 1 displays Arnstein's Ladder.

Another description of citizen power in terms of social media might be “citizen co-production.” Linders examines how social media and web 2.0 has led to the re-emergence of citizen co-production which treats citizens more as a “partner,” paving the way for both increased opportunity and responsibility for achieving desired societal outcomes (Linders, 2012). Social media, because of the ease in which information is shared and connects citizens, can multiply government's ability to leverage the eyes, ears and smartphones of citizens for the public good. For example, citizens of New York dealing with the devastation of hurricane Sandy in 2012 alerted fellow citizens about government emergency services by “retweeting” agency messages (Chatfield, Scholl, & Brajawidagda, 2014).

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