

Chapter 45

Usability in Local E–Government: Analysis of Turkish Metropolitan Municipality Facebook Pages

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ABSTRACT

Social media use is on the rise throughout the world. Influenced by this trend, governments of all levels and sizes are establishing their social media (like Facebook) presence due to the communication and interaction capabilities that such a presence brings. This study examines and explains the social media presence of Turkish local governments from a usability perspective. Usability studies provide governments with important empirical data about the citizens' /users' view/perception of the efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction of web-based content. Consequently, there is a need for usability testing of government social media services. The analysis of local government social media sites through scientific usability methods, such as expert review, guidelines and eye-tracking, reveals the strengths and weaknesses of government social media services in terms of usability. The study concludes with specific recommendations for improvement of government social media presence, which are applicable, to a great extent, to governments of all levels and sizes in Turkey and elsewhere.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-9860-2.ch045

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media applications are increasingly taking root not only in our personal, but also professional lives. In addition to the private spheres of individuals and groups, public sphere of both public and private sector organizations are adopting social media technologies for such diverse purposes as keeping up with the times, profit maximization, public relations, and promotion of more efficient and participatory government. For example, Mergel (2013) found that the main factors that influence the adoption of social media use in government are, “(i) information about best practices in their informal network of peers, (ii) passive observations of perceived best practices in the public and private sector, and (iii) “market-driven” citizen behavior.” Within this broader context, government agencies at all levels throughout the world experiment with various social media applications in order to figure out the best ways to utilize these technologies for their e-government applications (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012; Mergel and Greeves, 2013).

The main questions in this domain emerge as: First, from an administrative perspective to e-government, how can social media applications be used for efficient government information and service delivery? For example, regarding this first question, Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, and Luna-Reyes (2012: 509) found out that public servants in Mexico worry about inadequate resources and losing control of information while providing information and services via social media.

Second, from a political perspective to e-government, how can social media applications be better utilized for the promotion of participation, transparency, and accountability in government? This article aims to answer both questions from a usability perspective, as both the potential administrative and political gains of merging e-government with social media partially depends on the usability of these applications, among other factors. Regarding the second question, for example, the evidence is mixed. Bonson, Torres, Royo and Flores (2012) studied a sample of 75 EU local governments so as to understand the degree of corporate transparency in these units. They found that while transparency is increasing, dialogue and e-participation is slow to pick up (p. 130). Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010: 269) argue that despite the potential for social and administrative transformation, the change caused by social media will be most likely limited and incremental due to cultural, social and technology access factors.

Usability is about testing and employing standard usability principles and techniques, in this context, related to the management of the quality of users’ experiences in government information systems, such as websites and governments’ social media presence. Usability studies provide governments with important empirical data about the users’ perceptions about the efficiency and effectiveness of, and satisfaction from web-based content (Nielsen, 1993).

The importance of usability testing and evaluation for e-government studies is becoming increasingly evident, and usability analysis of government web sites is taking hold. However, the awareness about the importance of usability analysis for the social media pages of government agencies has only been recently recognized and it is a new venue for e-government research. For example, Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, and Luna-Reyes (2012: 504), after brainstorming with 250 Mexican local government officials about the risks and benefits of social media use in government, emphasize the lack of a long-term strategy of using social media in government and the risks of employing a trial and error approach, in spite of having scarce organizational resources. Mergel & Bretschneider (2013) identified a similar pattern of trial and error in government social media adoption, namely a first stage of informal experimentation, a second stage of chaotic norm and regulation-drafting and a final stage of formalization of rules and practices.

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