

Chapter 48

Revisiting Local Governments and Social Networking: Do You Speak Our Language?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that Web 2.0, a valuable tool used to expand government-citizen communication opportunities and bring citizens as a group closer to government, widens a communication opportunity divide between local government and its citizens. Web 2.0 access is almost exclusively English-language based, benefiting that segment of the population and leaving behind others, especially the fastest growing language minority of Spanish speakers. While local governments are increasingly taking advantage of the trend toward interacting with citizens through social networking (Aikins, 2009; Vogel, 2009), McDonald, Merwin, Merwin, Morris, & Brannen (2010) found a majority of counties with significant populations of citizens with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) do not provide for the translation needs of these citizens on their Websites. The chapter finds that Web 2.0-based communication is almost exclusively in English and that cities are missing opportunities to communicate. It concludes with recommendations based on observations of communities employing Web 2.0 to engage non-English speaking populations.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter revisits the issue of communication between citizens and local governments as impacted by Web 2.0. Historically, one-way communication between citizens and their government has predominated on the World Wide Web; however, Web 2.0 has expanded both one-way and more importantly two-way communication. The literature on government-citizen communication has not kept pace with the rapid changes in technology and other key aspects of this two-way communication, although the volume of research devoted to this subject has increased substantially in recent years. The uniquely important local government-citizen linkage viewed in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and democratization makes it imperative to explore the field-based literature on how local governments employ Web 2.0 in their citizen communication. This chapter follows on the authors' earlier work by exploring the uneven impacts of Web 2.0 in government, that Web 2.0 is expanding rather than contracting the digital divide that exists between English and non-English speakers. With so little research on city usage of Web 2.0 tools, the study reported herein is necessarily exploratory in nature. This chapter brings to date developments in local government usage of Web 2.0 since our prior work of 2012 (Merwin, McDonald, Merwin, McDonald, Bennett).

BACKGROUND

Web 2.0 will continue to provide a foundation for important further evolution in the manner we conduct digital business (Hof, 2006; How Web 2.0..., 2009; Cordis News, 2009). Web 2.0 is fundamentally changing personal and business interactions of the future. The concept and term - Web 2.0 - is variously dated; however, most literature dates the term to 2004 and Tom Reilly (O'Reilly, 2005b; Sander, 2008). Web 2.0 is defined in a variety of manners, all of which certainly hold truths and are keys to our understanding of this important new concept. Some authors sum up Web 2.0 as difficult, maybe impossible, to define; its technological, social, and other impacts are just too far reaching to totally grasp at this time (Madden & Fox, 2006; Kumar, 2008). This perspective certainly contains a kernel of truth; yet, understanding of this important concept and its far reaching ramifications requires definition, even if we fall short of perfection.

Numerous authors define Web 2.0 in terms of tools or applications, i.e., technology (Newsgator, 2009; Eggers, 2006). Herein, we employ "tools." The social impacts of Web 2.0 are often seen as fundamental to its definition. In short, 2.0 has changed, and is changing, the way we interact with one another and with our social groups by permitting two-way conversations between individuals and between individuals and institutions that are both instantaneous and direct, but also capable of spanning geographical and time differences. It also allows targeted communications with individuals and groups instead of the broadcast-style distribution more typical of Web. 1.0. Another definitional perspective involves how organizations—especially private sector organizations such as businesses—communicate internally, with other businesses and with customers. More recently, scholars, government officials, and others are advancing the definition of 2.0 a step further. Web 2.0 is viewed as a fundamental democratizing agent, as a force multiplier making government more effective and more efficient, and as a key to future governmental success (Ostergaard & Hvass, 2008; Webb & Pollack, 2009; Schrier, n.d.). Finally, Web 2.0 is viewed by expanding groups of practitioners and scholars as exhibiting such important and far reaching impacts that it may be paradigm-shifting, Web 2.0 is more than changes in magnitudes; it is

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