

Chapter 25

The Use of Social Media by Local Governments: Benefits, Challenges, and Recent Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how social media, if correctly used, can enhance cultural, political, economic and social engagement. They also represent key communication tools for administrators to highlight the principles of openness, transparency, and to promote civic engagement. Nowadays, local governments have launched social media strategies. After reviewing necessary categories such as E-Government and E-Democracy, this chapter explores in what ways the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can benefit governance, and foster transparency, participation. The chapter describes contemporary setbacks and challenges officials at the local level which have been encountered in the implementation and development of social media. Finally, it offers an empirical approach of the utilization of ICTs by the Office of the Mayor of New York City and, therefore, describes the portal NYC.gov.

INTRODUCTION

Social Media and the World Wide Web have transformed the way Governments and institutions communicate with citizens. They have offered new ways and opportunities to engage citizens in democratic processes and politics, and have led to the formation and ongoing evolution of formulas such as *E-Government* or *E-Democracy*.

The use of the ICT can make Government more efficient and effective in the delivery of public services. Moreover, Governments can become more accountable, since ICT offer contemporary ways of democratic accountability (Graham & Johnson Avery, 2013).

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The general benefits of ICTs to politics, such as enhancing the interaction between government and citizens, or reaching populations that are not often consumers of traditional media (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010), can extend to local governments, too. Certainly, social media offer great opportunities for local governments. Scholars state that local government apply regularly ICT tools since they are more operative and functional at this level (Peters 2001; Fung 2004; Briggs 2008; Sirianni 2009). The public communication model for governments should be open, honest, timely (Heise, 1985).

Blogs, podcasts, and social networks provide a more frequent, open, direct and targeted style of communication, with no intervention of mediators –editors, reporters-, as it occurs with newspapers, television and radio (Smith, 2010).

The following contribution is structured in four sections. The first section is of a more theoretical nature and casts light on contemporary forms of democracy in the digital age, taking into consideration that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can contribute to the strengthening of democracy by facilitating the civil society to become engaged in governance and public affairs. The second section deepens on concepts such as *E-Government* or *E-Democracy*, since they constitute the framework and context where social media connect with politics. The third section describes how the use of ICTs and social media can benefit governments, focusing on some experiences launched at the local and municipal level; and examines, as well, several hardships and obstacles elected officials might encounter when implementing ICT's in order to promote civic engagement, transparency, a better delivery of service, and political participation. The fourth section shows a case study to complement the previous theoretical views and ideas. Thus, it describes the portal NYC.gov launched by the Office of the Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio.

1. CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE XXI CENTURY

As we have already mentioned, the use of Information and Communication Technologies and Social Media can strengthen political participation and civic engagement, and enhance contemporary forms of democracy that aim to foster representative democracy with the presence of the civil society.

Representative democracy has repeatedly been identified with the notion of democracy itself. The essence of representation resides in the celebration of regular, free, fair elections where political parties compete to be in office. The legitimacy of the system is, thus, grounded on parties and elections.

In Western countries scholars have observed a certain erosion of the representative model: not of democracy itself but of the functioning of representative institutions. Representation has not supervised, restrained and controlled effectively the government (Hirst 2009). This trend does not apply to transitional regimes: they undergo a different path and revolutions have occurred to establish regimes based on electoral democracy –e.g., “the Arab Spring”-.

Paying special attention to Western countries, the financial crisis – breaking out in 2008- and the austerity measures introduced have raised a wave of protests and disenchantment among citizens all over Europe. They are concerned and fear the disintegration of the welfare State, and alert on the increasing poverty income limit and inequality (Oxfam Report, 2016). Freedom House emphasizes the “astonishing gains populist and nationalist political forces have made in democratic states” (Freedom House, 2017). These trends can be interpreted as well as a consequence and channeling of citizen disenchantment and disaffection.

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