Chapter 3

Social Media vs. the Public Sector:
Irresistible Force, Immovable Object

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ABSTRACT

What happens when the forces of social media—collaboration, open information, participation—collide with the entrenched patterns of public sector bureaucracy such as public servant anonymity, information hoarding, risk aversion, privacy, secrecy, and organizational silos? Different public service organizations, subject to the same rules, vary widely in response: from engagement to acceptance to resistance. This chapter provides a selective survey of the literature and some guidance for those who want to fast-track social media in the public sector.

INTRODUCTION

Powerful social media tools have increased the ability of people and organizations to share ideas and access information quickly and easily. This is forcing governments to examine policy issues related to the management of information, the limits of privacy, and the challenges of security. More significantly, perhaps, governments are learning that social media are powerful drivers for organizational change.

Social media have been defined as: "The trend in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to facilitate creativity, information sharing, and, most notably, collaboration among users" (Studios, 2009). They involve "web sites and services where the content is shaped partially or entirely by the users" (Penn State Learning Design Community Hub, 2010) and consist of technological developments that include social

networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as well as information-sharing tools including wikis.

Social media are more than an enhancement on the technological process from telegraph to telephone to email. Social media represent more than an evolution; they are a revolution that has created user expectations of engagement, connection and collaboration. Web 2.0 users "possess a new degree of urgency in constructing their engagement with resources and other users so that it is easy to form and interact with social and technological networks" (Hardey, 2007). Nigel Jackson argues that "Web 2.0 is also a state of mind that seeks to encourage social action" (Jackson, 2008).

The impact of social media is pervasive. Don Tapscott promoted the notion of the "ideagora" where people exchange concepts. It has now gone further, where online production and usage are integrated rather than discreet events and there is virtually simultaneous and instantaneous production and use: "The information age has reached a phase where the traditional 'production-communication-consumption' paradigm of information communication is being rapidly replaced by a 'produsage' paradigm" (Xiguang & Jing, 2010).

To explore the impact of social media and the issues they raise for public sector organizations, we consulted with public servants from the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government as well as academics, consultants, and members of think tanks. Roundtable discussions were held in Toronto, Ottawa, Edmonton and Victoria in Canada. Questions were asked about the role of social media in addressing the challenges of government modernization and the transformation of hierarchical organizational cultures to ones that are collaborative and open. We consulted with the Center for Technology in Government at SUNY in Albany, New York.

We honed the conceptualization in presentations at the United Nations, the Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) and the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC).

THE PUBLIC SECTOR OPPORTUNITY

Social media have great potential as tools for organizational change in the public sector. They can improve collaboration and networking across government, improve citizen input into policy making, increase productivity, and increase transparency. They can also be used to fight budget cuts: In 2010, the Greater Manchester Police Department logged every case it answered over a 24 hour period on Twitter. In response to proposed budget cuts, the experiment's objective was to raise public awareness of the 3,000 incidents reported. During that period the number of people following the police on Twitter jumped from 3,000 to 17,000. They learned that a significant number of the calls wasted resources, such as multiple 999 calls from kids playing with cell phones. Feedback suggested that followers acquired a greater appreciation of the role that the police were playing in their community.

While social media offer benefits, their use presents multiple challenges to governments, raising issues about the ownership and management of government information, the changing definitions of privacy and security, and how hierarchical government organizations will adapt.

Management and decision-making structures in public sector organizations represent "the relationship between politicians, bureaucrats and citizens [which] is essentially about organizing political and administrative power" (Savoie, 2008). The frameworks under which public servants have operated reflect the "ideal type bureaucracy" identified by Max Weber which called for "civil servants to deal with citizens equally, having no regard for their position in society or their wealth… through calculable rules" (Savoie, 2008).

Some hold that bureaucracy needs modernizing. According to Stewart Clegg:

Modern bureaucracies are under reconstruction. First, bureaucracy no longer being 'modern',

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