

Chapter 15

From E-Government to E-Governance: Exploring the Transformational Potential of Web 2.0 in State and Local Governments

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ABSTRACT

Increasing scarcity of resources and citizen demand for improved government services are leading public administrators and elected officials to search for new ways to communicate with citizens. The aim is to gain insight through the collective wisdom of the public to inform programmatic and budget decisions. What can result is the alignment of citizen preferences with government actions. E-government involves the integration of technology into government processes and services to provide information, opportunities for interactions, transactions, and transformation through collaboration. There has been much advancement in the way government incorporates technology into its operations. The availability of information and features on government websites that permit transactions are some of the areas that the public sector has vastly improved and provides to the public. Technology also offers the potential for transformation, when it is used to facilitate governance through collaboration within government, across sectors, and with citizens. Web 2.0 is one such technology that involves web-based applications to increase citizen engagement and potentially transform government. Such applications include Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. This chapter profiles three state and local government programs that are utilizing Web 2.0 technologies to bring citizens into the public policy process and record, and potentially act on, their ideas and policy suggestions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of some of the possible concerns associated with adopting Web 2.0 technologies in government processes and outreach strategies, as well as areas for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

Governments, at all levels, are progressing in the way technology is integrated into agency processes and functions. The public sector, for example, has invested in the development of government Web sites that foster transparency and transactions with the public. It is now a common practice to publish information such as meeting minutes and budget documents in downloadable formats. Other developments include the use of transactional Web site functions for payments of license renewals, taxes, or other fees. Still other government Web sites have the capacity to manage citizen queries via e-mails or other interactive formats. These are worthy accomplishments that meet the goals of e-government to provide strategies for a technological presence, interactions and transaction, yet the question of how e-government can stimulate transformation and serve as a catalyzing agent for e-governance remains unanswered.

E-governance expands the utilization of technology that supports open or transactional government to one that is more collaborative, inclusive, and responsive. Transformation, in this regard, means that government is able to develop virtual spaces that support collaborative decision making as agency barriers are dissolved and ideas are exchanged freely among all levels of government, across sectors, and with citizens. The potential for achieving the transformational dimension of e-governance seems very likely with the advent of Web 2.0 technologies that support real-time or other innovative and web-based social interactions. Applications such as wikis and blogs or communication using Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, and other venues for expression such as YouTube are ever more popular (if not the norm) in leisure and business activities, and are increasingly present in government efforts.

As with any new technology, strategy, or management technique that is incorporated into the works of public organizations, there are many considerations to address before adoption and

meaningful implementation. Without considerable thought and alignment between agency goals, democratic values, and organizational conditions, public administrators and staff run the risk of engaging in hollow exercises, window dressing, or symbolic gestures. In many cases, good intentions can simply run amok or fade like other passing management fads. With the great potential that Web 2.0 technologies offer for achieving the goals of e-governance comes the need to explore new models of engaging the public through technology.

This chapter begins with a discussion of citizen engagement and reliance on traditional strategies for including the public in the policy process. It highlights the great promise that technology offers as a new mechanism for engaging the public. An overview of e-government is presented, along with a discussion of its transformational goals and how they may be achieved through intentional citizen engagement efforts by government. The chapter will present how award-winning jurisdictions are utilizing Web 2.0 technologies to engage citizens. It showcases the works of the following jurisdictions: Manor Labs in the city of Manor, Texas; an online portal for sharing ideas to address fiscal crisis in Santa Cruz, California; and Empire 2.0 of the State of New York. These initiatives are receiving increased attention for their efforts by various award programs and professional development conferences and webinars. An examination of program Web sites and other materials provide practical illustrations for academicians, professionals, and students of public administration and related disciplines.

BACKGROUND: RETHINKING THE TRADITIONAL TOOLS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

There is a general consensus among public administration scholars that citizen involvement is a vital component of democratic governance that results in informed management decisions (Callahan,

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