Chapter 8.10

Systematically Exploiting Web 2.0 Social Media in Government for Extending Communication with Citizens

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ABSTRACT

Governments of many countries have been for long time attempting to establish communications with citizens in order to understand better their problems and needs, benefit from their collective knowledge, and promote public participation and transparency in their decision making and policy formulation processes. For this purpose they exploited initially the Web 1.0, making considerable investments in developing official e-participation websites, but the results were below expectations; so recently government agencies started exploiting the emerging Web 2.0 social media, which offers big opportunities for interacting with the large numbers of users these media attract. This chapter contributes in this direction by presenting a methodology for the systematic and centrally managed exploitation of Web 2.0 social media by government agencies for extending their communication with citizens. It is based on a central platform providing interoperability with many different Web 2.0 social media, which enables posting and retrieving content from them in a systematic centrally managed and automated manner using their application programming interfaces (APIs). It also allows the deployment in various popular Web 2.0 social media of Policy Gadgets (Padgets), which are micro Web applications presenting policy messages and collecting users' interactions with them (e.g. views, comments, ratings, votes, etc.). The two basic critical success factors of this methodology, interoperability with Web 2.0 social media and composition of their users' base, are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 has been initially used by individuals for personal and social communication (Dutton and Helsper, 2007), and later adopted by several private sector industries, such as media, publishing and advertising, having an important impact on them (Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery, 2007; Punie et al, 2009a); currently, it is beginning to have a wider impact on enterprises across sectors, being used as a tool for improved customer relationship and 'co-creation' of innovations in products, services and internal processes in cooperation with customers, suppliers and business partners. Some a first knowledge base has been developed in this area, which has taken the form of guidelines and frameworks for the exploitation of Web 2.0 by private sector firms (e.g. Constantinides, 2009 and 2010). Recently Web 2.0 applications have started being used in government as well, not only for 'soft' tasks (e.g. public relations and public service announcements), but also for 'core' ones (Osimo, 2008; Punie et al, 2009b; Mergel, Schweik, and Fountain 2009); however, the dominant Web 2.0 exploitation pattern in government consists in individual and fragmented uses of a few Web 2.0 social media (for instance posting to a Web 2.0 application of some content, e.g. a political message in the form of a text, image or video, and then retrieving and reading or processing the corresponding user-generated content, e.g. comments on or ratings of this message), while a systematic and centrally managed exploitation of a wide range of Web 2.0 social media is missing.

It should be emphasized that this new Web 2.0 Internet paradigm has the potential to drive important transformations in government related to key values, such as transparency, accountability, communication and collaboration, and to promote deeper levels of civic engagement. It can considerably enhance information flow within and across government agencies and also between government and the public, offering big opportunities for interacting with the large numbers of users that Web 2.0 social media attract. This has been for long time a major objective of many governments all over the world, which have been trying to promote the values of 'participatory democracy', and combine decision making by citizens' elected representatives with extensive citizens' participation in government decisions. The development and penetration of the Internet lead many governments to use it for these purposes, in order to support and extend public participation; this resulted in a rapid growth of e-participation (OECD, 2003 and 2004; Macintosh, 2004; Timmers, 2007), which is defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for supporting the provision of information concerning government activities, decisions and public policies to citizens, the consultation with them and also their political initiatives and active participation. However, despite the high public investments for the development of 'official' e-participation websites for the above purposes, their usage by the citizens has been in general limited and below expectations (e.g. see Ferro and Molinari, 2009). This, in combination with the high heterogeneity of citizens in terms of political interests, educational level and technological skills (so a common government e-participation for all might not be feasible), which make it difficult to develop e-participation spaces 'for all', necessitate governments to investigate the exploitation of the many emerging Web 2.0 social media as well for widening and enhancing e-participation. However, only a very limited knowledge base has been developed concerning the exploitation of Web 2.0 social media by government agencies.

This chapter contributes to filling this gap by describing a methodology for the systematic and centrally managed exploitation of Web 2.0 social media by government agencies in the processes of public policies formulation. It is based on a central platform-toolset providing interoperability with many different Web 2.0 social media, and enabling posting and retrieving content from them in a systematic, centrally managed and

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