Chapter 1
The Role of Social Media in the Public Sector:
Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Social media is promising new opportunities across a broad spectrum of public services. As the Internet and its ubiquitous applications extend globally, an increasing number of governments and their public service agencies are embracing social media as one of the major mechanisms to interact with the public. Social media provides a new wave of Web-based applications and channels for citizens to share constructive ideas and opinions and play active roles in various areas in the public sector. At the same time, social media helps government organizations and elected officials of different government levels to actively listen to citizens and constantly monitor their existing services as well as develop new initiatives. Effective integration of Web 2.0 technologies and applications into existing Internet infrastructure adds visibility and accountability in the public sector and enhances services to citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine recent developments on the use of social media in the public sector and explore existing as well as emerging platforms, applications, and tools that can be used by the public sector in various settings. We also review some of the social media best practices as well as initiatives from different regions and countries and discuss their values to various groups of users. Finally, we examine the critical challenges the public sector faces in embracing Web 2.0 technologies at the core of its processes and services.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0318-9.ch001

The meaning of social media is closely linked to the concept of Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 was first used in 2005 by Tim O'Reilly, a technology pundit who is recognized for being ahead of many Internet trends. O'Reilly initially classified Web 2.0 by identifying generally-accepted examples of Web 1.0 technologies, and then highlighting new tools and approaches that enhanced the features and functionalities of the web. For instance, O'Reilly classified Encyclopaedia Brittanica's Online Edition (a static version of the famous encyclopaedia's printed version) as an example of a Web 1.0 technology and then identified Wikipedia (a wiki-based encyclopaedia composed of collaborative and dynamic user generated content) as the successor that significantly improved the value to Internet users. Thus, the meaning of Web 2.0 covers not only the concept of the technology, but also demonstrates how the Web is currently used for various purposes. According to the pundit, "Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it; consuming and remixing data from multiple sources; creating network effects through an 'architecture of participation'; and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences" (O'Reilly, 2005). *Twitter, Wikipedia, Facebook*, and *YouTube* are shining examples of this "architecture of participation" in that users, without recognition or remuneration, commonly create and update contents to reflect current events and changes.

In defining the scope of Web 2.0, Osimo (2008) used a combination of technologies (e.g., AJAX, XML, open API, microformats, flash/flex), applications (e.g., blog, wiki, podcast, RSS feeds, tagging, social networks, Mashups), and values (e.g., user as a producer, collective intelligence, perpetual beta, extreme ease of use). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61.) also defined Web 2.0 as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)." Web 2.0 also represents "social software" or "social computing" as it shifts computing to the edges of the network, and empowers individual users with lightweight computing tools to manifest their creativity, engage in social interaction, and share knowledge (Parameswaran and Whinston 2007a, 2007b).

The advent of smart phones, mobile networks, and seemingly constant Internet connectivity has created a culture where increasing portions of our lives are "lived" online. Following the prevalence of social media in our culture, the public sector is embracing Web 2.0 technologies and applications in an effort to raise performance and enhance transparency, accountability and citizen-engagement. These technologies are creating new, effortless mechanisms to foster online engagement and dialogues between government (or civil servants) and citizens (Reece, 2006). At the very least, Web 2.0 applications can be used to bridge the gulf between citizens and public institutions (Johnston et al., 2008). Strategic benefits from Web 2.0 initiatives are also becoming visible in many technology-based public services, such as eGovernment, eHealth, and eLearning. Web 2.0 tools can be used to improve internal collaboration and facilitate strategic knowledge-sharing among workers, managers, and partners in government organizations (Human Capital Institute, 2010). Government organizations are heavily involved with routine communications, information exchanges with internal units as well as other government organizations on a day-to-day basis. These activities constitute substantial part of administrative expenses which can be efficiently handled by integrating Web 2.0 technologies in their current administrative systems. In addition, Web 2.0 tools can help government organizations to share best practices and build communities of practice (Human Capital Institute, 2010).