Chapter 41
Reaching Citizen 2.0:
How Government Uses Social Media to Send Public Messages during Times of Calm and Times of Crisis

Nancy Van Leuven
Bridgewater State University, USA

Deniz Zeynep Leuenberger
Bridgewater State University, USA

Danielle Newton
Bennington College, USA

Tammy Esteves
Troy University, USA

ABSTRACT

Many forms of public communication are now mediated through technologies that challenge traditional models of civic engagement and the public's "right to know," including communication for disaster management. This chapter employs a comparative lens to look at how social media messages are pushed forward by different layers of government to reach their publics during times of calm and crisis. Specifically, the project studies how information is framed for public consumption, how it is made available, and how it is timely and relevant. Research methods include a triangulation approach, including interviews with officials from over 20 city, regional, state, and federal agencies to follow up on content and textual analyses of online content disseminated by over 40 public agencies. This chapter argues that public administrators must be engaged with citizens and prepared to use social media during emergencies as well as for routine news, and offers key goals for government departments to promote an agenda of increased citizen information and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Blogs, tweets, real-time updates and Facebook's LIKE button. Social media is a critical communications tool in today's global conversations among citizens, non-governmental organizations, and public agencies, as seen in the explosion of blogging (e.g. the U.S. Department of State's DipNote), micro-blogging (e.g. Oxfam on Twitter), and social sites (including the British Embassy's presence on Facebook and former California Governor Schwarzenegger's YouTube channel). This is a huge shift from Web 2.0 – the shift from station-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4707-7.ch041

ary websites to those with social networking and shared content—to reach Citizen 2.0, those people who rely on social media to share information.

For this project, "social media" includes technology-based media that allows individual and accessible postings and shared information, such as Twitter, Facebook, and WiserEarth, a social network for sustainability. These e-channels are increasingly recognized as a way of communicating that compels transparency and engagement, as evidenced in global dissemination of the Kenyan draft constitutions in local dialects. While much is now being studied about how public administrators are using social media to better connect for civic engagement, this project is more centered on message content and purpose that adapts to real-time needs. This is a critical time for public information, especially when various levels of government are trying to maintain balance and credibility amidst media and residence who regard government as a dirty word (Eliasoph, 1998).

Specifically, how are "routine" content and channels switched from "times of calm" to include timely, relevant public messages during "times of crisis"? After all, citizenry access to information is constantly shifting: During the three week coding timeframe for this project, a massive earthquake and resulting tsunami rocked Japan and first-hand horror stories (and photos) immediately zoomed throughout the social media sphere. West Coast cities in the U.S. prepared citizenry for after-effects and many other public and private groups launched massive campaigns about how to help Japanese victims. Whether analyzing how a municipality such as Portland, Oregon, posts updates on how its citizens can donate, or how tweets tracked the effects of the disaster on the global map, the larger study reveals how this inverted pyramid of information is reorganizing public voices and toppling silos of information.

While previous scholarship addresses the increase of "narrowcast" social media with multiple voices versus the traditional "broadcast" approach of singular news, this study seeks to clarify whether changes in media systems have increased the capacities of public groups to communicate both to targeted public audiences and among themselves. As social media is increasingly part of communication during crises, it is valuable to know how particular strategies help reach Citizen 2.0.

BACKGROUND

Research efforts about new media, and how it can be used by governments to more widely disperse knowledge as an accessible commodity, has steadily grown in the United States and elsewhere, particularly since 9/11. As noted by scholars of civic engagement, media plays a pivotal role in informing citizens, holding leaders accountable, and being a critical watchdog (Cammearts, 2009). From a participatory perspective, it is also increasingly part of crisis management plans prepared by agencies for potential natural disasters (flooding, earthquake, famines, etc.) as well as crises caused by humans (nuclear, environmental, and political uprisings, etc.). While public administrators might routinely use Twitter to publicize town halls, many are also crafting social media plans to include public relations best practices of engaging messages for internal and external audiences, especially in times of crises (Fearn-Banks, 2007). At the same time, previous scholarship notes that civic engagement is also increasing in areas of community volunteerism, consumer activism, and social justice causes (Bennet, 2008).

Before adding to such valuable discussions, it is important to agree on just what media is today and how public administrators define other terms. Much mediated information runs through mobile applications, which are software applications designed to run on hand-held computers such as PDAs and cell phones, including online citizen reporting (FixMyStreet, etc.). For the purpose of this project, e-government includes public efforts using Internet-based technologies for business and