

Chapter 32

Who Cares for Identity Information in Government 2.0? An Empirical Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of an empirical study on the effects of identity information on government-citizen interaction in government 2.0 applications. It triangulates findings from a survey among government 2.0 users and quantitative and qualitative analyses of Dutch government 2.0 Websites. This reveals the identity information Web 2.0 users want to have of other participants and are willing to provide about themselves, the importance of role information of civil servants, and the relationship of identity information with the interaction level on government 2.0 applications. The results show that, contrary to what the literature suggests, there is no significant correlation between identity information and interaction levels on government 2.0 discussion forums. The findings suggest that government 2.0 initiatives should be designed with a flexible and liberal approach to identity information.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Research Question

Web 2.0, also called social media, is an umbrella term for technologies and applications that facilitate user interactions and user-generated content, leading to new forms of social networks. Government 2.0 can be seen as the use of Web 2.0 by governments, more specifically – in the sense that we are interested in in this paper – to facilitate government-citizen interactions. Many discussion platforms are being set up where government and citizens can meet, but not all of these are successful. Several factors affect

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the potential for success of government 2.0 (Meijer, Koops, Pieterse, Overman, & Ten Tije, 2012). One possible factor that we want to explore in this paper, which has significant implications for the design of government 2.0 Websites, is the amount of identity information that users have to give when participating in government 2.0.

The reason we focus on identity information is that the literature suggests this to be a key enabler of trust, and mutual trust is a necessary condition for these government-citizen relationships to be successful. Particularly in online interactions, trust can never be taken for granted; it has to be established. Since online interactions involve communications at a distance, traditional trust-enhancing factors that we rely on in face-to-face interactions may not necessarily apply (Pettit, 2004). For the purposes of this paper, we focus on the context of virtual relationships, for which Haenni *et al.* (2009, p. 40ff) describe trust as a subjective, context-dependent characteristic of one party (the trustor) in relation to another party (the trustee) in a relevant context. Trust has many aspects; in this paper, we are interested in preconditional aspects or enablers for trust to be possible in the first place: availability (is the trustee available when needed?) and identity (is the identity of the trustee established?) (Cofta, 2007).

Closely related to these enablers of trust in the trustee are enablers of confidence in the reliability of the trustee's statements. In government 2.0 applications, the latter are perhaps even more important: do governments and citizens trust the *content* of their Web 2.0 interactions? Content reliability can be gauged from two types of criteria: content criteria, related to the content itself, for example consistency, coherence, and accuracy; and pedigree criteria, related to the information source, for example whether information comes from a source that is authoritative or that proved reliable in the past (Vedder & Wachbroit, 2003). In online contexts (as in many offline contexts), people find it hard to apply content criteria and usually rely on pedigree criteria (Vedder & Wachbroit, 2003). In other words, trust in the Web 2.0 content often boils down to trust in the content's source, that is, in the counter-party who contributes content. Since many pedigree criteria are connected to the information's source, knowing who the source is becomes important. This underpins the importance of identity as a preconditional dimension of trust: it is a facilitating enabler for the other enablers of trust.

1.1.1 Background

What, then, is identity? Given our focus on online interactions, we focus on the three aspects of identity most relevant in online environments. First, identity knowledge, i.e., the knowledge of identity information available about someone, for instance on the Internet. Gary T. Marx (2006) distinguishes five types of identity knowledge that can be placed on a continuum, ranging from identity information very close and specific to the individual (core identification and unique identification) through identity information specific to the type of individual (sensitive information and private information) to any identity information that can be attached to a person (individual information). These five types can be thought of as concentric circles, with core identification as the inner, most limited category, and individual information as the outer, most comprehensive category. It is useful to distinguish between these types of identity information, precisely because identification seems such a key element in government-citizen relationships.

A central policy question is how much and what kind of identity information is necessary in various contexts. In particular, whether identification of a unique person is appropriate and, if so, what form it should take (Marx, 2006). For government 2.0 applications, one can hypothesize that, based on identity

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