Chapter 75

US Cities and Social Networking:
A Focus on City Websites and Mayors

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a random study of US cities' and mayors' uses of five social networking features: Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn as well as city use of online surveys. Data from a random sample of fifty cities stratified on population indicates that only Facebook is used by a majority of cities' websites and mayors. The lower level of use of Twitter and YouTube and less than universal use of Facebook is complemented by a very low level of citizen followers, viewers, and friends. Most cities also do not use online surveys on their websites. This low use likely just reflects government's tendency to follow trends rather than lead and is not a statement about cities' lack of citizen orientation. It also appears to be a reflection of smaller cities adopting information technologies more slowly than larger cities when we compare 2010 data with that from early in 2011. Nonetheless, the result is that the potential positive opportunities for cities and mayors to connect and converse with citizens via Web 2.0 are under-realized if we just look at the Internet social networking face presented, and if cities do not get on the Web 2.0 bandwagon in this regard, citizens, especially younger ones, may feel that it is another example of government being out of touch with what is happening in the "real" world.

INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 has certainly the potential to change how governments and citizens interact and communicate. Some have argued that such technology will lead to open government and thus promote public participation and collaboration (Piaggesi, Sund, & Castelnovo, 2011; Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010; Scavo & Kim, 2010; Eldon, 2009; Holzer, 2004). Noveck (2009) argues that tech-

nology will make government more expert and more democratic and thus better. Others have suggested we are in for a political makeover with the Millennial Generation coming of age because the Internet based technology that this generation knows so well will be used by them to transform politics (Winogred, 2008). There also is a ten year stream of research about social networks' impact on human interactions, trust, e-learning (Mesquita, 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007), but

this stream is separate from political issues and deals rather with sociological and interpersonal communication issues.

Impacts though at any level are dependent on availability and use. In this chapter we are going to assess if and to what extent US cities are using five social networking vehicles of Web 2.0 to potentially connect with their citizens and citizens with their local governments.

The study will explore city use by simply focusing on the official city websites' links and use of online surveys as well as the mayors' use of Web 2.0 features of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and MySpace. These Web 2.0 vehicles were chosen because they might fairly be considered the most known across the broad citizenry. For instance, after the 2010 movie, *Social Networking,* it is harder for an average citizen of any age and residence in the US to not have heard of Facebook. Television has also helped to promote public awareness of YouTube by playing popular videos from the site and turning them into news. Plus movie stars have popularized Twitter to broad audiences. Admittedly, there are also other important vehicles of Web 2.0 such as RSS feeds and blogs that are not included in this chapter's focus. But again, the chapter focuses on what reasonably can be considered the most widely known social networking vehicles across the populace that are used by government.

This study's assumption is "if you don't know about it, how can you take advantage of it?" All the suggested payoffs and even potential costs of utilizing social networks by public entities and populaces depend on use. Another assumption is that the official public Internet face of cities and mayors are rudimentary but initial potential contact points between governments and citizens. In essence, this chapter is an empirical description of the extent to which cities and mayors have public social networking faces. It also will assess two hypotheses: larger cities are more likely to have social network links on their official home pages, and cities whose home pages feature a clear "citizen" link will be more likely to have social network links on their home pages.

Findings from this study would be of value to researchers who wish to study beyond small case studies or focus groups on the hypothesized payoffs of public use of social networking. For example, one issue that this study can address is whether some social network vehicles are so common that it does not matter which cities to do in-depth analysis in. This study's empirical snapshot of city and mayor Internet faces should also be of interest to practitioners who are interested in comparing their city with others and do not want to be behind the pack and may even want to be part of the leading edge cities in having social networking faces. This study can at least indicate where the "pack" is as well as make comments on visibility of website links. Furthermore, public administration is about the practice of administration in the public arena based on empirical analyses and theories that are tested by such. The field assumes that case studies are limited in generalizability although certainly can be useful as benchmarks of what to do or what to avoid doing. But one does not know whether the in-depth case study is an example of the good or bad or mediocre practice or even the future or present day practice if one does not have some broad view of what cities are doing on the level of use, which this study can provide. Finally, e-government is changing fast, and an up-to-date inventory of where cities and mayors are in terms of social networking faces is useful for understanding trends in diffusion of technology.

BACKGROUND

By 2002, an ICMA survey found that 74.2% of all local governments in the US, even ones as small as 2500 people, had a website. Such websites have been deemed Web1.0. But new web presences were quickly appearing, making having just

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