

Chapter 6

Wrestling with Contradictions in Government Social Media Practices

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ABSTRACT

Research in government social media practices highlights expectations of co-creation and progression mirrored in maturity models, but research also documents low deployment degree and thereby points to a discrepancy. The paper suggests that the authors instead of co-creation and progression draw on a dialectical approach and understand the development of government social media practices as a wrestling with contradictions. The case of emerging social media practices in a Danish municipality used to illustrate this framework suggests three main categories of contradictions in emerging social media practices: Contradictions between service administration and community feeling as forms of practice, contradictions in organizing between local engagement and central control, and contradictions in the digital infrastructure between proprietary municipal websites and public social media platforms. The paper discusses if a paradox lens will enhance our understanding of inherent contradictions or the dialectical notion of contradiction serve the purpose. The paper contributes to a dialectical theory of contradictions through an analysis of emerging government social media practices.

INTRODUCTION

The growing investment in social media practices by both private corporations and government organizations has led to increasing research interests. A special issue on social media in *Information Systems Research*, Vol. 24, No. 1, March 2013, points to opportunities for organizational innovation but also to unexpected challenges, for

example that involvement of communities in design innovation processes can lead to devaluation of the obtained results. The editorial concludes that many questions are not only unanswered, but unaddressed (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013). A special issue on social media in *Government Information Quarterly*, 29, 2012 includes positive expectations, for example materialized in a typology for citizen co-production (Linders, 2012)

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and in a maturity model for social media based public engagement (Lee, Kwak, Gwanhoo, & Young Hoon, 2012). However, in the very same issue, empirical data document a low deployment degree of social media in local municipalities in the European Union (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Floresc, 2012), and likewise, a low level of activity on a government-run health portal (Andersen, Medaglia, & Henriksen, 2012). The special issue thereby points to a discrepancy between research highlighting expectations and best practices on the one hand, and empirical evidence of low use of social media on the other hand.

The discrepancy between the expectations of co-creation and the low degree of deployment can be explained as an example of what (Andersen et al., 2012) point to in the very same special issue of *Government Information Quarterly*, namely that the first wave of research of emerging phenomena often reflects an enthusiasm for the innovation, while the actual practices lag behind or are never achieved. The fashion aspect of social media (Bergquist et al., 2013) as well as also earlier seen technological determinism (Orlikowski, 1991) is most probably a part of the explanation for the discrepancy.

The paper investigates an alternative route for understanding what is at stake in emerging social media practices by regarding the development of government social media practices less as a matter of progression – for example staged in maturity models – than as a continued wrestling with inherent contradictions. The paper is therefore guided by the research question: *How is contradiction present in government social media practices?*

The paper thereby prolongs the investigation of Andersen et al. (2012) in which the authors point to contradictory effects embedded in social media practices in the healthcare sector. These include among others contradictions between (1) data availability to doctors and violation of privacy due to open exchange of knowledge, (2) widespread information availability, information exchange, and information overload, and (3) the

fact that social media, contrary to expectations, is a cost driver rather than a cost saver (Andersen et al., 2012).

According to the literature and dialectical approach that the present study will draw on, contradictions are understood as one possible ‘motor’ in change processes. To understand how these inherent contradictions are constitutive in the context of emerging government social media practices, the paper traces and analyzes contradictions in a case study of municipal social media practices. The study results in identification of three contradictions: 1. The contradiction between service administration and community feeling as forms of practice. 2. The organizing contradiction between central control and local engagement. 3. The technological infrastructure contradiction between proprietary municipal websites and public social media platforms.

In line with the literature, the paper argues that the future development of government social media practices is dependent on how government organizations wrestle with these contradictions by government organizations.

The study makes two contributions. First, it contributes to research on contradictions as drivers of change by exploring the concept in relation to emerging government social media practices. Because of the elusive nature of the paradox concept, the paper suggests ‘wrestling with contradictions’ as an alternative analytical lens. Second, the study contributes to our understanding of the opportunities and challenges in emerging government social media practices from an organizational perspective.

CONTRADICTION AND PARADOX

Organizational scholars belonging to a dialectical tradition (Benson, 1977) have used contradictions to explain change and development in organizations (Van De Ven & Poole, 1995). The fundamental assumption in this stream of literature is that

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