Chapter 69
Concerns Management, E-Government and E-Participation:
Experiences and Findings From Germany

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ABSTRACT

Advancements in internet technology have profoundly changed communication between citizens and government authorities. Concerns management systems and smartphone applications offer new and convenient channels of interaction. In Germany, the "Mängelmelder" platform offers a nationwide service channel for local citizens' concerns. Citizens generally use this communication channel for reporting public infrastructure defects. This paper examines whether the "Mängelmelder" platform – with customized systems can facilitate further citizen participation at the local level in Germany. Analysing different customized systems shows that possibilities for further use depend on the way in which local authorities handle the citizens' input. It could not be proven that offering an open category for citizens' recommendations (in a customized concerns management system) has an impact on further citizen participation. But using digital citizen services, such as concerns management platforms, can indeed facilitate increased citizen participation.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5646-6.ch069

INTRODUCTION

Due to the ongoing emergence of digital communication tools, especially within the mobile web, communication between government and citizens has been subject to rapid and massive changes in recent years. Not long ago, interaction was restricted to telephone and face-to-face contact and thus limited to operating hours.

In the late 1990s, Web 1.0 only provided static content: people could check websites for information such as telephone numbers or opening hours of the local authorities. After the turn of the millennium, Web 2.0 arose with new potential for connectivity and interaction (Ebersbach & Glaser & Heigl, 2008). The field of urban planning especially benefitted from these new forms of usage, particularly in terms of user-generated content and customized maps (Anttiroiko, 2014; Damurski, 2012) or regarding participatory sensor networks (Burke et al., 2006).

Technology changed dramatically with the onset of Web 2.0, especially with the emergence of mobile devices connected to the Internet. Although mobile Internet technology had been available for some years, the launch of the Apple iPhone in 2007 started an increase in the distribution of mobile devices equipped with sensors that were important for mobile applications. Linking today's omnipresence of everyday media to the proliferation of mobile devices, James Miller has coined the term of "everyware media" (Miller 2014). Anttiroiko (2014) summarized the increasing usage of mobile applications for interactive and collaborative means (Web 2.0) with the term "Web^2" ("Web squared"). Another proposed term is that of "Mobile Social Software," emphasizing the empowerment of digital communities to co-create (Lugano, 2010).

However, a study by the Pew Research Project found that US citizens prefer traditional channels of electronic communications, such as email (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007). Similarly, email still is the most popular way of online communication used in Germany: while nearly 80% of all internet users use email, only 39% use online communities and around 35% use mobile apps (ARD ZDF Onlinestudie, 2014).

Nevertheless, the statistics show that people have varying preferences for communication methods. Therefore, new tools have been established to meet specific target groups' preferences (The question of communication channels chosen by citizens is opened up by an interesting research published by Willem Pieterson (2009)). For instance, research shows that despite the globalized connectivity of the Internet, in some cases regional or local context is essential for citizen participation (Adam et al., 2010).

The need for a digital citizen feedback system arose, merging multiple communication channels in order to deliver high quality public customer service. Alexander Schellong introduced the term "Citizen Relationship Management" in 2007 as "a strategy enabled by technology with a broad citizen focus, to maintain and optimize relationships and encourage participation" (Schellong, 2007). This system was initially established as a centralised telephone service in the U.S, which enabled citizens to easily identify the person responsible for their individual concerns in local government. The telephone number 311 connected them to a municipal service centre that answered questions based on a comprehensive knowledge-database (Fleming & Barnhouse, 2006). The German equivalent is telephone number115, which took up regular operations in 2011 (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2011).

Just as the central service numbers facilitate the communication between citizens and governments, new tools such as concern management platforms and smartphone applications continued developing the use of Web 2.0 and Web^2 technology. This has widely made it easier for citizens to get in touch with