

Chapter 3

A Comparative View of Citizen Engagement in Social Media of Local Governments From North American Countries

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ABSTRACT

Taking into consideration the growing popularity of social media in North American countries, this chapter aims to perform a comparative analysis of the use of Facebook as a communication strategy for encouraging citizen engagement among local governments in The United States, Canada and Mexico. With regards to the three dimensions used in all regions to measure online citizen engagement, in general terms, the “popularity” and “virality” dimensions are the most common, while the “commitment” dimension is still underutilized. With respect to the significant differences found, Mexican citizens are those that make the best use of the tool “like” to express their support of the information supplied by local governments. Furthermore, in relation to the citizens that are fans of the Facebook pages of local governments, we can observe that Canadian citizens show a greater interest in participating more actively in dialogue building while U.S. citizens are the most willing to disseminate information from their local governments.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the demand for citizen engagement in the decision making process of local government has increased, as the actions that these entities carry out directly affect daily life and are of the most direct interest for citizens (Hui & Hayllar, 2010; Sandoval & Gil, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Therefore, these public entities should not only be more transparent and accountable about their actions but also need to implement mechanisms that allow citizens to have an “active voice” that guarantees a better democratic system. To this end, local governments need to implement a successful communication strategy which in turn implies the adoption of the current communication trends (Bonsón et al., 2014a).

Regarding the new models of communication, there is no doubt of the huge impact that social media are having on society (Akadwani, 2014). To authors like Kim et al. (2010) and Avery et al. (2010) the fast expansion of these technologies is due to the diverse advantages that they present, such as:

1. Facilitating collaboration;
2. Encouraging joint learning;
3. Permitting the rapid exchange of information among users;
4. The creation of online communities;
5. Enabling sharing-created contents;
6. It's ease of use; and
7. It's low cost.

All these attributes have allowed such technologies to play a pivotal role in citizen mobilization as they foster not just the mass distribution of a one message to many people but also, the interaction of messages from many to many (Zorn et al., 2013).

As a consequence, citizens are increasingly relying on social media for improving the quality of their communication with the government, particularly in terms of greater access to information and a greater sharing of concerns and ideas, which in turn leads to increased awareness, collective efficacy and civic participation (Kavanaugh et al., 2013). In this regard, Smith (2010) notes that the American population and, in particular, Black and Latin minorities strongly agree that the use of social media will improve the relationship between citizens and the government, as it allows people to be better informed about what the government is doing as well as making government agencies and officials more accessible.

Although social media are conceived as a “global phenomenon”, diverse authors argue that to understand the adoption of such technologies by both people and organizations it is very important to consider the culture of the country in which it is used, as perceptions and adoption behaviors concerning social media vary from place to place (Waters & Lo, 2012). Furthermore, Gong et al. (2014) add that the study of the adoption of social media should be clustered by regions and in this regard, previous authors have carried out a global analysis of citizen engagement in the social media from the local governments in Western Europe (Bonsón et al., 2014a) while others have analyzed this issue in certain countries of North America and particularly, citizen participation in the social media of the government of the United States (U.S.) (Mergel, 2013) and from Central Mexico (Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). However, little is known regarding citizen engagement in the social media that are used by governments from North America as a region. Likewise, the question regarding whether or not there are differences between the three countries that compose that region, the U. S., Mexico and Canada, is still to be explored.

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