Chapter 37
Social Media Use in the Public Sector

Anteneh Ayanso
Brock University, Canada

Darryl Moyers
Brock University, Canada

ABSTRACT

With advances in the Internet and its associated technologies, more and more governments and their public service agencies are embracing social media as a key channel of communication and service provision. These easy-to-use applications encourage the public to actively participate and share constructive ideas in various government initiatives. At the same time, social media helps governments to actively engage with the public and monitor their existing services for continuous improvements. In this chapter, the authors explore the application of social media in the public sector and review how it has evolved over time and what lies ahead for the future. To this end, the authors explore existing and emerging platforms and tools that can be used in various public sector settings. The chapter also reviews social media best practices and initiatives in similar settings. Finally, it examines the critical challenges the public sector faces in integrating social media in its processes and services.

INTRODUCTION

Many academic researchers and technology pundits have attempted to define social media and/or Web 2.0 technologies in different ways (O'Reilly, 2005; Osimo, 2008; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Parameswaran & Whinston 2007a, 2007b). For example, O'Reilly (2005) described the core competencies of Web 2.0 sites by highlighting new tools and approaches that enhanced the features and functionalities of the web. He emphasized that "Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it; consuming and remixing data from multiple sources; creating network effects through an 'architecture of participation; and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences" (O'Reilly, 2005). Similarly, Parameswaran and Whinston (2007a, 2007b) described Web 2.0 as

representing "social software" or "social computing" that shifts computing to the edges of the network, and empowers individual users with lightweight computing tools to manifest their creativity, engage in social interaction, and share knowledge. Osimo (2008) defined the scope of Web 2.0 as a combination of technologies (e.g., AJAX, XML, open API, microformats, flash/flex), applications (e.g., blog, wiki, podcast, RSS feeds, tagging, social networks, Mashups), and values (e.g., user as a producer, collective intelligence, perpetual beta, extreme ease of use). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61.) also defined Web 2.0 as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC)."

The broad scope of the above definitions shows the prevalence of social media in all walks of lives. In fact, the commercial sector did not take much time to capitalize on the benefits of this new channel of communication and marketing. At the same time, the public sector is increasingly embracing Web 2.0 technologies and applications in an effort to raise performance and enhance transparency, accountability and citizen-engagement. Web 2.0 applications are creating new, effortless mechanisms to foster online engagement and dialogues between government (or civil servants) and citizens (Reece, 2006), and they can be used to bridge the gulf between citizens and public institutions (Johnston et al., 2008). Routine interactions and information exchanges with internal units as well as other government organizations constitute substantial part of the administrative expenses in the public sector, and Web 2.0 and social media applications can be used to improve internal collaboration and facilitate strategic knowledge-sharing among workers, managers, and partners in government organizations (Human Capital Institute, 2010). Long-term, strategic benefits are also pursued in many technology-based public services, such as eHealth and eLearning.

Social media is also increasingly shaping the political landscape and the democratic processes both in developed and developing nations. It has facilitated an active participation of people from all walks of life and demography in local, national, and international events. Recognizing this, several international, regional, and national initiatives are underway to guide progress as well as to develop policies for the effective utilization of these emerging technologies. For example, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a United Nations agency, uses the ICT development index (IDI) to assess the adoption of existing and emerging technologies and how the digital divide among different regions and nations is evolving over time (ITU, 2009). Due to the cost-effectiveness and user-friendly nature of Web 2.0 technologies and applications, there exists tremendous potential for developing nations to bridge the disparity in ICT readiness (i.e., infrastructure and access), ICT usage (i.e., intensity), and ICT capability (i.e., skills).

In Europe, eGovernment has been a policy priority since the eEurope Action Plan in 1999 (Osimo, 2008). Under Europe's strategic framework for Information Society policy, Europe's EU15 Heads of Government identified that achieving an inclusive European Information Society is one of the top priorities. In achieving this objective, the public sector is recognized as a key ICT application field, because of the impact that ICT-enabled public services can have on economic growth, inclusion, and quality of life (Osimo, 2008). A successor of this strategic framework is Digital Agenda for Europe which is Europe's strategy for a flourishing digital economy by 2020 (European Commission, 2010). The goal of this agenda is to bring stakeholders together to assess progress and emerging challenges, and work closely with national governments, concerned organizations and companies, and outline policies and actions to maximize the benefit of the Digital Revolution for all (European Commission, 2010).

In Canada, a comprehensive system for online collaboration and social networking projects by government departments was initiated. This project involves systems that can provide social networking

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