Chapter 49
Social Media, Civic Engagement, and Local Governments:
Special Consideration to the Office of the Mayor of NYC

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ABSTRACT

Social media, if correctly used, enhance cultural, political, economic and social engagement. They also represent key communications tools for administrators to highlight the principles of openness and transparency. Nowadays Local Governments have as well a social media presence. The following contribution casts light on contemporary forms of democracy, deepening on concepts such as E-Government and E-Democracy. The paper describes as well how the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Social Media can benefit governance, and promote good governance, focusing on some experiences launched at the local and municipal level. Finally, it offers an empirical approach of the use of ICTs by the Office of the Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio.

INTRODUCTION

Social Media and the World Wide Web have transformed the way Governments and institutions communicate with citizens. They have offered new ways and opportunities to engage citizens in democratic processes and politics, and have led to the formation and ongoing evolvement of formulas such as *E-Government* or *E-Democracy*.

The use of the ICT can make Government more efficient and effective in the delivery of public services. Moreover, Governments can become more accountable, since ICT offer contemporary ways of democratic accountability (Missy Graham, M.A. and Elizabeth Johnson Avery, 2013).

The general benefits of ICTs to politics, such as enhancing the interaction between government and citizens, or reaching populations that are not often consumers of traditional media (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010), can extend to local governments, too. Certainly, social media offer great opportuni-

ties for local governments. Scholars state that local government apply regularly ICT tools since they are more operative and functional at this level (Peters 2001; Fung 2004; Briggs 2008; Sirianni 2009). The public communication model for governments should be open, honest, timely (Heise, 1985).

Blogs, podcasts, and social networks provide a more frequent, open, direct and targeted style of communication, with no intervention of mediators –editors, reporters-, as it occurs with newspapers, television and radio (Smith, 2010).

The following contribution is structured in four sections. The first section is of a more theoretical nature and casts light on contemporary forms of democracy. The second section deepens on concepts such as E-Government or E-Democracy. The third section describes how the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media can benefit governments, focusing on some experiences launched at the local and municipal level. The fourth section shows a case-study to complement the previous theoretical framework. Therefore, it offers an empirical approach of the use of social media by the Office of the Mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio.

CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

As we have already mentioned, the use of Information and Communication Technologies and Social Media can strengthen political participation and civic engagement, and enhance contemporary forms of democracy that aim to foster representative democracy with the presence of the civil society.

Representative democracy has repeatedly been identified with the notion of democracy itself. The essence of representation resides in the celebration of regular, free, fair elections where political parties compete to be in office. The legitimacy of the system is, thus, grounded on parties and elections.

In Western countries, scholars have observed a certain erosion of the representative model: not of democracy itself but of the functioning of representative institutions. Representation has not supervised, restrained and controlled effectively the government (Hirst, 2009). This trend does not apply to transitional regimes: they undergo a different path and revolutions have occurred to establish regimes based on electoral democracy –e.g., "the Arab Spring."

Paying special attention to Western countries, the financial crisis – breaking out in 2008- and the austerity measures introduced have raised a wave of protests and disenchantment among citizens all over Europe. They are concerned and fear the disintegration of the welfare State, and alert on the increasing poverty income limit and inequality (Oxfam Report, 2016).

The current, growing state of disaffection and distrust among citizens has more to do with the poor performance of particular representatives than with a crisis of the representative model. There is a huge "distance" separating the elected from their electors. The latter feel that once the former win the elections, they behave as an elite, as an oligarchy, and do not really matter about citizens´ views, and even are not interested in citizens to be involved in the political process regularly.

Some scholars suggest the convenience to revive political parties while others emphasize the importance acquired by participative, discursive, collaborative processes among citizens and representatives. Contemporary forms of democracy do not intend to replace representative government. On the contrary, they complement and amplify representation with the revitalization of civil society, and with the value of negotiated governance dynamics through participative, deliberative, dialogical, associative processes or consociational practices.

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