

Chapter 64

Using Social Media to Inform and Engage Urban Dwellers in La Paz, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Engaging residents in local affairs continues to be a challenge for cities around the world. Under a call for more open government, many cities have adopted web-based strategies, including social media, to inform, serve, and engage residents. Understanding the performance of social media to support transparent and participatory government through communication and engagement with citizens, especially by relatively early adopters in urbanized areas of developing countries, can inform theory, as well as practice. This article contains an analysis of social media communication for one government agency. The data are posts from the first 18 months of activity on a Facebook profile created and maintained by the municipal water agency of La Paz, Mexico. Consistent with previous work, the Facebook profile reflected relatively low usage, a propensity toward one-way provision of information by government, and limited interaction. However, by analyzing the content of each post and all interactions, the authors found the Facebook profile spurred citizen engagement in a collaborative effort mitigate a community problem.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement in local public affairs has long been a tenet of democratic political structures in developed countries. This engagement has taken many forms including exercising the right to vote, introducing ballot initiatives, and using electronic resources to communicate with government officials and other citizens (Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015; Smith & Tolbert, 2004; Stamatia, Papadopoulosb, & Anagnostopoulousa, 2015; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). With the rise of electronic resources, opportunity for citizen engagement with local government and civic affairs has dramatically expanded

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across political regimes and into many less developed areas throughout the world. Furthermore, the adoption of social media to complement more traditional forms of electronic government (e-government) has occurred and is expected to achieve multiple goals including information delivery, public service support, and citizen engagement (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014).

The use of social media by local governments varies widely across countries and this variation is likely related to political ideology, the capacity of a local government, and the general state of e-government within the local government's country (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015). In terms of the last point, a 2012 e-government survey of countries by the United Nations (UN) found wide gaps in the level of e-government development from country to country and these differences were especially pronounced between more versus less developed countries. For example, in the Americas, Canada and the United States had substantially higher scores on the UN's e-government development index (a composite measure with indicators including the state of online service and telecommunications infrastructure, as well as human capital elements) than did Mexico and other Latin American countries (United Nations, 2012). Despite these differences, according to Boughzala, Janssen, & Assar (2015a), the 2012 UN survey also shows that there has been progress across the globe in the area of e-government. These authors also emphasize the importance of the evolution of e-government and the rise of Web 2.0. Conceptually, Web 2.0 means that citizens are not only consumers of content, but can also add content and interact with their government and each other (Kahn, 2015).

Web 2.0 includes, among other applications, numerous social media or networking channels which are available for government to communicate with citizens. Overall, Facebook is the most popular social media tool and its usage continues to expand with over 1.86 billion monthly active users across the globe in 2016 (Facebook, 2017) and a worldwide increase of over 40% in daily active users between 2013 and 2015 (Internet World Stats, 2017). Facebook is a frequent choice of organizations, including public agencies, to inform and engage citizens, because it has so much potential for communication between people and their government in a wide range of contexts (Anger & Kittl, 2011; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015).

Social media such as Facebook can be a transformative experience for local governance. The opportunity presented by social media, to engage citizens and move beyond one-way information delivery, could redefine relationships and the way governing occurs in cities. Therefore, it is critical to understand social media use and performance in the context of local public agencies. While research on social media use by local governments has increased recently, especially in developed countries, much more work is needed to examine patterns and suggest explanations for variation in social media use and performance across governments within developed and developing countries. In other words, we need a better understanding of local government's social media experiences for effective theory building.

This research explores a set of questions about the use and effectiveness of one social media channel, as revealed by posts to the Facebook profile of *Organismo Operador Municipal del Sistema de Agua Potable, Alcantarillado y Saneamiento del Municipio de La Paz (OOMSAPAS)*, the municipal water agency of La Paz, Baja California Sur (BCS), Mexico. The posts in our analysis were made during the first 18 months of the agency's Facebook profile's existence. This research asks the following questions: What types of posts are found on the profile? Do the posts reflect a transparent and participatory local government? What is the nature of static (one-way) and interactive (two-way) postings? And, lastly, is the profile effective in promoting citizen engagement?

The research in this article contributes to the burgeoning literature on social media use by local governments in several ways. First, this study responds to the scarcity of knowledge about social media use by cities in developing countries. Second, the authors provide a detailed account of the profile over

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