Social media for openness and accountability in the public sector: Cases in the Greek context

Teta Stamati [a], Thanos Papadopoulos [b,*], Dimosthenis Anagnostopoulos [a]

[a] Harokopio University of Athens, Greece
[b] Sussex School of Business, Management, & Economics, University of Sussex, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of government social media for openness and accountability. The extant literature has highlighted the benefits of social media use in this context to enhance citizen participation and engagement in decision-making and policy development, facilitate openness and transparency efforts, and reduce corruption. Yet, there are limited studies that discuss those properties of social media that can afford openness and accountability, and their implications for policy and practise. To address these gaps, a study is conducted in the Greek context using interviews with top managers, policy makers, and relevant stakeholders across five initiatives. We discuss distinct affordances for openness and accountability, and propose their inclusion as building blocks of the national ICT policy for openness and accountability. Finally, we provide the implications of the affordances lens for policy and practise, the limitations of the study and future research avenues.

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1. Introduction

Social media "employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann et al., 2012). The particular attribute of social media which sets it apart from other existing forms of communication is its reliance on user-generated content, i.e. the content created and shared by end-users or the general public in real time using computers and mobile devices, allowing, thereby, 'many-to-many' communication (ibid). A survey by McKinsey suggests that 65% of companies are using Web 2.0 technologies (Bughin et al., 2010), whereas according to Forrester Research, the corporate spending on social media by the end of 2013 will reach $4.6 billion (Young et al., 2008).

Research has illustrated the benefits of social media by the government for openness and transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012; Bonson et al., 2012; Shuler et al., 2010) in the public sector when focusing on local government and municipalities (Bonson et al., 2012), citizen empowerment (Linders, 2012) and interaction with government (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013), for crisis situations (Kavanaugh et al., 2012), and their use in the 2012 U.S. presidential elections (Hong & Nadler, 2012). However, research on the impact of social computing on public sector is still tentative and

exploratory (Ala-Mutka et al., 2013). Social media can support, according to Ellison & Hardey (2013), but not replace fixed but less agile institutions of representative democracy. In particular, a review of recent research—cited as well in the Electronic-Government Reference Library (EGRL) (EGRL, 2014—see Appendix, Tables 1A, 2A, and 3A) and recent work on the material aspects of social media (e.g. Leonardi et al., 2013; Treem & Leonardi, 2012) revealed that there is a need for a better understanding of a. properties of social media that afford openness and accountability; b. how these properties can be included in design strategies for social media applications to facilitate openness and accountability in governance; and c. the implications of these design strategies for the national policy and practise. In particular, there has not been relatively little research on the material properties of social media that grant different users with different possibilities of action, and how these properties facilitate openness and accountability in governance. To address this gap we follow the endorsement by Leonardi et al. (2013) that "a theoretically motivated investigation of social media technologies in the workplace is now an imperative for the fields of communication, management, and information systems" (p. 16) and in our case, governance, and hence our research questions are the following: which are the properties of social media that afford openness and accountability? Could these properties be conceptualised as building blocks of social media for openness and accountability? Could these properties be strategically designed in social media for openness and accountability?

To answer these questions our research follows the qualitative case study strategy in the Greek context, using semi-structured interviews with executives, public policy makers, and relevant stakeholders in

* Corresponding author at: Sussex School of Business, Management, & Economics, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9 SL, UK.
E-mail address: Athanasios.Papadopoulos@sussex.ac.uk (T. Papadopoulos).

Table 1

Social media and ICTs into e-government transparency initiatives to promote transparency, accountability, and collaborative e-government.

Social media and ICT initiatives (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012)	Benefit for users	Benefit for government
Establishment of channels for dissemination of information from government agencies to citizens or targeted information for different social groups, using in particular media that public prefers using.	•	
Enabling users to view, discuss, upload, distribute, and store digital content that expresses their views on governmental decisions.	•	
Allowing members of the public to track the progress of their own interactions with the government.	•	
Publicly and collectively monitoring government officials and policy makers to prevent corruption.		•
Limiting the direct contact between the public and government officials/agencies.		•
Exposing government processes, including bidding, contracting, and processing of forms.		•

both private (service providers) and public organisations across five initiatives. We draw from the literature on affordances (Barley et al., 2012; Leonardi, 2011) and we discuss different affordances of social media for openness and accountability. We conceptualise these affordances as the building blocks of social media based on the framework by Kietzmann et al. (2011; 2012)—that defines social media as a honeycomb of seven interacting elements. Finally, we discuss the implications of these affordances for policy and practise and we propose their inclusion as building blocks of the national ICT policy for openness and accountability.

The paper is structured as follows: after a brief review of the literature on social media for openness and accountability (Section 2), we discuss affordances (Sections 3) as an alternative lens to illustrate those "sociomaterial" properties of social media that facilitate openness and accountability. After presenting the methodology (Section 4), we illustrate this argument through a case study in Greece based on five initiatives (Section 5). We then discuss the findings in light of the extant literature and illustrate the implications for policy and practise (Section 6). The paper concludes (Section 7) by highlighting its contribution to literature and suggesting future research avenues.

2. Social media for openness and accountability

In this section we briefly review the extant literature on social media use for openness and accountability. We include (i) a review of the literature in the EGRL (EGRL, 2014), and (ii) review of the literature on 'affordances', which is the theoretical lens of this study.

The EGRL was created in 2005 and included the peer-reviewed, English language literature of the EGR domain. Since 2005, it is being recorded and semi-annually updated (Scholl, 2009, 2010; Scholl & Dwivendi, 2014). The purpose of EGRL is to been "to improve the quality of e-Government (EG) research and publication…" and "to provide authors and reviewers access to the body of current academic knowledge, provide keyword searches to better inform research, and provide accuracy and reliability in citations"(EGRL, 2014). EGRL has been used in other studies in e-government (Larsson & Grönlund, 2014; Scholl & Dwivendi, 2014) since it "represents a comprehensive account of the

domain's English language-based body of peer-reviewed academic knowledge" (Scholl & Dwivendi, 2014). We searched within the database using the following search terms: 'social media', 'openness', 'open government', and 'accountability', since they are the keywords of this study. Our search yielded a total of 64 articles (39 for social media, 18 for openness and open government, and 7 for accountability). (Appendix—Tables 1A, 2A, 3A).

2.1. Defining social media

To define social media, Kietzmann et al. (2011; 2012) have proposed a framework (Fig. 1) that uses seven functional building blocks, that is, identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups.

Literature has underlined the role of social media use in government (please see Appendix, Tables 1A, 2A, and 3A). In particular, authors such as Picazo-Vela, Gutierrez-Martinez, and Luna-Reyes (2012) summarise the benefits of the use of social media in governments in "efficiency, user convenience, transparency, accountability, citizen involvement, and improved trust and democracy" (p. 505). Other authors, however (e.g., Abdelsalam et al., 2013; Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2012; Bonson et al., 2012; Bekkers, Edwards & de Kool, 2013; Snead, 2013) note that despite the benefits social media bring to government, there are also significant challenges related to privacy, security, data management, accessibility, social inclusion, governance, information policy issues, and participation. Local governments use social media to enhance transparency and citizen empowerment (Linders, 2012), but corporate dialogue and e-participation are still in their infancy (Bonson et al., 2012). The majority of studies focus on the study of social media from a technical perspective despite the increasing importance of information technologies and policies for democratic practises (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013). Therefore, there is still research to be conducted on the use in social media in government. Oliveira and Welch (2013) are calling for more research attention to interactions amongst social media technology, task, and organisational context. In this paper, aiming to respond to the aforementioned calls, we focus on social media for openness and accountability, since they are regarded

Table 2

Affordances of social media for openness and accountability.

Affordance	Definition
Communicability	The ability of social media to provide a common language and syntax for communication.
Interactivity	The ability of social media to provide a space for interaction between government and citizens.
Visibility	The ability of social media to make the work of the government visible and transparent to the citizens.
	The ability of social media to visualise the views of citizens and their needs and wants.
Collaborative ability	The ability of social media to provide a space to government and citizens for collaboration and knowledge/information sharing which are necessary for the improvement of governmental decision and policy making.
Anonymity	The ability of social media to provide a space for especially citizens to express their opinion anonymously. This may create better possibilities for citizen participation.