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Comparison of social media use for the U.S. and the Korean governments

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ABSTRACT

Social media allows for the creation of bottom-up online communities that encourage the government to utilize a two-way participatory media model, rather than a traditional broadcast media model. The purpose of this study is to examine the current status of social media usage in both Korean and U.S. governments, present several issues and suggest future directions.

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1. Introduction

Social media or social networking refers to online communication platforms that enable individuals to shift fluidly and flexibly between the roles of audience and author. Social media includes websites and applications for "social networking, photo and video sharing, blogging etc." (Nations, 2010). It allows the creation of bottom-up online communities that encourage governments to utilize a two-way participatory media model, rather than a traditional broadcast media model. As Jacoby (2011) notes, "social media has been successful in removing barriers that have existed between two persons at distance." It is now possible for individuals to share experiences and thoughts with great intimacy and ease. Social networking has also been "instrumental in promoting consumer awareness and providing access to vast amounts of information, which impact decision-making processes" (Radick, 2010). Government 2.0, which is an extension of Web 2.0, is a good example. As "technologies that make up Web 2.0 to the practice of government, including blogs, wikis and social networking" (Nations, 2010), Government 2.0 encourages communications between the public and the government on local, state or federal level (Radick, 2010); it also allows agencies to solve problems and to operate more effectively and efficiently. Bertot, Jaegerd, and Grimes (2010) succinctly summarize the value of social media as a tool to connect people in a form of virtual socialization. Social media empowers those with internet access to share information and to express opinions by the simple means of a platform.

Recent statistics show that Korea is a fast adopter of social media. Seven out of ten Koreans use it in various forms; most Korean government agencies provide social media tools or services (NIA, 2011) as illustrated in Appendix A. Yet such statistics are not a product of mature adoption processes or policies. Directions for managing social networking service (SNS) need a vast improvement. In this context, we attempt to present relevant issues and suggestions on the basis of the current status of social media usage and policies in both the Korean and the U.S. governments.

2. Social media trends for government

Social media can enhance communications within organizations, encourage collaborations and information exchanges with the public, and help keep pace with fast moving events in real time. Twitter alone grew by 1382% year-over-year in February 2009, registering a total of just more than 7 million unique visitors in the U.S. for the month (Ostrow, 2009). It is reasonable to expect that social media will become even more popular, more mobile, and more exclusive (Armano, 2009). And, with websites providing sharing functionalities which allow users to broadcast articles across media such as Facebook and Twitter, it will become a more main stream practice for people to share via networks what they previously shared through e-mail. These trends have strong ramifications on IT planning for an agency's social media application portfolio.

Social media tools can help the exchange of information with the public and harness the collective ingenuity of the public to support an agency's mission. Though the use of social media may often result in cost savings, its genuine strength lies in nurturing such positive audience engagement. Both the U.S. and the South Korean governments look to social media for various functions, which may include, but are not limited to, communication/announcement on current events for the public, such as disease or disaster alerts and weather reporting. Social media encourages open governments; it enhances their ability to reach the digital natives.

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2.1. Social media for the U.S. government: Examples and overview

HowTo.gov site exemplifies what social media can accomplish for a government. It shows the information on the types and use of social media in government, its challenges and contests as well as the open government directive (OGD). The site is designed to deliver better experiences to citizens. It seeks to help government employees and agents work smarter whether on the "front lines" of government customer service or managing a customer service channel. HowTo.gov offers innovation and advice to support citizens through new media, to foster open government through cloud computing, ubiquitous computing, communications, as well as myriad other capacities. HowTo.gov is about sharing new ideas, common challenges, lessons learned, and successes achieved. It provides the tools and ideas to effectively serve, engage and support customers across all types of interactions. HowTo.gov is managed by GSA's Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies and the Federal Web Managers Council; it is also supported by other communities of practice. When the Environment Protection Agency used social media to keep the public informed about the Gulf Oil spill, Lisa Jackson, the EPA administrator, shared information about the spill on her Twitter page. "The agency set up a website, deepwaterhorizonresponse.com, with a dedicated Twitter account at @Oil_Spill_2010 and on Facebook at Deepwater Horizon Response" to discuss the tragedy with the public (Howard, 2010).

As noted by Lampe, LaRose, Steinfield, and DeMaagd (2011), government agencies at all levels enter the social media web in an attempt to interact with stakeholders via contemporary technology. In April 2010, the federal government announced that it will launch its own social media site for its employees called FedSpace. Its intended function is to provide more opportunities for communication, collaboration and information-sharing within the federal government through blogs, wikis and files. In April 2010, Microsoft realized the ubiquity of state and local government sites and launched a social media directory for state and local governments (Deamer, 2011). The directory provides links to various state and local government social media platforms. Government agencies may also rely on social media to ensure transparency of actions and to encourage involvement of constituents in processes and transactions. As Jaeger and Bertot (2010) point out, the 1966 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) mandates the assurance of such transparencies for democratic governance.

Various technologies that fall under the umbrella term of Web 2.0 are deployed by the local, regional, and national governments in the U.S. In May 2008, a government employee took the initiative to launch GovLoop (http://www.govloop.com/), a social networking site that now connects about 25,000 federal, state, and local government employees, academics, and contractors (Dadashzadeh, 2010). According to Dadashzadeh (2010), there are twelve Web 2.0 services in governmental use. Included in that number are those blogs for social collaboration. Blogs, such as the Kentucky governor's, put a human face on government while taking advantage of the informal tone that they offer. Blogs can be effective tools to open up public conversations and to help surface as well as solve issues. Wikis provide an ideal platform for group work or public collaboration for project management, knowledge sharing, and public input. The Collaborative Work Environment (COLAB), which is hosted by General Services Administration, represents a successful intergovernmental solution. The simple idea of pushing information to subscribers expands the reach of a government agency to its citizens with automated notifications of frequently updated content of interest. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offers extensive news feeds on various topics and locations. Podcasting or multimedia content for use on iPod, mp3 players and computers provides government agencies with more ways to get their messages across and to build trust with the public in a conversational tone. It can be effective for updates, live government deliberations, emergencies and how-to messages. For example, the White House podcasts its press briefings as well as the President's weekly address. In addition, sharing photos (with the option to comment) helps create awareness and reach new audiences. The Library of Congress' photo stream on Flickr is a case in point; it shows an effort to capitalize on external services for photo sharing. Furthermore, videos and audios can be an answer to an agency's mission for service improvement. They may range from marketing to how-to videos and audios that support public outreach, education, and training. NASA, for instance, has successfully utilized YouTube to make its case for the U.S. space explorations.

Content-sharing, such as social bookmarking and tagging, helps promote articles to increase the popularity and use of government sites. Social networking involves people who build virtual communities with similar interests. Social networking requires trust that leads one to share what is valuable (one's knowledge for example), which in turn prompts others to participate, i.e., to move from taking value to adding value, thereby completing a cycle that creates true collaboration. Agencies may look to social networking for cross-government coordination and knowledge management, recruitment activities and event announcements to the public. An agency can either take advantage of some externally run social networking options (such as Facebook) or build its own site.

Virtual worlds provide capacities to reach niche audiences worldwide. They bring audiences together to meetings and lectures where an agency's education and training missions can be advanced. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), for instance, has been a leader in the use of social media such as Second Life. Mashups represent the very promising Web 2.0 technology of combining content from multiple sources to create an integrated web-based application. Due to the amount of public data available to them, the government agencies are in a unique position to take advantage of mashups' potential to provide data to others who are then able to create applications that increase values for the public. Widgets are small applications and code available for web pages or for desktop use that bring content to the user. They can promote awareness and aid in the usage and value of government sites, information, and services. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for instance, has several widgets, including the Most Wanted List which is downloadable. A form of blogging that allows brief (instant message) size text updates, as popularized by Twitter, can be used to broadcast messages in emergencies or for real time reporting. Washington State Department of Transportation, an early adopter of Twitter, has enjoyed a positive side effect of fewer loads on its web server during emergencies.

2.2. Social media for the Korean government: Examples and overview

Social media tools are vigorously utilized by government agencies in Korea. A social media portal (http://www.korea.go.kr/ptl/puinfo/sns/selectGovSNSList.do) connects all government social media sites. Depending on services, some agencies utilize only one, while others utilize multiple, forms of social media. The Ministry of Strategy and Finance provides a quiz to make difficult economic concepts and laws more understandable through Twitter and Facebook. The Ministry of Food Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Health and Welfare mainly use Twitter to generate quick responses between government and citizens. The Ministry of Public Administration and Security and the Ministry of Environment use Facebook because they are primarily interested in collecting survey results or opinions. The Ministry of Strategy and Finance and the Ministry of Education and Science and Technology have between 500 and 54,324 followers who express their opinions and pose questions, albeit somewhat personal and informal in nature. Details on how Korean government agency uses social media tools can be found in Appendix A.

"Social platform for government" is an initiative of the Korean government that seeks to enhance its presence through SNS's. The government has identified six major social networking services to

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