



Exploring fluctuations in citizen engagement on a local government Facebook page in Japan



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ABSTRACT

The Tsukuba Civic Activities Cyber-Square is a Facebook page managed by a local government in Japan that has over 2000 followers including various civil society organizations and individuals that are oriented towards civic activities. This study explored how various functions of government elevate the civil society Facebook page engagement and how latent dysfunctions of government operations inadvertently depress engagement. This study analyzed the results of two field experiments to promote this online community page from 2012 through 2013 and also conducted three interviews among local government workers involved in online community management of the page. This study determined that the different stages of growth can be attributed to a blend of periodic social gatherings and paid advertisements. Social gatherings were found to be more beneficial for “engagement” that affected the initial and continuous growth and promotion of online engagement in the early and later stages of this community.

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Japanese local governments have continued to implement new information and communication platforms so that they can engage more with citizens. These platforms are attractive options for renewing interest in governmental issues and create opportunities for citizens to participate in democratic processes. Prior to the spread of current popular social media platforms, local governments in Japan have had trials with customized social networking service systems. Many of these attempts were unfortunately unsuccessful and are rapidly phasing out, despite having been generously supported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan. Ironically, the necessity for such systems regained prominence after the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011. During this major disaster, social media proved to be a precious communication channel for the victims in affected areas as it made synchronous information exchange possible and bypassed the power outages and over-congestion of phone lines that took away the normal means of telecommunication. Local governments in Japan are once again reviewing the many available options for social networking and have this time, turned to and Facebook (Kaigo, 2012). This study will examine the first successful attempt by a local Japanese government to engage with civil society.

This pilot study is different from other studies focusing on online communities that are aimed at encouraging offline political engagement among users that are online. Instead, our study focuses on the creation of an online intersection initiated by the government for pre-existing civil society organizations and individuals that were offline. Our study will explore how actions by local government influences trend fluctuation of online engagement of a Japanese civil society SNS page. This study determines how some government initiatives increase engagement but at other times, administrative delays (so-called red tape issues) negatively affect it.

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1. Social media and civil society

The Habermasian idea of a public sphere describes how citizens that have the facilities of speech and action can take part in discourse, challenge assertions, introduce new agenda and express thoughts that are free from internal and external influence (Habermas, 1989; Wilhelm, 2000; Sassi, 2000; Keane, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001). The option of connecting governments to citizens via social media is an attractive platform for creating a partial public sphere. It can provide an information avenue for public affairs and issues that impact citizens' lives. Direct access to information will be possible from both inside and outside the government to the public, and it can gradually develop into an agency-centric or citizen-centric model tailored to the needs of the citizen (Dawes et al., 2004).

Social media has the potential to create a useful environment for citizens so they can participate virtually and actively towards a more open government (Lee and Kwak, 2012). Citizens can become the producer of public services through social media (Linders, 2012). Social media can also be used in times of crises (Kavanaugh et al., 2012) where civil society can assist governments because large-scale disasters may temporarily paralyze governmental functions.

Opportunities created by enhanced online communication allows for the creation of greater social capital and more effective civil society. For instance, McAtee and Wolak (2011) have found the existence of social networks leads to higher motivation and participation in civil society. The network society allows for the civic minded to have daily online communication and interconnectedness (Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Some studies have indicated the expectations of virtual communities to facilitate civil society through the development of online social networks (Jennings and Zeitner, 2003; Livingstone and Markham, 2008; Shah et al., 2001, 2005). In Japan, participation in civil society is viewed as an important element in building a democratic society and previous study results have encouraged the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan to help develop and support the implementation of expensive social networking services for local governments in the past.

2. Local governments, local SNS systems and red tape in Japan

In the early 2000s, customized social networking services or “local SNS systems” [chiiki SNS] were implemented by Japanese local governments and NPOs. They were created with the support of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Soumusho). Local governments hired IT engineers and corporations to develop local SNS systems, aimed at enhancing civic participation. The Manual for Use of Citizen Participation Systems [Jyūmin Sankaku Sisutemu Riyō no Tebiki] by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications of Japan raised three items to be considered for further participation of citizens through local SNS systems, which were (1) the promotion of more decentralization of authority, (2) acknowledgment of difficult budget constraints among the local and national government, and (3) new public services. In other words, even though the financial circumstances of governments are very tight, citizen demand for public services are increasing, therefore, participation by local citizens is necessary for solving issues related to local society in Japan (Soumusho, 2006). Some studies have reported that a few of the local SNS systems achieved partial success in Japan by being able to rediscover the importance of developing social networks among citizens and having active communication by the members that were using the system (Okamoto & Tanaka, 2008; Nakano et al. 2011). Nakano et al. (2011) conducted a survey among local SNS users and non-users in Kyoto. In their comparative study, they found that local SNS users were more likely to participate in local events and manage social events. Local SNS usage was found to correlate with promoting exchange between organizations online as well as offline in Hachinohe of Aomori prefecture and Uji of Kyoto prefecture of Japan (Okamoto & Tanaka, 2008).

Unfortunately, not all of the local SNS systems were successful and many are already out of operation. Goto et al. (2011) analyzed local SNS systems registered in LASDEC (the Local Authorities Systems Development Center) of Japan and discovered their effectiveness to be insufficient in accomplishing their objectives and many were facing maintenance problems and a serious decline of users. In 2010, 519 local SNS systems existed in Japan, however, that number decreased to 263 or was down by approximately fifty percent in February 2014, all within a four-year time frame. Among those 263 still existing, 92 are essentially non-active. Sixty percent of the municipalities that were once operating local SNS systems have had these systems phased out (Nakano, 2013). Although many different elements may have caused all these local SNS systems to fail, one may blame the insufficient know-how in management of the online community. Another reason for failure may be the administrative delays by government rules, regulations and procedures of the local governments.

For an institution to function properly, many rules, regulations and procedures are necessary and are defined within the entities, but they sometimes conflict with organizational objectives. Governments also create many rules, regulations and management procedures to create more order, however, these sometimes result in becoming a burden for facilitating government processes and are referred to as red tape (Kaufman, 1977). The definition of red tape by Bozeman (1993) suggests that these rules, regulations and procedures “entail a compliance burden for the organization but make no contribution to achieving the rules' functional objectives”.

Studies on red tape are often found in the field of public administration. Empirical attempts in collecting evidence or measuring degrees of red tape have been conducted (Feeney, 2011; Bozeman and Feeney, 2011; Feeney, 2012; Riccucci, 2012; Borry, 2013). Bozeman and Feeney (2011) have divided the administrative delays by red tape into two categories:

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