Stolen snow shovels and good ideas: The search for and generation of local knowledge in the social media community

Suvi Konsti-Laakso

Lappeenranta University of Technology, LUT Lahti, Saimaankatu 11, FI 15140, Lahti, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to address two research questions. First, how can citizen online communities support open innovation practices in the public sector? Second, what kinds of contributions are produced through social media platforms? These questions are examined through an experimental research setting and by analyzing interactions and contributions made in a neighborhood development–oriented Facebook group. This study contributes to the field of open innovation in the public sector by highlighting the networked nature of citizen participation and emphasizing citizens' capacity for meaningful contributions.

1. Introduction

Open innovation emphasizes the conscious effort by firms to incorporate ideas, knowledge and innovations created outside firm boundaries into innovation processes within firms or to send internally-developed ideas or innovations outside the firm for commercial exploitation (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013; Chesbrough & Bogers, 2014). Similarly in the public sector context, private firms, non-profit organizations and citizens are seen as valuable partners in renewal of government administration (Gil-Garcia, 2012) and their knowledge and creativity are sought after in public sector innovation (Nam, 2012; Thapa, Niehaves, Seidel, & Plattfaut, 2015).

In research concerning open innovation in the public sector and, particularly, citizen engagement, crowdsourcing (Brabham & Daren, 2009) or citizen-sourcing (Nam, 2012) and social media seem to be the dominant points of discussion. In terms of reaching outside organizational boundaries for ideas and knowledge, online communities are often associated with open innovation in the private sector (Dahlander & Wallin, 2006; West & Lakhani, 2008). Community can be defined as the voluntary association of actors, typically lacking common organizational affiliation but united by a shared instrumental goal, such as creating, adapting, adopting or disseminating innovation (West & Lakhani, 2008). Online communities have received scarce attention in research concerning open innovation in the public sector. This study examines interaction in open innovation platforms between citizens and public authorities in the early phases of the public sector innovation process. There exists very little empirical research that examines the interaction between citizens and local government in open innovation platforms

related to the co-design of public services (Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers, & Becker, 2013) or knowledge co-production (Nam, 2012) at the local or municipal level (Lev-on & Steinfeld, 2015).

Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine in detail what happens in an open collaborative platform dedicated to public innovation activities. This study seeks to address two research questions. First, how can citizen online communities support open innovation practices in the public sector? Second, what kinds of contributions are produced through social media platforms? These questions were examined in an experimental research setting (Sørensen, Mattsson & Sundbo, 2010) in which Facebook groups dedicated to urban development activities were established. This study contributes to the growing need to understand online communities' and stakeholders' roles, behavior and contributions (Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Koch, Hutter, Decarli, Hilgers & Füller, 2013) at the local governmental level and encourage local administrators to fully benefit from the contemporary opportunities provided by new communication technologies.

This paper is organized as follows: First, the literature review focuses mainly on empirical studies concerning online communities in public sector open innovation. The empirical section then describes the methodology and empirical setting. The discussion and conclusion summarize the main contributions of this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online communities

Community can be defined as the voluntary association of actors, typically lacking common organizational affiliation but united by a shared instrumental goal, such as creating, adapting, adopting or disseminating innovation (West & Lakhani, 2008). Typically in the private

E-mail address: Suvi.Konsti-Laakso@lut.fi.

sector, online communities of end-users are particularly important as their contribution to organization and its innovation activities lies in end-user insight into how products and services are used (Dahlander & Wallin, 2006; West & Lakhani, 2008). Nambisan and Baron (2010) distinguish two types of valuable contributions made by community members: peer support and knowledge contributions to organizations. Although online communities produce valuable information, for organizations, it may be difficult to obtain that information and support community members in creating valuable information and solutions. Dahlander and Wallin (2006) found that, in order to benefit from such communities, there needs to be a "man on the inside" of the community.

Online communities differ from approaches like crowdsourcing, which can be defined as "an open call to participate in a task online" (Brabham & Daren, 2009). Crowdsourcing aims at tapping into the large pool of professional knowledge and requires a clear problem definition. The answer is out there and, by means of new online tools, can be found. Therefore crowdsourcing or citizen-sourcing aims at sourcing professional or semi-professional knowledge and innovative ideas (Nam, 2012) and, therefore, "a certain form of intellectual elitism" (Hilgers & Ihl, 2010, p. 73) is present in this approach. Crowdsourcing has been used, for example, in governmental policy-making, finding new solutions and planning public services (Lee, Hwang, & Choi, 2012; Mergel & Desouza, 2013; Martins, de Souza Bermejo & Villas Boas de Souza, 2015).

The crowd- or citizen-sourcing process involves three basic components: individuals (the crowd), an organization looking to benefit from the crowd's inputs and an online platform through which the communication occurs (Nam, 2012). These components also apply to online communities as they involve a set of interested individuals, have a common goal or purpose and utilize information technology.

2.2. The crowd—citizens as co-producers

In the public sector, citizens' participation, knowledge and creativity are increasingly sought after. Citizens are a very heterogeneous group in terms of their capabilities, but, as Thapa et al. (2015) summarize, the benefit of involving citizens as co-creators is based on the citizens' intimate knowledge of local affairs. Bonsón et al. (2015) found that citizens reacted most to issues that are local and close to their lives, such as public transportation, housing and town planning. In these issues, citizens have the best knowledge. Local knowledge is information about specific characteristics, circumstances, events and relationships and understandings about their meanings in their local contexts or settings (Corburn, 2003). Citizens' inputs consist of experiential information, which is based on personal, culture-dependent experiences (Faehnle & Tyrväinen, 2013). Therefore, local knowledge differs from professional ways of knowing. Typically, public authorities such as planners expect visions and general directions, but citizens expect specific action-oriented results (Shipley & Utz, 2012). Dynamics of public engagement emerge from the different ways of knowing. Citizens can be out of touch with political and financial realities and long-term considerations for communities or resources, whereas public authorities can be out of touch with communities and local knowledge (Innes & Booher, 2004).

Koch, Hutter, Decarli, Hilgers, and Fuller (2013) identified six different user roles of contributors in online communities. These were motivators, attention attractors, idea generators, communicators, masters and passive users. These users differed according to their roles in their communication and commenting behavior as well as in terms of submitted ideas. Koch et al. also found that 85% of community members were passive but still rather important in gaining a critical mass, which is an important factor for community success. Similar findings were made by Dahlander and Wallin (2006), who observed that actual contributions were made by few members.

Afzalan and Evans-Cowley (2015) and Afzalan and Muller (2014) investigated the usefulness of citizen-initiated online communities for local planning processes. The studies found that only a small portion of the information related to detailed planning issues of interest to planners. They found that members contributed four types of posts: those asking for help, informing other members regarding activities, expressing personal experiences and expressions and selling, buying or renting.

2.3. The organization as co-producer

According to Linders (2012), design is one of the phases where information technologies (IT)-facilitated co-production takes place. The design phase is seen as important because many strategic decisions are made in that phase (Nam, 2012), but co-design is not a common way of working (Hofmann et al., 2013). Research has revealed that public authorities perceive that the expertise of citizens is limited in terms of the problems at hand. According to several studies, such as those of Thapa et al. (2015) and Magno and Cassia (2015), municipal administrators do not rely on citizens' involvement as the latter are perceived as not having the necessary knowledge, administrative problems are too complex and citizens know too little about the specifics. An overall averse attitude, organizational and administrative culture, lack of incentives and lack of evidence about benefits have also been identified as barriers (Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2015; Magno & Cassia, 2015; Hennala, Konsti-Laakso, & Harmaakorpi, 2012).

Linders (2012) suggests three types of relationship that takes place in virtual world: government to citizen (G2C), citizen to government (C2G) and citizen to citizen (C2C). C2G deals with consultation and ideation, through which citizens can share their opinions with government. G2C informs and educates citizens so that they can make informed decisions. C2C concerns self-organization and peer-to-peer–support.

According to Mergel (2013), public authority communication strategies for social media can be described in the following typology. First, representation strategy uses social networks to push information to the public. Second, engagement or pull strategy involves some comments and links to additional material. The interaction is still rather low and random, although some interaction exists. Networking strategy is interactive and extensive concerning commenting and information sharing. According to Mergel (2013), by using social media instruments, government can seek transparency, participation and collaboration. At the highest level of collaboration, citizens create their own content and also engage in offline actions.

2.4. The platform—interaction in social networking sites

One acknowledged problem of citizen engagement is how citizens are lured into spending their time and contributing to the public good (Seltzer & Mahmoudi, 2013) as users' motivations in private sector innovation enhancement relates to enjoyment, self-efficacy and pecuniary interests. In this sense, different online tools and, particularly, social media as a widely adopted technology in society, have been seen as a promising way to engage citizens (Criado, Sandoval & Almazan, 2013).

For online communities, social networking sites such as Facebook are important as they enable community building around a certain topic and offer the possibility of generating different kinds of content, such as text-based content and photographs. For citizen engagement, different metrics for social media have also been developed. Bonsón et al. (2015) found that the most popular way for citizens to interact is through likes. Lev-On and Steinfeld (2015) found that in municipalities Facebook-sites, public authorities were the most active participants. Users rarely shared other users' posts, while authorities' posts were often shared. Commenting seems to be the most unpopular. Bonsón et al. (2015) also found that, overall, the majority of posts concern marketing-oriented topics such as sports and other leisure-related events.

According to Afzalan and Muller (2014), social media played a complex role in the interaction between authorities and citizens. It supported both valid dialogue and consensus building but generated