Social media in Egyptian government websites: Presence, usage, and effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the presence, usage, and effectiveness of Egyptian government social media websites. The adoption of social media technology provides an illustration of the application of New Public Service (NPS) theory to public administration. The first phase of this study examined the presence of social media applications on these government websites. The second phase analyzed the use of Facebook by governmental entities in Egypt. The use of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were the top social media applications in Egyptian government websites, which is consistent with other government surveys of social media found in developed countries. In terms of effectiveness of these social media websites, they were used mainly to post information, with very little two-way interaction between citizens and government. The analysis in this paper shows that social media in Egypt is not much in line with the NPS theory.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the presence, usage, and effectiveness of social media adoption in Egyptian governments. In Egypt, the antigovernment protests appeared to utilize social media to advertise and coordinate the protests before the January 25, 2011 revolution (Niekerk, Pillay, & Maharaj, 2011). The response from the Egyptian authorities was to shut down the Internet and mobile services; this was ultimately unsuccessful as social media served as the catalyst for spreading the idea of protest.

The Egyptian revolution provides a good case study on the use of social media for political transformation in government. Although we show that there was a marked increase in the use of social media after the January 25th revolution, we found that this change was temporary. Therefore, social media technology in government has the potential to be a powerful tool for empowering protesters to incite and manage political change. In this study, this is addressed through the New Public Service (NPS) theory, showing that social media can be used to empower citizens to create meaningful change in government. Through NPS social media can be used as a vehicle to enhance trust in government by making it more open and transparent.

There is very little research on social media and developing countries (Shah & Lim, 2011). Developing countries, like Egypt, have unique challenges with the adoption of electronic government, or e-government, since they lack the requisite resources needed for successful adoption, and access to technology is more of a challenge for these nations (Abdelsalam, Reddick, ElKadi, & Gamal, 2012; Heeks, 2002). Further for developed countries, the adoption of e-government is inhibited many times by being too expensive to adopt and the uncertainty about the willingness of citizens to use this technology (Reddick, Abdelsalam, & ElKadi, 2011).

Traditionally, e-government has favored automation in government thereby creating greater efficiencies in public service delivery (Dixon, 2010). The idea behind social media is that it is transformational moving from e-government, with its focus on efficiency and service delivery, to integration and participation of citizens in government (i.e., co-production). This paper uses the framework developed by Denhardt and Denhardt (2000), of New Public Service (NPS), as a way of explaining the presence, usage, and effectiveness of social media in Egypt. This study examines, through an empirical analysis, Egyptian government social media websites for both the presence and its use and the effectiveness of Facebook; the most common social media application in this country.

This paper is divided into five sections. The second section discusses some background information on social media adoption Egypt. The third section provides a literature review. The fourth section discusses the research methods for this study. The fifth section discusses the research results. The final section provides a conclusion, which discusses the implications of this research.

2. Background information

In February 2011, and after a historic 18-day wave of anti-government demonstrations, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak

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resigned ending 30 years in power. Millions of Egyptians took part in the protests that aimed at forcing Mubarak out of the presidential office. These unprecedented protests on the streets of Cairo caught the world's attention. Despite of state police brutality that led such non-violent protests into a public revolution, the real reasons below the surface were the growing discontent over economic distresses, poverty, unemployment, and corruption.

One key facet of the Egyptian revolution was the extensive use of social media tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Social media can be examined in the context of the tremendous political change that occurred in Egypt. For instance, "We used Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world" Howard (2011) quoting an activist in Cairo. The significant use and impact of social media triggered the Egyptian government to try blocking key sites (Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube) on January 25th in the late afternoon, local time along with restricting – and then cutting of – mobile phone services until the government blocked Internet services.

Social media was, thus, considered as the main force behind the people revolution against the authoritarian regime in Egypt according to some analysts (Cohen, 2011; Webster, 2011). However, others argued that such revolution was seen to happen anyway with a marginal role of social media (Ingram, 2011; Rich, 2011; York, 2011). In fact, both contrasting views oversimplify the context within which the Egyptian revolution took place as people and social media are not detached from each other (Lim, 2012; Niekerk et al., 2011; Zhuo, Wellman, & Yu, 2011).

A constantly increasing use of the Internet can be easily spotted in Egyptian society as Egyptians constitute about 22% of total users in the Arab region (Dubai School of Government, 2011). Over the period 2001–2010, Egypt's international Internet bandwidth expanded steadily with an average annual growth rate of 105% and with an average annual growth rate of the Internet usage by 64% during the same period (MCIT, 2011). Given that 78% of Egypt's Internet users are less than 34 years old (MCIT, 2011) and that social media usage among young urbanites in Egypt is high with around 5 million Facebook users (Spot On, 2010), the role social media played in the revolution can be understood. After the revolution, and as the Egyptian governments started rebuilding trust between people and the state, social media channels were thought to be an effective means of doing so that would lead to enhancing citizens' empowerment in government. This paper provides an empirical analysis of how social media can be used for public service delivery in a country that witnessed tremendous political change.

3. Literature review

In this section, we will first discuss the impact of social media on public administration. This will be followed by a presentation of one of the promises of social media of transforming government. The purpose of this section is to understand the relationship between several public administration theories and transformational change from social media. It should be noted at the outset that the application of social media to government has been more extensively studied in developed countries, with much less research focused on developing countries.

3.1. Public administration and social media

Research has questioned if e-government will implement real transformational change in government, or just provides incremental change (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Kraemer & King, 2006). Along the lines of transformational change, public management is the examination of how to make public sector organizations more efficient, effective, and accountable. Public management is derived from the New Public Management (NPM) literature. This literature is a rejection of the Old Public Administration (OPA) model in which organizations are viewed as being reactive to situations, bureaucratic, and red tape bound which inhibit Information Technology (IT) reform (Bannister, 2001; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Fountain, 2001; Welch & Pandey, 2006).

E-government is said to change the way that bureaucracy interacts with its citizens (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). NPM argues that organizations need to be dynamic and take into account many of the principles of business administration and apply them to public settings. The focus on NPM is on results and outcomes, rather than just producing outputs as seen in OPA (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Essentially, NPM is the counterpart of business administration, but with the focus on public sector organizations. However, existing IT and public administration research challenges the presupposition that you can apply private sector principles to public administration (Bretschneider, 1990). The issues that public organizations face are viewed, according to the literature, as being vastly different than business administration.

The importance of citizens in public administration can be shown through the more recent New Public Service (NPS) literature (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). This literature is a rejection of NPM, in that it argues that public sector organizations should focus on more than just using private sector principles and applying them to public settings. With the movement to NPM in the 1980s, citizens were treated as "customers" and have taken a back seat to their important role in public service delivery (Chadwick & May, 2003). The adoption of e-government in the late 1990s, showed the extent to which citizens were viewed as being important (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005). The adoption of social media technology provides an excellent illustration of the application of NPS to public sector organizations. However, it should be kept in mind, that NPS could be criticized by the fact that the model focuses more on public service delivery and often neglects other objectives such as creating greater transparency and collaborative policy making.

Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) have examined the differences between OPA, NPM, and NPS and we have examined these theories with application to IT and public administration research. The core differences between the three theories of OPA, NPM, and NPS are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Old Public Administration, New Public Management, and New Public Service in Public Information Management and E-Government Adoption.

Roles	Old public administration	New public management	New public service
Technology and example	Passive to automate organizations (e.g., transaction processing systems for payroll)	To be more responsive to citizens (e.g., customer relationship management technology)	E-government used for greater access for citizens to enhance democracy (e.g., social media technology)
Citizens	Citizens viewed as being inferior to the organization	Citizens viewed as being customers	Citizens are viewed as the most important for enhancing democracy
Public managers	Increase productivity of workers	Provide incentives through market-based principles	To facilitate and collaborate with citizens
Policy making	To administer change from the top-down	Considers input from its customers, but government makes the final decision	Citizens initiate policy changes from the bottom-up with bidirectional flow of information
Politics	Separation of politics from administration	Intermingling of politics and administration with a focus on more efficient and effective service delivery.	Politicians are responsive to the needs of citizens; they collaborate and facilitate change through governance
Processes	Output-oriented	Results-oriented	Outcome-oriented