



# A critical examination of social media adoption in government: Introducing omnipresence



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## ABSTRACT

As government agencies at every level are adopting social media tools, scholarship is emerging that indicates dialogic potentials meant to increase citizen engagement might not be met. With that premise, we take a critical examination of the way social media can increase capacity for engagement rather encourage collaboration, depending upon the way the tools are constructed. To do so, we expand Lippmann's notion of the phantom public to introduce the theoretical constructs of Omnipresent Citizens and Omnipresent Administrators. These people are everywhere but nowhere and embody characteristics of accessibility, desire to participate, and the possibility of remaining anonymous. Each has implications for citizen participation.

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## 1. Introduction

In November 2012, J.D. Longmont created a petition on the White House's We the People website to have the government build a Death Star by 2016. The Death Star is a fictional space station/weapons system from the popular "Star Wars" movie franchise. Longmont (2012) argued that the government's efforts toward building this piece of equipment would create jobs in construction, engineering, and space exploration, as well as strengthen national defense. Garnering more than 34,400 signatures, the petition required an official White House response. In a humorous yet sharp reply, Office of Management and Budget Chief of Science and Space Branch Paul Shawcross explained that the U.S. government does not endorse blowing up planets. More seriously, Shawcross (2012) detailed the United States' existing space program, which includes partnerships with other countries to operate the International Space Station, as well as the Mars missions.

This example of public participation grabbed headlines because of its humor. This consequence, however, was that the White House changed its policies regarding responding to petitions on We the People ([petitions.whitehouse.gov](http://petitions.whitehouse.gov)). Originally, a petition garnering 5000 signatures would elicit a response. That number jumped to 25,000 before climbing again to 100,000 after the Death Star incident (Farrington, 2013). Capacity for interaction, rather than meaningful collaboration, is climbing with technology expansion.

Government organizations at all levels are rapidly embracing social media platforms such as the crowdsourcing We the People site as mechanisms to increase citizen engagement and collaboration. This is in part

due to President Obama's Open Government initiative (McClure, 2010; Mergel, 2013). More than 1000 agency, department, initiative, or team Twitter accounts exist within the federal government (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010; Lukensmeyer, Goldman, & Stern, 2011; McClure, 2010; Mergel, 2012). The National Archives and Records Administration reported more than 227,000 visits to its Flickr (photo sharing) page and another 18,000 more to Archive blogs (National Archives & Records Administration, 2011). Local governments are increasing their presences online as well (Hand & Ching, 2011; Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003), especially in the service provision realm. For example, there is an application called FixMyStreet.com, and Anaheim, California (among myriad other cities) has a phone app that allows users to request city services with one click (City of Anaheim, 2012).

It is believed (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010) that social media should foster a sense of connectedness amongst and between citizenry and government to build two-way, dialogic organization/public relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 1991). These tools, though, might fall short of the goals of two-way collaborative potentials (Brainard & Derrick-Mills, 2011; Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Hand & Ching, 2011).

### 1.1. Research Question

This piece is a critical theoretical examination of social media adoption within the public sector. Social media, ranging from video-sharing sites to microblogging sites to online discussion boards, can allow citizens to *feel* as if they were participating in knowledge co-creation and co-governance, letting governments move beyond transaction-based exchanges on e-government platforms (Bryer, 2010; Eggers, 2004; West, 2004) to the solicitation of feedback, preferences, and public opinion (Leighninger, 2011). The expectation of immediate engagement and feedback fits within other idealized perspectives (Habermas,

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1984, 1987) on communication to foster civic engagement that often are critiqued for being egalitarian (Flecha, 2000), unrealistic, idyllic, and sometimes Pollyannaish. In practice, one might also see that social media can encourage a sort of ersatz collaboration, replacing face to face meetings, debates, and other more traditional forms of civic engagement. It could help foster a *spectator's* approach to governance a la Lippmann (2008). At one extreme, we have social media tools potentially functioning similarly to “American Idol” as a mechanism to engender conformity, docility, and a wholly passive (Lippmann, 2008), consumer-based (Baudrillard, 1998) approach to governance with little real engagement. At the other extreme, it holds the potential for truly democratic engagement for everyone with a computer or other device and an internet connection.

To critique the former, we address the following question: Why might social media increase the government's capacity for engagement but still fall short of dialogic potentials as current scholarship finds? We want to be clear up front that social media, when designed with dialogic, interactive features, can increase citizen collaboration with agencies, thus furthering network governance strategies prevalent today (O'Leary, Gerard, & Bingham, 2006). We depart from the traditional view of social media and build off existing scholarship (i.e. Hand & Ching, 2011) to critique rapid adoption of social media in government agencies. This critical view is one that practitioners should consider when delving into social tools, as adopting too many social media platforms at the same time might not be effective (Mergel & Greeves, 2012). This is what we mean by the ability to increase capacity for collaboration rather than encouraging two-way knowledge co-creation.

This paper utilizes Lippmann (2008) to introduce the theoretical constructs of Omnipresent Citizens and Omnipresent Administrators, who are now everywhere yet nowhere. By utilizing social media tools, government agencies can either build in talk-back mechanisms for knowledge sharing and co-creation (collaboration) or simply offer platforms for one-way, government-led participation (capacity). When discussing increasing capacity for participation, we mean asynchronous information sharing that relies on push mechanisms (Mergel & Greeves, 2012) rather than engagement strategies (Bryer, 2011; Mergel, 2013). Agencies practicing engagement “have recognized the need of their audience to interact with government in a natural conversation style, instead of pushing government reports or memos out without providing opportunities for interactions” (Mergel, 2013, p. 128). To the point being raised within this article, Mergel notes that “there are very little role models within government to mirror an interactive engagement approach” (Mergel, 2013, p. 128), and social tools cannot automatically overcome peoples' passivity (Romero et al., 2010).

To explore this manifestation in social media, we consider first Lippmann's (1965, 2008) omniscient citizen, the unachievable ideal used as a foil to Dewey's arguments. Near unlimited access to filtered information (such as the information on most governmental sites) cannot provide a complete picture. Filtered information is understood as that which an agency controls to project a desired image (Peterson, 1977), thus not allowing people to make fully rational decisions (Lippmann, 2008). Next, digital domains often offer an *illusion* of privacy allowing people to engage in otherwise socially unacceptable behaviors (i.e. — cyber bullying, flaming). “Feeling of privacy refers to online users' perception of privacy psychologically, mentally, culturally, or conditionally rather than the actual security. Generally speaking, online users perceive different communication media with different levels of privacy in different circumstances” (Tu, 2005, p. 298, emphasis added).

We now have a starting point to theoretically understand why meaningful collaboration and engagement still remain relatively elusive for early governmental adopters of social media (Brainard & Derrick-Mills, 2011; Brainard & McNutt, 2010; Bryer, 2011; Hand & Ching, 2011; Mergel, 2013; Mergel, Schweik, & Fountain, 2009). At this point, we can clarify some terms readers will see throughout the paper. Public service delivery usually takes place in person or via one-way web-based

interactions, such as paying a water bill online. Service delivery, with its concrete outcome, often does not manifest in a social platform. Public engagement we defined above in line with Mergel's (2013) conceptualization of two-way knowledge sharing on social platforms. By collaboration, we mean the government agency and its stakeholders creating information together through social media's dialogic potentials. Mergel and Greeves (2012) detail numerous examples of this practice, such as the State Department's Ask State campaign via Twitter. All these practices mirror the shift in public administration toward governance (Linders, 2012) through networking rather than top-down government interventions. Our focus within this critique is how government agencies might be increasing capacity for participation rather than engagement as Mergel (2013) understands it, thus expanding opportunities for one-way information pushes that potentially fall short of governance interventions.

We want to reiterate that we are not offering the theoretical constructs of Omnipresent Citizens and Omnipresent Administrators as blanket terms to explain the totality of social media use within government. Indeed, readers will see examples of the democratically minded use we noted earlier throughout the article, as well as examples of our constructs. Instead, this is a critical approach to the rapid adoption of social media, highlighting recent empirical studies showing that engagement practices are not quite reaching dialogic ideals of governance. The platforms encourage citizens and administrators to appear omnipresent, everywhere and nowhere, participating by ‘liking’ a post or ‘sharing’ a page instead of engaging in two-way dialogue. Omnipresent characteristics of both administrators and citizens include: accessibility, directive to participate, and the possibility of remaining anonymous. Concerns with each are discussed in detail later, but we list them here to show the inherent paradoxes that social media brings to administrators and citizens.

The article begins with a background on social media, e-government and e-governance before introducing collaboration, and our Omnipresent constructs. It concludes with avenues for future research.

## 2. E-government, social media and digital governance

As initially conceived, e-government was highly utilitarian and used for transactions and information. Citizens could, for example, pay a water bill, fill out forms and file for permits, browse a calendar, scan records, and more. E-government and e-governance (with the same distinctions that government and governance hold) advocates saw opportunities to foster two-way communicative interaction in a non-threatening, non-hierarchical manner (West, 2004). E-government was not only to open government around the clock but also was to build trust and citizen satisfaction (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006) and reduce internal red tape (Welch & Pandey, 2007). This approach emphasized managerial language and outcomes that could, as a consequence, produce more citizen-initiated interactions with government (Leighninger, 2011; Thomas & Streib, 2003).

The demand for digital dialogic and knowledge-sharing options emerged as web technologies developed (Kent & Taylor, 1998), and the latest iteration of this is social media. Social media “integrates technology, social interaction, and content creation using the ‘wisdom of crowds’ to collaboratively connect online information. Through social media, people or groups can create, organize, edit, comment on, combine, and share content” (Federal Web Managers Council, 2011, para. 1). Examples of web-based social media include, but certainly are not limited to, weblogs, social networking platforms (such as Facebook), video/photo sharing (such as Instagram, YouTube, Vine), wikis (such as Wikipedia), discussion forums, Real Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, podcasts, LinkedIn, microblogs (such as Twitter), and more (McClure, 2010). These are not the only means through which governments are attempting to become more transparent and interactive. As noted earlier, some agencies are turning toward mobile applications, online “help desks,” blogs, and others. Our critique is not confined to one or two of

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