Social media institutionalization in the U.S. federal government

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Social media adoption changes the existing organizational technology paradigm of public sector organizations. This paper explains the internal decisions that are necessary before new technologies can be used to support the strategic mission of a government organization and which behavioral and technological changes are integrated into the organization's standard operating procedures. This is an important theoretical contribution, because social media technologies are developed and hosted by third parties outside of government, with government's role limited to reactively evaluating their internal needs, strategic alignment, and existing routines. Evidence from qualitative interviews with social media directors in the U.S. federal government and a digital ethnography of their online practices expand the existing theory of social media adoption by adding two distinct activities: strategic alignment and routinization which lead to the institutionalization of new technologies.

1. Introduction

Social media use among the federal agencies in the U.S. executive and legislative branches has become an accepted technology use to interact with the public in general, with other government agencies, and also to collaborate internally. The adoption of social technologies that are owned by third parties oftentimes constitutes a challenge for public managers. They have to rely on external technology platforms designed and hosted outside of government, which involves uncertainty of changes in the platforms, and uncontrollable cybersecurity risks that have to be mitigated by the platform providers. Agencies cannot opt out of revisions of the technology. They cannot hire contractors to outsource changes or request customization services to platforms to accommodate government needs. Public managers in charge of social media accounts are therefore exposed to constant changes of the platforms and at the same time have to deal with emergent citizen and employee behavior that challenge government's one-directional communication paradigm. The social behavior and culture evolving around social media technologies puts agencies in a reactive mode and formal mechanisms, such as social media policies and organizational structures subsequently have to be adapted as a result of the observed user behavior and technological changes (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013).

Most of the experience using social media was derived from President Obama's first presidential campaign in 2008 and replicated in his second run for office in 2012 (see for example: Shirky, 2011; Smith, 2009). Social media was heavily used by campaign staff to increase citizen participation and helped to influence online users of social media sites to change their behavior: people were moved from online interactions with the candidate to offline actions such as registering to vote and then showing up at the voting booths on Election Day. Social media played a crucial role in targeting citizens who have already registered, but were unsure who to vote for and also to use those with a clear choice to convince their friends in their online networks to vote for the candidates (Hong and Nadler 2012). Even though a political campaign has some parallels to the goals of a communication strategy in the public sector, the most common mission-relevant communication focuses on educating and informing the public. The goal is usually to passively inform the public, potentially improve transparency of operations, and if possible improve buy-in for government actions. Calls for action, such as specific behavioral changes are left to certain agencies involved in emergency situations, such as food or drug recalls or disaster preparedness and response.

Government agencies evaluate how social media can support their mission beyond the formal informing and educating goals and potential innovative practices that social media tools allow them to implement. These strategic decisions are highly context specific. Organizations like NASA that is fan-based have very different organizational missions than regulatory agencies with an enforcement mandate. The decisions on how to institutionalize social media and integrate new routines in the existing communication strategy are therefore highly individual to each government organization and evolve over time as Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) in their phased model of social media implementation showed.

The research questions addressed in this article are: how do government agencies in the U.S. federal government agencies of the executive branch approach the formalization and institutionalization of social media by adapting their internal organizational and institutional norms and regulations and standard operating procedures?

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2. Social media use in the public sector

Defined as "services that allow users to create an online profile and that also enable user-generated content, crowdsourcing, and online collaboration" (Mergel, 2012b:12), social media tools have the potential to connect citizens directly to government communicators and other citizens in real-time. Government organizations are using social media tools as a public affairs communication medium to increase transparency by sharing content that citizens are otherwise not aware of or cannot easily access through a government organization's website or other offline media. The high acceptance rate of social media tools is reflected in the fact that all federal agencies today have a social media presence. In addition, 84% of local and state governments in the U.S. are represented on social media (Mergel, 2012a, 2013a).

Social media applications are used for a wide range of purposes depending on the mission of the organization. The majority of government agencies are using social media tools to replicate already existing content from their websites or to point citizens to information that is already available online. The main purpose is to increase trust in government operations by providing more frequent and transparent online information. This new form of representation can be seen as the lowest degree of online engagement and is oftentimes misinterpreted as true citizen participation. More complex forms of interactions include active calls for engagement in form of submissions to photo contests, requests to submit information in form of blog comments or even citizen science and open innovation initiatives encouraging citizens to contribute knowledge or conduct micro-tasks online.

There is very little evidence so far that government agencies are using social media applications as an e-government service, delivering customer service beyond the response to citizen requests or for complex and event-driven interactions, such as active one-on-one communication or direct responses during emergency management services (see for example Kavenaugh et al., 2011). The potential however to close the gap between potentially flawed perceptions of government actions and the formal information government tries to transmit is still immense. Government agencies need to adapt their existing organizational routines to monitor, interpret and respond to social media interactions. It is therefore important to understand the current internal management practices and existing rules and regulations that lead to the routinization efforts of social media output and interactions.

2.1. Social media as innovative government technology adoption

Existing theories of innovation and technology adoption in the public sector focus on policy adoption and the resulting technology adoption. As an example, Rogers and Shoemaker provided a model that showed the growing numbers of adopters over time in aggregation over the whole population of potential adopters (1971). Innovation needs to be communicated through a network of adopters who can then observe each other's behavior. That also means that the visibility and observability of innovative practices is important, so that diffusion and replication can occur. In the case of social media practices this condition is fulfilled: each government account in the U.S. federal government is publicly accessible on the agency's website and most interactions are observable in an agency's social media timeline.

Other authors have shown that technology adoption occurs in stages (Coursey & Norris, 2008; Nolan, 1973): adopters can be divided by their speed of adoption from early adopters to laggards or from those adopters who are moving from the acceptance of simple technologies to complex technologies. Mergel has shown in her research on social media adoption phases that federal government agencies in the U.S. were initially engaging in a fair amount of experimentation that has then led to formal practices (Mergel, 2010, 2013a,b). While diffusion might be high, the extent of use varies especially when it comes to more complex or diverse practices.

The existing rules and regulations in a bureaucratic setting mitigate the extent of acceptance of new technologies and might even delay adoption (Fountain, 2001; Kraemer & King, 2003). This also explains that technology adoption is usually seen as an investment decision that is made top-down and rolled out throughout the organization. Technology acceptance follows existing policies and guidelines and has to be aligned with the existing technology use paradigm in government organizations.

Previous research has shown that government follows different adoption patterns especially when it comes to the different purposes or tasks that are conducted through social media, such as increases in participation and transparency (Bennett & Elman, 2006; Oversightandreform, 2012; Tansey, 2007) or the potential to respond in emergency situations (see for example Kavenaugh et al., 2011). Other research has focused on observable online tactics (Davis, 1989; Mergel, 2013b; Simon, 1976) and the effectiveness of these tactics (Sobaci & Karkin, 2013; Takhteyeva, Gruzbd, & Wellman, 2012; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000). Most of these studies focus either on publicly observable online practices that can be extracted from the Web and individual social media accounts. Or they focus on citizen behavior and how the public interacts through social media with government organizations (Linders, 2012). The data is then used to deduct adoption patterns and potential outcomes.

Mergel and Bretschneider have suggested a staged model explaining organizational dynamics of social media adoption moving from stage 1 with high degrees of experimentation, to stage 2 of "constructive chaos" to institutionalization in stage 3. Each stage is characterized by varying degrees of online interactions and maturity of practices. They hypothesize, that the degree of interaction declines with increasing formalization and suggest that organizational behavior cannot necessarily only be interpreted based on the output observable on social media sites (2013). Instead, it is necessary to understand internal decision-making processes in the context of existing organizational routines and constraints that govern these institutionalization decisions. This paper therefore focuses on the third stage that is rarely publicly observable: the decisions that lead to the institutionalization and routinization of social media adoption. Focusing on this third stage contributes to the expansion of Mergel and Bretschneider's theory. Rogers (2010) suggests that implementation of an innovation occurs when the innovation is incorporated into regular activities of the organization and the innovation is no longer alien to the organization. Otherwise it will lead to a discontinuance or failure of the innovation process. This article therefore sets out to answer the following research questions: How are social media practices institutionalized in government?

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Data for this article were collected using a digital ethnography approach over the course of five years from 2009 to 2014. The researcher participated in ongoing online interactions with the social government communicator community on the microblogging service Twitter using the search hashtags #Gov20, #SocialGov and #GovTech — a collection of keywords that are mainly used by government social media professionals. The digital ethnography approach is similar to methods, such as Kozinets' netnography, a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the Internet's influence on – in this case – government communication behavior (Kozinets, 2010). Problem statements and problem solutions provided by the community were extracted from online conversations and the researcher actively participated in online conversations by sharing insights, research and practitioner reports, Twitter updates, practitioner-oriented Op-Eds on government technology news websites and a research blog, as well as through teaching online classes for GSA's digital government university. Prior forms of online ethnographies, for example conducted by West, focused on similar non-participant observations of online tactics (Norris & Moon, 2005; West, 2005). West created an inventory of online services by extracting the number of interactive elements available on government websites