Telecommunications Policy xxx (2017) 1–9

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Telecommunications Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/telpol

When I chat online, I feel relaxed and work better: Exploring the use of social media in the public sector workplace in Rwanda

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Social media
Workplace
Private life
Public institutions
Rwanda

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of social media in the public sector workplace in Rwanda, a country that encourages new media technologies in all areas, including public institutions. In particular, we investigate how public employees reconcile job-related and private uses of social media in the workplace. To answer this question, in-depth interviews were conducted both with employees and employers. Our key findings reveal that social media are increasingly playing a central role in how public institutions function, and they are used to coordinate various activities (e.g., meetings and sharing information). Although social media are often feared for their potential to distract employees from work, in our study private uses of social media were seen as compatible with work in most institutions. Even where shortcomings were noted, they were too minimal to constitute a real threat to public institutions' productivity.

This paper explores the use of social media in the public sector workplace in Rwanda, a country that is strongly committed to mainstreaming the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) to leapfrog from an impoverished economy to a middle-income and knowledge-based economy. In the last few years, this trend has been hailed by many as bearing positive effects on Rwanda's GDP. The choice of Rwanda for this study was strongly motivated by the country's ICT policies and their implementation. The Rwandan government has set up policies and initiatives aiming at encouraging the use of new media technologies in various sectors in general and in public institutions in particular. These policies have been driven by the need to speed up the delivery of services, which has ushered in important progress in various fields such as education, health, agriculture, trade, and job creation (Ministry of Youth and ICT, 2014). In 2015, the country was noted by the World Economic Forum as being the best promoter of the ICT sector (World Economic Forum, 2015). Rwanda is also an interesting case in that it is often looked at as a good example of countries with effective leadership (OECD, 2011), which is perceived by many as a key factor of public sector's effectiveness (Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2016, pp. 1–12).

Various government officials and institutions have been called to embrace these new media channels in order to support citizens' queries. Several top leaders, including the President and his Ministers, regularly use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to interact with citizens. In doing so, problems are solved at low cost and with only a minimum of time delay. For example, the Minister of Health engages in Q&A sessions in what is dubbed "#MinisterMondays" in which she answers questions from different people involved in the health sector. Many Rwandans are now using social media platforms to discuss with high-level or local government authorities. These platforms are regarded being an important way of holding leaders accountable for the implementation of public policies (Kalisa,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2017.05.008
Received 5 October 2016; Received in revised form 30 March 2017; Accepted 30 May 2017
Available online xxxx
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Please cite this article in press as: Nduhura, D., & Prieler, M., When I chat online, I feel relaxed and work better: Exploring the use of social media in the public sector workplace in Rwanda, Telecommunications Policy (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2017.05.008

2014). The government issued directives in early 2011 to encourage top officials to adopt the use of social media in order to respond to citizens' queries (Rwanda Governance Board, 2013).

Social media, dominated by Facebook and Twitter, are mostly used in cities rather than in rural areas (Kalisa, 2014). Research has shown that social media in local governments are mostly used by individuals for their own rather than work-related purposes, especially in a bid to nurture their personal relationships (Rwandese Association of Local Government Authorities, 2012). Social media have become popular due to the increased popularity and availability of the Internet and mobile phones in Rwanda compared with the rest of the East African Region (Kalemera, Nalwoga, Nanfuka, & Wakabi, 2014). Official sources report a mobile teledensity rate of 72.6% and an Internet penetration rate of 31.5% (Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority, 2015). Although Internet access has significantly increased within the last few years, it is still a main challenge impeding the use of social media in Rwanda, along with illiteracy.

This study focuses on public institutions (including state agencies), which are often regarded as imperfect entities in many countries. Even so, public institutions are often the shapers of public action. Weaknesses in the public sector strongly impact the growth of many developing countries since their consequences are also felt by the private sector. Most problems in these institutions are generally connected to rampant corruption, bureaucracy, and poor decision-making (Independent Evaluation Group, 2008). Rwanda may not be an exception since it has been reported that the performance of its public institutions is marred by a number of shortcomings, including bureaucracy, duplication of responsibilities (Government of the Republic of Rwanda, 2014), and non-compliance with human resources management rules (Public Service Commission, 2013). With this background in mind, we believe that it is legitimate to probe the role that social media play in the functioning of the public sector.

The situation noted above drew our attention to the larger number of users who claim to use the Internet on the job, even for leisure purposes. In addition, the increasing ubiquity of social networks in Rwanda leads one to question the impact social media might have on organizational performance. We were accordingly motivated to shed light on this question with a special focus on public institutions. A particular focus in this investigation concerns the extent to which public employees reconcile job-related and private uses of social media (for example, managing family events such as weddings, burials, and entertainment while one is at work).

1. Unpacking the concept of social media

Social media platforms (and social network sites, which are often used interchangeably) allow people to communicate and collaborate online through various means such as blogs, emails, and instant messages, to name a few (Broughton, Higgins, Hicks, & Cox, 2009). Through various forms including microblogging, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures, and video, social media have the advantage of connecting two people or groups of people. Social media are particularly popular among individuals in younger generations who are eager to keep in touch with their peers (Baruah, 2012). Social media are also hailed for revolutionizing the way communication is conducted by allowing a two-way type of communication between users as opposed to the one-way communication, which prevails in other types of mass media such as radio and television. Different categories of social media users nowadays make their decisions based on the content of social media, which in fact constitutes an online version of offline exchanges. This content, however, is viewed by some people as having serious shortcomings due mostly to its anonymous and ephemeral nature (Dellarocas, 2003).

In short, we understand social media as various Internet-based services including Facebook, Twitter, Kakaotalk, WhatsApp, and Instagram, which allow people to create, share, or view user-generated content. A multitude of content, including videos, photographs, speech or sound, is transmitted and accessed via the Internet on different devices such as mobile phones or computers.

2. Social media use in the workplace

The interest in social media in general, and their use in the workplace, in particular, has ballooned within the last few years (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Robert & Namusonge, 2015; Wang & Kobsa, 2009). A wide body of research has concentrated on the use of social media in various types of institutions such as non-profit organizations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Nah & Saxton, 2013), political/intergovernments institutions (Robert & Namusonge, 2015), academic institutions (Lupton, 2014), and hospitality and tourism companies (Pan & Crotts, 2012). Research has also focused on privacy issues in the use of social media platforms at work (Wang & Kobsa, 2009). Social media have been theorized in frameworks in a bid to comprehend their nature and the real motives underpinning their use, the structure of their content, and the processes involved in the production and sharing of information among users (Pan & Crotts, 2012).

The majority of studies pertaining to social media have centered on how social media are used to trigger internal and external communication of organizations (Gibbs, Rozaidi, & Eisenberg, 2013; Sloan, Checel, & Yang, 2012). The trend is nowadays for each institution to have its own official social media accounts for employee/employer discussions and for public relations and marketing purposes. Employees and employers are now able to send messages of all sorts through different platforms such as Twitter and YouTube in order to reach wide audiences (Sloan et al., 2012).

3. Social media's advantages

The debate about the use of social media in the workplace is surrounded by controversy. Some individuals are adopting a deterministic approach toward these tools that views social media as having revolutionized institutional communication and the way knowledge is shared among companies' members, hence increasing its visibility and efficiency (Gibbs et al., 2013; Sloan et al., 2012). Social media are often viewed as organizational communication tools that are meant to facilitate the flow of information among

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