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Toward a typology of government social media communication: Democratic goals, symbolic acts and self-presentation

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ABSTRACT

Social media have provided new environments for both individuals and organizations to communicate. The literature on government use of social media has noted that these platforms provide a variety of democratic functions for government institutions, in their ability to increase transparency and citizen participation. However, there is less recognition and understanding in this context about the symbolic and presentational content governments communicate on social media. This is the case despite the fact that social media are tools for self-presentation, the exchange of symbolic content, and marketing. We have conducted a literature review from diverse sources, including e-government, business, human-computer interaction, social psychology and human communication to develop a typology of government communication on social media. We present a classification scheme with 12 specific categories and discuss the potential purposes of these various types of communication. Via empirical content analysis, we code a total of 2893 Facebook posts of local governments across the U.S., in a pilot and in a confirmatory study. This analysis allows us to better understand the categories of communication and the extent of their presence. Although we find that most content on local government Facebook pages falls into the category of democratic information provision, almost half of all messages refer to symbolic and presentational types of information exchanges. We illustrate our results with examples, and present a discussion of these findings with implications for practitioners and future research.

1. Introduction

Since the inception of the Internet, social media has generated profound changes in how individuals and organizations communicate and exchange information. Research on the use of social media by governments first argued these tools would provide government opportunities for fulfilling basic democratic goals of transparency, citizen participation, and engagement (Chun & Luna-Reyes, 2012; Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013; Mergel, 2012). The distributed nature of these technologies, and their adoption by large segments of the population, meant that social media could be used for disseminating critical information about government operations (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Linders, 2012), for dialogue with citizens (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012) and to generally perform communication functions that advance the public good and increase public value (Lee & Kwak, 2012; Mergel, 2012; Picazo-Vela, Fernandez-Haddad, & Luna-Reyes, 2016). To a large extent, positive uses of the most popular social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) have been observed, especially in the areas of crisis communication (Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015; Hagen, Keller, Neely, DePaula, & Robert-Cooperman, 2017); when conceiving of the media as additional outlets for governments to announce services (Gao & Lee, 2017; Lenhard, 2016); and as part of the integration into the contemporary online, networked media of public communication (Meijer & Torenvlied, 2016; Wukich & Mergel, 2016).

A common framework to explore the information and communication that governments exchange on social media has been the 3-category model of *push, pull*, and *networking* communication—which relate respectively to the open government goals of *transparency, participation*, and *collaboration* (Harrison et al., 2012; Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Mergel, 2013a; Mossberger, Wu, & Crawford, 2013; Nam, 2012). However, research has found that messages on social media are often for "self-promotion" and "marketing" (Bellström, Magnusson, Pettersson, & Thorén, 2016; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Sobaci & Karkin, 2013), uses of the application that do not fit and are not theorized under this framework. Although critical and distinct perspectives on the use of these technologies by governments have emerged (Bryer, 2011; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014), the e-government literature does not frequently explore why or how these self-presentational types of

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activities relate to government communication functions.

In this paper, we argue that a great portion of government's use of social media is for *symbolic and presentational* purposes. We argue this is the case because social media are not only tools for democratic transparency and citizen participation, but also tools for self-presentation, the exchange of symbolic gestures, and the marketing of products and services. To understand the multi-faceted nature of government information on social media, we thus propose a descriptive model of types of communication that extends the 3-category model of push, pull and networking, to include 1 additional broad category of symbolic and presentational communication.

For this study, we have conducted a broad literature review from diverse sources, including e-government, business, human-computer interaction, and social psychology research that pertain to organizational communication and uses of social media and social networking sites (SNS)—terms we use interchangeably. From this literature, we develop a typology of government communication that may be used to analyze government social media content or information. We discuss the characteristics of each type of communication and explore the nature and purpose of the information being exchanged. We then address two empirical questions: RQ1: To what extent can the Facebook messages in a sample of local government departments be categorized within the typology? And RQ2: What differences can be observed about the extent to which the types of communication are used across local governments in the United States? To answer these questions, we use a stratified sampling technique to identify diverse local government department across the U.S. and carry out a content analysis of their Facebook posts to examine the actual adoption of the different types of communication. We illustrate our results with examples of messages and, finally, provide a discussion of the results with implications for practitioners and future research.

2. Democratic goals of government social media

In attempts to understand the types of content that government organizations—that is, bureaucratic departments and agencies, at the local, state or federal level—post and share on social media (what we refer to as *government social media communication*) studies in the e-government literature have focused on the 3-category descriptive model of: *push, pull*, and *networking*, often associated with the three democratic goals of open government: *transparency*, *participation*, and *collaboration* (Harrison et al., 2012; Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Mergel, 2013a; Stamati, Papadopoulos, & Anagnostopoulos, 2015). Push refers to the simple provision of public and accurate information to citizens, which is associated with transparency; pull refers to the interaction of the agency with citizens for acquisition of citizen information and feedback, which may be accomplished by observing user behavior or directly asking for feedback; and networking or collaboration refers to activities in which agencies and their constituents engage in dialogue or direct involvement in some activity in order to improve government related activities. We now turn to a discussion of what these types of communication entail.

2.1. Providing information

Democratic political regimes are defined by the equality of individuals under the law (Post, 2005), the participation of their constituents (Viteritti, 1997), as well as the openness and transparency of their activities (Fairbanks, Plowman, & Rawlins, 2007). Thus, an essential function of democratic governments is to provide accurate and sufficient information to the public. In the U.S., regulations regarding the publication of information to the public are codified in legislative acts, administrative guidelines as well as by less permanent measures such as executive orders (Braman, 2006; Jaeger, 2007). Beyond the traditional focus on the freedom to access government information, there has been little scholarly attention paid to questions about the quality of the information that is provided by governments and how the dissemination of information takes place (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Garnett, 1997; Graber, 2003). Not all acts of government public communication may be considered acts of transparency (Bauhr and Grimes, 2012; Fenster, 2005).

In this study we conceive of *information provision* as referring to the two traditional government communication functions of: "public reporting" and "public education campaigns" (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Lee, 1999; Liu & Horsley, 2007). Public reporting is understood as the basic "presentation of government information to citizens" (Jaeger, 2005). The information should refer to the provision of "data and documents the public needs in order to assess government action and exercise voice in decision making" (Harrison et al., 2012, p. 3). This factual information assumes a level of accuracy and relationship with the workings of government. Public education campaigns, on the other hand, are more instructional, and may refer to elaborate programs that interact with community members to inform and educate citizens, or more simply to distribute "public service announcements" (Shoemaker, 1989).

We thus suggest that a category of *information provision* is a general type of "one-way" (Rowe & Gammack, 2004) or "push" communication strategy (Mergel, 2013a). Within this general category there are at least two types of communication: *operational and event information*, and *public service announcements*. Policy changes, program details and event announcements are considered under the category of *operations and events* as part of the factual content transmitted by governments about their activities, and reflect a basic level of government transparency. *Public service announcements*, on the other hand, are messages that have no reference to operations or services of the agencies but are intended to raise public awareness about an issue or to induce citizens to take actions to improve the public well-being (Shoemaker, 1989). The extent to which these types of information are provided by governments depend on a number of factors including laws, politics, media scrutiny and resources of the government departments (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Braman, 2006; Liu & Horsley, 2007).

2.2. Seeking input

Research on government use of social media also stresses the use of a "pull" strategy where governments request feedback from its stakeholders and potentially the public at large (Mergel, 2013a). This has also been termed "semi-two way interactive" communication (Suen, 2006), and resembles the "two-way asymmetric" model of communication from the public relations literature (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). These types of communication are "semi" or "asymmetric" because the audience "feedback enters the process" (Waters & Williams, 2011), but the organization is mainly interested in obtaining information rather than further interacting (at least in the short-term) with that content or those constituents (Leston-Bandeira & Bender, 2013; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). This type of communication, or information seeking behavior, reflects an interest on the part of the organization to understand more about its constituency in order to either improve its services or more simply to learn about its environment (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015).

Public announcements of input seeking activities observed on government social media include asking people to fill a "survey" or a "poll" (Waters & Williams, 2011), and helping with a crime (Mergel, 2012). Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) also found that Twitter was occasionally used by U.S. members of Congress for "fundraising" and Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers and Becker (2013) observed that Facebook communication of municipalities in Europe involved appeals for "donations" or "charity". For our typology, we thus propose a general category of *input seeking*, where messages reflect either requests for *citizen information*; or *fundraising* via fundraising or donation requests.