Innovation through social media in the public sector: Information and interactions

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper conducts a content analysis on the performance of information and interactions in selected Chinese government microblog accounts as innovations in the public sector. In specific, the study examines the quantity, content, stakeholders related, government levels related, timeliness, forms, language styles, sources of message, the use of push, and responses in government accounts. The study finds that a majority of messages in government microblog accounts were posted for self-promotion rather than service delivery. The forms, languages and timeliness of information posted tend to be monotonous, rigid and formal, and the interactions between governments and the public in government microblog accounts were mostly insufficient and preliminary. Furthermore, a longitudinal comparison between data in two sequential years also indicates that government use of microblogs is improved over time. Based on the findings, the paper provides relevant recommendations to governments.

1. Introduction

Microblogging becomes a mainstream internet application and hub of public opinions in China since 2009. General citizens, opinion leaders and traditional media in the country are using microblogging actively as a new channel to receive information, distribute messages and express opinions. By the end of December 2012, the total number of Chinese microblogging users had reached 309 million, representing 54.7% of the total internet users in China (China Internet Network Information Center, 2013). The phenomenon also impels the public sector in China to launch government microblog accounts as innovations to disclose government information and foster interactions between government and citizens. By the end of 2012, the total number of Chinese government microblog accounts has exceeded 176 thousand (China National Academy of Governance, 2012).

This study intends to explore how social media are used by government to disseminate information and interact with citizens by examining the information and interactions in selected Chinese government microblog accounts with content analysis. The research questions focus on: 1) how do governments use microblogs to disseminate information; 2) how do governments use microblogs to interact with citizens; and 3) do governments' approaches of using microblogs change over time?

The paper first reviews the literature of social media in Section 2. Next, in Section 3 the paper elaborates research methods of the study

with regard to research designs and research questions, coding schema development, sample selection, data collection and analysis. Then research findings are illustrated in Sections 4 and 5, followed by discussions and implications in Section 6. The paper ends up with the Conclusions section. The study could extend current knowledge on government innovation through social media and provide practical advices to government microblogging.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and its characteristics

Social media has been defined with various perspectives. Some definitions are technology oriented, and some focus on their impacts and what they can enable. Some are more general and some are more specific. According to Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011), social media is a set of online tools that are designed for and centered around social interactions. In practice, social media serves as a catchall phrase for a conglomeration of web-based technologies and services such as blogs, microblogs (i.e., Twitter), social sharing services (e.g., YouTube, Flickr, StumbleUpon, Last.fm), text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools (e.g., wikis), virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life), and social networking services (e.g. Facebook, MySpace). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)define social media as a social structure in which technology puts power in communities, not institutions, as well as a set of open, web-based and user-friendly applications that enable users to network, share data, collaborate and co-produce content.

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Spannerworks (2009) outlines some defining characteristics of social media: 1) participation: social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone interested, blurring the line between media and audience; 2) openness: most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, comments, and sharing of information with rare barriers to accessing and making use of content; 3) conversation: whereas traditional media is about broadcast, content transmitted or distributed to an audience, social media are better seen as conversational, two-way interaction channels; 4) community: social media allows communities to be formed quickly and communicate effectively around common interests; and 5) connectedness: social media thrives in their connectedness, exploiting hyperlinks and combining different kinds of media in one place.

Among various social media tools, microblogging is a broadcast medium in the form of blogging and is a network community based on huge grassroots net-users. It differs from traditional blog in its content that is typically smaller in both actual and aggregate file sizes, and allows users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links (Wikipedia, 2013a). Twitter, so far the most influential microblogging platform worldwide, is "an online social networking and microblogging service that enables users to send and read "tweets", which are text messages limited to 140 characters" (Wikipedia, 2013b).

In sum, the abovementioned definitions emphasize two fundamental features of social media. One is disseminating information produced by users to others, and the other is fostering interactions among users for the sake of conversation, connecting, participation and collaboration.

2.2. Potentials for government of social media

The potentials for government use of social media have been raised and discussed repeatedly in recent literature. Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes (2010) argue that the combination of e-government, social media, web-enabled technologies, mobile technologies, transparency policy initiatives, and citizen desire for open and transparent government is fomenting a new age of opportunity and social media has great potential to extend government services, solicit new ideas, and improve decision-making and problem-solving (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). The combination of government reform efforts and the emergence of Web 2.0 social media tools that promote information sharing, integration, and public discourse renewed the emphasis on the ideas that democratic governments should be open, accessible, and transparent to the governed (Dawes, 2010). Center for Technology in Government (2009) summarizes a variety of values of social media for the government: greater competitiveness in employee recruiting, enhanced access for the disabled, creation of virtual communities, instantaneous information sharing, enhanced collaboration, enhanced public safety, information dissemination and exchange, "Coolness" factor, improved training capabilities, cost saving and so on. Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2012) assert that social media has the potential to allow greater communication, participation, and collaboration with citizens. Wigand (2010) suggests that Twitter can help organizations to share essential information with the public effectively and induce the public (the ultimate beneficiaries) to participate in new projects. Picazo-Vela, Gutierrez-Martinez, and Luna-Reyes (2012) point out that government organizations are experimenting with social media to communicate with their constituents and reinvent government–citizen relationships. Moreover, besides the impact of social media use in governments in increasing transparency and participation of citizens in decision-making, Osimo (2008) also mentioned its effect in fostering collaboration between government agencies. Within government areas at all levels from local to federal, social media also allows large scale distributed collaboration, information sharing and creation of collective intelligence (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010).

Krzmarzick (2012) summarizes five levels of social use in federal government; 1) informed decision making, 2) communicate with citizens and other agencies, 3) internal collaboration, 4) research/information gathering and 5) marketing and promotion. Felten (2010) clarifies the difference between outreach and transparency, in that "outreach means government telling us what it wants us to hear; transparency means giving us the information that we, the citizens, want to get." Golbeck, Grimes, and Rogers (2010) also differentiate transparency from outreach (or self-promotion) by illustrating that "outreach is the practice of promoting and disseminating information and ideas to a specific or general audience. Transparency is the activity of making information free, open, and easily accessible to the public to help ensure accountability."

Overall, according to the literature, the potentials for government use of social media can be categorized into two types: information and interaction. Information means that government could use social media to disseminate information for enhancing government outreach, improving government transparency, and delivering public services. Interaction means that government could use social media to interact with various internal and external stakeholders for promoting citizens' participation in decision-making and improving communication and collaboration between government and citizens as well as among government agencies internally.

2.3. Performance of politicians' use of social media

A number of researches study the performance of politicians' use of social media with regard to information and interactions on their social media accounts. Golbeck et al. (2010) find that legislators in the U.S. are primarily using Twitter to disperse information and to report on their daily activities. These types of information tend not to provide new insights into government or the legislative process or to improve transparency; rather, they are vehicles for self-promotion. Although Twitter is also facilitating direct communication between Congress people and citizens, this is a less popular activity.

Small (2011) conducts a content analysis of the most popular Canadian political microblogging and indicates that informing is the primary function, while political dialog and reporting are rare. Sæbø (2011) examines parliament representatives' Twitter in Norway and finds that the main purpose of parliament representatives' Twitter is to disseminate information to electors, and provide information on ongoing activities to the audience. Sandoval, Matus, and Rogel (2012) investigate how Mexican presidential candidates use Twitter to communicate with citizens by analyzing 618 tweets from the three most important political parties and find that candidates are only sending messages for politicians and not for citizens. Sobaci and Karkin (2013) conduct content analysis to investigate whether Twitter is used by mayors in Turkey to offer better public services. The analysis reveals that Twitter is adopted and used by mayors mostly for the purposes of self-promotion and political marketing in Turkey, rather than for the use of Twitter for transparent, participatory and citizen-oriented public service delivery.

2.4. Performance of government agencies' use of social media

Several studies are carried out in North America to investigate the performance of government agencies' use of social media. While the U.S. federal government agencies are mandated to engage in higher level online interactions to not only become more transparent, but also increase participation and collaboration, Mergel (2013) shows that government is currently focusing mostly on using social media channels to push out information that is recycled from other government communication channels, rather than using them for engagement activities. The study also indicates that government agencies do not desire to create a direct, reciprocated relationship with citizens by following citizens back and have creative conversations online. Mossberger, Wu, and Crawford (2013) examine the use of social networks and other interactive tools in the 75 largest U.S. cities between