



Understanding risks, benefits, and strategic alternatives of social media applications in the public sector

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ABSTRACT

Social media such as blogs, microblogs or electronic social networks can transform the ways in which we relate to other people and organizations. Government organizations are experimenting with social media to communicate with their constituents, and many analysts see in these media a powerful set of tools to reinvent government–citizen relationships. In this paper, we present the perceptions of risks, benefits and strategic guidelines about social media applications gathered from 250 public servants from Central Mexico, most of them working in information technology, as web masters or responding to Freedom of Information Act requests. The conclusions of the analysis are 1) that governments' participation in social media may result in improved communication and citizen participation, more transparency, and transfer of best practices among government agencies; 2) that a good implementation strategy is necessary to realize these benefits and to avoid risks; and 3) that the implementation of social media highlights the importance of updating laws and regulations, and of promoting changes in government culture and organizational practices.

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1. Introduction

In the government, new media are capable of transforming power relationships between citizens and organizations to create a more open government; new media might even have the potential to transform current governance system at the city, state or country levels. In the private sector, organizations used social media to build customer relationships, interesting business models, or ways to create competitive advantages (Anderson, 2006; Surowiecki, 2004; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). In the government, these applications facilitate openness, transparency, and democratization (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010; Noveck, 2009). Moreover, events such as the WikiLeaks affair, in which private communications between the U.S. Secretary of the State and U.S. diplomats were made public, point toward the fact that the concepts of open government democracy and freedom of information were being transformed by social media.

Although there are many benefits and promises from social media and related technologies, several risks are associated with their use. In the past, technology applications like email and chats (text and video) were used to increase communication between organizations and their main constituents. These efforts have resulted both in benefits for organizations, and in some unanticipated problems. For example, when organizations began to communicate with their customers over email, the main concerns pertained to the technology (e.g. the server

or website), but not of the organizational changes that were needed. In this case, organizations neither assigned this responsibility to specific personnel, nor trained the personnel to respond to customers' requests. So email answers took days or weeks, if they came at all. The result of the technology was customer dissatisfaction.

The number of participants in social media websites like Facebook or Twitter continues to grow, with more than 800 million active users in Facebook (Facebook, 2012), and 300 million users of Twitter (Taylor, 2011). Growing dynamics of electronic social networks suggest that social media is not a fad. All types of individuals and organizations use social media. Public and private organizations are using social media to communicate with citizens and customers with different results, and not necessarily as a component of a long-term strategy. Many organizations have adopted social media following a trial-and-error approach, and at the expense of several organizational resources. For instance, an exploration of Mexican states' use of social media shows that only about 400,000 citizens out of 100 million are exchanging information with their state governments (Sandoval-Almazán, Gil-García, Luna-Reyes, Luna-Reyes, & Díaz-Murillo, 2011). Moreover, this same study shows that about 20% of Mexican states discontinued their use of Twitter or Facebook during the last year. Social media is still a new technology that needs to be better understood in terms of its benefits, risks, barriers and strategic use.

In this paper we introduce the perceived risks and benefits of social media among public servants from Mexico, and especially the strategic elements to include social media in e-government policy and as a communication channel with citizens. To accomplish this objective, the paper consists of five sections including this introduction. In Section 2, we define social media, previous studies of the use of

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social media at organizations, their use in the public sector, and a conceptual framework that is useful to organize the perceptions of participants. In Section 3, the research methodology is elaborated. In Section 4, the results of the study are explained. Finally, in Section 5 we present the findings and conclusions, and we suggest some ideas for further research.

2. Literature review

This section begins with a description of some of the key elements related to electronic government in Mexico, and continues with previous research on social media in the government. The section finishes with a conceptual framework used to organize and discuss the results of our research.

2.1. Electronic government in Mexico

Electronic government, or the use of information technology (IT) in the government, began in the 1950s and 1960s, when governments first acquired mainframes with batch processing capabilities (Andersen & Dawes, 1991). The term *e-government*, however, was coined in the mid-1990s, as a parallel term to *e-commerce* and the use of the internet. In 1994, President Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico uploaded the first website for the presidency, along with two important programs to promote the strategic use of IT in the government: the Public Management Modernization Program, and the Informatics Development Program (Gil-García, Arellano-Gault, & Luna-Reyes, 2010). By the early 2000s, all state governments in Mexico had an internet presence, at least in the form of a simple home page with a message from the Governor and some basic government information.

At the Federal level, the most important impulse to electronic government in Mexico took place under President Vicente Fox, mainly because of the Good Government Agenda, and the e-Mexico program (Gil-García et al., 2010; Luna-Reyes, Gil-García, & Cruz, 2007). The former included a set of strategic elements promoting process improvement, IT infrastructure and information policy with the purpose of creating a more effective, efficient and trustworthy government. The e-Mexico program consisted of three strategic components. The first supported Good Government Agenda strategies by promoting investment and the development of an IT infrastructure and system platforms for the government. The second was associated with the creation of internet access points for citizens, and the last created content in the areas of health, education, economy and government services (Luna-Reyes, Gil-García, & Cruz, 2007). Both programs provided a wide variety of relevant content for Mexican citizens. Moreover, the infrastructure program had a positive impact on access to internet, which was 29.7% in 2011 according to the Mexican Association for the internet (AMIPCI, 2011). In fact, the e-Mexico program was very innovative, creating on-line communities through the main web portal, and taking the country to the top ten of the UN's 2004 e-Participation index (Luna-Reyes, Gil-García, & Rojas-Bandera, 2007).

Despite these developments during President Fox's term, Mexico still lacks an integrated strategy to take advantage of IT investments in the public sector. In fact, investments and innovations through electronic government have been reduced under President Calderon (Gil-García et al., 2010). As a result, Mexico has dropped from 31st place in the UN Government e-Readiness index in 2005 to 55th in the 2012 report (UN, 2012).

Many Federal agencies are experimenting with the use of social media. Some of them, such as the Bureau for the Defense of Consumer Rights, are making innovative uses of blogs and videocasts. Unfortunately, there has been no systematic assessment of social media adoption and use by Federal agencies. The online presence of Mexican states has been improving (Sandoval-Almazán & Gil-García, 2009). The inclusion of social media tools in state government portals has

increased, but still is in its early stages. About one-third of states use RSS feeds, only 3.1% have blogs, and 48.8% use social markers and social networks (Sandoval-Almazán et al., 2011). An evaluation of 108 municipal websites reflects an even lower level of adoption. The evaluation – which took place in 2009 – shows that only 19% of the websites included in the sample used RSS feeds, and 17% had a blog with which to communicate with citizens (Sandoval-Almazán & Gil-García, 2012).

President Calderon has expressed his commitment to innovation and transparency, creating a new model of digital communication for the presidency. This model has four components: a new website, online spaces for interaction with citizens, an ordered platform of social networks, and a presidential blog (Sosa-Mirafuentes, 2011). Although the new model shows the importance of social media to the President, there is virtually no interaction between the President and the citizens on these spaces. The assessment of perceived risks, benefits and strategic alternatives of social media tools which we explore in this paper may increase the use of social media by the Mexican government.

2.2. Previous research in social media use in the government

The literature often refers to social media as Web 2.0 and most of the time these terms are used interchangeably (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Ryberg, 2008). However, social media and Web 2.0 are distinct concepts (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Web 2.0 (also called social or participatory web) stands as a networked platform, spanning all connected devices that encourage collaboration in terms of the creation, organization, linking and sharing of content (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Chun, Shulman, Sandoval-Almazán, & Hovy, 2010; O'Reilly, 2007). This platform includes a collection of technologies such as blogs, microblogs, wikis, content sharing sites, social networking sites, and RSS (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Chun et al., 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kes-Erkul & Erkul, 2009; Kuzma, 2010). Social media, in contrast, “is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Following this idea, Web 2.0 is more related to the technical platform in which social media applications are built to create and exchange user-generated content.

Social media using Web 2.0 technologies is a worldwide phenomenon, with two-thirds of the global online population visiting social sites (Kuzma, 2010). Some social media sites that dominate the global market, in terms of social networking and user contents, are Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Twitter (Kes-Erkul & Erkul, 2009; Kuzma, 2010).

Because of the success of social media, researchers are studying a variety of applications and potential issues related to the use of social media at organizations. Some of the research on applications at organizations includes the study of its roles in individual adaptation to IT-induced change (Bruque, Moyano, & Eisenberg, 2008), in providing e-services (Chang, Yuan, & Li, 2009), and in finding business opportunities (Wilson, 2009). On the other side, studies about potential problems of the use of social media at organizations include their use to support hiring decision at organizations (Clark & Roberts, 2010), privacy concerns (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Sola-Martinez, 2009; Tisselli, 2010), cross-cultural impact (Vitkauskaitė, 2010), and effects on productivity (Wilson, 2009).

Governments are adopting social media with different purposes, such as recruiting activities (Dorris, 2008), reaching out to citizens and other stakeholders (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008), sharing information within and across government agencies; disseminating information to the public (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008), enhancing community participation in decision making or voting (Chun et al., 2010; Dorris, 2008) and achieving transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010).

Among the benefits of the use of social media in governments are efficiency, user convenience, transparency, accountability, citizen

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