

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IMPLEMENTATION AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVELS

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to gain a deeper understanding of the management of social media at the local government level, the availability of opportunities for citizen dialogue on government websites, and the impact that social networking applications have on e-government. The results of the current study converge with prior research on the growing awareness amongst government practitioners regarding the relevance of social media, the use of social media for feedback on service quality, and privacy and security commitments in e-government. The literature on the use of information technology to transform government, the potential for online government information to contribute to citizen engagement, and the rapid growth in local government use of social media is relevant to this discussion.

Keywords: local e-government, social media, citizen engagement, e-participation.

1. Introduction

In the present paper, we focus on the implementation of social media into government administration, active e-participation models in local governance, and the challenges of e-government development at the local level. The purpose of this article is to gain a deeper understanding of the engagement of social media to promote citizen dialogue and government transparency (Machan, 2013), the factors that influence citizens to engage in e-participation, and the current state of e-government at the local level. The material gathered in this study provides a rich and diverse context for understanding challenges in managing social media across government organizations (Zaharia *et al.*, 2013), the democratic potential of e-government, and the potential of social media to contribute to civic engagement. We are specifically interested in how previous research investigated the integration of social media tools in core government operations, the use of social media technology in government, and the provision of mechanisms for citizen online participation in government.

2. E-government as a means of fostering citizen participation

Local e-government leaders should make a commitment to management for results and performance (Brata and Lagendijk, 2013), and then to managing them, and should reward the accomplishments of teams and individuals that contribute to improving e-government performance management practices. E-government development in local government aims to improve service quality by focusing on customers (e-government may substantially improve public service delivery to individual citizens) (Kim, 2009). Digital governance includes both delivery of public services and citizen participation in governance. Strong administrative support is important to e-governance performance, e-governance may evolve from posting information online to utilization of websites for online citizen participation, and informational content is the initial stage in all forms of e-government adoption. Government websites require users to submit their personal information apart and make use of tracking tools and cookies: websites should provide relevant and sufficient informational content to citizen users, and have privacy policies on every page that requires data in order to gain citizens' trust (Carrizales *et al.*, 2011). Citizens demand better services and thus information technology implementation in local government organizations (Tomescu and Agatador Popescu, 2013) needs to accommodate them; a central government can impose the adoption of e-government on local government bodies by indicating certain policies and regulations, and local governments can implement positive values from other successful local e-governments adoption in their environment. Lack of mission and vision in e-government implementation may create disorientation of the project (problematic goals in e-government implementation can hardly determine a strategy on how to implement effective e-government systems) (Nurdin, Stockdale, and Scheepers, 2011).

Local government employees should perceive e-government performance in terms of improved service quality (Hunter, 2013a), transparency, and cost-efficiency. Inspi-

rational motivation and the level of organizational commitment among the executive e-government leaders' employees are important factors in the implementation of e-government innovations. Employees who think reward systems are fair tend to express a positive impact of e-government development on cost-efficiency. The level to which an e-government program is managed for results substantially affects employees' perceptions of e-government performance. Elective executive leadership, management capacity, and management for results may influence employee perceptions of local e-government performance (Kim, 2009). Government agencies use different web technologies to offer various forms of electronic participation applications, the web-based e-participation program is an important tool for e-government to facilitate citizen participation, and e-participation is a special type of e-government service, relying on web-based applications as a technological platform (the use of e-participation is a technology adoption by citizens). Citizens tend to use e-participation to engage in policy decision-making processes (citizen-initiated e-participation may require citizens' commitment to participation in public affairs). The online community is one feature of citizen-initiated e-participation, 'ground-up' e-participation focuses on participation established by citizens, and trust in government influences citizens to engage in citizen-initiated e-participation (through ongoing and repeated interactions, e-participants can build online networks) (Lee and Kim, 2014).

At the aggregate level, e-government has incorporated more technological and organizational sophistication: national governments should have both financial resources and technical expertise to move systematically toward more sophisticated stages of e-government. E-government initiatives tend to evolve from the national to the local level: the system of rules moves from a solution-oriented goal to a behavior-control-oriented goal (systems of rules may affect the evolution of e-government). Specific contexts and the capabilities and resources of certain stakeholders may affect e-government evolution, the degree of responsiveness and accountability should be greater in local governments, and the development of clear dynamic indicators for the evaluation of e-government initiatives is necessary (Gil-Garcia and Martinez-Moyano, 2007). E-government may assist in the transformation of governance through service delivery and more informed and engaged citizenship. E-government use influences resources for participation, but depends upon motivation, and is associated with civic engagement and political participation. The use of government websites may stimulate knowledge and discussion of public issues (Profiroiu, Țapardel and Mihăescu, 2013): information about policy issues and community affairs may promote discussion and mobilization, and may act as a component in promoting civic engagement. There is an association between e-government use and civic engagement that may be supported by the online information and communication opportunities: citizens who are interested and informed tend to use digital government to support their civic engagement (the information capacity of e-government may influence the possibilities for government interaction with citizens) (Haller, Li and Mossberger, 2011).

3. The impact that social networking applications have on e-government

Local government authorities should create a transaction-enabled citizen-centered e-government (Ionescu, 2013), they should use an e-government strategy with well defined objectives, and local councils should focus their e-government initiatives on providing information and services to the citizens. Putting the traditional government structures online does not generally meet citizens' expectations. Connected e-government may affect organizational structures, policies, and employees. Management and leadership can influence the fulfillment of e-government promises (Fan, 2011). The usability and accessibility of websites are critical in the provision of online government services. Government website design may combine content and services in anticipation of the needs of citizens (the usefulness of a website is dependent on its content). Website usability may enable channels of communication and improve the relationship between government and citizens (Carrizales *et al.*, 2011). The presence of bureaucratic organizations in the public sector (Pera, 2013a) may influence the process of implementing an innovation: the organizational dimensions and the factors in each dimension may impede the adoption and implementation of local e-government (adoption and implementation of e-government at local levels involve many organizational constraints) (Nurdin, Stockdale and Scheepers, 2011).

E-participation is a communication channel in which e-participants express themselves, and plays as an online community, limiting the ability of both government and e-participants to interact with each other interpersonally (e-participants are active when they post more ideas and comments to others). Weak offline ties are positively associated with active e-participation (weak social ties are an incentive to use e-participation actively). People who do not actively engage in real life and have few social ties are more active online or e-participate (Inglehart *et al.*, 2014; Manolache, 2013). Strength of social ties is not relevantly correlated to active e-participation (de Beaufort and Summers, 2014; Dowell and Larwin, 2013). Active e-participation enables e-participants to build strong online ties, and may help at building online social networks as a complementary means for mobilizing resources. Active e-participation in local governance may be relevant for effective and transparent decision making and problem solving (Lee and Kim, 2014). E-government initiatives may be solutions to problems identified by public managers (they concentrate especially on the solution-guiding dimension). Public managers should develop and test initiatives to assess their efficiency and effectiveness (Paraschiv, 2013), and should develop strategies according to their options and the goals of the e-government applications (Gil-Garcia and Martinez-Moyano, 2007). Service users tend to email agencies or officials, to interact with government offline, and to participate online, in general, in public affairs. Online information may encourage citizens to interact with government offline, the information capacity of e-government may be a resource for acquiring knowledge for engagement and participation, and the effects of using the Internet depend on the gratifications individuals seek from media (Haller, Li and Mossberger, 2011).

Governance and administrative institutions have gradually adjusted to the potential offered by modern cyberspace: the public domain can realize efficiency gains and enhance the democratic interaction with citizens. The benefits of e-governance may be assessed on the basis of improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, and good governance (e-governance presupposes open and interactive communication channels). Local governments should ensure an efficient set of e-mechanisms that stimulate the trust and accountability of the public sector (Yadav, 2014). A growing public interest in e-governance may lead to policies and strategies to induce ICT development and mobilize it. ICT may enhance e-governance and reinforce the cyber image of cities. Using ICT to promote economic and social goals focuses on visions and critical judgment of the ICT relevance (Nijkamp and Cohen-Blankshtain, 2013). Social media can improve interactivity between a government and the public, allowing officials in government to build relationships with the citizens it represents (Pera, 2014); they can enhance governments' abilities to interact with citizens, and are transforming the way organizations communicate with their publics. Social media can offer a low-cost platform for dialogic communication with their publics (local governments can benefit from massive audience reach that social media provide). E-democracy can be promoted by engaging social media's ability to interact directly with citizens, and can transform citizen involvement in democratic processes mediated by social networking sites (Graham and Johnson Avery, 2013).

Governments can take advantage of emerging trends in social media, and are employing social media in ways that meet core operational goals: government agencies are turning to social media to engage constituencies and improve the provision of services (Petersmann, 2013), and all levels of government can be more transparent through social media (social media can alert the public about the release of new information and indicate available online reports). Local governments are using various social media applications to connect with constituents, and tend to develop consistent social media management strategies and employ new tactics (establishing and implementing a social media policy should help in managing the social media activities) (Hansen-Flaschen and Parker, 2012).

4. Managing social media across government organizations

Local governments that allow open communication on their social networking pages and exchange of information and ideas, must incorporate social media into their communication plans in engaging ways (Popescu Ljungholm, 2014), and must engage citizens by posting regularly and making their opinions relevant. Governments should integrate their social media presence with their websites, should systematically monitor the approaches of social media in order to evaluate effectiveness, and should consider citizen expectations as motivations for social media use (they must prioritize and respond to public expectations) (Graham and Johnson Avery, 2013). The success of an e-government strategy may depend on its ability to develop IT capacity, the perceived performance of an e-government innovation may depend

on the government's ability to develop IT capacity, and organizational leaders and IT departments need to analyze carefully their e-government strategic plan (human, organizational, and technological resources may generate capabilities that influence the performance of e-government systems). Local governments should develop capabilities to assemble resources that support e-government development strategies, and need organizational commitment to management for e-government results in order to clarify the strategy of continuous e-government investment and development (Kim, 2009).

There is a positive relation between perceived fairness of the e-participation process and citizens' active e-participation (Stel, 2014). Fairness in the participation process (Popescu *et al.*, 2013) and information access may make citizens to actively engage in e-participation (fairness and access to information in participation processes may be related to active e-participation). One can find a positive relation between volunteering and citizens' active e-participation. E-participation processes should be designed and managed to enhance citizens' ability to access information on government activities. Government responsiveness matters for facilitating active e-participation (management of e-participation processes is decisive in shaping active e-participation). There is a positive association between trust in government and active e-participation (trust in government encourages citizens to have a sense of cooperation with government) (Lee and Kim, 2014). Social-media technologies are effective tools to promote public goals, the use of social media means the interaction of elements of the technical and the social systems, and the coupling of technology and task shows how social media is integrated into organizational work systems. Social media technology is taken up by various types of government agencies, organizational factors may affect social media technology-task couplings, and managers should use social media as a means of communication, collaboration and stakeholder engagement (de Oliveira and Welch, 2013). The adoption of social media may provide convenient venues for dialogue between citizens, and with government: social networks may provide a new platform for communication between citizens and government officials (features that provide greater interactivity online may provide resources for civic engagement). The emergence of new tools online may not easily alter the classical patterns of government behavior. The popularity of social networks may increase their adoption on government websites (most local governments allow comments to be posted). There are new possibilities for transforming relationships between government and citizens through open government and citizen participation (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford, 2013; Hunt, 2013; Moore, 2013).

New technologies allow citizens to evaluate the records of governments and elected officials (Kenagy, Fox. and Vollrath, 2013), social media's implications for government leaders can change the way governments interact with their publics, and governments' interactions with their publics and online presence evolve beyond a static website. Organizations can manage the information they disseminate to publics through channels created by social media, government officials' perceived im-

portance of social media is a strong predictor of actual use by local governments, public information and communication officers should manage social media for local governments, and, through the utilization of social media, governments are making their initiatives more open and accessible (Graham and Johnson Avery, 2013). Cities are trying several tools and techniques to diversify social media offerings, using various tools and platforms to reach constituents (Hunter, 2013b), provide online content and increase collaboration (cities are establishing new workflows to accommodate social media activities) (Vasile, 2013; Pera, 2013b). Cities are developing strategic processes to launch new social media pages, and should implement creative ways for generating innovative ideas on how to better use social media. City employees try to integrate social media activities into their daily tasks, large cities are likely to be decentralized in regards to social media activities, and the adoption and promotion of social media are growing in city governments. Mobile applications constitute a growing trend in the city government use of social media, large and medium-sized cities have additional staff time and budget to develop mobile applications, and the social media applications can solicit feedback directly from constituents (Hansen-Flaschen and Parker, 2012).

Government agencies are using social media technologies to conduct their business and seek input: they tend to use social media to disseminate government information, services, and resources. Social media technologies may be a relevant change agent in shaping future democratic models, altering how the public and government interact, develop solutions, and deliver services, and having an outstanding influence on government-public-community interactions. Social media technologies are transformational in their ability to provide governments with instant feedback and new perspectives of their workflow, and should create immediate dialog through an interactive forum (Bertot *et al.*, 2010).

5. Case study: expectations and perceived importance concerning the use of social media in the local governments

E-government evaluation helps in driving e-government development: e-government efforts move from initial information provision to fully integrated electronic public services. Governments should ensure a secure environment that can be trusted to protect personal information from loss and misuse (they tend to move from basic online government information to connected e-government). Most of the local government websites provide one-way communication of information from government to citizens (privacy and security are a primary concern for e-government websites) (Fan, 2011). Leadership is crucial for successful adaptation of technology by government, being a necessary component to building e-government capabilities. The e-government transformation requires organizational leaders' commitment to change public structures and transaction processes. Visionary leadership, thoughtful planning and monitoring can make e-government an important instrument for government services and information. E-government performance requires executive leaders who believe

in innovation and experimentation. IT capacity and HRM capacity relate to perceived e-government performance (management capacity and processes may improve innovation and performance potential): IT capacity and the level of identification commitment of employees positively influence the perceptions of e-government performance. Executive e-government leadership, IT capacity, HR capacity, and the level of management for results influence employees' perceptions of the local e-government performance (Kim, 2009).

Communication with citizens may foster more responsive government: the participatory dimension of Web 2.0 may improve communications between government and citizens. The diffusion of social network use among local governments and the emergence of open data portals may transform relationships between government and citizens. Social networks may provide a platform for citizen participation: citizens can interact with each other, and can see responses from government officials. Local government authorities may post raw data, encouraging users to develop applications that make the information more usable. Responding to online surveys, filling out comment forms, or sending emails to officials may increase opportunities for government to receive feedback from citizens. The significance of open data portals depends on what data are made available and whether it is fully usable for intended audiences, local governments or independently-developed applications may provide innovative ways for citizens to use the data, whereas local websites play an outstanding role in making basic information available, thus improving transparency (Mossberger and Wu, 2012).

5.1. Methodology

As the literature we have investigated so far indicated mixed results concerning the effectiveness of social media implementation at local government levels, we have decided to clarify this better by focusing first on public administration scholars (as they have substantial theoretical experience on this topic) and secondly on local governments' employees (for their relevant empirical evidence related to this area). This is the first case study aiming to collate such results. The research started with a content analysis of e-participation survey data collected from 806 public administration scholars (64% response rate) from 54 countries attending 46 conferences in Europe between February 2012 and March 2014 (Table 1). We have selected the scholars according to their professional background on the topic (we especially chose those with first-rate academic affiliations and significant articles in ISI/Thomson Reuters and Scopus journals). We aimed to clarify their expectations and perceived importance concerning the use of social media in their local governments. We asked them to evaluate on a 1 (not important) - 10 (extremely important) scale how relevant they believed it was for local governments to use social media to engage citizens, and whether they thought the adoption of social media tools could facilitate citizen knowledge and engagement. We were also interested in evaluating the time allotted weekly by the 806 scholars in interaction with e-government (Figure 3), and their satisfaction regarding solved claims by e-government (Figure 4).

Most scholars were from UK (46), France (39) and Germany (37), and they also provided the most detailed responses (US also included). Those 806 participants we selected were associated with 208 universities (96 from Europe, 47 from North America, 43 from Asia, 9 from Africa, 7 from Australia, and 6 from South America). We identified the conferences by inspecting www.conferencealerts.com, and selected only those organized by outstanding universities or research institutes. We used this method for the survey as it seemed to be the most direct and clarifying one regarding our objectives (we received fast and almost thoroughly refined answers), with a satisfying response rate of 64%. The respondents were not significantly different in terms of age, gender, and education.

Then, we sent 1,014 emails to employees in local governments from those 54 countries, asking them to evaluate on a 1 (not important)-10 (extremely important) scale their beliefs regarding the importance to use social media to engage citizens. Regarding local governments, we selected only city halls, because we supposed they were quite well organized entities, and we identified on their websites those employees in charge with social media activities aimed to engage citizens in online participation. The most substantial and detailed answers came from employees working in countries renown for the quality of their public administration (Sweden – 68, Norway – 63, Finland – 58, and New Zealand – 54). We received irrelevant or mostly unclear replies especially from employees based in Asia and Africa. We used this method for the survey as we felt it was the most direct and satisfactory one concerning our objectives. We received 414 replies (Table 2), the answers were quite fast (1-7 working days), the response rate was lower than with the scholars, mainly 40%.

5.2. Results

Our analysis was meant to emphasize the use of social media by local governments to communicate with their publics, perceptions of e-government performance in terms of service quality, transparency, and cost-efficiency, and e-government’s potential in enhancing the transparency and accountability of government towards its citizens. This study was grounded in the considerable body of scholarship examining the performance of ICT-services in the public domain, the influence of organizational barriers to local e-government implementation, and adoption and implementation of e-government systems. The findings highlighted the importance of examining the use of the Internet by governments to communicate with citizens, e-government performance in public organizations, and the linkages between the use of e-government websites and measures of civic engagement.

Table 1: Scholars’ beliefs regarding the adoption of social media tools for facilitating knowledge and engagement

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Percentage of respondents	1	2	8	7	12	19	16	15	14	6

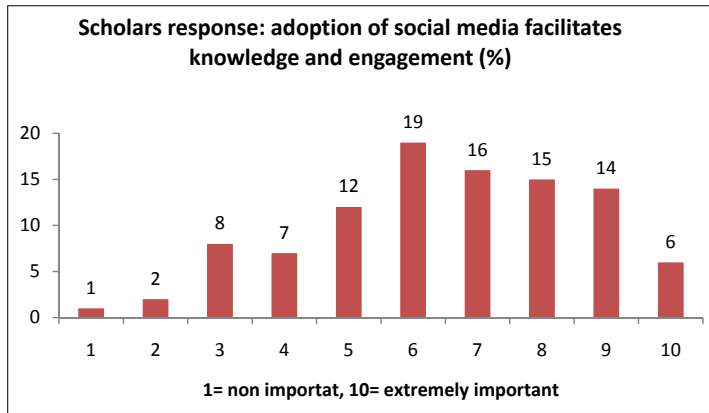


Figure 1: Scholars' beliefs regarding the adoption of social media tools for facilitating knowledge and engagement

Selected scholars tend to generally think social media tools facilitate knowledge and engagement outstandingly. More than 70% of the scholars that responded felt that adopting social media would increase engagement and facilitate communication.

Table 2: Local governments' employees' beliefs regarding the importance to use social media to engage citizens

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Percentage of respondents	4	8	6	9	14	11	6	17	9	16

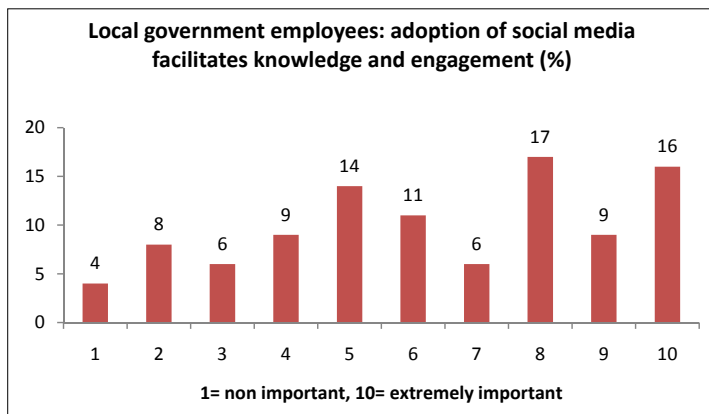


Figure 2: Local governments' employees' beliefs regarding the importance to use social media to engage citizens

Local governments' employees seem to be relevantly convinced of the importance to use social media to engage citizens. Compared to the scholars' responses on the same questions, we can see a bit more reticence on the part of practitioners – only 59% (compared to 70%) feel that social media facilitates communication and increases citizen engagement.

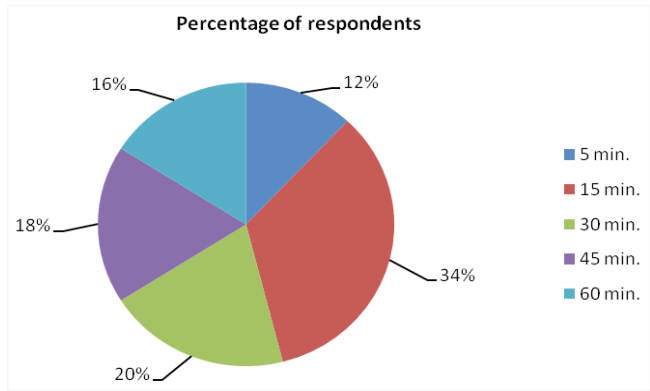


Figure 3: Time allotted by scholars weekly in interaction with e-government

Regarding interaction with local governments through online channels, scholars tend to spend mostly between 15 and 30 minutes per week (55%) with another 34% spending between 45 to 60 minutes or more on online channels. However, by taking a look at Figure 4 we can see that half of the respondents (scholars) are either not satisfied or just partially satisfied regarding this interaction so there is clearly room for improvement.

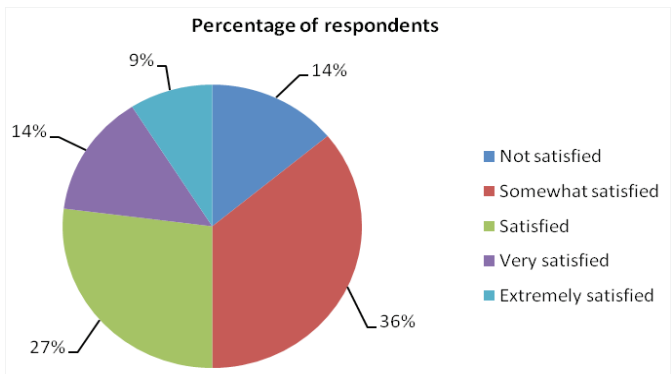


Figure 4: Scholars' satisfaction regarding solved claims by e-government

Taken together, these findings suggest that our respondents are generally convinced that e-government and social media can foster citizen participation substantially. Anyway, social media tools used by local governments to communicate with citizens should be more refined, as some local governments' employees ask for the improvement of those tools. Citizens tend to use a large portion of their time in their weekly interaction with e-government, but their satisfaction is not quite significant (there might be financial constraints influencing the implementation of local e-government).

5.3. Comparison with other studies

In order to better understand our own results we decided to present two recent similar studies. The first one (Fyfe and Crookall, 2010) was focused on finding what were 'the thoughts and attitudes of public servants (...) the role of social media in addressing the challenges of government modernization and the transformation of hierarchical organizational cultures to ones that are collaborative and open' (Fyfe and Crookall, 2010, p. 5, study done in Canada). Based on the data analyzed (interviews and discussion with over 100 respondents) the authors found there were six major drivers (or functions) for increased use of social media by public organizations (prevalence of each of the six depending on the specific responsibilities of the organization and its leadership): (1) internal collaboration; (2) cross-agency collaboration; (3) providing information; (4) open government; (5) interacting with and improving services to citizens; and (6) transforming government culture (Fyfe and Crookall, 2010, pp. 8-9). The authors conclude that there was a general consensus about that governments' need to implement and use social media, with the major challenges being the adoption of these new tools by middle managers and the change of the typical hierarchical public service culture which is slow to adapt; thus leadership will play a very important role, at least in the short term, for building a culture of openness and trust and developing responsive and adaptable guidelines on social media use by public servants (Fyfe and Crookall, 2010, p. 16). Our own study would lead to similar conclusions as both public servants and scholars do not doubt the importance of social media for modern public administration. Furthermore, the higher reticence of actual public servants is also confirmed with middle managers adoption of tools being seen as a challenge.

Another recent study (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford, 2013) on the use of social media by local governments in the largest 75 US cities shows a massive increase of social media use between 2009 and 2011 (six times more use of social media in 2011 compared to 2009), thus indirectly showing the importance that governments see in this form of interaction with its publics. Another interesting fact pointed out by the study is that citizen participation on government websites was lower than expected, 'raising questions about what citizens want, as well as what government should do' (Mossberger, Wu and Crawford, 2013, p. 20). It is safe to say that social media is clearly increasing in importance but, at the same time, a clear image about the benefits and costs associated with it is not really understood. Magro (2012, p. 155) is clear about this: 'the 'best' way to use social media in government is a nebulous and subjective problem that does not lend itself to a single set of guidelines for every task, country, agency, citizen, and government'.

6. Conclusions

The current study sets out to highlight the importance of social media use in the public sector. It is clear, based on the existing literature, that social media is a powerful tool for public organizations and governments all over the world in their efforts

to open up and increase participation or engagement from the communities that they are representing. It can also be seen as an instrument for increasing good governance practices, especially regarding transparency, facilitating communication and interaction between stakeholders, and, ultimately, increasing accountability. However, at present, although social media importance is not disputed, the best way for governments to proceed in implementing effective mechanisms and tools in order to respond to citizen demands is not very clear. The implications of the developments outlined in the preceding sections of this paper suggest a growing need for a research agenda on the diffusion of social media use among local governments, the adoption of social media tools for facilitating citizen knowledge and engagement, and the provision of municipal information and services through ICT applications. The results of the current study converge with prior research on the impact of digital government on civic engagement, citizen feedback through e-government use of social media, and organizational barriers in information technology. However, they constitute just a start for better understanding the use of social media in public sector organizations. Further study on the actual implementation process, focused on challenges, potential barriers, cost and benefits, and also potential success stories should be a priority for scholars in this field.

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