Inherent barriers to the use of social media for public policy informatics

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ABSTRACT

Social media has the potential to foster interactions between policy makers, government officials, and their constituencies. Opportunities to receive feedback from residents, inform them of government-provided opportunities, and increase engagement with the governance process have all been proposed as ways social media can play a role in Governance 2.0. However, the ability to realize these potential benefits faces inherent barriers in terms of perceptions of social media, ability of administrators to make effective use of social media tools, and the design of software used to operationalize social media. In this paper, we provide a case study of an attempt to use social media to engage with stakeholders, the AdvanceMichigan project, and discuss the various factors that hindered the success of that project.
***Key Words*:** social media, crowdsourcing.

Introduction

The term "social media" includes a range of tools and services that all enable direct user interaction on computer mediated environments. Recently, many units of government have either tried, or are considering trying, social media as a way of interacting with stakeholders in novel ways. Social media usage has often followed a few key paths: first, policy makers see social media as a way of micro-broadcasting news about policies to target stakeholders. Second, policy makers have seen social media as a way to "crowd source" feedback about policy. In this framework, the stakeholders can submit ideas and content to policy makers, who filter that content for worthwhile information. Third, social media interactions in third party sites like online newspapers and large-scale services like Facebook can be mined for stakeholder opinions.

However, implementing social media to achieve Governance 2.0 is a complicated proposition, with many elements that need to be coordinated. Along with decisions about how to use social media, policy makers must consider whether and how to create their own social media spaces for interacting with constituents including such options as building custom sites, using open source content management systems, or hiring commercial vendors who specialize in social media implementation. Site designers, working with key stakeholders of the organization, have to decide which audience they are trying to reach, how they will make that audience aware of the new social media channel, how to entice constituents to participate in those channels, and how to support real interaction as opposed to simple broadcasting of information.

We see the use of social media for Governance 2.0 as a complex set of decisions, group, organizational and technical artifacts, outreach activities, and alignment between goals and tools. We approach these issues as scholars of media and technology, and consequently provide a grounding in literature from those fields, though applied to the intersection of Governance 2.0 and social media. This paper presents a case study of one site, AdvanceMichigan, a social media implementation designed to collect feedback from a statewide organization that provides direct services in Michigan communities. The goal of the social media was to collect feedback from a very broad set of residents in Michigan, but the site ended up with limited use, and low amounts

of interaction. In this paper, we present the overall experience of defining and creating this social media implementation, and discuss implications for how the site was eventually used. We show that AdvanceMichigan did not meet its primary goals of collecting feedback from a broad group of constituents, although there were secondary benefits in terms of organizational knowledge and presentation. While MSUE is planning to return to a traditional method of collecting feedback from stakeholders, they are still excited about social media, and plan to use social media in other efforts. Discussed more fully at the end of the paper, we identify the following challenges to social media use in policy making:

- Matching audience literacy and preferences with social media
- Organizational capacity in terms of re-defining audiences and motivation to participate
- Difficulty in designing software for flexible social mechanisms
- Establishment of time frames for system adoption
- Matching task appropriateness for social media use

AdvanceMichigan

In this paper, we describe AdvanceMichigan, a social media implementation designed to "crowdsource" feedback from stakeholders of a statewide policy and service agency, Michigan State University Cooperative Extension (MSUE). This social media intervention was designed to accomplish a mandated needs assessment that helps define MSUE's goals. In this section, we'll describe MSUE and its role as a policy organization, goals of this needs assessment and why social media was chosen, and the AdvanceMichigan site.

Michigan State University Cooperative Extension is a branch of Michigan State University, the land grant institution of the state of Michigan, responsible for bringing the knowledge generated by Michigan's institutions of higher learning directly to the residents of the state. According to their mission statement MSUE "helps people improve their lives through an educational process that applies knowledge to critical issues, needs and opportunities." Established in 1912, MSUE has local offices in all 83 counties in Michigan, providing services tailored to the needs of individual communities. MSUE provides expertise to Michigan residents on topics ranging from agricultural methods, preventing obesity in children, mortgage foreclosure prevention, regional economic development, and more. MSUE staff in the local county offices often work closely with county government officials and local nonprofit agencies.

While funding for their activities comes from many sources, the federal funding of MSUE comes with a requirement to conduct a "needs assessment" every 5 years. This needs assessment is designed to align the activities of MSUE with the perceived needs of their constituents, namely the residents of Michigan. In previous years, this assessment has been accomplished through traditional surveys, and in 2005 10,000 residents of Michigan participated in the data collection. MSUE uses this assessment to evaluate their performance, allocate funding priorities for subsequent years, and identify areas in which they need to increase or decrease their activities. By their estimate, about 10% of the people they asked to participate in the survey did so. One of the necessary conditions for success in terms of the needs assessment included broad feedback from a diverse set of Michigan residents.

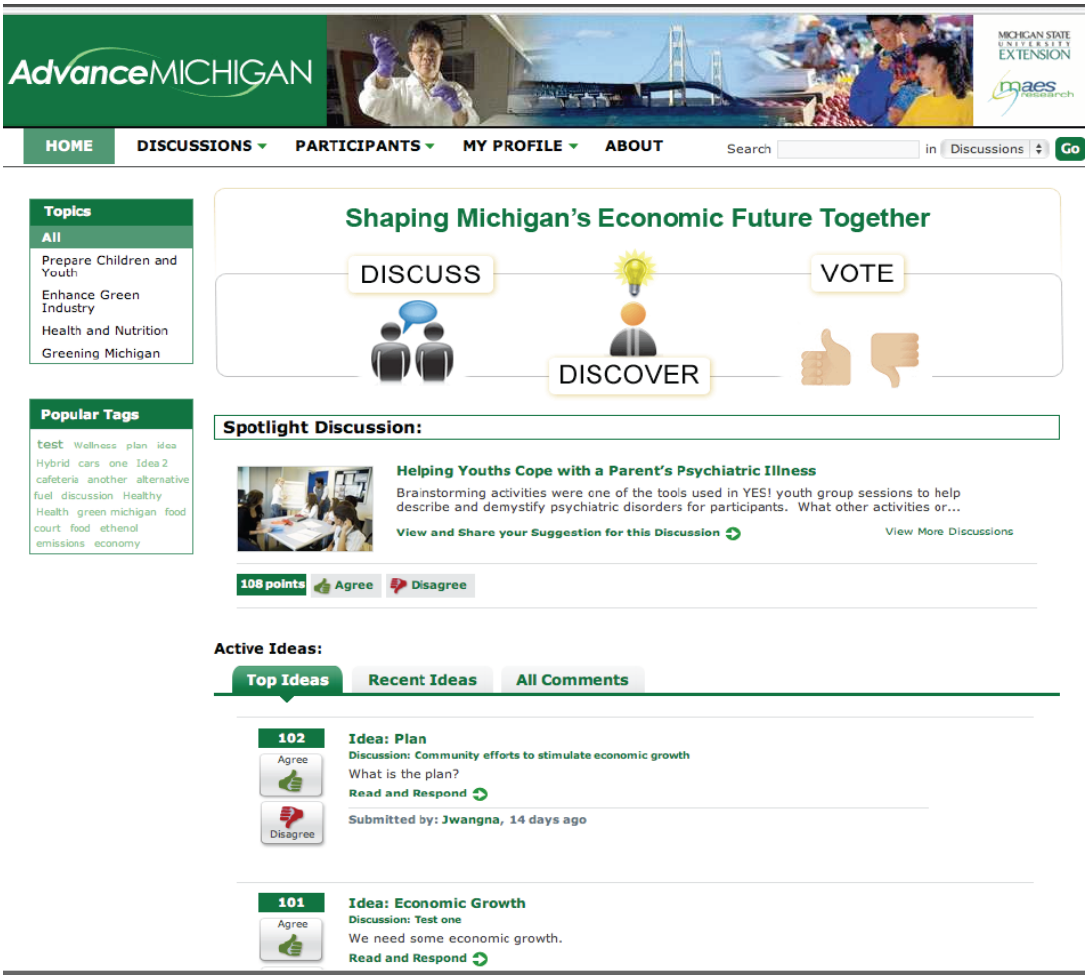
MSUE decided for their 2010 needs assessment to attempt an interaction environment based on social media, rather than using surveys as they had done previously. Their goals for using social media could be roughly divided into primary and secondary categories. The primary goals were to collect enough information from a diverse enough sample of Michigan residents that they could fulfill their needs assessment. While no desired number of users was established (though matching the 10,000 from the previous needs assessment was seen as desirable), having participation from across the state was seen as a necessary condition. They also wanted to open the feedback opportunity to a broader audience than they had in the past, where typically they had relied on lists of people who had accessed MSUE services. They specifically wanted people who had not had previous experience with the organization. Secondary goals were to make people more aware of the services offered by MSUE, to experiment with new technologies in the way they interact with constituencies, and to create new ways for stakeholders to interact with MSUE.

The initial decision to use social media was made in January of 2010. Since the federal reporting window was in the fall, it was decided that the site would only run through the end of June 2010, in order to allow time to analyze data. After the site topic had been established, the software vendor went through the design process. The site went live in May of 2010, leaving a total of two months for potential users to make contributions. After multiple iterations of design feedback, the AdvanceMichigan site was launched, as appearing in Figure 1. Initial topics and posts were populated by student workers, and in early May a public outreach campaign was conducted to bring people to the site.

The public outreach campaign had several aspects. The launch of the site was divided into two phases: a soft launch for MSUE employees would start discussions and see content, and a hard launch where current stakeholders and new audiences would be invited to discuss topics on the site. In the first phase, Extension members, of whom there were 1500 spread across the organization, were asked to created topics and hold initial discussions. This was done so that there would be content on the site when stakeholders came to participate, which would both shape how participation should happen and make clear there were other people also engaged with the project.

Extension officers in each of the counties were also asked to use their contact lists to invite community members to come to the site. Press releases were used to attract local print media. Social media channels like Twitter hashtags and Facebook pages were used to attract attention from audiences already using those services, and consequently more likely to use other social media. We identified several key, and subsequent activities as goals of outreach, all linking to meeting the overall goals of the site. First, the general public had to become aware of the opportunity to participate on the site, including that the site exists, what it exists for, and how to reach it. Second, users had to actually go to the site to see the content that was available. Third, users needed to create an account on the site, as there was no anonymous interaction available in the system software. Fourth, the goal was to get registered users to make a comment or vote on the content of others on the site. Each of these steps represents increasing commitment on the part of the users, with users making evaluations of their desire to participate at each step.

Figure 1: The front page of the Advance Michigan site



On the site itself, there were multiple possible types of interaction. Users could submit "Ideas", which were propositions about MSUE priorities. Users could discuss Ideas through a threaded discussion attached to each item. Also, users could vote content up or down, meaning that each idea and comment had a score based on the ratings of other users. All users had to register to participate on the site, both to get necessary demographic information for the needs assessment, and because the site software wouldn't support anonymous contributions.

In the end, 900 people signed up for AdvanceMichigan and made 561 comments on the site, well below the initial targets of MSUE. These participants were predominantly members of MSUE, and the most active members had been asked by supervisors to participate. In addition, MSUE offered multiple incentives to staff members to participate, including prizes for high levels of participation. This level of contribution was not seen as sufficient to meet the reporting guidelines for the MSUE needs assessment, and a new data collection is being planned. Perhaps because users logged in with their names, there was little to no angry content, though that had been a concern during the design process.

Below, we'll discuss the literature from media and information studies that guided the design of the system, and how that literature addresses common issues with the construction and use of social media systems. Next, we describe nature of the discussion that took place, and then present some of the feedback collected from the Extension directors during the implementation of the project.

Literature Review

What were the perceived benefits of using social media for a policy-related organization like MSUE? Previous literature had show social media, and Internet-mediated communication more generally, could be used for certain types of outreach tasks. In 2003, West studied over 2000 government agencies in 198 countries and found that most had an Internet presence, but only 16% used any form of interactive media (West, 2003). Even this 16% is based on a generous definition of interactivity that includes email lists, newsletters, and other targeted distribution of information. This presents an interesting gap in the literature for understanding the next generation of Governance 2.0. Whereas much of the prior literature on the success and failure of e-government internationally has focused on cultural and institutional obstacles (Krishna & Walsham, 2005; Ciborra & Navarra, 2005), or the lack of existing technology (Baliamoune-Lutz, 2003), prior research has not thoroughly examined whether highly interactive social media will result in greater success or introduce new obstacles.

Social Media and Citizen Engagement

Political deliberation, defined as a reciprocal open-minded process of reasoned argumentation (Dahlberg, 2001), has been identified as an important element for a functioning democracy. Individual citizens engaging in such deliberation have been found to experience increased levels of knowledge regarding the political system, empathy with fellow citizens, and a better sense of their own political interests (Mendelberg, 2002). Political deliberation has also been associated with the provision of benefits for collective decision-making (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004), making it an interesting variable to study when exploring how county governments engage and act upon citizen activity.

Using social media for political discussion may enhance the relationship between citizens and their governments. The effort of governments to engage citizens in democratic processes has intensified during the last years (Tambouris, Liotas & Tarabanis, 2007). E-Government applications are considered as useful tools for this purpose. E-Government, defined as the use of ICT in public administration (Löfstedt, 2005), aims at providing easy access to government information and services to citizens and businesses, increasing the quality of services, and providing the opportunity for citizens to participate in democratic processes. Although incipient, research exists on the participatory aspects of eGovernment websites. Muhlberger (2006) found that the use of e-Government applications that foster discussions seem to stimulate citizen deliberation, ameliorating the negative effects of citizens beliefs in a "stealth" democracy. Scott (2006), in a study that reviewed the capabilities to support citizen involvement of 3000 municipal government websites of the 100 largest U.S. metropolitan areas, found that very few municipal websites had applications that facilitated online public discussion. In contrast, they offered a large amount of information, financial transaction and information inquiry services.

The characteristics of the interaction that takes place through e-Government applications that support online discussion are largely unknown. Additionally, the technical affordances of systems that best encourage quality discussion and participation are also largely unknown. The use of county level government interaction in e-government environments helps explicate the relationship between political actors engaging through technical systems, i.e. who is discussing local policy issues and the effects of that discussion.

Social media and online interaction

Strong participation in social media for Governance 2.0 is dependent on a general base of social media interaction in other contexts, as core behaviors in social media sites may move from one site to another. Previous research has examined the factors that influence participation and interaction in social media, the strategies to motivate participation, and online behaviors such as peripheral participation, trolling and flaming. Several factors have been found to predict active participation and contribution. Characteristics such as type of group, identity of the poster and characteristics of the post predict whether a member will reply to a post by other community member (Arguello, Butler, Joyce, Kraut, Ling, & Wang, 2006); receiving a reply also influences the likelihood of visiting the community again (Arguello, Butler, Joyce, Kraut, Ling, & Wang, 2006). Furthermore, having a positive first experience with the online group is a strong predictor of participation and longevity in the group (Backstrom, Kumar, Marlow, Novak, & Tomkins, 2008).

Research studies have also examined the behavior of users in ”user-generated” sites, where users have the role of content producers, as in Wikipedia. They have found that only a minority of users contribute actively to online groups with actual content. Passive users that visit online groups and communities but only read and use the content without contributing are called “lurkers” or peripheral users. Although a common misconception that lurkers are driven by selfish motivations exists, research suggests that this behavior is in part due to the inexperience of users with the online community. Some lurkers are future active users that are learning from other users how to behave and contribute online (Chen, 2004; Dennen, 2008). Preece, Nonnecke, and Andrews (2004) found that reasons to lurk include efficacy issues with the topic and with the technical system itself, in addition to a lack of identity with the group, or perceptions that just visiting is actually a form of contribution.

Another type of behavior that has been observed includes antisocial behaviors called flaming and trolling. Trolling is described as provoking other group members in such a way that the discussion diverts from the main topic and falls into fruitless argumentation (Herring, Job-Sluder & Sckeckler, 2002), while flaming is an uninhibited hostile behavior expressed through words of profanity, obscenity, and insults with the intention to harm a person or organization (Alonzo & Aiken, 2004).

To sum the lessons of this literature, social media systems are notoriously difficult to get more than a fraction of an audience to contribute to, and sometimes those contributions are angry or abusive posts. These are significant design hurdles when the goal is to construct a policy feedback site encouraging wide-spread contribution. Consequently, we were designing with the idea that implementation would be difficult. Strategies to overcome these obstacles included partnering with strong offline organizations that intersected with stakeholders (local units of governments, libraries, schools), seeding content on the site to show the norms of

participation, and accessing existing social networks by having distributed MSUE staff invite their local constituencies to participate.

Social media and governance

The use of social media for political purposes by citizens, however, has been more dynamic in its evolution. Engaged citizens have used the Web to mobilize campaigns (Chadwick, 2006), engage in political opinion expression in the form of deliberation (see prior discussion), and in some cases, begin to cultivate an interest in politics through exposure via social media (Vitak et al., 2008). This body of literature, however, has yet to explore the level to which such citizen efforts are able to influence policy makers. Citizen efforts have been demonstrated to influence policy makers in the past (e.g., Stratmann, 2000) but little is known whether such influence can be exerted digitally.

The apparent intersection of these two bodies of literatures should involve the more routine operation of government. However, little conclusive evidence currently exists as to what level of impact ICTs, like social media, have on the routine function of government. Meijer (2007) summarizes the literature, indicating that some findings have suggested that ICTs allow for more information management by government, permitting them to accumulate more power, whereas other findings indicate that institutional norms dictate how ICTs are utilized in government settings and thus they have a limited impact on the routine operation of government.

Nature of AdvanceMichigan Content

First, we examine what type of information the AdvanceMichigan site gathered. The main purpose of the Advance Michigan website was to generate ideas about the way that the client organization should conduct itself and the missions it should pursue in the future. It's possible that while the site didn't accrue wide participation, as reported above, that the depth or novelty of the discussion on the site was useful to MSUE for its planning goals.

The constant comparative technique was used to categorize the calls for action contained within the 561 unique comments posted on the website. A preliminary set of codes was generated by analyzing a 10% sample of postings and these codes were subsequently applied to the remaining ideas. The categories were continually refined as the analysis proceeded. Up to four separate codes were allowed for each idea. However, none of the ideas required more than three separate codes and a total of 771 separate action themes were recorded.

Action themes were defined to refer to proposed actions identified in idea statements that were to be taken by the client or other parties to address the problem or issue under discussion. The action themes included in this analysis were the following:

- ***Formal education*** Courses for credit delivered in a formal classroom setting.
- ***Informal Education*** Information campaigns broadly addressed to segments of the general public through the media or live large group gatherings.
- ***Training*** Short-term, intensive, non-credit classes, professional conferences, or workshops on a specific topic addressed to a narrowly defined target audience
- ***Interventions*** Behavior change programs administered to members or clients of a specific institution.

- ***Consultations*** One-on-one or small group consultations with organizational agents or counselors, including expert systems.
- ***Policy*** Advocacy of changes in public or institutional policy through law or formal rule making.
- ***Research*** Basic or applied research to explore or monitor the issue
- ***Problem Definition*** Stresses the importance of the problem or defines an issue without proposing action
- ***Partnering*** Organize or facilitate cooperation with other organizations or individual volunteers
- ***No Action*** Reject proposed actions as either useless or incompatible with organizational missions
- ***Non-Responsive*** Ideas that don't further the dialog

Problem definitions were the most common form of idea, present in over 1/5 the postings. However, problem definitions were often coupled with proposed solutions. Informal education, intervention programs, and training were the most commonly given action themes. Each of these counted for over 10% total action themes recorded. Partnering with other organizations, advocacy of policy changes, research, and formal education accounted for the remaining themes.

Overall, ideas containing problem definitions tended to be among the longest ideas posted, occasionally running to 700 words or more. These tended to be statements of fact proposed by the author of the idea (e.g. "Having a balanced diet and not skipping meals is key to good health"), sometimes backed up references to authorities or web links to external websites or documents to substantiate their assertions. Problem definition statements without proposed solutions attached were common for some of the more controversial issues such as organic farming and animals rights.

In*formal education* solutions were the most frequently mentioned action theme. They typically referred to a wide range of conventional print and electronic media methods including fact sheets, flyers, posters, radio and television broadcasts, and educational videos. Information dissemination at live events including county fairs, street fairs, school events, and other community gatherings were also recommended. However, a number also offered non- specific urgings for public education such as," Educating individuals, families and children to help them to improve their lifestyle that leads in a good health," without identifying a specific medium or narrowly defined targeted audience. Although the issues identified for informal education campaigns cut across a wide spectrum of issues, they were most commonly mentioned in reference to public health and safety issues such as nutrition education and fire safety.

4-H activities accounted for most of the action themes in the **intervention** category. Many of these included calls to further involve youth in the planning future activities and to enlarge their scope to the broader community; for example, "Citizenship Academies have proven to be a great way to youth understand our local government and to see that they can have an active part of it. " These ideas included numerous references to existing programs around the state and the country that were offered as examples of activities worthy of wide-scale emulation.

P*artnering ideas* were those most likely to include innovative strategies, perhaps out of recognition of the dwindling resources available to the client organization. Schools, public service organizations such as Boys' and Girls' Clubs, and expanded industry partnerships were among those mentioned. Other partnering suggestions centered on building or expanding networks embedded in existing activities and forming clusters of organizations engaged in a particular industry:

Ideas for ***consultation*** services primarily revolved around the role of county extension agents. Many of the ideas in this category upheld the traditional role of the agricultural extension agents but others called for expansion into newer realms, "Assisting in Ag product development is key and aligns with MSU's assets and strengths, but assisting people wanting to develop microenterprise and home-based businesses outside of Ag may be just as important."

Public-policy ideas involved a broad spectrum of policy actors ranging from the mayor of Detroit ("This opportunity can be supported by Mayor Bing's recent suggestion that portions of Detroit need to be completely abandoned… could lead to large portions of the city that could be zoned for production agriculture.") to the National Forest Service ("Timber stand improvement cuts, and regular scheduled harvest reduce the amount of fallen dead trees and snags, and therefore reduce the amount of dry material for the forest fire to consume.") Ideas that focused on changes in the policies of the client organization were also found in this category such discussions of proposals to privatize that organization.

Research themes included open-ended questions for basic research such as," I wonder if anyone is researching if animal feeds are contributing to obesity rates?" as well as reminders of pertinent current basic research activities," MSU Extension at the NW Horticulture Research Station has conducted some very practical research on alternative pollinators for fruit trees." A number of the research ideas identified needs for applied research that develop data that can be used to monitor current conditions and to guide planning.

However, some ideas called for ***in*action**. They pointed out the uselessness of specific recommendations under discussion. Others pointed out the incompatibility of certain with the client organization's overall mission, such as prohibitions on advocacy of specific agricultural practices or public policies.

The data shown above were not truly interactive in the way it was hoped social media would encourage. Few new ideas emerged from the content contributed to AdvanceMichigan. Most ideas from users endorsed existing activities, or at most argued for further adoption of promising approaches but without incisive discussion of their merits. The area with the most new ideas, forming partnerships, in essence described ways of surrendering the mission of the client organization to others who were more likely to attract funding because they "owned" the populations served. Consequently, the AdvanceMichigan project, as mentioned above, did not gather the breadth of feedback from stakeholders hoped for, but also did not seem to foster a deep conversation between a smaller set of participants, which would have been an alternative positive outcome.

Feedback from County Extension Directors

During the course of the social media project, it became clear that fewer people than expected were creating accounts on the site and contributing both comments and votes. As described above, there was a model of user engagement that moved from making people aware that the site existed to encouraging their sustained participation. One possible explanation for the low rate of participation was that people were not being made aware of the site. Given there was not a budget on the project for a large mass media campaign, the main method by which the site was being propagated was through the network of Extension workers throughout the state, and the people with whom they worked at the local counties.

In order to evaluate whether this network of people was engaging was propagating the site to their stakeholders, we conducted 40 brief phone interviews with MSUE workers from across Michigan. These interviews were structured, with questions related to whether the MSUE worker had used the site, whether and how they had propagated it to others, and how useful and effective they found the site to be.

Most of the MSUE workers interviewed had heard of the AdvanceMichigan project. Many thought it was a potentially good tool in a general sense, but a bad tool for interacting with their specific set of current stakeholders. Many MSUE staff had read comments on the site, but had not commented themselves. When asked why not, they referred most often to being too busy to participate on the site, to difficulty in understanding how to navigate the site, and to not seeing how it would benefit their specific work in their areas. When asked why they would return to the site, most of the MSUE people interviewed said they would only return to the site if required by their managers.

Almost all MSUE staff reported that they had sent out invitations to participate on AdvanceMichigan through bulk emails, newsletters, presentations at meetings, social media messages and direct calls to interested organizations. Those who had not sent the site invitation reported either being too busy to do so, or that their constituents wouldn't be interested. For those who did invite others to the site, when asked what benefit they saw in the site for their stakeholders, they mentioned the ability to share opinions about the organization, the opportunity to learn more about MSU Extension, and that overall program sustainability was good for their stakeholders. When asked about what feedback they had received from groups whom they had invited to participate, the MSUE staff reported mixed feedback from constituents. While some users were positive about the site, most other listed a range of concerns, including that the site was too difficult to use, that it required registration, that it was slow to load in areas with no broadband, and that there were no topics on the site that seemed applicable to their concerns.

Discussion

The AdvanceMichigan project highlighted several issues with using social media for public sector interactions with stakeholders. The goal of the project was to collect large-scale feedback from MSUE's stakeholders, and to create interaction between site users that would create additional cues for future priority setting.

Studies of ICT and groupware implementation in organizations may have important lessons for how local governments and regional agencies implement these types technologies.

Grudin (1994) listed eight challenges for software developers who are designing systems that will be used by groups of people. His insight is that socio-technical systems compound the challenges of technical system design with management of social processes. He argues that a major challenge in designing effective social software systems is that there is often a disparity between who does the work and who does the benefit. This was the case for AdvanceMichigan, as it was not clear how the end users (who had to do the work of submitting ideas and voting on them) benefitted from their effort.

Another "Grudin challenge" for social software development is the need for critical mass. Social media depends on large audiences, both as low levels of participation are normal, and because network effects make it so the sites are more useful to end users as audiences grow larger. In the case of AdvanceMichigan, the number and diversity of comments never grew large enough to be seen as applicable to a large set of stakeholders. Critical mass can take time to develop, and it's very possible that the short window of life for the AdvanceMichigan site was too brief to build the type of critical mass necessary for large-scale interactions.

Grudin also points to the "failure of intuition" as a possible barrier to social software implementation. Designers and funders who both define and create social media projects in the public sector make assumptions about the needs of stakeholders, and what will be interesting to them. With the lack of other types of data, over-reliance on intuition and anecdote can mislead designers into making a site that doesn't meet the needs of a large body of stakeholders. In the case of AdvanceMichigan, designers never clearly identified what users gained from participating on the site, and over-relied on the idea that giving feedback about an important organization would be motivating in its own right.

Finally, Grudin mentions "unobtrusive accessibility" as a key necessary condition for social software sites. This means that the site needed to support both individual and group goals, as well as support a heterogeneous set of use types. Many social media sites provide multiple tools to enable diverse interactions, or have tools that are so general they can be applied to multiple purposes. The AdvanceMichigan site constrained users to posting ideas and comments and voting, which may have been too prescribed to encourage user interactions from a grassroots perspective.

Lessons from AdvanceMichigan

We learned several things in the design, implementation and evaluation of AdvanceMichigan. While the site was a success in terms of trying new media in the organization, and exploring the group's goals for use of social media, it did not attract the number of users or diversity of opinions to meet the requirements of the needs assessment. Success or failure of any software project is dependent on a complex set of variables, and the social factors included in projects involving social media only compound those difficulties. For AdvanceMichigan, we've identified several possible factors that might explain why the site did not reach the scale or scope intended by MSUE.

Audiences were not the right match for social media. While the overall goal of the project was to attract a wide group of stakeholders in Michigan, including those who are already using social media, the first groups of people to come to the site were those who had already

been engaged with the organization. These users tend to be over-represented by those living in rural and low-income areas. These areas often have lower Internet access rates, and efficacy when it comes to Internet use overall. Part of this is expressed as a norm of dismissing social media as banal, or eschewing online interactions in favor of face-to-face contact with Extension staff. While interacting in Web environments has become more common, issues like difficulty in expressing complex ideas in writing, using formatting tools in Web forms, negotiating registration processes, and understanding functions like tagging and linking are still barriers to those who do not interact on the Internet as a regular course of action.

The organization had a hard time, outside of a small group of champions, in thinking about new audiences. Most of the local MSUE staff, who had the main responsibility of propagating the site, often thought only of current stakeholders of their offices in terms of who might participate on the site. While central office staff saw this as a large-scale effort including people who had never interacted with MSUE before, interviews and evidence from the local staff showed that the focus kept re-orienting to current users of the organization's services. It could be that this "path dependency" in terms of stakeholders has a chilling effect on others who might be valuable contributors. By starting the "soft launch" period with MSUE members and key stakeholders, technical terms and "insider" language might have become prevalent, which could also have discouraged contributions from new audiences.

The organization, outside of the project champions, had low motivation to participate. MSUE is a massively distributed organization, and the needs assessment was largely driven by central office staff, with distant staff reporting low motivations to drive the process forward. Most of the distributed staff did send out messages to their stakeholders about the opportunity to participate, but had their motivation been stronger would they have pursued groups more aggressively, or participated more fully themselves? As mentioned above, not all MSUE staff registered for the site or posted Ideas, even though they were encouraged to do so by the central administration through continued reminders and reward incentives for active contributors.

The software was too hard to use for users not familiar with social media. For better or worse, sites like Facebook and Twitter, with easy interfaces and simplified user experience designs, have become the de facto standard for how people presume social media software will behave. For the software behind AdvanceMichigan, there were limits in terms of customization that might have affected interaction. For example, early in the process, users had to respond to an email to finish site registration, but the emails were often going to spam folders. Tags were mentioned as being confusing for users, but could not be removed from the site. As users make cost/benefit evaluations about their participation on a site, barriers to register and contribute increase the cost equation, making it less likely that they will contribute.

The timeframe mattered. As mentioned above, it's important to get critical mass in social media sites, and two months was likely not enough time to achieve that critical mass. This short time frame was imposed by exogenous concerns about reporting, but might have been a deciding issue, especially given the difficulty in bringing a distributed and diverse audience into the conversation. Timing issues might have been offset by a major traditional media initiative, but there did not exist the capacity for that in the course of this project.

The task may not have been a good fit for social media. The tools of social media depend on interactivity and user contribution. While crowd-sourcing feedback on community

development priorities could work in that framework, it could be that the specific goals of generating data for a needs assessment were too specific for a social media project. Goals like increasing interaction, fostering new connections, and encouraging stakeholder contribution are all goals aligned with the features of social media. However, the nature of social media is grassroots interaction between users, with the organization only acting as another type of user in these cases. Simply broadcasting messages, not responding to contributions of stakeholders, over-prescribing topics and overly specific goals may all hinder the success of social media projects in the public sector.

Conclusion

MSUE is planning to return to traditional methods for collecting data from stakeholders, but they remain excited about social media as a tool, and are planning new social media projects. For example, they have created a social media site for policy makers in local units of government in Michigan to discuss regionalism and place-making (http://greatplacenetwork.org). While it's clear challenges to the successful implementation of social media policy sites exists, the same opportunities that make them attractive in the first place also persist. As with commercial social media sites, most of which fail, obstacles do exist in social media projects in the public sector.

The AdvanceMichigan project shows that social media projects designed to interact with the public can be initiated with reasonable expectations, yet be hard to implement due to a range of limitations imposed by social, technical and task dependencies. How do we create compelling technologies that are tailored to correctly scaled tasks for audiences that have a likelihood to use social media sites? This combination of technology, task and audience is an essential set of dependencies that define success in social media use. Public sector organizations will struggle with using social media to accomplish goals of interacting with constituents until they establish clear cost/benefit propositions for those groups, identify technology that meets stakeholder needs, and match tasks to channels in a way that takes advantage of the interactive nature of the social media.

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