

The Role of Social Media in Public Consultations

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Abstract

The public sector, as an important actor in the development of service quality, has mostly shown a superior approach to receiving feedback from service users. In the era of community-oriented government, many governments use different methods to receive feedback from people, including public consultations. However, the practice of traditional public consultations does not satisfy public needs due to the fast development of society. Since the widespread use of the internet, many governments publish their policies to receive public feedback. Due to these shortcomings and the significant place of policies in public life, policymakers pay more attention to improving public consultations to enhance public support, so the academic world also becomes involved in improving public consultation methods. From theoretical perspectives to practices, studies have tried to find a way to enhance the effectiveness of policy feedback. Different theoretical perspectives have been used to facilitate the improvement of public consultations, including structural theory, practical theory, network theory, etc. Social media, as an essential tool in the early 21st century for a new form of communication, has also been the focus of some studies. Social media plays a big role in forming public opinion and shaping attitudes, especially related to social and political issues. Moreover, as a bridge, social media can connect people with the government, making it easy for them to send feedback and support, but there are challenges in the practical application of social media in enhancing public feedback.

Keywords social media, public consultations, feedback mechanisms, service quality, community-oriented government, policy development, public opinion, theoretical perspectives

2. Introduction

Social media platforms are playing increasingly significant roles as “intermediary infrastructures” between governing bodies and those governed for public dialogues and relationships. The engagement between government and governed as well as among the public in general, elements of “a polycentric system of multi-directional influence” are facilitated, extended, altered or sometimes mitigated. Social media is a broad term that refers to the many different and specific devices that enable social interaction of some form. For examples, blogs, podcasts, and wikis qualify as social media. There are additional facilitators that designers can assume will be used, including Email, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Social technologies and their particular types (blogging, social networking services, collaborative projects, twittering, etc.) are associated with the improvement of dialogue quality, better enabling the building of “participatory community beyond time and space.” Although various definitions of social media and social technologies have been discussed, the definitions are in structural terms. For research purposes it is the “understanding of conversation type” that is important. The research questions will explore the role of social media expressed “by means of human-centered conversation” in public dialogues in the domain of public consultation system. Therefore, “social media conversations” play a significant role. This study is an exploration of this last understanding. This study aims, first, at as broad a review as possible of the currents of thought in three main traditions that have an interest in discussing the working of social media: socio-cognitive and pragmatic framework, techno-centric references and studies about actual implementations of social media for public consultations. A cross-examination of these currents is conducted in order to map the intersections and differences within such works, all leading to a series of proposals for a better socio-technological design of deliberation. A better design is thought of as the leverage of better chances for the general public to hold this kind of public discussions. There should go along with the actual continuation of experimenting with social media technologies and conversations in public consultations. Ample reviews of public consultation practices are fulfilled, indicating the necessity of any detailed

scientific approach about this phenomenon in recent times. The rise of a particular type of public consultations is what brought about the design of this research project. The background is laid down by discussing some segments of general societal shifts that brought about variegated public participatory methodologies, which have been profusely based on the use of social technologies. The project of an empirical exploration of such a phenomenon comes afterwards. (Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021)

3. Theoretical Framework

1. Introduction

The role of social media in public consultations is wide-ranging. This paper, therefore, provides a framework that helps make sense of this role and uses three practical cases to show how the actual use of social media for public consultations currently occurs. Consultations form a critical part of creating policies and outcomes that underpin our public and social lives. Traditionally consultations were physical, primarily happening in town halls, council chambers, or the like, and involved a subset of people who were directly interested in or impacted by the actions being consulted upon. The development of the print media brought the possibility of broader public consultations in the form of advertisements, and the wider dissemination of information useful for responses, such as drafts of bills or policy summaries. Another technological leap forward in public consultations happened with the development of widespread phone networks in the 1960s and 1970s, enabling call-in radio talk shows and press to vote type calls to action.

In considering the social media and public consultations, the framework is positioned at the junction of the following two ongoing debates in the literature: on the one hand the strategic instrumentalization of social media use in the public duties of governments, civil services, and researchers, and on the other the more critical debate on the persistence of engagement inequalities in the uptake and use of new media to address traditional democratic challenges. This creates stakes in examining social media practices of public consultations at two paired but distinct levels. First is its capacity to change the traditional ways of how public consultations are conducted thanks to the

variously framed democratic affordances of social media, in turn yielding new practices and challenges in incorporating them within extant more or less formalised routines, protocols, and normativized expectations and obligations. Second, and relatedly, at the core is the investigation of how this change is articulated and navigated within larger governance configurations within and across state and semi-autonomous bodies on one hand, and between these and the public and civil society actors on the other. This is not just a variance in the polling or trending numbers that suggest a rise or fall in popularity, but a broadening out of the kinds of ideas and opinions that can be super-supported by evidence, values, preference or visceral response. (Chen & Wang, 2021)

3.1. Social Media and Public Consultations

This focus narrows the analysis from social network and media sphere as a whole towards a more specific domain of social media supported public consultations. Definitions of public dialogue processes are provided, highlighting their basis of face-to-face ideals. Social media tools are commonly classified in public consultation practices, consisting era-dependant groupings: Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used social media platforms, while others, like blogs, online forums, and dedicated consultation platforms, add to a further variety of practices. Real-time case studies to analyze social media impacts on public-involvement practices are reviewed. Social networked communication enhances transparency vis-à-vis processes, decisions and outlines the public's potential. Accessibility, understanding and public awareness rise from the technological affordances of social networks. Engagement may increase for both the general public and decision-makers. Over time, models of public engagement and public consultation practices have shifted towards less static and one-sided modes of communication. Traditional top-down approaches towards public reconciliation and information delivery progressively wane. One-way communication strategies extensively used during the late 20th century have, in part, given way to more interactive and immediate forms of engagement. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are employed to broadcast live videos, share various media formats, and communicate in real-time. To achieve sustainable outcomes, environmental changes

need to be addressed definitively. This includes adjustable and resilient systems that can keep up with (and preferably mitigate) socio-political and ecologic changes. Yet, definitions of success differ widely and are often conceded to high-level temporal scales. By contrast, less attention is currently given to the short-term considerations of public consultation success. The mutual relationship between social media activity and public involvement processes, whereas conflicting approaches suggest social media platforms generally impede public understanding and rational discourse or else predispose the information flow to a top-down direction. Hindered diversity, echo chambers and cross-platform content uniformity jeopardize the legitimacy of web-based engagement. Misinformation and slacktivism are described as further detrimental issues. Best online practices are also found to predominantly treat social media in training formats, without situating social media activities in a broader strategic, regulatory or social setting. Conversely, other social media practices necessitate continuous involvement and consultation where initial feedback is not an option. Erroneous user demographics and poor platform usability are found critical to the inefficiency of online communication. Lastly, the effectiveness of social media is seen as symptomatic of a broader political landscape and governance style. As such, cheap and mass-scale social media efforts are likely to fail if underlying consultation practices are perceived as insincere, contemptuous or remote. This study enriches the analysis with original interviews of industry and consultative domain experts. Policy makers, infrastructure developers and social researchers are invited to acknowledge the importance of social media activity and plan, anticipate and strategically channel their online communication in public consultation processes on time. (Criado & Villodre, 2021)

4. Case Studies

Most people do not participate in public consultations at any governmental level, mainly at the local. Despite some surveys trying to provide insights into the reasons that could explain this situation, no matching forum topic is always found. To address this gap, a worldwide comparison taking the UK and Brazil is undertaken using threads from the General forum about the disposal of two controversial issues in the urban environment.

It is found that the reasons why people stop participating in consultations are similar in both countries, always related to similar structural factors, not to cultural or governmental differences. Respondents in the UK elicit a list of informed strategies towards an enhanced consultation approach, while those in Brazil reflect on the potential of bottom-up social networks to aggregate and represent public opinion. Illustrated with examples from a growing practice in both countries, the conclusions drawn here are intended to provide thought and discussion for those who set, deliver and respond to the consultation processes. (Brusselaers et al.2022)

4.1. Successful Implementation of Social Media in Public Consultations

Social media allows for public engagement to come in many forms, with examples ranging from engaging posts about hobbies, professionally run contests, junk mail, and disseminators for news, to platforms of support for grieving individuals. Social media can help foster relationships between people separated by great distance or great difference (E. Schneider et al., 2018). It can put forth information that leads to discussions, which can lead to change. Effective research and anecdote come from multiple localities that looked at different ways to glean information; every social media platform appeals to a slightly different audience, and some audiences might overlap with those of other platforms. A practitioner of social media consented that diverging when communicating the same message across multiple platforms makes it feel “last minute-y.” Video and the use of humor were both successful. One successful post involved a video zoom through a model of the sun and then ending at a birthday cake model, all while showing the distance between the sun and the cake. Another shared an article that the practitioner thought was light on information but heavy on snark. It ended up getting 17k hits and got many to the website. Over the span of a few years doing a number of different things, the social media audience went from zero to 0.5m. A project on the islands of Hawai’i and Maui had an internet presence and a strategy for informing via social media prior to the project’s start. This strategy was detailed in the time of award. Methods to reach a broad swath of New York residents are still in development. A consultancy firm looked into reviews and ratings of a product, group, or

service, and figured out what to do with it. Because of that firm's nanobots in the air, a microwave water sanitation product was rated highly. This incident led to contracts with pharmaceutical organizations, brewers, defense contractors, and the State Department. (Andersen et al.2021)

5. Challenges and Limitations

Social media has been recognized as a promising platform to enhance public participation in the context of public consultation. Indeed, many governments and organizations nonetheless have implemented social media to invite public feedback on policy development. Given its characteristics that connect people widely across distance and time, let people post various formats from text to video, do it on both individual and collective levels, creates two ways interaction between them, and often empowers people to develop new opinion, it can be assumed that social media can boost the quality of public consultation (Sigit Sayogo, 2019). Ideally, by nurturing direct and transparent dialogue between public sectors and citizens, it brings collaboration, discussion, interest integration, and idea sharing into a more beneficial approach for all stakeholders. These goals are major goals throughout most of participations in public consultation. However, much evidence to the effectiveness of implementing social media throughout the process could not be entirely achieved. It implies that understanding the potential limitations and challenges of this technology becomes pivotal for public officials and organizations involved in those activities.

Social media applications may not address all of citizens' needs and interests for participating in public consultation. One of the notable issues is the notion of digital divide. This digital-based limitation indicates a certain gap or disparity of people to access, use, adopt, or establishing any technology and related information. Accepted as a new media, together with user generated content, social media does not necessarily mean to being reach all social condition and community, especially the poorest people. A skeptical opinion argues, instead of being a sophisticated technology for intensive dialogue and information sharing between people and public sectors, the disadvantage people instead used just for amusing, trivial discussion, and socially unrelated activities.

The disproportionate use of e-participation in terms of digital divides is considered to not producing an even, transparent and legitimate process. A further problem related to the lack of access to social media for consultation is social exclusion. A significant digital divide of new technology is measured by economic aspect comprehensively in social class, location, infrastructure, education, or combination among others demographic variables. Impoverished people are typically hard to engage and have a less chance that commenting on the web, as well as Internet necessities and related equipments. (Muhammed and Mathew2022)

6. Best Practices and Recommendations

This article provides a set of practices and recommendations drawn from the discussion on the role of social media in public consultations to serve as a guide to those looking to optimize it in practice. Consultation professionals and public officials looking to consult the public on decisions can benefit from this list.

Best Practices and Recommendations

1. **Clarity in Communication** Clarity in communication is the most agreed-upon practice among the presenters and the audience as indicated by 15 markers. Practice in clear communication concerns using simple language, breaking into smaller parts, being upfront for clarity, and using visuals to explain. This is a relatively consistent aspect of social media practices referenced, with good practice recommendations relating to the field of scholarly discourse including avoiding scientific jargon in posts.
2. **Responsiveness to feedback** Being responsive and able to adapt is the second most agreed-upon practice. Especially for public officials, as they are reminded, they are here to serve. This is emphasized elsewhere in contemporary document reviews, with research attempting to engage research priority setting topics suggesting an anti-deficit approach to priority setting, with social media being seen as a way that affected communities might be proactive in their approach to setting priorities.
3. **Inclusive Practices in Outreach** Inclusive practices in outreach more broadly are the third most agreed-upon practice. Steps to create an inclusive and helping environment are more practices listed for your reference, but among them, five complement most

closely those found in contemporary literature. This includes promoting accessibility information in the bio of your online platform and fostering partnerships with community organizations also working to improve public engagement efforts. Good practice in the broader literature includes ensuring that social media strategies are intentionally tailored for underrepresented subpopulations. This line of articles suggests that promoting information on equity in access to information and resources for participation in collaboration should be a fundamental principle for all public consultation practitioners. For those tasked with undertaking consultations, this also underscores how social media practice should be considered in relation to the broader public consultation strategy (Sivaratnam et al., 2022).

4. Ongoing Assessment and Adaptation Ongoing assessment and adaption of social media strategy to meet changing needs is another key good practice. Finally, for all stakeholders implementing the engagement of social media in public consultations, there is an explicit recommendation found online to ensure that adequate training and capacity-building resources are made widely available to stakeholders (Lu et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

The rise of social media has seen a shift in the traditional way in which governments communicate and engage with citizens. While the increased use of social media shows potential in enhancing democratic practices and increasing civic engagement, it also brings about evolving challenges. Building on a literature review, a theoretical framework and examples of good practices in Canada, the conclusion synthesizes the key findings, underlining that the rising significance of social media will increasingly shape the setting, framing and potentially also the outcomes of future public consultations. Social media have the potential to change the power balance in favour of the public, who proactively shape their own communicative agenda (A Ayankoya, 2013). The role of social media in public consultations, however, extends beyond particular issues themselves in synergy with other elements of the Help and Engage phases framed in Marinetrapp's gradient of Arnstein's ladder – the normative dimension focused on (in)equality of the distribution of power between government and citizens.

This is significant because the interactive features of social media allow both synchronous and asynchronous communication of messages and acceptance of a wider variety of formats of input. E-participation reaches beyond sharing information and trading on opinions, and people can be motivated, enabled and capable to add more fundamental inputs using social media. Public participation is not a fully spontaneous phenomenon; neither is it a one-off intervention. Awareness-raising and civic education need to be integrated in all public networks engagement and help create preconditions for more fundamental (either demand- or supply-driven) public involvement in future. Interestingly the use of moderated social media approaches may also address concerns of decision makers and prompt more willingness on their side to experiment with social media. Although the potential of social media used in consultation exercises opens a space for more reflexive and collaborative approach to policy making and brings positive implications to public network community building, to stimulate further experimentation and inform strategic planning recommendations stakeholders could benefit from more transversal and in-depth academic research consistently documenting good practices. With the evolutionary rationale elaborated on, a wide range of approaches and not a particular model is suggested.

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