Government Official Microblogs: An Effective Platform for Facilitating Inclusive Governance

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ABSTRACT

Applications of social media could bring more convenience to the government for getting public feedback, or more citizen participation, in order to provide more inclusive public services. Microblogs is one of those social media tools. Nowadays, all governments have begun to use government official microblogs to publish information, collect public opinions, and interact with the public. Based on current literature review and analysis, this paper first develops a theoretical framework on the effect that microblogs brings to public inclusive governance from the perspective of microblogs' interaction object. Theoretically, this research indicates that microblogs have a positive impact on inclusive governance, but this effect remains to be tested by future practice. There are still some problems in current public interaction between governments and citizens through microblogs, and the government needs to change their musty ideas and guide the effective interaction actively. Finally, this paper further discusses limitations of this research and directions of future research.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.6.1 [Management of Computing Information Systems]: Project and People Management-Management Techniques

General Terms

Management, Measurement, Performance

Keywords

Government Microblogs, Governance, Social Media, China

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of ICTs has brought public governance new opportunities, as well as challenges. In the era of Web 2.0, a huge number of web-based applications have emerged. These applications rely on the concept of the user as a producer of information, which provide more possibilities for better governance [13], for example, government official microblogs.

Nowadays, countries around the world take seriously to apply social media like microblogs, and high-level officials from US, Britain, and Japan has been microblog users. Applications of social media could bring some improvements aiming at providing feedback to agencies, and more citizen participation. Also, agency staff could use social media for improving formal cooperation [13].

By the end of 2010, Chinese microblog accounts have exceeded 75 million. With its network effect taking shape, microblogs is playing a more and more important role in Chinese social and political life. The year of 2010 was named as "China's first year in microblog's era" by Chinese citizens. By taking advantage of the rapidly growing microblog community, government could run official microblogs to interact with citizens, enhance government information services, keep tracking with public opinion, help with emergency response, improve government credibility and further promote the development of e-governance. Nowadays, many Chinese governments and officials have opened official microblogs to interact with citizens. Microblog, to some extent, is becoming a more and more useful tool for the government. However, compared to the traditional channels between government and citizens, what are the new changes of microblogs? What meaning does it bring to government governance? These are the main research questions of this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As a new kind of social media and web2.0 tool, microblogs attracted much academic attention in recent years. The current studies are mainly focusing on the definition of microblog, its characteristics and its implications on government governance, especially on public participation.

2.1 Definition of Microblog

Microblog as one kind of social media has increasingly become an effective way of information dissemination and personal communications. Social media is "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" [4]. With the help of social media, ordinary people have become producers of content as well as consumers so called "prosumers", being capable of publishing their own contents on the Web. Microblog is one kind of social media using web 2.0 technologies, which make people communicate with each other without ant time and space constraints once the Internet is available. The users send message on these websites to interact with other people, and the maximum length of one message should be less than 140 words.

When it comes to the characteristics of microblog, it is commonly believed by the scholars that microblogs is a new kind of social media and Web 2.0 tool, with the main features include timeliness, simplicity, economy, grassroots, interactive, pluralism, autonomy, the original ecology, fragmentation, group polarization, and at the same time it could weaken the role of opinion leaders. Zhao and Lai [15] also argued that microblogs have 4A characteristics, including Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime, Anything, that is, anyone can become the microblog communicators and can transmit any information at any time and any place.

2.2 Microblogging on Government Inclusive Governance

With the development of international electronic public services, new information technologies has contributed a lot on the promotion of inclusive governance and improved the level of public participation. Governments has been increasingly paid more attention on providing diversified, personalized, ubiquitous, and high-quality public services, which has clearly showing the characteristics of e-inclusion" [5][6]. Also, in public participation area, successful public participation depends on diversification, inclusiveness and equality; and diversification means its participants are able to represent the view of people from different social fields, social hierarchy; inclusiveness refers to lowering the threshold of e-participation; equality involves equal participation [1]. Microblogs provide a useful platform to improve public participation.

2.3 The Mechanism of Microblog's Effects on Public Inclusive Governance

As mentioned earlier, public participation requires people from different social fields, social hierarchy to participate equally [1], and microblogging reduce the threshold of public participation, so people could participate in anytime and anywhere. Therefore, microblogs expand the scope of public participation, and could provide more feedback to citizens.

2.3.1 Different Types of Microblog's Users: A Multi-Perspective

Microblogs has significant differences from the traditional government portal, blogs and other forums. Their users on these websites overlap a lot, but still not the same. The characteristics of different website applications involve different active citizens.

1) Personality. Previous research has proved that in the increasingly user-generated Web, users' personality traits may be crucial factors leading them to engage in this participatory media [3]. The former researches established three personality traits that are central to social media use: extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience [3][10].

2) Age: Correa et al. [3] also found that it was particularly important among the young adult and extraversion was the most important predictor of social media use. Prensky concludes that many digital immigrants confront each change in technology as something new to be mastered. Generally, young adult, the elderly who are open to new things and digital technologies tend to be more active in microblogs and other social media tools [8].

3) Gender: Gender presented another difference among personality traits. While extraverted men and women were both likely to be more frequent users of social media tools, only the men with greater degrees of emotional instability were more regular users. No significant relationship existed between women and emotional stability [3].

4) Social ranking: the low threshold of microblogs and the characteristics of the grass-roots has weakened the role of opinion leaders which enables people from different social class to participate in public governance, and promotes the exchange of social heterogeneity groups [12], namely, people from different social classes, departments, and other ethics.

5) Education Level: since microblog is easy to use, users could come from different education levels. Technology is not a barrier any longer, which could give the government more kinds of public opinions.

6) Special Target Group: taking the disabled as an example, Zhao & Qiu [14] examined the significance of social media to disabled students, and argued that social media tools are vital to the lives of teenagers today because microblogs removes physical distances and can significantly expand the living space of youth who otherwise are confined by their disabilities. The Center for Technology in Government (CTG) identified that social media like microblogs could provide more service channels for the disabled [2].

7) Space-time dimensions: Microblogs has 4A characteristics, that is, Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime, Anything [15], which expand the scope and depth of interaction and participation both vertically and horizontally.

In summary, microblogs has not only expanded the scope of public participation, so that different personality traits, age, sex, social class, education level could have equal interactions with the governments, but also expanded the channels for participation. Moreover, it vertically breaks the time limit of interaction and weakens the barriers of geographic isolation to promote participation any time at anywhere.

2.3.2 Governance in Microblog Era: Inclusive and Targeted

Based on the literature review above, with the help of microblog platform, government expands their service scope effectively, and brings more G2C participation and interaction, which give great impetus to inclusive governance. Due to the particularity of online participation, more introverted people could participate more, which could also strengthen the interactive effects of other active users. Those digital immigrants like the elderly who are open to new things and digital technologies, and the digital natives, that is, young people, and can participate public affairs online, while they have limited channel to participate before. So microblogs can make up the general public participation. From the social level, citizens from varied levels can participate equally, and this could impel the government to promote public decision-making more democratization and deliver more equal public services effectively. Microblogs also enables those vulnerable groups to participate in the process of governance. From the space-time dimension, it brings more possibilities for the government to provide cross-regional (or even cross-border) services ubiquitously, and extends depth of inclusive governance.

It is worth mentioning that, while expanding the breadth of interactive citizens, microblogs could also strengthen the interaction more targeted. Interactive citizens could have a significant difference depend on different government departments or various events. For example, from gender perspective, women may mostly participate in microblogs for expressing their views, or expanding their social networks and social activities, while men may be for strengthening their relationship with others, learning about current political events. Therefore, education, tourism, food and other related government departments may be more favored by women, while transportation, defense, and public security will be paid more attention by men.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PLAN

This research will take an analysis on secondary data, including research reports, thesis and research papers. In order to ensure the impartiality of the findings, the reports selected in this article are not only from universities or other research institutes, but also those from enterprises and social organizations.

There are many microblog platforms, like Sina, Sohu, Tencent, and so on. It could be a great challenge to discuss all the government official microblogs. Therefore, this paper simplifies the data collection and chooses Sina as an example. According to the DCCI survey in 2010, Sina is the most preferred microblog platform, which has the highest number of users or potential users, with the selection rate 69.7%. So I believe the status quo on Sina could reflect the reality of microblogs in China.

4. ANALYSES ON STATUS QUO OF GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL MICROBLOGS

In theory, microblog brings opportunities to the governments for inclusive and targeted governance by expanding the range of public participation. However, due to the development of China's microblog is not mature enough, so evaluation and discussion on the current status quo can provide recommendations for the development of the governmental official microblogs.

4.1 The Existing Government Official Microblogs and its Populations of Concern

1) Governmental institutions start opening microblogs: according to "2011 China Administrative microblog research report" (conducting by "Public Opinion and Communication Research Laboratory", Fudan University), till March 20, 2011, 1708 governmental agencies have opened real-name authentication microblogs, and the distribution of the government's official microblogs are not balanced either geographically or institutionally, including governmental level, institutional, and sectoral distribution [9]. The report further found that most Shanghai government officials registered there microblogs on the Xinmin Net (http://t.xinmin.cn), with the proportion up to total more than 84 percent, followed by Eastday (http://t.eastday.com/), which accounts for 15 percent account, while only 1 percent of them has registered on Sina or other microblog platforms. This situation is worthy of consideration, microblog is the interactive platform of government and the public, while most citizens are mainly active on the website of Sina or other open microblog platform, how to promote the interaction between governments and the public if governments open their microblogs on other website like Xinmin or Eastday.

2) The analysis of "Concern" subject of government official microblogs: for governments, microblogs is not only a platform for issuing information, but also to collect public opinions. According to a cursory analysis of governmental official microblogs "concerns", different governments have various kinds of "concerns". Most government microblogs has few "concerns", and even many government official microblogs concerned no more than ten other microblogs. Those "concerns" are mainly from the mass media, government agencies or departments of the same level, other government agencies, government branches at lower levels which have business contact, government officials, corporate high level executives, academics and other citizens. Government official microblogs pay more attention to the mass media, government agencies (all levels), and government officials, while less on citizens'. Microblogs provide a more convenient and efficient platform for the government to collect public opinions, but its active attention to the practical needs of ordinary citizens is still relatively lack.

4.2 The Main Characteristics of Sina Microblog Users

Currently, many scholars have conducted lots of analyses on the characteristics of the user of the microblogs multi-dimensionally. On the segmentation of individual users, taking "behavioral loyalty" and "emotional loyalty" as two standards, Zheng [16] divided all the Sina individual users into three types, mild, moderate, and extreme, and she further analyzed the user difference in terms of gender, age, education, and income. Report from Beijing Online Media Association analyzed the characteristics of the early users of the microblogs, and find out that the microblog users can be divided into four categories, namely, self-expression type (46%), socially active (16%), discuss and participatory (16%) and diving-prefer type (21%).

Specifically, microblogs has opened up the possibility of expanding interactive citizens or organizations, which could enhance inclusive governance. According to Sina's White Paper on Chinese First-year microblog, among all the active users of Sina microblog, women occupy 65 percent, while men accounting for 35% [11].

On the dimension of age, users from different ages use microblog on different purpose. Mainly of them are 20-30 years old, with main purposes to maintain contact with their friends, or to record their feelings, and to learn the social hot issues, while people from 30 to 40 years old is more focus on learn the social issues and expanding the circle of friends; however, users over the age of 40 pay more attention to understand the social hot issues, expressing their opinions, and expand their network; on the contrary, users under the age of 20 is more emphasis on recreation and leisure, recording their feelings, and making new friends [7]. Studies have shown that the younger age groups from 18-30 years old has a greater level of participation on microblogs, accounting up to 67%, which means microblog users tend to be younger [16].

From the view of income, occupation and education, data from Beijing Online Media Association shows that more than 63% microblog users has got a bachelor degree at least. Moreover, there is no significant income difference between microblog users

and non-microblog users. The number of microblog users with income of more than 5000 RMB per month is a little bit higher than those of non-microblog users, by 3 percent. Zheng [16] argued that current Sina microblog extreme users have lower education level and relatively low income.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The most important reason for government to use social media is to move closer to the users, in other words, "go where the mass go" [8]. Given the breadth of microblog users, government could achieve a more effective interaction and communication with the public by opening official microblogs. Theoretically, this research indicates that microblogs have a positive impact on inclusive governance, but this effect remains to be tested by future practice. It could expand the channels for vulnerable groups to participate more in public affairs, and it breaks the time and space isolation, and enables ubiquitous participation. With the help of microblog platform, government expands their service scope effectively, and brings more G2C participation and interaction, which give great impetus to inclusive governance. Upon the participation of different groups, government could conduct more targeted governance.

Overall, microblog makes interaction between governments and citizens more easily accessed in terms of geography, time, gender, age, occupation, income, and education. The assessment results are consistent with the theoretical framework, but still need further discussion and verification. Government concerns on microblogs are still in a narrow range, and they needs to pay more attention on ordinary people. Although governments conduct more interaction on government official microblogs, the degree of participation still needs to be improved. Theoretically speaking, one can access to the Internet with a mobile phone, but microblog is still a new thing. The current use of it is still very limited, and it will take more time to develop microblogs and to promote its implications in public governance.

According to DCCI's estimates, the annual growth rate of the various microblog accounts will be 140%-200% in the following three years, and the outbreak year of growth will appear in the years 2012, 2013 [11]. Government should pay close attention on the implications of microblogs continuously. Meanwhile, microblog is a grassroots media with no information "gatekeeper", so government also needs to correct and clarify information timely.

The limitations of this study are very obvious. Since the practical development of microblogs in China is still in its infancy stage, the discussions in this study are only a theoretical analysis. There are many other problems which need to be further solved, such as who are relatively active on what on microblogs, the public are concerning about what kind of topics, viewpoints on what kind of topics can be collected through the microblogs, what are the differences between microblog users and users of traditional media. The discussion on the status quo is mainly based on the assessment of current report, and lack of further empirical data validation. All these problems provide direction on further expanding and sublimation of this study.

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