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Building Trust in Government through Social Media: *An InterPARES Trust Research Project*

Patricia Franks and Mark Driskill

San José State University, San Jose, CA, USA

patricia.franks@sjsu.edu

mbdriskill@gmail.com

Abstract: Globally, trust in government fell 14% since 2013 according to the 2014 *Edelman Trust Barometer*. Canada experienced a seven-point drop to 51% and the U.S. a ten-point drop to 49%. At the same time, trust in information provided through new media rose. Online search engines were considered credible sources of information by 63% of respondents and social media by 45%, up from 41% in 2013. The purpose of this research project, *Social Media and Trust in Government*, is to answer two questions, “Is there a positive correlation between trust in government and social media initiatives?” If so, “What can we learn about the administration of social media initiatives that result in an increase of citizen trust in government?” The first phase of the project involves a literature review, a study of selected government social media initiatives in the U.S. and Canada, and a cursory examination of citizen attitudes as evidenced by online interactions. The second phase involves an exploration of the correlation between citizen experience and trust in government, as well as linkages between trust and the concepts of openness, transparency, accountability and social capital. This paper describes the work conducted to date. The authors are members of the North American Team of international researchers contributing to the InterPARES Trust research agenda aimed at producing a framework to ensure trust in digital records in a networked society.

Keywords: trust, e-government, e-participation, social media, social capital, InterPARES Trust

1. Introduction

Government experienced the largest decline in trust of any institution in 2013, according to the 2014 Edelman Trust Barometer. The online survey of 33,000 respondents in 27 countries revealed that globally trust in government fell four points to an historic low of 44 percent. The most significant drops were in the U.S., France, and Hong Kong, moving levels of trust in those countries below 50 percent.

The same study revealed that global trust across all media declined only slightly. However, in countries like the U.S. and Canada, less than half of the respondents, 42% and 41% respectively, trust media to do what is right. Although trust in the media in general decreased, trust in social media and information shared online has increased. This prompts the question, “Can social media be used by government to increase citizen trust?”

2. Literature Review

Understanding elements of trust as they relate to social capital is a significant challenge for government. Meeting this challenge requires an e-governance strategy that includes citizen e-participation. According to Watson and Mundy, when citizens learn “how and why a particular political decision is forming, citizens will be more capable of monitoring and influencing politicians” (2001:29).

Electronic Government (e-GOV), the application of the Internet and other Information Technology (IT) to provide information and services to citizens electronically, emerged in the late 1990’s (Gronlund and Horan 2005). Chen et al. (2006) define e-government as a “permanent commitment” by the government to provide electronic services to constituents.

Chun et al. (2010) place the development of e-government into four categories. During the first three, basic information is provided on government websites, interactivity is added to webpages, and transaction services are provided. The fourth category is a participatory/co-productive one where government promotes shared governance to transform operations in terms of seamless information flow and collaborative decision-making (p. 1).

Using a two-stage model to analyze 2001 Pew survey data, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) concluded that something as simple as “visiting a local government website led to enhanced trust in local government.” But Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley (2008) studied citizen participation in e-government through the lens of e-governance and concluded that e-governance is not fully functional until e-participation takes place. D’Agostino et al.

(2011) make a key distinction between e-government and e-governance, where e-government provides electronic services and access and e-governance fosters e-participation and civic engagement. If e-participation represents the actions citizens take to electronically engage with their governments, co-production (i.e., value created by one outside the agency prompted by the agency) is a positive outcome (Alford 2011:7).

Because e-participation goes beyond transactional relationships, understanding how governments may employ social media to facilitate e-participation is crucial to understanding the complex nature of the e-citizen/e-government relationship. In a cyclical manner, social media content has the potential to affect policymaking decisions that strengthen e-government initiatives, which in turn may lead to greater transparency and openness (see Figure 1). The genesis for providing effective e-governance lies first with creating more effective e-government models and then with facilitating more robust e-participation that advances e-governance.

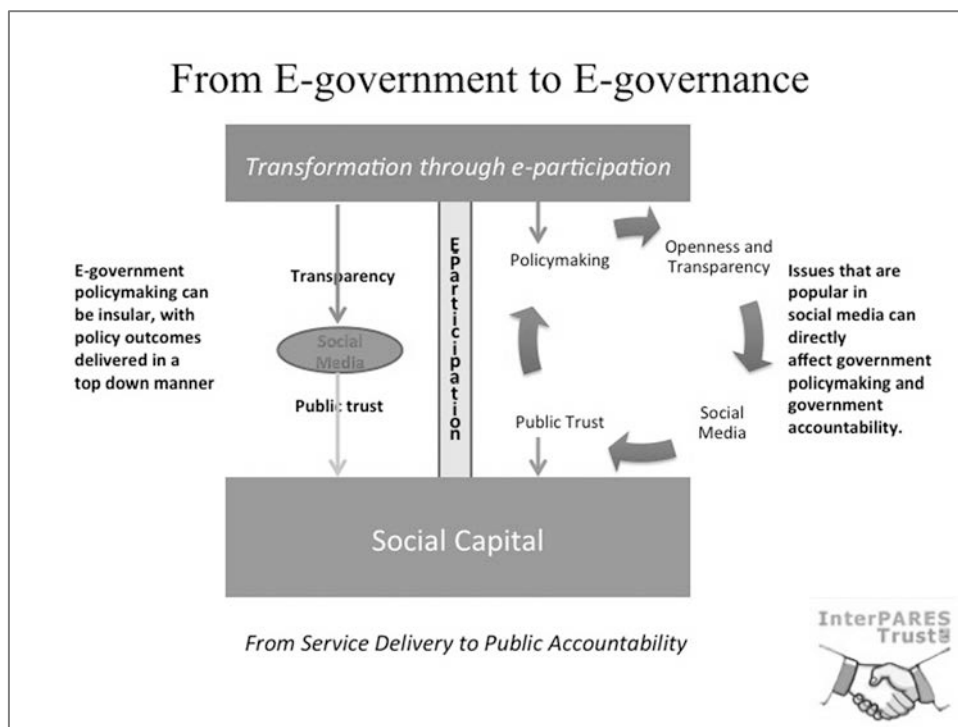


Figure 1: E-participation transforms E-government models into E-governance models.

Recently, researchers have recognized the relatively unexplored area of study related to the use of social media by government and its correlation to citizen trust. However, early empirical studies relied on 2001 Pew research survey data (Tolbert and Mossberger 2006; Welch et al. 2005; West 2004). A more recent study by Song and Lee (2013) used 2009 national e-government survey data from the Pew Research Center. This study will explore the relationship between government use of social media and citizen trust by gathering and analyzing primary data. From the data gathered, case studies will be written and best practices will be identified to assist public administrators improve their social media strategies with the goal of increasing citizen trust and social capital.

3. Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation is based upon archival and diplomatic theory and concepts related to trusted records and incorporates the following theories:

- Behavioural Trust Theory, which defines trust relations among people and organizations (related to citizen beliefs and preferences and trust in government).
- Resource-based Theory, which explains how public administrators utilize their resources and capabilities to share information, engage and influence citizens, and foster e-participation through social media strategies.

- Social Capital Theory, which is a broad term encompassing the “norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits” (Woolcock, 1998, p. 155).
- Social Network Theory, which views social relationships in terms of nodes and ties (actors and relationships, in this case government and citizens).

4. Research Design

This project is part of the overarching multi-dimensional, international, collaborative research agenda called “Trust and Digital Records in an Increasingly Networked Society (InterPARES Trust)” that began in April 2013. The four-year study is funded in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. It aims to produce frameworks that will support the development of integrated and consistent local, national, and international networks of policies, regulations, standards, and legislation concerning digital records entrusted to the Internet, to ensure public trust grounded on evidence of good governance.

The multi-faceted research design for this project combines both qualitative and quantitative methods, including exploratory research, correlational research, and case study design. The methods of data collection and analysis include observations conducted online, sentiment analysis of social media content, semi-structured interviews, and surveys to determine if there is a correlation between citizen trust and government use of social media.

4.1 Phase 1

This first phase is exploratory in nature. An iterative approach was used to develop the research design and to select subjects. During phase one:

- Ten cities from the US and ten from CA were selected from information available online to ensure geographic and demographic diversity while meeting the minimum requirement for social media accounts (i.e., Twitter accounts for the city, mayor, and police).
- Three years of content will be gathered from three city-sponsored government Twitter accounts for each municipality (city, major, and police). Sentiment analysis tools (e.g., Splunk, Weka, Netlytic) will be applied to identify citizens’ attitudes when interacting within government social media accounts.

4.2 Phase 2

The second phase involves both correlational research and case study development. During phase two:

- Online surveys will be administered to gauge citizen levels of trust in government and in information received through social media. A partial least squares (PLS) analysis will determine if a correlation exists. Linkages between trust and the concepts of openness, transparency, accountability, and social capital will be explored. The survey will be based on the Edelman Trust survey, and the levels of trust exhibited by citizens in each city will be compared with 2013 national averages for the U.S. and Canada.
- Additional data regarding administrative issues (e.g., expectations, metrics, outcomes) will be gathered either in person or through telephone calls or web conferences with government employees. Case studies will be developed for the four cities with the highest levels of trust exhibited as a result of the online surveys. Best practices for public administrators will be identified. Results will be disseminated through the InterPARES Trust website (Interparestrust.com), conference presentations, and publications.

5. Conclusion

Citizen trust in government is at an all time low globally and has fallen in both the US and Canada. At the same time, trust in social media as a credible source of information has maintained an upward trajectory. We posit that social media can be an effective tool to engender citizen trust in government and increase social capital. The purpose of this study is, first, to prove or disprove this hypothesis and second, to develop case studies and best practices to share with public administrators. Linkages between trust and openness, transparency, accountability and social capital will be explored.

Similar studies related to citizen trust and government use of social media analyzed existing datasets from 2000 or 2009. This study will examine primary data gathered from selected municipal government websites, government employees, and citizens. Questions to gauge citizen trust will be based on an existing tool, the

Edelman Trust Barometer, which has measured global levels of trust for the past 14 years. The results will be shared through the InterPARES Trust website, publications, and conference presentations. This research design can be replicated for additional municipal governments as well as government agencies on the regional level in the U.S. and Canada. It can be adapted to explore levels of trust in government and trust in information acquired from government social media sites for cities around the globe.

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