Civic Engagement in Services Design and Provisioning: A Case of We-government

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In recent years, public management literature has focused its attention on communities' role in public service design, production, and delivery. The present paper is focused on the review of the main academic contributions describing the most common models that frame citizens' engagement in service co-production. Among these models, a specific attention has been paid to one of the most recent: the "we-government" paradigm. Consequently, to better understand we-government conversational and cooperative potential, the analysis has also interested the influence of recent mass collaboration channels and in particular of social media on citizens engagement in public service co-production, in order to better understand how and when they act as local and national governments' partners. To support theoretical evidences, a case study analysis has been conducted in order to check the appliance of a we-government platform to a specific area. In particular, it has been analyzed the FixMyStreet social platform and its implementation in the city of Gloucester (UK).

Keywords: civic engagement, social media, co-production, e-government, we-government, FixMyStreet

Introduction

Over the past decades, literature has posed a growing attention on citizens' participation in public life, especially in public services design, development, and provisioning. Several scholars have considered the recent expansion of civic engagement as a response to the recent declining of citizens' participation in electoral competition (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jaafar, 2014). However, this concept seems to be used to cover several issues, such as those related to elections, charity, and civic organizations' activities. In this context, the spread of the Web 2.0 and social technologies offers to institutions "unimagined opportunities to do more for themselves" (Johnston & Hansen, 2011, p. 22), responding to citizens' demands for participation. Conversely, a silent, but strong revolution has led public management towards participative policies, based on government-citizen interaction that some scholars have defined "we-government" (Linders, 2012). This changing pattern is clearly related to the "e-government" evolution (Weerakkody, Irani, Lee, Osman, & Hindi, 2015), a phenomenon that "is understood as the use of ICT to promote more efficient and cost-effective government, facilitate more convenient government services, allow greater public access to information, and make government more accountable to citizens" (Bhatnagar, 2004, p. 19). Therefore, the evolution of e-government (citizen as a customer) towards we-government (citizen as a partner) has led to new forms of civil participation, often based on social media

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adoption. However, research on the influence of social media on civic behavior and engagement is still limited and not focused on the way these social media are reshaping the phenomenon of civic engagement. Therefore, this study examines online and offline political engagement and pays special attention to the role of social networking sites in people's political and social activities. Starting from the previous considerations, two research questions have been defined:

RQ1: Which are the most involving and challenging civic issues?

RQ2: How collaborative platforms impact citizens' commitment and involvement in public services design and implementation?

The study is organized in two main sections; the first one dedicated to the review of the most important academic contributions on co-production, civic engagement, and we-government; and the second one based on the analysis of a real case of we-government (FixMyStreet).

Civic Engagement: An Overview

In current era, citizens' involvement in public polices and services' design and provisioning has been often defined as "civic engagement" (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). This concept lacks of a unique definition, being based on different ideas such as the possibility to improve problem-solving or avoid disputes, the ongoing citizens' involvement in processes' planning, and citizens' ability in terms of self-mobilization. The civic engagement is strictly related to the most general paradigm of "engagement" (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011), emerging from marketing domain and defined as a phenomenon concerning employees and/or customers' disposition to cooperate to the building of "loyalty beyond reason" (Roberts, 2005). The appliance of this general paradigm to public sector has led to a better definition of citizens' participation in public polices and services. In fact, civic engagement refers to those individual and collective actions designed to describe and address public concerns or as the individual responsibility that people should have as a part of a community. This concept also refers to "the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Cegarra-Navarro, Garcia-Perez, & Moreno-Cegarra, 2014). Consequently, citizens, clients, consumers, volunteers, and/or community organizations can be now involved "in producing public services as well as consuming or otherwise benefiting from them" (Alford, 1998, p. 128). This has led to the emergence of co-production processes, highlighting the "conjoint responsibility of lay citizens and professional government agents for the delivery of public services" (Sharp, 1980, p. 105). In recent times, literature has been focused on a better understanding of civic participation in public issues, investigating the reasons why people decide to take part in these activities. In this stream of research, deliberative theorists stated that individuals generally led to share resources and in particular information, in order to face or solve social problems and learn the better way to participate in civic activities. It has to be noted that the emergent technologies (e.g. ICTs, social media, mobile technologies, etc.) are deeply influencing the evolution of civic engagement, enabling citizens to participate directly and in real-time to public activities.

Social Media Influence on Civic Engagement and Co-production Processes

In addition, the spread of the most recent ICTs has deeply influenced social changes, enabling "the most helpless and marginalized social groups to access the information base on which decisions are made, and ultimately, to enhance the responsiveness to people's real needs" (Gigler, Custer, Bailur, & Dodds, 2014, p. 211). The Web 2.0 and in particular social media have influenced both civic engagement and co-production in

terms of public consultation and participation, opening government core activities to citizens' contribution (Linders, 2012). In fact, these media seem to have deeply affected the co-production of public services' design, reshaping, and provisioning, supporting institutions in critical sector such as education, health, and justice. However, scholars and practitioners are still arguing about the influence of emergent technologies on citizens' participation in public policies (Bateman, Xiong, Benzinger, Fagan, Goate, Fox, ... Morris, 2012). In particular, some authors have highlighted governments and public institutions interest into Web 2.0 and social media, and considered it as able to enhance the transparency of their activities and promote citizens' online participation (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). It has to be reported that:

Social media include blogs and web forums, social bookmarking sites, photo and video sharing communities, as well as social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace, which offer a combination of all these with an emphasis on the relationships among the users of the community. (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, p. 438)

In particular, these media have promoted a balance shifting from government to society, contributing to the reinterpretation of government role and functions, and enabling citizens to participate in institutional processes. In literature, two main definitions of social media influencing civic engagement have emerged: the first one related to their ability to support social activism and virtual solidarity (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) and the second one that considers them as a real expression of consumerism over citizenship, social relations' fragmentation, and the subsequent erosion of civic involvement. However, in terms of civic engagement, according to Norris and Moon (2005), these media support three different processes: 1) the downward of information flows from government to citizens; 2) the upward of information flows from citizens to government, in order to facilitate decision making; and 3) the definition of horizontal communication flows that can flat traditional hierarchies. These processes get on other three fundamental concepts: participation, transparency, and accountability (Linders, 2012). In particular, participation is related to the ability of social media to facilitate the public access to institutional information and policies. Transparency is connected to "any attempts (by states or citizens) to place information or processes that were previously opaque in the public domain, accessible for use by citizen groups, providers, or policy makers" (Joshi, 2013, p. 3), and, finally, accountability is based on specific processes such as information acquiring, decision-making, and unsatisfactory performance identification and sanction. Participation, transparency, and accountability can be also supported by ICTs and social media, enabling the "disintermediation": a process that makes citizens able to directly interact with institutions. This practice has been also defined "re-intermediation" being strictly related to the involvement of "new intermediaries (or new roles for existing intermediaries) to address persistent information asymmetries and bridge digital inequality resulting from high costs" (Gigler et al., 2014, p. 215). Therefore, civic engagement can be considered as the latest step of some processes (e.g. socio-economic development, technological diffusion, democratization, etc.) that are influenced not only by resources availability and citizens' motivation, but also by social media and Web 2.0 potential that offers a better management of potential or real institutional and civic issues.

We-government: The Roots of an Emerging Paradigm

The spread of the Web 2.0 has contributed to the emergence of new e-government models and a better cooperation among institutional and non-institutional actors. In literature, terms as "Government 2.0" (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010) and "we-government" (Linders, 2012) are used to better define the

influence of social technologies on governments' disclosure towards different forms of social participation to public policies and actions. The emerging phenomenon of web-facilitated co-production has had several and sometimes different definitions, such as: crowdsourcing, "citizen sourcing" (Torres, 2007), "collaborative government" (McGuire, 2006), "Wiki Government" (Noveck, 2009), "open government" (Orszag, 2009), "co-governance" (Ackerman, 2004), "e-participation" (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2010), "do-it-yourself government" (Linders, 2012); and "government as a platform" (O'Reilly, 2010). However, the concept of we-government is not new, but often misunderstood; thus, several scholars have used it in a no consistent and scientific way, eventough this paradigm tries to summarize the influence of the most recent web collaborative tools on citizens' engagement in public policy and services. We-government seems to be the natural evolution of the traditional e-government paradigm, considering the new Internet and social technologies a network able to enhance citizens' participation in public services.

Research Method

This study analyzes we-government's best practice reported by some British institutions, in order to better understand citizens' participation in political and institutional activities. In particular, drawing on Hoffman and Fodor's (2010) framework and later adapted to Eisenhardt's (1989) and Yin's (2003) case study methodology, it has investigated a complex phenomenon (the online civic engagement) within its context. Civic engagement has been empirically examined considering the main online topics and activities in which citizens are involved. Starting from Hoffman and Fodor's (2010) framework, a new one has been developed to analyze social media and/or social tools effectiveness in terms of awareness, engagement, and word of mouth (see Table 1) in order to show citizens' online participation. In fact, if literature considers civic engagement as citizens' endorsement in public polices, it can be evaluated also by counting the number of: comments, active users, likes, user-generated items, used widgets, impression-to-interaction ratio, and rate of activities. However, citizens' awareness can be evaluated by counting the number of: members, installs of application, viewed pages, impressions, bookmarks, and ratings/reviews.

Table 1

Key Metric for Social Media Application

Social media application	Brand awareness	Brand engagement	Word of mouth
Social networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of members • Number of installs of application • Number of viewed pages • Number of impressions • Number of bookmarks • Number of ratings/reviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of comments • Number of active users • Number of likes • Number of user-generated items • Number of used widgets • Number of impression-to-interaction ratio • Number of rate of activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of appearance in time line of friends • Number of posts on wall • Number of reports/shares • Number of responses to friends referral invites

Source: adapted from Hoffman and Fodor (2010).

A content analysis has been conducted on users' messages posted on the selected social platform from January 2014 till August 2014 to better understand citizens' participation in their municipalities' life and define the hottest topics. The analysis has been based on a specific semantic level: the word (Berelson, 1952; Merton, 1968), the smallest unit used in content analysis. Consequently, words occurrence and their frequency distribution have been counted. The collected posts have also been ordered in four different categories: road

network, environment, society, and problems. The frequency of the words occurring in the selected text (reports published on FixMyStreet from January to August 2014) has been counted and the fitting ones have been reported in the above-mentioned categories (road network, environment, society, and general problems). The posts, which met these classification criteria, have entered into online open software (Concordance) in order to calculate words' high frequency (Stemler, 2001). The analysis has provided a list of all the words and times they occur in the selected text. To restrict the analysis, stop words have been excluded. To better evaluate FixMyStreet awareness rate, the visitors' number has been divided for published posts' number.

Findings

The present analysis has been conducted retrieving data from FixMyStreet social web site, which promotes the online civic participation since 2010 and enables British people to report urban problems or complains. The web site collects reports from all the municipalities of United Kingdom and publishes that related posts in specific sections. The most common reports often link to a photo and other geographical indicators, and relay to the protection of urban life, environmental resources, and road network maintenance. These reports are sent as short as possible to civic administration in order to make it able to quickly solve the related problems. Then, the reports are ordered in the following online categories: road network, environment, society, and general problems.

Table 2

Words Occurrences and Their Related Categories

Categories	Words and occurrences
Road network	Tunnel (1; 0.11%), Parking (6; 0.66%), Road (7; 0.78%), Street (7; 0.78%), Car (10; 1.11%), Access (2; 0.22%), Alley (2; 0.22%), Pavement (2; 0.22%), Pedestrian (2; 0.22%), Vehicles (3; 0.33%), Footpath (4; 0.44%), Manhole (3; 0.33%), Path (3; 0.33%).
Environment	Park/landscape (3; 0.33%), Park (8; 0.89%), Tree (3; 0.33%), River (3; 0.33%), Garden (2; 0.22%), Blocks (3; 0.33%), Water (1; 0.11%), Waste (2; 0.22%), Rubbish (8; 0.89%), Building (2; 0.22%), Fly tipping (9; 0.99%), Green (2; 0.22%), Recycling (1; 0.11%), Littering (1; 0.11%), Litter (1; 0.11%), Grass (1; 0.11%), Homes (1; 0.11%), Inhabitation (1; 0.11%).
Society	Job (2; 0.22%), Mess (2; 0.22%), Police (3; 0.33%), People (3; 0.33%), Taxpayers (1; 0.11%), Children (4; 0.44%), Dog (4; 0.44%), Council (40; 4.40%), City (26; 2.88%), Gloucester (25; 2.75%), Women (2; 0.22%), School (2; 0.22%), Adult (1; 0.11%), Resident (1; 0.11%), Neighbors (1; 0.11%).
General problems	Missing (3; 0.33%), Broken (4; 0.44%), Abandoned (4; 0.44%), Burnt (3; 0.33%), Complaint (1; 0.11%), Risk (1; 0.11%), Damaged (1; 0.11%), Destroyed (1; 0.11%), Security (1; 0.11%), Drugs (1; 0.11%), Anonymously (16; 1.77%).

Source: our elaboration.

As shown in Table 2, most of reports are related to environmental issues, while the highest number of occurrences is related to the following words: Council (40; 4.44%), City (26; 2.88%), and Gloucester (25; 2.75%), which are included in the category named "Society". This situation is not so significant because all the analyzed posts are related to the city of Gloucester and published in its specific area. The words with the highest occurrence rate have been ordered in the following categories: Road Network (Parking 6; 0.666%; Road 7; 0.78%; Street 7; 0.77%; Car 10; 1.11%) and Environment (Park 8; 0.89%; Rubbish 8; 0.89%; Fly tipping 9; 0.99%). A particular relevance has also the term "Anonymously" (16; 1.77%), occurring into the category named "General Problems" referring to those reports lacking in information about the author. This means that people often choose to not publish their name. The main topics in FixMyStreet social site are related to environmental and social issues (see Table 2), Gloucester citizens are particularly sensitive to environmental issues and protection (this category is made up of 18 recurrent words), even if they pay great attention also to Parking (6; 0.66%), Road (7; 0.78%),

Street (7; 0.78%), and Car (10; 1.11%) problems. The final feature set does not consider words put into stop words (e.g. and, or, the, can, etc.); consequently, the result is 901 tokens and 451 types. British citizens are deeply engaged in FixMyStreet website services contributing to its activities and of course to the local welfare and reporting to the related authorities' local problems, complains, and emergencies, in order to solve them as soon as possible (see Table 3). In United Kingdom, FixMyStreet has also a good rate of awareness, because it has developed a growing community made up of about 500 members. Consequently, citizens' awareness of this online social platforms is quite high, having an elevate rate of traffic and interaction (e.g. 479 members; 1,550 daily pageviewers; 379,708 daily rank, etc.).

Table 3

Key Metric for Social Media Application

Social media application	Social web site awareness	Social web site engagement
FixMyStreet	479 members	
	479 install of application	509,419 comments
	1,500 daily pageviews	87,000 different active users
	45.50% bounce rate	81,601 pageviews per month
	6 external links	2,133 reports
	11 internal links	510,014 updates on reports
	379,708 daily visitors rank	

Source: our elaboration.

Citizens' engagement in Gloucester municipality services has been also analyzed, counting the number of active users (25)¹ of the social site page dedicated to this city and then data have been divided by the municipality population (110,207). Engagement has been evaluated over the last eight mounts (January-August, 2014); thus, the analysis has demonstrated that Gloucester citizens are not so engaged in FixMyStreet. In fact, just 4% of them are aware about social site services. In particular, civic engagement in FixMyStreet social site has been analyzed retrieving information from some secondary sources, such as: corporate documents and web site (<https://www.fixmystreet.com>) and online rating society reports (<http://urlm.co.uk/>; <http://www.domainleia.com/>). Last but not least, the average level of Gloucester citizens' awareness has been analyzed considering the visits' number in the last eight months (1,601), and the number of published post (41). According to this measurement, just the 2% of Gloucester population seem to be aware about the services that the municipality offers through FixMyStreet.

Discussion

This study was aimed at investigating social media contribution to the enhancement of citizens' participation to public polices and services development. According to literature review, public administrations currently are somewhat obliged to manage social media (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011) in order to protect their public image from unofficial communication and make citizens sure about their activities and commitment with local issues. Furthermore, these open and participative tools have given to co-production new possibilities, making it much more reliable and open to take in charge citizens' contribution and suggestions. Generally, this process roots not only on the reinterpretation of government's role and function, but also on balance shifting from government to society power (Linders, 2012). In fact, the recent evolution of the Internet and the related social technologies has enhanced citizens' online involvement in a growing number of public activities, such as: the support for

¹ It has been counted the number of FixMyStreet users that have posted a report between January and August 2014.

social/political organizations, candidates, and social/political goals; mobilization campaigns; or even political hacking. The achieved results have led to answer to the above-mentioned research questions. In particular, the first one (Which are the civic issues in which citizens are most involved?) has been discussed through both literature review and case study analysis, identifying citizens' most challenging issues that promote their cooperation with local authorities to design, produce, and provide better and high quality public services. Moreover, the case study and, in particular, the content analysis results have offered a response to the second research question (How collaborative platforms impact citizens' awareness and participation in public policies and services?). In fact, even if the adoption of a specific social platform can help national or local government to interact with citizens, these tools are still considered as mere promotional channels and not real co-creational spaces. This situation is even more evident in local municipalities, where people seem to be not so open to these media, not considering they are able to support the solution of civic issues.

Conclusion

This paper offers some interesting insights in terms of how the most recent social platforms contribute to citizens' participation in public activities. In particular, the case study analysis has confirmed some theoretical statements underlined in literature review; thus, these technologies have opened and simplified citizens' access to public services. In fact, they can contribute to public service design, development, and provisioning not only posting and sharing links, news, photos, videos, and images on social issues (Warren et al., 2014), but also making them able to participate in strategic and decision-making activities. In terms of theoretical implication, it has to be noted that the mere adoption of a social platform seems to not have a direct and positive influence on civic engagement and awareness. Although, in terms of policy implications, to achieve a better civic participation, public administrations cannot avoid the implementation and the management of concrete online communication strategies. In fact, the spread of social media requires not only new rules, but also a general rethinking of the traditional co-production logic (Romero & Molina, 2011). In particular, the spread of social media in public sector has led to the emergence of a need for innovative research to better understand their influence on institutions-citizens relationship and civic contribution to public services design, creation, and provisioning. However, this study is somewhat limited by the analysis of a single case study, in other words, a single municipality participating to FixMyStreet network: Gloucester, a medium size city located in center of England. Consequently, results cannot be considered representative and cannot be generalized to other cities involved in we-government and/or in online participative initiatives.

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