Beyond Financial Support:
Helping Citizens in Welfare Programs

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Abstract

Governments are turning to Social Media as a way to engage citizens in public policies through online debates and discussion forums. Together with the communication team of a government department, we are exploring another facet of government-citizens communication, and another opportunity for governments to exploit Social Media. In particular, we are investigating whether online communities could become a new channel to support specific groups of citizens. In this model, a government would facilitate the creation of online communities for specific cohorts of people sharing goals and needs as well as act as mediator. This model would enable governments to capitalise on the power of crowd-sourcing and the social capital that gets created through such communities to provide social and emotional peer-support. These communities would also serve to provide direct feedback on social security policies. We propose to explore the issues that arise in this context.

Bringing governments closer to their citizens

With the development of the social web and its suite of tools, the Internet is not only a source of information, but it has also become an engaging place where anyone can create, participate, meet and interact with other people. Through these new connections, individuals are organising themselves in various groups creating "virtual" communities with specific needs.

For several years now, governments have recognised the potential of the Web 2.0 to bring closer together citizens and their government. The social web promises a better two-way communication where citizens are engaged through public consultations, contributing to the design of government policies and where the government becomes a collaborator more accountable, responsive and transparent. Leveraging off the benefits social media tools can provide to reach communities, many government agencies have begun actively increasing their online presence to engage more with citizens. Twitter and Facebook are now used as as communication channels; data sets are released so that anyone can use them in innovative projects; discussion forums are setup to encourage citizens to participate in policy developments.

We believe that social media can play yet another role in a two-way communication model between Governments and Citizens: A government could support specific groups of citizens through the creation and mediation of online communities, thereby capitalising on the potential power of such communities to provide social and emotional peer-support and get feedback on social security policies. This would address the social dimension of governments.

Two questions arise, then: Is this a role that the government should take? Would this be useful for citizens? These are the issues we are currently exploring.

Our work is being done in partnership with the communication division of Centrelink, the Australian Government's service delivery agency which is responsible to administrate all social welfare payments. Centrelink is already exploring the use of social media to complement their current communication channels. This project is investigating the social facet of Web 2.0 technologies, as a first step to answer these questions. Together with Centrelink, we are developing a trial online community, facilitated by Centrelink, as a support group for parents in receipt of income support. We hope the trial will provide the data appropriate to start answering the questions above. Our work to date has focused on exploring these ideas with citizens, though group interviews and questionnaires. This is to enable us to design the trial online community.

In this paper, we first look at recent changes in welfare programs and investigate ways of helping welfare recipients beyond traditional financial supports. We then discuss a number of issues government agencies may face when supporting specific groups of citizens through the creation and mediation of online communities.

Beyond the provision of financial support

Many governments play a social role, providing welfare system to their citizenry to enable disadvantaged citizens to have a minimum standard of living. Welfare systems typically include unemployment benefits, child support, and pensions for the disable or the elderly.

In recent years, however, there have been some reforms to the welfare systems in many developed countries – see, for example, the TANF legislation in the US[1] or the Work for the Dole program in Australia[2]. These reforms typically change the ways benefits are provided. In particular, entitlements are now often in exchange of work (or some form of community participation) and offered for a limited period of time. The basic tenet of the reforms is that this will result in long-term financial gains for the people involved (typically through improvements in job prospects).

Early studies on the impact of these reforms have challenged this assumption, especially when unemployed (Sawer, 2006) or female sole parent (e.g., Cameron, 2006 and Cox and Priest, 2008) are involved. They also revealed that the new requirements could potentially put stress on family relationships, and that the transition to work could be a very difficult one, and thus people need help. This help is not only a financial one. Many people also need emotional support, to help them through this difficult period, enabling them to keep positive on what is to come next. A social network could therefore be very beneficial.

Our work aims at helping people currently receiving welfare payments find a job and become financially self-sufficient. The purpose is not to replace but to complement existing welfare transition programs, providing an additional channel to deliver social security services. In collaboration with Centrelink, we are investigating whether an online community could provide a useful and welcome support network. Our target group is in receipt of income support who need to make the transition to work.

Building a community to work together

While we are currently designing and building an online community for a particular group of citizens, we would like to discuss here (and at the workshop) the idea of exploring online support groups run by government agencies at a more general level and discuss some of the challenges faced in terms of privacy, sustained engagement, and social outcome.

As we are only at the beginning of our project, we do not have answers to these questions yet but think they are important and need to be articulated. We hope our work will provide useful data to address them.

Is it the role of a government to create and facilitate an online community?

Is this a role that governments are happy to take? What does this involve? – Time, effort or willingness, social skill.

This is not a role traditionally endorsed by governments. Being involved in online interactions is one matter, running and facilitating an online forum is another one.

Furthermore, despite the push for government agencies to get onboard, public servants still lack the tools (e.g., access to social media or even the internet) and sometimes the necessary skills to engage meaningfully online, while still following public communication guidelines

Would such online communities be useful for groups of citizens?

There is certainly a value in being able to share with other people who are in the same situation. The potential (or promise) that an online community could be a place for mutual help and support, with the opportunity to share information and connect with other people, could be appealing compared to traditional government processes which tend sometimes to be, in the words of one of our survey participants, "*cold and matter of fact*".

In our work, we started with some group interviews and an online survey with the intended target users to explore with them the idea of using an online community as a support group for them. We organised four group interviews: 25 participants were recruited from two major cities in Australia and, out of those, 17 attended. The aim of the group interviews was to get an in-depth understanding of the issues this particular group of citizens is facing, and to cover the concerns they may have towards their participation requirement. (For more details on this see Colineau et al., 2011.) We were interested in particular in assessing people's level of interest and willingness to interact with the government on welfare issues. In all the group interviews, we observed that the participants really enjoyed the dynamics of a group environment and mentioned that they found it cathartic to congregate with peers and share personal experiences. During the interviews, we saw participants share tips and ideas.

We also conducted an online survey to follow-up on the discussion points developed during the interviews. Among the 899 people who were invited, 44 completed the survey. Overall, people were opened to the idea of the community, in particular to the opportunity to share and work with other members. Half of the participants reported not having a support network right now to help them go through the transition.

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[1] TANF: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (see TANF program, 1997).
[2] See Work for the Dole Legislation, 1997.

We also found that participants were supportive of the government exploring new ways of supporting them and providing information.

These results point to the potential utility of the government facilitating online communities as a novel way to support specific groups of people.

Would people feel free to talk knowing that the community is monitored by the government?

This is clearly an important question. In our consultation, interestingly, this concern was not really an issue. People simply suggested they should have an anonymous user name. They did want, however, the community to be monitored and the participation to forums moderated. This was to ensure that information given was correct and that the community would not be used as a place where people came to complain, express their anger and that very little outcome would come out of it. *"Keep it positive"* was a comment repeatedly given.

We hope that, while keeping the sentiment in forums positive, the community would also be a good way for participants to provide governments with feedback on social security policy and the impact it has on them.

Could online communities provide alternative ways to disseminate targeted information to groups of citizens?

A targeted online community can provide an additional channel to disseminate information, but, more importantly, it enables government agencies to tailor information to the targeted group of citizens, to bust myths and correct misconceptions, and to be more responsive to specific or personal questions.

The online community gives also the opportunity for people to provide feedback on government informational material (e.g., its readability, its relevance).

In our group interviews and survey respondents, we found that these two aspects were important.

Conclusions

What we are proposing contributes to the body of work studying the growing participation of citizens in government issues. The research questions we address here raise new challenges in designing social media technology able to support citizen-government interactions, while allowing governments take on a new role, that of a mediator, within communities of specific groups of citizens.

By facilitating the creation of online groups, governments capitalise on the potential power of such communities to provide social and emotional peer-support, they can connect more closely with people and better understand the impact social security policies on have on them.

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