Redefining Terms of Commitment:  
The Canadian Public Administration and Web 2.0

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Abstract

Web 2.0 technologies are very effective in promoting citizen engagement and enhancing the transparency of the public administration. However, the federal government in Canada has been unsuccessful in adapting these new technologies. This essay will argue that the government has failed to cope with the transition to Web 2.0 and, in turn, this has had a negative bearing on the public administration’s ability to effectively deliver services and advice. The government has not committed fully to establishing a clear plan that would create a unified transition into this new software, and has not used this technology to its full capacity when engaging with its citizens. Not having a structured adoption strategy has compromised public sector values causing them to erode.

Introduction

As new technology and social media tools are constantly being developed, the 21st century has become more complicated for the Canadian public administration. Web 2.0 is a shift in online technology characterized by higher degrees of interconnectivity and collaboration. In this new apparatus, the web user has the ability to not only consume material, but can also contribute through various platforms (Hui and Hayllar 2010, S120). The government has not committed fully to establishing a clear plan that would create a unified transition into this new software, and has not used this technology to its full capacity when engaging with its citizens. The basic principles of a democracy such as, citizen engagement, transparency and accountability are often sought as a means to running an efficient and effective state. With the switch to Web 2.0 and the use of social media tools, the federal government must re-evaluate its commitment to public sector values and these democratic principles enshrined in our Westminster system. This essay will consider the following questions: how has the Government of Canada handled the transition to Web 2.0 and social media? And how does this affect the administration of
This essay will argue that the government has failed to cope with the transition to Web 2.0, which has undermined the public administration’s ability to effectively deliver services. The lack of strategy has placed the values and ethics of the public sector in a vulnerable state, susceptible to erosion. This paper will examine three reasons why the government has failed to fully employ Web 2.0: the weak commitment to the transition, the lack of strategy and dedication towards citizen engagement, and the negative repercussions on public sector values.

Web 2.0 & Its Advantages

For the purpose of this paper, e-government will be defined as “the use of ICTs (information and communications technology), as a tool to achieve better government” (Magro 2012, 148). Web 2.0 provides the basis of e-government, where citizens are no longer merely consumers of the content, they are able to contribute by creating it and participating in discussion (Hui and Hayllar 2010, S121). This highlights the major difference between the previous Web 1.0 and the current 2.0. The former used ICTs mainly for providing information, whereas the latter involves more complexity and participatory roles for citizens (McNutt and Carey 2008, 52). An aspect of Web 2.0 that will also be discussed in this paper is social media, which encompasses social networking mediums such as, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc.

Web 2.0 offers many benefits for the government and public sector, underlining the importance that these new technologies are effectively utilized. For example, Bonson et al. argue that the main advantages developed from Web 2.0 “are the enhancement of transparency and citizen participation” (Bonson et al. 2012, 124). Web 2.0 provides mechanisms which allow for information to be shared easily, leading to transparency and openness with more information made publically available. It allows citizens to hold their elected officials and the public
administration accountable to the information that is shared through ICTs. In addition, the tools of Web 2.0 can generate citizen participation, changing the traditional idea of public values to match what citizens actually want. Citizens can engage, collaborate and share information, enriching and enhancing the development of policy and service delivery with citizens as a main stakeholder (Tapscott, Williams and Herman 2008, 5). Overall, it is evident that Web 2.0 does create many advantages that would benefit the emerging triangular relationship between government, public administration and citizens (Bonson et al. 2012, 124). This makes it crucial that the government implements a strategy to enhance the quality and adoption of Web 2.0 to make sure that they do not fall behind the times. The following sections will examine three limitations that have resulted from the government’s weak commitment to Web 2.0.

Weak Commitment

The first reason why the government has failed to fully transition to Web 2.0 designs is due to its weak commitment and lack of strategies behind this switch. The government has not dedicated enough resources and time to commit to this transition, especially in comparison to what has been seen in the private sector, provinces and municipalities (Laforest 2014, 63; Reddick and Turner 2012, 1). For instance, “the federal government only dedicated one full-time equivalent (FTE) to rolling out the open source software” (Laforest 2014, 63). Rather than making a strong commitment in the shift towards employing the new software, the federal government slowed the process down by advocating duties to a single FTE. This has generated problems for the federal government because without a strong commitment to adopting and utilizing the new technology, they will fail to obtain the benefits of this technology and continue to lag behind. Moreover, the quality of service delivery by the private sector will continue to accelerate ahead
of the public sector. This could create a gap between citizens who can afford better services delivered by the private sector versus those who are forced to use the ones provided by the public sector. In their 2011 Report, the Clerk of the Privy Council noted that fiscal restraint was causing problems for the public sector, and argued that experimenting with Web 2.0 technology was needed (The Clerk of the Privy Council 2014). However, the government has become subsumed with the idea of changing service delivery methods and generating shared government databases that it has neglected to establish collaboration across sectors and between different levels of government (McNutt and Carey 2008, 5). This has prevented them from utilizing other areas of Web 2.0, which could enhance transparency and direct engagement with citizens. Seeing that the public sector is known to have slower processes than the private sector, the expanding and fast changing nature of Web 2.0 will cause the government to continue to fall behind.

Absent Strategy & Citizen Engagement

The government’s lack of strategy has also caused many citizens to rely on traditional service delivery, such as in person visits and over the telephone, in order to solve their problems. A study performed by Reddick and Turner (2012) found that websites are viewed as channels where citizens can obtain initial information. Citizens then rely on traditional service methods to solve their problems (Reddick and Turner 2012, 1). Web 2.0 provides tools which can ease the process of service delivery, by utilizing technology for efficiency. The scope and abilities of workers in the traditional service delivery is limited, but with Web 2.0, the technology will alleviate some duties, making the overall process faster. In addition the costs of employing a FTE to provide a service is higher than the costs of online services. It is evident that the transition into Web 2.0 has not been effective if citizens continue to use traditional methods instead of using
the new technology to solve their problems. If the government dedicates more resources towards the transition to Web 2.0, it may increase the amount of citizens using it.

The government’s lack of strategy has affected the public administration in harmful ways, reducing their ability to deliver services effectively. For instance, the weak commitment has led some departments to fall out of unison and advance their services at separate rates. This has greatly impacted departments because they are unable to share information with each other if everyone is not on the same level (Roy 2006, 113). More services and programs are beginning to be run across various departments or in collaboration with other levels of government. For instance, immigration is a joint responsibility between the federal and provincial governments regulated by a series of bilateral agreements (Citizenship and Immigration 2013). If a province or a specific department has not fully adopted Web 2.0 technology, it will not be able to participate in information sharing and service delivery associated with this data. This can generate problems when attempting to pass information between tiers or undertake cross-sector collaboration.

In addition, the lack of strategy creates even more complications for the government because they will have difficulty measuring the success of their e-government initiatives if not every department is capable of adopting the programs. This prevents the public administration from advancing transparency and openness since they may be unable to measure and thus, cannot share the results of their service delivery. A negative misconception can arise about the public service that they are not being transparent towards citizens. However, it could simply be due to the government’s failure to properly establish a strategy for the adoption of Web 2.0.

The government’s lack of plan to accommodate the new technology has also caused the public administration to have a slow and lengthy process when creating and maintaining records.
The government has not adopted a new record keeping process, leading public servants to become delayed when trying to create records from Web 2.0 technologies (Laforest 2014, 66). Michael Ferguson, the Auditor General of Canada identified in his 2013 Report that there is no uniform measurement used by all departments. This generates issues when the information cannot be compared or used across government (Ferguson 2013). It is evident that the government’s lack of strategy and commitment to the transition into Web 2.0 has created a negative impact on the public administration contributing to departments growing at different speeds and preventing effective service delivery from being achieved. Additionally, the public sector has not been given a method where they can properly track the effectiveness of Web 2.0, so it is difficult for them to appear transparent towards citizens.

Another implication that has arisen from the government’s failed attempts to implement Web 2.0 is a lack of engagement with citizens resulting in strains on the public service. Citizen engagement encompasses a two-way interaction consisting of conversation and dialogue between the government and citizens (Sheedy 2008, 4). This is enhanced by Web 2.0 and e-government because they offer mechanisms by which the public can interact and participate in the policy process. Laforest (2014) discovered that 79 per cent of Members of Parliament (MP) are using Web 2.0 and social media technologies as a form of communication (Laforest 2014, 70). As well, more citizens are beginning to access new technologies, placing a large importance on government to utilize Web 2.0 for direct citizen engagement. Citizen engagement has been used in other areas in society such as, the grassroots movements ‘Occupy’ and ‘Idle No More’ (Smith 2014, 239). These movements applied online mediums like Facebook to interact with the public and engage in direct democracy where citizens could take part and interact in forums. The
success of these movements emphasize the potential for government to similarly use Web 2.0 to encourage civic participation and engagement with citizens.

Nevertheless, the government has failed to adopt Web 2.0 technologies and develop a strategy to make sure that its engagement with citizens contributes to the democratic process. Web 2.0 technologies are used to encourage the democratic process and develop a stronger relationship between citizens and politicians (Bonson et al. 2012, 126). By creating channels of communication that can be accessed by the public from almost anywhere, Web 2.0 has enhanced the mechanisms of direct engagement. While it has connected and eased this process, the government has not established a proper method to strengthen the democratic process of civic engagement through these new mediums. Despite the large portion of MPs who “have established an online presence, it does not mean that they have successfully harnessed social media as a way to engage citizens” (Laforest 2014, 70). There is no real proof that feedback provided through online forums actually results in policy change or influences policy decisions (Magro 2012, 156). This is because the government has not produced a method for departments to track the effectiveness of social media or properly record their engagement with citizens. Perhaps citizen engagement has been effective through service delivery and feedback, but it is difficult to know without a proper way to track it. Thus, social media has remained a tool of communication and has not been used by the government to further policy goals or encourage citizen engagement.

The government’s failed transition into Web 2.0 and social media technologies has fashioned a digital divide that is preventing public servants from delivering services effectively. In Reddick and Turners (2014) study, they discovered that the digital divide was prevalent among
women and older Canadians, whom were more likely to use traditional forms of service delivery instead of websites (Reddick and Turner 2012, 9). As the age of the person rose, they were less likely to use Web 2.0 technologies and services provided through those mechanisms (Reddick and Turner 2012, 7). This has created a divide among those who are excluded or who cannot obtain access to e-government. Simultaneously, it has increased the amount of Canadians who are seeking traditional service delivery. McNutt (2014), refers to this as the ‘digital exclusion’ suggesting that “persons who lack access to modern technological affordances will become increasingly marginalized in society and becoming digitally excluded in terms of education, health, work, and socialization” (McNutt and Carey 2008, 65). This issue is growing as the divide becomes a major barrier for certain citizens who may want to have their voices heard on policy and service delivery. Moreover, this creates a problem for the public sector because now there is a split between those who are using the new online services and a small part of the population still needing the traditional channels of delivery made available. It is clear that the government’s lack of strategy behind engaging with civilians has had a harmful effect on the public service’s ability to provide services.

The public administration’s policy advising role has also become compromised due to the government’s lack of strategy and the new role citizens have obtained through the creation of e-government. A role of public servants has been to give expert advice in their fields to the policy makers in government. However, with new technology, the government is often engaging directly with citizens and skipping the traditional process involving public servants (Laforest 2014, 72). This poses a problem for the public service which is having its policy advisory role decreased.
As mentioned previously, however, it is difficult to gauge whether citizens are even having an impact on policy making.

If the federal government wants to demonstrate legitimacy in this consultative environment, there needs to be a proper method developed that will measure the impact citizens are having on policy and the improvement of service delivery. It is also essential that in fairness, the government addresses the digital divide is reduced in order to ensure that the public service is able to deliver services equally to all citizens. The government’s lack of strategy impacting the public sector and commitment towards citizen engagement through the use of Web 2.0 tools, can create issues of legitimacy when the government chooses to carry out the solutions on its own. If the advice giving role of the public servants is lessened and the government is not utilizing advice of citizens, this can have a detrimental effect on democratic principles.

In order to maintain these, the government needs to develop a proper method to record the impact citizens are having on policy and the improvement of service delivery. It is also essential that the digital divide is reduced to make sure that the public service is able to deliver services equally to all citizens. Consequently, if the advice giving role of the public servants is lessened and the government is not utilizing advice of citizens, this can have a detrimental effect on democratic principles.

**Erosion of Public Sector Values**

Furthermore, the federal government’s adoption of Web 2.0 without a proper strategy to protect the values and ethics of the public sector has caused them to erode. The values and ethics are codified in the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat’s *Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector*, which came into effect April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2012. All federal employees are required to adhere and
abide by these principles laid out in the document (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2012). However, it is becoming an issue for the government and public administration to make sure that public servants are actively following these guidelines. The government has not adjusted the code to properly ensure that the values and ethics of the public sector will be upheld with the new technologies and tools of Web 2.0 and social media. This section will discuss various values and ethics that have become compromised due to the government’s lack of strategy.

The first public sector value and ethic that is being compromised is referred to as “respect for democracy” within the code of conduct. This regulation begins by stating that “elected officials are accountable to Parliament” and that public servants are expected to be “loyally carrying out the lawful decisions of their leaders and supporting ministers in their accountability to Parliament and Canadians” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2011). As a cornerstone of the Westminster system, the notion of ministerial responsibility serves as an important characteristic of parliamentary democracy. Ministerial responsibility ensures that ministers are using the powers of the state responsibly and are answerable for their department’s actions. This principle has become threatened because the government has not generated procedures with regards to public servants adopting a public image. Grube (2013) examines this so-called “public face model” by asserting that the normal dichotomy which once existed where elected officials served as the gateway between citizens and public administration is deteriorating (Grube 2013, 3-25). When public servants adopt a public image, it becomes difficult to hold the minister accountable for their actions, especially since the minister may not have been able to provide discretion over the activities of this individual. With Web 2.0 and new social media tools, it becomes increasingly easier for public servants to adopt a public face. Thus, without a proper
strategy to control what is being said by public servants, the traditional idea of ministerial responsibility is threatened. This creates issues for the government and citizens because accountability becomes unclear and it is difficult to keep ministers answerable to parliament for actions they cannot control.

The value, respect for democracy, continues by stating that “a non-partisan public sector is essential to our democratic system” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2011). This ensures that public servants are “respecting the rule of law and carrying out their duties in accordance with legislation, policies and directives in a non-partisan and impartial manner” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2011). Public servants are expected to remain neutral and non-partisan through their actions by ensuring that they do not act in any manner that may inhibit the impartiality of the public service (Kernaghan 2014, 304). However, Web 2.0 enables public servants to publish their personal beliefs through social media tools which may compromise their non-partisan nature. As technologies continue to expand, it may become more common for public servants to criticize the actions or policies of the government (Kernaghan 2014, 305). By doing so, public servants are adopting an openly partisan stance which would be available on the web for citizens to view. The government has not created a plan to control this criticism that may arise on Web 2.0 or social media mediums. As a result, there is a threat towards the value and ethic of neutrality in the public administration if the federal government does not account for this when implementing Web 2.0.

Additionally, another value and ethic of the public administration that is being eroded as a result of the government’s lack of strategy behind the implementation of Web 2.0 is openness and transparency. The guideline indicates that public servants must work “together in a spirit of
openness, honesty and transparency that encourages engagement, collaboration and respectful communication” (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2011). As mentioned previously, even with the expanding nature of Web 2.0 and social media, the government has not created a plan for the public administration to properly record their interactions with citizens. This can generate problems for the public service if they are unable to produce records for citizens to view and may hinder the value of transparency and openness.

There have been attempts by departments to develop their own procedures to reinforce the values and ethics guideline of the public sector. For instance, the Department of “Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s code has sections on Use of Social Networks and on Electronic Networks Access and Use” which are used to reduce the concerns that arise from Web 2.0 (Kernaghan 2014, 310). Although this does safeguard some departments against the deterioration of their values and ethics, this is not applicable to everyone. This creates challenges because now departments are governed under different sets of rules that the government has to monitor. Moreover, technology is developing at fast paces, so these codes may become outdated very quickly. It may be more difficult for departments to alter their codes of conducts than it would for the government to ensure their principles are up-to-date (Kernaghan 2014, 313). It is evident that the government’s lack of strategy to protect the values and ethics of the public administration has caused them to erode. Today, a great amount of emphasis is being placed on values and ethics of the public administration, making it crucial that the government strategizes to ensure they are well-maintained.
Conclusion

Therefore, it is apparent that the federal government’s failure to cope with the transition into Web 2.0 and social media has had a negative impact on the public sector. This paper has discussed various reasons why the government’s lack of strategy behind the adoption of this new technology has generated a damaging ripple effect on the public sector. The government has not committed enough time or resources, causing departments to uptake the new IT at different rates. This prevents departments from effectively sharing information horizontally and can obstruct the record keeping process. Citizen engagement may led to a reduced role for the public administration in providing advice because governments tend to prioritize public consultations where they know they will have the support of the public in their decision making. The government has not produced a method by which the public service can track citizen participation, so this may be decreasing the democratic process by skipping expert advice contributed by public servants. The lack of strategy has also led to a digital divide, where some citizens are still relying on traditional methods of service delivery, generating confusion for public servants. Additionally, the failure to develop a plan for the transition into Web 2.0 has caused the values and ethics of the public administration to erode. If the government does not begin to develop a strategy to properly ensure the transition into Web 2.0 is done in unison and considers threats to the public administration’s ability to deliver services, they will continue to fall behind.
Works Cited:


