

Strategic Communication and Public Engagement: The UAE E-Brainstorming Session

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Abstract

In the context of the conference's topic of 'Strategic Communication and Public Engagement' comes this case study, which illustrates the creative use of social media in crowdsourcing ideas from the public with the goal of formulating government policy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Unlike the usual model of top-down policy formulation in many developing countries, the UAE government adopted an experiment entitled 'The UAE Brainstorming Session', which is the country's first technology-based citizen engagement event that leveraged the highly popular social media platforms to elicit ideas and suggestions about public services. Specifically, two under-performing national sectors were targeted; public health and education. Citizens and residents were invited to identify the main issues in these two sectors and offer their suggestions to address them. The UAE Prime Minister personally tweeted inviting everyone to participate. The public response to this initiative was substantial, with 82,000 new ideas delivered by several social media channels. A ministerial committee then shortlisted the best ideas, suggestions, and these were subsequently discussed in a strategic cabinet retreat. The next step was government approval of several initiatives, which were subsequently implemented. Lessons learned from this case study can be beneficial to many countries that are considering similar technology-based initiatives that utilize popular and accessible social media as public policy tools and instruments of citizen engagement.

Keywords: Strategic Communication; Citizen Engagement; Social Media; United Arab Emirates Government.

1. Introduction

This paper presents a recent case study about innovative government engagement with the public using crowdsourcing via social media. The setting of this case study is the United Arab Emirates.

1.1 Selected literature review:

Crowdsourcing is a term that was used for the first time in June 2006 by Jeff Howe, a writer for Wired magazine who saw new opportunities due to the Internet's function of connecting people everywhere via online

communities provided by social media (Sherman, 2011).

The term was coined to describe how companies were beginning to outsource problems or tasks to the public through an open call for solutions via social media. In essence, crowdsourcing works to generate new ideas or develop solutions to problems based on public input. By doing so, a company 'is able to mine collective intelligence' through distributed problem-solving (Crowdsourcing on Freebase, n.d.).

Estelles-Arolas and Gonzalez-Ladron-de-Guevara (2012) provided a widely used definition of crowdsourcing:

Crowdsourcing is a type of participative online activity in which an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task. The undertaking of the task, of variable complexity and modularity, and in which the crowd should participate bringing their work, money, knowledge and/or experience, always entails mutual benefit. The user will receive the satisfaction of a given type of need, be it economic, social recognition, self-esteem or the development of individual skills, while the crowdsourcer will obtain and utilize to their advantage what the user has brought to the venture, whose form will depend on the type of activity undertaken.

A typical process of crowdsourcing starts with an organization that pinpoints tasks and releases them online to a crowd of outsiders who are interested in performing such tasks in return for a fee or any other incentive. Upon completion, the individuals submit their work to the crowdsourcing platform and the organization then assesses the quality of the work. However, not all crowdsourced work is compensated (Howe, 2006; Zhao and Zhu, 2014).

According to Spiegel, social media have changed the way businesses engage with consumers. 'It's no longer a one-way (or even a two-way) conversation. It's now a multiplayer experience that relies on collective, thoughtful engagement. Within this frame, crowdsourcing can be used to achieve powerful social engagement and activation (Spiegel, 2011).

Spiegel mentions three ways crowdsourcing can be used in social media like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and blogs. These include (a) asking the public for feedback, (b) creating contests and giveaways and (c) polling or surveying consumers. He emphasizes the

importance of follow-up action based on the input gathered from public. Along similar lines, Olenski (2015) suggests six ways to use crowdsourcing as part of a company's marketing efforts, including (a) inviting reader participation, (b) hosting a contest, (c) starting a conversation, (d) holding a survey, (e) treating customers as creators and (f) using influencers.

In their review of literature on crowdsourcing, Zhao and Zhu identify three future research directions on crowdsourcing:

1. Participant's perspective,
2. Organization's perspective and
3. Crowdsourcing system's perspective.

Participant's perspective deals mainly with motivations by the public to participate in crowdsourced events and participant's behavior, including effort and contribution. Organization's perspective includes variables such as crowdsourcing adoption by an organization, implementation, governance, quality, and evaluation issues. Finally, crowdsourcing system's perspective deals with incentive mechanism design for crowdsourcing systems and technology issues in crowdsourcing systems design (Zhao and Zhu, 2014).

Brabham (2013) defines crowdsourcing as a model for problem solving. He reports that US local government experimented with basic crowdsourcing strategies as early as 1989, but in the last few years local, state, and federal government in the U.S. have increasingly turned to crowdsourcing to increase citizen participation in problem solving, setting priorities, and decision making. Brabham considers crowdsourcing as 'part of a larger movement toward more citizen participation in democratic government.' He adds, citing several studies: 'involving citizens in the planning process can lead to outcomes that are more widely accepted by future users.'

In the following typology of crowdsourcing problem types for governance, Brabham (2013) describes four types: (T1) knowledge discovery and management; (T2) distributed human intelligence tasking; (T3) broadcast search and (T4) peer-vetted creative production.

Table 1: A Typology of Crowdsourcing Problem Types for Governance

Type	How it Works	Kinds of Problems	Examples of Uses in Government
Type One: Knowledge Discovery and Management	Organization tasks crowd with finding and collecting information into a common location and format	Ideal for information gathering, organization, and reporting problems, such as the creation of collective resources	Example: See <i>ClickFix</i> ; USGS's <i>Did You Feel It?</i> ; USPTO's <i>Peer to Patent</i> Possible Uses: Reporting conditions and use of public parks and hiking trails; tracking use of public transit; cataloguing public art projects and murals for historical boards
Type Two: Distributed Human Intelligence Tasking	Organization tasks crowd with analyzing large amounts of information	Ideal for large-scale data analysis where human intelligence is more efficient or effective than computer analysis	Example: Transcribing digital scans of old handwritten census records Possible Uses: Language translation for documents and websites; data entry; behavioral modeling
Type Three: Broadcast Search	Organization tasks crowd with solving empirical problems	Ideal for ideation problems with empirically provable solutions, such as scientific problems	Example: White House <i>SAVE Award</i> ; NASA's use of <i>InnoCentive</i> for a solar flare prediction formula Possible Uses: Finding better algorithms for timing traffic signals; improving actuarial formulas for Social Security
Type Four: Peer-Vetted Creative Production	Organization tasks crowd with creating and selecting creative ideas	Ideal for ideation problems where solutions are matters of taste or market support, such as design or aesthetic problems	Example: <i>Next Stop Design</i> bus stop shelter design competition; ITS Congestion Challenge for alleviating traffic congestion Possible Uses: Designs for public structures and art projects; urban plans; transit plans; policy proposals; school redistricting plans

Source: Brabham, Daren (2016). "Crowdsourcing in the Public Sector" (Public Management and Change). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

In type one crowdsourcing (knowledge discovery and management), government departments can use online communities to gather new information that will lead to better policy and decision-making. Type two crowdsourcing (distributed human intelligence tasking), deals with information management problems. While type one is for finding and assembling information, type two is for efficiently processing information. This model may be useful for governments who need to anticipate citizen behavior, such as for predicting behaviors that could inform public service providers.

In type three crowdsourcing (broadcast search), an organization poses a challenge to an online community, often with detailed scientific parameters, in the form of a problem brief, and the online community provides original solutions to address the problem. Brabham contends that with this approach, government can ask citizens for practical ideas to solve

specific problems. Broadcast search 'works in part because, by casting a wide net online, an organization can reach those on the margins of a problem domain, who may have unique heuristics, tool kits, or perspectives that could aid in solving a given problem.'

In type four crowdsourcing (peer-vetted creative production), an organization issues a challenge to an online community and the community replies with solutions. The community is empowered to choose among the submitted solutions, often via comments and/or votes. Type 4 crowdsourcing applications can help a government agency solicit solutions to ideation problems that require public support or that do not have scientifically right answers. According to Brabham, by allowing citizens to both submit ideas online and vote on the ideas, this process can mirror the democratic process inherent in traditional face to face public participation programs.

Turning our attention now to citizen engagement in the policy formulation, scholars of public policy formulation like Howlett and Ramesh (2003) and Hai (2013) explain that in the process of policy formulation in developing countries, the state and business often keep their dominant roles. The participation of civil society actors for direct citizen participation in policy formulation depends upon the institutional spaces, which are weak in developing countries. Many political leaders, policy-makers and researchers believe that such forms of direct citizen participation can help democratize and rationalize the state, as well as provide politically marginalized populations with a say in policy (Peter P. Houtzager, Adrián Gurza Lavalle and Arnab Acharya, 2003). Hai (2013) contends that the involvement of businesses and civil society - consumers, private entrepreneurs, employees and citizens, community groups and NGOs in designing public policy is critical if the governments of developing countries are to improve the transparency, quality and effectiveness of their policies as well as establishing the legitimacy of the public policy.

In west Asia, governments are realizing the potential of using the Internet in general and social media in particular, for enhancing citizen engagement. A report issued in 2014 by the Dubai-based Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government, entitled 'Citizen Engagement and Public Services in the Arab World: Potential of Social Media, sheds light on the increasing use by governments of mobile applications and social media in the provision of public services and for citizen engagement. Naturally, this development would not have happened without the phenomenal spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially in the Arab Gulf region. Following are Key findings of this report as they relate to this study:

1. Regionally, Arab citizens have positive attitudes towards the use of social media by government for public service design and delivery.
2. Arab users are mainly using social media sites for accessing information on public services, but not as much for giving feedback.
3. Social media has the potential to enable engagement but governments have to meet citizens' expectations.

4. Regional users are aware of the (increasing) risks of using social media for service delivery.
5. Civil society structures are empowered and are using social media for service delivery. (Salem, F., Mourtada, R. and Al-Shaer, S. 2014).

The report looked specifically at patterns of use of Facebook, Twitter and Linked-in but more recent studies include other social media that are popular with the region's youth, such as WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat. The context of this case study is explained in full in Salem, F., Mourtada, R. and Al-Shaer's report "From Majlis to Hashtag: The UAE National Brainstorming Session," published in 2014 by the Dubai-based Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, in partnership with the UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs.

Traditionally, the UAE and other Gulf states have enjoyed a decades old participatory system of public consultation called the 'Majlis' (Arabic for Council). This system enabled ordinary citizens to voice their opinions and concerns on public matters pertaining to their communities in informal public meetings with their rulers. This effective system still exists in traditional and modern forms throughout the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, although more formal parliament-like bodies have also become commonplace.

Recently, the UAE government decided to crowdsource suggestions and solutions from the UAE public directly about ways of reforming two chronic areas of under-performing public services, namely health and education. The goal of this exercise thus became 'to engage citizens through technological means to transform the country's education and healthcare sectors.' The UAE has a modern and strong ICT infrastructure and a large user base for social media and mobile technologies. The UAE ranks fifth globally in the quality of its infrastructure and leads the region in many other related indicators. A 2014 report indicated that Facebook had more than five million users in the UAE with penetration exceeding 60% (Mourtada and Alkhatib, 2014).

The campaign started with a public call issued by UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, inviting UAE citizens and

residents to join the national brainstorming session dealing with the state of health and education sectors. Interested persons were given the choice to use the official website of the prime minister or a dedicated e-mail address. The public was also encouraged to use their mobile phones to send video comments with their suggestions. Social media users were invited to tweet their ideas using designated hashtags in Arabic and English.

Using Twitter in Arabic and English, the Prime Minister urged citizens and residents to 'find new ideas for health and education.' He followed it with a second tweet saying 'Education and health concern all of us, so I invite all of society to think collectively of creative solutions.' In his third tweet, Sheikh Mohammed added: "UAE government is having a cabinet retreat that will be dedicated to further develop the health and education sectors."

According to Salem, F., Mourtada, R. and Al-Shaer, S. (2014):

The key idea behind the brainstorming session was that the cabinet would benefit from engaging the public in a systematic way to enrich their discussions with new and innovative ideas. The organizers hoped that this would help the government assess the state of the health and education sectors and understand pressing public issues better, based on firsthand public experiences, complementing expert advice and secondary research.

Next, teams were formed to collect, categorize, analyze and shortlist the proposals before they were forwarded to the cabinet retreat for consideration. Eighty two thousand (82,000) submissions were received from inside and outside the country. "Every single idea, proposal or participation was recorded in a special portal that was created internally to tally the public participation." Submissions were categorized under five pillars for each of the two sectors.

Following this, shortlisted ideas were submitted in a report to the cabinet retreat. Selected members of the public representing different stakeholders were invited to attend the cabinet retreat to present their suggestions directly to the cabinet. For example, a female

student with special needs was invited to present an idea that she had posted in a video in response to the call. The video provided a personal view of the challenges facing individuals with special needs in UAE schools.

2. Method

The case study method used in this paper adopts the definition by John Gerring (2007) as "the intensive study of a single" case and "a spatially delimited phenomenon observed at a single point in time or over some period of time." Denscombe (2007) notes that the reasoning behind concentrating efforts on one case rather than many is that there may be insights to be gained from looking at the individual case that can have wider implications. The aim, the author notes, "is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular."

Veal and Darcy (2014) reported four types of case study selection: namely (1) purposive, (2) illustrative, (3) typical/atypical and (4) pragmatic/opportunistic. Of these four, this case study fits the illustrative type where a case is intentionally selected to illustrate a particular proposition, namely that using crowdsourcing via social media can result in heightened citizen engagement and can serve as the basis for policy planning.

According to Denscombe (2007), a case study might be selected on the grounds that it provides something of a contrast with the norm. This applies perfectly with the UAE brainstorming exercise as the norm in developing countries is for top-down policy planning and formulation and not the reverse, as is the case with this case.

How the case will be analyzed follows Burns (1994) and Yin's (2009) three methods of analysis reported by Veal and Darcy (2014). Essentially, researchers either use pattern matching, explanation building or time-series analysis to analyze a case. The latter methods are useful to analyze this case as they involve using inductive reasoning to explain the case as well as developing explanations based on observing change over time, defined here as before and after the brainstorming experiment. This fits nicely with the uses of a discovery-led case study approach reported by Denscombe (2007). Essentially, a discovery-led approach describes what is happening in a case study setting (e.g.,

events, processes and relationships), explores the key issues (problems or opportunities) and compares settings to learn from the similarities and differences between them.

Admittedly, case studies are not as generalizable to a larger universe as studies using different methodologies. Despite this limitation, findings from this case may be generalizable depending on whether the case in question is either representative or unique to the particular circumstances of the case. This question will be tentatively answered in the discussion part of the paper.

2.1 Research Questions

RQ 1: What were the objectives originally set by the organizers of the government brainstorming initiative?

RQ 2: What were the outcomes of the government brainstorming session?

3. Results & Discussion

3.1 *Research Question # 1* asked what objectives the organizers of the government brainstorming initiative set. They were identified as the following:

- a. Citizen Engagement: Involve the UAE society in government decision-making processes, according them a direct role in influencing government decisions and contributing to government strategies;
- b. Development: Encourage citizens to participate in developing the education and health sectors in the country;
- c. Ideation: Contribute to establishing a “Government Innovation Laboratory ” in the cabinet retreat, where members of the cabinet can review and discuss the ideas submitted by the public;
- d. Citizen Empowerment: Inspire citizens to participate in making positive changes to their lives and contribute to improving the education and health sectors in the country;

- e. Collaboration: Exploit the possibilities offered by information and communication technologies (ICT) to cooperate with the public for better services;
- f. Partnership: Create a creative partnership between the public sector agencies and citizens through dialogue;
- g. Trust: Build a stronger level of trust between the government and people
- h. Two-way communication: Facilitate improved information exchanges using social media, in a fundamental shift from the one-way communication flow, which characterized government communications earlier.

3.2 *Research Question # 2* asked what the outcomes of the government brainstorming session were. The following outcomes were achieved:

- a. Crowdsourcing solutions for primary public service problems: The public suggested creative solutions to solve issues in education and health services;
- b. Identifying new problems in current public services: New problems in existing services were found through this process;
- c. Identifying indirect negative impact of existing services: The brainstorming session provided the government with insights about unintended negative impacts of existing government services, which can be solved;
- d. New Public Services: The process helped in the ideation of new government services. Original ideas for new government services were suggested by the public;
- e. Improving performance: The public generated innovative ideas that can enhance the way

- the government functions in certain services; and
- f. New communication channels between the government and the public: As an outcome of the process itself, the government opened a direct communication link with the UAE society, unseen anywhere in the modern history of the country.

The UAE brainstorming session that crowdsourced ideas and suggestions from the public has achieved its stated objectives. It has drawn significant popular participation with 82,000 public ideas and suggestions received through social media platforms and via the Prime Minister's website. According to Carroll (2014), there were more than 41,000 tweets in Arabic and 2,700 in English.

Demographic analysis of the ideas and proposals received through the Prime Minister's website indicates that participations on this website during the brainstorming session mostly came from those between 30-40 years old (around 45 percent), followed by those between 40-50 years old. According to Salem et al. (2014), the participations from older age groups "made sense, as they are the segments of society who are the primary 'customers' of public health and education services." Moreover, women figured prominently in this exercise as their contribution accounted for 56 percent of participants.

The public response was not limited to online participations, as representatives of students, teachers, parents, school administrators, doctors, nurses and other specialists in the health and education sectors were also invited to share their feedback in person during the Cabinet retreat (Salem et al., 2014).

The initiative produced several ideas for programs including an evaluation system for health institutions and a system for tracking teacher career progress. Carroll (2014) reported that one tweet from an Emirati doctor led to the creation of a UAE medical board. The case was an example of how the brainstorming initiative enabled citizen interaction with government and better idea gathering for services. Carroll quoted

Salem as saying: "It ended up from a tweet into an actual idea on the ground that all doctors were for years asking for, but there were not proper channels to reach to the Cabinet of the Government."

Dr. Saeed Al Dhaheri, an Emirati researcher said that this initiative will be institutionalized in the Government and will become government practice in the future." That could have a "profound" effect on citizens, Al Dhaheri said. "People will feel that they are part of the development – that they are responsible for voicing their opinion and engaging with the Government." He expects more brainstorming sessions and a framework on them in the future.

Among the challenges faced, the response was so overwhelming that government analysts were unable to cope with the volume of information received. "They weren't able to grasp everything because they didn't use big data tools to analyze the findings," Fadi Salem of the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government said. According to Salem et al., better planning by more people, the involvement of more government entities, diversifying platforms and localization could be useful for future sessions (Carroll, 2014; Salem, Mourtada, and Al-Shaer, 2014).

Mohammed Al Marzooqi, a columnist at Emarat Al Youm daily, said critical responses should also be welcomed and officials could use the opportunity to clarify issues with citizens. "Negative tweets are quite important in any hashtag campaign..." he said. Constant praise of the health sector and the UAE in general was pointless, he added. "The hashtag in the end gave an opportunity even for those complaining of the situation, whether in health or education, to have a fruitful result of their complaint, and in itself I think this is an achievement" (Carroll, 2014).

After the cabinet retreat, the Prime Minister said: 'Our people are creative. Many of the ideas we received were outstanding. We promise everybody that the development of healthcare and education will not stop.' He directed government entities to make the 'Government Innovation Lab' an official standard practice in citizen engagement for public service development in all federal government entities.

4. Conclusions

This experiment performed one of Spiegel's (2011) three ways for crowdsourcing via social media, namely asking the public for feedback. It used types three and four of Brabham's (2016) typology of crowdsourcing for governance, namely through broadcast search and peer-vetted creative production. Public reaction indicated the validity of Houtzager, Lavallo and Acharya's (2003) thesis that direct citizen participation in policy formulation 'can help democratize and rationalize the state' and help provide 'politically-marginalized populations with a say in policy.' In addition, it is further proof that such experiments improve government transparency, quality and effectiveness of their policies and legitimacy of public policy, especially when ideas and solutions provided via public crowdsourcing become government policy, as was the case following the UAE experiment.

One way of measuring the degree of success of the UAE brainstorming session is determining whether it was a one-off experiment or the dawn of a new mindset, that views public engagement via social media as an innovative tool to utilize social media as bridges

between the government and its publics. Given the UAE's record of accomplishment in innovation in public policy, it was expected that the government would adopt the crowdsourcing via social media model as a valuable strategic tool for public engagement and sound policy formulation. Indeed, most UAE federal entities are now following the lead of the UAE government in encouraging the public to offer ideas and suggestions to improve current services and set up new ones.

Because social media are globally ubiquitous, crowdsourcing can raise and improve citizen engagement and serve as the basis for sound policy planning in Asian and other countries. From this perspective, the UAE experiment has regional and global applicability and relevance. Lessons learned from this case study can be beneficial to many countries that are considering similar technology-based initiatives that utilize popular and accessible social media as public policy tools and instruments of citizen engagement.

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