

Capitalising on the Potential of Online Communities to Help Welfare Recipients

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Abstract. Social Media provides an opportunity for better two-way communication between governments and their citizens. So far, this has been explored mostly in the context of engaging citizens through public consultations to help design new policies and releasing datasets to enable their use for innovative applications by the public. In our work, we are exploring yet another use of social media in governments, as a new channel to support specific groups. In this model, the government takes a mediation role, facilitating the creation of online communities for specific groups of citizens, thereby capitalising on the potential power of such communities to provide social and emotional peer-support and get feedback on social security policies. We propose to explore the issues that arise in this context.

Introduction

With the development of Web 2.0, people have become more active participants in the creation and sharing of information, and, through this process, have met people they were unlikely to have met otherwise, and developed informal groups online. Over the years this culture of participation has been very strong,

demonstrating how quickly people can organise themselves, support each other, share ideas and construct new knowledge.

Governments and organisations recognise the potential of the social web, and they have begun actively increasing their online presence. They use Twitter and Facebook to keep the public informed (e.g., tweetMP to follow Australian Members of Parliament on Twitter, the Facebook page of the Bedfordshire Police), release data sets that can then be used in mash up projects (e.g., mashup Australia or data.gov.au to access and reuse public datasets from the Australian Government), and engage people through public consultations (e.g., Public Sphere to engage people in public policy development, Future Melbourne to involve people in the design and strategy of the future shape of their city, Together for London to encourage commuters to debate behaviour on public transport).

While this engagement to date has been mostly focused on data (e.g., dissemination, sharing and feedback), its potential social dimension has largely been ignored. Governments can expand their role to not only be a collaborator, but also a mediator facilitating the creation of online community groups aimed at providing social support to disadvantaged citizens. Welfare programs have changed over the recent past, and governments can take advantage of the power of such communities to provide the social and emotional peer-support currently missing in the implementation of social security policies.

Beyond the provision of financial support

Many developed countries provide an income support payment for people with low or no income who have the responsibility to care for one or more children. In recent years, however, welfare systems have changed, and the financial assistance that people used to receive without any mutual obligation requirement is now provided in exchange for work (or some form of community participation) and offered for a limited period of time. These measures, while aimed at encouraging people to undertake activities to improve their prospect of job, did not have the expected impact with respect to influencing people's behaviour. Early studies evaluating the effectiveness of these reforms failed to show any financial gain, or significant improvements in job prospects (e.g., Ziguras, 2004; Cameron, 2006; Sawyer, 2006; and Cox and Priest, 2008). These evaluations also point to the fact that the transition can be difficult, and thus people need help.

Our work aims at helping people currently receiving welfare payments find a job and become financially self-sufficient. More specifically, we are targeting families in receipt of Parenting Payment (PP) who will be transitioned to Newstart Allowance (NSA - an unemployment benefit) and have new compulsory participation requirements when their youngest child turns six years old (for couple families) or eight (for single parents). As the relationship between

governments and citizens is largely one-way and the support offered by government is mostly financial or informational, our aim is to complement existing welfare transition programs, by exploring the social and emotional dimension of this relationship. In partnership with Centrelink, the Australian Government's service delivery agency, responsible for administering social welfare payments, we explore the use of an online community, facilitated by Centrelink, as a support group for parents in receipt of income support.

A community for parents transitioning from welfare to work

The challenge for us is to create the right kind of community that people will value, building on a culture of citizens' collaboration, participation and information sharing. An important question is whether such online communities would be useful for groups of citizens. There is certainly a value in being able to share experiences 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 impersonal. This online community may also provide alternative ways to disseminate targeted information to groups of citizens (e.g., bust myths, correct misconceptions, and be more responsive to specific or personal questions).

However, being involved in online interactions is quite different from running and facilitating an online community group. This is not a role traditionally filled by governments, and it is not clear that people would want such a community be monitored by the government or would feel free to talk knowing that forums are moderated. These are the issues we are proposing to explore.

Method

To provide useful and effective support, we needed to get an understanding of what would be useful for families during this transition process and the difficulties and/or obstacles they face. We also wanted to explore with them the idea of using an online community as a support group. The data was collected through group interviews and an online survey.

The people invited to either the group interviews or the online survey were Centrelink customers currently on Parenting Payment (PP) and about to transition to Newstart Allowance (NSA) and customers already on Newstart.

Group interviews

During November 2010, four group interviews were organised and facilitated by the Centrelink Concept Lab. Each focus group was scheduled for one and a half hours. Out of the 25 participants initially recruited, 17 attended including 15 participants on PP and about to transition, and two participants having recently made the transition to NSA. Participants were mostly mothers, with only two fathers.

During these group interviews, participants discussed their understanding of the transition process, their feelings about their requirement to return to the workforce and to regularly report to the government, and the social barriers they perceive as affecting their ability to participate.

Online survey

The online survey was a follow-up of the group interviews to confirm with a larger group of customers our initial findings. In December 2010, customers having an online account with Centrelink were invited to participate to the survey.

Among the 899 customers who were contacted, 47 participated to the survey; but only 44 completed the survey. Most of the participants were females aged between 28 and 56 years old, with only 4 fathers. We had an equal participation from both groups (i.e., 22 in PP and 22 in NSA). Most of the participants were coming from large populated states such as New South Wales (NSW), Victoria (VIC) and Queensland (QLD).

Understanding of the transition process

For many this transition comes as a surprise. There was no clear understanding of what was going to happen next, what was expected from them (beyond the broad requirement to have to look for work) or what the consequences of the change would be for them, both financially and in terms of family life organisation. The following quotes, coming from people who participated in the online survey, illustrate this.

“I had been informed in an interview that nothing would change for me when my daughters turned 8. When I went in to organise the change I was shocked to hear about all that was required. I was even more shocked to discover the drop in the support I would be receiving from Centrelink.” (P42: a 39 year old mother)

“I wasn't prepared for the financial disadvantage or the change of payment arrangements of both Newstart and Family Payment. I had to rearrange all my automatic bill payments. It was a night mare because I could not receive the payments on the same day of the week as I previously had received Parenting Payment. Very stressful, varying advice from staff at Centrelink, confusing times.” (P11: a 54 year old mother)

People's feelings about the transition

As illustrated in Figure 1 and the comments below, the lack of understanding of what is going to happen and what to expect make people feel apprehensive. They are overwhelmed by the changes in the family routine and budget this is going to require.

"I know that I have to apply for newstart and have asked what I can expect to receive as to work out a new budget & have been told that from what I earn probably nothing. I don't earn a great deal as only work part time as have 2 primary aged children, so that is scary to be losing all that money. There will be very stressful times ahead until I can ascertain exactly what money I will receive if any." (P29: a 43 year old mother)

"I feel overwhelmed because our finances are very stressful and I am not sure how everything is going to work out." (P15: a 31 year old mother)

Others felt angry and not supported by Centrelink:

"I was not made aware until that phone call, how much information would be needed, how many details I would have to go over AGAIN [...] So much mucking around and misleading information left me extremely lost, angry and frustrated." (P48: a 43 year old mother)

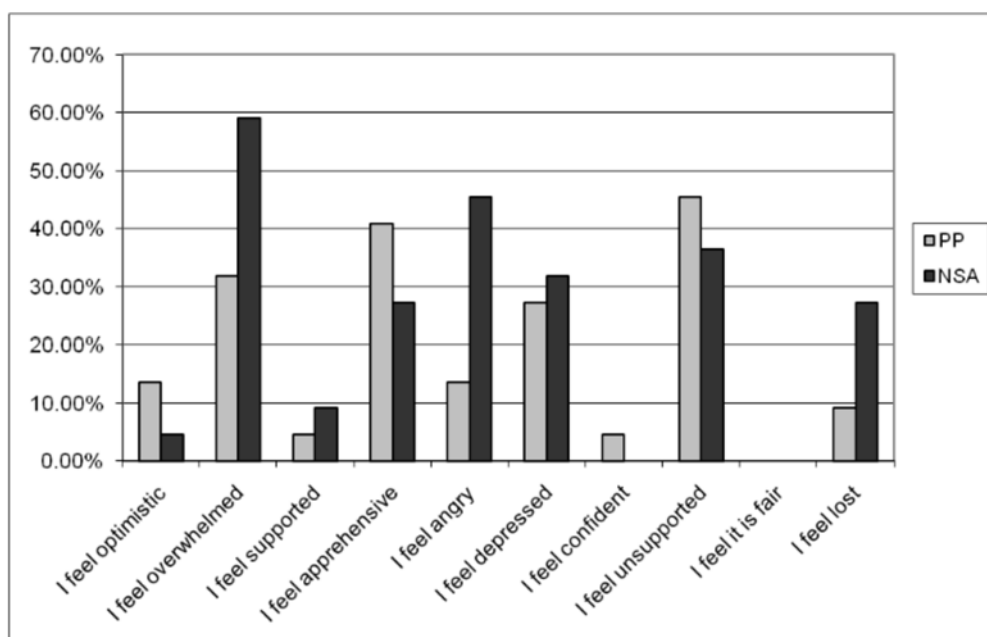


Figure 1. Online survey results: Participants' feelings about the transition process

A majority of participants also reported being not well equipped to make the transition or to adjust to their new situation. In the group interviews in particular, some expressed a lack of confidence and a feeling of being overwhelmed. Many felt that they were not equipped to look for a job, mostly because they had been out of the workforce for many years. They felt that they required much more support from the government than they were getting to enable them to find jobs. In the online survey, only half of the participants reported having a support

network, which gives us the opportunity to develop this aspect further through the online community work.

Usefulness of an online community for parents

Participants were described a scenario where they were offered the opportunity to join an online community of parents who are going through the same transition process, just like them, and, in this context, they were asked to consider a number of ideas and indicate whether they think it would be useful and it could help them, or not. We are presenting here some of the feedback collected.

Overall, the response was positive, with about 32% of participants¹ thinking it would be a good idea and 54.5% that some people might benefit from this support, as illustrated by some of the participants' comments we collected:

"i think a lot of parents would find this most beneficial as there is a wide amount of different situations that we all come from though all being parents (we have in common)we would have a support network also and maybe not feel so pressured into an unrealistic situation..." (P16: a 44 year old mother)

"I have no support network at all currently, no family to turn to. Such an online community would be a huge boost. It is hard caring for children on your own." (P2: a 46 year old mother)

Participants were asked to express their opinion towards a set of nine statements about the online community. Three of the statements were related to the regulation of behaviour in the community. As shown in Figure 2, participants felt strongly about the need to remind members of appropriate behaviours (88.64%), the need for the community to be monitored (93.18%) and the need for the discussion forums to be moderated (88.64%). People were concerned about the reliability of information in the community, but more importantly that forums could become a place for people to complain, drawing on negative feelings, as illustrated with the comment below.

"I think the online community could focus too much with people's frustration and negative feelings and become more of a place to complain than a place for mutual help and support." (P43: a 34 year old mother)

We had one statement about facts and who holds the authority on facts. Most of the PP group (73%) agreed that only Centrelink officers should provide the facts against 36% only in the NSA group. Because people interact with a range of agencies (e.g., Dept. of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) and service providers (e.g., Job Services Australia) to get information, they may regard them as authoritative sources as well.

We had also three statements related to how people identify themselves with the community. A large majority of participants (91%) could relate emotionally to

¹ These figures are taken from the online survey responses. They also reflect the sentiments captured during the group interviews.

parents in a similar situation, and learn from them what to expect next (79.55%). Participants showed also a certain level of commitment towards such an online community, reporting their willingness to work in partnership with other parents like them (68%), as shown below.

“I think that is great idea. None of my friends or associates are single mothers and I miss the opportunity to share information that could make a difference or be of any help. Sharing ideas on budgeting, hearing of others successes, [...] I would relish the opportunity to connect with other people who are in the same situation...” (P41: a 34 year old mother)

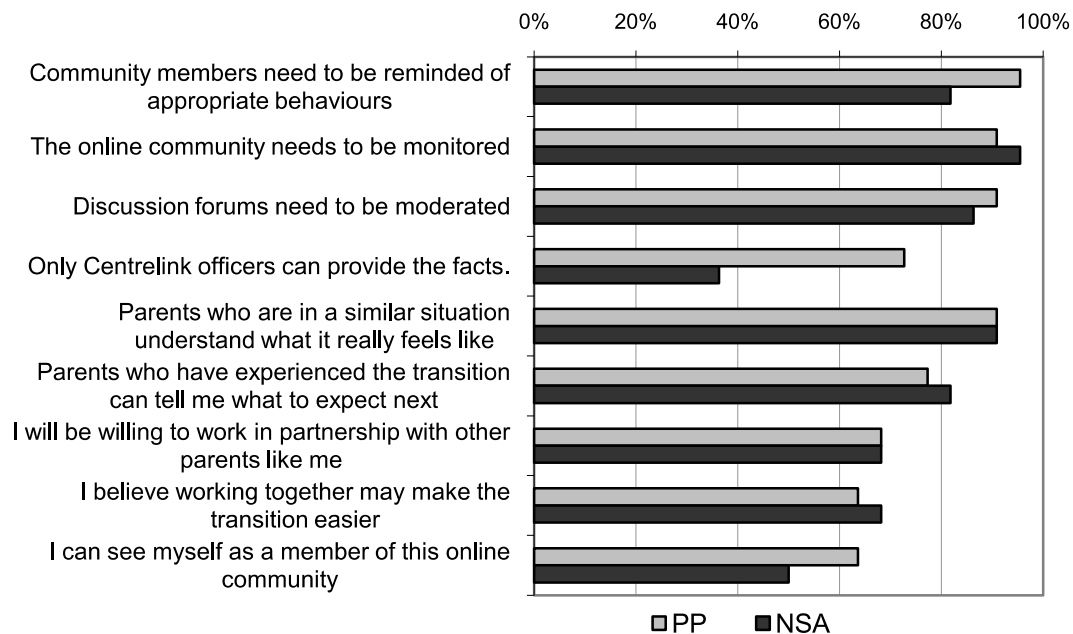


Figure 2. Participants' attitude toward the online community: percentage of agreement with each statement for each group.

Finally, the last two statements were measuring the sense of value in having such an online community group available and the sense of belonging it may create. Two third of the participants believed working together with other parents may make the transition easier, and 57% of them could see themselves as a member of this online community. When asked whether they would join such an online community, 34% of the participants reported that they would be happy to join; 48% of them reported that they might give the community a try; and only 18% said they would not be interested. It was interesting to see that almost all the participants who said they would be happy to join such an online community could see themselves as a member of it.

Overall people were open to the idea of the community, in particular to the opportunity to share (45.4%) and work with other members (41%). Participants from the NSA group were more enthusiastic about the project with one in four supporting it completely. This may be due to the fact that, in this group, people have already made the transition and have found it hard to adjust to the changes. Very few people (2.2%) did not see any value in the idea.

Conclusion

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 to take on a new role, that of a mediator, within communities of specific groups of citizens.

By facilitating the creation of online groups, governments can 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 have on them.

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