

Social Construction of Appropriate Use of Enterprise Social Media

Full Paper

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Abstract

Increasingly companies and governments are turning to enterprise versions of social software to accomplish organizational goals. Unlike public social media, access to Enterprise Social Media (ESM) is normally restricted to the organization or key strategic partners. We know from research on Information Technology (IT) value, that not only is system use necessary to achieve value, but also that this use must be appropriate. System use, and specifically appropriate use, has received very little attention in the literature. The nature of ESM tools and the absence of specific and detailed use guidelines creates an environment where employees are encouraged to explore means to achieve value. Thus, employees invoke a dynamic and interactive process to socially construct appropriate use. This paper draws on previous research on IT value, and legitimacy to propose a conceptual model to guide future research on how appropriate use of enterprise social media is socially constructed.

Keywords

Enterprise social media, IT value, use, legitimacy, social construction.

Introduction

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are three of the most common social media tools used in North America. A recent study by Pew Research Center indicates that 70% of Americans are regular users of social media (Pew Research Center 2016) with Facebook being the most popular. Research in areas involving public social media has primarily focused on its use in non-work environments such as education, emergency management, political engagement, public relations and social-cultural situations (Aoun and Vatanasakdakul 2012). There is also an emerging body of research on the benefits to be achieved such as maintaining relationships (Khan et al. 2014) and finding and sharing information (Lange et al. 2008). Research has also been done on some of the risks including to individual privacy and security, its addictive nature (Khan et al. 2014) and the potential of social media to increase social isolation (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

With the extension of social media into organizations, a new area of study has emerged. Most commonly used by organizations to reach out to external stakeholders, social media is now being implemented to benefit internal operations. Enterprise Social Media (ESM) has the potential to be transformational (Aral et al. 2013) by breaking down the geographic and hierarchical barriers (Aoun and Vatanasakdakul 2012). Because ESM use is voluntary, the benefits are highly dependent on how employees use the tools. However, how employees decide to use ESM tools is a highly dynamic and interactive process influenced by the technology, the organizational environment and the employee. Employees function within hierarchical structures, yet social technologies are designed to work across these structures.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical model of how appropriate use of ESM is socially constructed within a complex organizational environment. It draws on previous research on enterprise social media, information technology (IT) value, legitimacy and social construction. The resulting model captures the dynamic, interactive and interactive nature of the process.

Theoretical Basis

This section presents previous work that is relevant to understanding how appropriate use of social media is developed within organizations. Literature on enterprise social media, IT value, legitimacy and social construction of reality inform the development of the conceptual model presented in this paper.

Enterprise Social Media

Social media has proven to be a popular area of study for researchers with a search of the term “social media” returning nearly 18,000 entries for research conducted between 2006 and 2016. Social media technologies that are publicly accessible are rich sources of data and have attracted the interest of scholars doing research on learning and education, emergency management, political campaigning (Aoun and Vatanasakdakul 2012) or the social-cultural implications of the technologies (Olmstead et al. 2015).

The term social media refers to “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technical foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61) where ‘social’ is representative of the 2-way interactions that are enabled, while ‘media’ is representative of the richness of the information that can be exchanged (Hill et al. 2014).

Affordances refer to the relationship between technology and the user that has the potential to enable or constrain an outcome (Evans et al. 2017). Treem and Leonardi (2012) describe four key affordances that are available in social media that are not available in other technologies. *Visibility* is enabled when users can create personal profiles, establish connections, post updates and submit comments that are available via search engines. *Persistence* is enabled by ensuring that the content does not disappear. This means organizations can build on the knowledge base over time. Although some social media tool developers are trying to create non-persistent platforms, it is commonly accepted that once material is on the Internet, it is virtually impossible to call it back. *Editability* is enabled by permitting users to make changes to their own content including deleting it if necessary and to control what information users see. Users can, therefore, control how their messages are received and make changes to correct errors. Finally, social media enables the *association* of people-to-people, people-to-content, and content-to-content.

More recently, there has been an interest in understanding how social media can be used by organizations to achieve their objectives. Companies have embraced the use of social media for marketing, reputation management and to support customer service needs. Governments have also begun using social media to increase transparency, to seek input from citizens or to develop government services in cooperation with citizens (Archer-Brown 2012).

Previous social media use by organizations has focused on external facing relationships where engaging externally has a specific purpose. An evolving use of social media is with Enterprise Social Media (ESM) where access to dedicated social media technologies is restricted to those internal to the organization or carefully selected partners. ESM has the potential to be transformational (Aral et al. 2013) in organizations with benefits commonly described in terms of human, social, organization and symbolic capital (Mandviwalla and Watson 2014).

Unfortunately, ESM has not yet experienced the widespread success of public social media. Managers are concerned that employees will use ESM for non-work related discussions and have a negative effect on productivity (Mergel and Bretschneider 2013; Turban et al. 2011). From their own perspective, employees are concerned that managers will use the ESM to monitor employee actions (Leonardi 2014; Treem and Leonardi 2012) or to control the content (Omar et al. 2014).

Unlike many technologies implemented in organizations, ESM use is generally considered voluntary, so employees will engage with ESM according to their personal perspective of the value to be achieved. A key difference between individuals using public social media and employees using ESM is that the relationship between employees is a complex one. Employees function within a formal organizational structure (most often hierarchical) that imposes specific structures such as relationships and processes. It is unclear how these structures affect how users decide to interact with ESM (Cao et al. 2013).

Use

The expected benefits of an ESM implementation can be categorized at three levels (Hinchcliffe 2015; Mirani and Lederer 1998). First order effects are focused on efficiencies by overcoming barriers (i.e. time and distance) to communications and by reducing costs. Second order effects of ESM are focused on longer term effectiveness measures such as team building and knowledge management. At the strategic level, ESM can help with improving institutional practices and fostering an improved organizational culture.

The relationship between IT investments and IT Value is often explored from a variance perspective where researchers look for the causal relationships that will guarantee success (Soh and Markus 1995). Attempts to understand this relationship have had inconsistent results where investments in technology have not always resulted in positive value. Brynjolfsson (Brynjolfsson 1993) explains this paradox as being caused by an inability to properly quantify the all the inputs and all the outputs, the long delay in experiencing benefits, the potential that profits have been redistributed in the organization and finally the potential mismanagement of the information or the technology.

Many of the existing models that study IT Value incorporate a concept of *use* as an intervening variable or an intermediate process (DeLone and McLean 1992; DeLone and McLean 2003; Lucas 1973; Lucas 1993; Seddon 1997; Soh and Markus 1995). This recognizes that if the system is not used, it cannot create value or result in a benefit (Lee 2001). Soh and Markus present a very rich process model that directly addresses the link between IT expenditures and organizational performance (Soh and Markus 1995). They identify the *IT Use* process as the series of actions that are necessary to convert IT assets into IT impacts. They also specifically mention *appropriate use* vs *inappropriate use* indicating that *appropriate use* is a necessary condition to achieve impact.

Despite the recognition of use as a valuable construct, very little research addresses what is meant by *use*. In studies of social media and non-social media technologies, *use* appears as an independent variable (Brooks 2015; Burton-Jones and Straub 2006), a dependent variable (Adams et al. 1992; Doll and Torkzadeh 1998) and as an intervening variable (Goodhue and Thompson 1995; Trice and Treacy 1988). It has been operationalized as hours of use, number of functions utilized, or number of reports produced, but its operationalization is highly context-driven.

A great deal of attention has been put on the importance of *use* being voluntary. This implies that users who voluntarily take advantage of the system must personally see a benefit (Lucas 1978) and therefore system success has been achieved (Iivari 1985). Unfortunately, use may not be truly voluntary if there are no other options available (Adams et al. 1992) or if the social norms are very strong (Goodhue and Thompson 1995). The benefits of technology are highly dependent on context – how and where it is used – so researchers need to also consider the personality and experience of the individual as well as the social and organizational environment (Barua et al. 2010; Burton-Jones and Straub 2006).

Nan (2011) explored Information System (IS) *use* from a Complex Adaptive System lens and determined that *use* is “a multi-level, interactive and dynamic” process comprised of three elements: the users, the technology, and the task. Nan also noted that use is composed of two fundamental processes: one that is top-down addressing how collective use influences individual use and one that is bottom up that addresses how individual use results in collective use (Nan 2011).

Legitimacy

Research on legitimacy provides a useful lens through which to understand appropriate use of ESM. “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or *appropriate* within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574) (emphasis added). Although legitimacy was primarily covered from a political perspective to explain the existence and functions of political institutions (Beetham 1991; Clark 2005), it has also been widely used to study organizational structures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Scott 1983; Parsons 1960; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) and more recently, is used to understand interpersonal relationships and group dynamics (Ridgeway and Berger 1986; Tost 2011).

It is common to think of legitimacy as being applicable at only the organizational level, but it has value in considering a diverse list of entities including any “act, rule, procedures, routine, distribution, position,

group or team, group's status structure, teamwork, a system of position, an authority structure, organizational symbols, an organization's form, practices, services, program.." (Johnson 2004, p. 10). This makes it clear that the use of ESM could be informed by previous research on legitimacy.

The determination that an action is legitimate can come from three sources (Dornbusch and Scott 1975): an individual makes a personal judgement on legitimacy of an action (known as *propriety*), a colleague or social group can endorse the action (*endorsement*) and finally, a superior or someone with more authority can deem an action to be legitimate (*authorization*).

Several typologies of the bases of legitimacy have been developed and although there are specific differences, they share some commonality. *Regulative* legitimacy is grounded in the rule of law (Aldrich and Fiol 1994; Beetham 1991; Scott 2001) supported by an ability to sanction those who do not comply. *Pragmatic* or *instrumental* legitimacy has a self-interest perspective based on how a specific action can be perceived as beneficial (Suchman 1995; Tost 2011). *Cognitive* legitimacy is based on shared frames of reference or existing cognitive models that are taken-for-granted (Scott 2001; Suchman 1995). *Relational* legitimacy results from trustworthiness, interpersonal respect and individual charisma based on how the action makes the individual feel (Tost 2011; Weber 1947). The final basis of legitimacy is the one most often the subject of investigation. *Normative* legitimacy is linked to shared beliefs, values, and norms (Beetham 2013; Suchman 1995; Weber 1947).

Johnson, Dowd, Ridgeway, Cook and Massey (2006) studied legitimation in the context of group and organizational status and authority and they identified four stages of legitimation of social objects: *innovation*, *local validation*, *diffusion* and *general validation*. In this process, each stage is a necessary condition for the stage that follows. Legitimation is considered a dynamic, iterative and interactive process that could easily be applied to understand the process by which appropriate use of ESM is developed.

Institutional theory has provided the foundation for much of the research on legitimacy within organizations including organizational processes. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) describe three isomorphic processes to explain why organizations in a given field are similar, but this work can be extended to also understand how organizational practices become similar. *Coercive isomorphism* results from formal informal pressures and is often linked to threats of punishment, *mimetic isomorphism* results when employees decide to copy practices that have been used before and *normative isomorphism* describes actions taken because of a shared belief, norm or value.

Although their work was applied at the organizational level, the same isomorphic forces can help explain the social dynamic of employee interactions with ESM tools. Sources of regulative legitimacy, including legislation and formal policies have strong coercive influences on employee behavior. Users of ESM will be more likely to mimic the behavior of other ESM users or to comply with organizational norms in uncertain situations.

Social Construction

There has been a great deal of research to look at how legitimacy is gained, maintained and lost (Gilley 2009). It is generally accepted that the construction of a shared social reality is the foundation of legitimacy (Johnson et al. 2006). Berger & Luckman identify four levels of legitimation: *incipient* (based on the use of language and categorization), *theoretical schemas* (the evolution and distribution of common thought), *explicit theories* (differentiated body of knowledge) and *symbolic universes* (creation of a single collective meaning) (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Research indicates that for an action to be considered legitimate, it must be validated. The term *propriety* is used to explain when an individual believes an action to be legitimate (Walker 1986) but for legitimacy, an individual judgement is insufficient because legitimacy is generally accepted to be collective in nature (Nielsen and Rao 1987) and there are several stakeholders that can make a legitimacy judgement (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). If a colleague or subordinate group deems an action to be legitimate, then it is *endorsed*, while those with more power can *authorize* the action as legitimate (Walker 1986). This validation can be *explicit* because of specific actions or words that indicate the action is supported or not or the validation can be *implicit* when stakeholders fail to either say or do anything to contradict the action.

Employees can be influenced by the direct statements and judgments of co-workers and superiors (Fulk and Boyd 1991; Fulk et al. 1990) by observing and modeling the behavior of others (Fulk 1993; Rogers 1983) and by paying attention to the broader system values (Kwahk and Park 2016). We know that within social media, opinion leaders are sought for their input (Gladwell 2002; Rogers 1983) because of their ability to influence (Treem and Leonardi 2012) while others may be assigned a specific moderator role to control unacceptable behavior (McGillicuddy et al. 2016).

ESM tools are social by design and are intended to improve interactions in the organization. As employees interact with ESM tools, they are also interacting with other users. As they act and interact, employees learn more about the environment and organization and receive direct feedback on their actions. As a result, their future actions are framed by the experiences they have.

Conceptual Model

A conceptual framework or model is useful to understand the relationships between ideas (Lundberg 2004) and can guide future scientific endeavors. A conceptual framework that describes how appropriate use of ESM is developed in an organization would be of great interest from both a theoretical and a practical perspective. The four stages of legitimation (innovation, local validation, diffusion, general validation) proposed by Johnson et al. (2006) outlines a process by which social objects are legitimated and can be applied as the key elements for an appropriate use framework. This legitimation process is dependent on a start state where a user makes an individual judgment that an innovation is legitimate.

Figure 1 presents a descriptive process model to help understand how appropriate use of ESM is developed in an organization. Within each stage, detailed elements of the legitimation step are included. This is a dynamic and interactive process where individual employees learn and adapt their behaviors based on the feedback received.

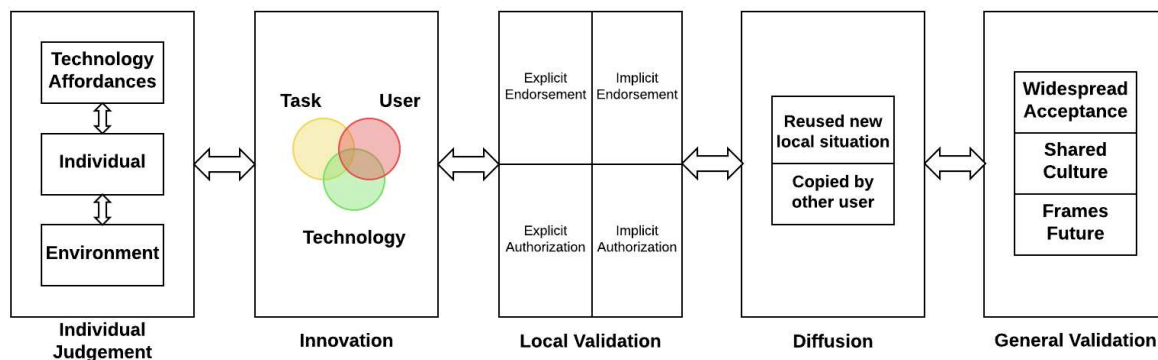


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Appropriate Use Process

Individual Judgement

The first step in the process to determine appropriate use is the judgment by an individual employee that certain actions are appropriate. This judgment is influenced by the technology affordances of ESM (e.g. visibility and persistence), the organizational and social environment (i.e., legislation, policies and organizational practices) as well as the individual's previous experience and knowledge. As an example, an employee should understand that it would be inappropriate to post information about a subordinate's performance evaluation on an ESM tool because this information would be visible to all users and would be in contravention of privacy regulations. Similarly, the employee is likely to understand that posting a question looking for help with a work task would be an appropriate use. While some actions are easy to judge, others are not so straightforward and require the employees to make an individual judgment.

The individual judgment that an action is legitimate can result from a belief that the action is appropriate based on regulatory legitimacy (i.e., legislation and regulations), normative legitimacy (i.e., organizational and social norms), cognitive legitimacy (i.e., the employee's experiences and knowledge) as well as relational legitimacy (i.e., building trust with other employees).

Innovation

The innovation step represents the employee taking a specific and overt action. The action is determined by the social role played by the user, the technical features offered by the ESM tool, and the specific task that is being performed. How the technology is used to get work done in specific contexts is important for achieving a desired outcome (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011). Li and Bernoff have defined a Social Technographics ladder where each rung of the ladder represents a user that is increasingly engaged with the ESM technology (i.e., inactive, spectator, joiner, collector, critic, conversationalist, and creator) (Li and Bernoff 2011). Dependent on the specific ESM tool, different features will be available (e.g., newsfeed, microblog, group chat, profiles). The task to be performed is specific but could include information sharing, collaboration, communication, learning, or management (Turban et al. 2011). The action by an employee to use a specific feature of the ESM technology for a specific function can be linked to pragmatic legitimacy where the goal is to achieve a certain outcome.

Local Validation

Once an employee takes a specific action, it will either be validated or not as being an appropriate use of ESM. Validation can be through the explicit or implicit actions of either colleagues and subordinates or superiors (Walker 1986). The affordance of visibility means that the action taken is immediately visible as is any response to the action. The longer it takes for an employee to receive explicit feedback on the action taken, the more likely the employee will deem the action to be implicitly validated. With ESM, the explicit feedback may be done using the ESM tool itself but is also just as likely to be done off-line, specifically in the case where the action was considered inappropriate by superiors. To not embarrass the employee, a superior is more likely to have a private conversation to clarify expected behaviors. In this case, the validation is explicit from the employee's perspective, but because it is done outside of the ESM tool, other employees may see this as implicit validation. Inappropriate actions may also trigger the need for the development of policy guidelines. However, there will inevitably be a time delay between the inappropriate action and the release of approved practice guidelines and once a behavior becomes established, it will be very difficult to change (Markus 1983).

Diffusion

When the action has been validated locally, the next step involves a diffusion. Diffusion of a specific practice or action refers to that practice being used by more employees or being used in different ways by mimicking the original behavior. Because validation of action using the ESM tool is visible to everyone, this feedback is immediately recognized. This step could also be described as routinization where structures emerge such as policies and formal rules that establish the ESM use as standardized (Saga and Zmud 1994).

General Validation

At this point in the process, the action is no longer perceived as new or out of the ordinary but is institutionalized as an organizational norm and accepted practice. "Over time and with sufficient exposure to the experiences of others ... people [will develop] shared understandings about acceptable behavior" (Kraut et al. 1998, p. 448). At this point, the ESM use has been internalized as a new objective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The action has been institutionalized as taken-for-granted and therefore has achieved cognitive legitimacy (Suchman 1995).

Model Validation

Level of Analysis

Validation of this complete model would require evaluation at both the individual and the organizational levels of analysis. The first two stages (individual judgment, innovation) would be best studied at an individual level because the judgment and the actions are unique to individuals. This also means that within a given organization, different results could be attained for everyone. The final two stages (diffusion, global validation) would be best studied at the organizational level because the interest would be at the macro level and although responses may differ for each action, there should be consistency in the organization. The middle stage (local validation) could involve both individual and organizational levels of analysis. There is an interest in what individual actions are taken to validate ESM use as well as how employees internalize these actions, but there is also an interest in the organizational system of validation and the norms of how this validation takes place.

Methodology

The development of appropriate use of ESM is a dynamic and interactive process that would be best studied using an interpretive approach. This approach recognizes that reality is discovered through “a process of enactment in which perceptions, attention, and interpretation come to define the context of the organization” (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978, p. 260). Although the conceptual model presented here takes a process perspective, any single element of the model could be further developed to support a variance approach.

As indicated by the model presented here, context will play a big part in any validation through a combination of ESM technology, individual experiences and knowledge, organizational and social norms, and specific tasks to be performed. What is of interest is to capture rich data to understand what is happening. This would be best accomplished through qualitative methods such as a case study or ethnographic analysis.

Contributions and Limitations

This paper extends previous work on legitimation in organizations and contributes a theoretical model to understand appropriate use of ESM.

The conceptual model presented here helps to understand the factors and concepts relevant to appropriate use of ESM. By design, a conceptual model simplifies the real world to make it easier to understand. The real world is far more complex that can be represented in a conceptual model therefore not everything can be included.

The use of social media technologies internal to organizations is still evolving and research in this area is still in its infancy. The model presented here challenges traditional thinking about the implementation of technology and how appropriate use of technology is socially constructed. Legitimacy theory has seen limited application to organizational processes and has not been used previously to understand the use of technology. This model includes social-cognitive elements, organizational-environmental factors and the technical aspects of ESM. It also considers changes that occur over time. The temporal and contextual factors described here comprise the boundaries for generalization of any results.

From a practitioner’s perspective, a different approach to training in enterprise social media is implicated. The functional and technical capabilities of the software are only one element that contributes to how it is used in an organization. It is important to realize that appropriate use is determined by a complex and interactive social process. Implementers of technology should study this process and account for it in any plans for implementation.

The model presented here is not a theory. Although the relationships between the concepts are described, there is no attempt to explain why or to determine causality. Nevertheless, the model can be extended to support further research on causality.

Conclusion

The process of developing appropriate use of ESM in organizations is a complex process because of the richness of the social media technologies, the individual perspectives of employees, the complex organizational and social environments and the variety of uses or benefits that can be achieved. This complex environment and the relative newness of ESM means that we do not yet fully understand the social process of how appropriate use is determined. Although no theory has been developed to explain causal relationships, we can be informed by previous research on enterprise social media, IT value, legitimacy, and social construction. The result of this research is the presentation of a conceptual model to understand and explain what and how appropriate use of ESM is socially constructed. This model can be used to guide and inform future research in this area.

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