

**Civic Engagement and
Local E-Government: Social
Networking Comes of Age**

PIs:

Karen Mossberger (CUPPA)

Yonghong Wu (CUPPA)

With assistance from:

Kamna Lal Mantode

(Public Administration)

Meng-Hao Li

(Public Administration)

Mona Noriega

(Public Administration)

Yu Shi

(Public Administration)

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**University of Illinois at Chicago
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs**

Karen Mossberger, Ph.D., mossberg@uic.edu
Department of Public Administration

Yonghong Wu, Ph.D., yonghong@uic.edu
Department of Public Administration

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How have opportunities for online citizen information and civic engagement changed in local e-government in the past few years? The unequivocal answer is social networks, on a large scale. Open data portals are emerging as a recent trend, although only a dozen of the nation's largest cities have them. Other changes between 2009 and 2011 include a few examples of online town hall meetings, and some modest improvements in information.

This study examined features on local government websites that could contribute to civic engagement, through 1) information about government and community, and 2) through interactive or participatory opportunities online. This included information on contacting local officials, local government organization, processes and regulations, neighborhoods, local policies and performance data, and opportunities to participate offline (such as public hearings). We also examined online interactivity and opportunities for participation (such as social networks, townhall meetings, and open data portals), and the transparency and accessibility of the main website. Information is critical for government accountability, as well as for providing the knowledge necessary for civic engagement. Communication with citizens, through a variety of online tools, can potentially foster more responsive government.

The research reported here repeats a similar study conducted in 2009, and is based on content analysis of government websites in the 75 largest U.S. cities and 20 largest Illinois cities, carried out between March and the beginning of May 2011. A number of studies have indicated that larger local governments are more likely to be first adopters of digital government innovations and to have more sophisticated websites. By selecting the largest cities, we are taking the pulse of those that could be expected at the forefront of new developments.

Among the major findings of the 2011 study:

Social Media

In 2011, adoption of various social networks by the local governments in our sample increased between 250% and 600%.

Among the 75 largest U.S. cities, 87% used Twitter, in comparison with 25% two years before. Facebook was also used by 87% of the U.S. cities, with an even larger increase from 13% in 2009. YouTube links appeared for 75% of major U.S. cities, up from 16% in 2009. This is a rapid jump for all of these sites.

For the 20 largest Illinois cities, each of the three most popular social networks was used by 55% of the cities in 2011, compared to 15% for Twitter, and 10% for Facebook and YouTube in 2009. The Illinois cities are mostly smaller (with the exception of Chicago, which appears on both lists). A somewhat smaller percentage of Illinois websites included social networks, but the magnitude of increase was similar in Illinois and the U.S.

Open Data Portals

A less prevalent but also potentially important change is the development at the local level of open data portals. Like social networks, open data portals are also associated with Web 2.0, or the “interactive web.” As of yet, however, their presence is still quite limited, found online for only 12 of the 75 largest U.S. cities (16%), and in only one Illinois city (Chicago).¹

Open data portals allow users to access city data on crime, budgets, freedom of information act requests, city facilities, vacant land, building permits, and a variety of topics. Several cities have held competitions for the development of applications (“apps”) to make the data usable in new ways.

Change in Rankings Comparing 2009 and 2011

Comparison of city rankings for 2009 and 2011 (using the 2009 measures) shows change over the two-year period, mostly because some cities that were further behind have moved up in the rankings.

¹ In addition to Chicago, the other 11 cities with open data portals available are Baltimore, Boston, Honolulu, Louisville, Milwaukee, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, Washington DC, and San Francisco.

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There has also been some improvement overall. The largest U.S. cities averaged a 5 percentage point gain on the E-Government Civic Engagement Index in 2011, with an average score of 83 percent. This compared with 78 percent in 2009. The Illinois cities gained, on average, 8 percentage points, rising from 66 percent to 74 percent of the criteria on the index.

While social networking was the category with the most change, local government websites have improved slightly in a few other areas, such as information on local government organization nationally, and in policy and neighborhood information in Illinois.

2011 Rankings

The 2011 criteria feature additional measures, including open data portals, comments allowed on blogs and social networks, and policy content present in these discussion venues. For large U.S. and Illinois cities, all Facebook and Twitter sites allow comments. For the cities with YouTube sites, 90 percent in the U.S. and 72.7 percent in the Illinois sample allow comments as well. Nearly all of these have some policy-oriented content (100 percent on Facebook, and 98 percent for Twitter and YouTube). In the Illinois cities that were studied, all of the Facebook and Twitter sites, and 72.7 percent of the YouTube sites had policy content.

Based on the expanded set of criteria, the top U.S. Cities in 2011 were: New York and Seattle tied for first place (with 93.33%), Virginia Beach (90.43%), Portland, Oregon (90%), San Francisco (89.36%), and Kansas City, Missouri (87.23%). The top Illinois Cities in 2011 were: Naperville (80.85%), Chicago (78.89%), Elgin (77.66%), Evanston (73.40%), and Aurora (72.22%). The full rankings are available in the appendices for this report.

Both of the major changes in e-government since 2009 – the rapid diffusion of social network use among local governments, and the emergence of open data portals – present new possibilities for transforming relationships between government and citizens. The open data portals make more information available to citizens, and invite the development of applications to improve the use of the data. Social networks open a new forum for online participation. Ultimately, however, the impact of these new tools depends upon many factors other than technology – the quality of the information, local government institutions and practices, and citizen response.