USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT:
Lessons Learned from the UAE National Brainstorming Session

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SUMMARY

On the 3rd of December 2013, the 'UAE National Brainstorming Session', a nation-wide technology led citizen engagement initiative, was launched by H.H Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum over the social media platform Twitter. This initiative was unprecedented, both in the manner in which it was conducted through the use of social media and in the scale of the response it generated.

The objectives of this initiative were twofold: to encourage citizens to engage with their government through a new medium – social media, and to gain feedback on how to improve the country's education and healthcare sectors. The brainstorming session generated just over 82 thousand submissions. These submissions were then discussed at a UAE government retreat, where all members of the Cabinet of Ministers congregated to evaluate the outcomes of the session and see how the ideas generated could be put to practical use.

This paper serves two purposes: Firstly, it documents the UAE brainstorming session from the reasons for its inception to the effects it aims to achieve . Secondly, it sets out a series of policy recommendations based on the session that serve as a point of reference for future citizen engagement initiatives of a similar nature.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, greater emphasis has been placed on acknowledging citizens of the UAE as individuals who actively contribute to sustainable community development rather than perceiving them as passive recipients of public services. Society in the UAE has steadily become more demanding of government services, requiring that they be more 'citizen centric'.

The government has attempted to capitalize on this demand, coupled with the UAE's high internet usage rates, to develop a range of public services that employ technology in various ways to increase their overall efficiency. Examples of this include the development of a range of online services – often accessible via mobile platforms – and the introduction of 'e-gates' in airports to speed up immigration procedures in the UAE (Salem, Mourtada & Shaer, 2014).

More recently, society in the UAE has become amenable to adopting social media for a variety of uses. So much so, that presently, approximately 60% of the country's population are regular users of this medium (Mourtada, Shaer & Salem, 2014). The UAE government has capitalized on these relatively prominent levels of social media usage within its society to communicate with members of the public and gauge how best to improve public services. This ultimately led to the conception of the 'UAE brainstorming session'.

Society and Trust in Technology

The UAE has generally been quick to adopt information communication technologies (ICTs) and employ them in various forms of public administration and government. This is evidenced by the World Economic Forum (WEF), which places the UAE at the top of its world rankings for acknowledging the "Importance of ICT to Government vision" and 2nd amongst 144 countries with regard to "Government Success in ICT Promotion" (WEF, 2013a). Similarly, the UAE is recognized by the UN as being one of the top twenty countries in the world in its "online service delivery" index (UNDESA, 2014). This adoption of ICTs has largely been well received by society in the country, subsequently harboring an environment of public acceptance of ICTs by the government; a claim that is substantiated further by the UAE ranking 3rd amongst 148 countries with regard to "Public Trust in Politicians", in accordance with the WEF's Global Competitiveness report (WEF 2013b).

History of Public Participation in the UAE

Since the UAE's inception in 1971, the only formal participatory process that existed in the country was conducted through a body called the Federal National Council (FNC). Its role was limited to suggesting legislative amendments to the UAE cabinet. The FNC was however supplemented by an informal public participatory process, namely the "majlis": a habitual gathering that enabled citizens to communicate their ideas and concerns directly to their leaders within their community.

As encouraging as such an environment was, it was limited, both in its reach and in its ability to significantly affect public policy. Until recently, there remained no formal process in the UAE that enabled members of the public to systematically communicate directly with the government.

2. PROBLEMS: THE HEALTH AND EDUCATION SECTORS

Despite admirable levels of government efficiency relative to other countries in the region, the UAE continues to face issues with two specific sectors: education and healthcare. Both of these services are critical to the development of the nation, yet despite their significance, they compare unfavorably to social, legal, economic and security services within the country. This is indicated by the UAE's relatively low global ranking of 49 for health and education services in the WEF's Global Competitiveness Report (WEF 2013b). This disparity is made further apparent by the results of a regional survey conducted by the Mohammed bin Rashid School of Government's (MBRSG) Governance and Innovation Program, where "education" and "healthcare" comprised the two lowest ranking sectors for public satisfaction of quality, efficiency and accessibility for government services in the UAE (Shaer, Mourtada & Salem, 2014).

It is imperative that radical improvements are made to the standards of both education and healthcare in the UAE, as they are the two most publicly accessed services in the country. The UAE's population is culturally, socially and economically diverse. This is reflected by the fact that education and healthcare services are not provided by one homogenous entity, but rather by a combination of federal and local government authorities as well as private institutions. As such, improving both health and education services would require engaging with the country's population on an unprecedented scale, both in terms of the quantity and the diversity of the feedback needed to impart meaningful change. Such an approach provides significant challenges, but is fundamental to the development of these two government sectors.

3. THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

The UAE "cabinet retreat" is a gathering that occurs on a regular basis, whereby all members of the country's Cabinet of Ministers congregate to discuss the most pertinent matters that the nation faces. Its predominant objective is to encourage collaboration amongst various government ministries so as to find solutions to critical issues at hand. Improving the government's education and healthcare sectors was the primary concern for the latest iteration of the cabinet retreat, which took place from the 8th to the 9th of December 2013.

A few days prior to this event, on the 3rd of December 2013, HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, issued a call for all members of the nation's population to take part in what was dubbed the 'largest ever national brainstorming session' in the world, appealing for ideas concerning how to tackle the issues faced by the education and healthcare sectors. This brainstorming session would be conducted over a range of traditional and online platforms, making it accessible to members of the public on an unprecedented scale. Further, it would provide members of the public with a systematic means of communicating with its government.

Participants were asked to submit their proposals either directly to the official website of the Prime Minister or via a dedicated email address that was provided. A short list of the most relevant proposals would then be discussed in further detail at the cabinet event.

The public response to the brainstorming event exceeded expectations. By December 9th – the last day of the brainstorming session – participants had provided in excess of 82 thousand submissions. These submissions were collected and sorted into five categories for each of the two sectors: education and healthcare.

For education, these categories were:

1. Teacher Quality: How to enhance the efficiency and competency of teachers and add value to their teaching careers.

2. Teaching Methodology: Developing innovative teaching methods, integrating technology and applying international standards in this field.

3. 'Upskilling' Students: Enhancing students' skills to meet the standards of other developed countries.

4. Higher Education: Increasing the number of students who complete high school, university and postgraduate studies.

5. Aligning Educational Output: Integrating educational outputs with present and future requirements of the different sectors of the UAE economy.

For healthcare, these categories were:

1. Quality of Services: Raising the quality of healthcare services for the public and private sector.

2. Competence of Healthcare Staff: Enhancing the efficiency and competence of healthcare staff, whilst also promoting careers in health care.

3. Specialized Health Services: Developing specialized medical services across the country.

4. Lifestyle Services: Transform lifestyle patterns to improve general health.

5. Prevention: Measures to limit the spread of diseases within society.

4. ACHIEVEMENT AND IMPACT: DOCUMENTED OUTCOMES

The objectives originally set by the organizers of the brainstorming initiative were numerous. They included actively engaging citizens by providing them with a means of directly influencing government strategies. Doing so would help to facilitate an environment that places citizens at the center of the decision-making process within government. This in turn, would encourage collaboration and partnership between the government and the public through the use of ICTs, thus generating greater levels of transparency – and subsequently trust – regarding government practices.

The actual outcomes of the brainstorming session surpassed initial expectations. The government actively made use of crowdsourcing to allow the public to produce new solutions to solve problems with education and healthcare services in the country. Additionally, new problems in existing public services were identified; this provided an invaluable insight into the unintended negative impact that certain decisions had had on existing government services. The process also produced a platform for the development of new government services and a direct means of communication between the government and the public.

5. CHALLENGES FACED BY THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

Several inferences can be drawn from the brainstorming session. Notably, whilst the manner in which the brainstorm was conducted can be improved significantly, the entire process has set a precedent for citizen engagement in the country and the wider region. The following observations serve to evaluate the challenges faced by the brainstorming session.

1. Allowing for Sufficient Time to Plan

Although progressive in its use of technology to engage citizens, ultimately, the brainstorming session was a reactive exercise. It was initiated as a result of the 'cabinet retreat' that had already been pre-planned. Further, the cabinet retreat was due to take place less than a week after the brainstorming session was conducted. This limited the potential impact of the initiative as it restricted the amount of time organizers had to:

a) Comprehensively plan the manner in which the brainstorming session was to be conducted; and

b) Put in place a process to compile and analyze the suggestions generated by the brainstorming session – over 80,000 in total – so that they could be fully utilized during the cabinet retreat.

2. Reaching Out to All Demographics

Typical problems faced by online crowdsourcing initiatives are associated with quantity: encouraging enough citizens to participate. This has not been the case with this brainstorming session as the number of participants far exceeded expectations. However, this initiative was distinctive as it occurred over a limited period of time. As such, results would have been collected more accurately had the session been more effective with targeting the relevant demographics.

When using online tools – specifically social media – to engage with the citizens, oversights commonly made include not having a strategy in place to effectively engage citizens, a key part of which would involve identifying the appropriate or best-fitting social media tools for targeting the relevant demographics. Such oversights can consequently limit the effectiveness and reach of these social media campaigns and potentially restrict citizen engagement.

3. Sufficient Resources

More resources need to be allocated towards handling the logistics of a process run on such a large scale. Few government entities currently allocate human resources for crowd sourcing, data collection and big data analysis, making it difficult to fully capitalize on all of the feedback generated by the project.

Further to a lack of manpower, no advanced tools were used to collate and analyze the submissions generated in the brainstorming session. This made it difficult to systematically collate posts submitted through Twitter, despite the social media site providing a good platform for public participation. The use of big data analysis tools are fundamental, especially if this process is to be standardized across government entities.

4. Processing Results

The UAE brainstorming session was a one-time initiative, conducted in a very specific, relatively short amount of time. This usually acts as a limiting factor for the amount of feedback an initiative like this is able to generate. Despite this, the brainstorming session, as previously stated, generated an unexpectedly large number of submissions. What, instead, hindered the overall impact of the brainstorming session were government entities involved being ill prepared to adequately process the wealth of data that the brainstorm generated. It is fundamental that this issue is addressed for the future success of similar initiatives.

6. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations attempt to directly address the challenges raised in the previous section. They serve as a means of reference for government entities that have the intention of conducting future projects that are similar to the brainstorming session.

1. Planning: Taking a Proactive Stance

As previously stated, the brainstorming session was reactive in nature. It was initiated as a new and alternative means of generating ideas for a cabinet retreat that had already been organized. In future, it would be advisable to plan initiatives in a more proactive manner. This can be achieved by planning crowdsourcing initiatives first, and then planning corresponding summits around such initiatives.

Further, any government entity that attempts to run a citizen engagement initiative on a similar scale to the brainstorming session would benefit from following a uniform, sequential process, which would allow for a sufficient amount of time to process and analyze submissions once they have been accumulated. Such a process allows adequate time for the following stages:

a) Identifying the best strategy and tools to engage target demographics (discussed further in '2. Effectively Engaging the Population')

b) Allowing for adequate resources to plan and implement the initiative (discussed further in '3. Allocating More Resources').

c) Processing, analyzing and communicating results and outcomes (discussed further in '4. Making the Most of the Results').

This way, the response generated by citizens can be utilized to its full potential.

2. Effectively Engaging the Population

In the recent past, questions regarding the use of technology to encourage citizen engagement were concerned solely with quantity; that is, how many people had internet access and what the best ways of communicating with them were. At present, individuals' relationships with the internet have developed and have subsequently become much more sophisticated. As such, when attempting to use social media to engage with the public, it is important to consider the following factors:

1. Why individuals are online in the first place.

• This will help clarify what purposes they use the internet for.

2 The forms of communication that are predominant amongst specific demographics.

• This will determine what the best tools to reach out to them are.

3. What the public's expectations of government are and how influential they expect their input to be.

• This will serve the dual purpose of gauging the public's current level of trust in government services, and setting realistic expectations with regard to the government's utilization of citizens' suggestions.

Once these factors are taken into consideration, the following steps can be taken:

1. Create a committee of government officials from relevant agencies to set a strategy for engaging citizens through social media.

This strategy should:

a. Identify the most appropriate social media platforms to use for different demographics and sectors;

b. Set a standardized procedure to be used across all relevant government agencies, covering all aspects of the process, from engaging citizens to collecting and analyzing data to incorporating citizen feedback into public services;

c. Align with existing strategies that focus on technology and citizen engagement (such as the Dubai Smart City strategy)

2. Develop public awareness campaigns to:

a. Educate people on how to engage with government through social media.

b. Establish greater levels of public trust in engaging with government through social media.

3. Create a roster of 'citizen experts': individuals who have expertise in specific fields (e.g. doctors for health issues and

teachers for education issues) in each public sector. These individuals can then be specifically targeted in future citizen engagement initiatives, to augment the public's feedback and bring their expertise to the topics at hand.

This should result in a more efficient means of communicating with the intended demographic.

3. Allocating More Resources

The UAE brainstorming session was somewhat limited by a lack of resources. This was due to the unexpectedly large number of individuals that participated on this particular occasion. Providing the following resources should contribute to future initiatives being more adequately equipped:

1. Financial resources: Relevant government entities should factor 'citizen engagement through social media' initiatives into their annual budgets, and allocate the required funds to develop and implement these initiatives.

2. Technological resources: Government departments should invest in 'big data' tools – tools that specialize in collating and analyzing large amounts of data – so that feedback from citizens is satisfactorily addressed and utilized.

3. Human resources: Government departments should provide capacity-building and training for employees in relevant areas such as big data analysis, project evaluation, and social media analytics so that they are equipped to effectively conduct all aspects of citizen engagement projects.

The responsibilities for acquiring and maintaining these resources can be shared across a range of government entities, depending on the nature of the citizen engagement initiative. Another consequence of this would be increased collaboration between such government entities.

4. Making the Most of the Results

In order to adequately process the results generated by engagement schemes such as the brainstorming session, it is fundamental that citizens are involved not only in generating and submitting ideas, but also in any further steps taken once they have been collated. This can be achieved by:

1. Inviting the greatest contributors to the brainstorming session to attend forums with decision makers in person. Individuals whose ideas have had the greatest impact on the sectors/topics in question are best placed to further explain and elaborate upon their suggestions. Taking the discussion offline would ensure a continuity of engagement with citizens that can be leveraged for further results and outcomes.

2. Conducting a thorough and comprehensive evaluation of the project. Make this evaluation readily available to the public; highlighting what was done with their suggestions during the brainstorming session, and how they were utilized. This will promote trust in the process and encourage citizens to take part in future initiatives.

3. Publishing the outcomes of the brainstorming session. This will show how the input of citizens has affected positive changes in the relevant service sectors, through various mediums and media outlets. These outcomes should also highlight any challenges and lessons learned along the way to streamline future initiatives, making them more effective and efficient.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been twofold. Firstly, it set out to evaluate the manner in which the government of the UAE has used technology, and in particular, social media, to improve public services, specifically within the health and education sectors. Secondly, it provided a series of policy recommendations to act as a means of reference for those looking to conduct citizen engagement initiatives similar to the UAE brainstorming session. These recommendations concentrated on approaching future initiatives by

systematically focusing on four steps: 1) Taking a proactive approach to planning, allowing for ample time to thoroughly organize the process; 2) Effectively reaching out to all demographics to ensure that citizens are effectively engaged; 3) Ensuring that future initiatives have adequate financial, technological and human resources so that they are able to deal with large amounts of data that they are likely to produce; and lastly, 4) Processing and communicating the outcomes of such initiatives to increase transparency amongst citizens.

The brainstorming session faced its fair share of challenges; however, its overall effect appears to be encouraging. Most notably, it has helped to generate greater transparency regarding the approaches that the government adopts to improve public services. This, in turn, has further enhanced the level of trust shared between the nation's citizens and their government.

The policy recommendations set out in this paper aim to serve as a means of guiding government entities on how to use social media to engage citizens in a manner that allows them to significantly influence the development of public services.

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