The Human Touch of Government Services

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Abstract. As personalisation is becoming prevalent in many areas, there is an increasing desire to provide personalised services (e.g., personalised brochures) in the government domain. The idea behind these services is that they would be fully automated, but feel personalised to the users. We argue in this paper that, sometimes, and in particular for some groups of citizens, the "human touch" is important – i.e., having a human interface with the citizens. We further argue that this is now possible with social media, which affords one-to-many interactions. We draw examples from a preliminary study of the discussion forum in a one year trial of an online community developed to support welfare recipients.

Keywords: Government Services, Online Community, Personalisation, Social Media

1 Introduction

Personalisation is used extensively in many domains, from recommending items to buy or recipes to cook to offering advice and encouragements to help people losing weight. As a result of this widespread use of personalisation and its apparent success, there is an increasing desire to provide personalised services in the government domain. These could include, for example, personalised brochures [1], or services which ask the user some questions first to ensure the appropriate service is provided (e.g., the newly launched Payment Finder service from the Australian Government Department of Human Services (referred thereafter as Human Services)[1]. The idea behind these services is that they would be fully automated, but feel personalised to the users.

In this paper, we argue that, sometimes, having a human present is important. We term this here the "human touch". Such a human interface already exists, of course, via call centres, front-desk workers or social workers. It is, however, expensive as it requires one-to-one interactions. It thus poses issues of scalability and economic sus-

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[1] http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/payment-finder/

tainability. With the emergence of social media, including its use by governments, we believe there is now an opportunity to provide the human touch in a scalable manner: through social media and the one-to-many interactions it affords.

Social media has given a voice to the citizens and a new place to find information. A person's difficulties in getting government services becomes everyone's experience through social media, and a question can be addressed to peers rather than to the government. Social media can be used to (crowd) source an answer to any question – see, for example, Q&A forums. Nowadays people may turn to social media before they turn to an official web or a call centre (especially when there are long waiting times). Consider for example the posts in Fig. 1, taken from the *bubhub* forum[2]. The first post asks a question to the community about a specific payment and its relationship to another payment, the Family Tax Benefit (FTB). It is answered by another member in that forum through the second post. This behaviour is frequent in forums and in microblog sites (e.g., Twitter).
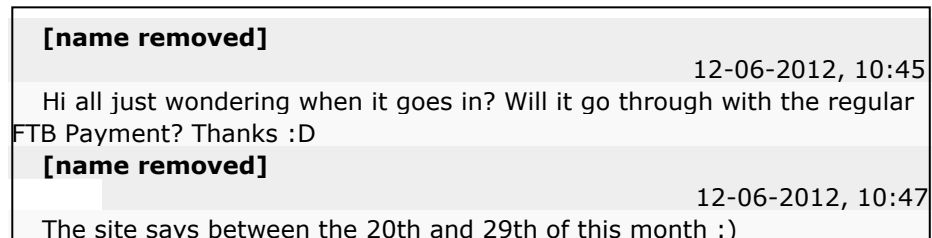
[name removed]	
	12-06-2012, 10:45
Hi all just wondering when it goes in? Will it go through with the regular FTB Payment? Thanks :D	
[name removed]	
	12-06-2012, 10:47
The site says between the 20th and 29th of this month :)	

Fig. 1. Questions and Answers from Forums

Consider now the post in Fig. 2. It is from a staff member from the Department of Human Services, who noticed that there were a number of queries about a specific topic (another specific government payment: The SchoolKids Bonus). To ensure that the information obtained by bubhub members is correct and that no misinformation is propagated, Rahul goes ahead and answers some of the queries, clarifying some points and correcting others (the specific responses are omitted from the figure).
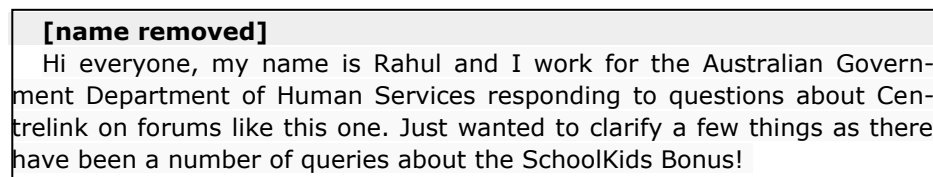
[name removed]
Hi everyone, my name is Rahul and I work for the Australian Government Department of Human Services responding to questions about Centrelink on forums like this one. Just wanted to clarify a few things as there have been a number of queries about the SchoolKids Bonus!

Fig. 2. An answer in a forum from a staff member from Human Services

This is an example of the type of one-to-many interactions that can occur in social media. While Rahul answers specific questions, and thus can be seen as providing

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[2] http://www.bubhub.com.au/

personalised answers, his answers also benefit a large number of people, through their visibility.

Before the existence of social media, it was possible to contain information and news within a certain group or set of people. With social media, however, information spreads quickly and is potentially far-reaching. This is good for fairness, quality and equality. Having a human intervene in this context can provide the "human touch" that is sometimes required to provide accurate information or diffuse issues. It can still have a large impact because of the potential spread of information, including jumping silos, as some individuals are likely to transmit the information from one place to another (e.g., one forum to another, onto Twitter and Facebook). This can be capitalised on to provide personalised services with a human touch.

One can ask whether the presence of a government department staff in social media is desirable or welcome, and what role such a person can play—e.g., [2]. We describe here our experience with an online community we developed in partnership with Human Services to support welfare recipients. In particular, we look at the role of moderators and argue they provided personalised information and services and a crucial "human touch". Importantly, because this was done in a social media context, although their answers were personalised to an original query, they benefited a large number of people.

The remaining of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents related work in the use of social media in government. Section 3 provides a brief description of our online community, its members and some of the design decisions. Section 4 presents some preliminary results about how our community members felt about the moderators and concludes the paper.

2 Related Work

Governments have recognised the potential of the social web. They have begun to actively increase their online presence, both to disseminate information and to engage citizens. Politicians and public servants now use Twitter and Facebook extensively to keep the public informed (e.g., tweetMP to follow Australian Members of Parliament on Twitter, the Facebook page of the Bedfordshire Police in the UK, the Facebook pages[3] or Centrelink account[4] of Australia's Human Services, etc.). They also use social media for campaigning purposes, e.g., [3-7]. Many governments (at all levels: local or state or national) capitalise on social media to engage citizens. For example, Public Sphere[5] is a consultation platform to involve people in public policy development; Future Melbourne[6] engages people in the design and strategy of the future shape of their city;   the city of Wellington in New Zealand introduced E-petitions to improve citizen participation [8]. In these initiatives, citizens are encouraged to con-

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[3] For example, the page for student https://www.facebook.com/StudentUpdate -- accessed May 7th, 2013

[4] https://twitter.com/Centrelink -- accessed May 7th, 2013.

[5] http://www.katelundy.com.au/category/campaigns/publicsphere/ -- accessed May 7th, 2013.

[6] http://www.futuremelbourne.com.au/wiki/view/FMPlan -- accessed May 7th, 2013.

tribute to the design of government policies and have a voice. In other initiatives, the government is crowd sourcing information. For example, the Victorian State Road Authority uses social media to obtain information about road hazards7. In our work, we are exploring the use of social media not as a way to engage citizens in policy making, but to support specific groups of citizens through the creation and mediation of online communities. Online community (and social networks in general) have been shown to have the potential to provide social and emotional peer-support. For some groups of citizens, such support would be important. Some researchers have looked into the use of new media to empower disadvantaged groups of citizens, e.g.,[9], but these initiatives were organised by Non-Government Organisations, not governments.

In our work, we look at the role of government in facilitating the creation of online community groups aimed at providing social support to disadvantaged citizens. In this paper, we look at the role of the moderators in such communities.

3 Our Online Community: *Next Step*

Next Step was designed and developed to support parents in receipt of welfare payments transition to a different welfare payment that has participation requirements (i.e., the need to work or study for a certain number of hours each week) when their youngest child reached school age [10]. This transition to work can be difficult, in particular for single parents and people who have been out of the work force for many years. As the Internet has become a social place where people come to exchange ideas, share experience and support each other, we wanted to explore whether an online community could be helpful in supporting people through this transition, helping them be better equipped to find a job and develop a support network. An online community could also be a place for the government to provide information specifically targeted to this group of people.

We designed the community informed from the results of group interviews and a survey we had conducted to gain an understanding of the issues this particular group of people were facing during the transition process, the concerns they had and the type of assistance (i.e., emotional and/or informational) that would be useful for them during this transition process [11,12].

Next Step is organised as a portal. It is not, however, a portal for government services. It is to serve as an online community. Members receive information tailored to their interest in the home page. A community page provides information about what is happening in the community, and there is a page for each resource offered within the community, e.g., forum, information packages, media, and activities. Members can move from one section to another through the navigation ribbon shown in Fig. 3. As also shown in the figure, the portal was clearly branded as being government sponsored.

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7 https://www.facebook.com/VicRoadsCS/app_354378081311737 -- -- accessed May 7th, 2013.
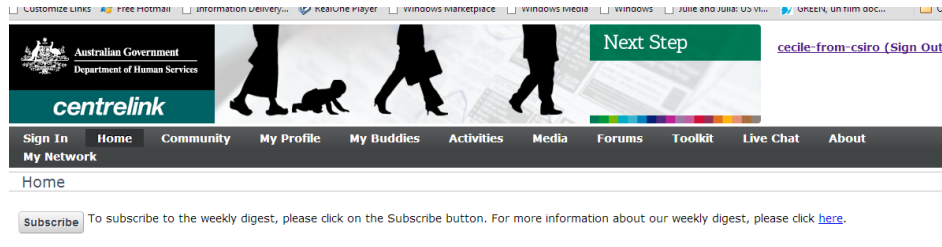
Fig. 3. The *Next Step* Online Community

During the design of the community, we paid particular attention to the ethical issues, as the target members were in a dependence relationship with the government (i.e., they receive their payment from the government) [13]. Assurance of anonymity in this context was paramount, as we wanted the community members to feel free to express themselves without fear of retribution. Our feasibility study had indicated that people would want the discussion forums to be moderated (88.64%) [11], both to ensure accurate information and to avoid the forum becoming a place where all people do is complain. Yet, we were worried that people would not want to discuss issues with Human Services staff present on the forum. As it turned out, people did express themselves freely (e.g., "*NO I DON'T FEEL SUPPORTED*"; "*not that Centrelink cares*"). They also took advantage of the fact that Human Services staff were present, asking them questions and verifying information they had received from other sources. Human Services' staff engaged with community members on a daily basis. In fact, community members usually addressed them explicitly (e.g., "*Hi Gigi. I appreciate your positive suggestions to the problems that are being faced by single parents trying to find suitable employment.*").

4 Were the moderators valued?

The forum is of particular interest to look at the issue of whether the moderators were valued. Like any other forum, this is where the discussions took place and questions were asked. While we are currently analysing the forum data in detail, we want to briefly report here the comments we received in an exit poll at the end of the trial. As we had conducted a trust survey at the beginning of the community, the exit poll was designed to see if people's trust values had changed over the course of the trial. The poll also included questions with respect to the Human Services moderators involved in the community: how helpful they had been and how useful their responses and information had been. We did not get many responses to the exit poll, but the ones we obtained are very positive towards the Human Services moderators. We also obtained feedback in the forum about the role of moderators. In particular, people were not only happy to have answers to their questions, but they appreciated the fact that a person was listening to them, talking to them, and empathising with their situations. This is plainly as illustrated by the following comments:

"You've been a great help, Gigi [Human Services Moderator], and I know we've been quite vocal in our discussions here about our disappointments with the changes. I hope you get recognition from your managers for your great work in being the face of Human Services and at the coalface of our issues with Centrelink."

"Thanks Gigi, it makes a nice change to have someone willing to listen and be sympathetic to the situations some clients may be in."

"If you mean the staff from Centrelink and CSIRO, they were very professional in their responses, and tried to give advice from the Centrelink sources. They came across as believable, and therefore trustworthy."

The last comment is particularly interesting as it mentions trust: it indicates how someone who provides trusted advice and is always professional is seen as "trustworthy". This is very important. Because of the changes that have affected our community members, their trust in the government and anyone related to government has become quite low. It seems that the moderators from Human Services have been able to change that attitude, at least towards themselves.

We believe our community participants appreciated having a person to whom they could ask questions and explain their situation. It made them feel valued. They also knew they would receive the correct information. Given the nature of the specific group we were dealing with, we believe that caring human touch is very important, and a fully automated personalised service would not be able to achieve this. Importantly, because the interactions took place in an online community, they benefited more than one individual, thus mitigating the issues of scalability and sustainability that one-to-one interactions face.

Our preliminary analysis shows that, at the beginning of the community, members were negative towards Human Services, anyone related to that department or to the government, and thus towards the moderators of the community. Over time, member's comments become more neutral and at the end the comments were still negative or neutral to Human Services but neutral, positive and even defensive of moderators. The comments given above already indicate a positive sentiment towards one of the moderators, Gigi (who was the main moderator of the forum throughout the one-year trial). The following comment given at the exit poll also reflects the feeling of the majority of members:

"Gigi was able to provide responses faster and more accurate than centrelink. Also when accessing social website forums we (the next step participants) were generally aware of info a lot sooner than other parents".

This shows that it is possible to provide human touch through social media.

We now analyse the exit poll from the top 10 active members in the community, as we would like to see the effect of that human touch. (We excluded the results from 2 other members as they have logged in a very few time in the community during a year trial period to have any significant understanding on the community). It is worth mentioning that our community followed the 90-9-1 Jacob Nielson's rule, whereby for 1% of highly active participants, there are 9% active and 90% passive members (often called lurkers). In *Next Step*, the top 10 active people contributed 90% of all the posts from community members (as opposed to moderators).

The preliminary results are shown in Fig. 4. All but one member found the moderators very helpful and mostly useful. It is worth noting that the only person who responded negatively was negative throughout the community life and refused offers of help from the moderators.

The results for "usefulness" are lower than those for "helpfulness'. This may be due to the fact some members felt that they could not express their opinion openly due to the presence of moderator (although they mostly did!). It could also be due to the fact that moderators could provide information, help out as much as possible and express empathy, but they could not change the situation nor the policy. (We saw many comments from the members such as: "please change this legislation" – this is clearly not something the moderators could do. They made it clear to the community members that they would pass on the comments to policy makers but that they were not in a position to change the legislation. While this was eventually understood by community members, it was still frustrating to them.)
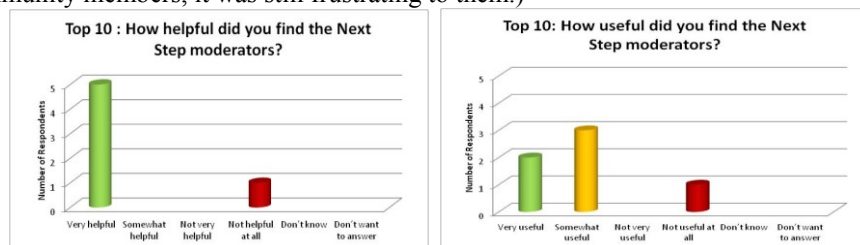

Fig. 4. Exit Poll Results on Helpfulness and Usefulness of the Moderator

We are currently analysing all the data from the community in detail, including the forum. Some of our aims are to identify when and how the change of attitude towards the Human Services moderators occurred during the course of the trial, whether people's trust values changed, and how the moderators addressed some of the situations that arose (e.g., members showing distress or extreme anger, etc.).

5 Acknowledgements

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