From chatter to championing change
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These technologies have emerged – perhaps inevitably – as core aspects of government information and communication strategies. But the potential audience is not just reporters on deadline – important though they are. Social media and digital communications can also pioneer successful public engagement for governments, including reaching society’s more elusive groups, such as young people.
Riding the digital wave

Digital connectivity is particularly important to young people. This group is the most active users of digital communications technology and this is expected to increase near-term. ITU estimates suggest that “digital natives,” or young people with solid ICT experience, represent 5% of the world population and 30% of youth (those aged 15 to 24).

Significantly, ITU figures show youth are twice as networked as the average population. The age gap is more pronounced in developing countries. And while the proportion of digital natives is estimated to be currently twice as high in developed markets relative to emerging markets, the number of “natives” is expected to more than double in developing countries between 2014 and 2019. The ITU also finds a strongly positive relationship between a country’s “youth bulge,” or large proportion of young people relative to the population as whole, and its digital connectivity gap between youths and adults. These countries are typically developing economies and, in addition to having a relatively large youth population, there is a relatively large disparity in internet use between youths and adults, compared to global averages. As a result, youths in these economies are even more at the forefront of spearheading digital adoption.

Digital = Flexibility

Global uptake in digital connectivity and social media use, especially among young people, is also driving important changes in information flows. First, social media supports democratization of information and of influence. Armed with a Facebook page or Twitter account, anyone is empowered to be a journalist or political commentator. Low barriers to entry and a proliferation of perspectives also mean people have increasing choice on what they consume. For policymakers, this trend drives an increased need for detection and rapid response. Given that social media can provide autonomy to its users, content becomes more challenging to police. Furthermore, a high number of communications outlets can mean conflicting information flows, potentially creating noise and distrust in government communications.

Second, social media platforms represent a shift from mass to micro media. Digital channels are supplanting traditional news mediums, including newspaper and television. In some markets, this means a switch away from government media, where this was pre-eminent until very recently. As a result, government needs to engage the population very differently, through multiple, fragmented and fast-moving digital channels.
Globally, many governments have already implemented digital communications strategies to leverage and adapt to new social media platforms. However, activity to date has been largely focused on social networking, with policymakers using popular tools to connect with the public. Such initiatives have been often launched in conjunction with a declared “open government” policy, particularly in developed economies, with the aim to improve government transparency and civil society engagement.

In some instances, this policy has resulted in the creation of “digital” government departments to drive the overall digital strategy across government, including public access to information, usability and security of data. For example, the Government Digital Service, a unit of the UK Cabinet Office, plays this role in the UK. And in the US, federal policymakers recently launched a Department of Digital Service, a centralized agency housed in the Office of Management and Budget, which aims to institutionalize best digital practice across government. Its remit also includes providing management consulting services to major government entities such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services by helping identify weak points in digital infrastructure and how to fix them.

Nonetheless, the goal of many existing digital communications initiatives has been to increase the frequency and accessibility of government-society communications, rather than facilitate deeper engagement with the public. While examples abound of government initiatives to engage in conversation with their contingents through Twitter, blogs, Facebook and other social media, the transformation of social media strategies from public and civil networking to actionable engagement is poised to be the next stage of this journey.

It is a process already underway in some economies, at different levels of government, and involves systematically using social media to drive increased transparency, collaboration and public participation. Specifically, this means deploying multichannel social media communications strategies, with consistent messaging across platforms. It also entails active listening and response strategies, such as systematic analysis of feedback; incorporation into service delivery; and tailoring the type and quantity of information available to the public, based on this feedback. Education is also a key element, involving the use of social platforms to inform constituents, and also using public feedback as a major new resource for government.

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From social networking to actionable engagement

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Committed and comprehensive social media strategies, at the national and local level, offer examples of best practice. Those policymakers who have adapted quickly to new channels, and are providing transparency to the public, are using social platforms to make government more agile, effective and informed. At the same time, these departments are transforming digital communications into a conduit for a more educated, connected and enabled public.

Reflecting the nature of social media, best practice examples are numerous and evolving rapidly. These can be characterized as examples of direct, frequent engagement; two-way dialogue; and tailored communications and integration into departmental strategies. Several standout initiatives are covered here.

Direct, frequent engagement

Some governments are using social media to directly engage with the public by simultaneously driving improvement in reputation and in service delivery. This is especially important at the state and local levels, with the unique nature of local community-level relationships well-suited to further connectivity and influence through social platforms. For example, local governments in the UK have initiated a proactive digital engagement strategy using social media monitoring to track residents’ activity and communicate directly with members of the public on relevant issues. Local policymakers are trialling an approach where they can monitor, via Twitter or Facebook, mentions of “coming home from hospital,” and then respond directly to that person with links to relevant social support they may be eligible for, as well as other resources.

Local governments also are using blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other tools to drive communications on localized issues, including crime and sanitation issues. This can include blog pages from the city mayor, such as that for the Mayor of the City of Vancouver in Canada, which includes news, opinion pages, forums and live updates on local issues.

At the federal level, many governments are engaging directly, and often, with the public. Canadian policymakers launched an Action Plan for Open Government in 2011, which explicitly leveraged social media channels “to support ongoing consultation with Canadians” in its implementation and began with the government’s first tweet chat with the public. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has a policy objective of direct communication with the Indian public and with civil society globally. He launched a Facebook page in late May 2014, which recorded more than 3 million “Likes” in its first month. Modi also has issued a mandate to his cabinet ministers to use social media regularly, including a request to interact directly with the public through Twitter and Facebook. Ministries have been advised to update their pages at least every 15 days.

Two-way dialogue

Social media strategies which are proactive in promoting a two-way dialogue between the government and civil society also exemplify best practice. For example, Singapore’s Ministry of Communications and Information uses social media, alongside websites and multimedia, to support an “e-consultation” initiative, a government-citizen, and citizen-citizen dialogue on the city state’s future in order to drive collaboration and build mutual investment in the economy.

In another example, the Iceland Government used social media in 2011 to engage its public in dialogue on review of the country’s constitution. Each week, the Constitutional Council posted draft clauses of the constitution for public comment on its Facebook page. Members of the public could comment directly on the post or join a discussion group. The Council also maintained accounts on several social platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube, to augment their interaction with the public.

Actively listening to public feedback via social channels, both direct and indirect, is another important component of two-way dialogue. For example, the city of Heidelberg, German engages directly with its residents through social media and considers both direct feedback and public dialogue through social media channels in its decision making. This approach is an important way to “hear” public opinion, even if direct responses to city postings on social media are limited. It is not enough to assume that if direct feedback is limited, there is no public conversation taking place on government social media communications. Significantly, through social media analytics, the city found that its citizens don’t often respond to direct questions from policymakers through digital channels, but they do discuss the information the city publishes via Facebook and other platforms, which the city can act on. In fact, policymakers postponed a civil investment project on the basis of opposition in conversations among residents via Facebook.

Tailored communications

Effective government use of social media also means tailoring content to the relevant digital medium and to its audience. There are several considerations for policymakers. First, with governments pursuing multichannel strategies, content that is consistent across channels but delivered according to the medium, showcases an effective use of digital social media technologies. For example, Chile’s Ministry of Economy e-government program to attract world-class entrepreneurs, Startup Chile, runs a comprehensive social media communications plan across its website, Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus. Content is coordinated across these channels, and they are integrated via this portal.

Second, social media communications also need to consider the audience. Facebook, Twitter and others characterized by speed and efficiency means that concise content will make messages digestible to a younger, tech-savvy audience. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is employing social media managers on the ground in key developing countries.

These locally based managers are tasked with creating and promoting communications to increase awareness of USAID programs in the country – a clear step-change from traditional communications strategies that exemplifies a conscious shift in strategy to tailor to a contemporary audience.2

Third, the underlying dialogue of social media, and high frequency of interactions, means that social media communications strategies should tap into the informal and conversational aspects of these mediums. For example, in the US, President Obama has conducted “Ask Me Anything” sessions on Reddit, a social news site. During these sessions, Obama receives unfiltered questions, which have included requests for the White House beer recipe, and engages with several hundred thousand participants. Further, in August 2014, the mayor of Vancouver took part in the “Ice Bucket Challenge” for charity, a viral Facebook phenomenon. He posted the video of his challenge via YouTube, to the mayoral blog.

Integration into departmental strategies

Best practice social media strategies are integrated into high-level department strategic plans. This means turning the data flow generated by social media into a comprehensive source of actionable information for government.

A good example is Poland’s National Bank and Ministry of Regional Development, which ran a series of film contests promoting financial literacy. Between 2007 and 2011, more than 1,300 movies were created on financial and economic education.

Some governments are using social media technologies for tax administration. For example, Spain’s tax agency uses YouTube to promote its activities; the Estonia Government uses the same media for instructional videos on completing tax returns; and Australian policymakers use Facebook to promote the use of its e-tax product.3

On information-sharing, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau in the US uses technology to collaborate with consumers and detect fraud. The department crowdsources consumer complaints through social media and analyzes trends to identify problems.

There are also numerous, and evolving, examples of government communications through social media to inform the public and thus achieve broader objectives. These include its use in crisis communications and emergency preparedness and response. For example, the city of Manila, in The Philippines, has a multi-pronged digital communications strategy around natural disasters. The city recorded zero casualties in the July 2014 Pasay Typhoon, with social media flagged as a key success factor.

The LEAD framework for transformative social media strategy

There are key considerations for governments that are aiming to progress public discourse from social networking to actionable engagement, with effective social media strategy demanding appropriate use of digital social mediums. In some cases, this also means a complete change in philosophy on public information. Policy transformation should focus on an overarching commitment to communications flexibility and transparency. The increasingly rapid, and multiplicative, nature of digital communications flow means policymakers need to implement a continuous cycle of development and improvement.

The below sections present our LEAD framework for social media strategy for governments. This is comprised of active listening (Listen); embedding social media strategy in departmental plans (Embed); communications autonomy (Autonomy); and driving economic and social objectives through social media (Drive).


Active listening (Listen)

Active listening is fundamental to using social media to drive actionable engagement and requires a deep shift in the way governments communicate with their citizens. It involves transitioning from a focus on social media outlets as an end-point to a complete digital two-way communications capability.

Engaging in dialogue with citizens is the centerpiece of active listening. Public interaction through social media and other channels builds trust and visibility and in offering a forum to respond, supports citizens’ investment in outcomes. As a result, active listening means implementing a strategy where policymakers can transmit, listen and respond to their constituents. To achieve this, governments can define a policy framework for dynamic and open social media communications with the public. This could include a “code of conduct” on social media use.

The framework should cover guidelines on responsiveness, with an emphasis on frequent participation in ongoing public dialogue. This is critical to building credibility and to effectively incorporating feedback in the decision-making process. Policymakers can leverage enterprise-class social media strategy tools, such as sentiment analysis and targeted listening, to support a systematic evaluation of communications and drive more active listening. It’s clear that an active listening approach extends beyond simply adding more communications channels with the public, for example, through creating a new Twitter or Pinterest account.

Embed social media into government’s traditional functions (Embed)

For governments to effectively capitalize on the intelligence and data from high-frequency, two-way communication flows, complete integration of social media strategy in overall departmental strategies is vital. The speed and interactivity of social media information flows mean this must be considered, both in communicating change with the public and in leveraging the data feeds they provide.

There are several key means for governments to ensure social media is layered in over departmental investment and strategic decisions. First, policymakers should explicitly integrate digital communications strategy in any IT investment strategy by department. This is necessary to ensure communications are effectively coordinated with open data, digital content and web policies, and that new systems are equipped to support the strategy.

Second, government leaders can encourage entrepreneurship and reinvention in how departments interact with the public.

This can be achieved through promotion and by showcasing best practices in social media communications, and its role in digital transformation, across departments. For instance, governments could introduce social media or digital transformation agents to each department – external technology, marketing or networking experts who will provide initial support in driving social media strategy.

Third, departments should engender a culture focused on customer feedback. As it relates to social media strategy, this could include a demonstrable leadership commitment to aggregating, communicating and using feedback from social channels. It also should also include performance metrics on use of public feedback originating from social media. Furthermore, a feedback-driven culture also could involve establishing formal “nowcasting” capabilities, using social media data flows. Policymakers now have the tools to monitor trends in public opinion and feedback through Twitter, Facebook and other social media.
Communications autonomy (Autonomy)

The fragmented nature of social media and its rapid response times highlight the need for more flexibility and autonomy to government departments for managing their interactions with the public.

First, to drive a cohesive social media strategy, coordination is critical. Governments should establish, or continue to strengthen the remit, of a central digital agency for all government. The agency’s mandate should include an umbrella framework for social media, as part of the overall digital strategy. Communications autonomy should be within a clearly defined framework. The digital agency should communicate clear, across-government messaging on cross-cutting issues to all departments. This is essential in effectively managing social media, given the omnipresence of communication channels and the fast and dynamic shifts in discussions.

Second, departments also need to work from a shared technological playbook, including a common platform and social media style guide, to ensure cohesiveness. This involves ensuring department-led communication strategies run on shared technology platforms. Per broader government digital transformation strategies, systems architecture must transition toward interoperability. Platforms should also be open, to support quick adaption to technological change, such as mobile technologies, collaboration and networking tools and security challenges.

Third, department-led strategies should center on several core tenets to address the unique opportunities and challenges afforded by social media. Given widespread differences in program mandates, these criteria will have vast interpretations, which is crucial to tailored, high-frequency public engagement.

Drive economic and social objectives through social media (Drive)

Social media strategies need to be clearly linked with departments’ economic and social objectives. Social platforms not only offer high-frequency interaction and insights, but can also work as a wider change agent. In fact, social media is altering our decision-making and day-to-day routines, and not only how we communicate. For example, people increasingly consult Twitter and blog feeds for information on weather events, and plan their course of action accordingly. Facebook, LinkedIn and Meetup enable networking on a large scale and are changing the frequency and breadth of human connections. An increasing culture of self-recording and documentation through social media channels is yet another way these mediums are changing human activity.

As a result, there are numerous potential high-impact applications for social media in driving governments’ economic and social agenda. These suggest that policymakers should include social media, just as it would infrastructure and other enablers, in development plans. Civilian protection is an obvious objective, with government exploration of apps and social media as a critical enabler advancing rapidly. Social media networking capabilities also suggest powerful application in career services and running smart cities through connecting governments, vendors and civilians, among others. Governments can also think much more broadly on using social data feeds. For example, self-reporting on food or other prices offers a real-time look at inflation pressures and helps policymakers design pricing strategies or subsidies.
With the digital transformation of public engagement through social media well underway, transforming social media strategies from public and civil networking to actionable engagement will be the next chapter. Social media is a high-frequency, granular policy tool. If governments can successfully leverage this two-way information flow to anticipate or react to public sentiment or demands, there is clear potential for improved policy effectiveness and resource allocation.

In this new world, flexible, responsive and tailored social media strategies will be most successful. With only 140 characters per Tweet, frequent participation in public dialogue is critical. With this in mind, policymakers will need to decentralize communications and engagement functions and integrate communications in departmental strategies more broadly. Governments also need to leverage social media as an explicit vehicle for economic and social reform, giving it a central role in some policies. The public is ever more social and connected. For those governments who invest in engagement, the prospects and potential for partnership are clear for all to see. Now, that's worth tweeting about.
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