

Chapter 2

Municipal Social Media Policy: A Best Practice Model

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ABSTRACT

As social media has become integrated into the public's everyday lives, local governments have started to take advantage of the power of social media as another governance tool to both inform and involve the public in local government. This new tool also introduces a new responsibility for government to monitor and analyze the actions taken on municipal social media sites. For this to be achieved, municipalities must implement a social media policy that addresses the abundant concerns inherent when engaging in social media use. This research indicates the areas that local governments must address in social media policy and offers a best practice approach to completing the task of policy development.

INTRODUCTION

Communications have changed drastically throughout the world as a result of the increased use of social media for social and business interactions. Individuals, businesses, and governments are now able to communicate with each other in a way that was not possible before. Government

relations with residents, visitors, and businesses must evolve with the changing digital and social landscape. Social media, as well as other Web 2.0 applications, is an example of a human-centered system design that benefits local governments and their citizens. Social media can be utilized as an e-governance tool that allows for increased dialogue with citizens in an environment where citizens drive discussion. As Web 2.0 application

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use becomes more widespread, governments can utilize these applications to increase citizen inclusion in the governance process.

Social media is a relatively new phenomenon. Although utilization of “community development” tools began in 1997, social media as we know it today did not become a mainstream phenomenon until 2002-2003 with the launch of Friendster and MySpace, both of which are no longer mainly utilized for social networking but for gaming and music respectively (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, pp. 214-216). Facebook, the most commonly used social media website today, was founded in 2004 and has grown to include millions of users including individuals, businesses, non-profits, and governments. According to the site’s administrators, Facebook’s purpose as a social media outlet is to “give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2012). Although there is no clear, definitive definition, social media generally refers to an online application that centers around social interaction online (Bryer & Zavatarro, 2011). This term encompasses a wide variety of applications, including social networking sites (such as Facebook, MySpace or LinkedIn), blogs/mini-blogs (such as Twitter), media sharing sites (such as YouTube or Flickr), and a myriad of other applications (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social media provides a medium where people and/or entities can easily provide information to a large group of people with the use of few resources.

As social media has become integrated further into the public’s everyday lives, local governments have started to take advantage of the power of social media as another governance tool to both inform and involve the public in local government. Governments can use these tools to inform citizens with up-to-date information and allow citizens to comment on issues and events occurring in their communities. Because social media has only been utilized for the past decade, there is little literature from which to study social media as a tool for local governments.

Although social media use is an important e-governance tool for all levels of government, local government social media use should be studied. Local governments are vast in number, which allows for a larger, more diverse sample from which to examine social media use. Local governments also have a closer relationship with citizens as they directly impact citizens on a daily basis through municipal service delivery. Residents can easily communicate with local government officials, whereas it may be more difficult to communicate with state or federal government agencies. Local governments also maintain other avenues for citizen participation, including mandatory public meetings, which create other avenues through which citizens may participate in government. Through the use of social media, governments can make the governance process more inclusive and transparent, which may stimulate citizen trust in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

As discussed above, there is a varying array of social media options available to the public. Local governments most commonly use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as their main social media tools (ICMA, 2011). Local governments can also take advantage of sites specifically designed for local governments, such as patch.com. Because communities are all different, each local government can use the social media outlet or tool that most directly meets its needs. Depending on location, size, demographics, community involvement, and any number of other factors, different organizations will use different types of social media outlets. To illustrate this point, the city of Chicago utilizes multiple Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube sites and also utilizes foursquare, an application that lets citizens/visitors “check in” to various locations in the city. Chicago clearly utilizes social media to inform citizens in a variety of ways about all different issues, including topics and departments such as the city bicycle program, the public library, police department, transportation, and

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