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Political Public Relations and the Promotion of Participatory, Transparent Government Through Social Media

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Using data collected from more than 450 local government officials from municipalities across the United States, this study examines the impact that various community features have on local governments’ social media use. It specifically addresses how staff and time resources, privacy concerns, citizen expectations, social media effectiveness, staff size, and public records requirements affect extent of use of social media for networking, research, and conferencing purposes. Ultimately, this examination of social media use reveals how they are used as a strategic and public relations function to promote more participatory and transparent government. Results indicate that, overall, citizen expectations and perceived social media effectiveness by government officials are strong predictors of social media use.

As governments at all levels pledge to be more transparent, participatory, and collaborative with their citizenry, they have increasingly utilized social media to accomplish this mission (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaiseyer, 2010). Social media usage enhances governments’ abilities to interact with and engage citizens. This more open form of government public relations is particularly beneficial to local governments, as it is the local level of government where citizens often feel the most direct access to and potential importance in governance.

The increasing popularity of social media has changed the practice of public relations and, as a result, government public information officers are adjusting their communication strategies and incorporating social media into their communication plans. Public relations is positioned under the umbrella of strategic communications, and the emergence of the Internet, and most recently social media, has had great impact on the theory and practice of this discipline. Governments have more opportunities than ever before to interact with and engage stakeholders, and social media offers an inexpensive and swift communications channel through which to do so. A recent survey showed that two-thirds of online adults use social media platforms (Smith, 2011). The social web is a dynamic and growing area online, and, as additional forms of social media emerge, it is important for public relations practitioners to understand which tools to use, how to use them appropriately, and how to measure their effectiveness.
Many of the communication barriers that governments have experienced in the past are eliminated by the open, dialogic nature of social media (Dixon, 2010). The two-way flow of information that is facilitated through social media use can foster democracy by allowing for greater citizen participation, knowledge of government actions, and more opportunities for engagement. Social media emphasizes “interactivity, co-creation of content, subscription-based information services, and third-party application development” (Kingsley, 2010, p. 3).

The Internet and especially social media facilitate new types of participative communication that was not possible before the availability of social media tools. These tools enable two-way interactions between individuals and groups and the formation and development of participatory groups across spatial and social boundaries (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000). Over the past few years, the numbers of social networking tools and of people using these tools has grown exponentially. Thus, the rules are constantly changing, and there is considerable uncertainty on how to employ these tools from a strategic perspective. Professionals in the industry have endured the “trial by fire” method of learning how to effectively use social media as part of their strategic communication initiatives, and there is still much to be learned.

Social media offer governments the ability to enhance and improve government-citizen relations; yet, little research exists as to the extent to which local governments are actually using social media to that end. As Wright and Hinson (2012) note, it is important to understand industry professionals’ attitudes on social media to better understand their impact on communications practice. Therefore, analyzing how governments are using social media to communicate with citizens and how government officials are incorporating social media into their communication strategies is worthy of investigation. This research will add to the growing body of strategic communication research on social media, and the results of this study proffer insight into how well local governments are meeting citizen expectations and advancing democratic principles through social media use.

Specific research questions explore government officials’ satisfaction with social media use, the effect of public relations staff size on extent of use, and differences in social media use among population sizes, community types, and government forms. Further, differences in use of social media for networking, research, and conferencing based on those variables are revealed. This national survey of local government officials (n = 463) reveals current social media practices and considerations that will inform future social media research in the realm of political public relations and strategic communications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Internet and Social Media

Since the early 1990s, the rise of the Internet has offered new channels for organizations and businesses to interact with a wide variety of publics. Today the most rapidly growing branch of the Internet is social media; research shows that social media are heavily used in the private sector, where more than 700,000 businesses have an active Facebook account (Hird, 2010). Additionally, a 2009 Nielsen poll showed that two-thirds of the world’s Internet population had visited a social networking or blogging site and that the time individuals were spending on these sites was growing at more than three times the rate of overall Internet growth (Nielsen, 2009).
The increasing popularity of social media has transformed the way people, businesses, and organizations communicate. Along with acknowledging this burgeoning popularity, there is debate about what constitutes social media. Bradley (2010) noted that at its foundation, social media technologies and channels enable community participants in the masses to productively join forces to promote change. Social media are also defined as “the democratization of content and the shift in the role people play in the process of reading and disseminating information” (Solis and Breakenridge, 2009, p. 10). Despite the potential ambiguity and breadth in defining social media, what cannot be disputed is that this new technology has completely changed the nature of communication between an organization and its publics through its user-to-user format and dialogic features. Social media, in their interactivity, offer particular utility to the government sector, which must manage public expectations of transparency and open communication while, at the same time, handle limited budgets.

Social Media and Public Relations

The benefits of social media use are being recognized by organizations and public relations professionals across all industries. The impact was felt even five years ago and has no doubt grown since then (Wright & Hinson, 2012); according to a 2007 survey conducted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Dow Jones & Company, the majority of participating public relations practitioners and students believe social media have positively impacted the public relations practice. Additionally, the survey results show the technology-driven channels that provide the best opportunities for the practice of public relations are online news websites, blogs, and social networking sites—all social media tools.

In their annual survey measuring how social and other emerging media are being used in public relations practice, Wright and Hinson (2012), found that most public relations professionals believe social media tools are beneficial to their organizations. Additionally, communication or public relations continue to be the organizational function responsible for managing social media communications (Wright & Hinson, 2012). Practitioners in that study also indicated “these new media effectively serve as a watchdog for traditional news media, impacting corporate and organizational transparency and advocating a transparent and ethical culture” (p. 1). Overall, social networks, especially Facebook, were considered the most important social media in public relations and strategic communication efforts (Wright & Hinson, 2012).

Research documents that public relations professionals have eagerly adopted the more established and institutional online tools such as email and the Intranet and are somewhat comfortable with blogs, but they are slower to integrate more technologically complicated tools such as social networking and text messaging (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetster, 2008). Of the adopted social media tools, the one that has been studied the most to date are blogs. One study showed public relations practitioners have used blogs to enhance their power within their organizations for some time now (Porter, Sweetster Trammel, Chung, & Kim, 2007). According to a study by Yang and Kang (2009), blog use can create a personal connection with the user and generate a favorable attitude toward the company or organization.

A recent study by Sweetser and Kelleher (2011) examining the motivations for social media use among public relations practitioners found that those who are more influential relative to others in the same group are more likely to see the positive benefits of social media. Leaders in public relations should look at individual motivation factors when trying to cultivate their
subordinates. As community leaders, who have inherent influence by virtue of their positions, local government officials would be expected to place high importance on the use of social media in government.

Social media are being heavily incorporated by public relations practitioners into crisis communication, with 48% of participants in a recent survey saying they have integrated social media into their crisis plans (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). Practitioners recognize the importance of controlling information and developing and disseminating key messages to the media, and public information and direction are critical in crisis situations (Shin & Cameron, 2005). Although social media provide opportunities for organizations to publish their own information, J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2011b) believe that there is still an “illusion of control” because publics are not constrained solely to the information that the organization provides. Publics are able to seek information from other sources and also post their own information online (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2011a).

Nonetheless, given the current media landscape where anyone can post information online, it is important for organizations to also have an active presence on official online channels so that they can control the information they are releasing and publics have a place to seek information. This accessibility is especially important for local governments, which would be a logical source of information in a community crisis. Although the benefits of social media are vast, it is not without shortcomings that are “most likely a result of the relative newness of social media, the democratization of media and voice that they enable, and the changing nature of public and private spheres in a globalized, networked ‘always on’ world” (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012, p. 303).

Governments’ Usage of Social Media

Communication practitioners frequently note that developing communications strategies for government organizations is different than for business or nonprofit organizations; Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) propose that although the general principles are the same for all organizations, “the specific conditions to which the principles must be applied are different” (p. 219). Decades ago, governments began using the Internet to communicate with citizens through the automation of routine government operations, which later evolved to websites, RSS feeds, blogs, and wikis (Dixon, 2010). Commonly referred to as “e-government,” these technologies were initially and primarily used as one-way methods of communication, allowing citizens to access services or retrieve information. In contrast, social media emphasize interactivity and co-creation of content, fostering a two-way exchange of information (Kingsley, 2010), which offers great potential for enhanced democratization of information exchange at the local level.

The use of information technology to transform government operations is not new. In 1993, Vice President Al Gore led the Reinventing Government initiative, and during the George W. Bush administration, the Office of Management and Budgets initiated several projects guided by the E-government Act of 2002 (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010). The efforts of the two previous administrations were intended to make government more open and efficient; however, neither sought to actively engage citizens through new technology to obtain feedback or to become a part of the government process. The Obama administration set the current stage for governments at all levels to have open and participatory government by instructing the Director of Management and Budgets to issue the Open Government Directive which, among other things, required agencies to create and implement open government, and many government agencies
used social media to help accomplish this directive (Peter R. Orszag, personal communication, December 8, 2009). Most federal agencies have a social media presence that includes blogs, social networking sites, YouTube channels, and more (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010).

Now, the use of social media is a worldwide phenomenon, with two-thirds of the global online population visiting social media sites (Kuzma, 2010). The social media sites that dominate the global market include Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter (Kes-Erkul & Erkul, 2009; Kuzma, 2010). Internationally, governments are adopting social media for different purposes such as recruiting initiatives (Dorris, 2008), reaching out to citizens and other stakeholders (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008), sharing information in and across government agencies (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008), enhancing community participation (Chang & Kanan, 2008; Dorris, 2008), and achieving transparency (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010).

In 2008, the Government of Canada set guidelines on how public servants can use social media. Subsequently, external guidelines about the external use of social media were published in 2011 (Government of Canada, 2011) and deal with the benefits of interactive and rapid communication; they also encourage public servants to be aware of potential risks (Toronto Star, 2011). Similarly, the state of Queensland in Australia has established guidelines for practitioners responsible for designing online communication engagement programs (Smart Service Queensland, 2010).

The guidelines are intended to define the use of social media and to address the risks and benefits of use prior to a government’s implementation. South Africa has also established guidelines for social media use by government agencies that were developed to foster transparency of government process as well as public participation and interaction with citizens (South Africa Government, 2011). In a 2009 survey of citizens in countries in the European Union, 28% of the population had used the Internet for posting information to chat sites, blogs, social networking sites, and other online discussion sites in the previous three months; this number rose to 67% if considering individuals ages 16–24 (United Nations, 2012).

The majority of relevant literature in the United States pertains to new media adoption at the federal level and, to a smaller degree, at the state level. Research on adoption and use of new technologies at the local level is only recently emerging. Hand and Ching (2011) examined local governments’ in the Phoenix metropolitan area use of social media and found that “using social media at the local level government level seems to offer promise of increased citizen engagement, reaching citizens on a common platform, and allowing for citizen comments (p. 379).

Often facing similarly strained budgets, nonprofit organizations have benefitted by using social media to reach similar goals. Qualitative research by Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2011) that analyzed the use of social media by the American Red Cross found that one of the most frequently cited barriers to using social media was resources, specifically time and staff. Since local governments are often operating with limited budgets and managing competing interests, adequate resources might not be allocated to strategic, effective social media use. If there is not sufficient staff to strategically manage social media, it is difficult for organizations to achieve commitment, which shows organizations are dedicated to online engagement with their publics (Hallahan, 2008). Another challenge that practitioners face in adopting social media to build relationships is getting “buy-in” from executive leadership (Briones et al., 2011, p. 40). This could also be an issue for local governments who need support from management to successfully implement social media relations.

The size of the community may impact the rate of adoption of social media, as demonstrated in an analysis of local public health departments. Findings from a survey by Avery et al. (2010)
suggest that public relations practitioners in public health departments have been slower to adopt social media technologies than practitioners in other industries, and there are significant differences depending on the size of the community. Of the community sizes that were examined, practitioners in urban communities exhibited the highest adoption rates, followed by those in suburban, large town, and rural communities. Additionally, among those who used social media to disseminate health information, the most commonly used tools were social networking sites (Avery et al., 2010). One of the reasons offered for these disparities is that resources may be more difficult to obtain in more rural areas than in cities. This study will evaluate if there are differences in the use of social media by local governments serving different sizes of communities and whether the findings are similar to the practice of social media use among community health departments.

**Dialogic Theory**

Combined theoretical lenses are used here to examine local governments’ use of social media to interact with and engage publics – dialogic theory, stakeholder theory, and democratic theory. A strategic framework for creating dialogic relationships with publics through the Internet was provided by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) more than a decade ago. Dialogue is “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) and represents efforts by those involved in a relationship to participate in an open and honest exchange.

This perspective is attuned with the current thinking on the role communication plays in relationship-building, where healthy relationships between an organization and its stakeholders are cultivated through communication managed by public relations practitioners (Ledingham, 2003). This “socially informed” generation calls for and expects dialog as governments shift their views of citizens from consumers to allowing citizens to contribute online to the development of government (Azyan, 2012). One unique advantage of social media tools in public relations practitioners’ outreach efforts is their ability to engage many constituents in two-way communication, even when an organization has a limited funding structure (Pew, 2010). This premise follows the tenets of dialogic theory and is a compelling characteristic to justify the active use of social media by local governments. This research evaluates the extent to which local governments are using social media, which can promote participation and improve transparency.

**Stakeholder Theory**

The definition of the term stakeholder includes “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). Stakeholder theory attaches importance to all parties with an interest of stake in an organization (Tench, 2006) and is especially relevant to evaluate local governments who routinely communicate with multiple publics, citizens, media, employees, and government agencies, among others. Like organizations, governments have objectives to meet and competing groups of stakeholders through which to do so.

Although their goals are public interest instead of profit, their actions have the potential to impact stakeholders (Scholl, 2001). In examining which academic theories were most relevant to applied public relations practice, a 2009 study of public relations practitioners indicated “stakeholder theory is seen as the most important theory to PR practice in the future” (Wehmeier,
2009, p. 277). This finding could be attributed to the rise of the social web, which enables communication with multiple stakeholders inexpensively and quickly.

This development can lead to increased demand for information from stakeholders for local governments, who in turn will need to meet this demand. Social media is an inexpensive tool to use to this end, but although financial resources are not particularly at issue, finding adequate personnel resources to manage an online presence may present more pressing considerations. As citizens are the primary stakeholders for governments, it is important to evaluate how governments are communicating with them.

Democratic Theory and Citizen Engagement via the Internet

Governments’ opportunities to engage their stakeholders may assume many forms, from simply sharing information about government services and policies to soliciting feedback on proposed legislation. Nearly one-third of online adults report using social media sites to get information about government agencies or officials (Pew Research Center, 2010). Use of social media technologies removes the traditional boundaries of time and space for government processes, which traditionally involved physical attendance at meetings, hearings, or other input-seeking activities (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010).

Fundamentally, social media technologies can foster an interactive dialog between governments, people, and communities. “To effectively manage relationships, it is critical that practitioners conceptualize of communication with key public members (rather than simply a transfer of information), and use communication to support an ongoing relationship” (Bruning, 2002, p. 44). The term used to denote governments’ attempts to communicate and involve citizens online is e-democracy. E-democracy is an emerging concept that signifies the transformation of citizen involvement in democratic and purposeful processes (Stayaert, 2000); social media can mediate the process. Analysis of social media use for citizen engagement by governments can be framed within democratic theory.

Traditional theories of democracy distinguish among pluralist, representative, and direct theories of democracy. The differences in the competing democratic theories and their relationships to e-democracy were suggested by Norris (2004). The key characteristics of pluralist theory are that elections are important to ensure the accountability and legitimacy of government and that a strong civil society is the key to the resilience and effectiveness of a democracy. New technologies reduce the cost of sharing and receiving information from constituents. Under the representative theory of democracy, democratic governance occurs through citizen representatives. New technologies can improve representation by making government records more accessible and by providing access to government officials. Direct theory proposes that democracy works best when people are directly involved in policy debate, actions, and decisions.

Citizens who are disengaged can become re-engaged through the use of new technologies; e-democracy can “overcome space and time constraints on public involvement, as well as those associated with status differentials, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and wealth” (Scott, 2006, p. 344). Through government social media use, citizens are given greater access to and control of data that was formerly in the exclusive domain of governments and their constituent agencies (Levy, 2011). Hence, in most forms of democracy, and certainly within the model of democracy practiced in the United States, the potential for social media to expand citizen participation is
worthy of investigation, and it is important to evaluate if governments are using it to meet this goal.

Much of the research on citizen engagement and local governments has focused on city websites. Cities can utilize their official websites for information services and interconnectivity with citizens (Musso, Weare, & Hale, 2000). A government website is also seen as a local portal for information about community services (Ho, 1997). Government websites offer citizens a channel for civic engagement opportunities at all levels of government. Civic engagement is defined as membership in collective activities for the betterment of the community through active citizenry (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001) and was first promoted on the Internet through city websites. Government websites generally “reduce the citizen to a customer” and neglect the potential interactive capabilities of the Internet for engaging citizens in democratic activities (Stayaert, 2000). In solely using a one-way communications strategy with their websites, many local governments failed to realize the full potential that the Internet provides to interact with citizens. Social media offer local governments the opportunity to rectify this shortcoming.

Citizen Expectations of Governments’ Activities Online

Citizen expectations of “open” governments are perhaps higher today than ever before. Citizens are demanding more accountability and transparency from their government, and they seek more opportunities for direct public input on the issues that affect them (Scott, 2006). Citizens expect that online government initiatives must attend to issues of transaction, transparency, and interactivity in order to garner trust (Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2004). In addition, in the current economic downturn, local governments are faced with budgetary restrictions, yet citizens are demanding more services from government, leading to an increase in demand for information (Azyan, 2012). “It is a fundamental right of citizens in a well-functioning democracy to know what their public officials are doing” (Edes, 2000, p. 3). To evaluate how local governments are meeting those democratic principles through social media use, their satisfaction with social media use, the effect of public relations staff on extent of use, and differences in social media use among population sizes, community types, and government forms, the following questions are asked:

RQ1(a): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for networking?
RQ1(b): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement?
RQ1(c): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for conferencing?
RQ2: Is there a significant relationship between the number of full-time PIOs on staff and extent of social media use for networking; research, monitoring, and measurement; and conferencing?
RQ3(a): What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for networking?
RQ3(b): What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement?
RQ3(c): What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for conferencing and collaboration?

RQ4: Does form of government predict extent of social media use for networking, research, or conferencing?

RQ5: How satisfied are city governments with their own uses of social media? How satisfied do they believe their citizens are?

METHODS

Survey Administration

In order to investigate local governments’ use of social media, a private survey research firm that specializes in local government and public policy research administered a national survey to its database of more than 3,500 local government officials. The firm was selected based on its ability to reach the most broad and representative sample of government offices that serve a wide range of population sizes and diverse forms of governments (mayor, manager, commission, etc.). Following IRB protocol, participants were first sent a solicitation email that requested their participation. If they chose to click on the survey link, participants were asked to read a statement of informed consent then notified that by clicking to continue the survey they were expressing their consent. The survey data were stripped of identifying information and entered into an Excel file prior to being given to the researchers. Data were then entered into SPSS for analysis, cleaned, and screened.

Participants

A total of 463 government officials participated in the survey about their social media use. There were a broad range of job titles, including: assistant city manager, chief information officer, chief of staff, city clerk, city manager, communication coordinator, director of public affairs, mayor, member of council, public information officer, public relations coordinator, town clerk, and village president. Regardless of title, participants were screened for suitability prior to participating by asking if they were capable of answering questions accurately and thoroughly about their cities’ social media use.

The age breakdown of participants is as follows: 18–24 (n = 2, 0.4%), 25–34 (n = 35, 8%), 35–44 (n = 81, 18%), 45–54 (n = 131, 28%), 55–64 (n = 152, 33%), 65 and above (n = 55, 12%), and 7 participants (1.5%) who preferred not to answer. There are representatives from 48 states in the sample. Government officials representing population sizes from less than 5,000 people (n = 8, 2%) to 300,000 or more (n = 6, 1.3%) were represented in the sample, with the largest categories being populations of 10,000–29,000 (n = 184, 40%), 5,000–9,999 (n = 109, 24%), 30,000–49,000 (n = 69, 15%), and 50,000–99,999 (n = 52, 11%). Forms of government included board of trustees, commissions, council-manager/administrator/supervisor, major-councils, presidents, supervisor-councils, and village boards. The most common forms of governments in the sample were council-manager (n = 274, 59%) and mayor-council (n = 167, 36%).
Measures

Local governments officials were asked about the importance (on a 1–5 scale) of a series of considerations for using social media, including staff time, privacy concerns, citizen interest in social media, effectiveness of social media, and public records requirements for using social media. The survey also asked questions gauging extent of use for a range of social media tool categories; participants were asked to report, on a 1–5 use scale ranging from “not used” to “very often used,” their frequency of use of social networking tools; research monitoring, and measurement tools; and collaborative/conferencing tools.

Social networking tools measured included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs, Google+, Delicious, Slideshare, YouTube, and Flickr. Research, monitoring, and measurement tools included Hootsuite, GoogleAnalytics, Bitly, GoogleAlerts, and Radian6. Collaborative/conferencing tools measured included Facetime, GoToMeeting, and Free Conferencing. Composite scores were created by computing the means for each tool type.

Citizen and self-satisfaction are measured as a necessary first step in this exploratory research gauging how well officials are meeting their constituents’ and own expectations for social media use. These perceptions are important, as disconnects between the two suggest that officials perceive needs from their publics but are not responding to those expectations. To capture officials’ perceptions of their constituents’ satisfaction with social media use, they were asked to evaluate on a 1–5 scale how satisfied they believed their citizens were with their use of social media. The same was repeated with regard to personal satisfaction. Expectations of their citizens for them to use social media to communicate important government information were also measured on a 1–5 importance scale measuring the extent of those expectations.

The number of full-time public information officers (or the equivalent), the size of the jurisdiction (population), type of community (urban, rural, suburban, exurban), and form of government (board of trustees, commissions, council-manager/administrator/supervisor, major-councils, presidents, supervisor-councils, and village boards) variables were also used in analysis. Finally, extent of available staff and time resources, privacy concerns regarding social media, perceived citizen interest in social media use, perceptions of the effectiveness of social media, and public records requirements to use social media were also measured on 1–5 scales.

RESULTS

RQ1(a): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for networking?

Linear regression was conducted to determine whether the extent of importance of the various considerations for using social media significantly predicted the extent of social networking use (measured by the composite score). Tolerance statistics for each independent variable met the minimum threshold (greater than .1), so the model summary was interpreted. Regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicted social networking media use, $R^2 = .15$, $R^2_{adj} = .14$, $F(5, 324) = 11.149$, $p < .01$. The model only accounted for 15% of variance in overall social networking use; both citizen expectations for social media use ($\beta_{180}, t(320) = 2.342, p < .05$) and perceived effectiveness of social media use ($\beta = .231, t(320) = 3.003, p <$
.05) were significant predictors in the overall model. Table 1 presents the coefficients for model variables.

RQ1(b): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement?

Linear regression was conducted to determine whether the extent of importance of the those considerations for using social media significantly predicted the extent of social networking use (measured by the composite score). Tolerance statistics for each independent variable met the minimum threshold (greater than .1), so the model summary was interpreted. Regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicted social networking use, $R^2 = .10$, $R^2_{adj} = .08$, $F(5, 320) = 6.9$, $p < .01$. The model accounted for 8% of variance in overall social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement; only perceived effectiveness of social media use ($\beta = .169$, $t(320) = 2.134$, $p < .05$) contributed significantly to the overall model. Table 1 presents the coefficients for model variables.

RQ1(c): To what extent do staff time and resources, privacy concerns, citizen interest, social media effectiveness, and public records requirements predict social media use for conferencing?

Linear regression was conducted to determine whether the extent of importance of the following considerations for using social media significantly predicted the extent of conferencing use (measured by the composite score). Tolerance statistics for each independent variable met the

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*Indicates a significant variable in the model.
minimum threshold (greater than .1), so the model summary was interpreted. Regression results indicate that the overall model significantly predicted social networking media use, $R^2 = .042$, $R^2_{adj} = .027$, $F(5, 320) = 2.825$, $p < .05$. However, this model only accounted for 4.2% of variance in overall social networking use. In fact, no independent variables were significant in isolation, indicating a possible problem with collinearity. However, tolerances were acceptable, and VIF statistics were less than 3 for each variable, indicating no statistical basis for exclusion based on collinearity.

**RQ2:** Is there a significant relationship between the number of full-time PIOs on staff and extent of social media use for networking; research, monitoring, and measurement; and conferencing?

Next, regression was conducted to reveal if the number of PIOs on staff in the government offices correlated with the extent of social media use for networking; research, monitoring, and measurement; and conferencing purposes. The number of full time PIOs ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 1.254$) was positively and significantly correlated to the extent of social networking use, $R^2 = .06$, $R^2_{adj} = .06$, $F(1, 310) = 19.861$, $p < .01$. The number of full time PIOs ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 1.254$) was also positively and significantly correlated to the extent of social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement, $R^2 = .27$, $R^2_{adj} = .07$, $F(1, 310) = 23.38$, $p < .01$. The number of full time PIOs ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 1.254$) was not significantly correlated to the extent of social media use for conferencing and collaboration, $R^2 = .003$, $R^2_{adj} = -.001$, $F(1, 310) = .813$, $p = .368$. See Table 1 for model variable coefficients.

**RQ3(a):** What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for networking?

ANOVA was conducted to determine if the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community types with social media use for social networking. After establishing that the interaction between the two variables was not significant, main effects for each independent variable were interpreted and revealed that extent of social media use for networking was significantly different across those serving different population sizes $F(7, 295) = 2.628$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .059$ but not for those serving different types of populations $F(4, 295) = .451$, $p = .771$, partial $\eta^2 = .006$. Bonferroni’s post hoc tests were conducted to determine which population groups accounted for the significant difference. Those with populations ranging from 5,000 to 9,999 used it significantly less than those with larger populations of between 30,000 and 49,999, those with populations between 50,000 and 99,999, and those between 200,000 and 299,999.

**RQ3(b):** What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement?

ANOVA was conducted the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community types with social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement. After establishing that the interaction between the two variables was not significant, main effects for each independent variable were interpreted and again revealed that extent of social media use for research was significantly different across those serving different population sizes $F(7, 295) = 2.979$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .066$ but not for those serving different types of populations $F(4, 295) = .839$, $p =$...
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.501, partial $\eta^2 = .011$. Bonferroni’s post hoc tests were conducted to determine which population groups accounted for the significant difference. Those with populations ranging from 5,000 to 9,999 used social media for those purposes significantly less than those with larger populations of between 30,000 and 49,999, than those with populations between 100,000 and 199,999, and those between 200,000 and 299,999. Those in the next size range up, from 10,000 to 29,999 used social media significantly less than those with populations between 100,000 and 199,999 as well as those with populations between 200,000 and 299,999.

RQ3(c): What, if any, is the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community type with extent of social media use for conferencing and collaboration?

ANOVA was conducted to determine if the relationship between size of jurisdiction and community types with social media use for conferencing and collaboration. For this model, the interaction between community classification and population was significant, $F(19, 295) = 1.813$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .105$, so main effects for each independent variable were not interpreted as the effect of one depended on that of another.

RQ4: Does form of government predict extent of social media use for networking, research, or conferencing?

Another series of ANOVAs focused on the role of government form and its potential effect on social media use for networking, research, and conferencing. There was no relationship between the form of government and extent of use of social media for social networking ($F(3, 322) = 1.88$, $p = .132$, partial $\eta^2 = .017$) or for conferencing and collaboration ($F(3, 322) = 1.47$, $p = .222$, partial $\eta^2 = .014$). However, there was a significant relationship between form of government and extent of social media used for research, monitoring, and measurement ($F(33, 322) = 2.897$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .026$). Means indicate that cities led by a Commission used social media for that purpose the most ($M = 1.333$), followed by Council-Manager governments ($M = 1.311$), then Mayor-Council ($M = 1.135$), and lastly an “other” group ($M = .900$). Although these differences were not at a significant level, the overall model did explain a limited amount of variance in social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement.

RQ5: How satisfied are city governments with their own uses of social media? How satisfied do they believe their citizens are?

In general, the 326 users of social media in this study presented quite a range in their satisfaction with their social media use. Almost 50 (15%) were very satisfied, 29 (8%) were somewhat satisfied, 63 were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied (19%), 29 somewhat unsatisfied (8%), and 3 (1%) were very unsatisfied. With regard to the perceived levels of their citizens’ satisfaction with their social media use, 49 (15%) indicated citizens were very satisfied, 156 (48%) indicated citizens were somewhat satisfied, 69 (21%) indicated they were neither satisfied not unsatisfied, 41 thought citizens were somewhat unsatisfied (13%), and 9 indicated citizens were very unsatisfied (3%). City government officials were more positive and decisive about their citizens’ satisfaction of their social media use than with their own; almost half indicate citizens were at least somewhat satisfied.
RESULTS OF THIS RESEARCH PROVIDE DIRECTION FOR MORE STRATEGIC USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND RAISE SEVERAL PRESSING CONSIDERATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND DIALOG THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA, ESPECIALLY FOR NETWORKING AND RESEARCH PURPOSES. BOTH CITIZEN EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTIVENESS SIGNIFICANTLY PREDICTED EXTENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE FOR SOCIAL NETWORKING, WHICH IS POSITIVE IN THAT IT INDICATES LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE RESPONDING TO CITIZEN EXPECTATIONS, A CORE OF DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURE. CITIZENS EXPECT AN “OPEN” GOVERNMENT MORE THAN EVER BEFORE AND DEMAND GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY THROUGH DIRECT INPUT ON THE ISSUES THAT AFFECT THEM (SCOTT, 2011).

THREE LENSES OF DEMOCRATIC THEORY TO BE USED JOINTLY TO PROVIDE A MORE COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF HOW, THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA, EACH AREA CAN BE USED TO PROMOTE DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURE. FOLLOWING THIS EXPLORATORY WORK WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS, RESEARCH MUST UNVEIL THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF ACTUAL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT THROUGH RESEARCH WITH PUBLICS. FOR SOCIAL MEDIA TO MEET ITS POTENTIAL IN EXPANDING DEMOCRATIC PROCEDURE AND TRANSPARENCY, TOKEN OR ONE-WAY USE IS INADEQUATE.

GIVEN NIELSEN (2009) REPORTS THAT TWO-THIRDS OF THE WORLD’S INTERNET POPULATION HAD VISITED A SOCIAL NETWORKING OR BLOGGING SITE AND THAT THE TIME INDIVIDUALS WERE SPENDING ON THESE SITES WAS GROWING AT MORE THAN THREE TIMES THE RATE OF OVERALL INTERNET GROWTH (NUMBERS THAT HAVE SURELY GROWN IN THE PAST THREE YEARS), IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT CITIZENS ARE MAKING CLEAR THEIR EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR LOCAL GOVERNANCE TO ADOPT AND UTILIZE SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS. FURTHER, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE MINDFUL OF THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS, WHICH IS EVIDENCE THAT THEY MAY ALSO HAVE THEIR FINGERS ON THE PULSE OF HOW WELL PUBLICS ARE UTILIZING AND RESPONDING TO THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA USE.

THE DIALOGIC NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IS A USEFUL BAROMETER TO THAT END IN THAT THEY CAPTURE PUBLIC FEEDBACK. OF COURSE, THESE EVALUATIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA, TO BE ACCURATE, SHOULD BE BASED ON STAKEHOLDERS’ ENGAGEMENT OF THE GOVERNMENT SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND NOT ON PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS OR DISMISSAL OF EFFECTIVENESS DUE TO UNWILLINGNESS TO UTILIZE. WHEN AND IF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND THEIR PUBLICS BECOMES MORE DIALOGIC, THESE RESULTS DIRECT US TOWARD RECONCEPTUALIZING THE ROLE OF A “STAKEHOLDER” IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

For research, monitoring, and measurement, citizen expectations did not factor into the equation, but perceived effectiveness did. This finding, in contrast with the above, illustrates that local governments may be strategically utilizing social media and mindfully engaging particular tools for different purposes. For research, monitoring, and measurement, given that only perceived effectiveness predicted any extent of use (and not staff time, privacy, or citizen expectations), local governments may be carefully investing in the tools that serve the most valuable purposes to different ends. Social media research tools such as Google Analytics and Radian6 have demonstrated outstanding potential for public relations practice at every stage of strategic communications, from formative to evaluative.

These research and monitoring tools likewise offer extraordinary opportunity for more participatory government as they enable officials to measure public opinion and evaluate campaign effectiveness. As these tools yield satisfactory return on investment rates to officials, they will likely be more readily adopted. None of the considerations were taken into account for use of social media for conferencing, which is not particularly surprising given that conferencing use of social media is likely not engaged in and evaluated at a stringent level.

Next, a series of correlations revealed significant and positive relationships between the number of PIOs on staff and the extent of use of both social networking and research oriented social media tools. This finding is not particularly surprising but does introduce some important considerations for public relations practice at the government level and beyond, especially when considered along with the above findings where staff time considerations did not affect use of social media tools. Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2011) found time and staff resources to be the most frequently cited barriers to using social media. Limited budgets and competing interests are plaguing most all industry types, and governments are especially hard hit. Without sufficient staff to strategically manage social media, local governments will be strained in meeting citizen expectations for social media and unable to document their commitment to that end (Hallahan, 2008).

These citizen expectations, and not staff time or resources, were pressing to government officials when choosing whether to use social media for social networking purposes. Although encouraging that citizen opinion “matters” for deciding to use the very popular social networking tools, this evidence that number of PIOs positively correlates with actual use of social networking and research tools is worrisome for governments unable to fund larger staffs of PIOs. Social media should offer citizens a more transparent and participatory government process regardless of practitioners; as stakeholders, they are entitled to such particularly since they do not have an alternative.

However, the reality is that already strained staff with limited resources will not be as equipped to actively manage social media, especially given that fewer PIOs on staff likely correlate with smaller governments. Evidence for this relationship lies in the next set of analyses. Although social media are praised for overcoming financial barriers, they do require extensive staff maintenance. In the interest of dialog with stakeholders, the “socially informed” generation that calls for and expects dialog as governments shift their view of citizens from consumers to allow them to contribute online to the development of government (Azyan, 2012), local governments will have to find ways to overcome staff limitations.

For both social networking and research tools, population size (but not population type) was a significant predictor of extent of use. Those officials representing the two smallest population sizes (from 5,000 to 9,999 and from 10,000 to 29,999) had significant disparities in use...
compared to several of their larger-sized counterparts. Citizens expect online government initiatives to attend to issues of transaction, transparency, and interactivity in order to garner trust (Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2004). Proper dialog and engagement to meet stakeholders’ increasing expectations for participatory democracy can’t privilege publics disparately based on their size. Future research must address ways to overcome this.

Form of government also had an effect on the extent of social media use for research, monitoring, and measurement, with cities led by a Commission using them the most, followed by Council-Manager governments, and then Mayor-Council forms. It would be early and beyond the scope of this research to offer why beyond some speculation that perhaps Commission-led governments, without an elected leader above them, are promoting a more participatory democracy and using research tools to gauge public opinion to a greater extent. Of course, this finding should be parceled out much further. However, the implications of government form on both dialog and stakeholder relationships through social media use bear further exploration, as dialog and stakeholder trust are essential to realizing the potential of social media in enhancing democracy.

Finally, it was interesting that city government officials were more positive and decisive about their citizens’ satisfaction of their social media use than with their own; almost half indicate citizens were at least somewhat satisfied. Perhaps this reflects “wishful thinking” on behalf of the officials. Or perhaps they are holding themselves to high standards, and while meeting and responding to citizen concerns and expectations, local government officials aren’t as confident in their use. Of course, these results reflect officials’ perceptions, so one limitation of this study is that some of its findings are based on perceptions of city officials with regard to their citizens’ satisfaction with their social media use as well as the effectiveness of that use. Future research with publics could reveal the accuracy of those perceptions and any “gaps” between actual and perceived satisfaction and expectations. Identifying how well officials respond to the perceived needs and desires of their constituents is an important initial step in revealing how local governments are using social media to promote more democratic procedure. Perceptions may well be reality, but if they are not, then future research can identify why and how to synchronize expectations between citizens and government officials.

The positive aspects of social media cannot be ignored by governments. To best achieve open, participatory, and democratic ideals, local governments of all structures and sizes must incorporate this technology into their communication plans. In addition, one-third of online adults get information about government agencies or officials from social media sites (Pew Research Center, 2010), and thus it is imperative for local governments to have an active, dialogic social media presence.

REFERENCES


