

# Social Media Use by Governments

Presence and activity on social media is no longer a question of choice for most governments as those new platforms empower individuals and non-traditional interest groups. Politicians were first to react to these changes by using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs to rally support. Government institutions are slowly catching up and increasingly experiment with social media.

This working paper takes a comparative snapshot of social media use in and by OECD governments. The focus is on government institutions, as opposed to personalities, and how they manage to capture the opportunities of new social media platforms to deliver better public services and to create more open policy processes. The analysis is based on a large amount of empirical data, including a survey of OECD governments on policies and objectives in this area. Major challenges are discussed, notably those related to the uncertainty of institutions on how to best leverage social media beyond “corporate” communications. The paper proposes tools to guide decision makers: a checklist of issues to be considered by government institutions, a set of potential indicators to appraise impacts, and a range of options for more in-depth policy analysis.

Governments are witnessing how social media empower individuals, as well as traditional and newly-formed interest groups to influence political agendas and policy processes. Most prominent topics discussed on social media include elections and political campaigns, disaster and emergency situations, political unrest. But social media are more than just a global place for discussions, they have become a vehicle for the organisation of collective action.

Political personalities, e.g. heads of state or heads of government, quickly adapted to these changes. Social media are today a standard component of a politicians’ toolkit for campaigning, rallying and fund-raising. Some state or government leaders are very successful, as illustrated by high levels of popularity on social media achieved by the President of the United States (@BarackObama) or the President of Ecuador (@MashiRafael) – both interact with communities of Twitter followers that correspond to more than 10% of the domestic population.

Government institutions are slowly becoming more represented and active on social media. The main executive institutions in 26 out of 34 OECD member countries operate a Twitter account; and they maintain a Facebook page in 21 out of 34 countries. Many ministries and spe-

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cialised agencies operate on social media; as do institutions at regional and local levels of government.

Data suggests that some of the social media activities by government institutions are met with interest. For example the top executive institutions in Ecuador (@Presidencia\_Ec), the United Kingdom (@Number10gov) and Chile (@GobiernodeChile) managed to build a community of Twitter followers that is equivalent to over 4% of the domestic population. Tweets by the United States White House (@WhiteHouse) are re-tweeted over 270 times on average, which can be interpreted as a sign of interest and perceived relevance by social media users.

The purpose and returns of social media use by institutions are not as clear as they are for political personalities. This leads to uncertainty among government institutions about how to best leverage social media and about the implications for strategic objectives and day-to-day operations.

Political leaders, i.e. heads of state and heads of government, are more popular on social media than the institutions they represent. On Twitter the average government leader counts at least four times more followers than the average institutional account for the head of state or government.

Higher social media popularity of personalities versus institutions relates to the expectation of many social media users to interact with “real”, i.e. identifiable, people. But it also illustrates uncertainty and a lack of creativity on the side of institutions. Political leaders are able to reap measurable returns on social media use, e.g.

through social media campaigns that lead to more funds, support or votes. Many government institutions in turn are still looking for the right “recipe” among the options for using social media: providing public information, providing 3 corporate information, promoting public services in general or promoting specific delivery channels, consulting and involving the population.

Good practices of purposeful and mission-oriented institutional use of social media exist. The Spanish national police (@Policia) has for example become a global reference for police work on and with social media. Such cases provide guidance on how social media help transform public services and help build trusted relationships with citizens.

But the overall uncertainty is confirmed by the fact that few national governments in OECD countries have a dedicated strategy or overarching plan for institutional use of social media. Among those governments that do, most consider social media as being mainly an additional tool to improve public communications. Only few governments try to genuinely leverage social media for more advanced purposes like involving citizens in public policy processes or transforming and re-designing public service delivery.

Social media have the potential to make policy processes more inclusive and thereby rebuild some confidence between governments and citizens. But there are no “one size fits all” approaches and government strategies need to seriously consider context and demand factors to be effective.

Social media offer new opportunities to reduce political exclusion, e.g. by allowing ad-hoc and diffuse interest groups to place items on the political agenda. Especially when combined with petitions, empirical evidence and on-the-ground actions, social media have proven their potential to “escalate” issues and alter original decisions made by established actors in the political system.

Governments can leverage this potential to design public policies and services in more iterative, collaborative and responsive ways. It does, however, require dedicating resources to participative development and establishing credible follow-up procedures to integrate feedback received via new channels and platforms.

Empirical evidence suggests that social media can bridge access and take-up gaps still faced by many traditional online government services. But the characteristics of social media users and non-users can be very different from country to country, as well as within countries.

Social media do not automatically “level the playing field” in the sense of empowering all societal groups equally. This might be the case in some countries, e.g. in Germany, Austria or some Nordic ones where social media take-up and use do not depend on educational attainment. But in countries like Spain, the United Kingdom, Hungary, Portugal, Greece and Turkey social media use is much more prominent among parts of the population with high education levels than among those with no or low levels of education. The uptake gap can be as large as 50 percentage points.

Neither do social media guarantee more attention or participation of younger, disenchanted people. General social...

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media use is of course very high among young people in almost all OECD countries. But just over 30% of young Dutch seem to use social media to discuss political or civic issues. The Netherlands in fact lead this European comparison, which is trailed by Austria where less than 10% of 16-24 year olds report using social media that way.

Low rates of young people using social media to discuss political or civic issues are not just an expression of disinterest. They also result from low levels of capacity and commitment by many government institutions to use this channel to engage young people. This is particularly worrisome in about a dozen European countries that also suffer from very high rates of voter abstention among young people. Governments in those countries are not able to realise the potential of social media to make processes more inclusive of young people. Non-government actors often fill the gap by showing creative options and using social media to foster inclusion, as for example the “Bite the Ballot” campaign for young voter registration in the United Kingdom.

Social media drive innovation in public service delivery and government operations. They amplify some of the “democratisation” effects of the Internet on public information and services; and they provide opportunities to deliver on expectations that are not met by traditional online government services. But institutions need to be aware of risks, for instance in terms of protection of privacy, quality of information and public perception.

Social media allow governments to “crowd-source” ideas, suggestions and critical remarks. Public institutions increasingly create or participate on collaborative platforms. One such example is GitHub, an open source collaboration platform that holds re-usable source codes for [www.data.gov](http://www.data.gov) (United States), [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) (United Kingdom) and many other projects. The “government” category of the platform’s repository has seen rapid growth since 2011.

Where governments fail to or are slow to use those platforms to improve and deliver public services, people and organisations step in and pressure for change. The impacts of “bottomup” processes tend to increase where social media are combined with online petitions, mobile applications, open (government) data analytics, crowd-funding initiatives, and collective “offline” action such as protests.

Better targeted and more efficient public service delivery is one of the expectations governments have towards social media. That expectation echoes the early days of “e-government”. It is therefore important to make sure institutional use of social media is directed towards the realization of tangible benefits for users, society and government. Analysis of specific government sectors helps illustrate the potential, e.g. in healthcare or employment services.

Digital opportunities in healthcare are a priority for many countries. But even in the most advanced countries only 50-60% of people use the Internet as a source for health-care-related information. This has to do with the importance of interpersonal relationships between practitioners

and patients. But it is also an illustration of the perceived lack of reliable and credible information. Seniors (over 65 year olds) are for example a fast-growing group of Internet and social media users – more than half of them are Internet users in Japan and the United States; and at least one in five seniors are social media users in Korea, Iceland, Norway and the United Kingdom. Public healthcare providers are still hesitant to use Internet forums or social media applications to accompany this segment of the population and to better integrate healthcare information into elderly people’s daily lives.

Looking for employment has long been transformed by the Internet and is under full transformation by social media. In some countries public employment services and commercial online service providers complement each other well, e.g. in Germany or Sweden where the majority of job seekers use the Internet to look for a job and consult the national employment agency. Germany’s Bundesagentur für Arbeit for example supports job seekers and employers by collaborating with the online professional network Xing. In several other countries, however, the perceived relevance of public employment agencies is declining, which should give the concerned institutions incentives to re-invent their service delivery in this new context.

As social media become more pervasive, they allow governments to use new sources of information to understand people’s needs and behaviours. Governments can mine social media activities to obtain insights for better quality of services across all policy areas. But this is also an area of growing public attention, resentment to privacy

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breaches and perceived surveillance 5 by governments. The number of government requests about individual users' information from platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Google is steadily growing. While these requests are, in principle, in line with national legislation and often concern criminal investigations, the numbers and reasons are not always well communicated by governments and can lead to unfavourable public perception.

Government institutions need to better understand the impacts they can achieve through social media in order to help prioritise targets and establish effective policies. They need to adapt to, learn from and preferably shape the ways in which social media transform public value creation.

Social media can help governments improve communications, both regular and emergency. But much potential is still undiscovered when it comes to using social media to transform policy processes, make decisions more transparent and processes more inclusive, and develop more responsive and more efficient public services. Few “recipes” are ready off the shelf but iterative interactions with users can start a process of mutual learning on how to best apply social media in a given area.

There is little guidance on how government institutions can appraise the impact of social media on people's satisfaction with public services, on efficiency of government operations and on greater openness overall. Only a small minority of governments systematically monitor or measure the impacts. Some quantifiable information can be utilised to measure presence or popularity of an institution on social media. But more qualitative information, e.g. case stories

about a better outcome for an individual or a community, are needed to appraise penetration, perception and purpose-orientation of institutional social media use.

Some government institutions take up the challenge of developing skills and capacities. This includes developing programmes to attract, develop and retain the skills sets needed among civil servants. The Australian Public Service has long had a systematic approach to developing skills and capacities for digital government reforms; and the framework is being adapted to include social media and collaborative approaches.

Governments need to build communities of interest around their social media experiences. There are some centrally coordinated exchange mechanisms, e.g. the “Social Media Community of Practice” supported by the United States GSA. Such communities help overcome some of

the hesitation and uncertainty that individual ministries or agencies express when it comes to questions about if and how to take up social media in their work.

The wide variety of practices mentioned in this report point to the benefits of further analysing the policy implications of social media, identifying good examples and developing mission-oriented guidance for the public sector. A checklist for institutions is proposed below. The report develops a set of potential metrics and indicators for impact measurement; and it outlines options for more in-depth analysis. ●●

Source: Mickoleit, A. (2014), “Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends, Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers”, OECD Working Papers on Public Governance, No. 26, OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxrcmghmk0s-en>



Gert Robijns, Untitled, 2003, Coleccion M HKA, photo M HKA

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## A checklist for purpose-oriented use of social media in the public sector

### Issue 1 «Objectives and expectations»

Questions to be raised and answered:

- What is the core mission of my institution?
- What are the most important information and services provided by my institution?
- How important is public communication for achieving my institution's core objectives?
- How can social media support my institution's core mission? What are examples from similar institutions domestically or internationally?
- Can social media enable outside actors to support selected activities of my institution, e.g. intermediaries or individuals for which my institution can provide a platform for collaboration?

### Issue 2 «Governance modes and guidelines»

Questions to be raised and answered:

- Is there a central oversight body for social media use across government or is the preferred operating mode one of dispersed innovation?
- How can different organisational units in my institution leverage social media, e.g. the public relations department, the IT department, the policy making department, the service delivery department?
- Is there a need for social media guidelines for civil servants, including for personal use?
- Is there a need for social media guidelines for official institutional accounts, e.g. Facebook presence of a given ministry?
- Who, if anybody, sets guidelines for social media use by politicians or appointed high-ranking civil servants representing an institution?

### Issue 3 «Legal compliance»

Questions to be raised and answered:

- What are the specific legal and regulatory provisions that may have an impact on how my institution uses social media?
- Are social media covered or excluded from official record-keeping?
- What disclaimers should be added to the social media presence?
- What information is my institution allowed to re-use when it comes to privacy protection or compliance with intellectual property laws?
- How to ensure that my institution's social media use meets requirements for accessibility of information and services?

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### **Issue 4 «Skills and resources»**

Questions to be raised and answered:

- What human resources are available or can be mobilized to achieve sustainable impacts?
- Are social media skills addressed by wider (digital) skills strategies at my institution or government?
- How are social media expenses accounted for? Can they be extracted from overall communications expenses in order to calculate specific costs?

### **Issue 5 «Collaboration and communitybuilding»**

Questions to be raised and answered:

- Do government communities exist where I can exchange social media experiences?
- What coordination or collaboration mechanisms would help my institution understand and maximize the impact of social media?

### **Issue 6 «Managing risks of social media use»**

Questions to be raised and answered:

- How damaging would reputational risks be for my institution?
- Does my institution need to worry about unintentional disclosure of information?
- What share of civil servants uses social media in their personal capacity?
- Are social media risks addressed by overarching strategies for managing risks in my institution or government?

### **Issue 7 «Monitoring and measuring social media impacts»**

Questions to be raised and answered:

- How advanced are my social media indicators? What do they actually measure: presence, popularity, penetration, perception or purpose?
- Does my institution use indicators that evaluate the contribution to actual core objectives?
- What would be an ideal set of metrics for my institution's use of social media?
- What information sources can I use to move from the current metrics to an ideal set of purpose-oriented indicators?