

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA: CONNECTING GOVERNMENTS AND CITIZENS ONLINE

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POLICY STATEMENT

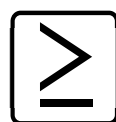
Social media use is growing worldwide. Although research shows that they are used primarily for leisure, it has been increasingly used for political and public communication. On the one hand, many experts have been condemning social media for undermining democracy and enhancing political polarisation. On the other hand, these networks potentially bring positive outcomes, such as greater transparency from public institutions and direct communication between governments and citizens. However, the institutions have a long way to go in tailoring their communications efforts to convey public information while appealing to the public successfully — and ultimately strengthening people's trust and interest in politics.

If entertainment seems to be the most popular content on social media, how could public agencies compete for people's attention online? How could public communication be adapted to social media? This public service must not simply replicate the content designed for traditional broadcast media. Instead, it should balance different needs: the audience's demands and the states' commitment to informing citizens while maximizing each platform's particular demographics, features and algorithms.

BACKGROUND

Surveys show citizens' growing scepticism towards politics: their concerns range from dissatisfaction with the democracies they live in [1] to utter distrust in political institutions [2]. Nevertheless, their expectations towards democratic institutions and demands for accountability and transparency only increase [3]. "Transparency is now proposed as the solution to one of the most intangible problems of democratic governance: citizens' increasing mistrust of government", argues Grimmelikhuijsen and Porumbescu [4].

In parallel, social media flourishes, and virtually anyone can simultaneously be a producer and consumer of information or become an influencer [5]. Thus, public and political communication are transformed: what was once limited to mass communication becomes, in the words of Manuel Castells, "mass self-communication" [5] — fertile soil for misinformation.



This paradigm shift inevitably led to discussions about the potential democratizing power of the Internet and how it could hinder citizen participation and engagement. Among the several criticisms, it's argued that the same political elite tendencies of the pre-Internet age continue evolving in the new media age; digital communication is used predominantly as "a new technical system for distributing old-fashioned mass communications content" according to Meyer and Hinchman [6]. In the end of the day, the public only gets further from the political centre [7], and the expansion of new media remains far from achieving its potential for effectively engaging citizens.

Regardless of such criticisms, governments worldwide are increasingly investing in and professionalizing their social media communication strategies. The reasons behind this approach include: a) reaching out to citizens and stakeholders; b) sharing information across and within political agencies and governments; c) disseminating information about the governmental operation; d) promoting citizen participation and government transparency; among others [8][9][10][11].

Despite its flaws, the potential for connecting people and governments should not be underestimated: on a global scale, people are spending more time on social media than ever, increasing the likelihood of coming across government's news and statements on social media first and, then, on other media, such as TV or radio.

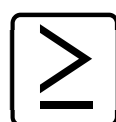
FINDINGS

Studies show that effective public communication in social media can increase citizen engagement and political activism; and that online interaction between political representatives and citizens affects the latter's perception of government transparency, efficiency, and corruption [13].

Case studies on government social media communication at local and national levels in the U.S. and the E.U. found that these networks are used mostly for self-presentation, marketing, symbolic gestures and information provision purposes [8][9][10][11], which are described below.

Self-presentation is connected to impression management and public relations efforts, which could be used to counteract a government's low popularity or push citizens' interest in public institutions. Marketing is used in communications in many ways and for many purposes — it's often hard to separate it from the informative content. In plain words, marketing is useful, for instance, to promote a municipality or vaccination campaign. Symbolic presentation is emblematic, usually resorted to present governments taking a stance on a political issue or expressing congratulations or condolences due to an event. Information provision regards the traditional reporting of governmental activities and factual information and educational campaigns, which are intended to teach citizens about an important issue or simply to make public service announcements [12].

DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison created a typology of government social media communication, which they used to analyze American local government departments' Facebook pages [12]. The authors found that 45% of all posts regarded symbolic and presentational exchanges, which means that the Facebook posts had messages containing a favourable presentation of the departments, political positioning, symbolic acts and/or marketing. Further, they found that 17.5% of the posts



regarded favourable presentation alone, in which achievements of the organization or one of its employees were the main content of the post.

Minussi used the typology mentioned earlier to analyze the Facebook posts published by the national governments of Portugal, Spain and Denmark [10][11]. It was found that the great majority of posts concerning information provision, that is, messages about public service announcements, operations and events that these governments joined or organized, and policies - especially related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sobaci and Karkin researched Twitter's impact on transparent, participatory and citizen-oriented local public services in Turkey. The analysis revealed that Turkish mayors use it mostly to share information, send personal messages and share their location and activities. Promoting transparent, participatory and citizen-oriented public service wasn't the goal. Indeed, self-promotion and political marketing were the main purposes for using Twitter.

Looking at all research findings described above, it was fairly usual to find social media posts that overlap two or more purposes. Ultimately, the research findings agree that posts that foster collaboration with citizens, promote interactivity, or ask for citizens' input are rare.

CONCLUSIONS

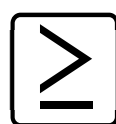
Public institutions still have a long way to maximize their communication efforts on social media. While these interactive channels have the potential to bridge politics and citizens, they have been underused, serving as a replica of the messages and strategy designed for the old media, broadcast channels — that is, one-way communication of news, marketing and symbolic acts.

Changing the public communication paradigm presents both new challenges and opportunities. Although using social media isn't exclusively for promoting public transparency, this is the alleged reason behind most governments' decision to join these networks. If institutions aim at making it the core of transparency efforts, they need to start by ensuring their communications are open to all and, most importantly, effectively reach citizens.

Effective online communication is not only a matter of providing social media users with content that interests them but also following and adapting to each platform's algorithms, which boosts certain topics and formats to the detriment of others. On the whole, findings and conclusions from the case mentioned above studies must be taken with a grain of salt: not only research on public and political communication on social media is still at an early stage, but the popularity of certain online platforms, types of content or media formats are debatable and constantly changing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although social media's features, popularity and algorithms aren't definitive, the findings could be useful for public agencies and governments reshape and improve online communications. In short,



online communications can't be limited to providing old-fashioned mass communications news and information.

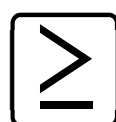
Every country and region has its more popular platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, etc.), and each platform requires different communication strategies, supports certain media formats (photos, videos, text, etc.) and has different user demographics. Thus, publishing content tailored for each network is quintessential.

Public institutions from local to national levels should collaborate and liaise digital communications strategies that would boost their reach and efficacy online. For instance, local and regional governments could work on promoting citizen participation, such as volunteering for community projects and meetings with political representatives. Bonsón and Ratkai argue that "if local governments plan on using social media primarily for citizen engagement, their efforts might be more effective if the posted contents concern the citizens' topics of interest — that is, topics they see as impactful on their lives" [14].

Since local and regional governments seem more approachable to citizens, national-level institutions could focus on wider campaigns showing their impact on the population's everyday lives. Otherwise, citizens might continue to feel detached from representative institutions. States have a unique opportunity to benefit from social media communication to strengthen their respective national identities and, consequently, citizen involvement and participation in politics. Governmental agencies need to use social media as a campaign tool and apply consistent and ongoing communication that creates awareness and advocates for the public good. For instance, encouraging the population to get vaccinated and vote. Uncoordinated efforts to inform citizens with bureaucratic-tone news or strong self-promotional messages won't cut through the networks' algorithms nor interest people. In the end, public communication is not only about being accountable and informing: it's also about strengthening citizens' trust in politics and their representatives.

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