Social media & the Government: living happily ever after?

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Introduction

Social media play an important role in the rapidly changing dynamics of government organizations and their interaction with the public. Governments are facing changing demands at organizational level due to the exponential growth of connections, networks involved in social issues and collaboration within and across organizational boundaries (Van Berlo, 2012). Vocal citizens are increasingly expressing their opinions openly and clearly, anywhere and any time. Sometimes they even get involved in (the creation of) government policy. Social media have the capacity to strengthen and facilitate online dialogue in society.

The active role played by citizens has an impact on the traditional hierarchical intercommunication of various intermediaries in the public domain (Edwards, 2003, cited in RMO, 2011). Government organizations are looking for ways of staying connected with their social environment in a meaningful and interactive way (Bekkers & Meijer, 2010). The government is not longer seen as a Big Brother watching over people (I-visie 2011-2015, Ministry of Economics, Agriculture & Innovation) and responsible for solving their problems, but rather as a facilitator of teamwork between various stakeholders in the public domain (Van Berlo, 2012). This has led to a widening of the horizons of government organizations and a more externally oriented vision of the professionals – in particular communication professionals – working within them.

In this context of changing dynamics in the link between government and the public, social media are seen as promising and effective means of providing information, promoting networking, stimulating behavioural change, involving the public efficiently and easily in government plans and facilitating interaction (Aalberts & Kreijveld, 2011, Norris, 2012 and Kaplan, 2010). Social media can mobilize public involvement, increase awareness of important issues and stimulate self-organization. Various innovative and interactive mechanisms such as online participation, webcare and mobile apps are used by government organizations to bridge the gap between them and the public, improve their service level, create support for their approach or ideas, or reinforce their image.

There are many examples of the use of social media in the public domain to achieve the above-mentioned aims. Dutch citizens can use a mobile app 'Compronet' (Community Protection Network) to report crime directly. The way social media can provide information and support networking was illustrated in Utrecht during the Queen's birthday celebrations where webcare directed visitors to public toilets and crowd control provided real-time information about which parts of town were more or less crowded. The educational online game 'Docks' stimulates awareness and knowledge of the economic and environmental problems involved in operating a big modern port.

Despite all successes in this field, government organizations are still experimenting and struggling to enhance their long-term impact with the aid of social media and to make full use of this new technology

(Ernst & Young, 2011, Kok, 2011, Bekkers & Meijer, 2010). How can they manage to stay in tune with their social environment and respond to the mindset of the public (TNO, 2011)? How can they make their activities future-proof (WRR, 2012)? Will they be able to avoid common pitfalls like the traditional one-way communication, top-down management and a lack of strategy? The main purpose of the present study is to gain insights into the way social media can be used successfully in non-profit and government organizations on the basis of best practice.

Theoretical background

There are several relevant theories addressing aspects of the use of social media by government. These theories concern the *motives and preconditions* for effective use of social media, the power of *networks*, organizational *challenges and restrictions* on the use of social media and the degree of *public involvement*. These various aspects will now be briefly discussed.

The promises of social media

One of the motives for governments to use social media as mentioned in the literature is the need to bridge the gap between government and the public; this has been stressed for example by Aalberts & Kreijveld (2011). Bekkers & Meijer (2010) use the term 'broken connections' in this context, describing cases where governments invest in social media e.g. to stimulate active citizenship and facilitate participation. The socially driven mission of government organizations and the creation of public value (Nah & Saxton, 2012) are pursued for example by facilitating, stimulating and monitoring the ongoing social dialogue. Social media are seen as a promising way of informing the public, facilitating interaction, using the power of networks and stimulating behavioural change by involving the public efficiently and easily by means of online participation (Aalberts & Kreijveld, 2011, Kaplan, 2010, Norris, 2012). A certain degree of interactive policy and co-creation can give insights into decision-making and executive processes. At the same time, this approach allows governments to take advantage of the innovative and creative potential of society (RMO, 2011). An active listening role vis-à-vis the public and facilitating and stimulating public participation can also lead to increased support for government plans.

The power of networks

One of the most frequently mentioned preconditions for making the most out of social media is the idea that the application should be based on networking. Networks are seen as powerful tools for delivering a wide range of messages to the intended target groups. According to Frissen (2008), the ability to create connections between the relevant groups and items of content underlies their success. Not only can networks lead to the creation and sharing of relationships, they can also stimulate the generation and sharing of knowledge and the ability to utilize the creativity of society. Opinion leaders can play an important networking role in the diffusion of innovation and behavioural change (Valente, 2010). In 'network society', traditional hierarchic structures lose much of their importance and organizations communicate in an increasingly horizontally-oriented way.

Organizational challenges

There are many challenges to the effective use of social media at an organizational level. One of the main problems lies in the field of planning. The current changes in the dynamics of society, characterized by increasing complexity of the issues involved, ongoing dialogue and evolving intercommunication between the public and the government, call for constant modification of the means of communication. These trends put pressure on the way communication planning is handled and the way achieved results can be justified.

Evaluating communicative interventions retrospectively on the basis of measurable results and being accountable for these results – that is, achieving 'performative accountability' – is becoming increasingly difficult in this dynamic setting. Research also shows that planning is not always the leading principle in daily communication practice (Wink, van Woerkum & Renes, 2007). An alternative route towards accountability is known as decisional accountability (van Woerkum & Aarts, 2011), where professionals explain the choices they made during the decision-making process. A new method of communication planning developed by Van Ruler (2013) displays a similar flexibility and ability to handle changing reality. The guidelines for this method – in particular (1) Frequent evaluation of objectives and actions during the process; (2) Co-creation with stakeholders for optimal performance; and (3) Definition of actions that are easily adoptable – reflect the characteristics of social media, since both take into account that objectives can be flexible and that it is difficult to control environmental variables.

Active public involvement

It is essential that the government's communication with the public should work both ways to ensure that the government does not lose touch with society (Van Woerkum & Aarts, 2007). Governments are looking for ways to make contact with citizens in order to create meaningful interaction and communication (Bekkers & Meijer, 2011). Research (Kok, 2012) further shows that most Dutch municipalities mostly communicate with the public in an one-sided way.

Reciprocity in governmental communication and co-creation from a two-sided perspective are key features of the co-creation model developed by Bekkers & Meijer (2010). This model approaches creation of content and participation from the perspective of both citizens and the government . Both parties can inform and consult one another and ask for feedback, or even engage in a debate on public issues. Co-creation occurs on a basis of equivalence at the point where citizens and government organizations meet in their communicative efforts. The co-creation model is based on the participation ladder originally designed by Arnstein (1969) which comprises eight steps of citizen participation, varying from non-participation to citizen power. The higher on the ladder, the more citizens have the opportunity to influence government policy.

Focus of this study

Based on the principles discussed above concerning (1) the promise of social media, (2) the power of networks, (3) organizational challenges and (4) public involvement, we will explore the way social media are used in the public domain by considering the following questions:

1. To what extent are the potential benefits of social media realized in the public domain?
2. How are networks being used in government communication via social media?
3. What lessons can be learned on effective use of social media?
4. How do organizations face planning challenges?
5. To what degree is the public involved in social media projects?

Method

To investigate these questions, we conducted semi-structured face- to- face in-depth interviews with communication professionals from nine government organizations (e.g. the police, municipalities and government ministries). The projects were selected on the basis of their submission for the 2011 Galjaard Prize. This prize is awarded annually to a successful government communication project. Researchers selected the projects to be studied with reference to the level of the government organization involved (local or national government) and type of communication (internal or external). The social media projects selected are given in the following table:

Social media project	Respondent's function
Municipality of Amsterdam (construction of the North-South line of the Amsterdam Metro)	Web manager
Municipality of Borne (co-creation of a future vision)	Communications policy advisor
Municipality of The Hague (pilot housing for commuters)	Project manager
Municipality of Eindhoven (prevention of traffic chaos due to planned construction work)	Social Media communications consultant
Municipality of Leiden (co-creation of cultural policy)	Communications consultant
Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport (use of social media in campaign to stimulate donor registration)	Senior communications consultant
Police in Groningen (use of Twitter by police)	Digital Media Project manager
Rijkswaterstaat – the Directorate for Public Works and Water management (introduction of social media for internal use)	Online strategist & community manager
Kromme Rijn regional community initiative, Utrecht (organization of a picnic)	Regional coordinator

Table 1: Selected projects and interviewees

The interviews (which were divided into five parts) focused on various aspects of the projects: the objectives, the communication strategy, the process, success and failure factors and results. Open questions were used to enable the interviewees to describe the process and setting in their own words. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and approved by the interviewees. The results were schematically processed to facilitate qualitative comparison of the aspects studied.

This approach yields insights into the use of social media by government organizations and the way these organizations can use social media to optimize contacts with their social environment.

Results

Objectives of the social media projects

Social media were used for various purposes in the projects we studied, ranging from involving citizens in the co-creation of cultural policy (Municipality of Leiden) or a vision of the future (Municipality of Borne) to the self-organization of a picnic to stimulate awareness of the green environment. Other objectives were rebuilding trust in the (communication) process concerning the construction of the North-South Metro line in Amsterdam) and stimulating prosocial behaviour (donor registration). Social media can also play an important role in sharing knowledge within an organization (Rijkswaterstaat, the Directorate for Public Works and Water Management, part of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment), strengthening the image of a residential town (pilot housing in The Hague), keeping the public informed about police work through Twitter (Groningen), or informing them about detours due to construction work (Municipality of Eindhoven). In short, when organizations use social media they expect to (1) stimulate awareness, (2) inform people, (3) involve them actively through participation and co-creation, (4) stimulate interaction and recruit help from the public and/or (4) stimulate behavioural change.

Awareness of citizens' needs

To stay in tune with citizens, it is important to be aware of their needs and motives. In the cases under study, involvement may be at three levels: *individual, group or public-interest*. At individual level, citizens may be affected by construction work and want to be kept informed about detours. Or they may have lost trust in the plans of local or national or national government for certain projects, or the way these projects are executed. Group interests are served when citizens feel strong links with their home town and are willing to contribute actively to policy in the field of culture or general policy. At the public interest level, citizens are willing to contribute to the solution of social issues such as the lack of organ donors.

Preconditions

The three main preconditions mentioned by organizations for effective use of social media are:

1. The strategic use of *networks and key figures* to reach citizens was the main precondition mentioned in all projects. Networking to get closer to citizens' mindset by a snowball effect can have three different outcomes: (1) give an impulse to citizens' interaction (2) create internal support (from within the organization) or external support (from specific target groups or society at large) and (3) inspire behavioural change. The communication strategy for the North-South Metro line in Amsterdam was aimed at facilitating a platform for interaction. Unlike other projects and contrary to many theoretical assumptions, no key figures were used here. Instead, a natural flow of individuals and social groups willing to share their opinions were used to stimulate interaction. In the social media project in Kromme Rijn, success depended completely on the power of networking. The slogan was 'change brought about by a bottom-up approach'. A small core group generated enough buzz to attract others and create support for the self-organization of a picnic intended to raise awareness of environmental issues. A similar process occurred in The Hague, where business networks were set up to reach potential temporary residents for the housing project and to enthuse them. Sometimes the power of networking can lead to behavioural change, as in the donor campaign. In this context, it is more convincing when a friend registers as a donor and urges you to do the same via social media than when the government sends a similar message; this is an example of the application of a social norm[1]. Networks are used to bring everyday liveability issues closer to target groups in an interactive, personal way.

   A noteworthy aspect of the use of networks to spread messages is the flexibility of the dissemination of the information. Organizations rely on the self-regulatory capacity of social media (e.g. in discussions), and the assumption of good behaviour of employees, both on-and offline.

2. The second precondition is the *flexible use of social media.* The organizations interviewed remarked that the potency of social media lies in the dynamics of loosening control and subtly giving direction to the process, without managing or directing guidelines too tightly. The municipality of Borne for instance did not work out a complete strategy in advance but used action plans made up and adopted during the civic participation and co-creation phase. Creating support was a crucial precondition in the planning of the police project in Groningen. Furthermore, the course on the use of Twitter given to police officers here was mainly based on learning from one another such matters as writing tweets and loosening control, with minimal guidelines and much discussion.

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[1] Social norms can influence individual or group behaviour, by prevailing codes of conduct that either prescribe or proscribe behaviors that members of a group can enact and individuals' interpretation of these norms (Lapinkski & Rimal, 2005).

3. Finally, the *mix of on- and offline resources* was seen as a key precondition. The combination of various media is essential in reaching a broad target group. An example of a successful mediamix is an inspiration session with a member of the municipal council about culture policy in Leiden, after which the public could continue the discussion via uploaded video's and propositions on twitter or LinkedIn. The activation buddy Frank from Rijkswaterstaat supported the participants both in real life and virtually, explaining how the internal social medium Yammer worked. He did this in a sympathetic, personal and accessible way. The municipality of Eindhoven also made optimum use of the benefits of various media. Columns in local newspapers, traffic signs and traffic information on Twitter, Facebook and a dedicated website all contributed to congruent, well-aligned communication and up-to-date, personal and relevant information.

Restrictions

The organizations consulted also mentioned several restrictions they had to take into account if their project was to be successful. Avoiding discussion and creating false expectations are fatal errors. 'If you offer people the opportunity to express their opinions, it's important to be transparent in sharing the outcome, even if that outcome is not what people would have wished,' according to one of the professionals. One-way communication and attempting to influence opinions too obviously is another restriction mentioned. This is illustrated in the communicative strategy adopted with respect to the North-South Metro line, which was explicitly not aimed at influencing opinions but rather at offering a platform for sharing opinions and stimulating interaction. The philosophy was that bringing together opinions of different individuals and groups and taking them seriously would automatically lead to a credible representation of the situation.

Conclusion and discussion

We conclude on the basis of our results that social media can enhance the interaction between government organizations and the public, can stimulate public participation and in some cases even behavioural change.

What do these results and best practices imply for effective use of social media, with particular reference to the potential benefits offered by social media, networking, the necessary preconditions to be observed, organizational challenges and active public involvement?

1. *To what extent are the potential benefits of social media realized in the cases studied here?*

Our results show that many of the potential benefits of social media mentioned in the literature were realized in the nine projects we studied. In these projects social media were mainly used for networking and to bring about behavioural change, to produce collective action, create public support or stimulate civic participation and involvement. Social media were also used to provide customized personal information in order to stimulate awareness and share knowledge.

2. How are networks being used in government communication via social media?

The main precondition for effective use of social media effectively is that the power of networking should be employed wherever possible. We found in our study that networks are often used to achieve objectives in the public domain. Networking power as defined e.g. by Boyd (cited in Van Berlo, 2012) is often observed when messages are disseminated via social networks. The effectiveness and speed of dissemination can be augmented by the natural influence, knowledge, reliability and enthusiasm of key figures or opinion leaders, who are able to bring the message closer to the intended target groups. According to Valente (2010), opinion leaders can play an important role in the diffusion of rapid innovations and behavioural change.

Employees and other members of the public can be encouraged to accept and use certain media for spreading relevant information on organizational topics (for example information about police activities or the decision whether or not to register as a donor) with the aid of networked power, when means of communication are combined in such a way that a relevant topic is put visibly on the agenda.

Organizations often try to nourish and expand their network through all kinds of communicative efforts, in order to preserve the possibilities of participation, consultation and citizen involvement in various governmental activities. Creating networks or online platforms for sharing insights, thoughts and opinions about public issues is defined by Boyd (cited in Van Berlo, 2012) as network-making power. The relevance of networks as used in the public domain has been stressed by many authors, for example Willemse (2013). In his analogy, the parties governments want to influence or involve are like a flock of sparrows, difficult to manage or direct and insensitive to and unattainable for targeted messages. Governments who want to set up a dialogue with the public and get their message across effectively will have to look for new ways of doing this.

3. What lessons can be learned concerning the preconditions for effective use of social media?

Two preconditions we found in this study that have a bearing on this question are *(1) a mix of various means of communication* and (2) *open, flexible use* of social media. The communication mix, or a 'diversity of channels' as Van Woerkum & Aarts (2007) put it, is used by governments in order to reach a broad target group. Maximal impact can be realized by combining specific characteristics of various media; this is also the added value of a good communication mix according to De Haan (2011). Online activities and traditional media are often focused on conversion from one medium to another. Another common characteristic in cross-media communication is the presence of the message 'What's in it for me?', which is an important prerequisite for responding to citizens' needs and for achieving a targeted approach. It may be noted that the cross-media strategy of government organizations is often characterized by a well-founded decision to use social media, while the choice of the specific social medium to be employed is mainly based on intuition or personal preferences. The underlying lesson to be learned concerning the mix of means of communication to be employed, is that it is best to embed various means of communication in a broader setting, which forms part of a long-term strategy. In practice, most organizations have a marketing strategy in which social media is embedded rather than a dedicated social media strategy.

The open, flexible use of social media mentioned above as another important precondition can be explained in terms of aspects of planning on the one hand and loosening of controls on the other. Flexibility towards the unpredictable nature of social media can be both a strength and a weakness. The strength lies in the ability to produce and enable unexpected results, changing the government's role increasingly into that of a facilitator aimed at collaboration. The weakness is that organizations cannot always handle the speed and amount of information they constantly have to deal with. The way organizations can respond to this threat during the planning process is considered in the next question:

4. *How do organizations face the challenges social media bring in the field of planning?*

In the cases under study, planning was adapted flexibly and gradually, in line with the recommendations made by Van Ruler (2013) in her new communication planning method. Municipalities evaluated their actions constantly in order to determine the next step. This is in accordance with one of Van Ruler's guidelines, which prescribes evaluation during the planning process instead of just after. Strict adherence to predetermined planning was rare, in line with the argument that the unpredictable nature of social media makes it difficult to plan communication in the traditional way where performances and activities are laid down in advance. Many organizations adopt a trial and error and 'learning by doing' approach within a general multi-phase planning framework.

Co-creation of content or policy was also shown in many of the cases we studied. Van Ruler (2013) states in her communication method that such collaboration between the various stakeholders is likely to lead to optimal results. Organizations should ideally use a networking approach to facilitate co-creation. Relevant networks are selected and approached strategically for different purposes.

Another planning aspect found in our cases was the selection of objectives that can be readily adopted. Many organizations in the public domain adjust their objectives during the course of a project. These objectives are generally concrete, measurable variables, such as the number of employees signing up for a given social medium, an increase in donor registrations or the number of participants in a social initiative. This aspect is also built into the communication method proposed by Van Ruler (2013). Other objectives, such as image building of a residential town, promoting public acceptance of a project or creating awareness of a given issue, are harder to quantify and thus to be accountable for. One approach to justification of such results is that of decisional accountability, where the communication or other professionals involved explain the choices they made during the planning and implementation process. The philosophy of flexible planning and constant evaluation matches this need for accountability, just as best practices described in this study.

5. *To what extent is the public actively involved in social media projects?*

Many organizations are aware of the danger of a one-way communication strategy when using social media. They therefore actively involve citizens in their online communication, for example by consulting them on topics related to cultural policy, or debating with them as described above under the heading Results. Some organizations remarked that they are surprised by the lively interaction with the public during the project,

whereas others included the creation of interaction as one of the objectives in advance.

The social media projects we studied demonstrated a variety of communication functions – often in combination – that can be a measure of interaction and involvement. Local governments *inform* the public about construction work, and the public responds by taking the initiative to *consult* local government on these and other issues. Or public consultation about government policy leads to the creation of networks whose members then consult one another and create new forms of collaboration. Discussions or debate between the government and individual citizens on certain issues can also help the government to provide the general public with more customized, targeted information. These aspects of communication and co-creation – information, consultation and discussion – may also be found in the co-creation model proposed by Bekkers & Meijer (2010). The underlying idea is the bilateral, equivalent role played by government and the public. It seems that the current use of social media by government at various levels is making it possible to approach this ideal role more closely. The flexibility discussed above implies active listening, which is also illustrated by the way government collects input and integrates it into its communication strategy. Citizens are consulted actively, and municipalities are constantly giving them feedback, for instance on planning issues and the next steps to be taken in a given planning process, and the relevance of the public contribution to the debate.

In conclusion, we may say that in order to live happily ever after in the world of social media, government will have to bear in mind that the use of social media is about (1) reciprocality and interactivity, (2) flexibility and adaptability, (3) openness and transparency, and (4) active anticipation of the changing needs of the social environment. Organizations seem to be aware of the pitfalls: the lack of strategy and social media policy, one-way communication and long-term impact. They are trying to avoid these by structurally integrating social media into their communication and marketing strategy, actively getting and staying connected with the public, getting to know target groups (defined by various social measures) better and constantly consulting and informing them before, during and after any given project.

It may be useful to investigate the extent to which the public is involved in government social media projects at a deeper level in future research. Such studies might be structured in accordance with the policy phases described by Frissen (2008): agenda-setting, outlining policy, services, enforcement and surveillance. Furthermore, organizations have indicated several challenges they are facing in connection with the effectiveness of social media and their optimization. One of these concerns the effort involved in active participation: What will eventually be done with created content and how can this be embedded structurally? An additional challenge for organizations involves methods for providing continued added value to created content, participation and interaction – for instance when the project comes to an end. What are the preconditions for durably maintaining the networks and content that have been created?

Another issue is the sustainability of social media. Organizations find it important to get rid of the hype at a

certain point, but to keep on innovating and anticipating. Constant evaluation, learning from best practice, preconditions and restrictions in the public domain can contribute to this development. We hope that the present study has made a useful contribution to this learning process.

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