



What makes local governments' online communications successful? Insights from a multi-method analysis of Facebook

Sara Hofmann*, Daniel Beverungen, Michael Räckers, Jörg Becker

University of Münster — European Research Center for Information Systems (ERCIS), Germany

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how public sector organisations capitalise on the potential of social networking sites (SNSs) as communication channels. Previous research is short on theoretical models and managerial insights into the success of local governments' online communication strategies. The purpose of this study is to explore how successfully local governments utilise SNSs for managing their external communication with citizens. Using a multi-method analysis of 15,941 posts and 19,290 comments on the Facebook pages of the 25 largest German cities, we make five contributions to research and practice. First, we analyse the properties and topics of government posts to draw a rich picture of how local governments use Facebook as a communications channel. Second, we conceptualise success in governments' online communications in terms of the frequency and polarity of citizens' reactions, which we use for third, evaluating government communication behaviour in SNSs. Fourth, we identify which benefits SNSs offer that traditional communication channels do not provide. Fifth, we offer guidelines for improving the online communication strategies of local governments using SNSs.

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1. Introduction

Social networking sites, a subgroup of social media, have become an integral part of everyday life as a means of communicating with 'friends' or potential customers (Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Although most SNSs were initially developed for the purpose of social exchange between private persons (e.g., Facebook was developed to connect students on a single campus), their focus has broadened as companies have recognised the potential benefit that SNSs offer. SNSs (like social media in general) provide a platform for advertising brands (The Social Break-up, 2011), and companies can make use of the 'capability of the masses' by encouraging online social network users to participate in the value-creation process of the company through such efforts as co-creation and mass customisation.

The benefits to be gained from utilising SNSs are not limited to private-sector organisations but extend to governments as well. Since government communications often suffer from a high 'distance' from citizens, one important benefit can be establishing closer interactions with stakeholders (Fisher Liu & Horsley, 2007). Unlike offline communication channels, SNSs offer the opportunity to interact directly with the public, but previous studies suggest that governments do

not make comprehensive use of this potential (Hofmann, Räckers, Beverungen, & Becker, 2013).

For communication to be successful, it is important not only that governments communicate with citizens, but also how they communicate and, in particular, how the citizens perceive the communication. Therefore, communicating in SNSs does not guarantee successful communication, a point previous research has emphasised in stating that traditional 'offline' communication cannot be transferred directly to social media communication since interaction in social media is subject to certain patterns (Lee & Lee Elser, 2010). Since our study seeks to determine what makes government communication in SNSs successful, the question guiding our research is: what kind of government communication behaviour is successful in social networking sites?

To answer this question, we (a) analyse how local governments use social networking sites to communicate with their citizens and (b) evaluate this communication behaviour with the help of (c) a structure that we introduce to conceptualise successful government communication in social networking sites. Based on these findings, we (d) make suggestions regarding how governments can use social networking sites to communicate successfully and (e) identify benefits of SNSs that other channels of communication cannot provide.

We collect and analyse sample data from the Facebook pages of the 25 largest German cities. In doing so, we first operationalise communication behaviour by analysing the government posts' properties (e.g., whether pictures, videos, or URLs are included) and the topic of the posts. Then we conceptualise communication success in terms of how much activity a post evokes from the citizens in terms of the number and polarity of the reactions to it.

* Corresponding author at: European Research Center for Information Systems, Leonardo-Campus 3, 48149 Münster, Germany, fax: +492518328070.

E-mail addresses: sara.hofmann@ercis.uni-muenster.de (S. Hofmann), daniel.beverungen@ercis.uni-muenster.de (D. Beverungen), michael.raeckers@ercis.uni-muenster.de (M. Räckers), becker@ercis.uni-muenster.de (J. Becker).

The article is structured as follows. In [Section 2](#), we discuss common deficiencies in traditional government communication, review the status quo of research on governments' use of SNSs, and define the potential benefits of government communication in SNSs and measures of communication success. Our research method, documented in [Section 3](#), includes inductive and deductive content analysis, which we use to categorise the topics and the properties of the Facebook posts, and sentiment analysis for assessing the polarity of the posts and comments. In [Section 4](#), we describe our raw data, and [Section 5](#) presents our results. In [Section 6](#) we discuss our findings, present a research agenda, and offer recommendations for successful government communications in SNSs. Finally, in [Section 7](#) we give a conclusion of our research.

2. Related work on government communications on social networking sites

2.1. Deficiencies in traditional government communications

One fundamental responsibility of governments is to provide information to the public, that is, to communicate with stakeholders. However, many governments lack the capability to communicate with other governmental organisations and the public effectively ([Fisher Liu & Horsley, 2007](#)). Because of low budgets, public-sector organisations often accord a comparatively low priority to external communications. As a result, the information on government activities is mainly published as mediated communication through mass media like television, radio, or newspapers, without involving public-sector organisations ([Towner & Dulio, 2011](#)), which does not facilitate direct feedback between the government and the public. These deficiencies can lead to the public's regarding of government communication as little more than propaganda ([Fisher Liu & Horsley, 2007](#)). The poor reputation of government communication can be attributed in part to the traditional use of one-way, 'offline' mass communication channels, which do not facilitate appreciable public feedback and which impede productive dialogue between the public and its government.

2.2. Government communication on social networking sites

Most public bodies have launched their own websites, a comparatively static form of communication, as platforms on which to provide information to the public ([West, 2004](#)), but web 2.0 platforms offer a broader range of interactive features to inform the public about government's activities ([Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010](#)). The emergence of SNSs, such as Facebook, with its one billion active users ([Facebook, 2012](#)), enables governments to contact the public "where the people are" ([Garvin, 2008](#)).

Governments have just begun to explore the benefits offered by social media. As early as in 2008, the United Nations' e-government survey emphasised the role of 'Government 2.0' in effective two-way communication between public bodies and the citizenry ([United Nations, 2008](#)). Facebook pages enable governments to provide information about their services, just as traditional websites do ([Garvin, 2008](#)), but governments can also reach a broader audience than they can with a traditional online presence since many citizens are active Facebook members ([Chun & Warner, 2010](#)).

Research on government communication in SNSs and social media in general is limited at best. Most studies focus on particular application areas and refer to communication only peripherally. [Brainard and McNutt \(2010\)](#) analyse the structure of the discussion between the police in Washington, D.C., and the public in online discussions forums and classify the interactions as informational, transactional, or collaborative, finding that most of the content is informational, although the platform allows more transactional and collaborative interactions. These findings suggest that communication between government and citizens has

shifted to new communication channels but has retained its traditional form without exploiting the advantages of these new channels.

Another field of application for governments' use of social media is open government, which aims at improving transparency, participation, and collaboration ([Executive Office of the President, 2009](#)), and [Lee and Kwak \(2012\)](#) develop a maturity model that assesses open government campaigns in social media. Besides providing government information, social media in general are suitable platforms for e-participation, for presenting and discussing political issues, and for a "corporate dialog" with the public ([Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012, p. 123](#)).

Previous research often suggests that governments' use of social media in general and SNSs in particular has various benefits for both governments and the public. However, exploiting these advantages is linked with several challenges that have been insufficiently addressed. First, governments need to rethink their role, as their traditional understanding of themselves as information and service providers ([Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2012](#)) no longer fits the paradigms of the new media, and they need to professionalise their behaviour in social media ([Mergel, 2012](#)). Second, laws need to be adjusted to fit the challenges of social media, including privacy and data security issues ([John Carlo Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012](#)). Third, governments need to establish policies on how to deal with citizens' online behaviour; since user-generated content published on social media can be unstructured in terms of both appearance and relevance, governments need a way to identify useful information ([Chun & Warner, 2010](#)).

2.3. Potential benefits of social networking sites for government communication

Social media is "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61](#)). Types of social media include "collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds" ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60](#)). SNSs offer various features that organisations can use to enrich the structure and appearance of their external communications, including setting up public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, articulating ties with other users, and viewing and traversing their list of connections and those made by others ([Boyd & Ellison, 2007](#)). Research has identified these features with a focus on the private sector (e.g. in [Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#)), so we build on [Hofmann et al. \(2013\)](#) to review these properties in terms of their applicability to the public sector.

2.3.1. Up-to-date provision of information

SNSs are almost real-time communication channels ([Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010](#)) that governments can take advantage of by providing current information, such as news on upcoming events ([Jaeger & Bertot, 2010](#)). Such a capability is especially important in emergency situations like natural disasters or disease outbreaks. For instance, the Australian authorities in Queensland and Victoria successfully used Facebook to manage information during the 2010/11 floods ([Bird, Ling, & Haynes, 2012](#)). This capability also allows governments to comment directly on external reports about their affairs and to answer citizens' requests in a timely manner.

2.3.2. Marketing

In 2010, companies spent about \$62 billion on advertisements on SNSs ([Gregurec, Vranesovic, & Dobrinic, 2011](#)), which shows the growing importance of social media as a marketing channel. Fifty-one per cent of users state that they are more likely to buy a product after becoming a Facebook fan of the respective brand. Although governments do not sell products and services like companies do, they can still 'advertise' their services and contributions and make it easier for citizens to access those services.

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