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Reusing social media information in government☆

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ABSTRACT

Across policy domains, government agencies evaluate social media content produced by third parties, identify valuable information, and at times reuse information to inform the public. This has the potential to permit a diversity of social media users to be heard in the resulting information networks, but to what extent are agencies relying on private citizens or others outside of the policy domain for message content? In order to examine that question, we analyze the online practices of state-level government agencies. Findings demonstrate that agencies emulate offline content reuse strategies by relying predominately on trusted institutional sources rather than new voices, such as private citizens. Those institutional sources predominantly include other government agencies and nonprofit organizations, and their messages focus mostly on informing and educating the public.

1. Introduction

Government agencies increasingly monitor, analyze, and interpret social media content produced by other users to understand the public's mood (Zavattaro, French, & Mohanty, 2015), gain insights from other users (Sutton et al., 2013), and monitor the reach of government-curated content. Some of that social media content is then reused and reshared with the public (Mergel, 2013a). This latter practice is important because resharing is oftentimes seen as a tacit endorsement of an online actor and a confirmation of the trustworthiness of its content, which potentially raises the profile of the account from which information is shared. It also has implications on the diversity of actors and ideas in circulation and on who is considered to be relevant within these virtual conversations (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2012; Sutton, League, Sellnow, & Sellnow, 2015).

The existing literature on social media use offers scant evidence, however, regarding what types of accounts and what types of message content government agencies reshare with their followers. This gap is relevant to broader research on social media's effects on public participation and interagency collaboration. On the one hand, research demonstrates that certain government agencies have incorporated tactics to engage citizens (Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Linders, 2012) as well as other agencies (Sutton et al., 2013). On the other hand, some research highlights the propensity of many agencies to repurpose offline practices that are not inclusive of online actors with potentially relevant information (Bryer & Nelson, 2013; Mergel, 2012; Reddick & Norris, 2013).

Resharing content represents one interactive tactic and warrants attention. This article examines what social media sources government agencies decide to share, asking whether these actors are new voices such as private citizens and organizations not normally engaged in the policy domain or whether they are established actors (e.g., other institutions engaged in the policy domain). In order to understand the online practices of government agencies, we chose a specific subset of public managers—emergency managers in all U.S. states who are working in incident-driven environments and who have to constantly rely on external information. Findings demonstrate that agencies emulate offline content curating strategies by selecting predominately trusted institutional sources rather than new voices. Yet at the same time those selected institutions represent a cross section of agencies working in the policy domain and provide critical pieces of information that if acted upon could empower the public to coproduce household and community safety.

2. Social media practices in the public sector

Social media platforms such as the microblogging service Twitter facilitate information exchange across a broad array of users (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2012; Southwell, 2013). Government agencies can use those tools to promote public participation and interagency collaboration; however, their practices differ widely and range from those inclusive of new voices to simple adaptations of offline behavior that fail to generate meaningful interaction with others (Mergel, 2012).

Some government agencies implement purposefully inclusive tactics (Linders, 2012; Meijer & Thaens, 2013), especially agencies such

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as NASA with their fan-based approach to engage diverse audiences in the space sciences or the U.S. Department of Interior with their positive messages about public lands and the emotional appeal of their Instagram photographs. Furthermore, through social media, some government agencies employ crowdsourcing where an institution "proposes to a group of individuals of varying knowledge, heterogeneity, and number, via a flexible open call, the voluntary undertaking of a task" (see Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladrón-de-Guevara, 2012, p. 197). These tasks can be related to solving specific problems and/or coproducing a specific good or service (Brabham, 2013). Mergel and DeSouza (2013), for example, detailed how some federal managers in the U.S. employed social media to promote open innovation initiatives. Meijer (2011) pointed out how social media platforms in the Netherlands facilitated coproduction by allowing for citizens to provide experiential information and social emotional support to others.

Not all government agencies implement inclusive strategies, however. Mergel (2012) found that instead of interacting with constituents, many agencies in the U.S. federal government repurposed existing press release content and relied on preexisting routines in the form of one-way communication strategies. Reddick and Norris (2013) as well as Bryer and Nelson (2013) demonstrated that local government agencies were not necessarily social via social media either; that is, they did not seek to engage the public in two-way conversations but rather posted one-way message content.

March (1991) theorized that public-sector personnel regularly weigh the costs of exploring and implementing new ideas against the certainty of maintaining existing standard operating procedures. Indeed, this tension between exploration and exploitation is present in public administration and has manifested in the past during the implementation of various types of information and communication technologies (Fountain, 2001; Norris & Reddick, 2013). Understanding the extent to which agencies implement new ideas as opposed to repurposing existing strategies contributes to our knowledge of social media adoption and use. To differentiate sources of information, we must first, though, identify which sources government personnel consider to be established and trusted and which are considered to be new voices.

3. Traditional Information sources and patterns of exchange

Traditional bureaucratic patterns of information exchange in public administration have long been criticized for their fragmented structures in which information is restricted to a few select actors (Churchman, 1968; Fountain, 2001; Roberts, 2011). This problem is particularly germane to emergency management because risk and disasters affect a range of people, organizations, and jurisdictions, and, therefore, requires information from disparate actors in order to meet the public's needs (Comfort, 2005; Kapucu, 2006).

As a profession, emergency managers have consequently promoted the importance of not just relying on each other for information; they also draw from a variety of other sources. Comfort (2005) illustrated a communication infrastructure in emergency management in which multiple organizations including utility companies, public safety departments, and others contribute information to a central command center, particularly during large-scale incidents. Other sources important to practitioners include meteorologists and seismologists who offer alerts and warnings (Mileti, 1999), engineers and planners (Knowles, 2012) who develop evidence-based mitigation strategies, and psychologists and sociologists who illuminate the tendencies of individuals during extreme events (McEntire, 2007). There are consequently an array of information providers that are considered to be trusted sources for government emergency managers.

Public information officers are asked to use those information sources to develop their agency's external message strategies. Their desired outcome is to create and maintain an accurate set of messages that leads to more informed and effective decision-making by other individuals and organizations (Comfort, 2007; Kapucu, 2006; Haddow & Haddow, 2014). Public information officers have been trained to carefully vet information before they pass it along to the public (Hughes & Palen, 2012). Inaccurate information (e.g., underestimating the impact of a storm, disseminating incorrect evacuation routes, or promulgating reports regarding incidents that have not actually occurred) can lead people to make suboptimal risk reduction decisions (Lindell & Perry, 2012). Consequently, emergency managers must be careful not to propagate unsubstantiated rumors and information.

Still, public information officers and other personnel have the responsibility to assess and communicate vital pieces of information. Organizations in the field may or may not be in communication with each other (Robinson, Eller, Gall, & Gerber, 2013) or with members of their own organizations (Butts, Petrescu-Prahova, & Cross, 2007); they may or may not have access to the intelligence created by those coordinating the emergency operations center (Comfort, 2005; Kapucu, 2006). This creates the problem of information asymmetry in which valuable information exists but is unavailable to all those who need it (Comfort, 2007). To solve this problem, Comfort (2005, 2007) and others (Kapucu, 2006; Hu & Kapucu, 2014; Mendonça, 2007) have advocated for expanded access to information and communication technologies. Reddick (2011) reported that most state emergency managers considered both Internet-based and wireless based technologies to be effective. What those designs do not necessarily account for, however, is access for citizens, emergent groups, and organizations outside of the policy domain. Citizens have traditionally contributed information formally through 911 call centers and a structured interview protocol that creates a record of interaction with other agencies. However, their access to the resulting intelligence is relegated by intermediaries such as the traditional news media or the formal press-release style information sharing model of government agencies (Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001). The emergence of social media channels such as Twitter or Facebook, however, offers a means to expand communication and interaction with those actors (Hughes, St. Denis, Palen, & Anderson, 2014; St. Denis, Hughes, & Palen, 2012).

4. Social media and emergency management

Many emergency management agencies use social media to send out information during all phases of the emergency management cycle (e.g., prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery) (Wukich & Mergel, 2015). This practice was established by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as part of their whole community approach to use social media as a linking mechanism to enable a two-way dialog between government personnel and the people served (Fugate, 2011). So far, however, empirical evidence shows that government actors' practice is to simply disseminate information and less frequently interact with citizens to advance dialog, diffuse rumors, and/or respond to direct requests (Hughes et al., 2014; Wukich & Mergel, 2015). Furthermore, Su, Wardell, and Thorkildsen (2013) reported that most state emergency management agencies fail to systemically monitor citizen information and thereby miss the opportunity to use citizens' knowledge who are considered by FEMA to be the 'first-first responders' and possess first-hand information from their observations of an incident. Consequently, government agencies fail to achieve significant levels of public participation, a frequently espoused goal during the adoption of social media programs (Bryer & Nelson, 2013; Mergel, 2012). Notable exceptions include certain large-scale response operations in which responders directly engaged with constituents (Chatfield, Scholl, & Brajawidagda, 2013; St. Denis et al., 2012) and the U.S. Geological Survey's "Did You Feel It?" campaign that elicits feedback following seismic activity (Atkinson & Wald, 2007).

An important problem experienced by emergency managers is that much of the information posted on social media is erroneous (Hughes & Palen, 2012; Starbird, Maddock, Orand, Achterman, & Mason, 2014). Unlike traditional communication systems such as 911, social media