



Social media monitoring: Responsive governance in the shadow of surveillance?

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ABSTRACT

Social media monitoring is gradually becoming a common practice in public organizations in the Netherlands. The main purposes of social media monitoring are strategic control and responsiveness. Social media monitoring poses normative questions in terms of transparency, accountability and privacy. We investigate practices of social media monitoring in four Dutch public organizations. Policy departments seem to be more strongly orientated towards monitoring, whereas organizations involved in policy implementation seem to be more inclined to progress to webcare. The paper argues for more transparency on social media monitoring.

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1. Introduction

Social media are rapidly penetrating the modern information society. This new generation of applications emphasizes the importance of user-participation, content-sharing, and network effects (e.g., O'Reilly, 2007). They facilitate a scale shift that makes the organization of collective action, with large numbers of participants, more efficient (Chadwick, 2009). The political potential of social media poses several challenges for public organizations. Strategic surprises may emerge from the rapid expansion of issues and ad hoc synchronization of messages in web-based protest politics (Bekkers, Edwards, Moody, & Beunders, 2011; Shirky, 2011).

Public organizations may perceive a need for strategies to cope with these surprises. These strategies include monitoring citizens' communication and content-sharing on social media (cf. Sobkowitz, Kaschesky, & Bouchard, 2012). This paper addresses the practice of web monitoring or, more specifically, social media monitoring by public organizations in the context of Western democracies. Social media monitoring is "the continuous systematic observation and analysis of social media networks and social communities" (Fensel, Leiter, & Stavrakantonakis, 2012). In the Netherlands, social media monitoring is gradually becoming a common practice in public organizations, especially in national departments and autonomous agencies.

In terms of public values, social media monitoring entails some tensions. On the one hand, it can facilitate the tuning of policies to citizens' needs and demands, and this may result in more responsiveness. On the other hand, social media monitoring involves communication between ordinary citizens in virtual domains that they may perceive as private. This poses ethical questions, especially when the monitoring agency is not transparent regarding its monitoring activities vis-à-vis social

media users. Our central research question is how public organizations use social media monitoring, for what purposes, and how they deal with aspects regarding responsiveness, privacy, and transparency. This paper aims to contribute to the intended scope of the special issue by highlighting government use of information from social media applications, how governmental agencies use these data from citizens to improve public policies, as well as how various goals and normative principles are involved in this. The empirical part of the paper addresses emerging practices of social media monitoring in four national public organizations in the Netherlands. Section 2 introduces web monitoring and social media monitoring, indicating the origins of these practices in the private sector. Section 3 presents three theoretical approaches to social media monitoring and introduces a normative framework for evaluating social media monitoring. Section 4 presents the research strategy and the analytical framework. Section 5 analyzes the four selected cases. Section 6 concludes and provides further reflections on this new phenomenon of social media monitoring by public organizations.

2. Web monitoring and social media monitoring

Monitoring activities have become a strong tradition within the public sector (Bouckaert, de Peuter, & van Dooren, 2003; de Kool, 2007, 2008). Traditional monitoring involves signaling relevant developments in the physical environment, for example in the domains of safety, education, and environmental policies. The rapid increase in the internet and social media usage by citizens, security threats, and the possibility of strategic surprises have induced governments to develop various online monitoring strategies and tools. These include tools for tracking movements and transactions, intercepting communications, and reading and interpreting data (Bannister, 2005). Tools to access and follow relevant communications on social media are a new development (Sutton, 2009). A distinction can be made between web monitoring and webcare. Web monitoring can be, but is not necessarily, the first phase of webcare, which includes online communication with customers

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or citizens. In reactive webcare, messages are sent in a situation of two-way or dialogical communication, in which participating citizens may expect the organization to react to their individual comments. In proactive webcare, messages are sent unsolicitedly (van Noort & Willemsen, 2011).

Various software tools are available for social media monitoring. Methodologically, social media monitoring can be performed in two different ways. One way is to feed the software program with a string of keywords, thus producing an overview of the instances of online communication and their locations (forums, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, etc.) in which these keywords are used. The other way is to steer the program towards a specific set of discussion forums and social networking sites, and to search them for a number of keywords. In the second case in particular, permanent monitoring of online forums during a certain period of time may occur. Unlike traditional monitoring, social media monitoring is real time and continuously preoccupied with relevant issues throughout the year. Information with regard to urgent issues with a potentially significant impact will require immediate action. Other relevant, but less urgent, information can be more gradually incorporated into policies.

Social media monitoring has its origins in the private sector. Most publications about these practices and tools are handbooks for companies (e.g., Croll & Power, 2009; Sen, 2011; Steimel, Halemba, & Dimitrova, 2010). Broadly speaking, these practices are aimed at strategic marketing and reputation management. Companies use social media monitoring for purposes relating to market research and early warning, trend scouting, and consumer feedback (Croll & Power, 2009; Steimel et al., 2010).

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Three approaches to social media monitoring

Monitoring is often approached as a rational instrument for gathering information. However, a rational-instrumental approach is too narrow with respect to understanding the complex character of monitoring and the policy processes in which it is embedded. A multiple perspective approach offers a better understanding of monitoring than a single rational perspective. For this reason, we make a distinction between three approaches to social media monitoring, namely, a rational-instrumental, a political-strategic, and a communicative approach. These approaches, derived from Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1981/1984), are analytically distinct in that they start from different premises about the relationship between the monitoring organization and the monitored subjects. However, the motives and actions of a monitoring organization can exhibit features of more than one approach. The approaches characterize types of organizational practices, but they do not exclude one another at the level of an organization.

3.1.1. Rational-instrumental approach

Rational-instrumental action aims at realizing pre-given goals on the basis of (1) information about the status-quo in the environment and (2) nomological knowledge about effective interventions. This means that social media monitoring is primarily conceived of as a means to find out what is going on in the virtual world in order to intervene in this environment with communication that can be expected to be successful in accomplishing certain policy goals. Monitoring is associated with the strong notion 'to measure is to know' (van Gunsteren, 1976).

The main advantage of social media monitoring within this approach is that it can be a useful tool to identify relevant trends in society, for example opinions of citizens and target groups about specific policy issues. More specifically, social media monitoring can be a promising tool to ascertain new developments in the virtual world. Early warning and dealing with new challenges are important elements of strategic issue management (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Furthermore, social media monitoring, if embedded in webcare, can be used to correct false, incomplete, or

misperceived statements of citizens on social media. The quest for more responsiveness is in this approach a top-down process aimed at fine-tuning policies within the existing policy framework.

Within the rational-instrumental approach, social media monitoring also faces several risks. First, the reliability and quality of information shared in social media can be doubtful (Beer & Burrows, 2007). Generally speaking, there is a strong perception that an overwhelming amount of irrelevant 'noise' and 'chatter' flows through social media outlets (Carr, 2005; Sutton, 2009). Furthermore, social media can distribute and enlarge news very quickly, potentially leading to lots of attention on incidents and misconceptions of the day. Third, it is often unclear whether the participants in social media are representative of a larger group. It is a real challenge to select and interpret the relevant and representative signals from the mass of online interactions. An important risk of social media monitoring is that it can result in information overload, which can result in a 'paradox of choices,' in which one cannot see the wood for the trees (Schwartz, 2004). For all these reasons, social media monitoring can entail an overestimation of the signaling power of public sector organizations.

3.1.2. Political-strategic approach

In strategic action, the actor acknowledges the presence of other actors in the environment who have their own goals and action plans. The success of strategic action depends on (1) knowledge about the goals and power resources of other relevant players, (2) a calculation of their action alternatives, and (3) a calculation of the appropriate action alternatives in one's own hands. In the political-strategic approach, information is seen as a source and object of power (Pfeffer, 1992). Information generated by social media monitoring can be used by government agencies to serve their policy goals and organizational interests, for example to find out what is being said about the agency and its policies. In this way, social media monitoring and webcare can contribute to online reputation management. Through webcare, government agencies can try to mitigate (potential) resistance against a policy measure by influencing citizens' points of view in certain directions. In this context, one can speak about 'strategic communication'.

However, online interactions with citizens and clients are politically risky. Statements or messages on social media sent by public organizations can be wrong, misperceived, or unwelcomed by citizens, thereby harming the public organizations' reputation. Specific conditions pertaining to the character of public organizations also constrain the use of webcare for strategic communication. Government organizations face some formal restrictions and regulations in their interactions with citizens because in representative democracies they have to consider the primacy of politics. Political decision makers function within a highly politicized environment. Public servants always have to ensure that their statements are consistent with the policies endorsed by the political decision makers.

3.1.3. Communicative approach

In communicative action, two or more actors aim to coordinate their individual action plans on the basis of a shared definition of the situation. Actors try to reach consensus, at least partially, about the interpretation of a problem, on the basis of a shared stock of knowledge. Within this approach, social media monitoring is embedded in the broader process of webcare, if this is aimed at a co-production of policies (Linders, 2012) on the basis of a shared problem definition. The first stage involves gathering information about citizens' perceptions, grievances, and demands, and getting feedback about policies that are being developed or implemented. In the second stage, government organizations react to, and interact by organizing 'collective intelligence' (Surowiecki, 2004). This can result in new ideas and lead to policies that are better attuned to the problems experienced on the 'work floor' of public policies and in the life world of citizens.

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