

Social Media Use by Frontline Government Agencies: Review and Recommendations

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Abstract

This paper reports on three case studies conducted to systematically examine how frontline government social services use social media and how their practices might be improved to optimize engagement with the public to serve agency goals, and to investigate the organizational setting around social media management within the agencies. The three cases involve the Department of Education (DepEd), the Department of Health (DOH), and the Home Mutual Development Fund (HMDF). The results indicate that there is a wide variety of approaches to social media, from a closed and outsourced system where materials posted go through layers of high-level approval to open and internal systems with greater autonomy in content development. Social media are now considered necessary parts of communication strategies, but how each agency adopts them tends to differ. Considering that these are official government social media accounts, there is a very high level of engagement with audiences for some of the agencies. The paper then makes recommendations on policies, on organizational arrangements, and on integration into broad overall digital and communication strategies of frontline government agencies.¹

Keywords: social media, Facebook, government communication, public communication

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Communication plays an important role in governance, and its strategic use can service the goals of different kinds of government agencies and offices. In particular, communication between agencies and their clients or constituents is necessary to fulfill various purposes. Offices need to inform and engage their constituents, who in turn need to have a way to bring their concerns to offices. Depending on the function of an agency, the extent of public engagement through communication varies, but every agency in government requires communication activities.

Almost all government agencies have communication offices that take charge of both internal and external communication functions. The functions normally include press or media relations, public relations, information dissemination, and corporate or organizational communication. Social media, as it has grown in importance, is now included among these functions.

Government agencies used to communicate with their public either directly through social service delivery or in a completely mediated manner through the press. The growth of social media use among Filipinos has provided a new way of communicating with relevant publics, a direct manner that is able to broadcast messages to large, connected, and networked audiences. Through the use of the two most popular social media applications in the country (Facebook and Twitter), government agencies are now able to bring messages to large numbers of people online without having these messages reframed and filtered by media organizations (Shirky 2010). At the same time, the interactive and networked nature of social communication online means that information flows both ways—publics communicate with institutions as well (Murthy 2013).

This paper reports on three case studies conducted to systematically examine how frontline government social services use social media and how their practices might be improved to optimize engagement with the public to serve agency goals, and to investigate the organizational setting around social media management within the agencies. The three cases involve the Department of Education (DepEd), the Department of Health (DOH), and the Home Mutual Development Fund (HMDF).

The assessment operates within a set of normative assumptions. First, that communicating with the public either directly or indirectly is necessary for good democratic governance, and that more communication is always better. Second, that citizen engagement with state institutions provide enabling environments for effective and efficient government. And finally,

that open government and open data are positive values that support goals of transparency and accountability. Taken together, these mean that institutions of government should be communicating with the public often, openly, and in an interactive manner.

What is Social Media and What are Its Possibilities for Government?

Social media are platforms for communication. They are channels through which individuals self-organize into communities. The platform allows people in a shared network to interact, share content, and collaborate online. There are different popular platforms, foremost of which are Facebook (FB), Twitter, and Instagram. Examples of more specialized ones are LinkedIn for professional networking, Snapchat for sharing photos, and blogs.

Even with a relatively low rate of Internet access (estimated at 43 percent²), the vast majority of Filipinos that do access it are on social media. A large portion of Internet users is on Facebook (latest estimate 94 percent), and a much smaller portion is on Twitter. The Philippines is among the top 15 countries with the highest Facebook penetration rates in the world (Naidu 2013). Market innovations and the spread of smartphones have driven down the cost and broken down barriers to FB use. According to FB, there are 50 million Filipinos on the platform in the country. One of the major mobile phone carriers offers free FB access without data charges, allowing users to browse content on their news feeds multiple times a day. This means that a Filipino with a smartphone can access FB for free but cannot visit an official website or text (via SMS) a government office without charges. As the prices of smartphones continue to decline, there is reason to expect even broader social media use over the long run.

Although there are many different social media platforms, this study examines the use of only two of the main ones, Facebook and Twitter. And between the two, Facebook is considered much more important because of its massive reach. Twitter, by way of individual reach, is not big in the country, but it is heavily used by reporters, editors, and bloggers. It provides agencies a good way to get their messages to the rest of traditional media.

Why is Social Media Different?

Social media has a number of features that distinguishes it from other channels of communication. Information posted on social media reaches a

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broad audience without the mediation provided by reporters and editors of the traditional media. In this way social media posts provide greater control over the messaging and narrative of all content and communication of an agency.

It does many-to-many communication instead of the usual one-to-many. That is, when an organization participates in the social media space, it is participating in a conversation and not in a broadcasting situation where the agency speaks and everybody else listens. Interactive platforms mean that when an agency posts, they get engagement from constituents in the form of comments, likes, and shares. Information flows both ways; the channel allows the agency to receive information from members of the public. Comments by the public on an agency's FB page are also publicly visible by default, which means that when a citizen posts criticism on the agency page it is visible to everyone.

Government communication in the age of networked society is much different compared to communication in the age of one-way information dissemination-type media. Figure 1a shows how communication worked before citizens were online (Shirky 2009). Government is the source of communication, and it sends information out to audiences, either directly to the public or through the press. There was little, if any, feedback mechanism that allowed government to be the recipient of information when it was the public that sought to communicate with agencies. Figure 1b depicts communication flows in a social media setting (Shirky 2009). Government is both the source and the audience. Facebook pages and Twitter accounts broadcast information directly to a larger public, including the press. Unlike traditional media, however, these platforms allow citizens to send messages directly to government agencies (Waters and Williams 2011). It is, therefore, up to the agencies to determine how they are going to treat direct comments and queries through social media sites, officially or unofficially, and with some thought to the implications regarding institutional rules of communicating with beneficiaries. For example, when a citizen stuck in traffic along Commonwealth Avenue on a Sunday morning wants to know what the reason for the traffic is, she can tweet @mmda directly. This message is public and can be seen both by the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) and everybody else on Twitter. The person manning @mmda can respond directly to the query or not, can choose to engage followers or to remain a broadcaster.

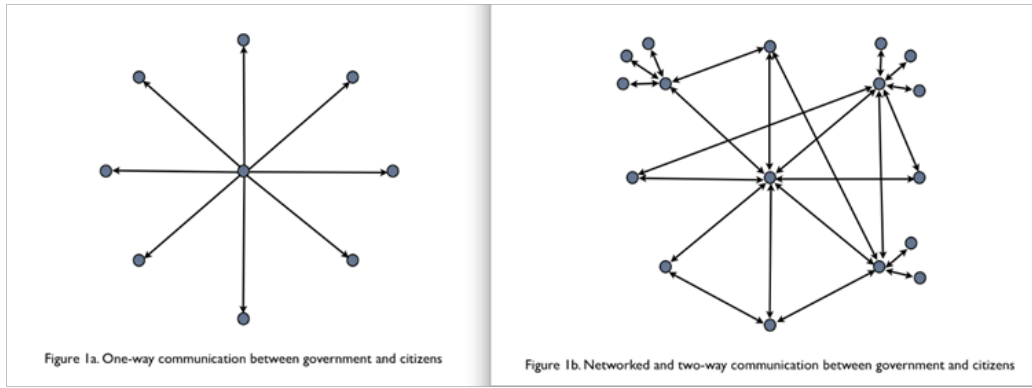


Figure 1. Types of communication flow between government and citizens

Often, the crowdsourcing potential of social media is overlooked by institutions that have a presence on social networking sites. Engaged followers are not only willing to ask questions they need answers to, but are also willing to provide information when asked. For example, the Department of Education once asked tweeters to send them photos of school building damage caused by Typhoon Glenda, and a number of people responded. This is important information that can aid in logistical planning for response. The theoretical framework we adopt in this study is cognizant of the various types of interaction and engagement that are practiced on social media to determine the appropriate policies for government institutions.

Communication practitioners operate from a framework of multiple audiences. Audiences are not homogenous sets of populations, but can be subdivided in meaningful groups that should be reached and engaged in a targeted manner. Different audiences will find different kinds of information interesting and useful, and each type of audience requires a different sort of engagement. It is similar to targeting different stakeholders, except that in this case the audiences are not only stakeholders; they include people who have a general interest in the subject and may not be directly affected by the activities of the agency. For government institutions, some of the important sub-audiences are: (1) issue publics, or especially interested members of the citizenry, (2) policy elites, (3) target beneficiaries in the population, (4) the press, (5) the general public, and (6) internal publics. This framework accommodates the varied nature of audiences and their role in agency engagement with citizens. It results in a policy that gives specific and useful guidance on how to design messages that maximize social media's impact on agency goals.

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This policy research investigates how social media activities are conducted within the organization and in the confines of the institutional constraints that typically accompany government activities. Any policy of social media should be cognizant of the impact of institutional arrangements on the freedom to publish information, the ability of the communication team to directly engage with audiences through social networking sites, and the overall interest in expanding public engagement with the agency.

While there are clear benefits for agencies to have a direct line of immediate and fast communication with its publics, there are limitations to its use and there are risks attendant to ease of adoption. Anybody with a computer and a laptop can open and run a social media feed for an institution, but the messages that will be relayed are limited in that these must be short yet self-contained. Messages lose contextual information that may be necessary to make sense of what is shared (Harlow and Johnson 2011). In addition, information via social media expires rapidly; it gets drowned out by millions of other messages that are being posted at the same time. How can attention be gained and sustained? What kinds of information can be officially released through social media? Who are allowed to speak on behalf of the institution and to what extent are these messages binding? Among the people manning social media accounts for government, to what extent are they able to fully address queries posted online? Online presence signals a readiness to respond in a fast manner, so presence in social media carries with it a public expectation of rapid response. Agencies must be prepared to provide this by having the appropriate team in place with sufficient manpower resources.

The Special Potential for Frontline Service Agencies

As with their other communication activities, frontline government agencies can use social media for many functions. They have important public information to disseminate regarding programs and policies. Social media are critical contact points for interfacing with constituent publics and stakeholders (Nitschke, Donges, and Schade 2014).

Fostering communication with the general public and with special interest groups *creates transparency*. When people see news about the activities of an agency, even when the information emanates from the institution itself for public relations purposes, there is greater awareness of the kind of work being done within the agency. The general public usually has a limited understanding of the work of many of the biggest and most important

agencies of the government, even those that deal directly with service delivery like the DepEd and the DOH. Any information about agencies is better than no information; left to the news media to report on the activities of agencies, very little information will trickle down to the public.

Social media allows agencies to broadcast, in a manner of speaking, any kind of message (Allen 1992; Jue, Marr, and Kassotakis 2010). This creates a sense of presence for constituents, making them aware that on a daily basis, work is being done in these institutions. As a consequence, a greater understanding of the scope of work of agencies will arm citizens with the necessary knowledge to find what they need when they are in need of services from an agency. For example, the MMDA has a strong social media presence; those on Twitter who are aware of this presence can directly query MMDA about traffic situations in specific streets and areas, and expect a response within a short period of time. By contrast, those who rely on the MMDA for traffic information only through radio reports cannot ask about specific streets and areas. The channel allows the agency to promote its work while at the same time expanding direct delivery of service through social media channels. All of these scenarios would also contribute to greater *trust in government institutions* assuming that the level of transparency perceived by publics accessing social media channels to converse with government agencies is high.

A social media strategy can and should incorporate a goal of *greater engagement with the public*. Some agencies maintain social media accounts only to send messages out, never to respond directly to comments by citizens. On the other hand, there are agencies that consider social media queries official inquiries that should be responded to with immediacy, as the channel demands a quick turnaround. The approach that an agency takes depends largely on the internal policy (or lack thereof) and the institutional structure surrounding social media management. These will be examined as important factors in assessing the effectiveness of the social media presence.

Government agencies also use social media to converse with the press. While traditionally, agencies would have structured communication through press conferences and press releases (Bennett 2004), or unstructured communication through interviews, the social media environment has created a new relationship with reporters and editors that is somewhere in between (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012). It provides the space to be pre-planned and yet is not as rigidly presented as a full press conference. The press is an important target audience for government agencies and officials, and reporters and editors are increasingly turning to social media to find sources

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of stories and official statements (Poell and Borra 2012). This sort of interaction is new, practices have not been institutionalized, and internal policies would help clarify the role that social media can play in *government-press relations*.

Inter and intra-agency communication can be enabled through social media channels (Franks 2010). This is evident during disasters when organizations like the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) cooperate with MMDA in determining damage assessments or status of flooding in the metro, all through communication on Twitter, either directly or through the press' Twitter accounts.

Since the mandates of line agencies involve public-facing service delivery, there should be a direct line of communication between agencies and citizens, allowing as well for a direct line of accountability. They have, or at least should have, closer relationships with citizens, and so most line agencies deal with large external publics or audiences. Many agencies have functioning social media accounts, but the nature of their use varies widely.

Table 1. Audience segments and potential social media functions

| | |
|--|--|
| Client-citizens | Channel for queries and feedback, source of information, dissemination of programs, rules, guidelines, forms, etc. |
| Internal audiences/ Corporate communication | Dissemination channel, source of information, creating culture of shared credit for work, building networks of practice, place to share best practices |
| General public and CSOs | Overall awareness of agency's work, functions, and mandate |
| Press/News organizations | Contact point for comment, official statements and positions, general monitoring for stories |
| Other agencies | Coordination and broad awareness of activities |

Table 1 illustrates the different ways in which social media can function for agencies in relation to the different audiences they usually deal with. In theory, agencies can take comments and feedback directly from beneficiaries and use social media as a channel for customer response or service delivery. Social media can be used to monitor the news environment so agencies can respond to fast-developing situations. The channels are, in fact, routinely used for disaster situations by different government agencies in a coordinated way. Social media can also be used generally to provide a venue of promotion for the institution's work and its image. A strong and constant presence gives citizens the impression that the agency is doing its work, is accomplished, and is responsive to the needs of its target publics.

The present research was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. How do frontline social service agencies use social media?
2. How might the practice of social media engagement with the public and the press improve to serve agency goals?
3. What is the organizational setting around social media management within agencies?
4. What are the ideal organizational arrangements for social media management to enable best use of the platform to assist in achieving agency objectives?

Method

This research into practices of line agencies was conducted through case studies, in-depth and comprehensive investigations of various aspects of different agencies' social media communication practice. Three cases were selected, each with a different approach to its social media but all of them with a significant presence on Facebook for at least three years.

A focus on frontline agencies is applied since these are the ones that must have strong ties with broad constituents and beneficiaries. They often interface with the public and should have existing relationships with large segments of the population. The nature of their work puts them in direct line of sight of important public issues that are the most critical points of contact and can be the most effectively served by social media strategies. The three cases examined are the Department of Education (DepEd), Department of Health (DOH), and the Home Development Mutual Fund (HDMF, more popularly known as Pag-Ibig fund).

These agencies are mandated to provide social services on a massive scale and, compared to others, they have immediate and direct contact with their constituents or clients. All three have active Facebook accounts and some have active Twitter accounts, although Twitter activity tends to be seasonal.

Each case investigation entailed the following specific information gathering activities: (1) interviews with communication staff, (2) interviews with staff responsible for creating content and posting on social media accounts, (3) observation and analysis of online activities of social media accounts, (4) documentary review of communication policies, (5) analysis of metrics of engagement and reach, and (6) analysis of institutional structures and support for social media use. Fieldwork and observation work was conducted between April and December 2015. Engagement metrics are the numbers of comments,

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shares, and likes of each post. In contrast to lower ones, higher values signal that the post is interesting enough to motivate people to engage with the content and spread its reach.

All three are social sector agencies and have direct dealings with the public. This section provides a brief background of the features of each agency that have a direct relevance to social media.

Department of Education (DepEd)

The DepEd oversees a massive institution comprised of over 47,000 public schools, over half a million public school teachers, and layers of division, regional, and central offices. In an average year, around 20 million students are enrolled in public schools at both the elementary and high school levels. Its structure is centralized, meaning all schools report directly to and are funded through the central office. As such, DepEd has a direct line of communication to all public school principals, staff, and teachers.

DepEd has a large internal public that figures into its social media strategy. Their internal publics include all employees, offices, and sub-national organizations that work directly with the agency in various capacities. Schools are not all wired but many are connected to the Internet and active on social media. Subnational offices and internal interest groups (for example, division-level disaster coordinators) create FB groups and accounts, small communities where functions and interests are shared. These pages are used to organize and announce events, share experiences, post information, and maintain networks. The internal publics are very loosely organized and many are transient, characterized by high levels of activity in the beginning and then tapering off after some time. Still, the groups sometimes have intermittent functions.

The external public is very large for DepEd and includes students, parents, and broader communities (e.g., LGUs, NGOs, the private sector). However, the information needs of each set are generally low because their relationship with schools is straightforward and the highly localized presence of schools and division offices means external publics have direct access. There are information needs that are regular and scheduled (e.g., requirements and dates for enrollment, events, graduation), and there are information needs that are unanticipated (e.g., *walang pasok* advisories for school closures).

In addition to the external public to whom service is directly supplied, there are “political” external publics who have a broader interest in the DepEd

as a government institution. The main mediator of this public is the press, specifically reporters and editors tasked to cover the education beat. There are seasonal news cycles when the DepEd gains much attention—the start of every school year, and, on a more unscheduled basis, when there are developments for large reform measures (e.g., K-12).

DepEd has strong relationships with other agencies, such as the DOH, National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), because it is involved in programs and actions that require access through schools. In many ways it functions as an information hub between these agencies and the public in some cases—for example, for mass vaccination initiatives through schools, large natural hazard events, and national programs.

Pag-Ibig

The service of Pag-Ibig is to provide individual loans toward home ownership. Its audiences are more specific, but the products and information are more complex. It is not a large bureaucratic institution like health and education, but provides housing support on a frontline basis and is the only housing office that deals directly with the public.

Pag-Ibig's internal audience is small and very controlled. It does not have city or municipal-level offices. Since its products are confined to housing loans, it does not have close working relationships with agencies outside of the key housing offices.

Its external audience, while smaller and more specialized than that of DOH and DepEd, is highly involved. Since the product and the audience are both specific, information exchange and efficiency of that exchange are critical to effective service delivery. A cursory examination of the Pag-Ibig FB page reveals that people interested in taking out loans ask direct questions about requirements and loan products. This is not the behavior of audiences for the other agencies where the nature of information exchange is more homogenous and less specialized.

Department of Health

The DOH is a devolved agency and does not have direct reporting relationships with the smallest health service units in local areas, the barangay health centers. Since its service delivery functions were transferred to local

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government units (LGUs), the DOH central office's function shifted toward policy-setting, response to epidemics and other health hazards, overall monitoring, and provision of social health insurance, among others.

The internal audiences remain large, but the nature of their relationship with these audiences is different compared to the DepEd. While municipal or barangay health workers do not report to the DOH, their actions and programs are directly affected by decisions made by the DOH. Thus, there should be some interest in staying connected, but the imperative is not as strong as their imperative to be directly connected with the LGUs.

More important to the DOH are its external audiences. Their press and communication activities are often comprised of health advisories, information about risks of diseases, campaigns about vaccinations, and other health prevention programs. By and large, the communications conveyed by the DOH central office has remained confined to health promotion.

Table 2. Facebook and Twitter follower counts (May 2016)

| Agency | Facebook Followers | Twitter Followers |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Dept. of Education | 1,394,562 | 2,624,619 |
| Dept. of Health | 547,248 | 416,812 |
| HDMF | 577,219 | 3,079 |

Discussion of Findings

In this section I discuss institutional arrangements, analytical findings, and implications on effectiveness of social media use. All three agencies make active use of Facebook, but their use of Twitter is either intermittent or nonexistent. Thus the main observations presented here pertain largely to FB accounts.

The three agencies have full intention to use social media as a key part of their communication operations for public-facing activities. Among the three, Pag-Ibig takes the most innovative approach and active stance in terms of making full use of the features of FB to connect with service clients. DepEd, in part because of its massive size and the size of its direct constituents, is also highly active and responsive online, but the nature of responsiveness is more generic and informational compared to Pag-Ibig which almost crosses over to client-servicing in the channel. DOH is the least active and has the lowest level of responsiveness, and the main reason for this is its institutional arrangement and onerous content approval process.

Content Style and Strategy

The primary driver of audiences in a social media account is content—its form and substance. If content is not compelling, interesting, attention-grabbing, and optimized for the medium, then audiences are not earned and kept, even if one spends on advertising. Posts can be highly technical and not understandable to a general audience, or too heavy on text and thus not visually attractive. Timing and frequency of posts, when done in a strategic manner, can ensure audience retention and greater reach.

DepEd’s FB account posts content that has a high production value, is original, and has relevance to different audiences. The messages contain mostly national-level, as opposed to local-level, relevant information—the same as Pag-Ibig. They are timely and relevant to a season in the academic year. These types of information appeal and are pertinent to a broader audience and are more likely to get shared. Using visual features like infographics and photos, a regular practice by both DepEd and Pag-Ibig, is considered best practice. Reposted news and announcements tend to get lower public engagement, and DOH relied on these for content throughout the months included in this study.

For DOH, in particular, many posts are press releases, publicity photos for events, and health advisories. Across these posts, engagement is relatively low, a consequence of the type of content normally shared on the site.

Table 3. Percentage of Facebook posts with type of content by agency

| Content of post | DepEd | Pag-Ibig | DoH |
|------------------------|-------|----------|------|
| Photo | 80.2 | 85.5 | 18.6 |
| Reposted News Articles | 10.6 | 8.7 | 75.5 |
| Reposted Announcements | 5.5 | 4.3 | 3.6 |
| Highlights Agency Head | 8.9 | 15.9 | 17.9 |
| Press Release | 11.8 | -- | 3.8 |
| Link to agency website | 28.2 | 100.0 | 0.9 |
| Link to other websites | 15.2 | 13.0 | 78.9 |
| Type of information | | | |
| Special programs | 25.0 | 4.3 | 2.0 |
| Regular services | 42.5 | 27.5 | 9.9 |
| Local | 13.8 | -- | 14.8 |
| National | 62.4 | 46.4 | 11.0 |
| Process | 18.7 | 18.8 | 8.3 |

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Most impressive for DepEd's account, and the reason for its continued relevance and large reach, is its active role during times of disaster preparation and response. When there are typhoons, heavy rains, or other forms of local crises, its FB and Twitter accounts actively disseminate information about cancellation of classes, solicit reports from followers to the channels for status reports, and responds directly to questions posted in relation to the event. During these times, audiences closely follow the pages and get used to following and engaging with posts, behavior that carries over to regular days.

One of the main issues of the social media strategies of all three agencies is the degree to which the agency website figures into the picture. For the DOH, and to some extent DepEd, there is no clear and regular link between social media posts and the website. FB accounts are not repositories of information as people cannot easily search through it if they are looking for something specific related to the services offered by the agencies. Social media strategies should be a seamless part of a broader online strategy that includes the website and quick adoption to new platforms that might arise. Both the website and the social media strategies should be designed in service of two broad goals: public-facing communication activities and internal institutional efficiencies.

There are types of posts that are not popular and should be avoided or used sparingly. These include the practice of DOH at the time of this research of making many posts that feature photos with the head of the agency. Doing this too much runs the risk of the page being seen as a publicity channel, causing audiences to tune out.

The popular assumption that human interest angles attract audiences, which holds true for news writing, does not appear to hold true with social media posts. Both DepEd and DOH data indicate that posts with human interest angles get a slightly lower engagement rate.

Responsiveness

If social media is going to be taken seriously by the public as a channel to reach line agencies, the accounts must be responsive in a real way. This means that ordinary citizens should be able to send messages, post comments, reach out in some way, and expect some feedback. Using the channel to respond to queries in a public way, and not only to broadcast information, will result in better service delivery as well as reputation gains from being a government office that is accessible and engages the public. The other side of this, or the

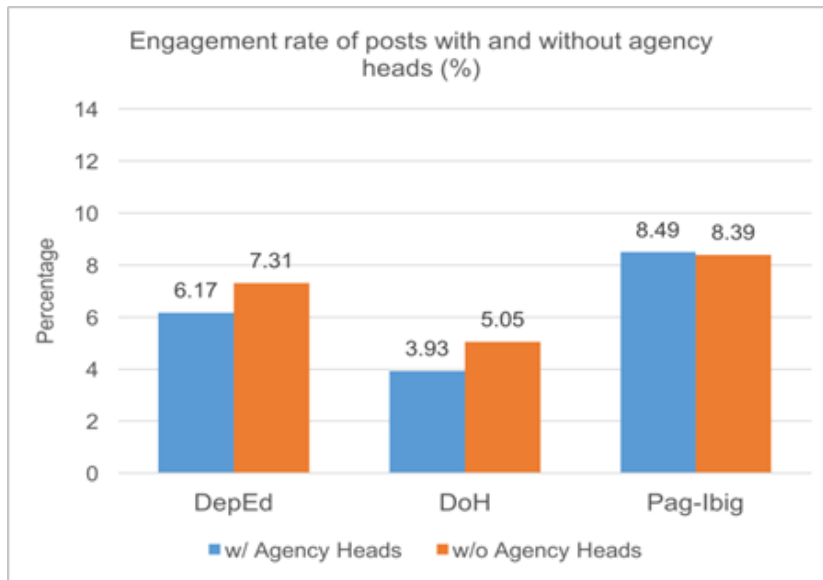


Figure 2. Engagement rate by post with agency head

risk, is that leaving queries unanswered will result in negative views and can erode the agency's reputation.

DepEd's page is highly active and engages its readers. It posts announcements and informational graphics that invite much interest from clients. Posts with practical information can get flooded easily with questions and comments, so answers are sometimes reposted for questions that are asked frequently. The answers come from the institutional page, and each answer tags the person asking, even if the same answer was posted before for a different person's query. It is good practice because it shows that the institution is paying attention and taking the query seriously. When the questions regard particular people or cases that should not be discussed publicly, they move the conversation to private messenger where it is more thoroughly addressed or is referred to the relevant office in the institution.

In sharp contrast, the DOH page, while active, gets low engagement. The information posted tends to be about personal health, and sometimes promotes events of the agency. There is limited interaction between the institutional account and members of the public posting. Although the account attempts to give responses to comments, they are not answers to the questions but just referrals to a phone number to call. This post is repeated over and over in a public way to different commenters. This behavior does not appear

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responsive, and may backfire because the public can see the canned response posted repeatedly.

The most highly responsive and ambitious FB page is that of Pag-Ibig. All comments that pose questions are given direct answers and then provided web links to the full information needed. The answers are in Filipino and written in a casual but respectful tone. This level and specificity of engagement means that the FB page is functioning as a transaction window, saving on transaction cost for both the person asking and the agency.

Organizational Arrangements

Social media teams' strategic advantage is best utilized under conditions of direct access to the agency's offices and a low degree of control over content postings. Where the social media person or team is lodged matters in their ability to experiment and innovate in the online space. When a competent and experienced social media or communication team is given a freer hand in content strategy, design, and execution, the FB channel tends to have innovative content and be more responsive. This is conditional on the communication team knowing a substantial amount of technical and operational information within the agency.

All social media functions for the three cases are lodged within communication offices, but the manner in which this function is dispensed varies greatly across the three agencies. It is influenced directly by the level of prioritization by the agency administration and the manpower capacity of communication offices.

The least involved communication office is the DOH. The Health Promotion Office functions as the de-facto communication arm of the agency, although its mandate is confined to health promotion and does not include internal communication. Given its limited manpower capacity for the communication function, the DOH decided early on to subcontract its social media management to a private firm. The firm was charged with maintaining the accounts, posting content, crafting infographics, and overseeing general strategy. Different offices within DOH send the information they wanted posted to the health promotions office, which approves and clears them for posting.

In one instance in 2014, a viral video that reflected poorly on the DOH circulated online. It had been posted on the social media account and immediately picked up and spread. The video was of a stage performance of children singing and dancing to a song that was disparaging to young girls

and boys. The performance was part of a roadshow program of the DOH to promote responsible parenthood. It was widely circulated, picked up by national media, and invited scathing criticism. The subcontractor was caught off guard and did not know how to control the situation. The DOH responded in a belated manner. After this incident, the DOH made it a policy to involve the Office of the Secretary in the approval process of social media posts; the agency's reaction was to place strict controls on social media.

The combination of having strict controls over content and reliance on a subcontractor leads to generally lower potential impact of the DOH social media accounts for many of its possible functions.

By sharp contrast, the DepEd and Pag-Ibig sites both are run by communication teams that have a freer hand in all stages of the production and strategy process. Social media is part of the broader communication strategy and team. Therefore, the social media team draws from the overall press relations, public relations, and corporate communication content and talent pool. They have access to graphic artists, multimedia designers, and relationships with other offices of the agencies where content emanates.

While DepEd's communication function is lodged within the Office of the Secretary, there was no policy of the Secretary himself, or even of the next layer of management, of having to approve each post before it goes live. The same is true for Pag-Ibig where the social media team not only enjoys greater leeway to make decisions on postings, but is also likewise empowered to provide individual responses to comments without having to clear them with higher offices.

Recommendations

For most government agencies, Facebook and Twitter have basic functions of disseminating information, announcing events, promoting programs, publicizing the heads of agencies, managing reputation, and communicating crisis, and sometimes acting as communication channels with internal audiences. For the most part, these are one-way communications. Thus the behavior of many agencies with their online presence is such that they are unable to leverage the key interactive features of the platforms toward their objectives. Outside of the usual functions, social media can offer greater service through direct engagement with constituents and beneficiaries—that is, using it not simply as a broadcasting channel, but also as a channel to gather information, to respond to queries, and to provide service.

Integration into Overall Digital and Communication Strategy

Social media should be fully integrated in the overall communication and digital strategy of an agency. There is enough interest and visibility among high-level government officials for social media that it is often the case that Facebook and Twitter accounts are of more interest among officials than websites. It is a positive development in that top leadership usually places importance on these activities, but the risk is for the accounts to be separated in function from the offices that run overall communication strategy. Social media should work alongside and in the context of all other communication activities ongoing.

Maximizing the potential of Facebook accounts means trying to achieve the following:

1. Social media actions should be linked to functioning central websites that house all content. Facebook accounts do not take the place of websites because content in the former is not organized and archived to make it easy to find. As a practice, these two channels should complement each other. FB posts should always contain links to relevant sections of a website, driving traffic to the sites; websites should function as an organized repository of most things posted on social accounts.
2. The staff running social media accounts should be part of the bigger communication office, or at the very least have direct working relationships with external communications, press relations, and corporate communication.
3. Social media staff, as with the communication offices, should have direct working relationships with all technical offices of an agency. This is to ensure a constant stream of accurate and timely information that can be turned into social media content. If the social media team is isolated or separate, the accounts are unlikely to thrive and gain interest.

Social Media Voice is Informal yet Authoritative

Social media is unique from traditional media in that on social media there is a perceived “personality” to an account, the personality of the agency. People who are on the platform are used to a communication style that is different from the typical press release, press statement, or prepared speech from agency officials. The communication style is informal yet authoritative; it is not an institutional voice but a personal one, and is more direct and informative. The closer relationship that is fostered with citizens through social media extends

to the style of communication. The FB page of an agency is just one among the FB pages of friends, of family, and of colleagues; it is not perceived as different. Audiences respond better to this type of voice and are more interested in what is being said when the tone is less institutional and more personal.

Written Policies and Guides

Most agencies have social media accounts, but most of them do not have written policies and guidelines. Institutionalization of these accounts will be more secure and stable when there are written policies. A written social media policy may include the agency's preferences and rules on the following:

- a. Objectives and functions of the social media accounts
- b. Approval process and rules governing production of content
- c. Rules for which people and positions in an organization should have editing and administrative roles in the accounts
- d. Tone, voice, language, style to reflect the agency's brand
- e. Policies for public engagement through the site
- f. Code of conduct and manners of use (e.g., gender sensitivity, respectful behavior)
- g. Handling crisis situations related to social media posts
- h. Integration with all other digital channels
- i. Policies on privacy, confidentiality (tagging)
- j. Policies on starting new sites, groups, or channels
- k. Copyright rules
- l. Flowchart of complaint and query handling in the context of the organization
- m. Monitoring and evaluation (e.g., regular metrics and target-setting)

The written policies should apply to the entire suite of social media channels, including Twitter, FB, blogs, message boards, image and video sharing sites, and any similar new platforms.

It is not recommended that agencies have restrictive rules that extend to personal social media pages. In my own opinion, this infringes on the rights of employees to manage a space that is in their personal, not purely professional, sphere. However, it is appropriate to put restrictions on any depictions of work product, office-related materials, identities of coworkers, and documents or sensitive information, even on personal FB pages and microblogs.

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Resource Investments

The practice of building and maintaining social media accounts and identities has matured over the last few years, to the point where it is a highly technical area of work. Recognizing this and hiring professionals or training staff on social media use and marketing will lead to better performing social media strategies.

There is a mistaken popular notion that getting publicity on social media is free—that broad benefits of posts going viral and bringing in droves of followers can be done with no expense. Advertising costs on Facebook are relatively inexpensive compared to traditional media, given the quality of targeting it offers. Pushing ads for a short period to increase the number of followers is a good investment in that it has an extended effect. Even posts without paid boosts will eventually get high visibility if the content quality and strategy are good.

Organizational Set-Up

Outsourcing social media function is not good practice. It is done by some agencies because of the high burden of work necessary to generate content, design and execute a strategy, and maintain a high level of engagement. Outsourced social media means the channel is managed by people who have limited familiarity with the agency's work, have no direct relationship with operational and technical offices, and are unable to respond to comments and questions on behalf of the agency.

In-house social media teams are in the best position to leverage the channel toward achieving the agency's goals. The team should be part of the bigger communication office—they should be given autonomy on postings and not have to go through too many layers in an approval process. Social media should have dedicated personnel, one or two depending on the number of channels being run. The team should have access to visual artists and multimedia designers so the dedicated personnel for social media can focus on substance, overall strategy, digital curation, content scheduling, moderating, and response.

Agencies that want to make their social media accounts responsive to reader comments and queries should have communication offices that have access and cooperative relationships with other offices. If an FB page is to function as a legitimate channel through which complaints can be brought to the agency,

problems can be alerted, and questions can be asked; then the social media personnel need to know where to get answers and where to send complaints. Without this cooperative relationship with other offices, creating an engaged and responsive page would be difficult.

Closing

Agencies communicate with a variety of audiences to achieve different goals. Communicating through social media can help further agency work toward these goals within the context of often-emplaced communication strategies within the organization.

Agencies can choose to invest enough systems and manpower to take full advantage of the benefits of citizen access through social media. It can reduce transaction costs of service desks by dealing with queries online, which in turn can improve the reputation of offices because they not only are more responsive but they are responsive in a very public way. Having constant accessibility online increases public engagement with services, and it holds field personnel to account as a result of citizens and clients having a way to communicate with higher offices. Through more specialized functionalities such as FB groups, for example, internal audiences or personnel can create and maintain closer relationships with communities of practice (e.g., disaster risk reduction officials in different field offices, provincial health officers in a region).

In general, well-run social media communication in a government agency can expand community engagement and aid the agency in providing better services and managing its public presence (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010). It has the potential to foster public perceptions of responsiveness, efficiency, transparency, and generally positive reputation-building through more direct client servicing and information dissemination. Agencies appear more reachable, accessible, and client-centered. However, a poorly-run social media strategy can result in the opposite; it can result in distrust, disengagement, and greater inefficiency. If response through the channel is slow or non-existent, the public will not take interest. An overly-cautious approach to social media postings and responses will likely backfire.

The large reach and high level of social media use of the Philippine public presents the government with opportunities in the online space. Given the nature of the medium as interactive, community-based, and network-building, the potential benefits for line agencies are bigger than in other agencies.

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Realizing the full potential of the various social media channels is possible if an agency is committed to transparency and public engagement as well as to making the necessary investments to build and foster an involved constituency online.

Notes

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2. "Philippines Internet Users," accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/philippines/>

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