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New Ways That Municipalities Are Leveraging Social Platforms

By Laura Royden

In the past decade, Americans' social media usage has increased nearly tenfold, with Pew Research estimating that 65 percent of all adults are on at least one social media platform. We now use social media for everything from keeping up with friends' major life updates to sharing passing thoughts, and it has become a primary method of communication for many of us.

Social media's growth also represents a unique and important civic engagement opportunity for municipalities that goes beyond basic advertising. By taking full advantage of social media, cities and towns now have a relatively easy, low-cost way to hold two-way conversations with residents, reach previously disengaged populations, gauge public opinion, garner feedback, and even analyze posts to make more informed decisions about municipal services.
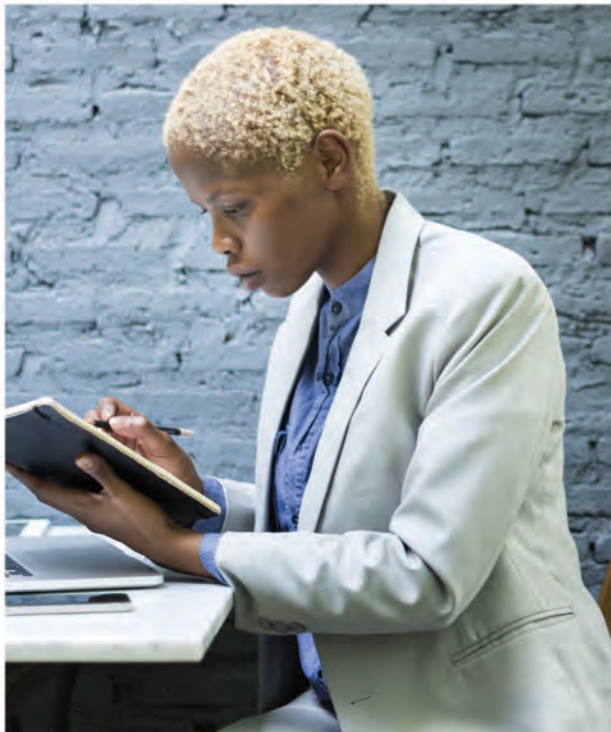
Easier Information Dissemination

The most obvious benefit of social media is the newfound ease with which cities can share information with a wide number of residents. City employees can spend a few seconds updating a social media page and reach thousands instantly, without ever leaving their desks. Cities of all sizes have begun to include social media as a standard part of their outreach, due to its comparatively low effort for employees and high impact.

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Las Vegas, Nevada, a finalist for the 2015 Shorty Award for Best Government Social Media, has built a wide-reaching social media network. The city has Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, and YouTube channels, and city employees have worked to develop a unified social media strategy across these platforms to reach as many residents as possible. Through social media, Las Vegas does everything from sharing safety updates, to publicizing voter registration deadlines, to highlighting inspiring stories from local residents or businesses. The city also incorporates interactive events, such as online scavenger hunts and challenges, to engage residents and incentivize them to explore social media channels and other online city resources.

Cities and towns have also tested live-streaming municipal meetings: Philadelphia began streaming its press conferences on Meerkat. The Los Angeles Police Department and Mayor Eric Garcetti used Periscope to broadcast a discussion about crime statistics. And Evanston, Illinois, livestreamed Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl's State of the City address. These livestreams lower the barrier of entry for citizens wanting to learn about their municipality by eliminating schedule and mobility restrictions.

Enabling Two-Way Conversations

With the help of social media, local governments have been able to build sustainable platforms for two-way conversations with citizens. Instead of having one-way announcements followed by one-way comments from residents in separate forums, cities and towns can directly interact with citizens, giving the government not only a good idea of how citizens are feeling about municipal initiatives, but fostering better relationships, trust and accountability between leaders and their constituents.

Perhaps the most famous government Twitter personality is former Newark, New Jersey, Mayor and current U.S. Senator Cory Booker, who became well-known for his engaging Twitter feed and won two Shorty Awards. Most of Booker's many daily tweets were direct interactions with citizens; whether pledging to fill potholes on ordinary days or helping residents with emergency supplies after Hurricane Sandy, Booker's Twitter served as an easy way for citizens to

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> *– Former Newark, N.J., Mayor Cory Booker*

gain quick answers or advice for their civic problems. By responding quickly, Booker was able to keep his finger on the pulse of Newark and quickly gained a reputation as a dedicated and concerned civil servant who was always working to better Newark and the lives of residents. In a 2015 interview with *Wired* magazine, Booker summed up the potential held in social media for governments: "When we embraced social media, we took more control of the Newark narrative. We increased responsiveness toward residents. We drew more of our constituents in to participate in government and improve our city." As social media continues to grow and develop, so will the possibilities for municipalities.

Aiming to improve direct service delivery and engage more citizens in the process, Somerville integrated its 311 system into its Facebook page. Residents can fill out a short form on the Facebook page with work orders or requests that are sent directly to relevant city employees. Residents can also post directly to the page with concerns or questions, which the city or other residents can comment on; for Somerville, this style has taken off and turned the Facebook page into more of a forum. Somerville has also taken advantage of the page to seek public input on new projects and advertise city meetings, which has significantly improved public attendance in civic life.

Engaging Millennials on New Platforms

One of the persistent problems with civic engagement is ensuring that all populations are having their voices heard, instead of just those already involved in the civic process. Millennials have become the largest generation in the U.S., but their participation in traditional civic affairs has remained lower than that of other age groups. When done poorly, civic engagement through social media can exacerbate this divide. For instance, Facebook and Twitter have millions of users, but these users tend to skew older than those on newer platforms. By leveraging these new social media platforms, municipalities can help combat this problem and hear from more subsets of their population.

Austin, Texas, a burgeoning tech hub, has been one of the first cities to reach out to citizens via Reddit, a tech-minded online forum and community popular with young techies. The city has become a frequent poster in the Austin subreddit (an Austin-focused forum on Reddit with 50,000 subscribers), at first primarily sharing links to press releases or promoting city events. Responses were surprisingly positive, so city employees continued engaging more. They began to communicate directly with citizens, answering questions and providing advice on city-run services and programs. Reddit allows Austin officials to communicate meaningfully and directly with residents, and it has increased the public's opinion of the city as an accessible and dedicated government rather than an unnavigable bureaucracy.

Cities ranging from Provo, Utah, to Las Vegas have also begun to experiment

with Snapchat, an instant photo-sharing app. Half of Snapchat's users are under age twenty-five, making the platform a unique opportunity for municipalities to reach and engage with the notably disengaged young demographic. Cities and towns can create a stream of photos and videos known as a "story" advertising events, explaining new initiatives, highlighting local businesses, sharing emergency information, and more. For followers, viewing a Snapchat story is remarkably low-effort: a single tap plays the entire story for them. Snapchat's immediacy and easy multimedia sharing makes it one of the most effective social media tools, full of potential for municipalities looking to improve their communication with younger residents.

Increased Feedback

Governments have long struggled to gather meaningful feedback from citizens. Long surveys often have low response rates, and even filing a simple complaint can lead to layers of red tape and bureaucracy. Social media presents a solution to this problem: by leveraging the already-present online infrastructure of social media platforms, governments can provide a clear, low-hassle way for residents to rate services or interactions.

The federal government partnered with the popular crowdsourcing review site Yelp to launch individual Yelp pages for a number of agencies. Instead of having to spend the time and money developing a standalone review website, federal agencies can simply "claim" their Yelp pages and gain full access to the feedback posted, allowing them to see feedback in real-time and respond directly to users if appropriate. The feedback data can then be analyzed and used by agencies to make more informed decisions on how to improve their service. For residents, the Yelp partnership streamlines the review process (with nearly 100 million unique monthly users, Yelp is by far the most popular rating site in the U.S.) and provides them with an easy way to rate their government interactions at the same time they rate their meals, haircuts and dentists.

In 2012, Washington, D.C., launched Grade.DC.gov, a citywide platform that

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allowed residents to grade city agencies and services. Users can leave reviews on the website itself, but the platform also collects relevant posts on Facebook, Yelp and Twitter and incorporates them into the grading of each agency. By taking advantage of already present posts, the city gets a better picture of how its services are performing and includes the voices of citizens who may not otherwise directly engage with government.

More Informed Decision Making

Social media can also provide municipalities with an easy and low-cost way to understand what's going on in their communities beyond communication with residents. By aggregating and analyzing social media posts throughout a municipality en masse, cities and towns can extract relevant data and trends from residents' tweets, even when they are not sent directly to local officials. This data can then be used by municipal departments to gain a better sense of how the city or town is functioning and to have more information when making decisions.

After a frustrating response to Hurricane Ike in 2008 stemming from disjointed information across different governments, emergency response departments in the greater Cincinnati area collaborated to develop the Regional Asset Verification Emergency Network (RAVEN911). The network provides emergency responders with real-time traffic updates and information about important local infrastructure in order to enable a cohesive regional response to emergencies. In addition, RAVEN911 automatically pulls geo-tagged posts from Twitter and displays them on a map for emergency response teams to view. These tweets help provide a wider view of the city, allowing emergency responders to better understand the geographic extent of disasters and make informed decisions about resource prioritization and management.

New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene used Yelp reviews to detect unreported foodborne illness outbreaks. The city partnered with software developers at Columbia University to turn Yelp reviews into machine-readable data, which could then be easily searched, grouped and analyzed. In their pilot test, the researchers found three restaurants that were collectively responsible for sixteen illnesses; when the city then sent health inspectors to these restaurants, they found a host of health code violations. New York City has since continued the project, planning to review feeds daily and expand to social media posts outside of Yelp. By leveraging these preexisting social media posts, the city was able to gain insights on where violations were most likely to be present and prioritize these establishments for inspections, preventing future illnesses.

Social media holds a wealth of potential for cities and towns, from easier basic communication with residents to advanced social media mining posts. Municipalities have experimented with integrating social media into nearly every aspect of government, and the possibilities will continue to grow as social media platforms evolve. ✱