

# Municipalities ‘Like’ Facebook: The Use of Social Media in Local Municipalities

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**Abstract** The use of Facebook in local municipalities has grown dramatically over the last few years. Local municipalities enter social media to meet people where they already are, in order to inform, discuss and receive feedback. The use of such services is rarely an integrated part of the municipalities’ communication strategies, and more knowledge is needed to explore how local municipalities could use such services to their benefit. This chapter contributes to this area of research by, based on current literature, classifying municipalities’ use of social media into six thematic areas. The explanatory potential is illustrated by conducting a qualitative case study in which a local municipality’s use of Facebook is analysed based on the suggested thematic areas. We argue that instead of viewing social media as a silver bullet, its implementation should be adapted to obtain specific achievements in one or several of the categories suggested here. Local municipalities could be more specific about the potential achievements in order to avoid a mismatch between external and internal stakeholders’ use and expectations of social media.

**Keywords** Social media · Facebook · Local municipalities

## 1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the use of social media in local municipalities. There are several reasons for why this area of interest should to be investigated. The public sphere is an essential part of a well-functioning democracy [1]. Media and

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societies' communication networks are core components of the public sphere in a modern society [2], rendering possible the formation of new opinions that can influence public decisions. If the interaction between the government and civil society is not working properly, or the communication channels are inhibited, citizens' affiliation to public institutions may disintegrate [3]. Therefore, it is of critical importance to utilise, develop and maintain well-functioning communication channels to serve the public discourse.

Municipalities have long since initiated projects where Internet-based technologies are used to increase citizens participation, but very few have been successful [4]. There is still the challenge of turning the audience into active users, and the emergence of social media is seen as promising, since such media attract large numbers of users sustaining a great deal of interaction [5]. Thus, social media is a promising tool for municipalities to inform, discuss and receive feedback from their surroundings, and maintain and augment local democracies. Moreover, the use of social media is a key component of governments' strategies on digitalising the governmental sector.

Even though social media has emerged in recent research literature [6], more work is clearly needed to explore how local municipalities may design, organise and benefit from social media for deliberative purposes [7]. In this chapter we propose a framework identifying six thematic areas through which social media may influence local municipalities. We illustrate the explanatory potential of these thematic areas by analysing a qualitative case study focusing on a local municipality's use of Facebook.

## 2 Theoretical Approach

The framework is based on literature with various theoretical approaches. A detailed review of these theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, and they are only very briefly introduced here. Castells work [2] on the public sphere as the network society shed light on the influence of information technology on social networks, elaborating on the seminal work by Habermas [1], which discussed social processes in the digital age, and Giddens' [8] theories on time and space. Work on e-democracy models [9] illustrate how information technology could be used to support various democratic contexts. Finally, the system theory focuses on the changes occurring in communication processes, moving from a one-way communication pattern to a two-way dialogue.

The six thematic areas introduced below explore how social media can influence local municipalities. As demonstrated later on when discussing the case study, online activities may relate to more than one category. Consequently, criticisms could be made regarding the mutual exclusiveness of the distinct areas. We would argue that even though some activities may relate to several of these thematic areas, the idea here is to identify and categorise distinct areas of *influence* that social media may have, not to categorise distinct area of online *activities*.

## ***2.1 From One- to Two-Way Dialogue***

Social media provide municipalities with the opportunity to develop ICT-based services for people to inform themselves, locate each other and interact [5], independently of borders concerning time, space and location [8]. Based on technological drivers (broadband access and development of ICT-based services), social drivers (changed media consumption habits) and institutional drivers (new legal means to create and distribute content) [5], the municipalities utilise social media primarily to support dialogue between the government and their stakeholders.

## ***2.2 Digitalised Administrative Governance***

Social media do not only provide opportunities for two-way dialogue, but also influence how municipalities design their services. In a digitalised world, government services are most effectively designed and developed to utilise the opportunities provided by online services, not to reflect internal workflow in the government sector [10]. New services should therefore be designed based on a self-service model, in which online support and the possibility to discuss and enter into a dialogue with the municipality and other stakeholders are an integrated part of the online services, rather than isolated stand-alone services with only scattered integration to the decision-making processes.

## ***2.3 Digital Participation***

A major objective for municipalities' use of social media is to invite citizens and other external stakeholders to participate in the use of online services. In a society where traditional public arenas are decreasing in strength (such as political parties, face-to-face public meetings and participation in various associations), and citizens' political interests are changing from a holistic perspective towards a focus on certain political aspects [11], it is important to invite external stakeholders to participate in the public debate on an individual basis. In turn, this allows them to use social media to debate, inform the municipality and add issues to the political agenda, as well as control and evaluate the decisions being made.

## ***2.4 Attentive Municipality***

Ideally, the municipalities are not only communicating with the citizens, but also invite them to participate in and influence the decisions being made [1]. A well

functioning public sphere is decisive in a system where politicians and citizens ideally share an interest in dialogue and discourse, leading to the formation of political opinion in which the input and cooperation between citizens and politicians constitute the legalisation of power [9]. Thus, an attentive municipality goes beyond the idea of only listening to external stakeholders; their input and ideas should also be reflected in the decisions being made, preferably by explicit integration of decision-making processes and the online political discourse [12].

## ***2.5 Developing Democracy***

Based on the activities classified above, local democracy may develop into a more deliberative way of thinking [12]. Moreover, the new networks rendered possible through globalisation and technological development, in which borders concerning time, space and location are eliminated, can heavily influence local democracies. The municipalities' stakeholders could be located all over the world with the same interest in participating and influencing local democracies. The globalised world also changes the municipalities' opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other, independently of traditional restrictions concerning time- and location-related issues.

## ***2.6 Organisational Culture and Change Management***

To be able to utilise the new borderless opportunities provided by the introduction of social media, local municipalities need to consider change management and their organisational culture, in order to explore their willingness and responsiveness to change based on signals from the external world [13]. A question related to the use of social media is the municipality's ability to invite external stakeholders to comment on their work processes and act according to the signals received [7, 14].

## **3 Introducing the Case, Data Collection and Analysis Strategy**

To illustrate the explanatory potential of this framework, we conducted an analysis of a local municipality's use of Facebook. Porsgrunn municipality, with approximately 35,000 inhabitants, was awarded a prize for the best local municipality's web pages in 2011, based on their citizen-oriented services and easy access to core services [15]. From a Norwegian perspective, Porsgrunn has been innovative in their use of digital media, and were early adopter of using Facebook as part of their communication with external stakeholders.

Since the conducted study (spring 2012) is exploratory by nature it was appropriate to design a qualitative study. We aimed to explore the use of Facebook, placing emphasis on understanding the phenomenon within its real-life context [16]. The major data source was semi-structured interviews with major stakeholders, both internal (employees and politicians) and external (citizens). Other sources included the online postings on the municipality's Facebook pages, and written material provided by the municipality. Ten interviews were conducted, selected by using a snowball technique [16] to identify interviewees who were knowledgeable on the topic being investigated. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed based on the categories presented above, whereas analyses of the online-postings increase our understanding of contextual issues.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 From One- to Two-Way Dialogue

The main motivation for the municipality's use of Facebook is to increase the dialogue between the municipality and their stakeholders: *There are new ways to communicate which we would like to employ actively in the municipality to support the public discourse* (employee). The municipality would like to arrange for digital meeting places where everyone could meet and discuss political issues. One reason for this is to become aware of criticism from the citizens: *It is important to work actively to notice the critical talk taking place in the discussion between neighbours, and to be able to respond coherently with one voice* (employee).

The internal interviewees tend to disagree on the extent to which the municipality will have an active role in the discussions, by initiating discussions, posting questions and participating in on-going discussions. A quite common apprehension is that the municipality needs to be on Facebook in order to provide information and listen to a dialogue of which it is not an active part, whereas the external interviewees more clearly expect the municipality to participate actively, and not only listen to whatever citizens do discuss. Despite acknowledging the importance of the municipality's presence, employees do realise the lack of dialogue: *We do not encourage citizens to ask question through Facebook since we currently don't have an instrument to follow up questions being posted. As a matter of fact it is still information from us to them.*

### 4.2 Digitalised Administrative Governance

Porsgrunn is about to introduce new administrative support systems where e-mail is fully integrated. The municipality is no longer printing numerous brochures to

inform their citizens; as such information is now primarily accessible for the citizens online. Facebook is not yet an integrated part of the governmental processes, since services cannot be exclusively provided through social media. The main focus is to provide mobile services for citizens to read, communicate and discuss through a mobile application from their smartphones. They have started to use Quick Response (QR)-coding to provide links to information and services to simplify access for external stakeholders: *Now you may have the information needed stored on your mobile phone, which is much easier than bringing brochures and paper-based plan-schedules. We may also link our Facebook pages through the QR-codes.*

### **4.3 Digital Participation**

A few online services are provided by the municipality, such as Fix my street and the QR-coded services, focusing on administrative processes and service provision. An ePetition system is currently being developed, allowing the citizens to promote causes for the municipality to consider. The ePetition services are designed for Facebook integration to attract more citizens and lower the threshold for citizens to sign. Facebook is considered instrumental in engaging citizens to participate and discuss: *Traditionally the municipality has only disseminated information to the citizens with few, if any, arenas for citizens to discuss and add their suggestions. We need to diminish some barriers to get the citizens running.*

### **4.4 Attentive Municipality**

Even though the municipality's web pages allow for two-way dialogue, discussions and public discourse between the municipality and its citizens are not the primary focus here. Thus, Facebook could provide opportunities not offered through their traditional web pages. A major challenge from the employees' point of view is to decide who is going to represent the municipality's opinion in online discussions: *Porsgrunn municipality has 3,000 employees. All of these can't represent the municipality's views externally through social media (employee).* As a result, the external stakeholders are frustrated by the lack of participation from the municipality's side on the issues being discussed, which is considered problematic: *It doesn't make sense to introduce social media if you don't have a plan or your product is bad. It is actually more harmful than anything. You have to eliminate reasons for negative publicity before you enter the scene (citizen).*

The employees argue that Facebook is added on top of everything without being integrated as a part of daily life in the municipality. Consequently, attendance in social media is not an integrated part of the daily routine, and relies on employees being highly dedicated: *It requires great dedication to maintain and*

*work with Facebook the way we would like to. You have to read and keep yourself updated in a way that we unfortunately are not presently able to* (employee). A lack of time and resources is not seen as a sound argument among external interviewees: *You don't need much time or money; it is about spending half an hour updating their Facebook pages. Everyone is able to dedicate the minimum amount of time needed.*

#### **4.5 Developing Democracy**

The interviewees tend to disagree on Facebook's potential role in the local democratic debate. Whereas one group (dominated by external stakeholders) argue that social media is the next big thing for political discourse, where the presence of local politicians is self-evident, another group of interviewees (dominated by the municipality's employees) voice their concerns about the amount and quality of online political discussions: *I'm not quite sure about the number of people who are using Facebook to discuss political issues. And we have to keep in mind that there are many inhabitants who are still not using such services* (employee). For the latter group, Facebook is considered tiresome, with very few topical contributions among a huge number of tedious postings.

Another main concern relates to how to censor online postings (and who to censor), and what to expect from the municipality's employees when discussing politics. Guidelines on how to behave are seen as important in order to reduce the amount of insults towards named employees or politicians. While everyone acknowledges the importance of including more people in the public debate by using Facebook, there is disagreement on how to manage negative comments and harassments posted online: *If we were going to respond to the negative enquiries, such postings would increase, bringing about successive un-reflected statements.*

#### **4.6 Organisational Culture and Change Management**

The process of developing an open and alternative-oriented municipality, as well as being citizen-oriented and responsive to suggestions made by external stakeholders, is an on-going process in Porsgrunn municipality. More effort is needed to encourage employees to share: *The main challenge is to get everyone interested in informing and dissemination online, not only among external stakeholders, but also to encourage employees to do so* (employee).

When it comes to change management, internal use of social media is of comparable importance to external use. Even though internal use of Facebook to distribute information and discuss internal concerns has so far not been prioritised, the employees are aware of the importance of doing so. The municipality needs to listen to internal as well as external stakeholders in order to stay dynamic over

time: *We do have well-educated and qualified employees who are perfectly capable of conducting the services provided by the municipality. But we are very much aware that it is instrumental for us to utilise citizens' competence and to engage them in our daily routine for us to stay adaptive and competent in the future as well (employee).*

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

Table 1 summarises findings from the case study.

The thematic areas introduced here contribute to the theoretical understanding of how social media may influence a local municipality, thus contributing to the need for more detailed criteria to evaluate municipalities' use of such media [6, 7]. Hence, we subscribe to an established line of IS research warning against viewing any application of IT as a generic black box, orientating instead towards analysing

**Table 1** Case findings summarised

Thematic area	Main findings	Main challenges
From one- to two-way dialogue	The main motivation for introducing Facebook is to enter into a dialogue with external stakeholders.	Lack of allocated resources and strategic foundation inhibits the transformation from dissemination into dialogue.
Digitalised administrative governance	The integration of social media is not prioritised, mainly since public services cannot <i>only</i> be provided through social media.	Administrative systems are traditionally organized to support municipalities' needs, not as citizen-centric systems.
Digital participation	Very few services are provided for the citizens to participate, but present services are well received by the citizens.	Services are needed where citizens are invited to participate in the democratic dialogue, not only to perform tasks needed or to provide feedback to the municipality
Attentive municipality	There are few possibilities for citizens to provide feedback or to discuss with municipality's officers.	To decide whom to represent the municipality and to allocate resources needed.
Developing democracy	Some argue that the use of social media is important for the democratic debate, whereas others voice scepticism due to scattered quality on the postings, censoring issues, and a lack of representativeness.	The use of social media should be designed as an integrative part of the decision-making processes, in a way that addresses issues related to harassment and representation.
Organisational culture and change management	Despite good intentions, the use of Facebook is so far not organised to support a dynamic municipality.	Facebook is introduced to strengthen the municipality's reputation, but the lack of feedback may lead to the opposite result.



the use of social media in the municipality as a structural process in which technologies and organisational contexts develop in an interwoven manner [17]. Our work points to the need for a particular technology in a particular context to understand how a particular communication medium can be effective in various contexts [9].

We would encourage researchers to take up some of the many issues that our study raises. An improved theoretical foundation might incorporate influences from political science, social theory, public governance theory, and communication studies. Whereas seminal work by Habermas [1], Castells [2] and Giddens [8] prove the importance of understanding the public sphere and the importance and characteristics of the networked society, more work is needed to further explore how social media could be utilised by local municipalities. One issue to look at is to explore the resistance to change among government officials when introducing social media like Facebook. Whereas it might be tempting to criticize municipalities' limited use of such services, more research is needed to fully understand why such resistance exists, and the (maybe well-argued) reasons for such resistance.

Some practical recommendations can be drawn. Firstly, municipalities must consider what they wish to achieve by using social media. The thematic areas introduced here may guide the process of identifying potential benefits. Secondly, there is a need to allocate resources when entering social media; efforts are needed to gain benefits. Being present without being responsive may be worse than non-presence, and may do more harm than good for the municipalities. Thirdly, municipalities need to consider the use of social media as an integrated part of their information exchange and their services. The real benefits may be achieved when the strengths of social media (to support dialogue) are integrated into administrative services, providing feedback mechanisms and services for citizens to discuss issues related to on-going decision-making processes. Finally, most emphasis so far has been on the *external* use of social media in the government sector, whereas *internal* uses have been investigated less. Both practitioners and researchers may bring the internal use of social media into focus to understand how highly educated and competent public sector employees may be encouraged to develop dynamic work environments in local municipalities.

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