

**Social Media Use in State Government: Understanding the Factors Affecting Social Media
Strategies in the Minnesota State Departments**

Professional Paper

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July 8, 2015

Effective communication is the key in government-citizen relationships, and social media play an important role in “engaging audiences in true multi-way conversations and interactions” (Heldman, Schindelar & Iii, 2013). In the recent years, we have witnessed a growing trend of using social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in government agencies. The exploding popularity of social media in government agencies enables public relations (PR) practitioners to better reach out diverse audiences and initiate real-time conversation with citizens. From a global perspective, governments in Australia (Alam & Lucas 2011), the Canadian e-government efforts (Small, 2013), and the U.S. Congress (Golbeck, Grimes & Rogers, 2010) have been well studied. In the U.S., most studies have focused on federal-level government but few shed light on state agencies. Current literature revealed that although an increasing number of government agencies have implemented multiple social media tools, strategic communication planning is still a big challenge for social media practitioners in these government agencies. There is limited reflection on strategic planning of engagement activities beyond pushing government information out through social media channels.

Interested in studying the social media use at state government departments, this paper selects two Minnesota state agencies, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), and the Minnesota Department of Human Services (MDHS), as the target organizations for a case study. As Minnesota’s lead public health agency, MDH has established its social media presence since 2009. In five years, MDH has maintained multiple social media sites, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Meanwhile, MDHS opened Twitter account in 2012 and recently adopted Facebook in 2014. Their role in shaping and implementing public health policies and programs make them the natural choice for this paper.

The purposes of this study were threefold: 1) to provide a general overview of the adoption and implementation of social media in MDH and MDHS and address the different interactive communication patterns on their social media platforms; 2) to investigate the factors affecting the two departments' social media strategies; 3) to reveal implications of strategic social media use in state agencies.

Literature Review

Social media use in government agencies

Among various social media platforms, Twitter is most widely adopted by government agencies. Twitter's popularity comes from its distinctive communicative characteristics that support immediacy and the ability to feed content frequently in real time (Panagiotopoulos & Sams, 2012). In addition, Twitter provides a way for two-way communication because government agencies can receive information back from their target population, communicate about news and events, the policy-making process and public opinions, and reach the target groups that they want to connect with. Twitter use can create an entirely new online communication environment for citizens' involvement and participation (Wigand, 2010).

Major Twitter use by government can be viewed as an improvement of public sector transparency, as well as an improvement of knowledge management and cross-agency cooperation. Wigand (2010) has identified four major roles that Twitter play for government agencies:

- 1) Extending the reach of communication
- 2) Updating and sharing information
- 3) Building relationships

4) Collaborating with stakeholders

The first two roles essentially use the social media's information function and incorporate it with existing traditional media channels. According to Small (2012), service delivery and information provision are the main focuses of government agencies' feeds. The other two roles employ social media's networking function – this aligns with the idea of two-way symmetrical communication. As messages can automatically be reposted to other social media channels and interactions can easily occur in a reciprocated manner, Twitter creates possibilities for two-way and real-time forms of communication. In another study, Java, Song and Finin (2007) identified four different intentions of using Twitter, including daily chatter, conversations, sharing information, and reporting news. In terms of the role Twitter plays in a government, it depends on many factors such as the level of the government, the nature of an agency, budget concerns, and social media capability.

To help government agencies to fully use the strengths of social media to promote civic engagement, Mergal (2013) provided a fourfold social media strategy, elaborated below:

- 1) **Push strategy:** based on content creation and content release, this strategy serves to inform and educate the public by posting contents of news and facts on social media sites
- 2) **Pull strategy:** similarly based on content creation and content release, the pull strategy makes more effort in providing opportunities for people to get involved in a conversation with government agencies. For example, an organization could use Twitter hashtags or pose questions to encourage participation.

- 3) **Networking/mingling strategy:** this strategy encourages the organization to value audience participation. This helps the organization to be more sensitive to the issues their audiences care about and react in a timely manner.
- 4) **Customer service and citizen relationship management strategy:** this requires the organization to have greater interaction with the public. It also suggests agencies provide customized service to interact with individual citizens. For example, agencies can answer citizens' questions or give feedback directly. However, it requires high investment in time and resources allocation, which often beyond most government agencies' social media capabilities.

Many government agencies have implemented the basic informational function of social media but few have realized its value for civic engagement. Small (2013) conducted a content analysis on the Twitter accounts of the Canadian government and surprisingly found that despite the Canadian government being an early social media adopter and has well established e-government structure, only a small number of citizens follow tweets posted by the Canadian government. The government has only made a nominal commitment to using Twitter as part of its e-government strategy. Other researchers found similar patterns in the United States Congress' Twitter use. By analyzing the content of Congressional members' tweets, the study indicated that personnel were using Twitter primarily as an informal self-reporting public record of their schedule and activities, and not for improving transparency (Golbeck, Grimes & Rogers. 2010).

Factors affecting government IT initiatives

As government agencies build their social media capability to diversify approaches of creating open government, researchers invested in efforts to understand internal and external

factors affecting government use of social media. Findings indicate that government agencies' use social media differently because of a series internal and external factors (Meijer and Thaens 2013; Zheng 2013; Orlikowski 2014). For example, Meijer and Thaens (2013) compared the social media strategies between North American police departments and found that social media strategies of those departments are different due to pre-existing differences between the organizations, including technological choice, organizational tasks, objections, and organizational arrangement.

Technology was once considered as a primary factor contributing to the changes of communication dynamics between government agencies and citizens. Proponents of this thought believe that information technology has the power to further democratize government by bringing citizens more fully into planning and administration activities of the government itself, especially in areas of citizen concern (Kraemer & King, 2003). Other scholars have questioned this perspective and emphasized that same information and communication technology can generate different outcomes, depending on how this technology is being used. Despite that information and communication technologies having the potential transformational power to change social and organizational structure, they are also affected by these structure in their design, implementation and use. Decision makers will put new technologies to their use and they will embed their values and predispositions in these new technologies. (Orlikowski, 2014; Meijer and Thaens, 2013).

Moving from only focusing on the information and communication technologies, scholars recognized other organizational and social factors interacting with social media implementation at government agencies. Gil- Garcia and Pardo (2005) classified those factors into five categories: 1) information and data factors; 2) information technology factors; 3)

organizational and managerial factors; 4) legal and regulatory factors, and institutional and environmental factors. Zheng (2013) also summarized factors related to government use of social media into five dimensions: 1) social and economic; 2) political, legal and policy; 3) organizational and managerial; 4) information – related; and 5) technological. A considerable number of studies suggest managerial and organizational factors mostly influence a government agency’s social media use (Han, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2012; Picazo- Vela et al., 2012; Zheng & Ren, 2012; Zheng, 2012). Although those factors are believed as influential elements to affect an agency’s digital initiatives, they have not been “fully identified and incorporated into a comprehensive prototyping strategy.” (Gil- Garcia, Pardo & Baker, 2007, pp. 4)

Research Question

As discussed in the previous section, numerous academic researchers have studied the important role social media plays in creating a more open and transparent government. However, many of them are focused on the federal and national level, and few shed light on state government agencies. State departments have more specific missions and duties than the federal government and play a vital role in delivering direct public services to large and diverse populations. To help fulfill the gap between growing demand of using social media and lack of strategic approaches, it is meaningful to learn from an insider’s view and investigate factors affecting state agencies’ social media strategies. It will help us understand current situations and improve their social media practice in order to better pursue the goal of an open, democratic government. Therefore, my research questions are:

RQ1: What are current social media strategies used by state government?

RQ2: What factors affect the state government’s choice of social media strategies?

Research Design

This study focuses on state-level government agencies in Minnesota. The scope has been narrowed down to the following types of social media: Twitter and Facebook because they are the two major social media tools used by state departments. This study is interested in understanding the differences of social media strategies adopted by the state departments, and the decisive factors explaining the differences in social media implementation. This study aims to answer the research questions by scrutinizing the emerging social media strategies of two major Minnesota state government agencies. The Department of Human Services (MDHS) and the Department of Health (MDH) were chosen as case studies for several reasons. First, they are typical adopters of push & pull strategies and network strategy (Mergal 2012), representing most state agencies' use of social media tools. Second, they resemble each other in terms of organizational structure, size, and the tasks they have to fulfill within the government. Additionally, the types of social media adopted by both agencies are similar. MDH and MDHS share similarities in their missions and values, playing vital roles in fulfilling state government's health and human service obligations. They are highly public-oriented, as they provide services to large state populations, including vulnerable groups like children and seniors. In addition, they are all visibly using more than three types of social media tools. However, their use of social media tools differ from each other. It is important to study this and try to open the "black box" (Mergal, 2013) of government decision-making and internal and external factors that lead to their adoption of social media.

Methodology

The case studies of the two major departments comprised both semi-structured and interpretive interviews conducted from October through November 2014. Key players for social media strategies, including two communication directors, four social media staffs in divisions (Newborn Screening Program, Infectious Disease Division, Children and Families Services), and one IT staff member, were carefully selected and interviewed. In this study, social media officials refer to the state government employees who are on the communication staff or authorized to access official social media accounts on behalf of the department. Interviews were conducted with chief communication staff in the agencies' central and divisional communication team, as well as IT staff who are responsible for information technology support. Only official department social media accounts will be studied. Personal use by staff members, which is not related to official duties, will not be studied in this paper.

Based upon the previous studies on conceptualizations of social media strategies (Mergal 2012) and e-Government successful factors (Gil-Garcia and Pardo, 2005), the main interview questions were designed around the following topics:

- 1) *Social media adoption* (i.e., What kinds of social media tools are being used? Which ones are more / less frequently used? What social media tool do you prefer to use for your department, and why?, etc.)
- 2) *Social Media Strategy* (i.e., Does your organization have a strategy regarding social media activities, and if so, could you talk about that? What were the department's objectives and goals of using social media?)

- 3) *Organizational factors (i.e., How many people in your department are working with social media? Does the department only have one official social media account, or do divisions have their own social media platform?)*
- 4) *Managerial factors (i.e., What is the decision making process of designing a social media strategy? How do you collaborate with divisions, and with the IT department?)*
- 5) *Information and technology factors (i.e., Do staff members know the functions and features of different social media platforms? Who will provide the technological support if you have problems with using social media platforms?)*
- 6) *Legal and policy factors (i.e., Is there a regulation or policy that requires your department to have social media presence, or to use specific kind of social media tools?)*
- 7) *Contextual factors: (i.e., How do you see the role of social media use in your department in relation to improving transparency, public participation, and collaboration?)*

Data collected were then recorded, transcribed, and coded by the author to identify common practices and perceptions. Two types of coding methods, deductive and inductive coding, were applied to analyze and interpret qualitative data. Following the guidance of previous literature (Luna – Reyes et al., 2010; Gil- Garcia & Pardo, 2005; Zheng, 2013), this paper will use a slightly modified version based on the frameworks in the previous studies to understand important factors influencing social media application in the state government (Figure 1). This framework addressed both internal and external factors related to an organization’s social media initiatives and reflected the multiple dimensions of the

organization's social media implementation. The layers included in this framework are: 1) contextual factors; 2) legal and policy factors 3) organizational factors; 4) managerial factors; 5) information and technology factors (See Appendix 1). Analogies and differences between the social media strategies are discussed. Common patterns generated from the interview data, such as successful achievements, challenges and concerns, and the departments' attitudes toward public participation, were also coded inductively as important references. Primary documents, websites, and major social media presence of the two departments were analyzed in addition to the interviews.

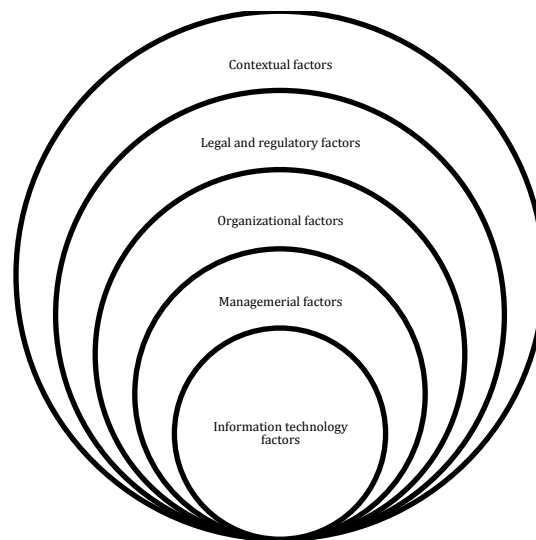


Figure 1. Factors affecting government social media strategies (adapted from Gil – Garcia & Pardo, 2005)

Findings and Discussion

To answer the first research question, I incorporated Mergal (2012)'s fourfold social media strategies into the analysis of the Department of Human Service and the Department of Health.

MDHS- Push Strategy

MDHS employs a push strategy because the department uses social media tools as broadcasting channels mostly for one – way communication.

With the mission of helping people meet their basic needs so they can live in dignity and achieve their highest potential, the Department of Human Service established Facebook, Twitter, YouTube channels as its online presences. To regulate governmental social media use, MDHS has established a policy, in which MDHS social media accounts are defined as “not official MDHS websites, but rather the department’s presence on third – party service providers’ platforms.” (“Social Media statement”, 2015) In this sense, the agency does not have a lot of control over personal data privacy but follow the privacy policies of the social media platform just as a normal user.

Twitter is MDHS’s major social media outlet. The official Twitter account was launched in February 2012 for the purpose of disclosing the agency’s information to the general public. Reviewing the latest one hundred tweets, 36% of them are informational posts, including MDHS’ news releases, updates, and announcements. 41% containing external links, articles, information, and activities related to MDHS’ work. For example, “Check out News from DHS for a roundup of our news and announcements in March <http://t.co/uzkmuFa9OF> <http://t.co/ueI4iUySFz>.” As to the contents, 20% are about issues related to children and families, which is a large portion of population served by MDHS. Other issues such as disabilities and Medicaid reform are also frequently posted.

Run by the chief communication staff at the DHS Commissioner office, Twitter was adopted as a public relations mechanism in addition to traditional media channels to post announcements, positive news releases, and generate traffic to the department’s website.

According to the department's policy, although the department has been trying to build connections online, the compositions of whom it's following and its followers are concentrated on officials and organizations in the same area. Therefore, the department finds it is challenging to making new connections with a broader range of target audiences.

"And this policy talks about who will follow. Generally we saying like we follow other DHS accounts, accounts at federal, state, and local governments, you know the other state agencies we follow. We also follow county services agencies." (Interview 1)

"It doesn't say that we have to. It just says the DHS will follow, and subscribe, whatever, with other accounts like federal, state government (agencies), elected officials, acting official capacity, media organizations, reporters, and other partner agencies, which we get grant money from." (Interview 1)

The department also opened its Facebook account in December 2014. The Facebook page has generated 744 likes in total. Similar to Twitter, the majority of posts focus on topics related to children and families. More than 70% of the posts contain photos, images, or stories but have generated very few replies. Comparing to Twitter, Facebook has been used less frequently out of the concern for uncontrolled reactions from the public.

"... there has been little hesitation in the department worrying about, I guess, the social aspect of the social media, like the comments people might have." (Interview 1)

MDH-Network Strategy

In comparison to MDHS, the Department of Health is on the more active end of social media use among state government agencies. MDH started using social media with Facebook in 2009, and Facebook in 2011. All the social media profile accounts use recognized, official, and

trademarked MDH logos, and have linkages to the MDH's website. The bottom-up social media initiatives were starting among employees and supported by the management team.

“It was mostly employees that were using Facebook at the beginning. You know, they were wondering why we don't work on Facebook. And other agencies and organizations are also using Facebook” (Interview 2)

As one of the early adopters, the department runs on multiple platforms with different objectives. Until May 2015, MDH's Facebook has accumulated 3324 page likes, becoming one of the most liked state department page. The feature of Facebook is that it provides a place for people to conduct open conversations under certain topics. To generate discussions, MDH uses videos, images, and stories to build emotional connections with its audiences. Among all the posts originally created by MDH, 16% (856/ 2,446) contain photos, accounting for 53% (3,662/ 11909) of the total likes.

As to engagement with citizens, significant growth in the number of retweet is a good indicator of engagement and interactions because it means that messages are disseminated broadly. At the same time, it shows that increasing numbers of people are paying attention to the government's online activities and participating in open conversations through sharing information on their own timelines. Different from MDHS's conservative attitudes, interviewees in MDH hold positive attitudes toward public participation and value both good and bad feedback from citizens.

“Even if there is negative comments out there, or there is something negative, we at least have somebody takes a notice of our department. And they may not have been really familiar with us before” (Interview 2)

"There always a certain amount of risks in the public forums because basically everybody can comment, and they do. We get some of thoughts, but at least there is an engagement, people are aware of something." (Interview 3)

Risks lie in open conversations with citizens because some of the issues that MDH deals with are controversial. For example the Newborn Screening program. Newborn Screening does genetic tests for newborn babies, which raises controversies about the data that have been collected, stored, and the changes in law. Although the department is open-minded in building relationships with citizens, especially new parents, it still holds the concern to avoid direct conversations regarding sensitive and controversial issues.

"Even if putting out the name Newborn Screening would cause negative comments because of that association, so we didn't directly try to talk about those issues but we didn't avoid to talk about the Newborn Screening organizations because of the fear of that."

In addition, MDH is also one of the few agencies investing funding in outsourcing social media services to a third-party company (e.g., Gov. delivery), to help monitor social media trends and manage operations. The department also has specific grants to support paid service, such as the use of Twitter ads for promotions during the flu seasons.

Influential factors

To answer the second research question: what factors affect an agency's choice of social media strategy? This section provides details and discussion regarding key influential factors related to issues of technology, policy, organizational structure, and management; and explains how those factors interact to determine an agency's particular way of using social media.

Their choices of social media strategies differ widely. The main characteristics of their current strategies are summarized below (Table1), which shows that the social media strategies of the two state agencies differ on many dimensions. These dimensions are not independent. Factors of external environment, policy, organizational structure, management, and technology are intrinsically connected in determining the agency's social media strategy.

Table1. Overview of the social media strategies		
	MDHS: Push Strategy	MDH: Network Strategy
Major function	Disseminate information out to the public; connect with partner organizations and stakeholders	Informational posts; public education; public response; public healthcare campaign
Objective	Branding: build and maintain positive social image	Engagement: become more accessible and interactive with citizens
Legal and policy issues	In the process of policy development and approval	Have developed internal use policy
Organizational structure	Centralized arrangement and collect information from divisions	Centralized but oftentimes divisions are actual players contributing to planning and execution
Management	Short-term goal; Limited tasks: mainly disclosure public information; Limited personnel; Simple team decision	Clear goal Diverse tasks: Interactions and engagements aligned with division tasks; Limited time commitment; Team decision with clear roles and responsibilities
Information and Technology	Mainly use Twitter, no Facebook	Multiple platforms, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, used separately for different purposes; Paid service: GovDelivery, Twitter Advertising

Information technology factors

Both the MDHS and the MDH have more than two years of social media history and use at least one social media applications, and Twitter is the major social media presence and has been used most frequently in the two agencies. One major similarity is that they both have adequate ICT infrastructure and receive equivalent technical support from the Minnesota's Information Technology Services (MN.IT Services). As the central state IT agency, MN.IT Services provides information technology support to the state of Minnesota's executive branches by assigning IT professionals to agency-based offices. These MN.IT professionals work collaboratively with communication staff but only assist with technical issues such as web design and maintenance. Since popular social media tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) are well developed third-party platforms, which require limited professional IT knowledge, the communication staff from the respective agencies are the main implementers of the agencies' social media operation. Therefore, it's reasonable to believe that the main differences in their social media capacity did not result from ICT infrastructure.

Legal and regulatory factors

Both MDH and MDHS have developed internal social media policies. These policies define the scope of official social media implementation, regulate the posts, and distinguish organizational use from personal use. Some items are specifically tailored to the agency's online environment, including whom to follow, whom to be friends with, and which sensitive contents should be voided. However, interviewees from both agencies believe that there is a major problem with the complicated and slow bureaucratic approval process.

“For example, our lawyers won't allow us to have a YouTube channel because of the term of use agreement. There is a specialized agreement for state agencies, but that is not really a technology problem but out of legal and policy concerns”

“We have applied for it (a new social media platform) but I would worry when it would be accepted to get different licensing agreements for each department.”

According to the interviews, it is not the absence of policy instruments that slows down social media development, but the complicated policy applications going through third-parties that impedes the progress of social media in state government agencies.

“We wanted a Facebook two years even before we actually got it because we cannot apply by ourselves. We have to go through the overall application as we use it as MDH employees.” (Interviewee2 and 3)

If an agency wants to create a new social media account, it has to apply through the IT department. MN.IT will sign separate contracts with third-party social media technology providers to make sure the use of social media meets the requirements of government’s privacy and security requirements. Waiting for policy approval can often last several months or even half a year, which is way too long for an agency to keep up with trends in the constantly changing social media environment. That explains why social media implementation is still an emerging technology to many agencies while it has been used maturely in private sector for long time.

Organizational factors

As shown in the Table 1 that both departments utilized centralized communication structure. The communication staffs at the central office operate system, review contents, and make decisions on connecting with target users. A centralized organizational structure is believed as a joint effort of organizational decision, which makes sure the online contents are consistent within the department and cross multiple social media platforms. So far, most interviewees from the divisions have been satisfied with their collaboration with central communication office.

“I think having a centralized approach to social media is a good one for our agency. It ensures consistency in our messages about a wide variety of programs and services.”

“We get our messages out through a variety of sources, not only social media. We issue news releases, post information on our website, send out tweets, contact reporters directly, publish brochures and fact sheets, host meetings and events, and meet with partners and providers.” (Interviewee 4)

Although the two departments have numbers of divisions that cover a wide range of public services, if we take a look at the contents presented on both departments’ Facebook and Twitter platforms, the majority of them are created by only a few divisions. Both MDHS and MDH have high proportions of contents related to children and families. Among MDH’s nearly 30 programs, Newborn Screening and Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention and Control provide about 40% of the social media contents. Since July 2013, the Newborn Screening division has contributed more than 100 unique posts to the MDH’s Twitter regarding its tasks. As one of the largest divisions at the Department of Health, Newborn Screening has a unique task to specifically targeting new families and young parents. It also created a social media team made up of representatives from each section of its program, and formed a strategic plan with clear goals, division of work, decision making process, and executive routine. A recent innovative activity they initiated on Twitter was encouraging people to upload pictures of kids’ Halloween costumes. It was not only a fun and interactive approach to reach out to its target audience, but also an innovative way to humanize the program, given its controversial public image.

Although the divisional staffs indicated that *“the department overall will be benefit from having broader audiences but to divisions a narrowed scope of target audiences and specific communication objectives will be more beneficial”*, and the chief communication staff at central

office admitted that divisions are more active and innovative in leveraging the power of social media, the communication staffs at divisions refused to answer the question whether they would like to operate separate Facebook and Twitter accounts. One concern regarding the resources allocation and personnel is that *“whether or not that is good to use state money to have a full time person in every single division.”*(Interview 4)

Management factors

The two departments set different goals of using social media. MDHS’s currently uses social media as an information board to build a positive image of the department, and send the message out and generate traffics to the department’s main webpage. MDH set a higher goal of pursuing engagement and interactivities with citizens through online channels. As one interviewee at MDH indicated that their communication goal is, *“to provide availability for citizens whether they want to ask questions or find out information. No matter what forms we use, that’s the goal, accessible to public.”* (Interview 2) As agencies are getting more and more comfortable with social media, their goals would move away from simply pushing news releases to providing opportunities for engagement.

“I think initially, it was probably just (about) start using another tool that was out there. More recently, the goal has been more (on) engagement, that’s probably always the goal of social media, trying to get engagement.” (Interview 2)

As to the attitudes toward citizen engagement, one reason for less engagement is the lack of designated staff working with social media. No full-time employee is specifically working on social media in both MDHS and MDH. Comparing to traditional public relation and communication work, maintaining social media platforms only consists of a very small

percentage workload of communication staffs. Therefore, they are not able to invest sufficient time to conduct online audience analysis, evaluate social media traffics, or maintain a two – way communication with citizens.

“Myself and others are doing it as a part of other jobs. The biggest barrier is that there is no one person can devote enough time to working on social media. We have multiple platforms, the expectation is that we can have someone who has that time dedicated to social media.”

(Interview 2)

Previous studies also indicate that government agency’s limited online interactions were due to insufficient knowledge of information techniques and inability to interpret data (Human Capital Institute, 2010; Zheng, 2013). However, this is not the most important reason for the relatively under-realized use of social media in the Department of Human Service. In fact, MDHS officials intentionally avoid using social media to create in-depth interactions with citizens because the department does not involve with the direct citizen contact. Most of its human service programs are carried out by county and city level human service agencies where citizens will go for specific questions or information.

“Even if they ask us questions, we will still tell them to go to the website or ask their county for specific questions,” as indicated by the interviewee (Interview 1).

For example, as one of the important partners of MDHS, Hennepin County Human Services offers help for Hennepin County residents with a variety of programs, from financial assistance to children and family support, which are corresponding to the services and programs provided at the MDHS with greater details and instructions. For instance, both state and county website have information about SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). MDHS lists key information about this program but the Hennepin County Human Service website shows

details, including online application procedure, locations of offices, finding an interpreter, training and other contact information, to assist low income community members to access the program.

Comparing to the state department, county human services agencies show more direct interactions with citizens online because the work they do are closely related to their communities. It makes more sense for citizens to participate in online activities such as survey or discussion with county level agencies because their feedback can be used to improve the local government services more efficiently.

“Suburban county residents: Help rank housing and public service needs in your community with this 15-min survey: <http://bit.ly/1Caf6Zz> ” (Hennepin County, 2015)

*“*Really* impressed by @Hennepin Service Center in #Ridgedale. Scheduled an appt. online - worked like a charm! Thanks for the great service!” (Winegar, 2015)*

Therefore, instead of overinvesting to social media, the department decided to deliver messages through multiple channels to foster transparency and accountability.

“We get our messages out through a variety of sources, not only social media. We issue news releases, post information on our website, contact reporters directly, publish brochures and fact sheets, host meetings and events, and meet with partners and providers.” (Interview 4)

Discussion

The two configurations are differentiated in some key features, which are mostly associated with organizational and managerial issues, which echoes the results from previous literature review. It is important to generate a comprehensive understanding of the unique characteristics of social media as a communications tool that foster the government and citizen

relationship. This paper, therefore, identifies the following three questions that need to be concerned by government agencies when deciding what organizational, managerial, and operational structures are necessary to create effective social media strategies.

Single-standard vs. Mission-oriented

While previous studies emphasize that social media is an innovative approach to creating open governments featuring transparency, collaboration, and participation, oftentimes it has been assumed that all government agencies would make similar efforts to create an open and participatory environment. As indicated in the case studies of MDH and MDHS, government agencies have different priorities in their engagement strategies with social media applications. A state agency's social media use is largely related to its mission. MDH has its mission of protecting, maintaining and improving the health of all Minnesotans. With more than 30 programs covering every aspect of people's health and wellbeing, MDH has the obligations to educate the general public and increase their health awareness. Therefore, social media is an effective reach-out tool for public campaign. MDHS, on the other hand, indicate in its mission that "working with many others, including countries, tribes and nonprofits, DHS helps ensure that Minnesota seniors, people with disabilities, children and others meet their basic needs and have the opportunity to reach their full potential." (What we do, 2015). This statement implies that most of the human services that the general public would get involved with are provided by MDHS' partners, while the major obligation of MDHS is to set legislative agenda of human service policies. Therefore, the department has legitimate reasons not to overinvest time and resources for a two-way, direct communication with the public as the connections between citizens and MDHS are less strong than it is with county level agencies and other human services organizations. According to these cases, both MDH and MDHS design their social media

strategies in line with the agency's interest, objective, and political agenda. Therefore, it is not reasonable and practical to ask for a homogeneous use of social media without understanding an agency's particular situation. Instead of requiring all the departments to pursue a same degree of citizen engagement on social media, a more effective and practical social media strategy should be in alignment with the organization's actual need based on its mission.

Centralized vs. Decentralized

The findings of the interviews outline mixed conclusions about having a centralized or decentralized social media arrangement. On the positive side, divisions have specific tasks, and targeted audiences. Although the organizational arrangements in the two state agencies are both centralized, a limited number of divisions are the actual contributors to content creation, and citizen relationship building. Managing separate accounts gives divisions more flexibility to decide who to interact with, and what kinds of contents being shared, which would result in more in-depth and effective public participation. Having a centralized account is useful in pulling aggregated followers to a social media application. However, its ability to target specific audiences might be limited.

On the negative side, governmental accounts need to go through separate legal clearance with a third-party social media provider. Having more than one account for each department raises more policy issues, such as extra contracts, security of data and information, and risk control. In addition, maintaining more accounts requires more public resources. Although many divisions can benefit from their own accounts, evaluating the qualifications of separate accounts is necessary, which is heavily dependent on the division's specific mission as well as its staff capacity.

The goal and target audience in divisions are more narrowed other than the department's overall goal and target audience. Since divisions have specific tasks that are directly connected with the public, it is not surprising that they would sooner require more advanced social media applications to build symmetric communication with citizens. At this point, a decentralized approach would be necessary to meet communication demands from the public.

Regular use vs. Case-focused

Although using social media on a regular basis can be a good practice to improve government transparency, it is hard to measure the engagement based on daily use. A better approach to generate citizen engagement with low cost is through social media campaign.

Social media campaigns have strong short-term effects, which is much interactive and in line with specific political agenda (Lance and Shanto 2008). Social media campaigns are generally free or relatively low cost compared to other forms of campaigns. Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention and Control (IDEPC) division within MDH is a good example of using social media to launch public health campaigns. Last year, they collaborated with Mayo Clinic and StarTribune to launch an awareness campaign during the flu season. By using hashtag #fluchat and employing advanced Twitter service, this campaign created 6,183,635 impressions and reached 214 average tweets per hour. 78 participants from the agency, partner organizations, news media, university and general public actively joined the online conversation. The agency has been receiving positive feedback from the public on events like this. This is a good example of government agencies deliberately seeking interactions with citizens. "It is important that an organization maintain a regular Twitter presence, but it is not necessary to update your Twitter

status hourly” (Waters and Williams 2011). A focused approach might be more effective at integrating limited resources and maximizing the potential of social media.

Conclusion

This study examines the social media strategies adopted by state government through scrutinizing the social media use of two Minnesota state agencies. In order to gain an understanding of agencies’ choices, the study used different interview techniques to find out key factors affecting the agencies’ social media strategies. The findings reveal that MDHS, as a representative of push strategy adopter, is still at the beginning stage of using social media. Meanwhile, MDH, as one of the sophisticated social media users among state agencies, shows higher-level interaction and engagement with citizens. Among key factors affecting government use of social media, technology is not the major reason causing different usages. Organizational and managerial factors are more closely related to how an agency selects certain social media strategies. Governmental use of social media also creates policy challenges, as the term of user agreement has to address data and privacy issues, which results in a slow approval procedure. Based on the findings, this paper also addressed several concerns when designing social media strategies in state government. First, a successful social media plan should be specifically tailored to its needs, which are in line with the organization’s mission, function, and resources allocation. Second, compared to the central communication department of each respective agency, the agency’s divisions may have more flexibility in using social media to reach target and diverse audiences. Third, in addition regular administrative use, social media may work more effectively in public campaigns.

Some recommendations for future development and implementation of social media strategies are:

1. Government agencies need to reexamine mission, expectation, and resources allocation in order to make sure their social media strategy fit with actual needs. This is a common sense but is oftentimes neglected by agencies. Building social media capacity by effectively using public resources, instead of blindly following popular trend, is also a good way to show the government agency's social responsibility and accountability.
2. Be aware of the target audience. Since government agencies will not and cannot follow back every follower, finding target audiences and building reciprocal relationship with them is important. Divisions could have more advantages in narrow down target audience through direct contacts. Therefore, the central communications department should work collaboratively with divisions on to how to best use the data.
3. Accelerate policy procedure to meet growing social media development. Social media is a user-generated tool. As new social media applications and services emerge in market, accelerated policy instruments are needed to meet the growing needs of sophisticated social media use.

Certain limitations of this study need to be acknowledged. This study only uses two government agencies in the Minnesota state government. All care has been given to choose two representative agencies. Given that social media has been widely adopted by states in the U.S., it would be amplify the sample size and compare examples of social media use among government agencies across several states. In addition, for pragmatic reasons, citizen's perspective was not studied in this paper, which can be a limitation because citizen's evaluation is a critical

measurement of a successful social media strategy. While this comparative case study provides only a small glimpse into the factors that affect the current social media strategies adopted in statewide government agencies, it supports the ideas in the previous literature that the most influential important factors are associated with organizational and managerial issue. This study further raised questions about appropriateness and effectiveness of using a particular kind of social media strategies regarding the organization's actual needs and capacities. Therefore, this study can serve as a base for future studies on how to develop a social media strategy that best meet the mission of the agency and the needs of its target audiences. In the future, the use of multiple research methods, such as the addition of empirical analysis is encouraged to quantify the performance of government's online communication and public participation.

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Appendix 1. Coding Instructions

- My coding book is generated from the theories in previous studies and the data I collected for this study. The first part is deductive theory-driven codes. It is built upon the theory of “Key Factors Affecting Government IT Initiatives” from the previous literature. I employed those key concepts as main coding categories.

Contextual factors (F1)

Interviewees talked about general context contributing to their adoption of social media strategies. Requirements from the "Open government" Act, popularity of social media, and concerns about social reactions have been discussed.

F1-OG: Requirements from the Open Government Act, which asks governments to be transparent, collaborative and participatory.

F1-Pop: The popularity of social media

F1-SR: social response to government

Legal and regulatory (F2)

Policies are designed by each agency based on its own situation. There is a clear boundary between personal and organizational use of social media. Restrictive policies and regulations slow down the development of social media use in government agencies.

F2-IP: Policies on internal use and personal use of social media

F2-GP: Policies on the government official use of social media

Organizational (F3)

Interviewees make direct and specific references to organizational structure and arrangement of social media.

F3-decentr: decentralized arrangement. The department has more than one official account.

Divisions also have and manage their own account.

F3-centr: centralized arrangement. The department only use one official social media account.

F3-CM: communication team/ staff members

F3-IC: Internal collaboration between central office and its divisions, or between one division to another within the department

F3-EC: External collaboration with other departments, news media, nonprofits, business, celebrities or other organizations or individuals out of the department

Managerial (F4)

This category focuses on management issues associated government social media strategies. Key issues are related to goals and planning, designated personnel, budget, and decision-making process.

F4-Goal: the department has Clear and realistic goals of using social media

F4- DM: Decision-making process of how to use social media

F4-Budget

F4-Task: what does the agency do on social media?

F4- MM: maintain and manage social media platforms (update news/ pictures; monitor replies; etc.)

Technology (F5)

This refers to the organization's technological ability of using social media. Important factors include technological complexity, compatibility, technical skills and expertise.

F5-IT: Technology, facilitates, equipment (computer/ laptop/ Internet)

F5-EX: IT experts, IT staffs

F5-TL: Social media tools, third-party social media analytics, outsourcing social media management service

F5-INV: Other innovative technologies used on the org's social media platforms

- I noticed that some frequently occurred words and phrases were not identified in the theory-driven code. Therefore, the second part of my code book is inductive and generated from my interview data. I particularly care about what concerns government when using social media to create public participation.

Attitudes toward Citizen Participation / Engagement (AP)

AP+: positive

AP-: negative

Challenge/risks/barrier (Challenge)

Challenges are coded when interviewees talking about their worries in general, or when discussing a specific key factor affecting their social media strategies.

Accomplishment / Improvement (Success)

When interviewees talk about successful examples of their social media use; or talk about making progress in using social media.