

## **Government Public Relations and Social Media: An Analysis of the Perceptions and Trends of Social Media Use at the Local Government Level**

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*Using survey data collected from 463 local government officials from municipalities across the United States, this study examines the use of social media tools by local governments and their perceptions of social media use by their citizenry. It specifically addresses how social media are used as public relations functions to serve democratic, participatory, and transparency models across a range of government contexts. Results indicate that social media are somewhat underutilized by local governments, with about a 70% overall use rate. Perceived importance of social media predicted actual use; however, it was disappointing to find that these officials' perceptions of whether or not their citizens expected them to use social media did not predict use. Facebook and Twitter were the most commonly used tools; the vast majority of posts and tweets they write are about special events. Well over one-third used at least one research or conferencing social media tool. Implications and importance of findings are discussed.*

A social media presence is a trademark of a vibrant and transparent communications strategy, and, to that end, social media offer particular utility to local government public relations. Social media tools can improve interactivity between a government and the public, and they reach populations that do not consume traditional media as frequently as others (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010). This new technology allows officials in government to build relationships with key stakeholders, namely the citizens it represents. The relationship-building potential of social media is especially valuable for public relations professionals since building relationships is at the core of public relations (Ledingham, 2003). Additionally, social media can enhance governments' abilities to interact with and engage citizens as well as to meet their expectations for transparency. Practitioners in government public relations have more tools to engage and communicate with the public than ever before. A recent survey showed that two-thirds of online adults use social media platforms (Smith, 2011). In addition, 40% of Internet users go online for data about government operations, and social media users are more tied to civic groups (Raine, 2011).

Social media offer great opportunities for local governments. The open, dialogic nature of social media eliminates many of the barriers in communication that these governments have experienced in the past (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Communication with constituents can be more frequent, open, and targeted. Historically, governments have relied heavily on traditional mass media to disseminate public information (Dixon, 2010). The advent of blogs, podcasts, and social networks provides government officials the means to communicate directly with their publics without the intervention of editors and reporters, who can act as gatekeepers or censors of information (Smith, 2010). In addition, with declining newspaper readership, the quality of local coverage of news and information

could be waning (Kingsley, 2011), thereby forcing officials to find new outlets to reach their publics. In the past, governments have had to rely almost exclusively on traditional media (Dixon, 2010), specifically newspapers, television, and radio, to get information to citizens. Because of this, governments had limited control over what was disseminated to publics and when it would be distributed. The boom of the Internet and particularly social media has changed the landscape for communications. Traditional media are now not the only source of public government information influencing public thought and discourse. Additionally, traditional media accommodate a one-way communication model, but a one-way power over news generation and dissemination is largely obsolete (Shirky, 2008). The fundamental difference between social and traditional mainstream media is the user-to-user format as opposed to top-down news dissemination (Clark & Aufderheide, 2009). With social media, users are able to post, share, and republish information easily and quickly. Social media are a rapidly moving and vigorous domain (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is crucial for organizations to have strategies in place for utilizing social media. This research evaluates the use of social media by local municipalities and addresses the opportunities and challenges that government officials face in incorporating this new technology into their communication plans.

The use of social media in the public sector has become a hot topic recently, and administrators are beginning to embrace them to encourage civic engagement and build community. At the federal level, the General Services Administration recently hired a highly regarded social media pro to, among other duties, coordinate the GSA's "internal social media initiatives with Twitter, You Tube and Challenge.gov" (Kash, 2012). Fostering more open and transparent government and creating new methods for democratic participation are just a few of the potential benefits offered to governments through the interactive and instant capabilities of social media (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010).

The transformative capabilities that social media can bring to governments are significant (Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, & Glaisyer, 2010). As user-generated media, social media allow public relations practitioners in government the ability to inform and to seek input and opinions from relevant publics (Hand & Ching, 2011). Despite the enormous value social media offer government-citizen relations, there is scant research on the extent to which local governments are actually using social media to inform and engage publics. Given the extraordinary growth and popularity of social media over the past few years, it is important to evaluate if governments are using this technology to communicate with their publics and how government leaders are incorporating it into their communication plans. Social media are transforming the way organizations communicate with their publics, and governments are not exempt from societal pressures to make use of them. This exploratory research provides an important review of social media use in local governments to inform future research on how social media serve democratic, participatory, and transparency models across a range of government contexts. In *Political Public Relations* (2011), Stromback and Kiouisis address the need for additional research and theory building in the growing area of political public relations, which is informed by research in political communication, public affairs, marketing, political science, and public relations. Political public relations can best be understood as a management process by which an organization or individual uses purposeful communication for political purposes and seeks to influence, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics (Stromback & Kiouisis, 2011). This research explores

government communication, which Stromback and Kiouisis (2011) believe is a major part of the political public relations domain. Specific research questions explore the adoption and use of social media tools by local governments and local government officials' perceptions of social media. We first review the literature on governments and social media and the opportunities it provides them in promoting democracy, increasing participation, and promoting transparency. A national survey of 463 local government officials from a national sample representing 48 of 50 states reveals trends and considerations that will inform future social media research in the political public relations domain as well as government practitioners' audits of how their own use compares. Specifically, this study will look at whether local governments use social media, the specific social media tools they are using, and their attitudes toward adoption and use.

## **Literature Review**

Organizations and public relations professionals recognize the benefits of social media across all industries. A recent survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America revealed that 82% of the respondents' organizations use social media (Wigley & Zhang, 2011). Furthermore, respondents indicated that the stakeholders they communicate with most frequently are potential clients, 71%, and the news media, 61%. These findings are consistent with past assertions by Taylor and Doerfel (2003), who reported that online communication is becoming a necessity for organizations, which are quickly incorporating them into their communication and operating plans.

The term social media includes a range of tools and services that all enable direct user interaction online. Sweetster and Lariscy (2008) define social media as "centered around the concept of a read-write web, where the online audience moves beyond the passive viewing of web content to actually contributing to the content" (p. 179). Put simply, social media encompass anything that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations and most often take the form of social networking sites, blogs, and Wikis (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). This basic understanding of social media was used to guide this study.

A recent social media study by Wright and Hinson (2010) found that most public relations professionals believe social media tools were beneficial to their organizations. Specifically, 77% of respondents indicated social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn were important, 65% believed micro-blogging sites such as Twitter were important, 65% believed video sharing sites such as YouTube were important, and 57% believed blogs were important. Public relations professionals largely view social media as a "cost effective way to receive greater reach for research and timely targeted dialogue" (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011, p. 327). In addition, public relations practitioners in Fortune 500 companies believe that one of the most important functions of social media is "getting attention focused on an issue" (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetster, & Howes, 2009, p. 13). Practitioners also use social media tools to promote ideas and activities and engage in a two-way dialogue with publics (Avery, Sweetster, & Lariscy, 2010). However, while social media present many positive opportunities for organizations, challenges remain that must be addressed.

A recent study that interviewed public relations executives about the impact of social media in their organizations found the lack of control to be the primary limitation of social

media use (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011). Participation in social media makes organizations vulnerable to both internal and external crises. On an internal level, organizations have to be concerned about online behavior that could potentially damage the brand, such as criticism of management, intellectual property leakages, and embarrassing employee behavior; externally, criticism, false information postings, and rogue activist groups can cause considerable harm (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011). Of course, the many advantages of using social media have established their longevity in public relations communication plans.

### **Dialogue on Social Media**

A strategic framework for creating dialogic relationships with publics through the Internet was provided by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) more than a decade ago. Dialogue is “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325) and represents efforts by those involved in a relationship to participate in an open and honest exchange. This perspective is attuned with the current thinking about the role communication plays in relationship building, where healthy relationships between an organization and its stakeholders are cultivated through communication managed by public relations practitioners (Ledingham, 2003). The current, “socially informed” generation, expects dialogue, and governments at all levels are being compelled to shift their views of citizens from mainly consumers to active participants by allowing citizens to contribute online to the development of governments (Azyan, 2012); these benefits and expectations are realized in other organizational contexts as well.

### **Social Media and Nonprofits**

Much of the literature on the adoption of social media has focused on nonprofits (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), perhaps because of social media’s ability to offer organizations with particularly limited budgets a low-cost platform for dialogic communication with their publics. A 2010 study of public relations practitioners in the nonprofit sector revealed that social media tools are becoming beneficial methods of communication and that organizations with defined public relations departments are more likely to adopt social media technologies and use them to accomplish organizational goals (Curtis, Edwards, Fraser, Gudelsky, Holmquist, Thornton, & Sweetster, 2010). Additionally, the American Red Cross has been successful in using social media to build relationships, specifically with younger constituents, the media, and the community (Briones, Kucj, Liu, & Jin, 2011). In contrast, there is evidence that public relations practitioners in health departments have been slower to adopt social media technologies, and there are significant differences in adoption rates based on the size of the community (Avery et al., 2010). Urban communities exhibit the highest adoption rates, followed by suburban, large town, and rural communities. Additionally, among those who used social media to disseminate health information, the most commonly used tools were social networking sites (Avery et al., 2010). Similar to the nonprofits that often have limited monetary resources, local governments can also benefit from the inexpensive, yet massive audience reach that social media provide. Thus, it is pressing to reveal whether they are following the frequent use trends marked in nonprofits or if their adoption rates have been slower, similar to their government counterparts at public health departments.

## **Government Public Relations and Transparency**

Communicators who have worked in government often note that developing communications strategies for government organizations is different than for business or non-profit organizations; Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) propose that while the general principles are the same for all organizations, “the specific conditions to which the principles must be applied are different” (p. 219). The creation of the government decision wheel supports this claim. Liu and Horsley (2007) offer a theoretical approach to examining the differences between corporate and government communication practices with their introduction of the government communication decision wheel. They assert that the public sector environment creates unique challenges and opportunities that differentiate the practice of public relations from the private sector. Challenges and opportunities include: politics, public good, legal constraints, devaluation of communication, poor public perceptions, lagging professional development, and federalism (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Moreover, Sanders (2011), observed three key themes in research regarding government communication: the role of power, the relationship to and the role of the news media, and normative questions related to government communications purpose and performance in constitutional democracies.

In this era of increased government scrutiny and mistrust by citizens, transparency is essential to effective government relations (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Transparency is defined as the availability of information on matters of public concern, the ability of citizens to participate in political decision-making, and the accountability of government to public opinion (Cotterrell, 1999). According to Piotrowski (2007), governmental transparency allows the public to develop a more accurate picture of what is happening in government, which allows citizens to hold governments accountable and evaluate performances of government agencies.

Concise and purposeful communication between a government and its citizens is a pragmatic practice as well as a moral obligation that derives from the principles of democracy (Viteritti, 1997). To address the need for enhanced transparency in public organizations, Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins (2007) developed a model with commitment to transparent communication processes as its foundation. The key elements of the model are communication practices, organizational support, and the provision of resources. The most important part of a public communication model, according to Heise (1985), is for governments to communicate in an open, honest, and timely way with their publics, without manipulating the information they share. The Internet and particularly social media offer great opportunity to that end.

## **E-government and Social Media**

The use of the Internet by governments to communicate with citizens is certainly not new; often referred to as “e-government,” these initiatives include all online communications and activities by governments (Dixon, 2010). The e-government paradigm is well suited for this era of networking and governance with an emphasis on users as partners in governance (Anttiroiko, 2004). A key component of e-government is e-democracy, which can be promoted by engaging social media’s ability to interact directly with citizens. E-democracy is an emerging concept that denotes the transformation of citizen involvement

in democratic and purposeful processes (Stayaert, 2000) and can be mediated by social networking media. The classic theories of democracy distinguish among pluralist, representative, and direct theories of democracy. Norris (2004) outlines the differences in the competing democratic theories and their relation to e-government and e-democracy. The key attributes of pluralist theory are that elections are important to garner accountability and legitimacy of government and that a robust civil society is the key to the resilience and effectiveness of a democracy. New technologies reduce the cost of sharing and receiving information from constituents. Under the representative theory of democracy, democratic governance occurs through citizen representatives. New technologies can improve representation by allowing citizens the ability to evaluate the records of governments and elected officials and by providing the means for citizens to interact directly with government officials. Direct theory proposes that democracy works best when people are directly involved in policy debate, actions, and decisions. Citizens who are disengaged can become re-engaged through the use of new technologies; e-democracy can “overcome space and time constraints on public involvement, as well as those associated with status differentials, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and wealth” (Scott, 2006, p. 344).

Bryer & Zavattaro (2011) note that government public administrators are engaging social media similar to their active use of the e-government and e-democracy platforms. Social networking applications and social media, in large part because of their ease of use, have become instruments of communication and change and should be expected to have a significant impact on government communication for the foreseeable future. A recent review of the literature concerning social media’s impact on e-government initiatives in the public sector by Mangro (2012) found that defining an ultimate goal for e-government, changes in government culture, and resource management are needed before governments can achieve success in the use of social media.

Hand and Ching (2011) examined local governments’ in the Phoenix metropolitan areas use of social media and found that “using social media at the local government level seems to offer promise of increased citizen engagement, reaching citizens on a common platform, and allowing for citizen comments” (p. 379). A similar study by Bonson, Torres, Royo and Flores (2012) that looked at local governments in Europe found that many governments have realized the opportunities that social media present and that by making their news available through social media they can vastly increase their audience reach at very little cost. In addition, local governments are using social media tools to enhance transparency, but the use of social media to promote e-participation with citizens is still underused. Research has unveiled who those using social media are more likely to be, though.

### **Predictors of Social Media Use**

Previous research has shown an association between an individual’s age and adaptability and adoption of new technology (Pew Internet and the American Life Project, 2004, 2008; Olson, O’Brien, Rogers, & Charness, 2011). Youth is positively correlated with extent of new technology use; however, there is evidence of that gap in trend rates narrowing. This same relationship might also apply to local government officials’ and their citizens’ use of social media. The predominant users of social networking sites are young adults, and

three-quarters of adult Internet users under age 25 have social networking site profiles (Lenhart, 2009). Moreover, the recent popularity of these sites has attracted more and more older adult users. In 2005, only 8% of adult Internet users had a profile on a social networking site; in 2009, that number had increased to 35% (Lenhart, 2009). Age emerged as the single strongest predictor of social networking use in a recent health communication study by Chou et al. (2009); adults ages 18-34 were the highest users of social networking sites. Therefore, health communication programs utilizing social media must consider the age of the targeted population to ensure messages reach the intended audiences (Chou et al., 2009).

Little empirical research exists on the use of social media by local governments, and this study expands that knowledge base. As citizens often believe they can have the biggest impact at the local level of government, it is important to see if and how this new technology is being used to communicate with publics. In the United States, social networking accounts for 11% of all time spent online, and it is one of the most engaging activities across the web (Center for Media Research, 2009). Social media's implications for government leaders are powerful and can transform the way governments communicate with their publics, and this study takes an initial step in understanding their current use rates and trends.

## **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The following questions are asked and hypothesis made to better understand usage of social media by local governments to communicate with their publics. As governments' interactions with citizens and online presence evolve beyond a static website, citizens are offered enhanced opportunities to communicate with local governments in a multitude of online arenas including social media, while governments are given the chance to improve transparency. As nearly one-third of online adults report using online social media sites to get information about government agencies or officials (Pew, 2010), it is critical to develop a broader understanding of how governments are taking advantage of the opportunities social media grant them. The following research questions and hypothesis were developed to analyze the use of and attitudes about social media among local governments.

**RQ1:** To what extent do local government officials use social media to reach their publics?

**H1:** Higher levels of perceived social media importance by local government officials and perceived citizen expectations for use will significantly predict local governments' social media use.

**RQ2:** Is there a relationship between age and social media use among local government officials?

**RQ3:** What is the nature of Facebook use (reasons for use, frequency of posts, extent of monitoring, content of posts, dialog on walls, and advertising) among city government officials?

**RQ4:** What is the nature of Twitter use (reasons for use, frequency of tweets, extent of monitoring, age of account, and content of tweets) among city government officials?

This study expands existing literature and yields important considerations for public relations practitioners, government officials, analysts, and scholars.

## **Methods**

### **Survey Administration**

In order to investigate local governments' use of social media, a private survey research firm that specializes in local government and public policy research administered a national survey to its database of more 3,552 local government officials, comprising a national sample generated through direct human research using the Internet and by finding publicly available email addresses on city websites. Although every local government is not represented in the original sample, great efforts were made to insure a broad range of geography and community types is represented in the sampling frame. Large metropolitan areas with offices where email is unlikely to reach qualified officials were called to establish contacts. The firm was selected based on this ability to reach the most broad and representative sample of government offices that serve a wide range of population sizes and are diverse in the form of their governments (mayor, manager, commission, etc.). Following IRB protocol, participants were first sent a solicitation email that requested their participation. If they chose to click on the survey link, participants were first asked to read a statement of informed consent then notified that by clicking to continue the survey they were expressing their consent. The survey data were stripped of identifying information and entered into an Excel file prior to being given to the researchers. Data were then entered into SPSS for analysis after being cleaned and screened.

### **Participants**

A total of 463 government officials from different municipalities participated in the survey about their social media use, representing a 13% completed survey response rate. This rate exceeded industry averages for the firm and does not include participants who did not pass the screening question, which would make the overall click rate higher. There were a broad range of job titles, including: assistant city manager, chief information officer, chief of staff, city clerk, city manager, communication coordinator, director of public affairs, mayor, member of council, public information officer, public relations coordinator, town clerk, and village president. Both administrators and communications personnel were included in the sample so that offices without a full-time public information officer were not neglected. Regardless of title, participants were screened for suitability prior to participating by asking if they were capable of answering questions accurately and thoroughly about their cities' social media use. The age breakdown of participants is as follows: 18-24 ( $n = 2$ , .4%), 25-34 ( $n = 35$ , 8%), 35-44 ( $n = 81$ , 18%), 45-54 ( $n = 131$ , 28%), 55-64 ( $n = 152$ , 33%), 65 and above ( $n = 55$ , 12%), and 7 participants (1.5%) who preferred not to provide their ages. Participation requests were sent to local government officials in all 50 states, and there are representatives from 48 states in the sample. Government officials representing

population sizes from less than 5,000 people ( $n = 8$ , 2%) to 300,000 or more ( $n = 6$ , 1.3%) were represented in the sample, with the largest categories being populations of 10,000-29,000 ( $n = 184$ , 40%), 5,000-9,999 ( $n = 109$ , 24%), 30,000-49,000 ( $n = 69$ , 15%), and 50,000-99,999 ( $n = 52$ , 11%). Forms of government included board of trustees, commissions, council-manager/administrator/supervisor, major-councils, presidents, supervisor-councils, and village boards. The most common forms of governments in the sample were council-manager ( $n = 274$ , 59%) and mayor-council ( $n = 167$ , 36%).

## **Measures**

The survey asked questions gauging extent of use for a range of social media tool categories; participants were asked to report, on a 1-5 use scale ranging from “not used” to “very often used,” their frequency of use of social networking tools; research monitoring, and measurement tools; and collaborative/conferencing tools. Social networking tools measured included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogs, Google+, Del.icio.us, Slideshare, YouTube, and Flickr. Research, monitoring, and measurement tools included Hootsuite, GoogleAnalytics, Bitly, GoogleAlerts, and Radian6. Collaborative/conferencing tools measured included Facetime, Skype, GoToMeeting, and Free Conferencing. Extent of use of a wide variety of tools was measured to reveal overall use rates, but we focus on Facebook and Twitter in more depth as the most commonly used tools.

As a first step in this exploratory research, it was important to capture the officials’ perceptions of the extent of expectations of their citizens for them to use social media to reveal if and how well they were responding to those expectations. To capture participants’ perceived importance of social media, they were asked to evaluate on a 1-5 scale how important they believed it was for local governments to use social media to engage citizens. Expectations of their citizens for them to use social media to communicate important government information were also measured on a 1-5 importance scale measuring the extent of those expectations. Given that this construct is fairly concrete, a single item measure was deemed adequate, especially when weighted with the concern that, for these high-ranking officials, respondent attention is restrictive. A series of questions regarding motivation to use, frequency of posts, types of information posted, citizen comment permission, monitoring, and advertising were asked regarding the Facebook and Twitter use of participants.

## **Results**

### **RQ1: To what extent do local government officials use social media to reach their publics?**

Overall, 325 (70%) participants report that their city governments are using social media to some extent to communicate with citizens while 138 (30%) are not. Table 1 presents frequencies for the extent of use for each tool, among the social media users, along with overall means, modes, and standard deviations. Overall use of social media was first measured on a dichotomous (yes/no) scale; for those who reported that they use social media, the extent of use of each tool specifically was then measured on a 5-point scale, where one was “not used” and 5 was “very often.” The initial impression of the average extent of use scores for each tool, ranging from 1.02-3.39 (on a 5-point scale), indicates a

relatively scant use of social media in local governments. Facebook was the most frequently used tool ( $M = 3.39$ ), followed by Twitter ( $M = 2.44$ ), YouTube ( $M = 2.10$ ), and Google Alerts (2.01). However, the last column of Table 1 reports use scores as the overall percent of local governments who use each tool among current social media users (excluding those who answered above a 1 for “not used” (do not use social media) and thus skipped this section. For social networking tools, there were the following use rates to communicate with citizens: 91% use Facebook, 59% use Twitter, 50% use YouTube, 28% use LinkedIn, and 28% use Google+ to some extent. For research tools, the most used tools include Google Analytics (36%) and Google Alerts (36%). For conferencing, GotoMeeting was the most popular tool, at a 42% use rate. So, the highest social media penetration rates were for some of the social networking tools, but well over one-third of local governments are also using at least or more research tools and conferencing tools.

Table 1  
*Extent of Use of Social Media Tools Among Social Media Users*

Tool	Not Used	2	3	4	Very Often	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Use
<b>Social Networking Tools</b>										
Facebook	30	5 4	8 5	7 2	85	3.39	3	3	1.28	91%
Twitter	133	5 4	5 1	4 0	48	2.44	2	1	1.4	59%
LinkedIn	235	3 8	3 1	1 2	10	1.54	1	1	1.02	28%
Blogs	263	2 2	2 4	4	13	1.41	1	1	.972	14%
Google+	235	2 2	3 2	1 6	21	1.67	1	1	1.22	28%
Del.icio.us	316	7	2	0	1	1.05	1	1	.305	3%
Slideshare	312	9	3	1	1	1.07	1	1	.370	4%
Youtube	163	5 4	5 5	2 1	33	2.10	1.5	1	1.35	50%
Flickr	257	3 1	2 3	8	7	1.40	1	1	.887	21%
<b>Research, Monitoring, and Measurement Tools</b>										
Hootsuite	297	1 2	3	4	10	1.21	1	1	.984	9%
GoogleAnalytics	208	2 0	3 2	2 8	38	1.98	1	1	1.46	36%
Bitly	293	1 0	7	9	7	1.24	1	1	.807	10%
GoogleAlerts	208	1 9	3 2	2 2	45	2.01	1	1	1.5	36%
Radian6	322	3	0	1	0	1.02	1	1	.191	1%
<b>Collaborative/Conferencing Tools</b>										
Facetime	303	1 6	2	3	2	1.11	1	1	.492	7%
GoToMeeting	188	5 3	6 6	1 3	6	1.76	1	1	1.02	42%
FreeConferencing	286	2 3	1 3	4	0	1.19	1	1	.554	12%

**H1: Higher levels of perceived social media importance by local government officials and perceived citizen expectations for use will significantly predict local governments' social media use.**

Binary logistic regression was used to determine whether citizen expectations for governments to utilize social media to communicate with them and perceived importance of social media use are significant predictors of actual social media use among local

governments. Regression results indicate the overall model fit of the two predictors (-2 Log Likelihood = 467.6) was statistically significant in distinguishing between those who used social media or not ( $\chi^2(5) = 89.22, p < .001$ ). The model correctly classified 70.7% of the cases. *Wald* statistics indicated that only the perceived importance of social media variable positively predicted actual use; citizen expectations did not contribute significantly to the model. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 received partial support; perceived importance but not citizen expectations significantly predicted use.

## **H2: Is there a relationship between age of government officials and attitudes toward social media use?**

ANOVA was run using a 6-category age variable (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, and 65 and above) and the 5-level perceived importance of social media variable to reveal if age was significantly related to perceived importance of social media use. There was no significant relationship between age and importance  $F(5, 453) = 2.205, p = .053$ .

## **RQ3: What is the nature of Facebook use (reasons for use, frequency of posts, extent of monitoring, content of posts, dialog on walls, and advertising) among city government officials?**

First, general frequencies reveal different trends regarding Facebook use among local governments. When asked for the primary reason they are using Facebook, the most common motivations among those who are currently using Facebook were citizen desire or pressure ( $n = 105, 35\%$ ) and internal pressure ( $n = 132, 45\%$ ). Regarding frequency of posting for those using Facebook, 35% post daily, 48% post weekly, 8% post monthly, 2% never post, and 7% indicated they weren't sure. Regarding content, 97% of those who post do so about special events and activities, 61% post pictures or videos, 47% post issue or policy information, and 36% post police and crime alerts. Most of those with Facebook sites allow citizens to comment on their walls—181 allow posts (61%), and 83 (28%) do not. The others indicated they were not sure. With regard to monitoring, 63% do so daily, 20% weekly, 6% monthly, and 11% do not monitor their official Facebook pages. Almost 34% of those who use Facebook indicate they have used Facebook ads to advertise information or events, while the majority had not or did not know.

## **RQ4: What is the nature and extent of Twitter use among city government officials to communicate with citizens?**

First, general frequencies reveal different trends regarding Twitter use among local governments. For the primary reason they were using Twitter, similar to Facebook, it was in response to citizen pressure ( $n = 53, 27\%$ ) or internal pressure ( $n = 93, 48\%$ ). Of those who report using Twitter, 71 (37%) tweet daily, 84 (44%) weekly, 21 (11%) monthly, 4 (2%) never post, and 13 (6%) didn't know. For monitoring, 99 (51%) monitor daily, 49 (25%) weekly, 13 (7%) monthly, and 32 (16%) never monitor. About half of the governments with Twitter accounts have had that presence for 1-2 years ( $n = 96, 50\%$ ). 45 (23%) had Twitter accounts for 2-3 years, 44 (23%) for 1 year, 6 (3%) for 3-4 years, and 2 (1%) for more than 4 years. Special event information ( $n = 186$ ) was the most common type of information posted by the 193 Twitter users; issue or policy information ( $n = 85$ ), police and crime alerts ( $n = 81$ ), and pictures and videos ( $n = 61$ ) followed.

## **Discussion**

The advent of social media presents numerous opportunities for all types of organizations to communicate in interactive and immediate ways. In addition, social media have created channels for organizations to manage the information they disseminate to publics. Several studies have documented how social media offer particular value to public organizations and, in particular, local governments in promoting dialogic, transparent contact with their citizenry (Azyan, 2012; Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011; Hand & Ching, 2011). Despite these benefits, these findings suggest that social media are underutilized by local governments; although encouragingly, the majority (70%) report using social media, the extent to which each individual tool is used does not represent active engagement with or reliance on social media. In an era where many industries have fully and centrally integrated social media into their communication strategies, these results from a broad national sample indicate local governments may be lagging behind in their use. Of the local governments that are using social media, social networking sites are the most commonly used tools; however, it is important to note that well over one-third of local governments are also using at least one or more research and conferencing tools.

The study confirmed government officials' perceived importance of social media was strong predictors of actual use by local governments, which is positive evidence that they are both recognizing the importance of and engaging social media. Less encouraging is the fact that citizen expectations did not significantly factor into those decisions. Further, although it was suspected that younger officials would be more active users of social media, the age of the local government officials did not predict social media use. This finding is inconsistent with Chou et al.'s (2009) health communication study where age was a strong indicator of social media use. The failure of citizen expectations to motivate overall social media use runs counter to other reported findings in this study, where one of the strongest motivations for Facebook and Twitter use specifically was citizen expectations or pressure (but again, internal pressure was the most important motivator). It seems that citizen expectations may not be adequate to tip non-users of social media into the user realm. Or perhaps government time, financial, and human resources are so over-stretched that responding to internal expectations takes all-consuming priority. However, for those already using social media, many did report a sense of obligation to respond to specific public expectations regarding the two popular tools (Facebook and Twitter). This finding merits further research for its basic implications for e-democracy. Democracy is at its richest when people are involved in public debate and decision-making, and new technologies enable disengaged publics to take part in ways they were previously not availed. Concise, engaging communication between a government and its citizens is pragmatic practice as well as a moral obligation that derives from the principles of democracy (Viteritti, 1997); governments that do not consider citizen expectations as motivations for social media use are failing their publics to that end. Given the potential of e-democracy to transform citizen involvement in democratic and purposeful processes mediated by social networking sites, governments must prioritize and respond to public expectations. If their perceived importance of social media blights that of their publics' expectations for use, public officials are not acknowledging the core of e-democratic principles. It is encouraging that, overall, a vast majority of governments are using social media and that current users generally respond to specific expectations of their publics;

yet, that one-third of non-users becomes the focus here and a priority for future research. Also, co-orientation studies with citizens and officials could reveal the accuracy of officials' perceptions; any disconnects may suggest a need for better dialog to understand and respond to constituents' needs.

Facebook was the predominant social media tool used by local governments to communicate with citizens. Several trends emerged regarding Facebook use among local governments. First, the primary reason local government officials indicated for why they are using Facebook is internal organizational pressure. This interesting finding raises additional questions to be answered in future research regarding the staffing and support of social media initiatives by local governments to respond to these internal demands. Second, for local governments using Facebook, daily posts were the most common (35%) followed by weekly posts (28%). This finding is in line with general social media usage statistics that show 35% of adults using social media make posts daily, and 25% do so every few days (Correa, Hinsley, & Zuniga, 2010). The content of the majority of the posts was about special events and activities, followed by pictures and videos and policy information. Again, this offers early evidence (that merits further probing) of perhaps a more surface-level integration of social media into the overall communications plans of these governments, when the expectations of e-democracy are taken into account. One-way announcements such as special event information (the most frequent type of content for Facebook and Twitter) provide the critical function of creating a more informed citizenry but do not necessarily further dialog and transparency. Of course, we do not discount the importance of keeping publics informed about events or engaged through picture and video. Yet, less than half post issue or policy information, which is central to promoting more transparent governance. The types of content posted on government social networking sites merits further consideration with regard to how well it actually accomplishes key democratic objectives. Posting one-way announcements is of course easier and less engaging than more dialogic, participatory posts and forums. That level of investment is likely more feasible for officials with strained resources but is not adequate in utilizing social media to meet core democratic objectives. Yet, the majority of local governments using Facebook monitor their sites daily (63%), and, while some local governments had closed Facebook pages, meaning they only used the page to post information and did not allow a dialogic exchange, the majority of local governments reported that they allow citizens to comment on their Facebook walls. This is an important finding as these settings allow Facebook walls to be online platforms for e-democracy and citizen engagement, and daily monitoring of the majority indicates that not only are they allowing commentary but also actively seeking it (and hopefully responding). However, if officials are only allowing posts with possibly more substance than announcements but not making them themselves, they are engaging in a passive use of social media for democratic engagement. Finally, in an age where government budgets and resources are decreasing and advertising dollars are often one of the first areas to get cut, it was surprising to reveal that 34% of local governments who use Facebook have used Facebook ads to advertise information or events. Research with citizens who use that information can and should reveal how wise that investment is.

Twitter use among local governments seems to be on the rise as its overall popularity increases, and 59% of social media users in local governments in this representative sample are currently using Twitter. Similar to Facebook, most local governments are

using Twitter in response to internal organizational pressures, so the same considerations raised above apply to its use. The most common frequency of tweets was weekly (44%), followed by daily (37%). Most local governments monitor Twitter daily. Special event information was the most common type of information posted by Twitter users. Again, these trends are similar to those found for Facebook use and raise the same questions.

Findings from this study indicate that local governments are, by and large, utilizing social media to some extent to communicate with citizens and key publics. Of the 70% of users of social media, social networking tools are most used, but at least a third of these officials use networking or research tools. As evidenced by the primary focus on event information in these results in Facebook posts and Tweets, less obvious is the engagement of social media to promote citizen dialogue and government transparency on substantive issues. Governments are making information available to citizens and providing them with a forum to get information and ask questions. Through the utilization of social media, they are to some extent making government initiatives and activities more open and accessible. Consistent with the government transparency requirements suggested in Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins' (2007) model, local governments are informing, educating, and reporting about government activities, policies, and community issues through social media; however, there is room for improvement in this area based on the types of information posted. Providing this type of transparency builds trust and encourages accountability (Bertot & Jaeger, 2010). Moreover, local governments seem to support democratic and participatory citizen engagement by allowing for open communication on their social networking pages and allowing dialogic exchange of information and ideas.

## **Limitations and Conclusion**

One limitation to consider in this study is the use of participants working in a range of capacities within city offices. Although screening questions insured their general knowledge or awareness of social media use, participants may not be aware to the exact nature of and extent of use. Also, given that it is an online survey, perhaps those with more Internet savvy or predisposition to online use were more likely to take the time to reply. The large, national representativeness of this compensates somewhat for this shortcoming, however.

In the evolving realm of social media, local governments must find ways to incorporate this technology into their communication plans in engaging and meaningful ways. Social media's popularity, low cost, relative ease of use, and ability to reach large audiences make them tools that public relations practitioners in local governments cannot ignore. The responsibility of managing social media for local governments lies on public information and communication officers, who must have the approval and support of government officials—both elected and appointed. The importance of pressure from those higher offices to use social media is revealed here.

Yet, these results suggest social media are somewhat underutilized by local governments, with a third of respondents not using them. Although perceived importance of social media predicted actual use, we were dismayed that these officials' perceptions of whether or not their citizens expected them to use social media did not predict use. Well over one-third used at least one research or conferencing tool. The nature of use expected merits further

consideration—to use or not use is not enough. Social media can be engaged strategically to actually meet democratic ideals. In order to keep citizens engaged and returning to their sites, local governments must engage citizens by posting regularly and making their posts interesting and relevant. The focus of Facebook posts and tweets on special events reviewed here may not be compelling to that end. It is also important for governments' to integrate their social media presence with their websites and other communication channels. Since social media are a dynamic and powerful communication tool, governments must regularly monitor their approaches in order to evaluate effectiveness and make improvements.

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