Facebook usage in government – a case study of information content

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Facebook Usage in Government
– A Case Study of Information Content

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ABSTRACT
Social media is making its way into government agencies as a medium for citizen communication. A recent survey suggests that almost half of the population in Sweden uses Facebook. Consequently, government agencies such as municipalities have started adopting Facebook to ‘be where the users are’. Facebook offers new opportunities for rapid dissemination of information and dialogue with the public that may lead to greater transparency and increased e-democracy. However, relatively few studies exist that have examined the actual content in governments’ Facebook pages. In this exploratory case study of a Swedish municipality’s Facebook page, several categories of information posted on the Facebook wall are identified. While the municipality uses the wall primarily for marketing events, the public members display a diverse usage including requests for information or services, reports of service failure, and making complaints. Both parties also use the wall for community building.

Keywords
Social media, social networking services (SNSs), Facebook usage, government, Government 2.0, information content.

INTRODUCTION
The wide adoption in society of social media such as blogs, twitter and Facebook has put pressure on organizations to reach target groups “where they ‘live’ online” (Hanna, Rohm and Crittenden, 2011:265). Facebook is a web-based social networking site (SNS) that allows individuals and organizations to connect and share information (Facebook Newsroom, 2012.), and its diffusion and rise in popularity has been remarkable. The basic purpose of a Facebook page is to post messages and pictures on a “wall”, which can be read and commented on by other Facebook-users. In this way, an organization is able to disseminate information, start discussions, get feedback from readers and to gather users that “like” the organization. A recent Swedish survey found that several municipalities have begun using Facebook to communicate with their citizens (Säfvenberg, 2011). Some, however, are hesitant regarding Facebook, as they are unsure of the advantages or the resources required (ibid.). Hanna et al. (2011) argue that although many organizations recognize the benefits of social media, they do not understand how to use it effectively. Relatively few studies have examined how governmental agencies use Facebook today.

For the public, social media represents simplified opportunities to ask questions, request or present information, make comments and put forward criticism, all of which may increase citizen participation and e-democracy (cf. Aula, 2010; Thomas and Streib, 2003). However, considerable resources in time and staff may be required (Briones, Kuch, Fisher Liu and Jin, 2011). In order to evaluate whether public resources are well spent and the effort is worthwhile, we need to establish how governmental Facebook pages are used by government agencies and their customers/citizens. The purpose of this study is to analyze the information content and identify themes of usage at a municipal Facebook site. The research question explored is: What type of information does a municipality send and receive through their Facebook page?
LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and Content on Facebook Pages

According to Aula (2010:43), “social media is characterized by interactivity – participants freely send, receive, and process content for use by others”. Kim, Kim and Nam (2010:216) clarify that social web sites “make it possible for people to form online communities, and share user-created contents (UUCs)”. This is also emphasized in Hanna et al. (2011:265), who claim that “Consumers are no longer merely passive recipients”.

Once an organization has adopted a SNS, it is important to regularly update content, engage in interactions with users, and keep content interesting (Ayu and Abrizah, 2011). Overall, Kent and Taylor’s (1998) principles for successfully building organization-public relationships through dialogue on the web are quite relevant for social media, since they stress the importance of timely responses and good communication skills. Furthermore, it is in the organization’s own interest that the content on the web site is valuable for the user (Kent and Taylor, 1998:328):

[…] relationships with publics must be cultivated not only to serve the public relations goals of an organization, but so that the interests, values, and concerns of public are addressed. Information is made available to publics not to stifle debate or win their accent, but to allow them to engage an organization in dialogue as an informed partner.

Relationships may be ‘cultivated’ on Facebook through at least three strategies: disclosure, information dissemination and involvement (Waters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas, 2009). These strategies are not exclusive, but complement each other. While disclosure focuses on creating transparency and trust, the purpose of information dissemination is to add value to the user. Involvement represents efforts to engage the user in the organization and on the Facebook page. These strategies are implemented through the content that the organization places on the Facebook page. How users perceive the value, and what kind of value organizations want to purvey is contextual, however the definitive mechanics of social media in general dictate how information is consumed. As a social medium, Facebook presents new aspects of communication for a municipality.

The traditional one-way communication that previously was and often still is the norm among governmental institutions is described in Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) “transmission model” of communication. This model describes a sender and a receiver, and focuses on the linear transmission of a message, and is appropriate for describing how for example newspapers function, where information is produced by designated producers and received by one or several receivers. In order to capture the shift from transmission to communal, social production and dissemination, the metaphor of the ritual model of communication (Carey, 2008) is more suitable. This model is constructed around the act of ceremony rather than transportation. Instead of the fixed roles of sender and receiver, participants engage in a shared experience where the goal is to construct a sense of community. Ritual communication is less about learning (transmitting) new things and more about reaffirming one’s mutual interests and belief-systems. In ritual communication, all acts of communication are “symbolic processes where reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed” (Carey 2008:23).

The shift from transmission to ritual affects identity construction. Foucault (1995) argues that our perception of reality (truth, power, politics, history, and economics) is shaped through discourse and the texts we are subjected to. Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and the means of communication, and those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss. Thus, discourse is linked to identity formation (i.e. who are we?). Identity is therefore also produced using discourse, be it a diary, a blog or a Facebook page.

Previous research on information content of organizational Facebook pages is best described as anecdotal. Ayu and Abrizah (2010) studied the usage of Facebook in Malaysian academic libraries. They identified six types of status postings from library administrators: any kind of greetings, information on library news, information on library resources, information on web resources, library solicits feedback and information on community. The library users’ postings were divided into: any kind of greetings, inquiry on library services, suggestions/comments to library and “other”.

In Green, Choudhry, Kilabuk and Shrank (2011), the authors applied an inductive approach for content analysis while studying Facebook groups focusing on diabetes. The study identified four prominent usage themes: information sharing, patient-centered management, community building and marketing and data collection. Almost two thirds of the posts were information providing, in which the users shared their experiences and advice. Chew and Eysenbach (2010) found personal experiences or personal opinions to be a common content in their study of tweets during the 2009 H1N1 (swine flu) outbreak. They categorized the tweet content into six categories; resources (summary of or linked articles), personal experiences, expressions of personal opinion and interest, jokes/parodies, marketing and spam.

**Organizational Drivers and Usage**

Studies of Facebook usage in organizations often focus on marketing or customer relationship building (c.f. Casteleyn, Mottart and Rutten, 2009). Although traditional marketing of products and services is not the primary incentive for Facebook usage in government, relationship building is still important to engage citizens in public management, as is portraying a municipality or a city as a good place to live. Waters et al. (2009) claim that organizations use Facebook and other social media to develop and strengthen relationships with important publics. The large number of users may “provide a wealth of information” (Casteleyn et al., 2009:439) and Facebook can serve as “a crystal ball for future consumer intentions” (Casteleyn et al., 2009:440). Although ‘getting to know’ your customers may be more important for for-profit organizations, public organizations can also plan their matters better if they know their users. The advantage with a local government’s Facebook page is the ability to ‘mingle’ the citizens and exchange useful information on a platform that is readily accessible, while at the same time influencing how the municipality is perceived by its citizens. The mere presence and act of “mingling” may construct the identity of the municipality as “friendly”, “accessible” and “personal”, particularly when postings are signed with the names of the public officials responding.

In government agencies, Facebook and other SNSs is perhaps best understood as the next step of e-government, i.e. Government 2.0. In Sweden, the transition towards e-government was guided by values such as ‘democracy’, ‘efficiency’, ‘citizen in focus’, and ‘transparent governance’. An overall goal with e-government is to increase citizen involvement and thereby e-democracy (Streib and Navaroo, 2006). Leighninger (2011:27) suggests that Internet provides new tools for increasing democracy by surveying citizens, helping citizens identify and prioritize problems that government can fix, and using “serious games” to generate interest, understanding and input.

**Incentives for the Public to Use Governmental Facebook Pages**

As already stated, the use of SNSS in government may be seen as a natural development of e-government. Thomas and Streib (2003) performed a telephone survey were they investigated reasons for visiting government sites. The most frequent motives were to obtain information (64 %) or to find contact information (47 %). Other common reasons were to request a service (36 %), to complain about the government agency (30 %) or to express some kind of opinion (14 %).

As for motivation for Facebook usage in general, its role for self-expression and self-construal is often mentioned (c.f. Kim et al, 2010). The use of Facebook is also relaxing entertainment for social interaction with friends and a channel for sharing information (Smock, Ellison, Lampe and Wohn, 2011).

**METHOD**

**Selection of Case**

This case study is exploratory in nature due to the relative lack of qualitative studies of information content in organizational Facebook usage. A content analysis was performed of Karlstad municipality’s Facebook site. Karlstad is the 21st Swedish municipality in population size, with approximately 86 000 inhabitants. Sweden is fertile ground for studying Internet phenomena, because of its high Internet penetration statistic; in 2011, 88% of the population had access to the Internet. A little over half the population (52%) visits a social media site. Among those 63% use Facebook and 46% update their status frequently (Findahl, 2011).

Early in 2011, Karlstad set the goal of being ‘the most liked municipality on Facebook’. A Facebook-themed campaign was launched, encouraging citizens to ‘like’ the municipality and after six months they had achieved the most ‘likes’ of all the Swedish municipalities (Granqvist, 2011). Among our reasons for choosing a single case study are to use the case as a pilot study, with the intention to study the same phenomenon in other organizations, and to perform a longitudinal study enabling the detection of changes over time (c.f. Yin, 1994). Due to its position as a ‘Facebook leader’ among Swedish municipalities, Karlstad’s Facebook usage also fits the description of being a unique case, another rationale for selecting a single-case approach (ibid.).
Data Collection

This study focuses on status updates from the municipality and user postings on the wall, as these best represent intentional usage. Our objective was to develop concepts or content categories from these, a type of generalization mentioned by Walsham (1995) among others. The month of October 2011 was selected randomly.

Status updates and user postings were downloaded and printed on paper. The content was evaluated and categorized in an iterative coding process inspired by an initial set of categories identified and described in earlier studies of information content in social media (cf. Ayu and Abrizah, 2011; Green et al., 2011). This evaluation resulted in an extended set of categories that emerged from the data as well as some minor changes in naming of the categories, and the deletion of non-relevant categories. The research team then once again evaluated their individual coding in what can be described as ‘a steady movement between concept and data’ (Orlikowski, 1993:311). The coding and naming of the categories were discussed until there was consensus. The final categories are given in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Content category</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educating Citizens</td>
<td>EC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Elucidate citizen, e.g. ‘serious games’ or by helping citizens educate each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing of Events</td>
<td>ME</td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting different happenings in the municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing of Municipality</td>
<td>MM</td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting the municipality as a good place to live or work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing of Services</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting municipal services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request Information from Citizen</td>
<td>RIC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Asking citizens for information or assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Maintenance Information</td>
<td>SMI</td>
<td></td>
<td>Informing of service break-downs and ongoing repairs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizens</th>
<th>Content category</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizen Marketing Events</td>
<td>CME</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen promoting events that are not directly connected to a commercial organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen Sharing Information</td>
<td>CSI</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sharing information, links etc. that are not marketing of an event or business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaining about Municipality</td>
<td>CM</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen holding government responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express Opinion</td>
<td>EO</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen stating his/her point of view in a municipal matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity or Community Building</td>
<td>ICB</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen promote oneself or the municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing of Business</td>
<td>MB</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizen promoting a commercial organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Praising Municipality</td>
<td>PM</td>
<td></td>
<td>Giving positive feedback to the municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request of Existing Service</td>
<td>RES</td>
<td></td>
<td>Appeal for improvement in present service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request of Future Service</td>
<td>RFS</td>
<td></td>
<td>Appeal for launching of non-existing service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for Information</td>
<td>RI</td>
<td></td>
<td>Asking a question to the municipality or other citizens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report Service Breakdown</td>
<td>RSB</td>
<td></td>
<td>Inform the municipality of problems with their services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Identified categories for municipality and citizens
FINDINGS

The main contributions of the study are summarized in Table 1. Though our study should be viewed as a qualitative study, we have also counted the number of occurrences for each category. Figures 1 (municipality) and 2 (user) illustrate the frequency of each category during October 2011. The Facebook wall postings this month consisted of 99 user postings and 47 status updates from the municipality. The diagrams in Figures 1 and 2 should only be viewed as an indication of what the Facebook content is communicating.

It noteworthy that one status update or user posting could be coded into one or several content categories if its content could be interpreted as belonging to several categories. The examples given in the categories are our translations from Swedish.

The Municipality’s Usage of the Facebook Wall

Educating Citizens

Leighninger (2011) suggests that the Internet may be used in government to educate citizens, for example with ‘serious games’ that inform the public and generate interest. The ‘educational approach’ was used several times by Karlstad municipality, mainly for climate or environmental issues. Links to videos on climate change were posted and a climate campaign launched and promoted:

*Test your environmental knowledge and win prizes! How climate smart are you? Karlstad’s climate campaign will start tomorrow and for five weeks you can participate and win fun prizes. Join us!*

Topics such as ‘fair trade’ and child security were acknowledged in a similar way.
Marketing of Events

The most frequently used type of status update was to market different events in the municipality. This is in line with the results from the study of Ayu and Abrizah (2011), who found that publicizing library’s events and sharing photos were the most common activities. The events marketed on Karlstad’s Facebook page concerned areas such as culture, sports and environmental issues. Some were meant to educate the citizens. According to Waters et al. (2009), information dissemination is one strategy for building relationships with an organization’s Facebook users.

Marketing of Municipality

Some status updates were categorized as marketing the municipality itself. Examples of this were the acknowledgement of ‘everyday heroes’ in the municipality and positive feedback from other municipalities on Karlstad’s Facebook page. Moreover, a national award for one of the municipality’s schools were commented on, and linked to. Another example is the municipality’s posting of a photo of flower decorations in the city. The use of Facebook for marketing purposes is discussed by Casteleyen et al., (2009) among others. Due to the non-commercial character of a municipality, it is reasonable to believe that one important argument for marketing the municipality is community building (c.f. Green et al., 2011).

Marketing of Services

A few status updates concerned marketing of services. Ayu and Abrizah (2011), show that this was a major application area in the studied libraries as they used Facebook to inform about their services and promote the use of different resources. During the studied period, only a few status updates in Karlstad focused on marketing of services. This included promoting new e-services on the website and the sale of building plots.

Request Information from Citizen

An important strategy for relationship building is to strive for user-involvement (Waters et al., 2009). In some of their status updates, the municipality applied this strategy when asking the users for information or assistance. This is in line with Streib and Navarroo (2006), who claim that citizen-involvement is one objective for e-government. Typically, these status updates had the character of monitoring ‘what is going on in the municipality’. The users were thus encouraged to share their information on different events or activities. Also, in one status update, the municipality requested a Christmas tree for the city square.

A typical example of this type of status update is:

Here’s a selection of activities for the weekend. What are your suggestions? Have a nice weekend and see you Monday ☺

Service Maintenance Information

The Facebook wall was also used for service maintenance information and crisis communication, primarily for information on water leakage. This may be a strategy to allow citizens to easily identify (operational) problems for the government to fix, as suggested by Lehnininger (2011). One example of this type of status update is:

The Water leakage in Skåre is now isolated to Granitvägen where about ten houses lack water. Others affected should now have their water back. A water tank will be placed at Granitvägen from approximately 10 AM for those needing to get water. We trust the leakage to be fixed during the day.

The Citizen’s Usage of the Facebook Wall

Citizen Marketing Events

Users took advantage of the opportunity to market various events on the Facebook wall. One user for example promotes a local sports event: “Semi-final in the Swedish cup – volleyball at elite level!”

Citizen Sharing Information

Furthermore, some of the user postings concerned information dissemination to the community (c.f. Green et al., 2011). One user linked to a local newspaper and added complementary information on a traffic accident:

There are long queues on E18 in westbound direction at Våxnäs in Karlstad. There is an accident at the old Milko factory stopping the traffic.
Complaining about Municipality

An obvious risk that an organization takes when opening up for user-generated content on their website or Facebook page is being exposed to complaint or even harsh criticism that may risk the organization’s reputation (Aula, 2010). Thomas and Streib (2003) found complaining to be a common reason to visit governments’ websites. There were some complaints in the studied Facebook page, which concerned service failures or services that the user felt should be offered. The subjects for the complaints varied, although a majority of the postings related to ‘infrastructure problems’ i.e. problems with water or heating supply, street lighting or other outdoor illumination, parking fees, speed limits etc. For example, one user states “The playgrounds in the area are old and need to be restored”.

Express Opinion

Social media is known to be a forum for self-expression (Kim et al., 2010). This may include expressing one’s opinion or personal standpoint in different matters (c.f. Chew and Eysenbach, 2010). Some examples of this type of usage were found in this case study although they were not frequent. The subjects varied but a common denominator seems to be that the subject was ‘non-operational’ in character. One example of this type of posting is:

*If Karlstad has the ambition to reach 100 000 inhabitants it is important to learn from others that have done the same. Such as Danish Fredriksberg outside of Copenhagen, that recently got their 100 000th inhabitant. [...] Perhaps it’s time that Karlstad municipality visited Denmark to study?*

Identity or Community Building

The second most common user wall posting (along with service-breakdown) can be categorized as identity or community building. These postings almost exclusively consisted of an uploaded photo with a short text. The photos often showed beautiful scenery from the municipality. It is difficult to know whether the purpose of these postings is to show-off with one’s photography skills (identity building) or to acknowledge the beauty of the town (community building). According to the following texts accompanying two different photos, community building is one of the motives: “Beautiful Karlstad at night” and “Beautiful September morning in Karlstad”. Green et al. (2011) identified community building to be one important theme of usage in the studied Facebook pages.

Marketing of Business

A few user postings have to do with marketing a commercial organization or marketing an event held by a commercial organization. For example, one user presents some offerings and the opening hours for a local café. Both Green et al (2011) and Chew and Eysenbach (2010) found marketing to be a regular content in their studies of Facebook and Twitter usage respectively.

Praising Municipality

There are also some examples of user postings whose only purpose seem to be give thanks to or praise the municipality for good services or initiatives. One example concerns the new sign at a pedestrian crossing:

*I become so happy every time I see the female crosswalk sign in the crossing at the Norrstrand’s school. Thank you municipality for contributing to recognizing half of the population.*

Request of Existing Service

A number of postings concerned requests for existing services, e.g. appeals for lighting the streets lights earlier or emptying the waste bins more often. Thomas and Streib (2003) found request for services to be an important reason for users to visit the website of a government agency.

Request of Future Service

However, even more postings had to do with request for future services, that is services that the municipality does not offer at present or does not offer in the entire municipality. The postings spanned topics from ideas for an ‘outdoor gym’ to a plea for a stroller shed at a municipal daycare to requests for speed bumps.
Request for Information

Thomas and Streib (2003) found that almost two thirds of their respondents visited governmental websites to obtain information. People search for information on the organization, its services or to get contact information. Social media such as Facebook provide the possibility not only to search for, but also to request, information. Accordingly, the most common type of user-generated content on Karlstad’s fan page was to request information. About a quarter of all user postings belonged to this category. A small amount of the postings were directed to ‘anyone’, i.e. users and the municipality. Once again, the area attracting interest concerned infrastructural matters:

Hi! Is there a problem with hot water at Kronoparken again? Or is it just me that has bad luck with everything today. An ice cold shower was not what I was expecting.

Report Service Breakdown

A usage area identified in this study is to use the Facebook wall to report service problems or breakdowns. This was the second most frequent type of user posting. The relatively high amount of error reporting through this channel can probably be explained by the fact that the municipality itself has opened up for this kind of usage by reporting service maintenance. An example of this type of posting is:

The street lighting in Hagaborg at Norrstrand seems to have changed its circadian rhythm... it is coal-black at night but now at daytime they are lit.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This exploratory study seems to confirm the results from earlier studies in that information dissemination, marketing and service requests are important types of usage. This particular case, however, allows for more accurate theorizing in some areas. First, some categories were refined (i.e. ‘marketing’ and ‘service request’). Second, we were able to establish that both the users and the municipality contribute to community building. This case study thus demonstrate that organizations’ Facebook pages may contribute to community building by acknowledging, from both sides, ‘things to be proud of’. Third, the Facebook presence has provided names and faces to some of the more common functions of the municipality, effectively opening up the municipality’s routine work such as customer service (e.g. informing of and handling reports on service breakdowns) and creating an informal image of these functions. The purpose of the Facebook presence seems more focused on assisting in general maintenance and discussion around facilities than inviting a deeper political debate or increasing transparency in governance.

Revisiting Carey (2009) and Foucault (1995), the resulting discourse of the municipality’s Facebook usage has to some extent redefined and expanded the identity of the organization. The balance of power between citizen and governing municipality seems to have shifted slightly, bringing citizens more level to their government, and its every-day activities. What has not been done (yet) is to create an open climate for political debate, or invite deeper discussions around legislation, health care, childcare etc. Nor is any public documentation (e.g. minutes from council meetings, policy documentation) made available that can provide insight into decision-making at the political level. The purpose thus far of the Facebook presence seems to be to invite citizens to celebrate the existing as-is community, report service failure, request tangible services that are lacking, and in general assist the municipality in its maintenance work by discussing routine, practical issues.

The categories presented in Table 1 could serve as a foundation for future research on social media usage in government. Furthermore, this study may inform managers, politicians and employees in government agencies about the potential of Facebook usage. However, as the studied material was small (single case study, postings and status updates during October 2011) and we have not confirmed our interpretations with the municipality, the results should be validated in further studies.
REFERENCES