SOCIAL MEDIA

"Social Media" is a term given to websites and tools that allow people to interact through the sharing of information, opinions, knowledge, and interests. These services encourage the participation of users and the building of online and real-world communities.

Unlike some traditional forms of media, social media puts power in the hands of the people. All users can be active authors rather than passive audiences in the development of social media services. While this makes social media a great tool for civic engagement, it also opens the door for a number of potential risks and challenges.

It's important for Municipal employees to be aware of the benefits and risks involved with social media. The best practices laid out in this chapter should serve as helpful guidelines for the smooth operation of social media projects.

BENEFITS & OPPORTUNITIES

It is no secret that social media services have become an important part of popular culture. In the corporate world, companies have already begun to recognize their great potential. In many cases, services like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs have come to play an important role in corporate communications plans.

This section will outline the reasons why social media have come to compete with old media as tools for civic engagement.

Definitions

Old Media: forms of communication that existed before the invention of the Internet such as newspaper, radio, etc.; also known as traditional, conventional, or industrial media.

User: a person using a social media tool or service.

Web 2.0: a term commonly given to Internet applications based on interactivity, collaboration, and information sharing; usually a synonym for social media.

Accessibility

Old media tools create a divide between authors and audiences. The tools for producing **old media** are often privately owned and controlled, giving little or no access to regular people.

Social media tools are available to almost everyone. While some services might cost a small fee, most are free-access. Anyone with an Internet connection and a bit of computer knowledge can become a social media author.

Real-Time Communication

Old media can't escape the concept of time-lag. Most old media services take hours, days, or even weeks to publish information and gain feedback.

Social media services work much faster. Through Twitter, Facebook and other services, important public statements can be made at a moment's notice. Just as quickly, citizens can submit their responses, providing valuable feedback in a matter of minutes.

Flexibility of Formats

Old media tools are limited in the ways they can present information. Newspapers reach their readers through text and pictures. Radio stations speak to their listeners through music and audio. Even television, which supports video, audio, images, and text, lacks the flexibility of **Web 2.0**.

Social media can be more dynamic. By offering multiple formats for sharing different types of information with varied audiences, it's easier to draw **users** in and keep them engaged.

Coordination

Despite their differences, social media and old media can work together. Through coordination, it is possible to strengthen one Communications approach without damaging another.

The possibilities are endless. Why not use a corporate Twitter account to direct users to an article in the daily newspaper? Why not use a newspaper article to recruit new users to a corporate Facebook page? By coordinating old and new media, the whole can truly be greater than the sum of its parts.

Civic Engagement

Social media services perform roles designed to share information, provide feedback, and bring people together. By doing this, these services are able to act as all-in-one tools for civic engagement (*Link to file "Draft Civic Engagement Policy March2009"?).*

Sharing information

Departments can use a wide array of social media tools in order to share information with citizens about new projects, initiatives, and other issues.

Providing feedback

Social media tools can help departments to measure public opinion, gain input, and guide issue, project, and program management.

Bringing people together

In a community as large as Chatham-Kent, there are often geographical obstacles which keep citizens from communicating with one another. Social media help to eliminate these obstacles and to bring people together.

Who's Doing It?

Many local governments are already reaping the benefits of social media. For example:

- The Recreation & Parks division of the City of Mississauga maintains an official Facebook page to keep citizens up-to-date on breaking news and events.
- The Mayor of the City of Toronto has used a Twitter account to document events, thoughts, and remarks on City Hall politics.
- The City of Calgary uses a corporate YouTube channel as a tool for public outreach, education, training, and recruitment.

Social media can enhance the experience of citizens by making them feel closer than ever to their local governments. Many local governments, including ours, have already found ways to harness this power. The sky's the limit!

RISKS & CHALLENGES

So, what's the catch?

Increased civic engagement is certainly a plus, but social media can also be the cause of some serious headaches. In fact, tools like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are often prime targets for civil or criminal law violations and other areas for concern.

This section will take a look at some of the issues that might arise when using social media.

Definitions

Hyperlink: a reference to another document or website that users can follow; also known simply as a *link.*

Log On: the process of gaining access to a website through the use of a personal username and password.

Third party confidentiality: the Municipality is constantly in possession of information that belongs to third parties. This information cannot be disclosed without the expressed permission of those businesses or individuals.

Copyright: the economic or moral rights given to the owner of products like music, film, or art.

Trademark: "signs" that act as illustrations of ownership and can help to distinguish products of different companies; examples include logos and slogans.

Plagiarism: quoting directly or indirectly from a source (a book, a websites, etc.) without including a proper reference or credit.

Blurbs: areas in which users are encouraged to briefly describe themselves; e.g. "About Me", "Interests", "Favourite Movies", etc.

Tagging: assigning related keywords or terms to a piece of information (a video, image, etc.).

Harassment & Obscenity

Rules of etiquette can be easily broken in social media. Don't be surprised when some citizens abuse their opportunity to speak by harassing and making obscene comments. This concern is especially important for the Municipality as public figures are often preferred targets for attack.

Examples of obscenity

Obscenity often includes the use of profane language or content. The use of sexual language or content, or even **hyperlinking** to sexual content, can also count as obscenity.

Examples of harassment

Harassment often takes the form of discrimination based on race, creed, colour, or some other factor. Some forms of online solicitation can also be viewed as harassment.

Defamation & Libel

Statements may be made that illegally harm the reputation of individuals or organizations. This is known as defamation. When these statements are published online, they are known as libel. Libel can even occur when defamatory statements are quoted or **hyperlinked** on a website.

Illustration

John Doe has just been fired from his job at Example Industries for poor performance and bad behaviour. Upon arriving at home, John **logs on** to the company's corporate Facebook page to post made-up statements about its corrupt and illegal operations.

This is defamation.

Breech of Confidentiality

Some information is not supposed to be made public. Third-party confidentiality and other privacy issues dictate that certain information cannot be disclosed without permission. If confidentiality is breeched on a social media website, there can be serious problems.

Social media can turn private information into public information very quickly. As soon as news is posted, it can be shared by users at a rapid rate. With social media, it doesn't take long for confidential information to become common knowledge.

Invasion of Privacy

Social media users don't always respect the privacy of others. Whether intentional or unintentional, sharing people's private information on a social media website is a serious issue.

It's dangerous to collect information about visitors to a blog or website. The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA) states that citizens must consent to having their information gathered or used in any way.

Illustration

Jane Doe maintains a corporate blog for Example Industries designed to keep citizens informed on the inner workings of the company. In her latest post, Ms. Doe mentions an upcoming work party and publishes the name and address of the party's host without his permission.

This is an invasion of privacy.

Intellectual Property Theft

Intellectual property refers to intellectual 'products' with commercial value. Music, essays, videos, and even ideas can be examples of intellectual property. **Copyrights** and **trademarks** are two common tools used to protect against intellectual property theft.

Using intellectual property without permission can cause a lot of trouble. "Stealing" a copyrighted or trademarked product is the same as stealing merchandise or any other physical property.

Plagiarism can also be an issue in social media. Many quoted works are likely to be protected by copyright. Short quotes are usually fine if they are properly referenced, but it is always good make sure before quoting something that was written by someone else.

Even linking to information on other websites can lead to trouble. Most websites lay out their policy in a Terms of Use or Copyright section. Some sites state that linking to their home page is fine, but deep linking to pages within the website is not.

Illustration

Jim Doe has been approached by Example Industries to produce a video for their corporate YouTube channel. After editing his footage, he decides to overlay the video with a song he has ripped from his favourite CD which is protected by copyright. Without permission from the band, Jim submits the video to the company who quickly upload it onto YouTube for all to see.

This is one example of copyright violation.

Staffing & Resource Challenges

Constant monitoring is needed to protect against the risks of social media. Specially trained staff members need to be devoted to the task. This is especially true on weekends and holidays as social media are used most often during non-business hours.

Increased use of social media requires more money and hardware. There is a cost to being successful with social media. Staffing, training, and special software and hardware devices are required to give departments all the tools needed for social media projects.

BE CAREFUL!

Despite the best efforts of editors and spokespersons, things can still go wrong. **In some cases, the policies or formats of certain social media services can have a negative impact on a corporation's professional image.** For example:

- Some services claim total ownership of content on their sites. This would infer that you have consented to their use of any Municipal images, videos, or music as they see fit.
- Corporate MySpace pages are bound to the same display format as personal profiles with **blurbs** like "Interests" and "Marital Status". This could confuse the image of the department and the Municipality.
- YouTube publishers have no control over the ads displayed alongside their videos. They also can't control the videos linked to theirs' through **keyword tagging**. This could lead to some controversial linkages.

For this reason, it is very important to be well-prepared when entering into any social media project.

BEST PRACTICES

So now the question becomes: what is the best way to capitalize on the opportunities provided by social media while avoiding all of the pitfalls?

This section will try to help answer this question by giving some helpful tips on how to be successful in social media.

Planning Ahead

Follow the Employee Code of Conduct. It can be very helpful to use the Employee Code of Conduct's section on Media and Public Relations. After all, social media are a form of corporate communications. The Code gives spokesperson authority to EMT and SMT members that they can delegate. It's best to follow this model for all social media projects.

Know what you're getting into. It's a good idea to enter into social media projects with well-defined goals, scope, resources, and a marketing strategy. It helps to know that the right tools are available before launching a new corporate service.

Create a Communications Plan. Once you know what you're getting into, the next step should be to work with the Communications Officer to develop a Communications Plan (or business case). This Plan should include the needs, benefits, risks, resources, and timeline of the project. Specifying all of these factors will help to make sure that the service runs as smoothly as possible.

Delegate authority. The Communications Plan should name the editor who will hold general authority over the project. It should also indicate which department or SMT member has overall responsibility for the project's outcome. In case of emergency, it may also be helpful to name two alternate editors who can serve as backups.

Create a monitoring team. Because of the need for constant monitoring, it may be a good idea to devote a team of staff members to the cause. This team's job will be to keep a close eye on all activity and to deal with any problems that come up.

Understanding What Needs To Be Done

Keep a central record. For the sake of organization, it's a good idea to maintain one central record of all social media sites. Approved Communications Plans, off-hours contact information for editors, and all URLs, passwords, and usernames should be filed with the Communications Officer.

Use central accounts. In order to ensure integrity, it's best to avoid using employees' personal e-mail accounts to set up and manage social media tools and profiles. Instead, use a central corporate e-mail account which can be monitored by more than one staff member.

On Facebook, always use "pages". When using Facebook to connect with citizens, it's best to create "pages" with a moderated "wall" section. This will help to avoid the risks that can arise when employees' personal profiles are linked with the Municipality.

Check with ITS before installing software. There are a number of software programs available that are designed to track and monitor social media tools. It's best to check with ITS about installing such programs onto Municipal computers to ensure that they are not security risks.

Maintain backup records. ITS will not be keeping backups of any external sites. This means that they will not be able to recover lost data if a site is suspended. Thus, departments should get into the habit of keeping their own backup records in case of emergencies.

Acting as a Spokesperson for the Municipality

Maintain a clear corporate identity. It isn't possible to keep up two different images created through conventional and social media. Thus, it is a good idea for spokespersons to ensure that their services maintain a clear, singular, corporate identity. To do this, public statements made through social media should be consistent with other corporate statements.

Err on the side of disclosure. When using social media, it's best for spokespersons to make it clear that they are speaking as municipal employees. The use of disclosure can go a long way towards avoiding the appearance of corrupt practices or public scandal.

Be Transparent. It's a good idea to let users know that corporate social media sites are monitored for harassment, obscenity, and other violations. This effort for transparency and integrity will be a helpful defence when dealing with inappropriate users complaining about editing practices.

Collect Fair Comment. As editors, spokespersons should be careful about what they choose to allow and disallow. Comments that do not fall under any of the civil or criminal rights violations mentioned earlier should not be edited.

Respond, don't censor. In the end, social media sites are designed for two-way communication. For this to happen, it's important that spokespersons encourage civic engagement by being honest, open, and polite. It may also be helpful for spokespersons to find ways in advance to settle conflicts among users. At the same time, try to stick to the topics in which you have a mandate. This is why you prepared a Communications Plan.

Respect Due Process. As a tool for sharing information, social media can be a great way to let citizens know about what's going on within the Municipality. However, it is important to make sure that due process is always followed. All Council decisions and initiatives should come from Council before being made public through social media.

Be discerning. Spokespersons should never take privacy for granted. The concept of "off the record" simply does not exist in the social media landscape. Thus, it's best to act as if all information shared can and will be made public.

Publishing for the Public

Engage blog readers. Try to make sure that blogs are maintained regularly by one person or by a small group. It's also important that blog posts be relevant and written in such a way that they are easy to read.

Avoid using too much technical language. It's best to assume that readers have only a limited understanding of the topics being discussed. Use simple, plain language and be sure to provide plenty of background information on issues.

Write in a clear, concise, and professional manner. Use software programs to check your writing for spelling or grammar errors and consider having your work proof-read. It's also a good idea to write in short paragraphs and to avoid wordy sentences.

Understand users' expectations. Remember that users have their own expectations when entering into conversations with Municipal spokespersons. While social media sites often host casual user interaction, it's important to realize that citizens may expect more formal behaviour from Municipal employees. No matter the situation, all interaction should remain professional.

The use of social media is bound to produce both positive and negative feedback. Some people will always have a problem with messages and the way that they are sent.

It's important not to underestimate the effects of social media activity. With a large number of citizens using social media services on a regular basis, any action could lead to far-reaching effects on Councillors, Municipal employees, or local citizens.

Thus, employees are encouraged to develop a firm understanding of the risks, benefits, and best practices set forth in this chapter.

Of course, the knowledge and views of the Municipality are likely to be affected by the constant changes in the social media landscape. Thus, departments and spokespersons will be asked to help with the development of future social media policy and practice.

APPENDIX 1: SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMPLES

The social media landscape is in constant motion. Services that are widely used today may become faint memories tomorrow. There will always be new, more exciting, and more user-friendly websites waiting to take their place.

This list will highlight a number of the most common social media tools in use today.

Definitions

Gigabyte (GB): a unit of measurement for the storage of digital information. For reference, a typical DVD can hold 4.7 GB of storage.

Applications: software that can be downloaded to a hand-held device or other computer which allows users to perform specific tasks; also known simply as *apps*.

Thread: a method of organizing digital conversations by grouping discussions by topic and displaying responses to each topic vertically with the newest responses at the top.

Examples

Blogs (short for "weblogs") are websites on which users regularly posts commentary or describe events. These entries might also include multimedia like graphics or video. People can post comments on blog entries which allows for interaction between bloggers and their readers.

RSS News Feeds are based on "Really Simply Syndication" technology. RSS gathers and presents the latest headlines from news sites as soon as they are published. With RSS, Users can subscribe to receive updates from their favourite news sites without having to visit each one.

Facebook is a free-access social networking site that allows users to keep in touch with friends both new and old. Each account comes with a "wall" feature where friends can post comments, images, videos, and links. Users can also use their "wall" to post status updates, images, and videos for others to view. A "news feed" section lets users stay up-to-date with the activities of their friends.

People, companies, and other groups can also create "pages" which users are able to become "fans" of.   Through a "discussion board" feature, fans can share their thoughts on the person, project, service, or concept in focus.

MySpace is a free-access social networking site which brings people and groups together. MySpace lets users customize their profiles with "blurbs" and a blog feature. Users are also able to embed multimedia such as YouTube videos and music into their profiles. This feature has made it a popular venue for musicians and other artists.

Linkedin is a business-oriented social media site used mainly for professional networking. Like a personal résumé or CV, profiles can be used to display users' school and work experience. Users can also create "connections" with other people, businesses, and corporate groups in the network. Linkedin ensures that only trusted business contacts can create become connected.

YouTube is a social media site that allows users to view and post videos limited to ten minutes in length and a file size of 1 **gigabyte**. Publishers are given the option of letting other users post comments on their videos. Users are also able to subscribe to "channels" and to receive updates when new videos are posted to them.

Twitter is a free-access, text-based social networking service. User updates, known as "tweets", are posts of up to 140 characters. New "tweets" are displayed on the user's web profile page and can be sent to their "followers" or those in their circle of friends. Updates can be received through the Twitter site, cell phone text messaging, RSS, or downloadable **applications**.

> **Did You Know?**
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> *New Scientist* magazine reported in May 2008 that instant messaging systems like Twitter are better at spreading information during emergencies like the shootings at Virginia Tech University than traditional news media or government emergency services.

Flickr is an image and video hosting website that is often used by bloggers as a photo archive. Users with Free accounts have a monthly upload limit while Pro accounts offer unlimited uploading for $25 US per year. Users tag their images with keywords for public searches although they also have the option of limiting the users who can see their photos. The service also allows users to set up and join groups for community involvement and discussion.

Wikis are websites that allow for shared authoring and editing. Users with different knowledge and experience can work together in a shared space to develop an idea or piece of work. While some wiki services are open to the public, many are private within governments or other organizations.

Wikipedia is a wiki-encyclopaedia made up of 15 million articles written by volunteers around the world. Most articles can be edited by anyone with access to the site, although only registered users can create new ones. Because each article is the product of the shared knowledge of many devoted editors, false information is rare and short-lived.

Groups (such as Google Groups, Yahoo Groups, etc.) are free services that allow people to hold discussions on common interests. Members interact through **threaded** conversations either on the web or by email. While some Groups are simply news lists posted by editors, others encourage discussion and participation from all members.