

The role of social media in government

More people are not only using Facebook but becoming actively involved reading, engaging, and voicing opinions over user policy changes daily. The level of participation has exponentially grown and often Facebook has taken into account the thoughts of its users, like a true democracy, and adjusted settings as necessary. In a time where people tweet more than text, email more than mail, it's only a matter of time before government use social software to engage people in meaningful ways and to understand public sentiment.

Imagine if these practices were to be adopted by the national government and local authorities. With a tweet or text – potholes, broken streetlights and other issues being reported and fixed. Unfortunately there are very few examples of this happening so far, but certainly this trend will catch on.

Social media has greatly changed the way the public communicates and expectations of the responsibility of government have also shifted. While some countries are being pro-active on the social web, others often find themselves in a corner, forced to engage in discussions that often started without them. In the private sector, there are many case studies about companies using social media as an effective tool to solve problems in real-time. In fact, the biggest brands are using social media to monitor sentiment and help customers.

It's easy to see governments as nameless, faceless, something impersonal or, even worse, untrustworthy. Much of that is because government culture remains steeped in traditional ideas about public relations and outreach work, notions that have become archaic in an internet-enabled world. Just as private companies are learning to embrace social media to manage brand reputations, governments must adapt if they wish to effectively communicate with citizens and stakeholders.

Social technologies can make networking and engagement with the public simple and powerful, make research faster, provide mechanisms for combating negative publicity, and measure public sentiment to help inform public policy. In my opinion, there is a good deal of opportunity for bi-directional engagement between the government and its citizens.