

## Urban Europe Policy Brief

# Policy recommendations for government use of social media for collaboration with citizens

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### Introduction

Government and institutional organizations at all levels, from the EU Council and European Commission to single municipalities, are increasingly using social media (SM) and social networking sites (SNS) (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) to communicate with and broadcast their information to their “citizens-followers”. Especially at the local level, governments use SNS to create a new channel for two-way communication and collaboration with citizens, engaging them in the design and delivery of policies in various domains. In doing so, governments face many challenges that undermine their own efforts and limit the potential and effectiveness of SNS to deliver improved communication and collaboration. Evidence from the

JPI SmartGov Project shows that most challenges relate to: guaranteeing privacy, data protection, accuracy and consistency of information; achieving integrated workflows between departments; identifying stakeholders to connect with; determining employees’ code of conduct; defining clear roles and responsibilities (e.g. communication managers and data analysts).

This policy brief provides practical recommendations for governments, especially at the local level, to overcome these challenges and make effective use of social networking sites for communication and collaboration purposes. The recommendations are based on a thorough review of relevant academic literature and interviews and questionnaires with the SmartGov Project pilot cities.

### Key Message

- Social media strategy allows relevant stakeholders to be identified and greater collaboration to be achieved;
- Social media guidelines help determine how often to post, the kind of information, and manage users’ expectations;
- Coordination between different departments is essential for exchange of best practices;
- Allocation of clear social media tasks and responsibilities increases efficacy of social media organizational efforts;
- Alignment of social media, servers and networks facilitates management and users’ activity and interaction;
- Ownership and control of data is essential to guarantee privacy, accuracy and assessment of social media activity;
- Monitoring, analytics, and measuring of social media activity is key to assess opinions of relevant stakeholders and make relevant changes to organization’s social media policy.



## Decide on a social media networking strategy

Decide on a social media networking strategy for collaboration purposes and identify two important components: i) the target audience (the 'audience' of stakeholders and the influencers it wants to work with, outlining incentives for them to feed in); ii) other government departments to collaborate with.

Previous research shows that until 3 years ago a minority of 25 OECD national governments had a dedicated social media strategy (Fig. 1). For example, the mobility and transport department might have as its target audience mainly commuters and should network with public transport companies, traffic department, and public works department in order to provide its audience with relevant and more up to date information. Networking among different departments may result in increased inter-department collaboration with positive effects on the structure and governance of the whole organization.

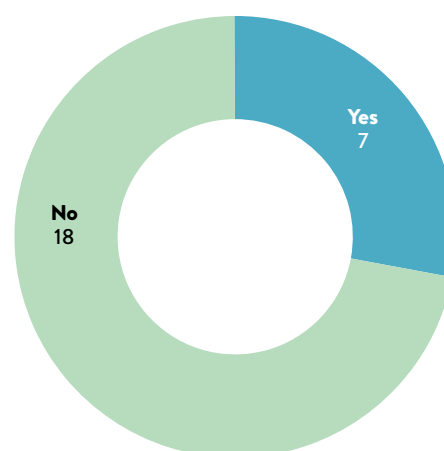
## Establish clear guidelines for social media use

Social media guidelines are a fundamental element for guaranteeing effective use. The guidelines should determine how often to post (and at what times during the day); the kind of information (e.g. change of schedules, works on routes, delays); acceptance of comments; responsiveness (response time to comments); moderating role of citizens' comments; code of conducts for wording and behaviour for employees, and expectation management, i.e. what may the target audiences expect in terms of speed, substance and online/offline follow-up of government responses.

## Organizational recommendations

- Decide on a social media networking strategy to identify your target audience and other departments and stakeholders to collaborate with;
- Establish clear guidelines for social media use and determine responsiveness, acceptance and moderation of comments, code of conducts for employees;
- Co-ordinate between different departments, and between back and front-office, for effective communication;
- Appoint social media personnel with clear tasks and responsibilities such as social media managers, experts, analysts, moderators.

Does your government have a dedicated strategy for the use of social media?



**Figure 1**  
Dedicated social media strategy in 25 OECD countries.  
Source: Mickoleit (2014).

## Co-ordinate between different sub-units and departments

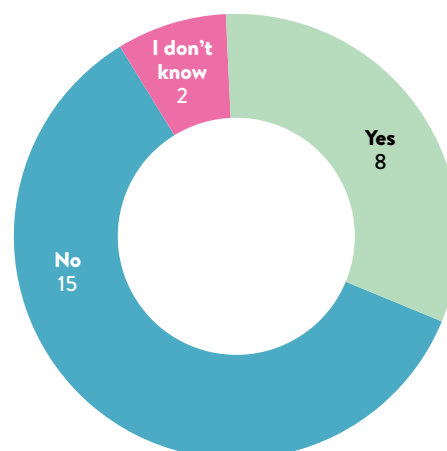
Re-structure the organization and its governance in terms of integration, collaboration and interaction between different sub-units. Coordination among sub-units should be achieved with regard to the strategy, guidelines, exchange of best practices, and communication with citizens. This also includes adapting the front- and back-offices to enable constructive responses to citizens' input, both online and offline.

A dedicated communication department guarantees coordination, analysis of social media activity (see technological recommendations), and can avoid creation of multiple accounts which results in fragmented action, confusion and discouragement of citizens. A successful example is the Newsroom of the Municipality of Utrecht, The Netherlands, as a sub-unit of the communication department (back-office) which guarantees interaction and coordination with other departments and collaborates with the Customer Contact Centre (front-office) to increase both online and offline responsiveness.

## Appoint dedicated social media personnel

Appoint dedicated social media personnel with clear responsibilities and tasks (e.g. social media managers, experts, analysts, moderators) (Fig. 2). It is important to free up social media staff capacity from other 'regular' tasks since overlap of responsibilities and greater workload might negatively affect responsiveness to social media activity and other functions. If possible, social media efforts need to become an integrated part of the organizational budget. Political support and acceptance by organizational leadership is needed in the early phases.

Does your government have a strategy or plan to develop civil servants' capacities for social media use as part of their official tasks?



**Figure 2**  
Skills strategies for government social media use in 25 OECD countries. Source: Mickoleit (2014).

## Technological recommendations

- Align ICT Infrastructure such as networks, hardware, databases and servers between different departments;
- Set quality standards for data published by the agency and data gathered from social media;
- Optimize analytical, monitoring and measuring skills for activities such as data crawling and mining, content and sentiment analysis.

## Align ICT infrastructure and system architecture between departments

ICT infrastructure and system architecture (networks, hardware, databases, and type of social media ) need to be aligned between different departments to allow them to collaborate effectively. It is recommended that sub-units of an organization agree on whether to use Twitter or Facebook (pages, groups) or other social networking sites for consistency within the organization and to facilitate their followers. The IT and communication departments would ideally oversee this process and ensure proper data and workflow integration.

## Set standards for data management and quality control

Data management and quality concern two dimensions: 1) data and information created and published by the agency; 2) data and information gathered from social media channels. Ownership and control over data produced and shared by the agency is required as well as quality in terms of accuracy, timeliness, and consistency among sub-units. The agency also needs to set up standards for social media data collection and archiving procedures.

## Optimize analytical, technological and monitoring skills

The final set of recommendations relates to technological and analytical skills within the organization and is strictly related to training, appointing or hiring skilled personnel. Monitoring and measuring social media activities and their impact on followers is essential. Technological skills such as data crawling and mining are fundamental to make sense of social media data. Monitoring and analytical methods such as content and sentiment analysis are required to assess the opinion of relevant stakeholders, allowing for constructive responses of the agency, both online and offline.

Various metrics such as number of visitors, downloads, likes, retweets, and shares, but also more content-based inputs are essential if government intends to use social media data and feedback to improve existing services, activities and decisions or decide on new ones. An organization-wide social media department or taskforce could perform such responsibilities for other departments.

**More information about the project**  
[www.smartgov-project.eu](http://www.smartgov-project.eu)

## References & Further Readings

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