

Social Media Policy

Harnessing a Runaway Horse



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The recent riots in England have demonstrated both the good and the bad side of social media. On the one hand, you have the rioters who used social media to coordinate illegal activities. On the other, you see an example of how communities can use social media to coordinate efforts at recovery. (See my recent blog, [Social media and recovery: the London riots.](#))

Social media is an ever-expanding tool, full of possibilities. In each recent disaster, we have seen the emergence of new and creative uses for social media and an increasing empowerment of communities to play a significant role in response and recovery. The old myth that people in disasters can't look out for themselves may finally be dying.

But with change comes risks. We are seeing the emergence of some interesting legal problems associated with social media, pertaining primarily to privacy issues, copyright infringement, defamation and loss of intellectual property.

How then can an organization or government protect itself and still make use of social media? The

starting point is the crafting of social media policy.

Why Social Media is Different

There is a tendency among large institutions to treat social media as just another public relations communications channel.

Responsibility for social media is assigned to the public information officer or corporate communications department and used to disseminate the same press releases that are sent out to the traditional media. This approach is doomed to failure.

In *Making the Most of Social Media: 7 Lessons from Successful Cities*, author Chris Kingsley identifies three critical differences between social media and traditional communications channels.

First, and probably the hardest for those in hierarchical institutions, is that social media is interactive rather than authoritative. Instead of controlling the flow of information, the organization is now one of many speakers in a conversation. Credibility is derived not from the inherent authority of the organization but from the responses and interactions of the participants.

Secondly social media is personal rather than institutional. Just because you put out information using social media doesn't mean that users will not ignore it or fail to pass it on. The user makes the choice about what information he or she considers relevant.

Finally, social media actually reaches a much smaller audience than main stream media. It is narrowcast rather than broadcast. The power comes from personal relationships and networking. A person is more inclined to believe and react to a message if it is passed on by a trusted friend.

These three characteristics create real problems for organizations used to hierarchy and tight control. The "single point of release" paradigm needs to be replaced by a coordinated message released at multiple levels in the organization. The lines between personal and business use of IT resources is becoming blurred as social media becomes a tool for professional development as well as official organizational interests.

Policy Elements

In *Designing Social Media Policy for Government: Eight Essential Elements*, researchers Hrdinová, Helbig, and Peters studied a number of government social media policies and identified eight areas that should be addressed in social media policy:


1. Employee access – who can access social media sites? What sites can be accessed?
2. Account management – what types of accounts are established? Who maintains them?
3. Acceptable use – how are agency resources to be used? Is personal use allowed? What are the consequences for violations?

4. Employee Conduct – What is inappropriate conduct? What are the consequences for violations?
5. Content – who is allowed to post content? Who monitors for accuracy?
6. Security – what security measures are required of users, e.g. complex passwords, virus scans, etc.?
7. Legal issues – how will you ensure all applicable laws and regulations are followed?
8. Citizen conduct – how will you handle engagements with your audience? What is acceptable conduct? How will you handle inappropriate comments?

Designing the Policy

While social media issues can be complex, designing the actual policy should not be. Hrdinová, et al. suggest a four part approach:

1. Determine goals and objectives for using social media tools.
2. Convene a multi-functional team of stakeholders: communication, legal, technology, human resources, and program units.
3. Identify existing policies applicable to social media tools.
4. Resolve conflicts and inconsistencies between proposed and existing policies and procedures.

Social media is still evolving but establishing a basic policy can go a long way to making sure you can use it effectively. 

Works Cited

Hrdinova, J., & Helbig, N. S.-P. (2010). *Designing social media policy for government: Eight essential elements*. Albany: Center for Technology in Government.

Kingsley, C. (2009). *Making the most of social media: 7 lessons from successful cities*. Philadelphia: Fels Institute of Government.