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Government use of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, has become common practice over the last five years. However, as governments adopt social media tools as a way to connect with citizens, these efforts fall short of creating meaningful engagement. Government Fan Pages emphasize government driven, one-way information dissemination instead of two-way collaboration and exchange with citizens. This paper looks at a sample of North Carolina city government Facebook Pages to identify features that support two-way interactions between government and citizens that may contribute to increased engagement and participation.

Headings:

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FOSTERING CITIZEN/GOVERNMENT INTERACTIONS ON FACEBOOK AS A
WAY TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT

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Introduction

Within the last ten years, the explosive growth of social technologies has made its mark even in the notoriously slow public sector. Federal, state, and local government units are adopting social technologies, particularly social media tools, as an inexpensive way to communicate with the public. President Obama's 2009 memorandum "Transparency and Open Government" is widely credited with propelling government into seriously considering ways to effectively use social technologies. The memorandum highlighted the idea innovative use of social media by government, or Government 2.0, can be a low-cost way to increase citizen participation, transparency, accountability, and service delivery in the public sector that may ultimately lead to greater engagement (Obama, 2009). Although the memorandum was directed toward the heads of executive departments and agencies in the federal government, the essence of its message has made an impact on governments at the state and local level. Particularly for local governments, social media tools create a realm of possibilities for boosting citizen engagement and participation. Social media tools have emerged as channels for the public to share ideas and facilitate discussion. The influence of the Internet on citizen participation and engagement is often discussed but the question of social media's effects on engagement has only recently begun to be examined (Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero 2012).

Research on social media and engagement is generally based on evaluating government-side quantitative measures, such as number of fans a Facebook Page has at a given time. However, since social media is based on two-way interactions, this approach falls short of examining the engagement potential of Facebook Pages by looking only at how well a government uses a Page to provide information to citizens (Strecker 2011; Mossberger and Wu 2012; Kand and Gearhart 2010). To understand and explore the citizen perspective, as well as examine the potential of Facebook Pages as spaces to engage, this study seeks to identify what, if any, relationship exists between the interactions of citizens and government on Facebook that may lead to engagement, and what characteristics of Pages support engaged interaction.

Literature Review

I. Government 2.0

Social media sites are characterized by the creation of a public/semi-private profile within a defined space, the ability to connect with others who share this space, and user-generated content (Mossberger and Wu 2012; Boyd and Ellison 2007). Social media networks developed as part of a broader collection of Web 2.0 technologies that allow web-based interaction and collaboration among users that are virtually instant, as well as “inexpensively storable, shareable, participatory” (Mergel 2013, 169; O’Reilly 2005). Web 2.0 tools evolved in the late 1990s and early 2000s from static, non-interactive Web 1.0 tools through which users could view, but not create content (Nabatchi and Mergel 2010). Through social media, users can create, organize, edit, comment on, combine, and share content as an individual or as part of a collaborative effort to connect online information in an immediate, multi-directional way.

Governments at all levels routinely use the most popular social networks, including Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, to reach a broad audience. Facebook is the largest social network community, with 974 million members worldwide and 168 million users in the United States as of December 2012 (Social Bakers.com n.d.). Between 2009 and 2011, Facebook use by the 75 largest cities in the United States jumped from 13% to 87% (Mossberger and Wu 2012). This rapid growth reflects the increased use of social networks by the public: 65% of adult Internet users also use social networking sites. Of these users, 89% had a Facebook account (Rainie 2012). In 2007, Facebook introduced Fan Pages as a way for private and public organizations to communicate with the public efficiently and inexpensively (Strecker 2011). For local governments, Facebook can be a channel to disseminate information as much as it is a place to hear what the public is saying about government. As of 2011, 74% of North Carolina municipalities with populations greater than 10,000 use Fan Pages as a way to connect with citizens (UNC School of Government 2011).¹

Pages are designed to imitate the standard Facebook Timeline user profile.² Users “like” a Page to connect with organizations on Facebook and, in turn, these Pages can post content into a Fan’s newsfeed or send direct messages, depending on the individual user’s settings. Liking a Page is distinct from liking content. Fans can “like” pieces of content posted by Pages or friends as a way to give positive feedback on content without leaving a comment. Individual content items can be liked without liking the Page itself. Depending on a Page’s setup, fans may be able to post directly

¹ To promote consistency across Facebook, “Fan” Pages were renamed “Like” Pages in April 2010 (Social Bakers n.d.). Despite this change, most of the features remained the same. In this paper, “Fan Page”, “Like Page”, and “Page” will be used interchangeably.

² Timeline replaced the traditional Facebook Profile for individual users in August 2012.

onto the Page wall, but Page administrators can disable comments to moderate content and control discussion on their Page. However, users can always comment on posts made by the Page or write recommendations about what appears on the Page.

The number of likes a Page has is often considered a measure of the overall success of the Page, with more likes associated with higher value and legitimacy. However, evaluating a Page based on its total number of likes is a superficial measure that does not provide information about engagement, popular content, or what users are saying. To improve understanding of Page activity, Facebook introduced “People Talking About This” in October 2011 to track the number of unique users who created a “story” with a Page in a seven-day period (Inside Facebook).⁴ This new metric does more than simply count likes by capturing how users are “engaging” with the Page and posted content. Ultimately, “People Talking About This” emphasizes the need to look at a range of factors when analyzing interaction and engagement on Facebook.

II. Public Participation and Engagement

As one of the many types of information and communication technologies emerging from Web 2.0, social media tools are slowly changing the way people interact with each other and the way government connects with citizens (Svara and Denhardt, 2010).⁵ Social networks create new possibilities for online participation as channels that support potential two-way interactions between government and citizens (Nabatchi and Mergel, 2010). The success of government in using these tools depends on a

⁴ Stories include posting on a Page wall, liking, commenting or sharing a Page’s post, mentioning or tagging a Page, checking in, writing a recommendation, and sending a “RSVP” to a Page event.

⁵ Examples of Web 2.0 tools include blogs, Rich Site Summaries (RSS) and syndicated web feeds, wikis, photograph and video sharing services, podcasts, social networks, social bookmarks, and mashups.

variety of factors, including the quality of content, specific local government practices, and citizen response. Furthermore, the organizational missions and standard operating procedures of most government agencies do not provide much support for the use of social media. Information and communication from government is hierarchical, and is written to avoid confusion, misinformation, and rumors, whereas communication through social media is often reactive, decentralized and unplanned. As a quasi-public space, users are able to see and respond to content published by other users as much as they create and share their own content.

Governments using social media may ask for input from citizens, but this does not necessarily create an “authentic relationship between the bureaucracy and the public” (Morse 2006). Governments often fail to effectively employ social media because they do not use these tools in the way they were designed for, namely, as a platform for two-way communication (Hand and Ching, 2011). Ultimately, a government’s social media *presence* does not guarantee *engagement* with citizens.

Emerging out of Government 2.0 came the concept of Participation 2.0, a term coined to describe the use of Internet and social media applications to “engage citizens in the work of government and governance...[and] allow for bidirectional interaction among government and citizens” (Nabatchi and Mergel, 80). Based on moving the public beyond the passive roles of observers or consumers of government, participation supports the existence of active, involved, and interested citizens in government. Nabatchi and Mergel’s “Public Involvement Spectrum in Decision Making” table illustrates the use of Web 2.0 technologies by government agencies and maps the tools to specific levels along the public participation spectrum.

Level and Goal of Involvement	Examples of Participation 2.0
Inform- Provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternative opportunities, and/or solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interactive websites • Facebook and social networking sites • Twitter
Consult- Receive and respond to citizen comments, requests, and complaints, and/or obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SeeClickFix.com • FixMyStreet.com • Love Lewisham • Citizens Connect
Include/Incorporate- Work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public's concerns and aspirations are consistently understood by staff and the public considered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wikipanning • <i>2020Buzz</i>
Collaborate- Partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virtual Ward Panels • <i>My Raleigh Ideas!</i> • <i>Speak Up, Edina!</i>
Empower- Place final decision-making authority in the hands of citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Virginia Idea Forum

Table 1- Public Involvement Spectrum in Decision-Making⁶

At its best, Participation 2.0 is helping citizens take an active role in the work of government by using new technology to engage citizens in identifying, organizing, prioritizing, and solving community issues. Participation 2.0 falls short, however, when citizens are not provided with the capacity, information, or expectations needed to participate meaningfully in government processes. Despite its potential, most online activity between citizens and governments is driven by the legacy of Web 1.0 technologies. Citizen-government interactions remain largely static, non-interactive, and

⁶ Participation 2.0 examples that are italicized were included in the table by the author as additional cases demonstrating real-world use of Web 2.0 tools by government.

one-directional. It is precisely this potential of decentralized, two-way communication that makes social media use by government so appealing.

Citizen engagement is based “upon a fundamental right of all citizens to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives” (Lukensmeyers and Torres, 9). Providing opportunities for citizens to take meaningful roles in decision-making, from defining problems and identifying solutions to determining priorities and creating policies, is important for creating strong communities with empowered citizens. Lukensmeyers and Torres identify six principles that drive citizen engagement:

1. Inform and educate the public about important policy issues.
2. Improve government decisions by providing information upward from citizens to decision makers.
3. Create opportunities for citizens to shape, and in some cases, determine public policy.
4. Legitimate government decisions by ensuring that the voices of those impacted by government policy have been heard, considered, and addressed.
5. Involve citizens in monitoring the outcomes of policy for evaluation.
6. Improve the quality of public life by restoring the trust and engagement of citizens.

Engagement is often described as a spectrum with increased citizen involvement and influence as you move across levels. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum identifies five levels of engagement: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. The lowest level, inform, involves only one-way communication from the government to citizens, while the highest extreme, empower, places decision-making in the hands of the public (IAP2 2007).

Moving away from the low participation range of the spectrum requires a shift from one-way “information exchange” to two-way “information processing” models that enable knowledge sharing and meaning making for citizens. (Lukenmeyer & Torres, 7).

Genuine citizen engagement requires actual engagement as opposed to exchanging information, with engagement centered on citizen interest and needs (Svara and Denhardt, 2010). Citizens should drive the focus of discussion because governments should “address the issues that people perceive to be important and meet citizens where they are in order to get them engaged” (Svara and Denhardt, 19). Social media tools have the potential to increase public engagement, but most governments fail to move beyond the basic level of inform with their social media efforts toward engagement.

The capability to provide information through social media does not guarantee genuine citizen engagement. Governments use social media in the limited inform stage when they push content out to citizens and do not offer any significant ways for citizens to respond. Many governments use Facebook as a way to share time-sensitive information about upcoming events or services and the wall of a government’s Page is often one long stream of posts made by the government. Citizens can respond to specific posts, but most Pages are not set up in a way that facilitates or welcomes citizen dialogue and discussion. In order to encourage meaningful engagement through social media and move up the spectrum of participation, governments need to reconsider how they use social media. This may require governments to rethink the reasons behind its use of social media, the outcomes expected, and how it measures whether or not it was successful in using social media. Social media has the potential to be a tool for governments to connect with citizens in a way that enables two-way information

processing and increased participation. Designed for interaction and exchange, social media is a place for governments to share *and* receive information from citizens.

However, based on analysis of Facebook Pages, most governmental use of social media is limited to the lower end of the public engagement spectrum with government-driven information dissemination that does little to genuinely engage citizens.

Methodology

This study used a mixed-method design with quantitative and qualitative components conducted in two phases: a survey administered to visitors of local government Fan Pages and a content analysis of a sample of Fan Pages reported in the survey. To recruit cities to post the survey on their Facebook Page, an email was sent out on the North Carolina Public Information Officer (NCPIO) listserv, a professional group comprised of local government public information officers and communication specialists from across the state. As governmental communication officers, this population is often responsible for the administration and monitoring of their local government Facebook Pages. The email sent to the listserv requested their assistance by posting a link to the survey on their city's official Fan Page (See Appendix C). All municipal government Pages were eligible to post the survey, however, posting the survey was at the discretion of the Page administrator. Because the survey request was sent out through a listserv, the number of links actually posted on Fan Pages is unknown.

Questions for the online survey were based on prior studies (Mossberger and Wu 2012). There were 27 questions in the survey, with questions divided into four sections: the respondent's self-reported assessment of their general Facebook use and

specific use of municipal Fan Pages, self-reported degree of civic participation and involvement, questions related to the participant's opinion on the legitimacy and value of municipal Fan Pages, and optional demographic questions. (See Appendix B) The survey was designed to gather consistent data across all responses so most of the questions were multiple choice, with an "other" option available. This allowed participants to add extra information if they did not think any of the prescribed choices applied to them. The survey was piloted on seven individuals with similar characteristics of the intended survey participants, and any suggested changes or clarifications were made prior to the launch of the survey. Once the survey was launched, 71 surveys were started but only 50 were complete enough to provide useful data for analysis, a 63% completion rate. The remaining 21 surveys were not included in analysis of the results.

The variables used for the Fan Page content analysis were also based on prior research studies that identified key features of Pages that may contribute to engagement (See Table 2; Strecker 2011; Mossberger and Wu 2012; Tufts, forthcoming). In addition to the one-dimensional metrics that are often used to evaluate a Page, such as the number of fans, posts or likes, measures that examined features related to citizen-government exchange were also identified. These measures include the presence of a comments policy, which suggests the government is receptive to receiving citizen response and is prepared to facilitate discussion, and whether citizens are allowed to directly post onto a Page. Together, the one-dimensional and exchange variables provide a comprehensive assessment of the potential of Pages to spark engagement.

Content Analysis Variables

Government Facilitation	Citizen-Driven Interactions
Link to Facebook from city website	Number of fans
Start date of page	Number of likes on city posts
Number of postings by city	Number of citizen shares
Number of photographs posted by city	Citizens allowed to post directly on page
Number of videos posted by city	Number of citizen direct tags/posts on page
Presence of comments policy	Number of citizen tagged photographs
Number of city responses to citizen comments	Number of citizen tagged videos
Appearance of third party application tool to post	Number of citizen comments on city posts
	Citizens allowed to make recommendations on page

Table 2: Variables for the Content Analysis

Pages selected for in-depth analysis were chosen based on responses from the survey. One of the questions asked respondents to identify the city they were referring to for the survey. Overall, a diverse group of Pages was examined for this project, representing urban, rural, and suburban municipalities located throughout the state. Survey responses identified 12 unique municipalities in North Carolina to conduct the Page analysis on: Asheville, Burlington, Carrboro, Cary, Chapel Hill, Claremont, Huntersville, Matthews, Morganton, Rocky Mount, Rocky Point, and Newton (See Appendix A for a Page example). The Pages for these municipalities were analyzed over a six-month timeframe between June 1 and November 30, 2012.⁷ During this time, all posts on the Page were recorded and categorized, along with the number of Fan interactions and city responses to these interactions. Most variables are limited to

⁷ These numbers represent a snapshot of the Page at a particular time. As a result, information gathered from the Page, such as the total number of Fans, photographs or likes, may have changed since the initial data collection and do not accurately reflect current totals.

information from this specific month time frame, but variables marked with an asterisk include information for the entire lifetime of the site. Of the pages examined, six are highlighted in Table 3.

Findings and Discussion

With 50 survey responses representing only twelve cities, the data collected from the survey sample and Page analyses are too small to draw generalizable conclusions about the role of Pages in fostering citizen engagement. While a substantial number of people use the Internet and Facebook, not everyone does. Furthermore, even among Facebook users, the number of citizens who like or become fans of their local government's Page is small. Because of self-selection bias, survey responses may not be an accurate representation of the opinions of average citizens. In light of these factors, the analysis is limited to descriptive statistics because any meaningful statistical analysis would not be valid. However, suggestions for ways local governments can increase the engagement potential of their Pages can be identified.

Findings based on survey responses indicate:

- 86% of respondents agree Facebook Pages are good places for city governments to post information.
- 78% of respondents agree Facebook Pages are good places for engaging citizens.
- 88% of respondents agree Facebook Pages help citizens stay informed about current events and public affairs.
- 88% of respondents agree Facebook Pages help citizens stay informed about their local community.
- 86% of respondents agree Facebook Pages provide information to citizens that they otherwise may not have known about.

Forty percent of respondents reported visiting their local government's Page with some frequency between once a week to a few times a month. Other responses given for the frequency of visiting a Page was "only if something pertinent [was] posted in newsfeed", "if pushed there by a post in my feed" or "I wait for it to show up in my FB notifications." It is likely fans rely more on passively receiving information from their government's Page rather than actively seeking it out. For high-volume Pages and active users, information tends to get lost, or quickly "buried" among all the other content. Comments from the survey indicate users are aware of content posted by a government Page only when it appears in their newsfeed. For this reason, it is worthwhile to actively promote important content posted on Pages.

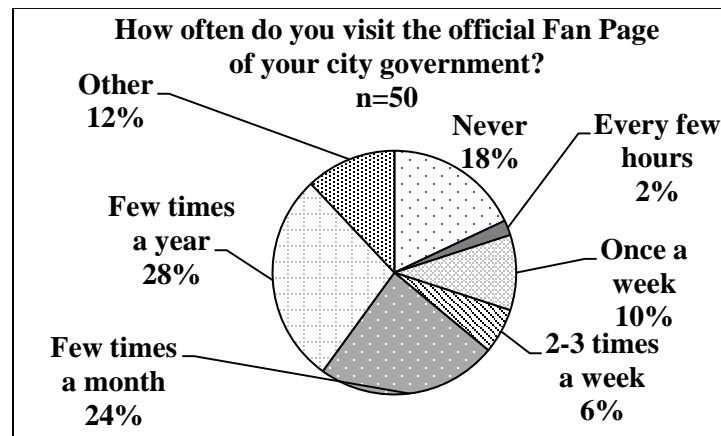


Figure 1- Frequency of Page Visits

The demographic makeup of survey respondents was similar to results from other Facebook user demographics as identified by previous research and corresponded with the general population of Facebook users (Online MBA). Thirty-one out of 50 participants, or 62%, were between the ages of 25 and 44; 40% of Facebook users are between the ages of 25-44. Sixty-eight percent of survey respondents were female, compared to the Facebook average of 57%. Survey participants had higher levels of

education than the average Facebook user with all 50 respondents indicating at least some college education. Thirty-six percent reported having a Bachelor degree while 48% reported having a graduate or professional degree.

Of the total response of valid surveys, 68% of responses represent the Town of Chapel Hill. This high response rate, relative to other jurisdictions reported, is less than one percent of the total 3936 Fans of the Town of Chapel Hill's official Page.⁸ This reach, or the number of people who see a post, is small in relation to the Town of Chapel Hill's total population of 58,000. One factor behind the relatively high response rate for the Town of Chapel Hill was the use of multiple channels to share the survey to citizens. Along with posting the survey on the town's Page, information about the survey, along with links to it, were publicized on the Town of Chapel Hill's website, weekly e-news, and Twitter account (See Figures 2-4). This multi-channel approach pushed the survey out to a wider audience and presented the information in different formats, likely driving more traffic to the survey.



Figure 2- Town of Chapel Hill Facebook Post

⁸ The large number of responses based on Chapel Hill also explains the high levels of education reported. Chapel Hill is one of the most highly educated communities in North Carolina with 73.2% of the population having a Bachelor Degree or higher. Over 44% of Chapel Hill residents are estimated to have a graduate or professional degree (American Community Survey).



Figure 3- Town of Chapel Hill Twitter Post



Figure 4- Town of Chapel Hill website announcement

Many cities use multiple channels, both online and offline, to connect with the public.

Of the six cities listed in Table 3, all have a website and Twitter account, and most also have YouTube or Flickr channels.

To get information out to the public, another city also uses a multi-channel approach, but slightly different than the one used by Chapel Hill. According to the city's Public Information Officer:

"I do not have multiple channels linked together. I don't believe it is most effective to post the same thing in multiple different places simultaneously. I try to tailor the message to the medium used. I do, however, often share the same information throughout our channels (website, twitter, Youtube, email subscriptions, direct mail, etc.) but try to share that information in a manner conducive to the type of media being used to transmit the message."

E-mail with public information officer, February 11, 2013

Both cities acknowledge the importance of disseminating information through multiple channels in order to reach the widest audience possible. Ultimately, Facebook is not a stand-alone platform: it works best when it is used in conjunction with other media. Using social media and Web 2.0 tools is most successful when it is used alongside traditional methods of communication.

Analysis of Pages indicates a relationship between the types of content posted and Fan engagement. Pages that post significant numbers of photographs and videos have increased engagement and interaction with Fans. This finding supports previous research that photographs are factors for increased engagement but video posts are also emerging as an important source of engaging content. Among the six Pages with high levels of user activity listed in Table 3, four posted videos on their Pages.

City	Asheville	Burlington	Chapel Hill	Matthews	Newton	Rocky Mount
Start Date*	12/8/09	12/19/08	10/20/08	6/29/09	10/7/09	1/22/09
Videos*	20	20	0	0	9	37
Photos*	461	2854	89	124	7368	1363
Total fans*	8595	2417	3696	1231	1623	2863
Posts by city	89	85	87	74	107	82
"Likes" on City posts	393	899	377	477	539	356
User shares	71	221	120	15	57	52
Users allowed to post	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
User comments on City posts	71	107	61	18	55	56
City responses to comments	0	15	4	84	5	36

Table 3: Comparison of cities' level of Page activity

With the exception of the Town of Chapel Hill and Town of Matthews, these cities had more instances of citizen comments and citizen shares than Pages that did not post videos. Despite posting far fewer photographs and videos than other cities in the table, Chapel Hill's multi-channel approach is a likely factor to its relatively high level of user engagement. The high frequency of responses to citizen comments from the Town of Matthews may have positively influenced citizen engagement despite the low volume of videos and photographs posted by the city. Although the town did respond to comments, the town did not allow users to post directly onto their Page wall.

Among all cities, Rocky Mount was more likely to use Facebook as a tool for both engaging and informing citizens. Of the cities listed in the table, only Rocky Mount allowed users to directly post onto their Page (See Figures 5 and 6). Going beyond just enabling user-generated comments, Rocky Mount also responded to comments regularly.



Figures 5: Fan Page interactions between the City of Rocky Mount and citizens.



Figure 6: Fan Page interactions between the City of Rocky Mount and citizens

Matthews, Rocky Mount, and Asheville highlight the various approaches government can take to in regards to user comments. Asheville did not allow users to directly post on their wall and did not respond to comments. Matthews also did not allow users to post onto their wall, but they did respond consistently to comments made by users on the town's posts. Rocky Mount allowed users to post original content and was active in responding to comments and posts. Ultimately, responding to comments is one approach governments can take to transform a Page from a place of information to engagement because it shows government is listening to what the public is saying.

Despite the potential value of citizens posting directly on government Pages, many jurisdictions do not allow it. One of the major reasons government do not allow direct citizen posting is based on the issue of control: enabling citizen posts will open Pages up to the unknown, unpredictable, and possibly unwanted. One Public Information Officer described the decision made by her jurisdiction for why the city did not allow citizen comments:

“I do not allow for direct posting for a few reasons. Our posting policy indicates that citizens must post “on topic.” This is much easier to facilitate if fans respond to a particular City post. Spam (advertising, or cross-posting) is rampant when posting directly to the wall is permitted. Monitoring social media during non-office hours is often difficult enough and remains more manageable without the ability for citizens to post directly. If citizens need to reach out to us through Facebook and don't want to comment on a post, they typically use the messaging feature.”

E-mail with public information officer, February 11, 2013

Giving up control is uncomfortable and is not without some risks, but governments can ease their concerns by developing policies and procedures that address these issues.

An additional reason why government agencies do not enable citizen comments is the concern for “junk” posting (Mergel 2013). This includes content that is off topic or unrelated to the scope of the Page, such as spam or purposefully irrelevant commentary. Another well-known example of this type of content is often found on The White House’s “We The People” blog in which the public can submit online petitions. Many petitions are serious, on-topic and follow the expectations set forth by the site, but other posts are intended to be humorous and are not meant to be taken seriously by any reasonable standard.

A highly publicized example of a “We The People” petition that fell into this category was the “Secure resources and funding, and begin construction of a Death Star by 2016” petition that gathered over 34,000 online signatures and received a popular, tongue-in-cheek response to the petition by the White House in January 2013 (We The People). Despite the humor of these particular posts, genuine petitions with serious intentions are well represented among all posts.⁹

One of the most important tools for managing a Page is a clear commenting policy that distinguishes between behaviors and content that is acceptable from what is not. Many governments have some type of a blanket commenting policy that applies to many communication channels, but a Facebook-specific policy that is posted prominently on the government’s Page is important (GovTech). If governments are concerned citizens will post unrelated comments or spam, a clear policy will provide Page administrators room to moderate and, if necessary, remove content that falls

⁹ In January 2013, the signature requirement threshold, the minimum number of petitioners needed to sign in the first 30 days before the White House is required to respond, increased from 25,000 to 100,000. The 2011 original threshold was 5,000.

beyond the scope of what is acceptable for the Page. However, governments should err on the side of allowing more rather than less.

Along with the commenting policy, governments Pages must be continuously monitored. This serves a dual purpose: to “police” the Page for inappropriate comments or spam and responding to citizen comments or questions in a timely manner. Finding time and resources to do this is a challenge for many governments, particularly for those who cannot hire an employee dedicated to social media efforts. Ideally, Page administrators should determine, prior to launching a Page, the extent to which they can oversee the site and respond to citizens in order to make realistic assessment of what they should expect from the Page. Other questions to address include:

- **Who is responsible for monitoring Pages?** If there is not a dedicated social media employee, who is responsible for overseeing Pages, responding to comments, and deleting inappropriate content? How is social media oversight included into the overall work of the employee and how will time and resources be allotted to fulfill this assignment?
- **Who determines what content is acceptable?** Are social media monitors enforcing policy they did not write or were they able to provide insight for how a Page is operated? Are multiple stakeholders represented in discussions about what is acceptable content, including administration, legal, implementation, and user perspectives?

- **Who has the authority to post on the Page or respond to comments?** Is there an employee designated as the official voice or moderator of the Page? What is the range or scope of this authority to respond on behalf of different departments or programs within a government?

Ultimately, the decision to allow citizen comments on the Page is based on policy, but if a government's goal in using Facebook is to provide another avenue to *engage* citizens, governments must make a good faith effort to provide citizens genuine opportunities for engagement. These opportunities might range from a citizen asking a question about city services, to posting a negative comment, but this is exactly what citizen participation seeks: interest and involvement. Whether positive or negative, citizen comments provide governments with real feedback and offer jurisdictions the opportunity to hear the “buzz” of what citizens are saying as it comes immediately, and directly, from the public.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The analysis of Facebook Pages, along with the survey data and insight gathered from attempting the survey, point to several recommendations for local governments seeking to use Facebook beyond a channel for informing and more as a tool of engagement.

- **Use multiple channels to effectively reach your audience:** The relatively high response rate for the Town of Chapel Hill was driven, in part, by a multi-channel communication strategy. Develop a unified communication platform and create integrated campaigns, using both traditional and new media, to cross-promote content. Maximize the audience by sending information out through as many channels as possible.

Social media works best when it is used along with, and not in place of, traditional forms of communication.

- **Push content out to cut through the noise:** Facebook users are more likely to notice content that shows up in their newsfeed. Facebook users are often overloaded with information so it is important to think strategically about how to disseminate content. Highlighting content, such as through paid Facebook advertising or “organic promotion,” are ways to prevent information overload and buried content.¹⁰ Promoted posts appear higher in the newsfeed, increasing the likelihood users will notice the post.
- **Post dynamic content:** Visual content, such as photographs and videos are popular and are likely to elicit a reaction or response from users. Asking questions or posting fill-in-the-blank statuses, tactics used on the U.S. Air Force Recruiting Page, are other ways to foster interaction and engagement with citizens. See Appendix D for examples of U.S. Air Force Recruiting posts.
- **Be interactive:** In order to make a Fan Page a place of interest and information for citizens, local government administrators should be prepared to interact and engage with citizens through this medium. Facilitate interactive communication, connection, and public engagement

¹⁰ “Organic promotion,” refers to the news feed stories automatically created from the actions taken by people on a specific Fan Page or Page post.

by responding to comments, answering questions, and creating events to invite fans to offline activities.

Social media has limitations and while it may be a good tool to inform, it may not always be the best tool for engagement. However, if the goal is to go beyond informing toward at least some degree of engagement, then it is important for governments to make the effort to provide citizens with meaningful opportunities to engage. Facebook and other social media tools are designed to spark conversations and interactions between users. Citizens want, and to some degree expect, at least some interaction with their government through Pages. For government, the traditional approach of using social media, as a one-way information broadcast from government to citizen, fails to use this resource to its full potential for engagement. If governments want to use Facebook and other social media as meaningful engagement tools, they need to take it a step further and enhance opportunities for two-way engagement.

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Appendix A

Screenshot of the City of Burlington Page

Note- the screenshot was taken in February 2013 while the content analysis of the page was conducted in November 2012. This explains the difference in total fans, or “likes”, in the image compared to the number recorded in table 3.

facebook Search for people, places and things Allie Moore

City of Burlington, NC - Government 2,507 likes · 69 talking about this · 1,031 were here

Government Organization
Welcome to the Official City of Burlington Facebook page. Please review the City of Burlington's Social Media Policy (<http://www.burlingtonnc.gov/index.aspx?NID=1181>) prior to commenting. Check out our Twitter Feed at

About · Suggest an Edit

Photos Likes Map

City of Burlington, NC - Government Friday

Burlington City offices/services will operate under a two hour delay on Friday, February 22 due to the inclement weather.

Stay safe out there Burlington!

Like · Comment · Share

5 people like this.

View 2 more comments

Melanie Brewer 3 hr delay schools
Friday at 6:06am via mobile · Like

JoAnne Croy is court a two hour delay?
Friday at 7:06am · Like

Write a comment...

City of Burlington, NC - Government Thursday

Safety tips from NCDOT for travel during the upcoming winter weather:

Recommendations See All

Write a recommendation...

Amy Lloyd
what do you do when your neighbors behind you hav...
about 6 months ago

Burlington North Carolina
With questions or comments, please send the City's p...
about 7 months ago

Elizabeth Beggs Bowen
I'm curious about the plans to finish construction at C...
about 8 months ago

Nancy Ballard
I would like to thank all the hard workers that made ...
2 · about 10 months ago

See More

Likes

Burlington Recreation & Parks
Government Organization · Public Places & Attractions · Like

Burlington Fire, NC
Government Organization · Like

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire

1. What city are you referring to for this survey?
2. Are you a resident of this city?
Yes No
3. How often do you access Facebook?
Never
Every Few Hours
Once a Day
Once a Week
2-3 Times a Month
Few Times a Month
Other
4. How often do you visit the official Fan Page of your city government?
Never
Every Few Hours
Once a Day
Once a Week
2-3 Times a Month
Few Times a Month
Other
5. Have you "Liked" your city's Fan Page?
Yes No
6. How often do you use Facebook to Like a post or picture put up by your city, send a message etc?
Never
Every Few Hours
Once a Day
Once a Week
2-3 Times a Month
Few Times a Month
Other

7. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to seek specific information about a community issue?

- Never
- Every Few Hours
- Once a Day
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Few Times a Month
- Other

8. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to search for information about your local government?

- Never
- Every Few Hours
- Once a Day
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Few Times a Month
- Other

9. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to participate in, or read about, political discussions?

- Never
- Every Few Hours
- Once a Day
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Few Times a Month
- Other

10. How often do you re-post information from your city's Fan Page on your profile page?

- Never
- Every Few Hours
- Once a Day
- Once a Week
- 2-3 Times a Month
- Few Times a Month
- Other

11. Within the past twelve months, have you: voted in a national election?

- Yes
- No

12. Within the past twelve months, have you: voted in a local or state election?

- Yes
- No

13. Within the past twelve months, have you: contacted a government official?
Yes No
14. Within the past twelve months, have you: volunteered on a community project? (e.g. community gardens or coaching youth sport teams.)
Yes No
15. Within the past twelve months, have you: volunteered for non-political groups? (e.g. Habitat for Humanity or the American Red Cross.)
Yes No
16. Within the past twelve months, have you: attended a public hearing, town hall meeting and/or city council meeting?
Yes No
17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Facebook and Fan Pages are appropriate places for city governments to post information.
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree or Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
18. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Local governments should pay more attention to what citizens say on their Fan Page.
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree or Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
19. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page is a good place for engaging citizens.
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree or Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree
20. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page helps citizens stay informed about current events and public affairs.
Strongly Disagree
Disagree
Neither Agree or Disagree
Agree
Strongly Agree

21. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page helps citizens stay informed about the local community.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page provides information to citizens that they otherwise may not have known about.

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neither Agree or Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

23. What is your age?

24. What gender do you identify with?

25. Ethnicity origin (or Race):

26. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

27. What is your political affiliation?

Appendix C

Request to Post Survey

My name is Allison Moore and I am conducting research, under the supervision of Professor Shannon Tufts, on how local governments use Facebook to communicate with citizens and to assess whether citizens feel this online interaction with their local government increases offline participation. For this study, I am asking Facebook users who visit the Fan Page of a local government to complete a short survey. Participants are asked to report on their experience using Fan Pages and their opinion on this interaction.

To survey as many people as possible, I am asking you, as the person responsible for your city's Facebook Fan Page, to post a link to this survey on the Fan Page on **Wednesday, November 28th**. This link will redirect participants to a Qualtrics survey hosted on University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill servers. The survey will be open for 10 days. If possible, please repost the link on **Monday, December 3rd**.

Responses will be confidential and no identifying information such as names, email addresses, or IP addresses will be collected. Participants will be asked to identify the jurisdiction they are reporting on in the survey, but they will not be identified by name or any other information that could be used to infer their identity.

Appendix D

Examples of dynamic content posted on the U.S. Air Force Recruiting Page

