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# Social Media Communication by Michigan County and City Government

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# Social Media Communication by Michigan County and City Government

**Abstract**

In this fast-paced society, municipal governments struggle to keep up with venues of communication to relay information to their public. As of 2017, an estimation of 23 million people follow Twitter accounts maintained by government entities. Residents depend on social media more than going to their represented municipal websites for information. Today, government employees struggle to produce information that the public can read and understand. The purpose of this study is to discover how cities and counties in Michigan use websites and social media and if a community's affluence affects governments' ability to communicate to their citizens through social media. Results showed that cities and counties in Michigan rely more on websites than they do social media.

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**SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION BY MICHIGAN COUNTY AND CITY  
GOVERNMENT**

**By**

**Courtney J. Marshall**

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**Eastern Michigan University**

**Honors College**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation**

**With Honors in Political Science**

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## **Abstract**

In this fast-paced society, municipal governments struggle to keep up with venues of communication to relay information to their public. As of 2017, an estimation of 23 million people follow Twitter accounts maintained by government entities. Residents depend on social media more than going to their represented municipal websites for information. Today, government employees struggle to produce information that the public can read and understand. The purpose of this study is to discover how cities and counties in Michigan use websites and social media and if a community's affluence affects governments' ability to communicate to their citizens through social media. Results showed that cities and counties in Michigan rely more on websites than they do social media.

## **Introduction**

Local government entities throughout the state of Michigan struggle to communicate with their residents online. As technology rapidly progresses, some agencies have difficulties keeping up with these changes. Social media is the newest way of communicating with local governments to relay information to citizens and be able to receive feedback. Local governments are now able to use online websites and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to contact citizens about updates in their community.

Each municipality communicates to its residents or those interested in the community in a unique way. Social media has recently opened the doors to a new type of communication. As government entities learn about the ways of communicating through various social media pages, audiences develop preferences as to how they would prefer to receive updates. To learn how each region of the state of Michigan communicates, all eighty-three counties and county seats were analyzed. Twenty of the eighty-three were analyzed closely on the content those counties and cities provided on their websites and social media pages and what they provide to their residents. Fifteen of the twenty counties and cities were chosen based on their region within the state, five cities/counties were chosen in the Upper Peninsula, and ten counties/cities in the Lower Peninsula. To make sure all regions of Michigan was represented, the richest and poorest counties in the north, south, and central regions of the Lower Peninsula were selected.

For social media use and communication, population size and household income could be another factor if a city has an active social media policy and social media sites. Each city's connection with their audience was measured through resident feedback on social media sites and website interaction. Each county and city will be analyzed to see how many municipal social media sites each have, and what information is provided on each site.

Social media policies are created for government entities for employees to follow and take note of how the city should communicate and represent on each social media site. These plans are guidelines to explain what is acceptable to post on public pages. The goal of social media policies is to leverage social media to improve the quality of the government services and enable higher citizen engagement (Helbing, 2016).

## Chapter 1: Previous Research

### *The Era of Social Media*

Social media was created for users to communicate in different regarding how they best access information. Today, people can instant message their friends, send media (photos and videos), and post long or short posts on their profiles. Government sites have not yet grasped the concept that there are different ways to communicate to their residents. Social media began in 1997 when the first social media site website, Six Degrees, was created. This site allowed users to create a profile and friend other users on the site and people who did not register on the site could confirm friendships on Six Degrees (Hale, 2017). As social media developed computer mediated communication advanced to the era of blogging and instant messaging.

In 2000, around 100 million people had access to the internet. By this time, it was common for people to be engaged socially online by utilizing chat rooms to make friends. By 2003, Myspace and LinkedIn were popular sites to connect with friends and potential employers. Although Myspace is not nearly as big as Twitter or Facebook, there were musicians like Colbie Caillat who used Myspace to share their music and was heard by record producers (Hale, 2015).

By 2004, Facebook was launched and is still running as the most significant social media site today, having over one billion users. In 2006, as the popularity of text messaging was grew, Twitter was created as a service to allow users to send “tweets” of 140 characters or less to their friends. Twitter currently has over 500 million users. By 2010 and beyond, there were many other website providing different kinds of social media services. Flickr was one of the earliest photo-sharing sites and is still one of the most popular. Social media caters to all platforms of social media, but each has a slightly different purpose. Instagram feeds to users who like to



communicate through photos, and Twitter caters toward users who want to read short bursts of information.

These various social media sites might intimidate and scare government entities in the idea of using these social media sites due to the different platforms they provide. In 2010, the National Association of State CIO's noticed a rising shift toward the use of social media, (O'Leary, 2010). City and county residents rely on social media more than going to their represented municipal websites due to the convenience of having government information on the same site they find updates of the daily lives of friends and loved ones.

### ***Benefits of Using Social Media in Government***

There are many benefits in the use of social media sites for government agencies to communicate to their audience. These benefits include crowdsourcing information and feedback, participation in public conversation, and communication during emergencies and time-sensitive information.

#### ***Crowdsourcing***

The purpose of social media is to help municipalities' crowdsource information and feedback through commenting on posts (Advanced Learning Institute, 2015). *Hootsuite* explains that government agencies can succeed in having knowledge of public opinion by participating in the public conversation. Today, most of those discussions take place on social media through commenting on municipal posts on city and county government pages. The American Congressional Management Foundation social media study they found that 76 percent of American policymakers found that social media can create meaningful interactions with their audience (Russell, 2017).

In 2011, Civic Plus designed a Facebook application called Citizen Request Tracker. This app allows users to go to their Facebook account and use the app to contact the city or county about issues like potholes, broken sidewalks, graffiti, and noise complaints (Civic Plus, 2011). The tracker then sends the request to the city for an official to contact the citizen to resolve the claim. The tracker has been designed to help make local government more accessible to citizens who use social media sites and mobile devices in their daily lives. Currently budgets, hours, and staffing are shrinking, local governments have a difficult time getting through the process of receiving, tracking, reporting, and resolving citizen-reported community issues or concerns.

Citizen Request Tracker is a significant breakthrough for municipalities to better communicate with their citizens. The tracker allows the citizen to send the request directly and getting by to the citizen when progress is made and when the task is complete. If municipalities budget for at least one part-time employee that runs the tracker once a day, then the application would successfully assist community interaction and development.

During the 2016 presidential election, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump used social media to publicize their views on issues that face the United States. Clinton connected with her audience by talking about problems facing women, ethnic and gender minorities. Meanwhile Trump used social media to connect with the country's disenfranchised working class (Russell, 2017). The 2016 election was the first presidential election in which campaigns directly targeted voters through social media more than face-to-face appearances, which expanded their reach regardless of their physical location.

### *Communication During Emergencies*

Social media has changed how government entities communicate during emergencies. Government organizations can use their social media sites to get vital information needs out to the public quickly. When an unpredictable wildfire was expanding throughout the northern Canadian city of Fort McMurray, municipal and provincial levels of government turned to social media. Crisis communications show that government organizations should use social media sites as their website to communicate to their residents. Having the access to communicate to citizens with social media helps send out important information to those who do not check their government website regularly.

Civic Plus explains that most municipal governments can post time-sensitive information like weather alerts and Amber Alerts using their social media channels. For Amber Alerts, local government pages can post to seek information on wanted criminals in the community (Civic Plus, 2017). Cities should not rely on social media for all emergency communication since not all residents look at social media, but communities typically set it up as part of their communication plan. Municipalities have the option to offer live or archived videos of public meetings, and to share links to the videos on social media sites to advertise town halls and council meetings. For example, Whitehorse City Council made a commercial for their social media sites to promote city council meetings.

## *Negatives of Using Social Media in Government*

Municipalities throughout the nation struggle to communicate with their audience. Government entities have issues keeping their websites up to date, public lacking interest in municipality updates, the consequences organizations face when reaching out to the public outside of work hours, and executing important updates in a successful manner.

### *Issues with Government Websites*

*Governing* research shows that some government websites fail to link users to the pages that are labeled on their homepage. For example, the Rhode Island website does not have updated links to annual reports. Most of the annual reports provided on the homepage are five to ten years old. More recent reports do exist, but the yearly report list has not been updated (Barrett, 2017). Government entities should take the time and money to hire at least a part-time employee or an intern to handle updates with websites and social media sites. Government entities should change the duties of an employee to make sure government sites and social media pages are updated.

### *Sites Lacking Public Interest and its Consequences*

Some government entities face the issue of getting people to follow their social media sites due to the public's lack of interest. A few cities have decided to use employees' private accounts to connect with residents, which can lead to problems in the long run. Allowing employees to use their own personal accounts to connect with residents can lead to issues of determining what is and is not appropriate in the use of social media by government employees (Barrett, 2017). Giving access to employees can also make it difficult for residents to know what is official policy compared to an employee's opinion. The rate of employee access to government accounts has grown due to the lack of part-time and full-time staffing of updating

these sites, where the audience's expectation of these sites is to be less bureaucratic and more casual.

A social media coordinator for Frederick County Public Schools in Maryland was fired for tweeting at a student that did not convey, "an FCPS voice" that would "lift up and encourage students." (Callaghan, 2018). When a student tweeted about wanting a snow day spelling the word "tammarow," an employee with access to the Public Schools account replied to the student saying that, "but then how would you learn to spell 'tomorrow'?" (Baltimore, 2017). Giving access to more employees can bring connection to the communities, having the "voice" of the government entity or municipality be humorous and casual is not an efficient way of communicating to their audience (Callaghan, 2018).

Government entities are often confused by social media communication. When is it appropriate to post? Should it be at work or in the comforts of one's own home? How relevant should the information be to post on an organization's social media sites? Callaghan from *Governing* believes that giving employees have access to these accounts is, "a cost-effective way to extend the reach of the governmental message," but having employees as agents of government in their private lives is not a good idea. The line between public and private social media blurs, which tends to have negative consequences (Callaghan, 2018).

### *Executing Communications*

One of the most important factors of a municipality is to communicate important information to its residents. The City of Cape Town failed to make their residents aware of the health risks associated with the municipal water supply in January, 2018. (Kahn, 2018). Some guidance on the use of greywater is contained in documents on its website, but it is not actively

displayed on the website and contains inaccurate information, according to an epidemiologist from the University of Stellenbosch. (Kahn, 2018).

### ***Does Social Media help the Government-Citizen Relationship?***

Social media tends to move faster than the government organization's pace which causes government entities to struggle to keep up with new trends, platforms, and usage patterns. Time is the enemy of academic studies to better understand what is needed to improve communication. Theories fade due to the fast pace of social media platforms and sites being created or forgotten. With Nextdoor, government organizations must worry about overstepping resident neighborhood sites (Nextdoor) before they can post about anything specific, especially law enforcement based.

With the different types of municipal pages to worry about, it seems that government agencies need a full-time staff member to keep up with the pace of social media. Dr. Lori Brainard does not believe that government agencies should give in to the pressure to join social media and just stick to updating audiences through government websites. (Toscano, 2016). Dr. Brainard believes that agencies should not spread themselves thin by communicating on multiple sites when there are more important tasks that need to be fulfilled on a day-to-day basis. A large percentage of the U.S. population uses social media on a daily basis to communicate to friends, family, and the public. If government agencies do not use social media, how can municipalities make it easier for the residents and audience to communicate to government officials?

A study by the Pew Research Center found that less than 30 percent of adults take advantage of their local government's online offerings in order to complete common services, such as submitting and following up on requests (Civic Plus, 2017). According to Civic Plus, 75

percent of the citizens who use internet on a daily basis welcome the option to report municipal issues online. Less than 50 percent of government website offer this opportunity to report (Civic Plus, 2017). Although Citizen Report Tracker gathers, organizes, and distributes citizen issues and requests, finding the staffing to have someone go through the reports is also tricky in smaller cities.

The Gilbert Arizona digital team began to offer Social Media 101 training to their employees to keep up with the expanding world of social media. The training sessions turned into a formal ambassador program. After five lunchtime sessions, an employee becomes a “Certified Gilbert Social Media Ambassador” (Barrett, 2017). Having these training sessions helps employees have the same mindset and idea of what the organization should be posting on their social media sites. In 2015, Las Vegas started a program like Gilbert. Neither program had monetary rewards for completing the program and handling social media, but both were successful.

To improve social media efficiency, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) brainstormed ways to maintain the “Public Trust,” or to maintain the trust of your community (Young, 2017). The ICMA believes in keeping this trust by getting the real news out early and often, no matter how good or bad, so the public trusts that this (the municipality social media page) is the best source for the facts. If there are outside social media blogs sharing misinformation, then limit the direct engagement to the blog and consider a single response that shares a link to the full story of the correct information. The ICMA also recommends ideas like adopting consistent branding across departments so the public can recognize official content and clarifying policies for online engagement.

Creating “social media ambassadors,” for government entities, staff are unsure what is appropriate between public and private social-media interaction, and is already generating undesirable consequences (Callaghan, 2018). An example of this confusion is President Trump. The president uses his private Twitter account to tweet official statements from the White House. Multiple questions are raised, like if the president’s ability to block other users from his Twitter feed violates his ethical duty of fairness and impartiality; or if the president or his agent removes a tweet, can it be removed without breaking the Presidential Records Act (PRA)?

Government officials’ use of social media is questioned. A constituent in Arizona sued a state representative after he blocked her from his private Facebook page due to her critical comments. Since it was his personal Facebook account, he believes he can block whomever he wants; while the constituents think that the representative uses his private account in an official capacity to conduct public business, where the constituent’s right to free speech had been violated. It was not until then the representative allowed the constituent to see his Facebook page (Callaghan, 2018).

Given what we know, municipalities struggle to staff employees to handle social media sites and websites to communicate with their community. Municipalities struggle to find their “voice” and communicate to their staff as to how social media sites should post and what information should be posted. Giving employees multiple tasks in their day-to-day work life will leave staff members to prioritize what they need to do, which will most likely leave their duties of updating websites and posting on social media sites as the last thing to do on their list.

Being that the employee originally hired for another task was later given the responsibility to work the public relations of the government entity might leave the employee overwhelmed by the new tasks that they must do. This will leave the social media sites and



websites out of date, and not helpful for the general public. Separate departments could handle these responsibilities. Dispersing the source of communication can increase the chance of information not being published to the public by spreading responsibility to other entities rather than having one source to communicate to residents. Keeping government information to one page and one department to communicate will make the process of locating information for residents easier.

The size of a jurisdiction might have an effect on social media communication in Michigan. A factor of a municipality struggling to communicate with its residents might be the result of not having a formal social media platform to communicate properly. Another factor of social media interaction could be household median income because having the technology (wireless internet, phones, computers, etc.) can affect one's ability to connect to municipality sites via social media. In this study, it will be discovered if cities and counties in Michigan follow a social media policy and if a community's affluence affects governments' ability to communicate to their citizens through social media.

## Chapter 2: Michigan Counties and County Seats

### *Michigan County/City Analyzation*

Every county in the state of Michigan has been analyzed to understand how all counties take advantage of websites and social media to communicate to their residents. All county seats in the state were also examined to compare how cities communicate relative to their counties. The analyzation will give a broader picture of government entities' ways of communication throughout the State of Michigan. Counties were analyzed as well as cities to see how the difference in staff affects the usage of websites and social media sites. Counties elect their representatives for a limited time while cities hire employees for an indefinite amount of time.

Each county and county seat was searched on the internet to see if it had an official website, Facebook page, and Twitter page. Table 1 shows out of the eighty-three counties/seats how many websites and social media sites are used in the state of Michigan.

**Table 1**

Sites Used by Michigan Counties and County Seats

	<b>Facebook</b>	<b>Twitter</b>	<b>Website</b>	<b>None</b>
Counties (N=83)	19	10	83	0
Cities (County Seats)	41	24	79	3

Although each county has an official website for their residents to access, three county seats of eighty-three county seats do not have any website. Through this analyzation, Facebook is not a strong aspect of communication by Michigan counties, but about half of the counties seats use Facebook for their municipality. Twitter is a very weak way of communication through

Michigan counties, but over 25% of Michigan county seats do use Twitter to communicate to residents. Not every county or seat uses all options of communication (websites, social media sites). The question that next needs to be asked is, why? Why doesn't every county and county seat take advantage of these options of communication?

### ***Household Median Income***

Funding could be a factor of how municipalities chose to use social media sites and run their websites. Not all counties have a financially wealthy community. Figure 2 shows the comparison between median household income for Michigan counties and how many cities and counties use websites and social media sites analyzed. Household incomes were found from the U.S. Census Bureau and based on 2016 monetary value from 2012-2016 and divided by the state median of \$50,803.00 (Census.gov).

**Figure 1**

**Household Median Income Analysis of MI Counties/County Seats (\$50,803.00 state media)**

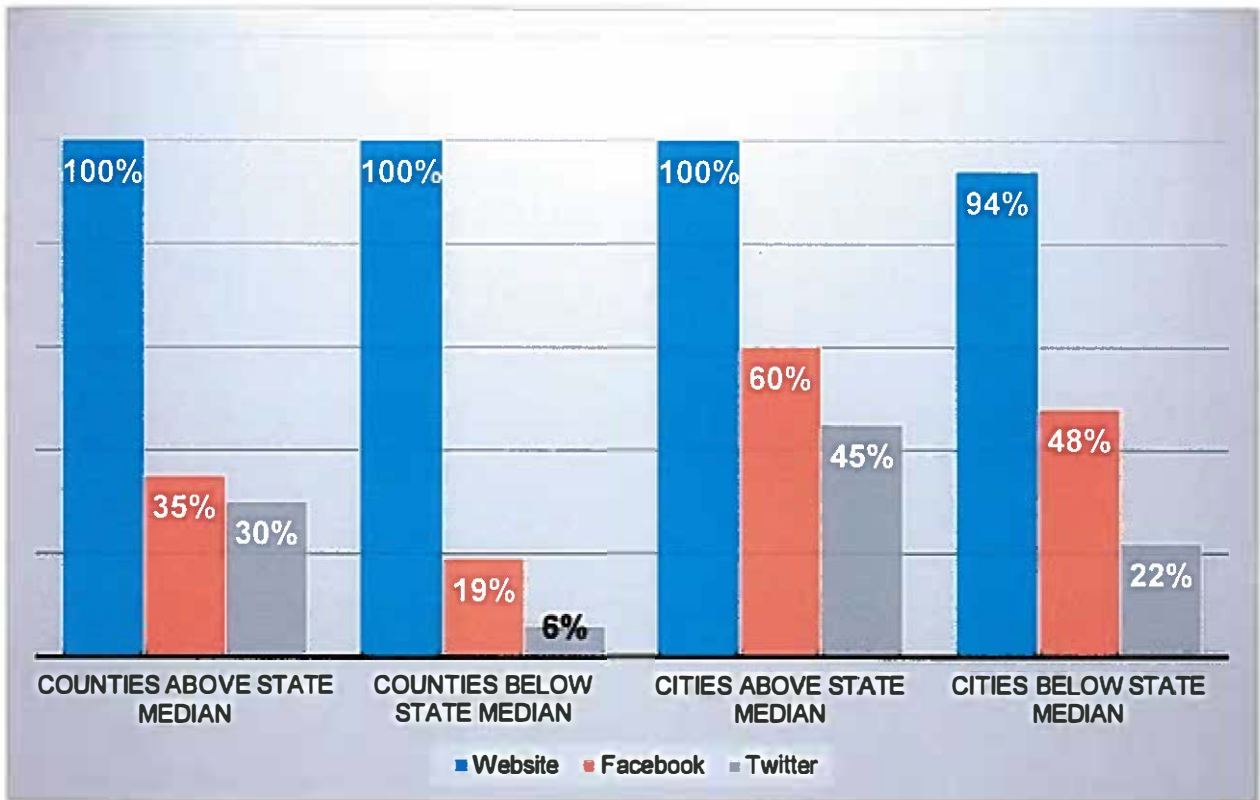


Figure 2 shows that there is a significant contrast between counties' household income, and how many sites they use to communicate. Between Twitter, counties who have household median incomes above the state median, 30% use the site while 6% of counties below the state median use Twitter. Local counties above the state median use Facebook than counties below the average by 16%. The most active path of communication by cities and counties is websites, where all counties in the State of Michigan have a website, while 79 of 83 county seats have a website.

Meanwhile, in the comparison of cities', household median income, and the number of sites used, Twitter is the only site that shows that cities with a higher household income use this specific site. Although there are only twenty counties that are above the state household median

income, the counties above the median have a higher rate of social media and website usage for their municipalities. Cities that are under the state median income rate lower, where sixty-three counties are accounted. Between counties and cities, results show that cities take advantage of social media to communicate more than counties. Both sites above and below the median surpass the amount of county social media usage. Out of the sixty-three counties below the median, only 6% of counties use Twitter pages, while 22% of cities below the average use Twitter.

Table one and figure one show that social media usage is low for Michigan counties. The reasoning could be because the county departments have already created their own Facebook pages where the municipality does not feel that creating another page that represents the county itself is needed. Figure 2 shows a image of a google result of “Kalkaska County Michigan Facebook page.” The image shows the various links that google found that relates to the search.

## Figure 2

### Google Search for Kalkaska County MI Facebook Page

#### **Kalkaska County Road Commission - Home | Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com> › Places › Kalkaska, Michigan › Business Services ▾

The Kalkaska County Road Commission is hiring a full-time truck driver. Applicants must have a minimum CDL-B with Air Brakes (CDL-A is preferred). Applications can be found at [www.kalkaskaroad.org](http://www.kalkaskaroad.org) in the Employment tab or apply in person at 1049 Island Lake Road, Kalkaska, MI 49646. Applications must be received ...

#### **Kalkaska Sheriff Office - Home | Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com> › Places › Kalkaska, Michigan › Government Organization ▾

★★★★☆ Rating: 4.7 - 75 votes

Having had a personal encounter with police officers while having a mental illness episode I offer thanks to the responding officers from kalkaska county sheriff's office. Officers ..... Applcations can be obtained on our website, [www.kalkaskasheriff.net](http://www.kalkaskasheriff.net) or picked up at our office 605 N. Birch St. Kalkaska, MI 49646. Kalkaska ...

#### **Rapid River Township, Kalkaska County, Michigan - Home | Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com> › Places › Kalkaska, Michigan ▾

★★★☆☆ Rating: 3.6 - 14 votes

Rapid River Township, Kalkaska County, Michigan, Kalkaska, MI. 244 likes. Supervisor - Terry Williams (231) 258-2943 ext 2 Clerk- Valerie Hansen...

#### **Kalkaska County Events and Information - Home | Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com/KCEand/> ▾

Kalkaska County Events and Information. 1640 likes · 69 talking about this. Kalkaska County events, activities, governmental and community...

#### **Kalkaska Animal Control/Shelter - Home | Facebook**

<https://www.facebook.com> › Places › Kalkaska, Michigan › Animal Shelter ▾

★★★★☆ Rating: 4.3 - 43 votes

Kalkaska Animal Control/Shelter, Kalkaska, MI. 3.5K likes. Official Facebook Page for Kalkaska County Animal Control & Animal Shelter.

Figure 2 shows the search results on Google to see if Kalkaska County has its own Facebook page. Kalkaska County had different Facebook pages pop up, not including one for their government organization. Their Road Commission, Sheriff Office, and an Events and Information page were at the top of the search. Although Kalkaska County does not have an official page, the county does have various pages split up into one. Does this make the posting

process more manageable, to have different departments take care of their communication, or does it make it harder for residents to access communication having it split up in different Facebook pages? Having multiple pages for a county or city can make finding information confusing for a resident.

Does the creation of a social media page have a relation to household median income? Does the initiative to create a page in 2008 show the community's median wealth than a government organization that created a site in 2014? Luckily, Twitter has easy access to all pages and shows when their accounts were created. Figure 4 and Figure 5 show the relation between household median income and the twitter account start year for counties and county seats in Michigan.

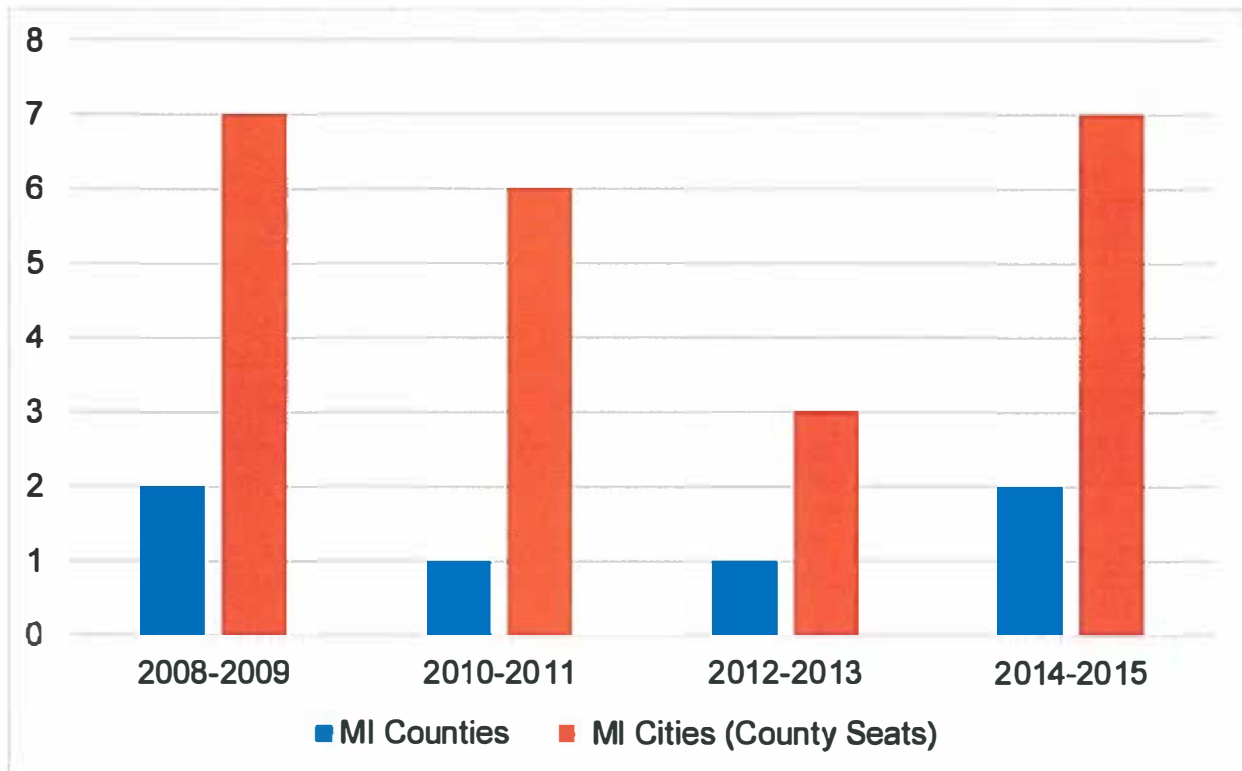
**Table 2****Michigan County/City Analysis of Twitter Start and Household Median Income**

County	Year	City (County Seat)	Year	Household Median Income
Washtenaw	2008	Ann Arbor	2008	\$62,484
Livingston	2015	Howell	2009	\$76,764
		Traverse City	2009	\$55,597
		Adrian	2009	\$49,300
		Coldwater	2009	\$46,428
Muskegon	2009	Muskegon	2009	\$43,920
		Mt. Pleasant	2009	\$40,706
Ottawa	2013	Grand Haven	2010	\$61,367
		Kalamazoo	2010	\$49,693
		Grand Rapids	2011	\$54,673
		Saginaw	2011	\$43,712
		Manistee	2011	\$42,530
		Ithaca	2011	\$42,145
		Sault Ste. Marie	2012	\$42,287
Oakland	2009	West Branch	2012	\$36,941
		Jackson	2013	\$47,709
		Pontiac	2014	\$69,850
		Hastings	2014	\$56,883
		Charlotte	2014	\$56,472
Midland	2014	Midland	2014	\$54,852
		Mason	2014	\$46,842
		Marquette	2014	\$46,822
Wayne	2010	Detroit	2014	\$42,043



**Figure 3**

**Analysis of Twitter Start Year Between for Michigan Cities and Counties**



Due to the lack of counties creating Twitter pages in Michigan, the county results drop between 2010-2012 to zero as well as in 2015 for MI cities. Figure 3 shows that cities have a stronger initiative to start Twitter pages than counties. Table 2 and Figure 3 show that cities have a consistent pace of starting Twitter pages, while counties have a slow and inconsistent pace. Table 2 shows that cities are quicker to start Twitter accounts than their counties. The city of Howell began their Twitter page in 2009 while Livingston county began their account in 2015.

The results could be due to counties covering a broader audience than a city. No matter the median income, the figures above prove that in 2009 and 2014 were the years when the most significant number of cities and counties began Twitter pages, meanwhile the most significant number of counties to start a page was in 2009, which was just 2 counties. A reason for the low

results for counties is because counties are run by elected officials while cities have hired staff that can work for the organization for an indefinite amount of time.

### ***Population***

Population is another factor as to why some government entities could have more resources to use social media sites than others. The size of a county or city can take into effect whether or not these sites are used. Communities might be forced to use Facebook and Twitter due to the large population of a city and the need for other venues of communication to get their information out to the public. Communicating to a large population might force a municipality to use these sites to communicate information more effectively due to not just depending on the government website.

Smaller communities might feel that they do not need to rely on social media due to their smaller population and the lack of communication. Municipalities might feel that they do not need other communication sites for their audience to receive information. At the same time, household median income can have an effect of resources due to the municipalities' budget. Does population and household median income have a factor whether a city or county use social media sites? Figure 6 shows the analysis of population to household median income, and number of social media sites used above and below the median income.

**Table 3****County and City Social Media Use by Population and Household Median Income**

<b>Counties</b>	<b>Number of Facebook and Twitter Sites</b>	
	<b>Below Median Income</b>	<b>Above Median Income</b>
<b>Population</b>		
Under 25K	1	3
25K-50K	1	3
50K-99K	2	2
100K-199K	6	1
Above 200K	3	6

<b>Cities</b>	<b>Number of Facebook and Twitter Sites</b>	
	<b>Below Median Income</b>	<b>Above Median Income</b>
<b>Population</b>		
Under 5K	14	0
5-10K	6	9
10-19K	7	4
20-40K	10	0
40-100K	4	4
Above 100K	2	4

When analyzing counties, Figure 6 shows that household median income might not influence the number of sites a county has, but the population size of a county does show a relation to the number of sites. There are not many counties that have a population over 200,000, but there are nine social media sites for that population size, which is the largest out of the populations. Figure 6 shows that for cities, median household income and population do not have a relationship with the number of sites used for cities.

There are not a large number of cities with a population of under five thousand, but those that were did not have any social media site and fully depended on their government website to distribute information. While there were zero cities with social media site above the median and a population under five thousand, there were 14 cities below the state median that did have social

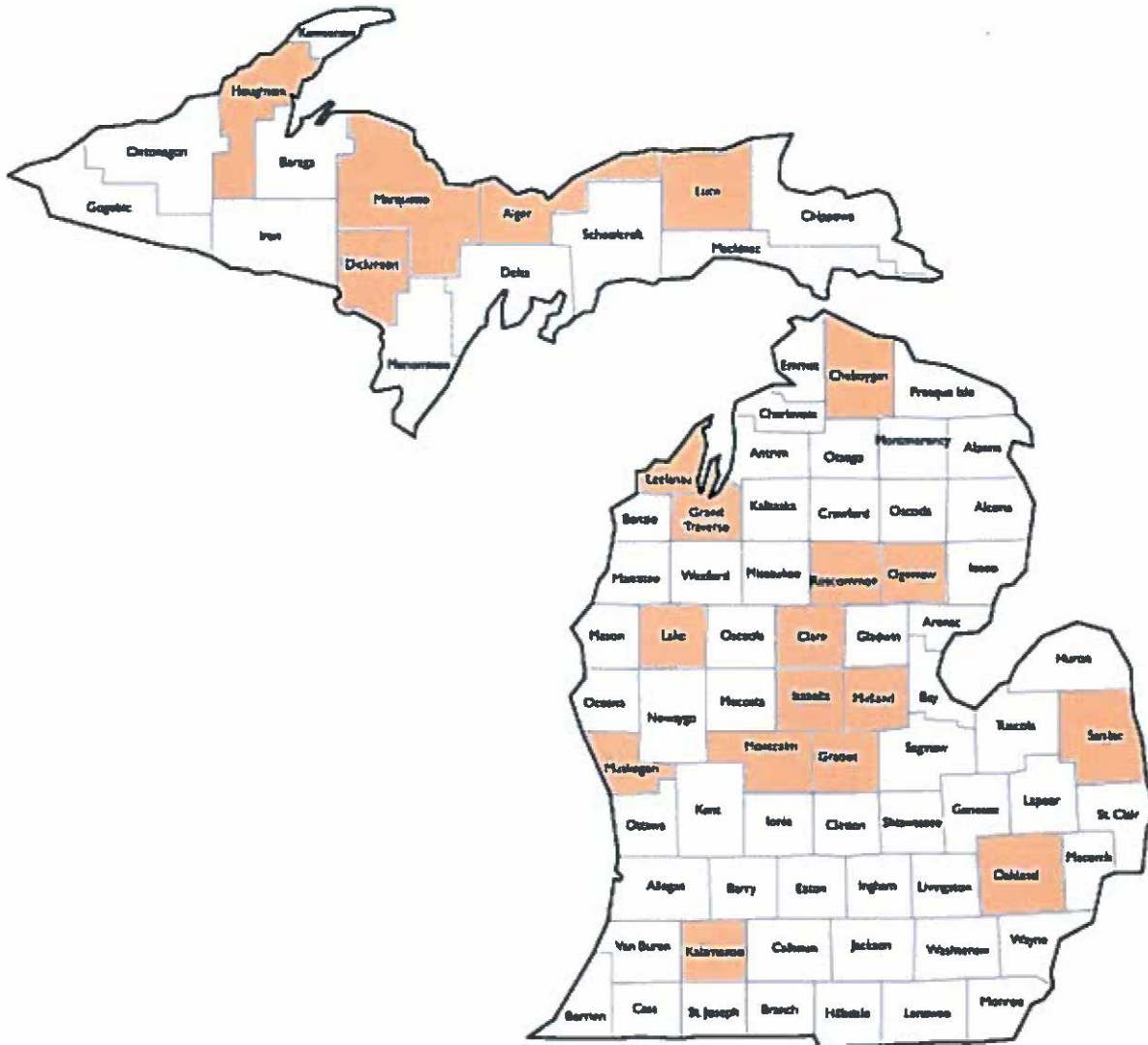
media sites. The data reflect that there is no relationship between population and number of sites used above and below the median income. This is most likely due to the lack of largely populated cities in Michigan. There are only three cities with populations over one hundred thousand citizens while there are forty-three county seats that have populations under five thousand. Due to the larger number of small populated county seats in the state can have a factor of the large number of sites used in the small populated areas than the large populated areas.

### *Content*

To better understand how websites and social media pages were used for government communication, twenty counties (25% of Michigan counties) were analyzed for their content. The twenty counties were chosen by the region of the state and median household income. The selected counties represent various rankings of median household income from the highest income to the lowest income. This selection was chosen to get the best idea of what content is used based on all regions of the state with different financial income. Figure 7 shows counties chosen.

**Figure 4**

**Counties Analyzed for Social Media and Website Content**



Every website and social media page for each of the twenty counties were analyzed based on social information, service information, weather info, emergency information, government news, and calendar of events. Before the research of content began, the list below shows how each section of a website or social media posts were studied.

**Table 4**

**Content Analyzed for Michigan County Sites**

<b>Social</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Business openings</li><li>• Visitors Info/Video tours</li><li>• Community activities/organizations</li><li>• Lodging/Restaurants</li></ul>	<b>Services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Links to documents</li><li>• Information of departments</li><li>• Meetings for departments</li><li>• Minutes from meetings</li><li>• License info/online sheet</li><li>• Payment</li></ul>	<b>Government News</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Press releases</li><li>• News/update section on a website; regular posts on FB</li><li>• News updates on SM sites</li></ul>
<b>Weather</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Weather updates</li><li>• Weather Advisories</li></ul>	<b>Emergencies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Road closures</li><li>• Weather warnings</li><li>• Loss of electricity/water</li><li>• Emergency resources information</li></ul>	<b>Calendar of Events</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Calendar of municipality meetings</li><li>• List of upcoming events</li></ul>

Figure 8 below shows the number of cities and counties using their websites and social media sites to display different types of content. Sites were examined between September 2017 and February 2018.

**Table 5**

**Number of Counties and County Seats Providing Different Types of Information Using Social Media**

	Social	Services	Emergency	Weather	Municipal News	Calendar of Events
Counties (20)	7	18	6	3	11	14
Cities (County Seats) (20)	16	20	3	5	15	17

The table shows that cities provide a significant amount of social information on their websites and social media sites. Counties provide more information about emergencies than cities. The lowest amount of content coverage was the emergency and weather categories for both cities and counties. A reason for these results could be the lack of professional access to emergency information as well as a lack of staff to keep track of weather advisories. The most powerful aspects were the services, social, and events categories. Both majorities of counties and cities have a calendar of events for their citizens to follow for meetings and city events.

The county section for the services shows that two of twenty counties did not provide services information or tools for their residents. Two counties did not supply a section for residents to find information about county departments, services (parking, forms). Alger and Lake Counties had more of a social website than a government focused website. Out of the six categories, only the Michigan cities all had services on their websites. Each website was able to provide tools and information for residents about paying bills, finding information of city departments, and the staff who work for the city.

The data show that counties do not have as much content provided on their websites as cities do. Is this due to low staffing to update county websites? A reason for the lack of general content is due to the lack of social media services these sites provide for municipalities. Facebook and Twitter only give government organizations the ability to post statuses on their pages. These sites are unable to give their direct audience linkage to the need that they need to be served like how websites have certain tabs to services. When a person goes on a municipality's website, they can scroll to different tabs on the site's homepage to find the information or service they need. Meanwhile, on social media sites, the only category these sites give content for is social updates in the community or news updates of what is going on in the area.

Another issue of social media sites is the ability to make sure their audience sees their posts. For example, on Facebook, if a resident who follows their municipalities' page and does not "like" the page's posts regularly, the less like the person will see their posts on their news feed. This is due to Facebook prioritizing the Facebook user's interests in pages and friends. To make sure a page's posts are being shown on their audience's newsfeed, the municipality must spend money to broadcast information on the site. Some counties and cities do not have the funding to broadcast their posts to their audience let alone have the staff to post their community updates.

### ***What Does This All Mean?***

In the state of Michigan, less than half of counties and cities use social media to communicate to their residents. All cities and nearly all counties use websites providing municipal and social information from hotels to parks to visiting. Although websites can be



found with a simple search on Google, some social media pages can only be found by clicking on a link from the municipalities' website. Although all counties have a website representing their city, most websites struggle to keep all their links and tabs on their site updated. Some tabs on multiple counties sites lead to an error or just a blank page on the site with no information.

Michigan cities and counties have a large number of less populous cities, which is a most likely a reason why municipalities choose not to use social media sites due to the idea that these entities feel that it is not a need. The smaller the population, the less responsibility and area to cover to communicate. By living in a rural small town, these government entities might feel that they are communicating effectively since forty-three out of eight- three county seats have populations under five thousand.

The information missing from these websites could be due to the lack of funding for staff to maintain the websites. Constituent communication can be difficult with a shortage of staff. Even with larger cities like Detroit, replying to question through Facebook, Twitter, email, and voicemail can be a lot for a staff. Is social media ineffective way of communication? Is there a better way for a government entity to communicate to their community?

Recommendations for cities and counties to communicate more efficiently are to take advantage of sites that help filter questions and concerns of residents by using sites like Romulus. These sites help companies and government entities to track, sort and compile all communication filtering in and out to the public. Chicago was one of the first cities to test this system. (Charles, 2018). The issue of using sites like Romulus that can relieve the stress of communication is the monthly cost to access the site. Romulus costs eighty dollars a month to use, which totals up to almost one thousand dollars a year. Having the tools to be able to

communicate to large populations is essential, but the capability to fund these types of systems can be impossible for communities who do not have this sort of funds.

Another reason for these results is a lack of a social media guidelines/policies for these government entities and the support of professional organizations from the State. Social media policies give an organization directions of what sites to use, what to post, and how often to post. Policies also provide guidelines for responding to reader comments. The Michigan Municipal League stresses the importance of social media, but only offers social media policies from other Michigan cities. There is no ideal social media policy a city or county could follow in creating that correlates to their community. The state of Michigan's website has information about social media policies, but when you try to look at their *Social Media Standard* link on the page, it takes you to a broken link, and the page could not be found.

### **Chapter 3: Conclusions**

Before more solutions can be made, more research needs to be done as to why a low number of municipalities throughout Michigan use social media for government communication. Interviews with staff members of government entities need to happen so questions can be answered rather than assume what the data mean. Interviewing if the staff has a social media policy would help clarify how social media guidelines are followed in the organization. It seems that population can be in affect of these results, as well as the size of staff. Analyzing the entities where the sites are monitored will make the cause of the problem clearer.

Cities and counties that are in rural areas might not have as much access to internet as communities in urban areas. Urban areas with a more substantial population tend to have better internet access, which allows residents to use social media as much as they please. Due to lack of stores in extremely rural areas of the state, residents can also have limited access to computers and tablets.

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