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“JUST BECAUSE WE CAN” – GOVERNMENTS’ RATIONALE FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Complete Research

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Abstract

Governments have slowly started to exploit the potentials that social media offer for their external communications. The related work reveals a quite diverse picture both in governments’ quality of social media maintenance as well as in the interaction with citizens. Our aim in this study is to understand the factors that drive governments’ decisions to use social media for their external communications as well as to comprehend their underlying strategy. Therefore, we conducted a qualitative study among 20 German municipalities. Our results reveal that hardly any government agency follows a distinct strategy when implementing social media. Furthermore, we come up with ten propositions that explain the influencing factors of governments’ social media decision. Whereas mainly ambiguous privacy regulations and financial shortcomings negatively influence the decision to use social media, initiatives by single employees, perceived external expectations and the wish to become more attractive for citizens drive the use of social media. In addition, observed social media behaviours of other governments and experiences in the governments’ environment influence the decision. Our results both give in-depth insights in governments’ decision and implementation processes of social media and serve as a basis for further (quantitative) studies.

Keywords: Social Media, Government, Facebook, Strategy, Interviews, Content Analysis.

1 Introduction

Governments’ external communications have often been regarded critically by the public (Fisher Liu and Horsley, 2007). Caused by lacking resources and expertise, communicating with citizens mainly takes place as one-way communication thus impeding an interactive dialogue between government and citizens. Negative perceptions of this behaviour range from a high perceived distance between governments and citizens to labelling governments’ communication as propaganda. To some extent, the problem is ascribed to the traditional offline communication channels, which are not designed to meet the demands of a two-way communication (Fisher Liu and Horsley, 2007). The rise of social media has raised high expectations to overcome the deficiencies immanent in traditional government communications (Garvin, 2008; Hand and Ching, 2011). With the help of social media, governments can offer a dialogue platform to their citizens; they can actively integrate different stakeholders in their decision making, use participatory open innovation processes to address challenges, render direct accountability or even recruit potential employees (Calogero, 2011; Chun and Warner, 2010; United Nations, 2008).

Unlike many companies that have used social media as a marketing instrument for years (Coursaris, Van Osch, and Balogh, 2013), governments have slowly started to take a chance on these new technologies. In their process of adopting social media for external communications, they face various challenges. We witness that despite the interaction potentials of social media, governments revert to their one-way communication behaviour that is common for offline channels (Brainard and McNutt, 2010; Lee and Lee Elser, 2010). User reactions on the social media sites suggest that governments pass up the chance of enhancing their relations to citizens (Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers, and Becker, 2013). In order to exploit the full potentials of social media, governments need to define a social media strategy that is aligned with the comprehensive corporate strategy (Agostino, 2013; Heath, Singh, Ganesh, and Kroll-Smith, 2013). By social media strategy we understand “a well-defined and tightly focused social media action plan, which has clear business objectives, specific policies, desired audience, desired resource and predefined metrics for measuring the social media impacts” (Ng and Wang, 2013, p. 2).

This raises the question whether governments actually define a strategy prior to adopting social media and how these strategic considerations look like. However, up to now, there has been little theoretical understanding of social media strategies both in private sector companies as well as in government agencies (Heath et al., 2013). We generally see that whereas the external recognition of governments’ social media activities has been subject to research, the internal perspective has been neglected so far (Mergel, 2013). This gap serves as the starting point for our research. In this study, we aim to answer the questions:

RQ1. Which factors influence governments’ decision to use social media for their external communications?

RQ2. Which strategy do governments pursue with their social media presence?

Since research on governments’ social media strategy and adoption decision is a quite unexplored field, our goal is to derive first propositions of the underlying mechanisms. In doing so, we follow a qualitative research approach. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 employees in charge of the external communications in German municipalities. We interviewed them concerning their social media strategy in general and used the example of Facebook to go through their social media behaviour in detail. We analysed the transcribed interviews using a structured content analysis approach. Our results reveal that German municipalities are at an early stage of adoption social media thus rarely defining a distinct social media strategy. The factors that drive governments’ decision to use social media for their external communications are structured among 10 propositions.

2 Related Work on Governments’ Communication in Social Media

One major task of governments is to communicate with the public, i.e. they inform companies and citizens about current activities, new services or changing legal regulations. However, citizens’ understanding of their role in government communication has started to change. Whereas formerly seen as ‘customers’, they meanwhile perceive themselves as ‘partners’ (Linders, 2012). This leads to rising expectations towards governments addressing the public. Governments’ communication behaviour, though, exhibits several deficiencies (Fisher Liu and Horsley, 2007). In contrast to companies, the budget for external communications is comparatively low in governments thus impeding an elaborate public representation. Government communication remains a one-way communication via traditional mass communication channels. What is more, in most cases, communication on government issues takes place in mediated ways in television, newspapers or radio without involving government agencies (Towner and Dulio, 2011). With the rise of online media such as web sites, governments were expected to better fulfil their duties in reporting to the public topically and reacting to citizens’ requests (Hong, 2013). However, it was not until the emergence of social

media that governments (in theory) were finally able to reach the public in an environment “where the people are” (Garvin, 2008) and communicate and interact with their citizens effortlessly.

According to Kaplan’s and Haenlein’s often cited definition, social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Web 2.0 in turn is a paradigm shift from the provision of online content through individuals towards the participatory and collaborative creation by all internet users. Social media can be classified into different categories including “collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds” (p. 60). The most frequently researched social medium is the social networking site Facebook. According to their own account, Facebook had 1.19 billion monthly active users as of September 30th, 2013 (including 874 million using the mobile version) and 728 million daily active users (with 507 million mobile users) (Facebook, 2013). These figures make it the social medium with the highest number of active users. Twitter, in comparison, which is the largest micro-blogging service worldwide, has 554,750,000 active users (Statistic Brain, 2013).

Whereas most social media sites have originally started as a means of connecting individuals and exchanging content between them (e.g. Facebook has been developed as an online social network for students at Harvard University), organisations have rapidly acknowledged the potential that social media offers for their purposes (Andriole, 2010). Social media allow companies to set up a public profile thus creating a face to the customers, to connect with potential customers as well as learn from their comments and preferences (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Public sector organisations, too, can benefit from a boost of external communications by social media: “The potential of social media to significantly alter citizen engagement, to change the rules of the game, so to speak, is compelling” (Hand and Ching, 2011, p. 363).

First of all, social media enable governments to provide the public with up-to-date information (Jaeger and Bertot, 2010) since social media are close to real-time communication channels (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes, 2010). Furthermore, “Social Media is one of the fastest growing marketing platforms in the world” (Coursaris and Balogh, 2013, p. 2). Although, in contrast to private sector companies, governments do not depend on selling goods, they can still ‘advertise’ their services and increase their reputation by e.g. creating a sense of belonging among the citizens. Governments – as well as companies – can exploit social media in order to exchange information with customers and to spread word-of-mouth about new services. They can especially take advantage of the influence of peers since social media users are more likely to be influenced by information from peers they know and trust and since these connections between users are visible in online social networks (Baum, Spann, Füller, and Pedit, 2013). One main advantage of social media marketing is that it is free of charge and the contact with the target group is personal and social (Coursaris et al., 2013). In doing so, governments can address citizen segments they could not address before, because they could either not reach them or because addressing them would have been too expensive. Finally and maybe most importantly, social media offers advantages for governments by integrating citizens’ ideas and opinions into policy making, increasing the transparency by sharing information and collaborating with citizens, for instance in open innovation initiatives (Mergel, 2013). In times of low government budgets, citizens can hence contribute to government decision making and innovation by co-creation processes. Social media alter the perspective so that citizens are no longer customers (as is the case in e-government) but become partners of government, which Linders (2012) calls ‘we-government’.

Exploiting the benefits of social media challenges governments in various ways. First of all, governments need to adjust their self-understanding towards citizens since their traditional position as information and service providers is called into question by citizens becoming co-creators and partners (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2012). Second, social media management needs to be embedded in the organisational structure (Agostino, 2013). This could require a new organisational role that is

responsible for maintaining the social media presence, i.e. updating information or responding to citizens. Third, governments need to identify an adequate way of communicating via social media. Previous research suggests that governments use social media as a one-way-communication channel to inform the public rather than for two-way symmetrical conversations (Hand and Ching, 2011; Katz and Halpern, 2013; Waters and Williams, 2011). Deactivated or missing functionality prevents citizens from interacting with the government. In addition, governments have to find the right balance of information frequency to encourage citizen participation and interaction. Information overload in social media leads to low levels of user satisfaction (Maier, Laumer, and Weinert, 2013). Fourth, governments have to develop dynamic capabilities in order to adapt to the changing environment as social media are volatile in the sense that they can alter their functionality “overnight” (Hu and Schlagwein, 2013, p. 2). Both topics and users in social media, too, are quite dynamic so that organisations need to react quickly and satisfy the most important topics of interest (Heath 2013). This fluctuant behaviour goes along with the abundance of unstructured data that is produced everyday on social media and that governments need to make sense of (Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Finally, governments need to consider and understand legal restrictions. Yi, Oh, and Kim (2013) identified several major concerns of governments when using social media, among which range the unclear protection of privacy in social media. New legal regulations including privacy and data security laws are required to meet the challenges of social media (Bertot, Jaeger, and Hansen, 2012; Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, and Luna-Reyes, 2012).

Governments need to address these challenges to successfully run a social media presence. Defining an appropriate social media strategy is crucial in order to reach this goal (Heath et al., 2013; Lee and Lee Elser, 2010). Social media strategy is understood as “a well-defined and tightly focused social media action plan, which has clear business objectives, specific policies, desired audience, desired resource and predefined metrics for measuring the social media impacts” (Ng and Wang, 2013, p. 2). Our definition of strategy expands Meijer’s and Thaens’ (2013) understanding of governments’ social media strategy that includes technological decisions, organisational integration, identifying objectives as well as assigned organisational tasks. Heath et al. (2013) find that organisations in general have difficulties in formulating a social media strategy. The problem often lies in undefined objectives, which renders it impossible for organisations to measure their social media effect (Larson and Watson, 2011). It is crucial for governments to define a social media strategy that is aligned with the overall public relations strategy (Agostino, 2013).

3 Research and Analysis Method

3.1 Semi-Structured Interview Design

In order to answer the question on governments’ strategy and rationale for (not) using social media, we conducted semi-structured interviews. Since to the best of our knowledge, this topic has not yet been investigated, we deemed an explorative study as the most appropriate research design. Based on the related work on social media use in organisations and in particular in governments, we developed an interview guideline with two variants: The questions were in parts different depending on whether a government agency used social media or not. The interview guideline was derived based on the related work presented in the previous section and contains the following set of questions:

1. *Introduction and general questions regarding the government agency:* The introductory part is meant as an icebreaker for opening the interview. It contains asking the interviewee about her tasks and career in the government agency. Furthermore, it comprises questions on the government agency’s structure, their use of social media as well as the position responsible for PR and social media.

2. *General questions concerning the government agency's internet usage:* This section sheds light on the government agency's general internet readiness and experiences and leads over to the more specific social media related aspects in the following section. It covers questions regarding the content and services of the web site and the reasons for (not) offering them.
3. *Social media related-questions:* The third section aims at understanding the government agency's use of social media as well as the rationales behind. It encompasses questions regarding the interviewee's understanding of social media as well as the government agency's strategy to use social media.
4. *Questions specifically related to the government agency's Facebook usage:* The fourth section is dedicated to the use of Facebook. It contains question on how the government agency uses Facebook (if they use it at all), their objectives as well as their planned Facebook activities.
5. *Closing questions and outlook:* The closing section is meant to summarise the government agency's experiences with social media. It includes questions regarding the evaluation of citizen feedback as well as the future plans for social media-based services.

As a preparation for the interviews, we analysed the web sites of each government agency and checked whether they were using social media. This helped us to identify interesting aspects that we could incorporate into the interview as well as to double-check the answers of the interviewees. We contacted the government agencies of the 200 largest municipalities in Germany both via e-mail and (in case they had a Facebook page) via Facebook. In Germany, the governmental system is organised on three levels: the Federal level, the Länder (state) as well as the local level. The latter comprises 22 administrative districts, 301 counties, 112 urban municipalities and 12,234 municipalities (Fuchs, 2009). Local governments in Germany have the right to make several decisions autonomously. This includes, for instance, structuring their organisation, managing human resources and finances.

If the information was available, we directly addressed the PR department or the press officers. Since our intention was to understand the use of social media for external communications, PR officers are the most knowledgeable employees in this area. In the beginning, we also tried to contact the governments via telephone to settle an appointment for the interview. However, it turned out that they were taken by surprise and preferred to be informed via e-mail beforehand. We conducted the interviews via Skype or telephone, taped and afterwards transcribed them.

3.2 Content Analytical Design

In order to answer our research question, we analysed the transcribed interviews using qualitative content analysis as proposed by Mayring (2000). Content analysis is a method often used in social sciences to extract both the manifest as well as the latent content of communication (Krippendorff, 2004). It provides techniques for systematic text analysis. Typical purposes of applying qualitative content analysis are to generate hypotheses and theories as well as to undertake pilot studies. The purpose of our study is to generate propositions serving as the basis for theory development.

In order to guarantee inter-subjectively comprehensible analyses and results, content analysis follows a strict and systematic procedure (Früh, 2007). In the *planning phase*, we started our research design by translating our research questions into an interview guideline (cf. Section 3.1) thus narrowing down its broad topic. In the following *development phase*, we developed a coding scheme that defines which parts of the text are assigned to which categories serving as the basis for the subsequent analysis. One distinguishes two different kinds of categories: Theory-driven, i.e. deductive categories are derived from the hypotheses or the research areas of interest. They are defined prior to analysing the material. In contrast to them, empirically driven, inductive categories are derived while working with the material. As a mixed epistemological approach is suitable in most analysis scenarios, we followed this combined approach as well. However, our focus lay on an inductive procedure. In deductive

approaches, the structure of analysis “is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge” (Elo and Kynga, 2008, p. 109). Therefore, we first used theory to deductively generate categories for the content analysis. Categories that emerged from related work are in our case for instance challenges/obstacles of social media, potentials/reasons for social media or the existence of a social media strategy.¹ Since, however, the field of governments’ social media *strategies* has not yet been subject to in-depth research, the related work to base our categories on, is quite limited. In this case, an inductive approach is recommended (Elo and Kynga, 2008). Hence, when subsequently coding the text, we inductively added new categories that emerged during the *testing phase* as well as omitted unnecessary categories. Since several interviewees mentioned the problem of ambiguous privacy regulations as well as a perceived pressure from citizens, we added, for example, the categories privacy and data security aspects or citizens’ request for social media. In the *coding phase*, we coded the text using the ‘summary’ method, i.e. paraphrasing and reducing each text passage in such a way that the important content was still contained in the resulting paraphrase. Finally, in the *evaluation phase*, we analysed and evaluated the results of the coding phase. Here again, theory has informed our analysis. We reflected our findings with the related work presented in Section 2. In addition, we searched for further theories supporting our evaluation. As the majority of the interviewed governments stated a missing strategy as well as rather unstructured behaviour, we explicitly searched for a theory that explains governments’ maturity in using social media.

The coding took place in the last two weeks of November and the first week of December 2013. Based on the results of the coding phase, we derived several propositions for governments’ use of Facebook (cf. Section 4).

For reasons of completeness and for making our results inter-subjectively reproducible, we would like to point out potential biases in our coding and analysis judgement. Our previous research on governments’ appearance in social media suggests a quite ingenuous behaviour of governments (Hofmann, Beverungen, Räckers, and Becker, 2013). Although we tried to take a neutral perspective, we cannot guarantee that our previous experiences with governments’ partly poor Facebook pages has not biased our way of conducting the interviews as well as the subsequent analysis.

4 Governments’ Strategy and Rationale for Using Social Media

The interviews lasted between 13 and 45 minutes with an average duration of about 26 minutes. The interviewees all are PR officers or at least in charge of the municipality’s online communications. All of the interviewed municipalities are equipped with dedicated PR departments or at least one or more PR officers. In most cases it is the PR department that takes care of the social media use in the government. Only in some cases, the city marketing managed the social media relations. The number of employees who are responsible for maintaining social media lies between one and four depending on the size of the government agency. Six of the twenty interviewed governments did not offer a social media presence. From the remaining 14 governments, twelve used Facebook, eleven Twitter, eight YouTube, three Google+, two Flickr, two Xing, one offered a blog, one Instagram and one government applied Netvibes. Both the numbers as well as the interviewees’ answers state that Facebook is the most important social medium for governments: “*Facebook is THE medium*”². Governments that have implemented social media sites evaluate their social media activities in a positive way. The picture for governments without social media presences is diverse, however.

¹ A complete list of the final categories is attached in Annex A.

² We conducted the interviews in German and translated the quotes to English. The interviewees’ quotes are presented in italic to differentiate them from related literature’s quotations.

Whereas some do not see the necessity to operate a social media platform (“*You don’t need to jump on every bandwagon*”), others regret not being able to use this technology appropriately: “*It would be an incredibly worthy extension of our communication strategy*”.

The first sub-section answers RQ1 “*Which factors influence governments’ decision to use social media for their external communications?*” by developing propositions that explain governments’ rationale for using social media. In the second sub-section, we shed light on the question RQ2 “*Which strategy do governments pursue with their social media presence?*” We integrate the findings grounded in our analysis with evidence from theory.

4.1 Factors Influencing Governments’ Decision to Use Social Media

Challenges of social media

One of the main obstacles or challenges that influence governments’ decision to use social media are privacy concerns. Many governments refrain from using certain features provided by social media. Hardly any government integrates the Facebook badges that allow users to directly access Facebook from the governments’ website: “*That means we would send data of all our websites’ users to Facebook even if they do not want that [...] [There] is the order by the data protection officers that local governments should no longer use this Facebook one-click-like button*”. Privacy concerns go to such lengths that some governments are not allowed to react to citizens’ communication: “*Therefore, we do not design our channels in such a way that we communicate*”. In contrast, some governments do not pay attention to privacy regulations: “*We did not think about [privacy] before because we were not aware of this topic [...] We will simply wait whether someone complains*”. Our findings are in line with McGrath (2012) who found that employees in charge of legal regulations are often not integrated in the social media team thus leaving the PR employees unaware about what they can disclose on social media. The statements support Bertot et al. (2012) as well as Picazo-Vela et al. (2012) who call for new legal regulations that satisfy the unregulated areas brought up by social media. We conclude:

Proposition 1: Strict privacy regulations negatively influence governments’ decision to use social media for external communications.

Proposition 2: Uncertainty about privacy regulations negatively influences governments’ decision to use social media for external communications.

A second major obstacle is missing personnel and financial resources that governments cannot offer: “*People almost expect an immediate answer. How can you guarantee that? In fact also on weekends.*”, “*You have to be able to come to a dialogue situation with people. [Town X] is not capable of doing this. [...] I don’t want to bore people by simply posting our press releases.*” Governments will only be able to implement social media “*by the counsel granting a third- or half-time position.*” This finding is in line with Fisher Liu and Horsley’s (2007) observation that the budget for external communications is too low to allow adequate communications with citizens. Martinelli (2006), too, does not see the problem in the fact that governments do not have many interesting stories to tell. Rather, many PR officers are so overburdened with work that they are not able to publish more than one-way communication press releases. Hence, we suggest:

Proposition 3: Low financial and personnel resources negatively influence governments’ decision to use social media for external communications.

Few governments fear citizens’ critical opinion as well: “*We consciously decided against it [...] because we did not want these shitstorms on our homepage.*”, “*Very, very critical citizens, unfortunately. The truth is often bended. That’s clear – social media – people like to flame*”. Only few interviewees mentioned missing usefulness as a reason for not using social media.

Personal attitudes of the PR officers

These judgements are reflected in the interviewees' personal attitudes and experiences with social media. Whereas the interviewees in governments that use social media have mainly made positive experiences with social media in their leisure time ("*We are proficient [in Facebook] ourselves*"), the interviewees from governments without social media often do not hold social media high in their opinion: "*I am not convinced [by social media]*", "*I know it from my son [...] I have reserves about Facebook*". Obviously, the main driver for actually implementing social media goes back to initiatives by single employees, be it the PR officer or the mayor: "*We decided in favour of Facebook in 2009 quite spontaneously. I had the idea then because I also use it in my free-time.*" This behaviour is typical of governments in an early stage of using social media where the new technology is especially introduced by individuals that are familiar with social media from non-work related activities (Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). We assume that:

Proposition 4: Experiences and initiatives by single employees positively influence governments' decision to use social media for external communications.

Relationships with citizens

Governments see one of the main advantages of social media in a way to get into contact with new user groups. Their goal is to involve more (especially young) people in politics. This is in line with Coursaris et al. (2013) who see one advantage of social media in the possibility to get into personal contact with citizens and to address citizen groups that until then could not be reached. Furthermore, our interviewees see social media as a means for distributing information to a wider audience, for exchanging opinions both between government and citizens as well as between citizens and to foster transparency and discussions. In addition, they can directly and quickly communicate with their citizens and they hope to get closer to the people by sensing their moods and sentiments on specific topics. As Garvin (2008) states, social media allows governments to address citizens "where the people are". We assume that:

Proposition 5: The intention to be more citizen-centric positively influences governments' decision to use social media for external communications.

Proposition 6: The intention to address new citizen groups positively influences governments' decision to use social media for external communications.

On the other hand, governments perceive an external pressure to establish a social media site: "*In my opinion, we cannot escape [from this trend] – even as a government. You must not be absent*", "*The elder colleagues always ask me 'Why do you deal with this crap?' Shall I ignore it? It happens to be reality*". As Linders (2012) finds, citizens have changed their perception in the sense that they now see themselves as 'partners'. Organisations in general face demands by their clientele for a social media presence (Heath et al., 2013; Larson and Watson, 2011). Hence, we propose:

Proposition 7: Perceived expectations by citizens positively influence governments' decision to use social media for external communications.

The perceived pressure goes along with the hope to create a modern reputation: "*[it] shows that governments can keep up with the times and communicate with people in a modern way*". Most governments choose their social media platform based on the number of potential users: "*I believe that Facebook is currently most hip*". Larson and Watson (2011) found that companies, too, are advised to be present on social media to avoid the appearance of being old-fashioned. Based on these findings, we suggest:

Proposition 8: The intention to create a modern image of the government positively influences governments' decision to use social media for external communications.

External inspiration and experience

The way of preparing their social media launch is quite different from government to government. Some governments engage professional consulting or prepare in-house seminars before starting their social media sites. Others, however, rely on their own ability: “*Creating such a page [...] – that is not rocket science*”. We encountered that prior to launching their own social media site, many governments seek inspiration in the social media sites of other government agencies. The decision to adopt social media practices is influenced by observing citizens’ use of social media as well as innovative departments and agencies (Mergel, 2013). Besides, we found that especially one government that had not yet adopted social media was extremely affected by the experiences other users had made with social media: “*This has shown us how dangerous Facebook can be.*” Therefore, our last two propositions are:

Proposition 9: The observed social media behaviour of other governments influences governments’ decision to use social media for external communications.

Proposition 10: The social media experiences in the environment of governments influence their decision to use social media for external communications.

We cannot yet specify whether the influence is positive or negative for these two propositions since we do not know yet whether positive experiences will necessarily influence the decision to use social media in a positive way and negative experiences in a negative way.

4.2 Governments’ strategy for using social media

Existence of strategy

None of the interviewed governments but one has a distinct social media strategy: “*Currently, [our use of social media] is a shot in the dark*”, “*We got into Facebook without a strategy. We just started a profile*”, “*We do not have a written strategy*”. The one government that has a strategy in written form started without strategic considerations as well: “*Therefore we have actually only developed our strategy within the first six months after we have started*”. However, further governments plan to develop a strategy in the future. Lacking personnel is seen as the major inhibitor for developing a strategy.

Interrelation with ‘traditional’ media

There is no consent among the interviewees how the rise of social media will influence ‘traditional’ communication media. However, they all agree that social media will induce a change: “*Things will be re-arranged*”. Whereas some believe that social media will complement print media (“*We still cannot do without paper and print media*”, “*I believe [...] that the classical media will exist in one way or another*”), others assume that “*traditional media will be replaced by social media*”. Furthermore, the interviewees acknowledge a change in the communication behaviour: “*Communication becomes more egocentric, is less geared towards broad knowledge, the life, the past [...], social conditions [...] etc.*”, “*You do recognise that communication and communication forms suffer compared to what was the standard some years ago. Sometimes you do not understand exactly what people want*”. Furthermore, many governments change their way of communicating with the citizens via social media (“*We communicate on Facebook more informally than we would do on our homepage.*”) but try to stay authentic: “*We do not use youth slang [...] I would find that silly*”. In general, they publish more photos, shorter texts or teasers. Only some governments still publish mainly text news.

Maintaining the social media presence

The interviewed governments handle their citizen management on social media in different ways. Apart from those governments not interacting with their citizens at all, many governments react to citizens' requests via social media only during the office hours. On the other hand, some interviewees also answer citizens during their free time, i.e. especially during weekends since they feel responsible for the social media site. However, no specific regulations exist yet that define how government is supposed to handle citizens' requests during off-hours. Many interviewees indicate that they started their social media sites as a trial balloon in order to learn about the required effort as well the citizens' acceptance. Governments without a social media site nevertheless learn from observing the social media behaviour of others: *"We have experienced it here [...] last year what Facebook can cause and how fast you can activate people for a gathering. They have spontaneously organised a commemoration ceremony [for a murdered girl] in which spontaneously 2000 people took part."* However, also the drawbacks of social media are observed: *"There were prejudgements; there were calls for mob law on Facebook."*

Appropriate topics for social media

Most interviewees agree that mainly 'soft' topics are appropriate for social media and Facebook in particular: *"It is rather about the image which is mainly addressed by soft topics with an easy character."*, *"Not a soul is interested in hard topics... Be it stories about financial cuts, education topics – no one is interested. [...] but things that go down well are photo collections, videos and these 'blah' topics."* The user reactions sometimes deceive the PR officers: *"We are sad because it is quite comfortable to post five nice pictures and then receive 80 'likes' within two hours. But these are actually not the topics we have in mind."*, *"In the beginning, our expectations were different in the sense that Facebook would be used more intensely for informing. [...] Our impression is that it is rather a medium for entertainment."* Slightly different topics are posted on other social media platforms. Especially on Twitter, governments post information and short service reports. One government uses Google+ for in-depth discussions and one interviewee reported about applying YouTube for informing about political decisions or large-scale building measures.

Guidelines for social media

Only few governments possess internal guidelines for their employees' behaviour on social media. Some provide a netiquette for external users defining the rules of conduct on their social media sites. In most cases, governments do not (need to) interfere in the comments posted by citizens: *"Users regulate themselves in these discussions."* However, in case racist, sexist or abusive comments are posted, all governments would delete these posts or ban the respective user.

Evaluation of social media

Actively collecting user feedback does not happen: *"I think you feel it a little bit. We do not have great tools and do not spend money for this"*, *"We would be more interested in the actual 'clicks' and where the users came from. I don't know how to look this up on Facebook."* In case an evaluation takes place, governments mainly use the features provided by the social media sites: *"We use the on-board functions of Facebook"*. As Larson and Watson (2011) state, governments often cannot effectively measure their social media success since they have no clearly defined objectives. Rather than using predefined metrics for measuring the success of social media (Ng and Wang, 2013), governments rely on their gut feeling. In general, governments using social media are quite happy with their decision: *"We are satisfied"*, *"In general, we have made really positive experiences."* In contrast, governments that do not offer a social media presence regard the activities more critically: *"I would not know of any city that makes it [their social media channel] really good."* However, many governments see a room for improving their social media activities. Some interviewees wish for a social media platform different from Facebook: *"It is not perfect yet because Facebook is a platform that does not conform to German law."* In the future, some governments without social media sites plan to offer a platform

as well. Governments already using social media, though, do not see the capacity to extend their social media activities.

Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) distinguish three stages for social media use by governments: In the ‘intrapreneurship and experimentation stage’, the focus of governments’ social media activities lies on informal experiments with social media disregarding technology use policies. Governments are looking for low hanging fruits, i.e. easy to implement solutions that promise clear benefits. In the second stage, governments take a step further from the quite chaotic first stage by recognising that they need norms and regulations that define how to manage social media activities. The third stage is characterised by governments deriving a clear outline of appropriate behaviour in social media that finally results in a social media strategy. The majority of our interviewed governments can be classified in the ‘intrapreneurship and experimentation stage’. They were curious how their social media sites would be accepted by citizens as well as how they would be able to internally manage the new tasks. They learn by trial and error: *“We have simply created a profile until we noticed: ‘Oh, a profile for a government – we are actually not allowed to do this.’ We approached this a bit blue-eyed.”* At least one of the interviewed governments has gone beyond stage one by defining a social media strategy.

5 Conclusions

In our research, we conducted 20 interviews with PR officers from local governments in Germany. Our aim was to record their social media strategy as well as the factors that influenced their decision for or against social media use. We analysed the transcribed interviews using qualitative content analysis. Based on these results, we derived ten propositions that strive to explain the reasons for governments using or not using social media for their external communications.

14 out of the 20 interviewed municipalities operate at least one social media site. The remaining six governments are currently thinking about whether to follow up or are already taking concrete steps towards launching a social media site as well. However, it is quite alarming that most governments do not have a social media strategy. Their main focus is on experimenting with the new media, which indicates an early stage in the social media adoption process (Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). Although seen as one of the most promising advantages of social media (Mergel, 2013), integrating citizens’ ideas and opinions in policy processes does hardly take place in German municipalities.

Our interviews revealed that the main obstacles for using social media in governments were privacy regulations (Proposition 1) or uncertainty about these regulations (Proposition 2) as well as missing personnel to maintain the social media sites (Proposition 3). Furthermore, we found that the decision to use social media in governments often goes back to initiatives by single employees who have already become familiar with social media in their free-time (Proposition 4). Reasons for governments to implement a social media site were perceived expectations by the citizens (Proposition 7) as well as the wish to present themselves as a modern (Proposition 8) and citizen-centric government (Proposition 5) and to engage with new target groups (Proposition 6). Before launching a social media site, governments observe the social media activities of other government agencies (Proposition 9). Furthermore, they learn from the experiences that other social media users make (Proposition 10).

Our results have several implications both for theory and practice. From a theoretical point of view, our propositions can serve as a starting point for future research on governments’ social media strategy as well as their rationale for adopting or not adopting social media. It is necessary to understand the relationships between our propositions, i.e. whether they are in parts redundant or drive each other. Furthermore, we see the need to analyse whether all inhibitors mentioned by the interviewees are actual problems or whether they are just pretexts. Since, up to now, there is little theoretical understanding of organisations’ social media strategy (Heath et al., 2013), our findings can be a valuable extension of the existent body of knowledge.

From a practical viewpoint, we have shown that governments' decision to use or reject social media is rarely grounded on objective considerations. It is mainly the preference of single employees that drive the adoption of social media within the government. As mentioned above, two main obstacles were identified: the lack of personnel to maintain the social media sites as well as too strict or unknown privacy regulations. Governments need to decide whether to allocate more resources to the social media departments. However, governments must not ignore the (perceived) expectations by citizens to be present on social media since social media meanwhile permeate all parts of our lives. Other than traditional media, spreading information on social media does not require citizens to know and actively search for governments' information channels. Rather, it has the potential to serve as a rare channel to push information to citizens. What needs to be clarified is the question who actually 'owns' the Facebook page. Does it necessarily have to be the government or can it be the citizens as well or a mutual ownership? If citizens see themselves as an integral part of the social media site, their willingness to participate might be higher, thus creating more value for the social media site. It is also worthwhile discussing how to measure the success of a social media site using SM analytics. Governments have to cope with two contradicting duties. On the one hand, they are responsible for listening to citizens' needs and demands. On the other hand, they need to ensure their citizens that privacy and data monitoring standards are met. Therefore, governments as well as the political decision makers should make clear which privacy regulations apply for governments' use of social media. Furthermore, we suggest reviewing whether the existing regulations still meet the existence of the new technologies. And finally, we highly recommend governments to develop a social media strategy in order to offer an adequate social media portfolio.

Our research shows several limitations. First of all, we conducted qualitative interviews, which gave us an in-depth inside into governments' decision processes. However, our insights are limited due to the small number of interviews. We cannot guarantee that the analysed governments are representative of the base population. We only considered municipalities, whereas different (federal) levels of government might deal with social media differently. In addition, we concentrated on governments in Germany, which are renowned for their strict privacy regulations. Therefore, we cannot guarantee generalisability of our findings. Both cultural as well as legal peculiarities are likely to influence governments' behaviour in social media. We suggest that future research should address these issues. Furthermore, we interviewed PR officers whose opinion on social media might not be representative of a government organisation as a whole. In order to get a comprehensive understanding, it is worthwhile capturing the opinion of different stakeholders, e.g. including the mayor. Based on our propositions as well as experiences from other studies, quantitative surveys should be conducted that analyse governments' decision mechanisms on a large scale. The used theoretical constructs should be enriched by relevant theories, for instance from the field of technology adoption and diffusion. Finally, we see the need to understand citizens' demands. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse their expectations as well as experiences with existing social media sites offered by governments.

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Appendix A

Variables	Description/Example
Sequential number of interview	
Duration of interview	
Name of governments' city	
Existence of dedicated PR position	Whether a position or department dealing with PR exists
Department responsible for social media	E.g. PR department or online communications
Number of employees in charge with social media	The governments' numbers of employee dealing with social media
Position of the interviewee	The interviewee's job title
Personal attitude towards social media	The interviewee's attitude and experiences with social media
Strategy of social media use+	Whether the government pursues a social media strategy and in case yes, how this strategy looks like
Planned strategy+	Whether the government plans a social media strategy and in case yes, how this strategy will look like
Social media sites+	The social media sites that the government offers
Challenges/obstacles of social media	Reasons speaking against governments using social media
Potentials/reasons for social media	Reasons speaking for governments using social media
Citizens' request for social media	Whether citizens have asked government to introduce social media
Experiences with social media+	The governments' experience with social media
Experiences with social media*	The governments' experience with social media
Privacy and data security aspects	How privacy and security aspects are affected by social media
Preconditions for using social media*	The conditions that would need to be fulfilled before launching a social media site
Preliminary work for social media	The actions governments take before using social media
Target group	The target group governments aim to address by social media
Changing social media communication	The way communication is altered in and by social media
Topics on Facebook	Topics that are typically posted and discussed on Facebook
Topics on other social media	Topics that are typically posted and discussed on other social media
Most important social media site	The social media site that is most important for governments
Marketing for social media site+	The way governments draw attention to their social media site
Interrelations with traditional media	The influence of social media on communication via other channels
Internal social media guidelines	Whether internal social media guidelines exist and how they look like
Moderating	How governments (plan to) moderate discussions in social media
Room for improvement in social media+	How governments' proper social media activities could be improved
Room for improving social media activities in governments in general	How the circumstances for social media activities in governments could generally be improved
Evaluating user feedback	How governments evaluate user feedback
User feedback	How social media users react to governments' social media activities
Evaluation of strategy	The way governments evaluate their (potential) social media strategy
Future extension of social media activities	Whether and how governments plan to extend their social media activities in the future
Prognosis of general development	How the interviewee predicts the general development of social media
Further interesting aspects	Further interesting/strange aspects that arouse during the interview

Table 1. Final set of categories used for coding (categories marked with a plus (+)/an asterisk (*) only refer to governments using social media/not using social media).

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