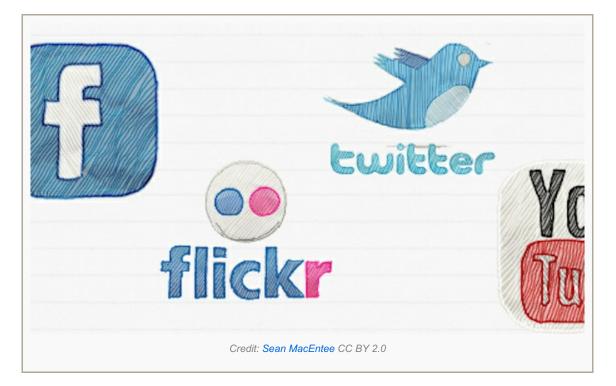# Between the system and lifeworld: Despite adopting social media tools, public administrators remain in a legitimacy dilemma

*Social media platforms theoretically align with many aspects of Habermas' ideal of "authentic communication". However, **Claire Knox** writes that this does not make them automatically applicable to public participation in governance structures. For example, while we see evidence of "cautious experimentation" among public administrators, there remains a lack of "institutional imagination" to maximise the democratic potential of social media tools.*

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Jürgen Habermas and his theories are marginalised in the study of public administration due to his idealistic presentation of government and society – most notably the deliberative public sphere. In his 1996 work, *Between Facts and Norms*, he shifted the focus from policy to public administration and the legitimacy dilemma. The administration legitimacy dilemma occurs during the administrators' translation of abstract policies and laws where they should be amendable to public feedback while also refraining from being political or influencing policy. To overcome this dilemma, there needs to be "an interplay of institutional imagination and cautious experimentation" (Habermas, 1996, p. 441).

I frequently question the logic and rationale for pushing Habermas' ideal aside in the study of public administration. Some scholars argue for theories applied to public administration and policy to remain narrow in scope, predictive in nature, and rooted in empirical evidence as to aid government decision-makers. If this is the case, then what are we striving for? I agree with many of the scholars – the ideal often contradicts reality. However, how can we better society and governance if we set the ideal aside or do not strive for it from the start? I am not arguing that Habermas' theory is the ideal, but it is one theory providing parameters for authentic communication between government and

citizens while also helping public administrators overcome the legitimacy dilemma. By applying Habermas' ideal to the reality of public administrator's use or nonuse of social media platforms, we are able to engage in a deeper conversation missing in the expanding literature.

In a new article entitled "Public Administrators' Use of Social Media Platforms: Overcoming the Legitimacy Dilemma?" I discuss institutional barriers to social media implementation by government organisations and how these barriers negatively affect Habermas' ideal for authentic communication by public administrators. Habermas offers a critical perspective of legitimacy in his Advanced Capitalist System – one in which the political and economic systems are intertwined thereby increasing the citizens' need for legitimation from political institutions.

Public administrators are located in the nexus between the system and lifeworld. While this affords administrators the opportunity to use instrumental and communication rationality justifications to validate claims, it often places them in a legitimacy dilemma. When public administrators communicate and interact with citizens in the lifeworld, they become trapped between the norm-free, institutional guarantees of the political systems world and the shared societal values, norms, and culture of the lifeworld. By being actively engaged in continuous, unimpeded discourse with affected citizens, public administrators have the means to use both types of justifications to avoid alienating citizens and themselves. Specifically, communicative rationality justifications reduces the feelings of alienation in both groups.

Many scholars view social media platforms as the new public sphere and a democratic tool because it allows for cultural reproduction, social integration, and value sharing required by the lifeworld and relied upon by the system. As an open portal for public administrators to use in the nexus, these platforms contain multiple characteristics that align with Habermas' ideal of authentic communication:

- Readily accessible from multiple devices

- Readily available to an unlimited number of individuals on a global scale

- Relatively inexpensive to implement

- Allows for bi-directional interactions

- Allows for synchronous and asynchronous communication

- Co-creation, modification, and sharing of knowledge and content

- Allows for transparency and neutrality

- Opens government to actively participate with, and learning from, stakeholders

- Can contribute to organisational learning and decision making (when used strategically)

Even with these characteristics aligning with Habermas' authentic communication, these platforms are not automatically applicable to public participation in certain governance structures. Studies highlight institutional, social, and political factors impeding successful implementation; I followed Habermas' focus on institutions. Based on normative and empirical studies, the primary challenges include:

- Not decentralising the power and control of information to social media users

- Platform initiatives designed for the organisation and not the citizen

- The costs of democratisation (transparency laws, backend costs, personnel costs, etc.)

- One-way/push information practices continue to dominate institutional culture

- Organisational norms penalising public administrators for valuing citizens over elected officials

- Younger administrators increasingly using social media platforms for citizen engagement, while senior administrators/managers dominating the bureaucratic decision making

- Lack of evidence of citizen feedback contributing to organisational learning or decision making

Implementing social media platforms in governance structures without addressing these challenges equates to electing a president and then having a public vote. In other words, the ends are already decided; therefore, the means serve no purpose. Habermas acknowledges that citizens might reach the wrong ends; yet, the democratic means to reach that end is valuable. Public administrators' use of communicative rationality justifications empowers them and citizens to debate the means and ends. Social media tools have the ability to extend the public sphere and overcome the administrative legitimacy dilemma. However, as detailed above, systematic and institutional rationality justifications continue to dominate a governance structure's social media implementation and usage.

While we see evidence of the "cautious experimentation" happening within many governance structures, we are lacking the "institutional imagination." Organisational rules, norms, procedures, and culture need to shift to allow administrators to implement fully the multiple social media characteristics to reach Habermas' ideal of authentic communication between the lifeworld and system. Organisational leaders need to encourage unimpeded communication and rational-critical debate between government and citizens instead of rhetoric, which is distorted speech used to manipulate individuals. Without this shift, a government's use of social media platforms could:

- Increase the norm-free, institutional guarantees of the political systems world

- Increase the use of rhetoric as a form of distorted communication

- Decrease the shared societal values, norms, and culture of the lifeworld

- Increase citizen's distrust of government

- Decrease an organisation's efficiency

- Increase the costs of democratisation

- Increase the alienation of public administrators and citizens

- Increase the colonisation of the lifeworld

Most importantly, even with these open portals between the system and lifeworld, public administrators in the nexus remain in a legitimacy dilemma.

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Note: This article is based on Knox, C. C. (2016). Public Administrators' Use of Social Media Platforms: Overcoming the Legitimacy Dilemma? Administration & Society*, 48(4), 477-496. Access the full article here.*

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Claire Connolly Knox, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor and the Emergency Management and Homeland Security Program Director in the School of Public Administration at the University of Central Florida. Her research interests include environmental policy and management, Habermas' critical theory, and environmental vulnerability and disaster response. She has published in multiple journals including *Public Administration Review*, *Administration & Society*, *Environmental Politics*, *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, and *Disaster Prevention and Management*. She tweets @DrEcoclaire.