

Using Social Media in Local Government 2011 Survey Report





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1. Background

Over the past 10 years social media has changed the way people communicate with each other, and interact with governments. Research conducted by Sensis¹ in 2012 shows that 62% of Australians who access the internet have a social media presence. The steady growth of social media and the ever changing list of tools in the social media toolbox offer both opportunities and challenges for local government.

In recognition of those opportunities, and the changing role social media is playing in communication and community engagement the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (www.ancelg.org.au), in partnership with the University of Canberra, undertook a survey to explore the application, adoption and use of social media tools and techniques in Local Government.

This survey was designed to capture the views, experiences and perceptions of local government leaders about the contribution that social media is making, and has the potential to make, in communicating with residents, ratepayers and other stakeholders, and in improving the planning, organisation, and delivery of Local Government services.

The survey explores the benefits, risks and barriers to councils in using social media, and identifies those areas where social media might best serve the sector.

The survey was designed specifically to provide a solid benchmark, against which changes in the use of social media in the sector can be measured and analysed through future surveys.

The results of this survey have also informed the Position Paper on Social Media being prepared by ACELG.

¹ Source – Yellow Social Media Report, Sensis, June 2012

2. About the Survey

2.1 Methodology

The survey was administered electronically to all councils in Australia over two weeks in November 2011. The survey was widely promoted to the sector and local government associations in each state and the Northern Territory encouraged council to participate.

2.2 Sample

The survey was sent to council Chief Executive Officers and General Managers, who were asked to forward the survey to the person in their organisation who was best placed to answer the questions, if they themselves were not able to.

A total of 225 councils responded to the survey. Responding councils were evenly divided between metropolitan (34%), regional (31%) and rural/remote (31%) with 6% described as "other".

2.3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed with considerable consultation with the sector, and piloted with the participants of the 2011 Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG)/ACELG Excellence in Local Government Leadership program.

A copy of the questionnaire is appended to this document.

2.4 Coding

The survey contains several open ended questions, where respondents were encouraged to answer the question in their own words. The information collected in these questions was coded using a code frame based on 20% of the total responses, and is presented in this document as both a percentage of the respondents who mentioned that particular code, and as a percentage of the total items mentioned (bearing in mind that many respondents mentioned more than one item in answering a particular question).

Verbatim quotations are used throughout the report to support and illustrate the findings.

2.5 Statistical significance

Results in this report are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, where the difference between responses is +/- 5%. Other responses should be considered indicative only.



3. Executive Summary

Social media has really only been around for ten years. The year 2002 saw the launch of the first significant social networking site, Friendster. Myspace was launched in 2004, followed by Facebook in 2006 and Twitter in 2006.

Not much is heard of Friendster or MySpace nowadays, but according to research conducted by Sensis² in 2012 - *Facebook dominates as the most used social networking site, being used by 97% of social networking participants or 6 out of 10 Internet users. This was unchanged in the past year. Facebook is used by more than 95% of social media users from both sexes and at least 93% in all age groups. LinkedIn was the next most popular social media platform, being used by 16% of social networking users, up from 9% last year. Twitter was used by 14% of social networking site users, up from 8% last year, and Google+ was used by 8%.*

This represents a massive change in the way people communicate with one another, and with the organisations they interact with, including local government.

The 50% response rate, and the high level of interest in the results of this survey point to a sector already grappling with the implications of social media, and, in many cases, looking for support and direction to fully understand the opportunities offered by social media.

It is of particular interest that while the survey was directed to the person in the council who was responsible for council's social media position, only one in five of those people described themselves as understanding social media *very well*, while a further 37% described themselves as understanding it quite well.

This leaves 43% of respondents who did not have a good understanding of social media.

While over two thirds of responding councils were using social media in one form or another, 38% described themselves as *just starting to use it and still feeling our way*.

Only six percent described themselves as *leading the sector in social media use* and 25% as having *some experience* with social media. One in six participating councils were planning to use social media, but had not yet started, while a similar number (14%) were not planning to use social media at all.

While councils are aware of a wide range of types of social media, Facebook and Twitter are easily the most used social media tools, followed by Youtube and LinkedIn.

In considering future use, councils are most likely to intend to use Twitter, followed by mobile apps like Snap Send Solve and the Youtube and Facebook.

Interestingly, while some rural/remote councils felt that social media was not relevant to them or their communities, one rural/remote council had found that they were able to communicate much more effectively with their residents via social media as they were too geographically dispersed to support a local newspaper.

² Source – Yellow Social Media Report, Sensis, June 2012

As might be expected, the strongest drive for a council to use social media came from staff responsible for communications (41%), and communications staff “owned” councils social media initiatives in 61% of cases.

The majority of councils were developing (50%) or had in place (26%) a social media policy of some sort – in most cases (84%) the policies were based on an existing policy of another organisation and either adopted with little change or used as a framework for a more tailored policy. This suggests a need for the development of standard social media tools and resources which can be easily tailored to suit individual councils.

Just on half of all participating councils who are using social media confined its official use to one or two staff members, most likely the in the communications team, where one exists. A further third of councils expanded their use of social media to key personnel throughout the organisation.

Anecdotally there is talk of staff being locked out of personal social media use at work, and this was true in around half of the councils who participated in the survey. At the same time only 27% had developed a policy covering personal use of social media by staff in regard to making comments which may reflect on the organisation or industry, and a further 20% were developing one.

Few councils (21%) provided social media training for their staff, and even fewer (9%) provided social media training for their elected representatives, although many supplied them with smart phones and tablets which can be used to access social media, and 64% of participating councils had one or more elected representative who used social media to comment on or discuss council business.


Councils were most likely to see value in social media use for events, promotion to youth and general community engagement, and when asked to nominate examples of their own council’s effective media use events and festival promotion was the most frequently mentioned response.

Interestingly, 14% of those councils who were using social media had also found it to be useful to manage controversial issues, address public misconceptions and build positive reputations, and a further 10% had found it effective for emergency management. Exploration of the comments supporting this question suggests that this is an often unexpected benefit of social media use, but one that councils are quick to capitalise on once discovered.

Significantly, few councils had in place any formal evaluation processes to measure the effectiveness of the social media they use. This places social media at a disadvantage compared to more traditional media which has well established evaluation techniques, and may contribute to a sense that it is difficult to tell how really useful social media campaigns are.

In exploring opportunities for social media use for councils, a quarter of councils believed that social media would specifically assist them to engage with hard to reach segments of the community, including youth, those with disabilities, seniors and time poor families. Further,





councils saw that social media offered them an opportunity for true collaboration between council and their communities, and *humanising the council* for the community.

Interestingly, and perhaps most indicative of the confusion surrounding the use of social media in local government, among the main barriers to the use of social media identified by respondents were *fear of loss of control of the message* and *increased transparency/engagement with the community*.

The most significant barriers to the use of social media were to do with a lack of resources and a lack of knowledge. In particular a lack of sector wide guidelines and education was cited as a barrier – coupled with a lack of understanding of social media inside the organisation.

A lack of confidence in the ability of staff to communicate effectively was a barrier for some councils, and there was particular concern around the area of record keeping and possible legal issues.

Perceived risks associated with social media use included negative community feedback, and *“uncontrolled commentary about council”* and lack of resources, although comments made by councils who were using social media suggest that they had found it to be an efficient way to engage with the community.

Significantly, much of the perceived risk associated with social media use clustered around information management and record keeping issues, suggesting a lack of clarity around state record keeping regulations as they relate to social media and commensurate uncertainty within the sector as to their responsibilities.

Further uncertainty was evident when councils were asked about the extent to which they might consider using social media in an emergency, following on from the experience of Queensland councils during the floods and cyclones of 2011.

Importantly, a key finding of the Queensland Flood Commission of Inquiry Final Report was that *Councils that have not already done so should consider how social media may be used effectively to provide accurate information about flood levels and local conditions to residents during a flood event.*

While some councils had already experienced using social media in an emergency situation, many more were gearing up to do so – and looking for guidance and more information to support their efforts.

It is clear from the results of the survey that there is a significant gap in knowledge and support for councils looking to implement effective social media strategies. While some councils have taken the plunge and embraced the use of social media, many more are sitting back, or dabbling at the edge of the social media pool – concerned about liability and unsure of their obligations, looking for some support in the form of guidelines and case studies.

4. Detailed Findings

4.1 Understanding of social media

In any exploration of local government use of social media, it is important to understand the context surrounding it, in this case, the extent to which the decision maker personally understands social media.

Well over half of all respondents (57%) claimed to *personally* understand social media very or quite well. This may partly be a reflection of the fact that in some cases the survey would have been directed to the person in the organisation most qualified to speak about social media.

However if we assume that people inside local government are as likely as the community as a whole to use social media personally we might expect that around 60% of respondents would have a social media presence.

Q. How well do you feel you personally understand social media?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Very well		19.3%
Quite well		37.4%
Somewhat		35.3%
Not very well		7.5%
Not at all well		0.5%

Table 1 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

4.2 Use of social media by councils

Respondents were asked which of a range of responses best described their council's current position on social media.

More than two thirds, or 69% of participating councils were using social media in some way at the time of interview, with most feeling that they were just starting out or beginning to develop some experience.

Only 6% of participating councils described themselves as "leaders in the sector".

Just under one third of participating councils (31%) were not using social media at the time of the survey. Of those, around half were planning to use social media in the future, while the remainder has no plans to use it.

Metropolitan councils are more likely to consider themselves to be experienced or leaders in the use of social media (48%), while 28% of rural and remote councils have not used it all. Interestingly, 4% of rural and remote councils consider that they are leaders in the sector in their social media use.

It must be noted that, while there is no way of verifying it, it is possible that councils with no social media presence were more likely to self-exclude themselves from the survey. Therefore the proportion of all councils using social media at the time of the survey may be slightly overstated.

Q. Which of these statements best describes your council's *current* position on social media?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
We are using social media extensively and are leaders in the sector in social media use		5.9%
We have some experience with social media		25.3%
We are just starting to use social media and are feeling our way		38.2%
We are planning to use social media but haven't started yet		16.7%
We have considered using social media and decided against it for the moment		7.5%
We have not considered using social media		6.5%

Table 2 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

4.3 Ownership of social media inside council

In order to place some context around the use of social media inside a council, it is important to understand where in the council the push to use social media comes from, and where the “ownership” of social media sits within the organisation.

As the following table illustrates, the drive to use social media comes most significantly from communications staff within councils (42%).

Interestingly elected representatives were the main driver in nearly one in ten participating councils, while other staff drove council’s use of social media in nearly one in five cases.

* Where “other” drivers were mentioned, they included:

- The mayor
- Youth or community services
- Library staff
- Tourism or economic development

Q. Where did the initial drive for your council's use of social media come from?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
The community		5.7%
Elected representatives		8.9%
Communications staff		41.8%
IT/Web staff		7.6%
Other staff		19.0%
GM/CEO		7.6%
Other*		9.5%

Table 3 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Consistent with that finding, six out of ten councils sit their social media activities within the communications department/section of council.

Interestingly 22% of respondents mentioned “other” responses to that question, including:

- No one in particular
- Whoever started the account
- Each department has its own
- Library staff
- Tourism or economic development

Q. Who “owns” social media within your organisation?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Communications		61.1%
IT department		8.9%
Web team		6.4%
Library		1.3%
Other		22.3%

Table 4 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)



4.4 Social media policy

The use of a social media policy can support and contain strategic social media use across the organisation.

Just on one half of participating councils who are using social media were developing a social media policy at the time of the interview. One quarter had already developed on and the remainder did not have a policy at all.

Q. Does your council have, or are you developing a social media policy?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes - we already have one		25.5%
Yes - we are developing one		49.7%
No		24.8%

Table 5 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Those councils who had or were developing a social media policy were most likely to be piggybacking on another policy, either using another social media policy as a framework for their own, or simply modifying an existing social media policy for their own use.

Q. Which of these statements best describes your council's social media policy position?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
We took an existing social media policy and modified slightly for our own use		32.8%
We used another social media policy as a framework but modified it extensively to meet our needs		49.6%
We developed our own social media policy ourselves		17.6%

Table 6 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

4.5 Staff use of social media

The approach councils take to allowing staff access to social media varies considerably.

Just on half of all participating councils who are using social media confine its official use to one or two staff members, most likely in the communications team where one exists.

A further third of councils expand their use of social media to key personnel throughout the organisation.

Where councils provided an "other" response, they were likely to say that there were no official protocols yet, or that their interaction was limited to an online community engagement forum.

Q. To what extent is your staff able to *officially* use social media to communicate with the community?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Communication through social media is limited to one or two staff members		49.0%
Key individuals throughout the organisation are able to communicate with the community via social media		34.2%
All staff can communicate with the community via social media		3.2%
Other		13.5%

Table 7 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Anecdotally, there is much talk about staff being “locked out” of personal social media use at work, but the survey responses showed that councils are evenly divided about the extent to which staff can access social networking sites for personal use at work, with 47% of councils claiming that staff can access the sites.

Q. Are your staff able to access social networking sites (eg. Twitter and Facebook) for personal use at work?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes		47.1%
No		46.5%
Don't know		6.4%

Table 8 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Regardless of whether councils allowed staff access to social media or not, they were, in the main, aware of a need to have a policy regarding personal use of social media by staff, where they may comment on work or industry related matters.

Just over a quarter of councils (27%) have already developed a policy covering personal use of social media by staff and around one half (51%) are developing or considering the development of such a policy.

Q. Does your council have, or are you considering a policy regarding staff *personal use* of social media in regard to them making comments which reflect on the organisation or industry?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes - we have developed a policy		27.4%
Yes - we are developing a policy		19.7%
We are currently considering the issue		31.8%
We haven't considered it		11.5%



We have considered it and decided not to proceed with a policy		3.2%
Don't know		6.4%

Table 9 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Remarkably, while policies are being developed and considered important by the majority of responding councils, only one in five councils provide any social media training for their staff.

Q. Do you provide social media training for your staff?



RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes		21.0%
No		79.0%

Table 10 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Those councils who were providing some form of social media training were asked to describe the form that training took.

Where training is being provided it is being taken seriously – councils report a variety of approaches to training but many involve a two stage approach where key personal are trained by outside consultants or through government subsidised training programs (often through libraries), and that knowledge is passed on to other staff via internal training sessions and or podcasts etc. One respondent noted:

“We are just in the final stages of getting our policy finalised. Once it is endorsed, we will be coordinating social media training for key staff who will play a role in Council's official social media use. We will also be offering general social media training to all other interested staff in regards to issues such as privacy online, defamation”

There does not appear to be a standard approach to training for social media use, and a variety of resources and training providers are mentioned:

“One-on-one with communications staff. (We) have also invited in professionals to speak at the time of the introduction of our social media policy. (We) will look at more professional training as more departments begin to use social media.”

“It hasn't happened yet, but it is anticipated that a 3rd party will conduct training with councillors and other staff as is required.”

4.6 Councillor use of social media

More than half of participating councils (57%) provide their elected representatives with some sort of smartphone or tablet device, many of which are internet and or social media enabled. As well, many councillors have their own devices which allow access to social media for both private and public use.

Q. Thinking now about your elected representatives, does your council provide them with a smartphone, iPad, or equivalent tablet style device for council use?




RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes		56.8%
No		38.1%
Don't know		5.2%

Table 11 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Nearly two thirds of respondent councils (64%) have one or more elected representatives who use social media to comment on and/or conduct council business.

Q. To your knowledge do any of your councillors use social media for council business, or to comment on council proceedings?


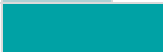


RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
No - none		28.2%
Yes - one or two		42.3%
Yes - more than one or two		10.9%
Don't know		18.6%

Table 12 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Interestingly, despite the earlier figure, fewer than one in ten councils provide social media training to the elected representatives.

Q. Do you provide social media training for your councillors?



Response	Chart	Frequency
Yes		9.0%
No		91.0%

Table 13 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

The social media training offered to councillors is, in most instances less formal than that offered to staff, with one respondent noting:

“basic instructions on how to handle questions on social media, how to ensure their personal security settings are ok, what they should avoid posting due to compliance with legislation etc.”

4.7 Social media evaluation

It is particularly notable that, of those councils who do use social media, only one quarter have a formal evaluation process in place to measure the effectiveness of the social media they use.

This places social media at a disadvantage compared to more traditional media which has well established evaluation techniques, and may contribute to a sense that it is difficult to tell how really useful social media campaigns are.

Q. Do you formally measure the effectiveness of your council’s social media use?

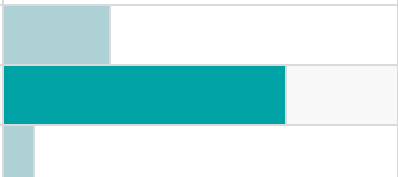
RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Yes		24.8%
No		70.6%
Don't know		4.6%

Table 14 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Where councils do measure the effectiveness of the tools they use, they are often limited to counting “likes” and “retweets” as a way of estimating engagement with the social media communication. A sample of responses to this question include:

“Provide monthly figures on growth of friends base; evaluate comments being posted on Facebook; obtain monthly breakdown of pages being visited on council website eg Youtube, Facebook and other pages”

“Rather roughly. We monitor our output, followers, retweeting, Facebook views, extent and type of questions/issues raised; and we run several blogs from our website, including a Mayoral Blog.”

A few had more sophisticated methods with KPI’s and “expected levels of likers, followers, retweets, shares, views and levels of interaction - posts, survey responses, etc.”

4.8 Opportunities and effective use of social media

When asked whether they see social media as more useful for broadcast communication or as a tool for community engagement, the majority of respondents (54%) see it as a tool for community engagement, while 20% see it as more suited to broadcast communications only.

Interestingly, councils see that social media has value for many areas of council business. While perceived value is perhaps strongest for events, it is also seen to have value for both general and project specific community engagement, for engagement with youth, for customer service and for tourism.

Q. Which of the following areas of council do you think social media has the most value for?

RESPONSE	CHART	FREQUENCY
Customer service		63.0%
Events		87.9%
Corporate communications		62.4%
Library		52.0%
General community engagement		79.2%
Project based community consultation		64.2%
Youth activity promotion		78.6%
Works information		45.7%
Development application tracking		18.5%
Tourism		55.5%
Economic development		34.1%
In-house training and development		17.3%
Other specify		9.8%
None		1.2%

Table 15 (Respondents could only choose a *single* response)

Respondents were asked a number of open ended questions regarding the opportunities offered by social media and the barriers and risks associated with its use. Respondents answered in their own words, and their responses were analysed and a coded frame was developed against which the verbatim responses were coded.

The following charts show both the number of respondents who mentioned that specific item (% of respondents) and the number of times that item was mentioned against the total number of items mentioned (% of responses) assuming that many people mentioned more than one item in response to a question.

Respondents were initially asked to nominate examples of effective social media use in their organisations.

EXAMPLES OF EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USE	% OF RESPONDENTS	% OF RESPONSES
Event/festival promotion	18.33	52.38
Manage controversial issues, address public misconceptions and build + reputation	13.89	39.68
Youth specific engagement/initiatives	13.33	38.10
Emergency management/severe weather events	11.67	33.33
Specific project consultation	8.89	25.40

Too soon to tell	8.89	25.40
Service/facilities management	7.22	20.63
Respond to specific customer/resident issues quickly	5.56	15.87
Community input into broad strategic planning	4.44	12.70
Best/only option in small community/no local press.	3.33	9.52

Table 16

Figure 1 – Examples of effective use of social media



When asked to nominate examples of effective use of social media in their councils, respondents were most likely to mention **events and festival promotion**:

“Recent event for the Mayors Charity dinner party. Proceeds when to Save-A-Dog. Facebook advertising and Facebook seeding was implemented to help raise awareness of the function. A number of pro animal related Facebook book groups 'shared' the event and supported the Major for her efforts to support Save-A-Dog due to their 'no kill policy'. This raised her profile within the community and the event was sold out. Success”

“Currently we are only using social media to advise the community of upcoming events and exhibitions at the ...Cultural Centre...”

In particular, social media seems to work in smaller communities, and sometimes even in remote locations, where more traditional forms of communication are non existent:

“As we are a remote council we have no circulating newspaper. Therefore, social media has been helpful in promoting large events. We also promote our events on our website. We link the URL from our website to facebook so viewers can read the event poster. It also created discussion about the event, which helped with the lead/build up to the event.”

It is evident from some of the comments that the promotion of events provides a safe, non – threatening way for councils to begin using social media:

“We have literally only just begun to use social media, as of last week. We are hosting a festival in our town site and have set up a Facebook site as part of the promotion for the event. To date we are unable to tell if this is being effective.”

Interestingly, the next most frequently mentioned effective use was **manage controversial issues, address public misconceptions and build positive reputation**. This is particularly remarkable because almost the same responses came up very strongly as a risk of social media.

When talking about using social media in this way, it is clear that this is a sometimes unexpected benefit of social media use. A sample of responses include:

“Our official Facebook site is drawing people in from more negative FB pages and allowing the town to have a voice in some of the more controversial issues. People are now coming to us to fact find and then posting the information on the negative sites.”

“Council worker drove through cattle crossing a road, cattle owner went on Facebook and complained publicly, using the mayor's profile we replied publicly, apologized, ensured appropriate action and turned the conversation around. Complainant ended up thanking the mayor for his swift response”

“There have been two instances where a post via Facebook resulted in a resident having their issue resolved. A breakdown in our customer service area meant this person's complaint about a wheelie bin had slipped through the system, They posted it on Facebook and Communication team provided comments to Customer Service, who investigated and found the issue had not been resolved -- it was rectified within 24 hours -- The people posted a "thank you" on Facebook”

“Customers can now use Snap Send Solve to log jobs /maintenance repairs in our community.”

The relatively high number of mentions of **Youth specific engagement/initiatives** suggests that social media is still seen as a “young persons” activity, when in fact the average age of a Facebook user is 38 and a Twitter user is 39.

Having said that social media is clearly a successful way for local government to engage with youth. A sample of responses:

“Our Youth Services team use Council's Youth Facebook page to promote youth events and to provide opportunities for youths from across the Shire to connect despite the vast distances involved.”

“Our retail initiative - won national award - reaches students via twitter and SMS alerts about deals and jobs advertised in the city centre.”

“In a community engagement project about renaming the Council's youth centre. Was a great technique to get to the hard to reach group of youth”

“We used social media for consultation around the redevelopment of our skate park. A Facebook site was set up and received a lot of feedback and discussion from a sector of the community (young people) that may never have participated in a council consultation session previously.

Council was able to engage these people, include them in on-site meetings and develop a plan that involved all stakeholders. The skate park redevelopment is now complete and there have been no complaints at all about the design or the process.”

The other significant area of effective use, and an important one for councils to give thought to early on is that of **Emergency management/severe weather events**. Many councils have found that social media comes into its own during emergencies:

“During Cyclone Yasi, we extensively used Facebook and Twitter to great success, with many hidden benefits. We received enormous praise from our community and other agencies (eg Police and Ergon) for our communication in this medium. Additional benefits including education of young people about council's role (as opposed to other levels of government) and the capturing of written praise for our staff - more than 400 positive comments which we put into posters around our depots and offices. We worked these tools from our homes from our smartphones, through the cyclone period until the disaster centre opened and we established ourselves on site to provide an integrated media, website, twitter and Facebook approach to communication.”

The comments suggest that councils are better able to control the accuracy of the messages if they are posting themselves, and also can correct misinformation quickly as it is posted. The social part of social media ensures that the community will do its part in disseminating the information to wider audience than could possibly be reached otherwise.

“Definitely in the Floods in December and January. We were able to get the "correct" message out about what was happening, when there was a lot of incorrect information on other Facebook pages.”

“While we still don't officially use social media, we are aware that during the flood event, briefings from the LDMSG that we put on our website were copied and put onto Facebook pages of local residents.”

“Outstanding in emergency situations. Twitter in particular has proven a sound real time tool for getting out emergency messages and holding conversations at such times.”

Respondents were then asked to nominate those areas where they believed social media offered the most opportunities for local government use.

OPPORTUNITIES	% OF RESPONDENTS	% OF RESPONSES
Increases engagement with hard to reach segments of community (youth, disabilities, seniors, time poor families)	24.06	71.43
Provide channels for increased engagement with community	22.46	66.67
Allows true collaboration between council and community on plans, services and programs/increased citizen participation	13.37	39.68
Humanises the council for the community and builds relationships	8.56	25.40
Broadcast media/provide information	8.56	25.40
Effective emergency/crisis management tool	6.95	20.63
Real time event info	5.88	17.46
Helps to address negative media and false information	4.28	12.70

Cost effective, timely communication	3.74	11.11
Customer service function/ community reporting of issues for action	2.14	6.35

Table 17

Figure 2 – Opportunities for local government in social media use



While overall increased opportunities for engagement and collaboration it the key opportunity for social media, one quarter of respondents believed that use of social media would specifically increase engagement with hard to reach segments of the community, including youth, those with disabilities, senior and time poor families. Respondents noted:

“Social media gives Council the opportunity to communicate with traditionally hard to reach sectors of the community. As well as being substantially cheaper than many traditional ways of communication, social media also provide instant communication with the wider community and invites interaction.”

“Opportunity to engage all segments of the community as there are many that do not read papers or listen to radio or watch TV adverts. The social media seems to get to these people and gets responses.”

“Offline engagement activities pose considerable barriers to participation from the community, particularly for those who are:

- *Restricted by family or work commitments*
- *Transport disadvantaged*
- *Mobility limited*
- *Intimidated by the confronting nature of public debate*
- *Deterred due to a strong personal preference for online or anonymity-enabling communications Unable to express themselves adequately through a formal written submission*
- *Unaware of the opportunities available to them*

- *Better able to participate when engagement techniques allow for the use of assistive technologies such as screen readers*

As a result, traditional engagement methods invariably connect with and give voice to only small segments of the community. The Internet provides the opportunity to increase reach to the 'silent majority' and create a real opportunity for people to participate at a time and place of their own choosing, in a format that suits their personal preferences and unique needs; The Internet offers inexpensive and accessible opportunities for citizens to learn about"

Other responses included the opportunity for more genuine collaboration with the community, and the notion that community interaction with council through social media can "humanise" the council for the community and assist in the development of ongoing relationships.

4.9 Barriers and risks of using social media

While there are many perceived benefits associated with local government's use of social media, respondents also identified perceived barriers and risks associated with its use.

Respondents were asked what they considered to be the main barriers to the adoption of social media by local government, and where they thought the biggest risks for local government lay.

BARRIERS	% OF RESPONDENTS	% OF RESPONSES
Lack of resources/time consuming	25.08	46.84
Lack of knowledge/understanding within the organisation	16.95	31.65
Fear of loss of control of message/ brand integrity	12.88	24.05
Lack of sector wide guidelines/education	10.85	20.25
Negative community feedback/"council bashing"/reputational risk	9.83	18.35
Increased transparency/engagement with community	6.44	12.03
Staff not able to communicate effectively with community	6.10	11.39
Technology/security issues	6.10	11.39
Record keeping issues	5.76	10.76

Table 18

Respondents saw the major barriers to using social media as a lack of time and a lack of knowledge within the organisation. Some comments include:

"Resource implications of using social media and the necessary expansion of the Corporate Communications or IT portfolios (and staff time) at a time when financial constraints on Councils is an ever-present pressure"

"Resourcing to be "on-call" to be constantly monitoring the channels"

"I don't have an IT person or a person with specialist skills who can get this happening - I can do it myself but as General Manager (only recently appointed) have not yet been able to allocate the time and there is no budgetary opportunity for me to employ someone to do it. I do however think

it is a high priority for us to be using social media and will be prioritising getting involved in the next 12 months or so.”

The lack of knowledge is a significant barrier for many, who look for guidance from the sector in relation to the legal and record keeping considerations as well as more general guidelines.

“Also the lack of guidelines for LG. At present our media policy only allows for the Mayor and GM or those authorised under them to speak to Media, there is no clear definition of whether social media is considered unofficial media releases.”

“Generally we do not have an in-depth awareness of the larger issues, such as risk and risk mitigation around social media, or the resources such as employing staff dedicated to managing social media relationships and to train staff on their obligations when they talk online about their employer. It seems that few can see the advantages or envision how social media can benefit although this could be generational. With regard to managing staff performance - Councils, if they want to keep Gen Ys employed longer must enable them with the tools and policies to retain good staff”

Importantly, many councils identified risks associated with social media use. As with the barriers to use, lack of resources and time is seen to be a significant risk to councils in social media use, but the most significant risk identified by councils responding to the survey is “negative community feedback/“council bashing”/reputational risk”, with one quarter of respondents mentioning it as a risk of social media use:

“The major risk is the potential for defamation and attack of the council in public forums.”

“Bad exposure, inappropriate staff comments, liable, defamation, adequate resources to truly be in the space.”

RISKS	% OF RESPONDENTS	% OF RESPONSES
Increased community expectations	3.57	5.06
Litigation	3.57	5.06
Record keeping issues	5.36	7.59
Technology/security issues	7.14	10.13
Information management protocols breached/info not timely or accurate	9.82	13.92
Loss of control of message/ brand integrity	13.84	19.62
Staff not able to communicate effectively with community	14.29	20.25
Lack of resources/time consuming	18.75	26.58
Negative community feedback/"council bashing"/reputational risk	23.66	33.54

Table 19

Figure 3 – Risks associated with social media use



Other significant risks include loss of control of message:

“Uncontrolled commentary about council and its activities appearing in public - lack of control which is easy to maintain with conventional means.”

“The area is unregulated so it is difficult to control negativism or abusive behaviour. I have not encountered this but the risk is obvious.”

and lack of confidence in the ability of staff to represent council via social media:

“Inappropriate comments made by staff. Lack of clarity around whether a staff person's comment is personal or could be interpreted as being an official comment “

There was a significant cluster of responses around information management and record keeping issues, suggesting a lack of clarity around state record keeping regulations as they relate to social media, and commensurate uncertainty within the sector as to their responsibilities.

4.10 Use of social media in an emergency

Respondents were asked to discuss the extent to which their council might consider using social media in an emergency, following on from the experience of Queensland councils during the floods and cyclones of 2011.

There was a huge variation in responses to this question, and much uncertainty on the part of many respondents, as to how social media should (or could) be implemented in the future.

Some councils had already experienced the sort of situation that might require the use of social media:

“Yes we have (used it in an emergency) and we would. Media staff have logins and passwords so that they can update website, Facebook and Twitter from home or at work to keep residents aware”

"Yes - we have done it and we have done it damn well! We just haven't had time to tell the rest of Queensland how well we did it.... Plenty of learning to share."

"We posted information on Facebook and Twitter, when we encountered our own crisis situation."

"Yes. As mentioned previously, during storms it allows us to alert residents to traffic issues, such as road closures and traffic light failures. In extreme cases, it can also help spread the evacuation message. We have consistently used social media during storms to make sure the community is prepared before the storm hits (securing loose items, not parking under trees etc.)"

Many more are considering the future use of social media in emergency situations. There is considerable variation between approaches, from those who have set up a basic framework:

"Yes, we have the protocols and processes in place. We need to better manage our internal information flow. However, at this stage we don't have the audience to use these tools for a wide reach. The emergency situation itself has been shown to generate the audience - so should this happen, we have the steps in place to use the channels appropriately. "

"Yes - I think I made reference to it before. For geographically isolated areas this is one of getting an alert through very quickly. Road closures are of particular importance to our community so it could also be used to notify of these types of activities as well. We are considering SMS alerts, Facebook and other social media."

"Yes, we recently had floods and social media would have been a good way to communicate. We did not use it to its best extent, but will improve on this in future."

to those who are investing significantly in the development of an emergency management social media strategy:

"Objectives for our Council: Develop resident database for emergency management Create a digital information portal which can be launched instantaneously during an emergency; Develop a form of communication that is sent to our residents instantaneously during an emergency event Develop a reliable method to communicate with staff during emergencies; Develop an emergency mini site which can be launched under www.xxx.vic.gov.au during an emergency; Develop backup for the web during emergency digital outlets using digital media; Develop a SMS signup system for residents to receive emergency recovery; SMS Review business continuity plan to ensure web services are sufficiently addressed"

"Our online communications specialist recently undertook research in the United States on this topic and is currently providing a report to Council on how we can use Social Media as a communications tool during emergencies."

Some councils remain unconvinced as to the usefulness of a social media component to their emergency management:

"You have got to be joking ! By all means put a Twitter message out there but the real people will be out helping to fight the fire and deal with the flood, they won't have time to tweet their progress. Besides you need power to run a mobile phone (And a network to operate one on and a signal) or computer and these are usually the first to go in a storm. The two way radio is much more effective in messaging around the fire scene."

4.11 Social media tools

All respondents were asked about their council's use/potential use of a range of social media tool. Note that the tools were grouped by type rather than referred to specifically. This is because of the dynamic nature of the social media market, where apps and tools are likely to appear and disappear over time, but the nature of the communication may not change.

This approach will allow for more accurate comparisons when data is refreshed in the future.

Of note, awareness was highest for professional networking sites (LinkedIn), online forums (Google or Yahoo Groups), video sharing (Youtube) and microblogging (Twitter), all slightly ahead of social networking tools like Facebook.

While councils are aware of a wide range of types of social media, Facebook and Twitter are easily the most used social media tools, followed by Youtube and LinkedIn.

In considering future use, councils are most likely to intend to use Twitter, followed by mobile apps like Snap Send Solve and the Youtube and Facebook.

Q. Please look at the following list of types of social media. For each one please tell us whether you are aware of that type of social media tool, whether your council currently uses that type of tool, and for those that you don't currently use, whether you are likely to use them in the future.

SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS		AWARE	WE CURRENTLY USE THAT TYPE OF SM TOOL	WE ARE LIKELY TO USE IT IN FUTURE
Microblogging (e.g. Twitter)	%	57.5	41.2	32.7
Social networking (e.g. Facebook, Google+ or Myspace)	%	48.4	68.6	24.8
Professional networking (e.g. LinkedIn)	%	62.1	24.8	18.3
Photo/picture sharing (e.g. Flickr or Picasa)	%	55.6	21.6	21.6
Augmented reality (e.g. Layar)	%	35.3	0.7	5.9
Video sharing (e.g. Youtube/Vimeo etc)	%	57.5	39.9	24.8
Presentation sharing/viewing (e.g. Slideshare)	%	49.0	8.5	15.0
Extranet/Wikis (Not Wikipedia)	%	44.4	6.5	6.5
Online forums like Google or Yahoo groups	%	59.5	17.0	13.1
Mobile apps (e.g. Snap Send Solve)	%	48.4	15.7	26.1
SMS communication	%	9.8	3.9	2.0
Internal microblogging (eg Yammer)	%	7.8	2.6	1.3
DA Apps (e.g. Planning Alerts)	%	5.2	2.0	2.0

Table 20

5. Conclusions

There are clearly benefits for many councils in the use of social media – in particular in engaging with hard to reach communities and fostering a more collaborative, transparent approach to community governance.

As well, councils are being encouraged to consider the use of social media as part of their emergency management strategy.

Social media use is not without its risks however, and can certainly be resource intensive when developing strategies and establishing platforms.

The results of the survey show clearly, that while some councils have forged ahead with a social media strategy and are beginning to reap the benefits, many more are waiting in the wings – looking for guidance and support from the sector.

In particular, councils are anxious about how social media fits in to their record keeping obligations, and the possibility of litigation should defamatory material be placed on their social media sites. Currently authoritative information about these issues is difficult to source, and the advice is not always clear, varying as it does from state to state.

The most significant barrier to participation in social media for most council is an overall lack of understanding of the various social media tools and the way that they could be incorporated into councils' existing communication platforms.

The provision of local government specific sector wide training and documentation, incorporating case studies and online tools would go a long way to assisting councils to benefit from a social media strategy.



Appendix - Survey Questions



When we talk about social media we are talking about a wide range of tools designed to communicate to and with people. Please answer the following questions as openly and honestly as possible.

1. How well do you feel you personally understand social media?

- Very well
 - Quite well
 - Somewhat
 - Not very well
 - Not at all well
-

2. **Social media position.** Which of these statements best describes your council's current position on social media? **Pick one only**

- We are using social media extensively and are leaders in the sector in social media use
 - We have some experience with social media
 - We are just starting to use social media and are feeling our way
 - We are planning to use social media but haven't started yet
 - We have considered using social media and decided against it for the moment >> *Skip to: You said that your organisation doesn't currently use social media, why is that?*
 - We have not considered using social media >> *Skip to: You said that your organisation doesn't currently use social media, why is that?*
-

3. You said that your organisation doesn't currently use social media, why is that? *Please write in all of the reasons*

4. Where did the initial drive for your council's use of social media come from? **Pick the MAIN driver**

- The community
 - Elected representatives
 - Communications staff
 - IT/Web staff
 - Other staff
 - GM/CEO
 - Other _____
-

5. Who "owns" social media within your organisation? **Please pick one**

- Communications
 - IT department
 - Web team
-

-
- Library
 - Other _____
-

6. Does your council have, or are you developing a social media policy?

- Yes - we already have one
 - Yes - we are developing one
 - No >> Skip to Page 9: To what extent are your staff able to officially use social media to communicate with the community?
-

7. Which of these statements best describes your council's social media policy position?

- We took an existing social media policy and modified slightly for our own use
 - We used another social media policy as a framework but modified it extensively to meet our needs
 - We developed our own social media policy ourselves
-

8. To what extent are your staff able to officially use social media to communicate with the community?

- Communication through social media is limited to one or two staff members
 - Key individuals throughout the organisation are able to communicate with the community via social media
 - All staff can communicate with the community via social media
 - Other _____
-

9. Are your staff able to access social networking sites (eg Twitter and Facebook) for personal use at work?

- Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
-

10. Does your council have, or are you considering a policy regarding staff personal use of social media in regard to them making comments which reflect on the organisation or industry?

- Yes - we have developed a policy
 - Yes - we are developing a policy
 - We are currently considering the issue
 - We haven't considered it
 - We have considered it and decided not to proceed with a policy
 - Don't know
-

11. a) Do you provide social media training for your staff?

- Yes
 - No >> Skip to Page 14: Thinking now about your elected representatives, does your council
-



provide them with a Smartphone, iPad, or equivalent tablet style device for council use?

11. b) What form does that training take?

12. Thinking now about your elected representatives, does your council provide them with a Smartphone, iPad, or equivalent tablet style device for council use?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

13. To your knowledge do any of your councilors use social media for council business, or to comment on council proceedings?

- No - none
- Yes - one or two
- Yes - more than one or two
- Don't know

14. a) Do you provide social media training for your councilors?

- Yes
- No >> Skip to Page 18

14. b) What form does that training take?

15. Please look at the following list of types of social media. For each one please tell us whether you are aware of that type of social media tool, whether your council currently uses that type of tool, and for those that you don't currently use, whether you are likely to use them in the future. **Tick as many as apply.**

	Aware	We currently use that type of SM tool	We are likely to use it in future
Microblogging (e.g. Twitter)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social networking (e.g. Facebook, Google+ or Myspace)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Professional networking (e.g. LinkedIn)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Photo/picture sharing (e.g.Flickr or Picasa)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Augmented reality (e.g.Layar)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Video sharing (e.g. Youtube/Vimeo etc)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Presentationsharing/viewing (e.g. Slideshare)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Extranet Wikis (Not Wikipedia)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online forums like Google or Yahoo groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mobile apps (e.g.Snap Send Solve)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
SMS communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internal microblogging (eg Yammer)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
DA Apps (e.g. Planning Alerts)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

16. Do you formally measure the effectiveness of your council's social media use?

- o **Yes** >>Skip to: How do you measure the effective of social media as a tool for your organisation?
- o **No** >> Skip to: Please tell us about a case where social media has worked well for your council. Please give as much detail as you can
- o **Don't know** >>Skip to: Please tell us about a case where social media has worked well for your council.

17. How do you measure the effective of social media as a tool for your organisation? Please describe as fully as possible any formal or informal evaluation techniques you use to assess the effectiveness of the tools you use.

18. Please tell us about a case where social media has worked well for your council. Please give as much detail as you can.

19. Which of the following areas of council do you think social media has the most value for?

- o Customer service
- o Events
- o Corporate communications
- o Library
- o General community engagement
- o Project based community consultation
- o Youth activity promotion
- o Works information
- o Development application tracking



- Tourism
- Economic development
- In-house training and development
- Other specify _____
- None

20. Generally speaking, what are the main opportunities for councils taking up social media? Please explain the opportunities as fully as possible - type NA if you can't answer.

21. Generally speaking, what are the main barriers for councils taking up social media? Please explain the barriers as fully as possible - type NA if you can't answer.

22. Generally speaking, what are the risks councils need to consider before taking up social media? Please explain the risks as fully as possible - type NA if you can't answer.

23. Recent events in Queensland have highlighted the possibility of councils using social media as an emergency management tool. Has your council considered how you might use social media in an emergency situation? Please write in...

24. Thinking about the opportunities for social media use in councils, where do you think social media sits on the following scale?

1 = Social media is mainly useful as a broadcast communication tool, to tell people what they need to know

5 = Social media is useful for broadcast information but its main strength is as a community engagement tool, to develop a dialogue with the community on a range of topics

	<i>1 – Broadcast communication</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5- Community Engagement</i>
Council use of social media is...	○	○	○	○	○

25. Which, if any, social media tools do you use personally (not for work)?

-
- Twitter
 - Facebook
 - LinkedIn
 - Flickr
 - Youtube
 - Slideshare
 - Google+
 - Wikis
 - Blogging
 - Online forums like Google or Yahoo groups
 - Other _____
 - None
-



ABOUT ACELG

ACELG is a unique consortium of universities and professional bodies that have a strong commitment to the advancement of local government. The consortium is led by the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Local Government, and includes the University of Canberra, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, Local Government Managers Australia and the Institute of Public Works Engineering Australia. In addition, the Centre works with program partners to provide support in specialist areas and extend the Centre's national reach. These include Charles Darwin University and Edith Cowan University.

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