

CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES

How Local Government is Using Social Media to Engage
with Citizens

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Further information:

www.governanceinstitute.edu.au
www.ancelg.org.au
www.iken.net.au

Email: iken@ancelg.org.au
Phone: +61 (0)2 6206 3968

 [@IKENdotteam](https://twitter.com/IKENdotteam)

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Executive summary

This report examines how Australian local government is adopting and using social media.

Social media refers to a wide range of tools (such as Twitter and Facebook) that enable people and organisations to communicate using internet-based technologies, including smart phones. Social media enables a two-way communication, allowing people and organisations to create and share content in the form of words, pictures, audio or video, in real time, almost anywhere.

The research for this report was undertaken from June 2011 to April 2012. It involved a national online survey by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) and a series of in-depth interviews with elected members, staff and professionals working in local government to gain insights into the ways that councils are approaching the use of social media.

The research found that there is enormous interest in social media among councils, even councils yet to introduce it into their operations. All council staff consulted during this study strongly believed that social media should be integrated into their council's strategic communications alongside traditional media and face-to-face contact.

The research also found that those councils that do take a strategic approach are already achieving impressive outcomes. Councils are using social media to promote events and activities, reach out and communicate with hard-to-reach groups, develop networks within the community around specific issues, plan and implement consultation processes, deliver services such as libraries, and gain community feedback and reports on problems.

Social media is also becoming a popular communication channel for councils in times of emergency. For example, Brisbane City Council created history when it used social media during the Brisbane flood of January 2011 to share vital information and engage with residents and businesses that needed to evacuate.

The research found that citizens in councils that are using social media are overwhelmingly positive about its use.

However, the research found that many councils are still in the 'try it and see' phase, with their social media initiated by individuals, who effectively become the 'champions of change' within their organisation before it is integrated into their corporate communications.

The research also showed that many councils perceive that a number of challenges and barriers need to be overcome before starting to adopt or fully integrate social media. These challenges and barriers include:

- **Risks:** There is concern about the potential for people to post negative comments about their council; of losing control of the communication message; about information technology (IT) security and information management protocols; and staff divulging confidential information. There are also fears of litigation.
- **Lack of expertise:** There is concern that staff may not have the skills to use social media effectively, or that they may make insensitive comments.
- **Resourcing:** There is concern that social media will place undue resourcing and workload pressures on employees.

- Community expectations: There is concern about raising the community's expectations, and potentially not being able to meet these expectations, as many in the community are more familiar with social media than those in councils.

The reality is that councils need to devote time and resources to develop policies and procedures for the use of social media, to train staff, and to ensure adequate resources are available to monitor, post and respond to social media activity. This is because social media is fundamentally different from traditional communication channels. Social media brings with it a different set of demands that relate to monitoring, response times, frequency rates, tone of conversation, the need to be authentic and transparent, and to ensure any information posted is factually correct and timely. Also, social media conversations are permanent.

Councils that have overcome some of the above challenges revealed the importance of leadership of the process, and for senior management to see social media as an opportunity for a council to position itself in the community. Examples of social media leaders include Adelaide's Lord Mayor, Stephen Yarwood, who is a strong proponent and user of social media, and Kingston City Council CEO, John Nevins, who drives much of the social media activity in that council.

Participants in this study emphasised that most, if not all, of the challenges can be overcome by councils taking a strategic approach. This involves devising social media policies in collaboration with employees, and providing guidance and staff training on behaviour and how to use the social media tools appropriately. As well as having a set of well-developed policies, it is also critical to have an understanding of community expectations prior to launching a social media presence.

This report sets out how local councils might address these challenges and includes a communication matrix and framework to help councils integrate social media in a strategic way.

The overwhelming conclusion of this report is that social media presents councils with an opportunity to display their ingenuity, innovation and initiative and, in the process, become increasingly relevant to the communities they serve.

Councils that resist adopting social media risk becoming distant and disengaged from their communities.

This report recommends that ACELG work with its partners in the local government sector to raise awareness and understanding of the application and use of social media, deliver programs to build capability in social media (among elected members and staff), undertake further research, and establish a national award scheme for the innovative use of social media.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

This is the report of a study of how Australian local government is adopting and using social media. It was initiated and commissioned by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) under the Innovation and Best Practice Program hosted at the ANZSOG Institute for Governance at the University of Canberra. A research fellow (consultant) was employed for six months, and then the work completed by Howard Partners, a Canberra-based management consultancy and public policy research and advisory firm. The study covers the period from winter 2011 to autumn 2012.

The aim of the study is to understand the growing use of social media by local government.¹ The study also aims to provide the local government sector with a greater understanding of social media and examples of how local councils are adopting and using social media as another channel of communication. Also, the study seeks to address some of the issues that arise when councils consider introducing social media into their organisation.

Social media enables people and organisations to communicate using internet-based tools. Social media can be readily accessed on computers as well as tablets and other mobile devices meaning that people can communicate with others, including local government, in real time from almost anywhere in the world.

Social media enables people to interact and share content in the form of words, pictures, audio or video. New devices and social media tools are constantly evolving and offering increasing functionality to their users. This rapid change in technology is impacting the way people are using all forms of media such as television, film, music, talkback radio, and social media. Often people are using several forms of media at the same time (Accenture, 2012).

This study explores the implications of the rapidly changing environment for communications and public relations professionals working in local government as well as people whose job it is to manage the strategic communications for local councils.

1.2 The ACELG Innovation and Best Practice Program

The ACELG Innovation and Best Practice Program aims to research and disseminate good examples of innovation and best practice in local government, and facilitate and encourage knowledge and experience sharing. The Program manages the Innovation and Knowledge Exchange Network (IKEN), which is an online, interactive forum designed to enhance how Australian local government shares information and ideas about better practice and innovation. Social media has become an increasingly important area of research for the Program.

1.3 Methodology and approach

The primary research for the study involved:

- A preliminary, high-level desktop review of the Home page of every council website, which was undertaken mid-way through 2011.
- A national online survey administered by ACELG in October 2011 and sent to 560 councils.

1. News of the way in which Brisbane City Council had used social networking sites Twitter and Facebook to communicate with citizens during the Brisbane flood event of January 2011 had heightened awareness of the power of social media and its potential for local government.

- An exploratory investigation into social media use in 105 rural-remote and Indigenous councils (February 2012) as part of another ACELG research project underway at Edith Cowan University.
- An extensive consultation program that included in-depth interviews with a number of council officers, elected members and the local government sector. Councils ranged from major metropolitan city councils through to regional councils and rural-remote and Indigenous councils. Councils that took part in the consultation program were identified through their reputation for using social media, referral from State and Territory local government associations, as well as through a self-selection process. The consultation also included some councils that are not using social media.
- An analysis and interpretation of patterns that emerged from the interviews with council staff and others associated with local government.
- A review of feedback and outcomes from a national roundtable “Social Media and Local Government” convened by ACELG in December, 2011.
- A review of recent relevant literature, as well as participation in local government discussion groups, communities of interest, and other social networking groups dedicated to exploring and sharing experiences and knowledge on how local government can utilise social media.

1.4 Structure of the Report

Section 2 provides an overview of social media and examines some of the terminology around what is meant by Web 2.0, social media and social media platforms.

Section 3 examines the people and organisations that are using social media in local government. There is discussion about some of the reasons why local government is adopting and using social media.

Section 4 uses recent data to understand how Australians are using social media and why. Also, there is discussion around how Australians are interacting with government online and some of the implications for local government.

Section 5 looks at how social media supports and extends a council’s current communication activities. It draws on findings from the consultation process and discusses the importance of linking social media to the corporate strategy. This includes tools to assist councils with such integration.

Section 6 further develops the importance of placing social media in a strategic communication context, and examines how councils are using social media. Examples are drawn from the consultation process and used to illustrate the many different ways that councils can incorporate social media into their communication program.

Section 7 examines benefits, barriers, adoption and implementation issues for councils wishing to use social media. Highlighted are findings from the ACELG national online survey. There is reference to a Nielsen study showing similar issues and concerns experienced by Australian businesses. The section draws on the findings from in-depth interviews with council officers to address some of these concerns.

Section 8 addresses some questions around how social media impacts on overall council performance.

Section 9 focuses on rural, remote and Indigenous councils and draws on the exploratory work undertaken as part of another ACELG research project looking into *Community Engagement in Rural-Remote and Indigenous Local Government* being undertaken at Edith Cowan University.

Section 10 outlines some strategic ways forward and presents a number of recommendations for consideration.

2 Social media in context

Local government has been using electronic communication for many years. This section provides an overview of Australia in the digital age, social media and Web 2.0 and how social media is being adopted and applied in Australia. This provides an important context for looking at the adoption of social media in local government.

2.1 Australia and the digital age

Australians have embraced the digital age, an era characterised by the widespread adoption, application and use of information and communication technologies. It involves the incorporation of digital processing technologies into the collection, storage and retrieval of information (text, audio, visual, video) and into the manufacture and distribution of goods and services. It is an era in which everyone comes in contact with and becomes fully dependent on technology to access information and get it quickly.

Public and private organisations have generally integrated digital technologies into their way of working; there is some concern about the extent to which small businesses and citizens in rural, remote and isolated communities and people in positions of socio-economic disadvantage (income, ethnicity, disability, or age related) have been able to fully incorporate the digital environment. These concerns are of importance in accessing web-enabled services, and particularly e-government.

2.2 E-government

E-government (or digital government) is the use of the internet and the World Wide Web for delivering government information and services. It involves the use of IT, information communication technologies (ICTs), and other web-based communication technologies to improve or enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in the public sector (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2006).

E-government involves a number of activities:

- Providing information, directions and advice.
- Two-way communication, including notifying problems, providing comments, or submitting requests.
- Conducting transactions. This includes paying accounts, purchasing products and materials, lodging returns, and submitting applications for services and grants.
- Governance, enabling active citizen participation through informing, representation, consultation, and involvement.

The recently released e-government survey, *Interacting with Government*, indicates that Australians have embraced the internet as a way of interacting with government. The internet has now become commonplace and a natural means for dealing with government and is the preferred means of accessing government services (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2011).

The survey found that when there is a choice between using the internet or some other communications channel, the former is the preferred method of contact with government. Just under half (47 per cent) of those for whom the internet was an option used it in their most recent contact with government, with a similar proportion (46 per cent) saying they prefer the internet over other forms of contact.

2.3 Web 2.0

Web 2.0 technologies enable the development of websites that facilitate interactions between people and organisations; networking; community building; information-sharing; and the ability to foster user-generated content. It differs from what is known as Web 1.0, which produces static pages only and one-way communication.

Web 2.0 is known as the social web and facilitates the formation of communities of interest. People with local knowledge, technical expertise and shared interests can be quickly identified. Web 2.0 tools enable communities to filter the torrent of information on the internet and identify the most useful parts. They enable finding the most useful contributors in any given subject area, be they a world expert or someone possessing important local or ephemeral knowledge (Australian Government 2.0 Taskforce, 2009).

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 encompasses the way in which the internet has become a platform for the distribution of vast quantities of data and the way in which it has empowered people and organisations to transform data by 'mashing it up', combining it with other data so that it can become useful in new ways.

These new tools and the culture of open collaboration, which distinguishes the culture of Web 2.0, present important new challenges and possibilities for government. This offers new opportunities to refresh and deepen the enduring principles and values of modern democratic government and improve the quality and responsiveness of government policy-making and service delivery.

2.4 Web 2.0 and social media

Social media is the term used for internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information by people. It refers to user-generated information, opinion and other content shared and discussed over open digital networks. Social media also integrates other emerging electronic/digital communication applications.²

Social media may include (but is not limited to):

- Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace).
- Video and photo-sharing websites (e.g. Flickr, Youtube).
- Blogs, including corporate blogs and personal blogs.
- Micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter).
- Forums, discussion boards and groups (e.g. Google groups, Whirlpool).
- Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia).
- Vod and podcasting.
- Email and instant messaging.

2.4.1 Terminology

Web 2.0 and social media go hand-in-hand. Social media is any tool or service that uses the internet to facilitate conversations and connections between friends, peers, influencers and collaborators to share knowledge, experiences, opinions, news and insights. It can involve the use of words, pictures, video, chatter or audio (Solis, 2010).

2. Victorian government's e-Government Resource Centre: <http://www.egov.vic.gov.au/victorian-government-resources/website-practice-victoria/web-2-0-victoria/guidance-for-use-of-social-media-in-the-victorian-public-sector.html>

Social media enables people and organisations to create, publish, share content and communicate in an interactive manner online and in real time.

Mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets are enabling people to use social media virtually anywhere at any time. Mobile applications (known as 'apps') provide people using mobile devices with quick and efficient access to software programs and information that is important to them. At the end of 2011, Facebook reported that more than 500 million people used an app on Facebook.

2.4.2 What's special about social media?

Social media enables the swift and easy development, creation, dissemination and consumption of information, knowledge, and entertainment (Smith and Wollan, 2011). It is distinguished from more traditional communication by enabling one-to-many or many-to-many interactive communication, in real time, regardless of location.

Social media has the potential to create large, and powerful, networks. As more people join the network, its reach increases exponentially. This is sometimes referred to as 'the network effect'³.

Potentially, the greater the number of members in the network, the more valuable the network becomes to all of its users.

Social media enables instant communication at anytime from anywhere. Messages can be sent directly to one person or to thousands of people instantaneously; replies are also immediate. Therefore social media is highly interactive and enables real-time conversations to occur. Social media is always 'on' and in effect operates continuously.

Using social media, people and organisations now have the ability to publish and transmit key messages to large audiences.

2.4.3 What are the benefits to organisations of using social media?

There are several areas where social media can assist people and their organisations (Golden, 2011):

- Customer relations, service and brand enhancement: this involves getting to know customers and clients, demonstrating accessibility, and listening to what is being said about you and the business.
- Building reputation and credibility: this can include attracting attention, organic 'pull' marketing and creating expert and 'thought leader' status.
- Demonstrating accessibility: this involves identifying and listening to people with valued opinions and knowledge.
- Networking: this involves deepening current relationships with more frequent and better quality contact.
- Engagement: this involves establishing credibility by providing information-based content. These benefits can accrue to local councils, in an organisational and leadership context, as well as to staff in a management and service delivery context.

3. Metcalf's Law states that the number of unique connections in a network of a number of nodes (n) can be expressed mathematically as the triangular number $n(n - 1)/2$, which is proportional to n^2 asymptotically.

2.5 Social media platforms

There are many different types of social media platforms, each one designed to provide a specific service. In addition to email, which is also classified as social media, some of the popular social media platforms are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Social Media Platforms

Platform	Description
Wiki	A website that enables groups of people to work collaboratively on projects. Wiki software enables people to add, delete or change the content. There are wikis for all occasions with the most popular wiki being Wikipedia. Other wikis are in use in schools, communities, corporate intranets, or even families and among friends.
Social Networking Sites	Websites that encourage people to join a group or network of friends, family, or professional associates to share content. Each member of the site creates a personal profile to become part of the community. Well known social networking sites include Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.
Internet forums	An online discussion where people post and respond to messages which are displayed as threads producing a conversation around the subject area.
Online communities of interest	Practitioners in a particular area of interest who come together online to create and share knowledge. Members must usually meet certain criteria and can be located anywhere in the world.
Blogs	Shorthand for 'Weblog'. Anyone can create a blog using free software to write a personal diary, express an opinion, and upload photos, videos, or other material they may wish to share with others. Blog readers can comment on the content of the blog. Bloggers can build quite large and loyal audiences if the content is regularly updated and a level of expertise in the subject area is displayed.
Photo-sharing sites	Provide online tools that allow users to upload photos, and make them easily available to family and friends. They do this by providing storage, different categories, sets and collections. The most popular site is Flickr, although there are several dozen sites on the market.
Video-sharing sites	Provide online tools that allow users to upload videos, and share them with family, friends or thousands of people around the world. The sites enable easy browsing to find and watch a video. YouTube and Vimeo are two of the most popular sites.
Social bookmarking sites	Allow people to store, classify, share and search for content online using bookmarks. Bookmarking sites enable people to keep track of webpages they may find useful at a later date and share these links with others. People also add descriptions of the content to help add context to the content. Tags or shared vocabularies (known as folksonomies) are also developed to assist with organisation. Popular online bookmarking sites include Digg, Reddit, Newsvine and StumbleUpon.

2.6 Widely used social media formats

There are hundreds of individual social media technologies in use around the world. The most widely used social media sites for business and private use in Australia are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Widely used social media formats

Format	Description
LinkedIn	LinkedIn is the world's largest professional network on the internet with three million members from Australia alone in March 2012, and 135 million members in over 200 countries worldwide. It is seen as a safe place to 'collect' a lifetime of business connections (Golden, 2011). Further interactions occur through common interest groups by posting or answering questions.
Facebook	Facebook is the world's most popular social networking site that connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. By the end of 2011, Facebook had over 800 million users. It facilitates group discussions and is easy to use, particularly as a photo-sharing and conversation hub. Average user age is above 40. Facebook groups and corporate company pages can be conducive to building engagement.
Yammer	Yammer is a simple, scalable way of letting employees share and connect with co-workers in a private, secure enterprise social network.
Twitter	Twitter is a forum that consists of a running thread of 140 (or less) character postings called 'tweets'. Users subscribe to 'follow' people of their choice. There is a vast amount of information, from the annoying and mediocre to the excellent. Twitter has become an important source of information and news for mainstream media, as well as a real-time information network for members. Most business users share tips and links to articles and news to spark interest in a conversation. Monitoring Twitter is a wise public relations activity: positive mentions can be thanked and negative ones corrected. Waiting for a negative mention before setting up a Twitter account is 'sub-optimal'. A staff member Twitter presence can be a worthwhile marketing initiative for the purpose of public engagement and brand management.
YouTube	YouTube provides a forum for original content creators and advertisers.
Pinterest	Pinterest is a pinboard-style social photo sharing website that allows users to create and manage theme-based image collections such as events, interests, hobbies and more. Users can browse other pinboards for inspiration, 're-pin' images to their own collections and or 'like' photos. Pinterest's mission is to "connect everyone in the world through the 'things' they find interesting" via a global platform of inspiration and idea-sharing. Pinterest allows its users to share 'pins' on both Twitter and Facebook, which allows users to share and interact with a broad community.

Flickr	Flickr is an online photo management and sharing application that helps people make their photos easily available to friends and family. In addition, Flickr enables people to organise photos and videos collaboratively.
Blogs and RSS feeds	Blogs are distinctly structured websites that contain short, conversational style articles (posts) each housed on a separate URL that can be commented on by readers. They are used widely by professionals. Blogs can replace or supplement email content distribution. They are 'alive' and available anytime. RSS feeds (short for Really Simple Syndication) are able to automatically send updated website content to subscribers' browsers to save them the trouble of having to constantly return to a website and search for new information. RSS feeds can be web-based, desktop based, or delivered to a mobile device.
Cloud-based hosting services	Cloud-based hosting services, such as Dropbox, use cloud storage to enable users to store and share files and folders with others across the internet using file synchronization. In October 2011, Forbes estimated that Dropbox had 50 million users, of which 96 per cent were using a free account. Other cloud-based hosting services include Box.net, FilesAnywhere, CloudMe, CrashPlan, Egnyte, iCloud, Mozy, SpiderOak, SugarSync, TitanFile, Ubuntu One, Windows Live SkyDrive, TeamDrive, Wuala and ZumoDrive.
Apps	Social media also includes apps developed for smartphones. Apps are being developed by third party providers (Snap, Save, Send) and by councils for their own purposes. Popular social media apps include Instagram, which enables users to share photos with friends. Users simply snap a photo with their iPhone, choose a filter to transform the look and feel, and send it to Facebook, Twitter or Flickr. Another app, Foursquare, enables people to share where they are located in real time, such as when they are visiting a library, park, landmark, restaurant, or meeting with friends.

All of these social media formats can be used by local government depending upon the different situations, and are discussed in more detail in Section 5.

3 Who uses social media in local government?

The main focus of this study is to provide an overview of how Australian local government is using social media. This section examines who is using social media in local government. It draws on the results of the ACELG 2011 national online survey, together with a series of in-depth interviews with council officers and elected members in a broad range of councils across Australia.

3.1 Council leaders

Gaining the buy-in, cooperation and support from top management is essential and there are many Australian local government CEOs and General Managers who are active supporters and users of social media.

For example, Adelaide Lord Mayor Stephen Yarwood is a strong proponent of social media. He has more than 3700 followers and uses Twitter enthusiastically. Stephen is a regular blogger and, in an interview following his election, said that social media helps him to remain relevant by allowing plugging into an up-to-date stream of consciousness in a constantly changing world with a new type of operating system (Yarwood, 2011)

Many council CEOs and General Managers are also regular and proficient bloggers. At Kingston City Council, CEO John Nevins is described by his staff as the “visionary CEO who is championing Kingston’s social media revolution”. He is driving much of the social media activity, including the CEO Blog, and acknowledges that social media is here and that it can be used to advantage (Staff Writer, 2011).

3.2 Citizens

Citizens are accustomed to the immediacy, interactivity and more casual tone of social media. The study revealed that they also expect councils to reply quickly to social media conversations. Interviews with council representatives revealed that councils need to respond to social media within a few hours, compared to a time when they had a few days or even weeks to reply through other communication channels.

Bundaberg Regional Council, for example, monitors Council’s Facebook pages and ensures a quick response to inquiries and comments. On at least one occasion, Council’s quick response prevented inaccurate information being spread throughout the community. In turn, Council found that once it had posted the correct information on the record, members of the community ensured it was passed on.

Several councils commented on the importance of adopting a conversational and friendly tone when using social media. By adopting this less formal approach, councils have found that they are able to ‘humanise’ local government and develop rapport with citizens.

Authenticity, accuracy, timeliness and openness are essential traits when using social media. An added advantage of councils responding quickly, in a friendly tone with accurate information is the opportunity to build trust with the community. Brisbane City Council’s use of social media leading up to and during the Brisbane flood crisis in January 2011 is an example of how a council can build a strong reputation as a source of trusted information, and a large following on Twitter and Facebook as well.

The official twitter channel of Brisbane City Council, @brisbanecityqld had more than 16,530 followers, as of 10 June 2012.

3.3 Councils

3.3.1 Survey results

The ACELG national online survey undertaken during October 2011 was sent to 560 councils across Australia, and received a completed response from 235 councils (just over 40 per cent). Of those councils that responded, more than half indicated that they use social media. A breakdown of the different usage is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Council use of social media tools

Tool	We currently use that type of SM tool (%)	We are likely to use it in future (%)
Social networking (e.g. Facebook, Google+ or Myspace)	68.6	24.8
Micro-blogging (e.g. Twitter)	41.2	32.7
Video-sharing (e.g. Youtube/Vimeo etc.)	39.9	24.8
Professional networking (e.g. LinkedIn)	24.8	18.3
Photo/picture-sharing (e.g. Flickr or Picasa)	21.6	21.6
Online forums like Google or Yahoo groups	17.0	13.1
Mobile apps (e.g. Snap Send Solve)	15.7	26.1
Presentation sharing/viewing (e.g. Slideshare)	8.5	15.0
Extranet/wikis (not Wikipedia)	6.5	6.5
SMS communication	3.9	2.0
Internal micro-blogging (e.g. Yammer)	2.6	1.3
DA apps (e.g. Planning Alerts)	2.0	2.0

Source: Purser, K. 2012. Using Social Media in Local Government Survey 2011 Survey Report. Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney.

The survey data indicates that social media use is highest for social networking sites (Facebook), micro-blogging (Twitter), video-sharing (YouTube), professional networking (LinkedIn) and photo/picture-sharing (Flickr). In considering future use, councils are most likely to intend to use Twitter, followed by mobile apps (e.g. Snap Send Solve), YouTube and Facebook.

The national online survey also asked councils to identify areas where they see the most value coming from social media. The most frequent response was “promoting events”. This was followed by “general community engagement” and “youth activity promotion”. The results are listed in Table 4 on the next page.

Table 4: Council perceptions of areas where social media will have the most value

Response	Frequency of responses (%)
Promoting events	87.9
General community engagement	79.2
Youth activity promotion	78.6
Customer service	63.0
Project based community consultation	64.2
Corporate communications	62.4
Library	52.0
Tourism	55.5
Works information	45.7
Economic development	34.1
Development application tracking	18.5
In-house training and development	17.3
Other specify	9.8
None	1.2

Source: Purser, K. 2012.

The in-depth interviews with councils validated the findings from the national online survey with council officers indicating that they use social media to:

- Promote council activities and events such as market days, festivals and art exhibitions.
- Disseminate information for weather warnings, road closures, and other emergency issues.
- Drive traffic to the council's website.
- Correct misinformation.
- Engage with the community on a range of issues relevant to council and the community.

When using social media, it is important that councils use the same communication channels used by the community. If a group of people within the community is using social media to discuss a particular activity or event to be hosted by council, then it makes sense for the council to also join in the conversation and discuss it on those same social media channels.

Social media is particularly important when reaching out to young people. Several council youth officers indicated that social media had been highly effective in enabling them to connect and communicate with a target audience that had traditionally been hard-to-reach. In these cases the young people use their social media channels every day; it is rare that they would refer to the local newspaper. In some cases, it was pointed out that young people do not even read their emails.

The in-depth interviews also revealed that the library is often one of the most enthusiastic and sophisticated users of social media, creating communities around book reviews, author events, and the like.

Other council officers indicated that they use social media to help improve council's customer relations by getting back to citizens as quickly as possible. Social media is interactive. There is an expectation that people will respond to messages in a very short time period, usually within two to four hours, and this applies to local government as well.

Many council officers indicated that when council responds to social media posts quickly, even if they cannot provide the exact answer at that point in time, the reaction from citizens has been positive and the image of the council improved.

3.3.2 UK and Australian local government trends

A recent survey of 78 councils in the UK found that 97 per cent of councils were using Twitter, 93 per cent were using Facebook, 63 per cent were using YouTube, 48 per cent used Flickr and 28 per cent used blogs (Spurrell, 2012). The survey also found that:

- The most popular ways of using social media were posting news stories and information (96 per cent) and promoting specific events and campaigns (90 per cent).
- While 41 per cent of authorities monitored forums and blogs, only 28 per cent actively engaged in them.
- More than two-thirds of authorities said they use social media for both one-way and two-way communications while a quarter said they use it for just one-way communication. Nine per cent of councils said they used social media solely for two-way communications.

While the UK survey and the ACELG national online survey are not directly comparable, the results from both surveys tend to indicate that the most popular social media channels used by local government in Australia and the UK are Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

Also, the UK survey found that the most common way of using social media was to post news stories and information and promote events. The research for this study produced similar findings, although other uses are also gaining in popularity.

3.3.3 Preliminary review of council websites

To obtain a high level, and preliminary, overview of the use of social media by councils, a review of the home page of all 560 council websites throughout Australia was undertaken by staff of ACELG Innovation and Best Practice Program during June–July 2011. The review found that:

- Many local government websites are still based on the one-way communication design of Web 1.0 and had not yet adopted Web 2.0 design with its interactive technology capabilities (see Section 2 for an explanation of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0).
- Eighty-two councils had social media applications on their websites.
- Sixty-four councils had a Facebook page, 61 used Twitter, 23 had YouTube channels, seven had blogs and six had Flickr pages.
- Only one council had a downloadable iPhone app.

The council use of social media, on a state-by-state basis, is shown in Table 5 on the following page.

Table 5: Australian local government use of social media applications

Application	NSW		Victoria		Queensland		Western Australia		South Australia		Tasmania		Northern Territory		Total	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Facebook	20	13.2	14	17.7	11	15.1	10	6.8	6	8.1	3	10.0	0	0.0	64	11.4
Twitter	20	13.2	16	20.3	8	11.0	10	6.8	6	8.1	1	3.3	0	0.0	61	10.9
YouTube	6	3.9	4	5.1	4	5.5	3	2.0	5	6.8	0	0.0	1	6.3	23	4.1
Blogs	1	0.7	3	3.8	0	0.0	3	2.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	1.3
Flickr pages	4	2.6	1	1.3	13	17.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	6	1.1
No. of Councils with SM presence	26	17.1	20	25.3	13	17.8	16	10.8	10	13.5	3	10.0	1	6.3	82	14.6
Total no. of councils	152		79		72		148		74		30		16		560	

Source: ACELG Innovation and Best Practice Program, July 2011

From the preliminary review, it would appear that in July 2011 Victoria had the highest penetration of social media, followed by Queensland, NSW and South Australia. Some other features of the review include:

- Councils with larger populations were more likely to have a social media presence.
- Councils that actively promoted tourism had better developed social media applications.
- Sixteen of the 26 councils in NSW (62 per cent) were in the Sydney metropolitan area.
- Nine of the 20 councils in Victoria (45 per cent) were in the Melbourne area.
- Brisbane City Council had the greatest number of social media users in the country, although this atypical of local government as it covers the whole of a metropolitan region.
- Indigitube stood out as a social media channel connecting indigenous people in remote Australia.

However, these results need to be treated with caution as the review only covered home pages and did not delve into the body of websites, particularly key functional areas such as youth services, libraries, leisure centres, art galleries, planning and corporate services, many of which use social media.

3.4 The growing importance of council websites

Councils in Australia have had websites for many years but the extent to which they have redesigned their websites to incorporate interactive Web 2.0 applications and social media varies considerably. An overriding finding from this study is the important link between social media and a council's corporate website.

In some cases councils have been keen to integrate social media into their communication activities even though they have not yet undertaken a major website redesign. Often in those cases where older style websites are still in use, councils have created separate interactive websites that link back to the corporate website, thus gaining some of the functionality to enable users to interact with council.

In all of these cases, representatives from councils consulted during this study indicated that a key objective for using social media was to drive traffic back to council's corporate website.

In all of these cases, representatives from councils consulted during this study indicated that a key objective for using social media was to drive traffic back to council's corporate website.

Councils indicated that social media enabled them to quickly, easily and cheaply embed a link that will take people directly to the relevant page on the council website. Once people arrive at the website, they are then able to participate in a range of activities that can include:

- Finding specific information.
- Engaging in a particular activity.
- Having their say on a council proposal.

A key finding is that the website is growing in importance as a central plank of a council's communication strategy. An interactive council website can assist council to readily communicate externally on many levels: providing customer service; promoting sporting and cultural events; presenting council with a 'human face'; developing trust and openness; and assisting with consultation and engagement activities.

3.5 Social media and internal communications

Employees have always exchanged information, ideas and opinions with colleagues and customers through face-to-face communication, meetings, documents, telephone and email. Social media, particularly with the increasing uptake of mobile devices, is enabling the conversation to continue anywhere and anytime.

Some councils indicated that they have introduced social media internally to allow employees to become familiar with using social media. This strategy has assisted employees to learn how to use social media in a safe and protected environment, and to learn about the organisation's social media policies and procedures.

Also, reports of social media facilitating innovative cross-functional sharing across departments of council are beginning to emerge, which benefits employees and the organisation as a whole.

Many council officers stated that local government needed to embrace the new technologies for many reasons. These included to be accessible to the community and to help attract professionally qualified employees, who expect their workplace to offer contemporary communications.

4 Australians and social media

4.1 Recent surveys

Australians are engaging with social networking sites in increasing numbers. According to the recent *Nielsen Online Ratings State of the Nation Report – Australia 2012*, 16.4 million Australians were online during the month of January 2012 (Nielsen, 2012b).

Nielson also reported that 11.3 million online Australians had visited Facebook at least once during the month of January 2012. Of particular interest, 36 per cent of online Australians had engaged with government or politicians on a social networking site.

In May 2011, the Sensis® survey of social media use found that 62 per cent of internet users had a presence on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or LinkedIn (Sensis, 2011) The study also found that 46 per cent of those people clicked the Facebook ‘Like’ button for a brand, product or organisation, and that 43 per cent shared their opinions through social media. If the organisation or brand were not listening to the social media, it would not learn about these opinions.

The survey noted that in “only a few short years social media has created a fundamental shift in consumer behaviour”. However, only half of Australia’s large businesses and most small to medium size businesses do not have an on-line presence. In a message to business, and equally applicable to public sector organisations engaged in service delivery, Sensis commented:

Australian businesses need to be alive to the opportunities and challenges of engaging with consumers and customers in this very different environment. Business should be monitoring, responding and looking at proactive strategies to manage the way their business is presented and reviewed online (Sensis, 2011).

The *Nielsen Australian Online Consumer Report 2011–2012*, released in March 2012 (Nielsen, 2012a), reported that use of the internet by the Australian population is approaching saturation point. Key findings from the study include:

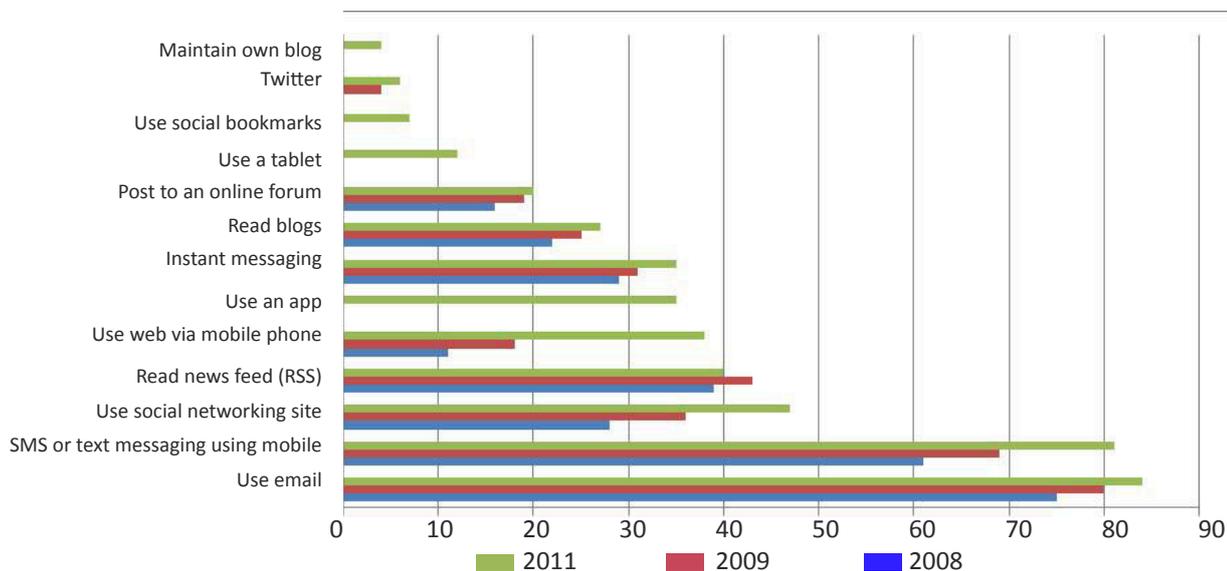
- Almost half of all online Australians browse others’ social networking profiles on a weekly basis, or more often.
- Over 18 per cent of households now own a tablet computer, which is up from eight per cent in 2010. Tablets are forecast to be in 39 per cent of homes by 2013.
- More Australians have embraced social platforms to connect with brands. One of the key areas of participation with social media in 2011 was in ‘Liking’ brands (now 57 per cent, up from 46 per cent in 2010).⁴

4.2 Technologies used

The *Interacting with Government* study (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2011) saw significant increases in the use of a number of communications technologies compared with previous years. The more significant increases were in accessing the web via a mobile phone or similar portable device and the use of social networking sites and SMS. Major new entries included maintaining a blog, using social bookmarks, using a tablet and using an app. Trends are shown in Figure 4.1.

4. Clicking the ‘Like’ button on Facebook is an easy way of giving positive feedback without actually having to write a comment.

Figure 1: Use of email, SMS and other communication technologies



Source: Australian Government Management Information Office. 2011. Interacting with Government: Australians' Use and Satisfaction with E-Government Services. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

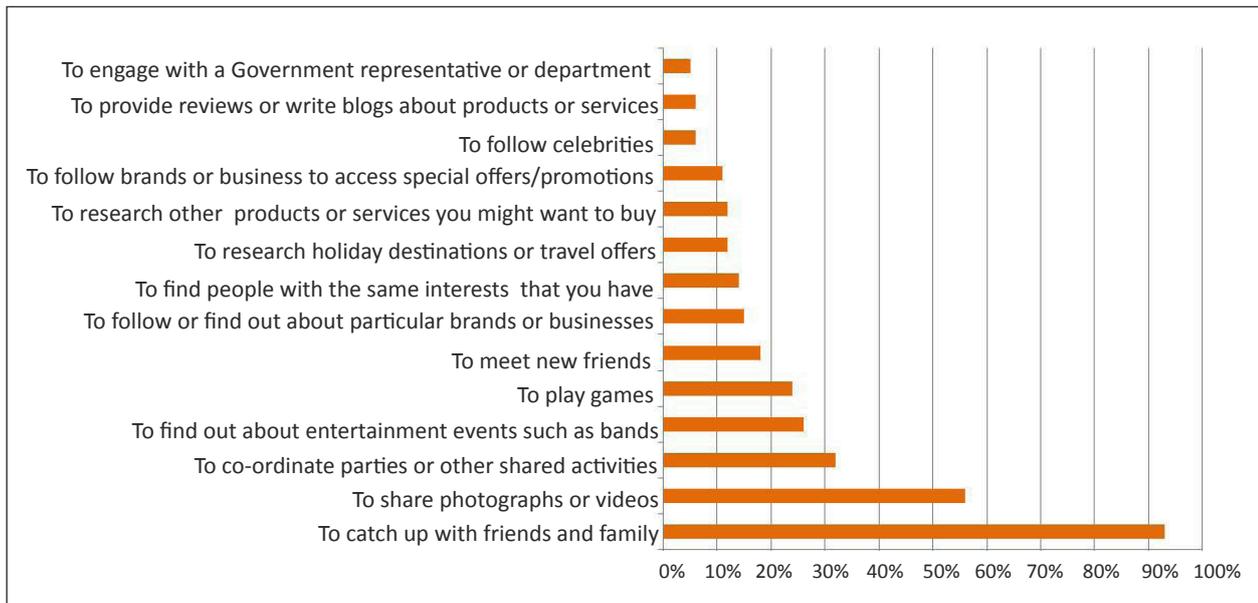
Figure demonstrates the following trends between 2008 and 2011:

- Email is the most significant form of social media contact, followed by SMS messaging.
- About 38 per cent of Australians used the web via mobile phone (compared with only 11 per cent in 2008).
- Around 47 per cent used social networking sites (28 per cent in 2008).
- Approximately 35 per cent used instant messaging (29 per cent in 2008),
- About 27 per cent read blogs (22 per cent in 2008).
- Approximately 25 per cent used an app.
- Around six per cent used Twitter (4 per cent in 2009).
- There was a slight downturn in reading news feeds (RSS) from 2009 to 2011.

4.3 Reasons why people use social media

The most common reason nominated for using social networking sites is “to catch up with friends and family”. Photo sharing or video-sharing is ranked number two followed by coordinating shared activities and finding out about entertainment events. Only five per cent use social media to make contact with government (Sensis, 2011). Figure 2 on the next page shows the reasons for using social media.

Figure 2: Reasons for using social media

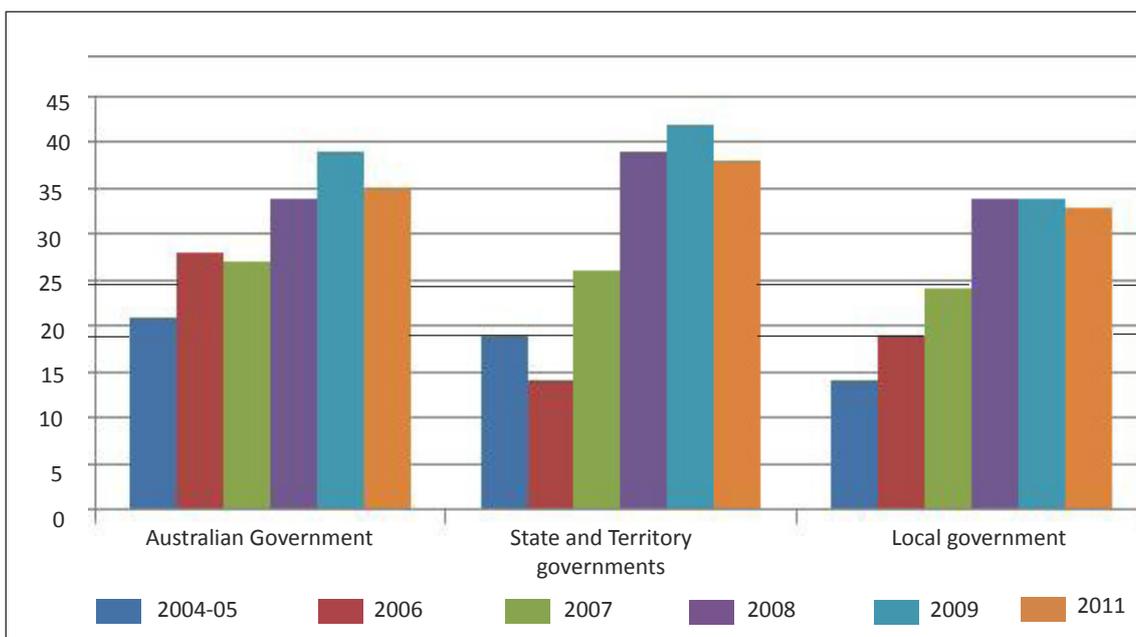


Source: Sensis 2011. The Sensis Social Media Report: What Australian People and Business are doing with Social Media. Sensis, AIMA, Sydney.

4.4 Connecting with government through social media

The *Interacting with Government* study (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2011) also provides information on the proportion of Australians who use the internet to contact each level of government. This is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Connecting with government through social media



Source: Australian Government Management Information Office. 2011.

The study indicates that Australians contacting local government by the internet rose substantially from 14 per cent in 2004–05 to 33 per cent in 2011, which compares with the figures for contacting State and Territory government (38 per cent) and the Australian Government (35 per cent).

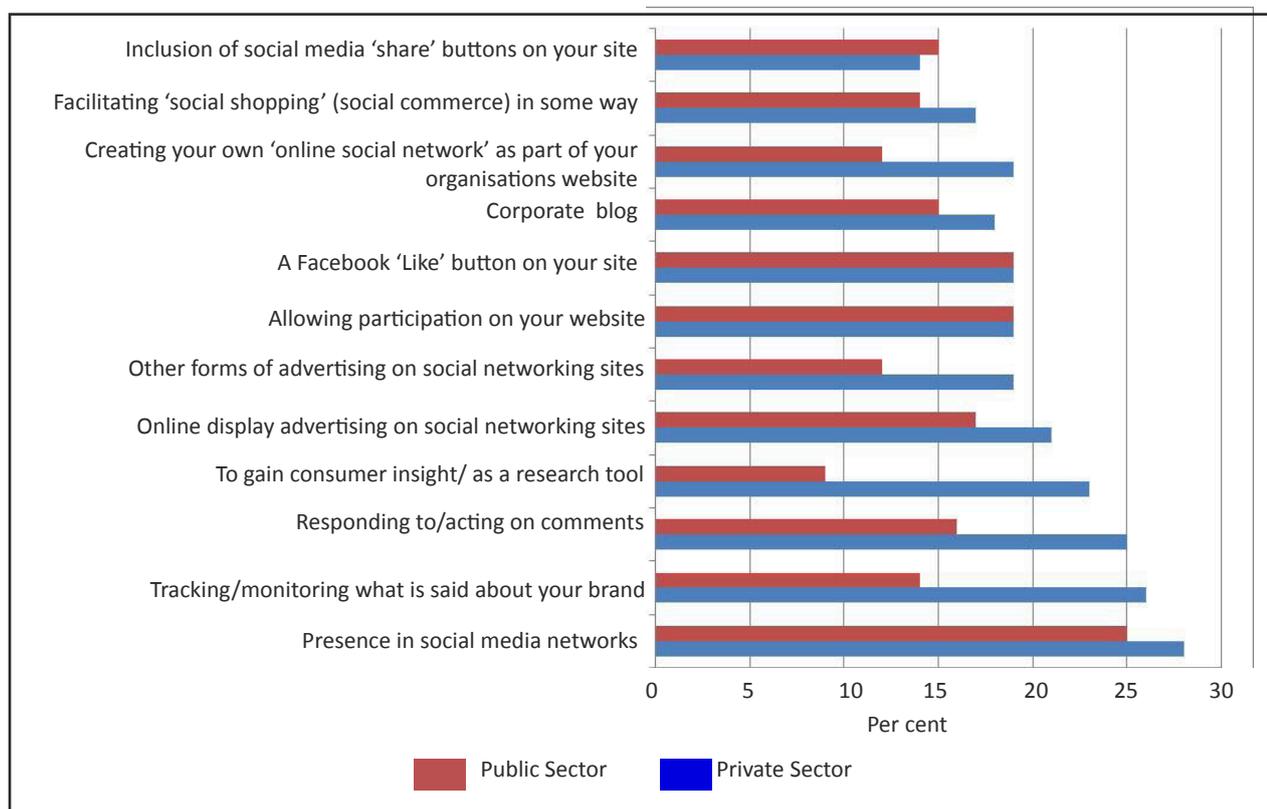
4.5 Online service activities

The Nielsen Social Media Business Benchmarking Study 2011 reported that 63 per cent of online Australians had a Facebook profile in 2011 (Nielsen, 2011). The study also reported that the private and public sectors were on a par across many areas of social media activity, but that the public sector had been slower to take up some activities. These included:

- Monitoring and tracking about what is said about your brand/organisation/staff.
- Responding to/acting on comments.
- Gaining consumer insight and linking the ‘online social network’ to the corporate networks.

Further information is provided in Figure 4.

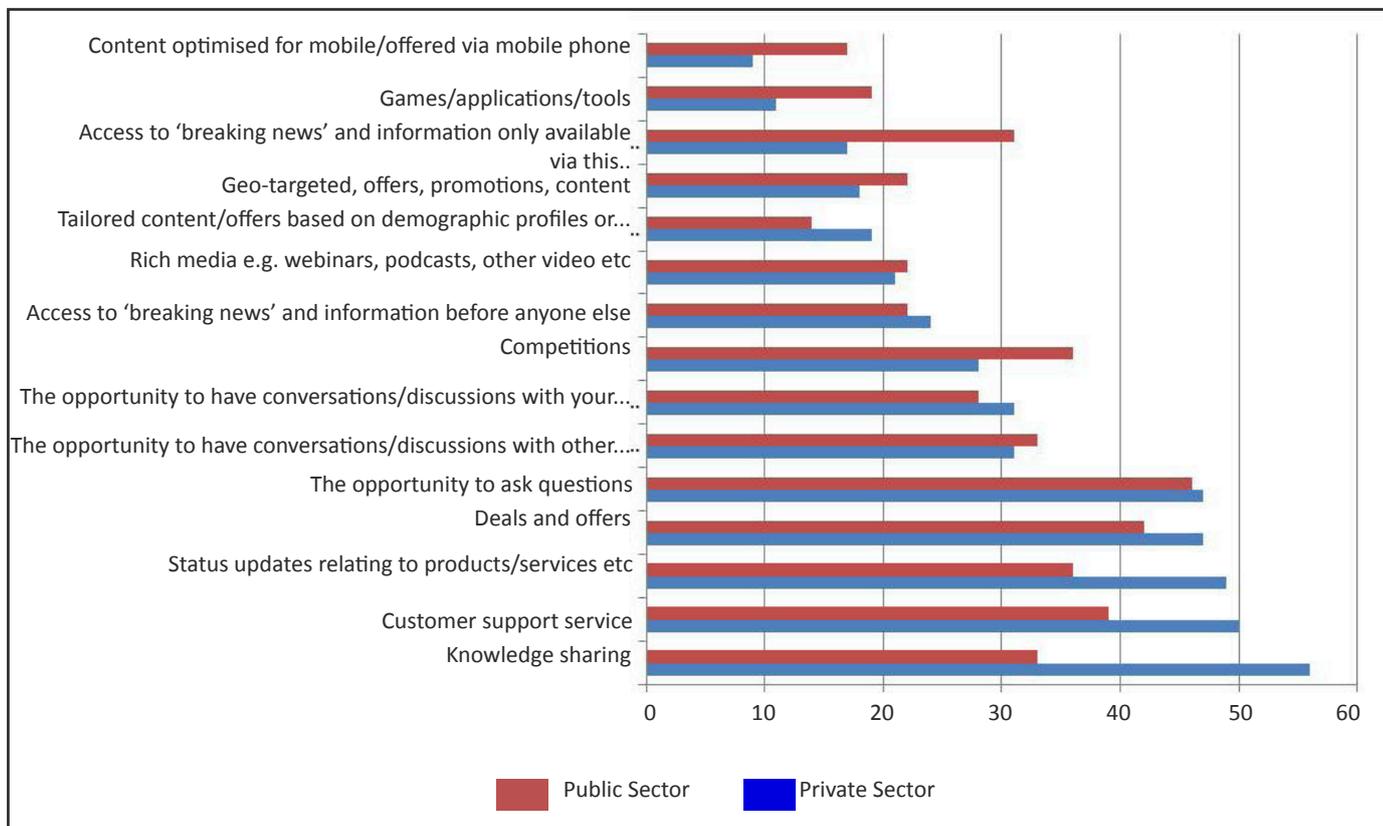
Figure 4: Comparison of public and private sector uptake of online activities



Source: Nielsen. 2011. Social Media Business Benchmarking Study 2011 Nielsen, Sydney.

The Nielsen study also reported on the content of online activities. It found that the public sector lagged the private sector in knowledge sharing, customer support and service, and status updates relating to services. From the interviews and consultations undertaken for this study, it is apparent such matters are being addressed by councils. The public sector led in providing ‘breaking news’ and information and optimising content for mobile phones. This data is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Comparison of public and private sector online activities



Source: Nielsen. 2011.

4.6 Implications for local government

As presented in the above sections, social media use in Australia is now mainstream. In recent years, councils across Australia have increasingly embraced social media as an additional communication channel, and are using the internet to communicate with their communities in new ways. In this context, social media plays a valuable strategic role for councils, enabling them to improve the way they design, develop and implement policies, strategies and programs. This strategic opportunity is discussed in the following Section 5.

5 Social media in a strategic context

This section examines the role that social media can play in a council's overall communication strategy, or in specific strategies.

5.1 Linking to corporate strategy

The link between social media and corporate strategy is receiving increasing attention in the business literature:

In order to be effective components of corporate strategy, social media programs should be developed within a strategic context that ensures alignment with real business goals and objectives. This requires buy-in and cooperation from top management. Failure to obtain consensus at top executive levels of the organisation will result in ad hoc, uncoordinated grassroots efforts that produce few tangible benefits (Thomas and Barlow, 2011).

Likewise in local government, it is important that social media programs are developed in a strategic context and based on an individual council's needs and capabilities. Also, social media requires careful planning, support and buy-in from top management and appropriate policies and training and education.

Social media is also helping organisations execute strategy more effectively. When applied internally, social media has the potential to 'smarten' organisations by providing employees at all levels with access to knowledge already contained within the organisation. Social media can enable this by expanding networks of contacts, helping to determine where expertise is located, and facilitating timely access to these resources. It makes it easier for employees to work collaboratively in real time (Weber, 2011).

A well-developed corporate strategy will ideally include an integrated communication strategy which demonstrates an understanding of target audiences, sets achievable objectives, has meaningful messages, and builds monitoring and evaluation in to enable council to track progress and modify if required. In other words, a robust strategy will be driven by a council's objectives and relate directly to them.

Kingston City Council

Kingston City Council in Victoria introduced a Facebook page in early 2011. Prior to launching, Council undertook a rigorous process of research and consultation over many months to ensure that the benefits of social media would meet council's business objectives. For more insights into Kingston's strategic and integrated use of social media through many of its operations, a transcript of an in-depth interview with their CEO is available at:

<http://www.iken.net.au/communities-of-practice/case-studies/local-government-leadership-community-engagement-social-media-a>

Social media is very effective at gaining an understanding of different segments of the community and the issues and concerns that matter to them. Social media also helps local councils to identify key influencers within those groups who in turn can inform the social media program that council employs. If social media is undertaken strategically it will be relatively easy to ascertain if the social media activities have achieved the desired objectives.

In consultations and interviews undertaken for this study, councils were keen to report positive outcomes from their use of social media. Councils are finding that by incorporating social media into their communication strategies, they are able to reach groups in the community that would not normally engage with council.

In the ACELG national online survey some respondents reported several ways in which social media had supported their usual communication activities. This was by enabling important messages to be broadcast to citizens in times of crisis, promoting what council was doing, and eliciting responses from people who didn't normally buy or read newspapers. Also, it offered more channels for council to interact and engage in conversations, fostering greater collaboration and developing a sense of community.

Mosman Council provides an example of a well-developed social media communication strategy.

Mosman Council

Mosman Council was an early adopter of web technologies for communication and engagement. Its Community Engagement Strategy adopted in April 2009 won the Gov 2.0 Innovators Award in the Small Agency category from the Government 2.0 Taskforce. The council uses blogs, forums and participation in social networks, and was the first to set up a local government Twitter account in Australia. Together, they form part of the way the council does business.

5.2 Social media and the communications mix

Communication theorists have traditionally placed communication and interaction in four broad contexts, namely Telling, Selling, Consulting and Engaging (Munter, 1992).

In 2003, Howard Partners further developed these four contexts into a communication matrix with the aim of assisting organisations to integrate their varied communication activities strategically. The matrix is derived from the level of community involvement in developing message content (along the vertical axis) and the level of community involvement in the delivery of the message (along the horizontal axis) as shown in Figure 6. Social media can be used in all four contexts.

Figure 6: Communication matrix

High Level of Community involvement in developing message content	Selling Promotional approach Promoting events, services, creating awareness and understanding Sales, Marketing Research, Advertising, Public Relations	Engaging Joint/integrated commitment We would like to work with you to develop, adopt and apply new strategies, plans and actions Collaboration and partnership Conversations and participation
	Telling Broadcast We have got this knowledge and information and it is in your (and others) interests to use it Informing and explaining Press release, Newsletters, Pamphlets	Consulting Listening and feedback We have these ideas and potential initiatives and we would like your feedback Community Consultation- meetings, discussions, surveys
Low	Low	High
	Level of community involvement in message delivery	

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The matrix can help organisations incorporate social media into their communication strategies by providing a framework for considering the extent to which social media can be adopted, applied and used in an overarching communication strategy. Social media adds the most value when it is integrated into the overall council communication and engagement strategies.

By way of example, social media has been used by councils to:

- Disseminate information about weather warnings and road closures (broadcasting).
- Promote council activities such as market days, community events and council activities (promoting).
- Seek community reactions about potential initiatives (consulting).
- Engage the community in the development of future plans and strategies where the council position has not been formulated and is committing to a genuine search for ideas (engaging).

It is important to stress that from a communication perspective engagement is collaborative and involves a joint approach to the development of message content and delivery. It connotes partnership, cooperation and the development of alliances. If council is simply 'opening up' as a receptor for new proposals and ideas, there are risks that expectations can be created that go well beyond its capacity to deliver in terms of resource cost, capacity, and even legality.

While the communication matrix is designed to help councils develop a corporate communication strategy, the International Association for Participation (IAP2) has developed a framework to explain participation and development in the context of public participation and decision-making (see www.iap2.org.au). This may run in parallel to a council's communication strategy.

5.3 Integration with mainstream media

While the mainstream media of the press and the broadcast media have always been integral to a council's communication activities, social media is both extending the potential reach and enabling councils to communicate directly with particular target audiences.

Council officers indicated that they regularly provide news about council business to mainstream media either in the form of media release, opinion, advertisement or public announcement. However, they noted that the media adds its own interpretation, or 'take' on the story, which may or may not be welcomed by the council. Also, the media is able to present a particular viewpoint and will publish other opinions. Previously, if reports were inaccurate, council had little opportunity to correct the misinformation.

Social media changes all of this as it allows a council to publish its own message, unaltered by mainstream media, which it can then broadcast directly to its key audiences and at a time that suits council. Social media enables council to broadcast its message in its own words, and use pictures, audio and video to help gain attention, and encourage people to respond, either positively or negatively, and take part in the conversation.⁵

Social media allows councils to initiate discussions, respond to questions and comments from citizens, and break down perceived barriers between councils and the community. Several council officers reported that they have used social media to quickly correct misunderstandings before they can take hold in the community, and have used social media to enhance council's reputation as a source of trusted information.

5. AIDA is an acronym used in Communication theory, meaning: "to gain attention, create interest, develop desire and initiate action".

In some areas, councils have used social media such as blogs because the local newspaper had been forced to close due to declining readership and advertising revenues. In these cases, social media has proved highly effective in communicating with citizens in the absence of a local newspaper.

Social media also supplements the role of the broadcast media. Journalists read blogs and tweets from elected members and senior staff, which may create topics for newspaper stories and talkback radio. Talkback radio hosts encourage the use of social media (particularly Twitter) during conversations and interviews.

By using social media, councils can also communicate directly with different audience segments. Some of these audiences may have been very difficult to reach using traditional communication channels. There are several examples of how councils have successfully engaged young people using social media.

The important point to remember with social media is to integrate it into council's communication strategies and use it to support other communication activities.

5.4 Framework to use social media to support and extend communication strategies

Local government is using social media in many different ways for a wide range of purposes. To provide readers of this report with further explanation of how social media can be used to support and extend communication, a framework has been developed to assist local government. This includes the benefits that can be expected from strategically incorporating social media into the communication activities of council. The framework is summarised in Table 6.

Table 6: Examples of how social media supports and extends communication of a council

MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITY	SOCIAL MEDIA APPLICATIONS AND CONTEXT	BENEFITS
Corporate image	Social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Website, blogs) to enhance the council's image and reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can reinforce and enhance council's image and increase its visibility in the community when integrated • Enables council to show the community that it is listening • Allows council's corporate image to be developed through personal interaction and experience • Enables the community to contribute to enhancing council's reputation • Permits council to quickly correct misinformation • Can be used to 'humanise' council's profile when developed in a conversational, friendly tone
Promotion, direct marketing	Social media (eg Facebook, Twitter, QR codes, mobile apps, blogs, video and audio, Google ads) to promote events, arts shows, market days, and other activities of a council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can form an important component of council's integrated promotion and marketing strategy • Allows council to target individuals directly who may be interested in the event • Enables council to reach people on their mobile devices and drive traffic to the website • Can allow for council to apply QR codes that are linked to events or activities • Cost-effective and efficient communication for council • Can save on print and distribution costs for council
Brochures and booklets Posters and flyers	All social media (whether it is Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs and other community forums) to link information and content (text, pictures, audio, video) that can reinforce, clarify and enhance messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhances traditional one-way forms of communication for council • Enables fast updating by council • Can allow council to tailor language, set, props and messages to suit individual target audiences • Allows for interaction and audience(s) to ask questions and receive fast answers from council • Facilitates target audience sharing of information with others and can assist with distribution of messages • Provides opportunities for council to save on printing costs
Video and audio-visual	Social media tools such as Vimeo, YouTube, Slideshare to embed videos and audio-visual presentations on a council website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables council to tailor messages specifically for target audiences needs • Allows council to better engage, entertain and get messages across to the community • Can be used by council to facilitate the community's sharing videos with friends and others who may be interested • Provides options for production to be undertaken in house by council
Newsletters and bulletins	Websites with web 2.0 technologies using RSS feeds to deliver eNewsletters directly to interested citizens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows council to make cost savings on printing and distribution • Enables council to update and deliver information quickly • Allows audiences in the community to share information with others • Can enable council to stimulate discussion in the community • Encourages council to keep messages relevant and timely
Internal communications	Enterprise social networking tools such as Yammer and wikis to increase interaction, collaboration and communication between staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates the fostering of greater understanding, collaboration and sharing of knowledge across council • Enables the breaking down of barriers and silos between council's functional areas or different departments • Can be used in project management by council
Events	Social media (eg Facebook, Twitter, QR codes, mobile apps, YouTube, community boards) to promote events and organise staff and volunteers for such activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows council to add other communication channels to the mix • Enables council to apply cost-effective ways of getting the message out directly to target audiences for events • Can facilitate follow up by mainstream media and generate additional interest for events • Allows council's target audience to easily forward on messages to friends and others who may be interested

<p>Community consultation and engagement</p>	<p>Social media tools (eg Facebook, Twitter, mobile apps, Google ads) to expand the potential participation of community in consultation and engagement activities and generate greater interest</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can allow council to drive traffic to its website which, in turn, can provide an online format for consultation and engagement • Enables council to support online discussion forums for specific issues and so attract feedback • Can allow people to use downloaded apps to interact and provide feedback at a time that suits them • Facilitates the linking of peoples' ideas and opinions of others • Allows for council to accommodate different trends with agree/disagree options and for facilitation of discussion • Can help council to build a community of interest around specific issues, programs or events • Enables council to incorporate geo-spatial attributes • Allows options for people to interact and engage with council at a time that suits them (24/7 if they wish) • Online ads can be used by council to focus on particular demographic and geographic areas
<p>Community relations</p>	<p>Social media as an important community relations tool</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitates council's interaction with citizens and building relationships • Enables opportunities for council to clarify misinformation in the community • Allows council to develop relationships with 'hard-to-reach' groups in the community • Can assist council with presenting a human face and an image that 'real' people work in a council • Demonstrates how a council is working for the community
<p>Sponsorships</p>	<p>Social media tools (eg Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, photo sharing and video sharing sites) as part of an integrated communication strategy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes inexpensive and effective ways for council to be involved • Enables council to collaborate with sponsors • Can allow council to sponsor community activities such as sustainability initiatives, and positively promote such involvement
<p>Customer service</p>	<p>Social media as part of customer service</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables council to recognise issues raised by members of the community • Allows citizens to contact a council directly and publicly • Facilitates rapid response by council and direction of queries to the appropriate area of the organisation
<p>Human resources</p>	<p>Social media tools such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter used to find new staff</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can enable council's HR department to gain insights into potential new staff • Provides council with an inexpensive and often fast way of recruiting
<p>Issues management</p>	<p>Social media to allow for monitoring of issues in the community that are of concern to residents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be effective and inexpensive to use and assist council to lead discussion, as well as monitor conversations and respond accordingly • Allows council to facilitate the building of a 'community of interest' around specific issues
<p>Emergency and crisis management</p>	<p>Social media as a highly effective way to communicate during times of crisis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for efficient and effective interaction and information flow between council and the community • Can be accessed by people almost anywhere and at any time (24/7) • Enables quick dissemination of urgent information by council • Allows council to answer questions quickly, ensuring accurate information is made available • Provides mainstream media, that follows local government social media sites, with information to broadcast • Can enable citizens to pass on information from council to their followers, which helps to disseminate messages more quickly • Enables council to broadcast valuable information to the community, such as weather warnings, road disruptions, beach closures • Provides inexpensive communications channel, once a social media strategy or program is set up by council

Source: Howard Partners in association with ACELG and ANZSOG Institute for Governance 2012

6 Social media adoption and application by local government

While more and more councils are taking the decision to use social media, there is a wide discrepancy in the way they are using social media. This section presents some of the ways that councils are using the different social media.

6.1 Platforms

6.1.1 Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social networking site used by local government across Australia.

Councils using Facebook have generally reported positive outcomes from the experience. They use it to disseminate information, promote festivals and art shows, drive people to the council website for consultation activities, and access groups considered as “hard to reach”.

As with all communication, success tends to be directly related to the objectives of the communication activity and its implementation.

Often councils will have a number of different Facebook pages, each one relating to a specific council business unit or activity. The reason behind this is quite strategic: it enables councils to engage with specific target groups and form communities around topics of interest. Important examples of the well integrated Facebook application are the Councils of Melville City, Kingston City and Bass Coast Shire.

Melville City Council

Melville City Council in Western Australia started a corporate Facebook account in 2009. It also set up a Facebook account aimed at a younger demographic. It is popular with young people who often use their smart phones to interact with the dedicated space. The Facebook pages are key communication channels for the council’s youth manager to connect with the city’s young people.

Kingston City Council

Kingston City Council in Victoria has set up several different Facebook pages, each focused on the interests of a different community group. These include users of the leisure centres, youth services, and maternal and child health (where the focus is on topics of interest to young mums, dads, babysitting groups, childcare centres and the issues they care about such as immunisation, babysitting, feeding and parenting).

Bass Coast Shire Council

Bass Coast Shire Council in Victoria set up a Facebook page in 2010 that specifically targeted Victorian secondary school leavers who arrive at the end of each year to celebrate ‘Schoolies’ on Phillip Island. The influx of so many young people rejoicing was not popular with local residents. Consequently, Council implemented a Facebook strategy aimed at targeting the young visitors to positively inform their choices. The Facebook page featured a cartoon character, Marty the Dog, which spoke and behaved like many of the young target audience. Marty soon recorded more than 1100 friends on his Facebook page. Council’s Facebook page was highly successful in communicating with this young ‘hard to reach’ group and influencing their behaviour.

6.1.2 Twitter

Councils are using Twitter extensively to communicate with the community. Councils find that tweets are a fast and direct way to interact with followers to both inform them of relevant issues and promote events and activities. Councils have found that tweets are also a highly effective way of driving traffic back to the council website.

Twitter can be used effectively to provide an information source and customer service, and to seek out and contribute to existing conversations that are taking place in the community.

Although tweets are restricted to just 140 characters, they can contain links to pictures, videos or other text that allow followers to discover more about the tweeted topic.

The Local Government Association of South Australia (LGASA)

At the LGASA's 2011 Annual General Meeting and associated seminars the LGASA provided a live twitter fall (in which messages cascade down a screen as new messages are posted) in the plenary auditorium for a group created for the event.

The next year the LGASA introduced a twitter group discussion through a smartphone conference app that provided a twitter fall of discussions visible without having to join twitter. The smartphone app provided an online program, venue map, information about speakers, sponsors and exhibitors and the capacity for instant feedback on speakers and sessions, and alerts for delegates, in addition to the live twitter fall.

City of Sydney Council

City of Sydney Council has found that Twitter is an excellent channel to develop a high engagement with the community. Given the real time nature of the platform, Council often receives customer service reports from Twitter. Also, Council has also found that it has been able to build goodwill with followers by quickly following up on their concerns.

Council also used Twitter on New Year's Eve to provide real-time event information on vantage point capacity and road closures against the hashtag #NYESYD. This hashtag trended locally and nationally throughout the evening demonstrating a high level of engagement around messages being shared.

Pittwater Council

Pittwater Council in Sydney is an active user of its Twitter account @aboutPittwater. Council uses it to disseminate information, promote activities and local attractions, and drive communication with the community.

The research for this report found that some local government staff use a number of different Twitter accounts. They do this to separate personal, professional and official areas and to ensure that comments made on a personal or professional Twitter account are not taken as representing the official views of the organisation.

Examples for the integration of Twitter include the Local Government Associations of South Australia and Queensland, Pittwater Council and the City of Sydney.

Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ)

The Media Executive at the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) uses three separate Twitter accounts. While they are all connected with the local government sector, the official @LGAQ Twitter account is used primarily to inform followers about general local government issues. A second account @qldcouncils is focused purely on promoting the activities of individual Queensland councils in the lead-up to constitutional recognition @qldcouncils. A third private Twitter account @johnstonec is used to follow and participate in areas of personal interest such as urban development and planning issues that are occurring around the world.

It is not just councils that use Twitter to communicate with the community. Citizens also use Twitter to communicate with councils. In the case of the Brisbane floods, Council received constant updates from residents and businesses on the flood situation as it occurred. This information proved invaluable as intelligence for the disaster management group.

6.1.3 Pinterest

Pinterest is a social media networking site that enables people to organize and share images of all the things that interest them. Pinterest's goal is to connect everyone in the world through displaying the 'things' they find interesting. Local councils around the world are also discovering that they can use Pinterest to capture images and stories of favourite historic buildings, landmarks and events within their local areas. In Australia, a good example is at the City of Salisbury.

City of Salisbury

The City of Salisbury in South Australia joined Pinterest to help celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the St Kilda Adventure Playground. The visual nature of Pinterest and the fast uptake amongst social media users lent itself to showcasing the story collection for the Anniversary of the Playground. The City is aiming to collect images, stories and experiences from residents and visitors. In a very short space of time, the St Kilda Adventure Playground Pinboard has received photos and memories from residents all over South Australia.

Moving forward from the St Kilda Story Collection project, the City of Salisbury has plans to increase its boards to include a wide range of visual topics, including an upcoming Salisbury Writers Festival. By featuring both the Writers Festival and the authors on Pinterest, the City is able to pin photos of authors' book covers that link directly to the authors' pages selling the book.

6.1.4 LinkedIn

In the private professional services sector practitioners are encouraged to have a LinkedIn profile (Golden, 2011). Several councils reported that individual officers have joined LinkedIn to enable them to network with professionals in the local government space and to share information. In addition, councils are also creating corporate LinkedIn pages as a way of connecting to the professional and business groups in their communities. Greater Geraldton and Kingston Councils are examples of such applications.

City of Greater Geraldton Council

A number of employees at the City of Greater Geraldton in Western Australia have joined LinkedIn so they can sign up to the different professional local government groups on offer in the network. LinkedIn groups, such as the WA Local Government Customer Service Network, enable individual local government employees from across the State to share ideas and information concerning aspects of their professional lives and gain advice from their peers.

Kingston City Council

The Kingston City Council has a strong business and manufacturing base. Council's Business Economic Development Group has formed a number of member-only groups on LinkedIn to communicate and network with local business. Different groups include the Kingston Business Women's Network, the City of Kingston CEO Roundtable Networking Group, and the City of Kingston Group. The groups provide networking opportunities for like-minded local businesses and also make available several business trends, resources and other useful information specifically targeted to the members of the LinkedIn groups to help businesses in the local area grow.

6.1.5 YouTube and Vimeo

Councils use YouTube and Vimeo to enrich their message delivery. More and more councils are experimenting with video and finding that it assists in generating interest, providing greater context, and creating a more personal experience for the viewer. Good examples of such applications include the councils of Frankston City, Great Lakes, Hobart City, Mosman and Alice Springs.

Frankston City Council

FrankstonTV was Australia's first community-driven YouTube network. The initiative was developed by Frankston City Council in mid-2011 and has evolved into one of the most innovative social infrastructure programs in Australia. FrankstonTV was originally implemented to address a widespread online perception problem that the Frankston area is subject to. Within one year, search results for 'Frankston' on YouTube have transformed online perception from parody to parochialism. Unique web functionality was commissioned by Council, allowing the community to upload videos direct to its own YouTube channel through <http://www.frankstontv.com>. This provided impetus for the program's unprecedented success. Beyond satisfying its core objectives, FrankstonTV has generated a diverse raft of outcomes, exceeding all expectations along the way.

Great Lakes Council

Great Lakes Council in New South Wales has a Sustainable Business Program that helps businesses within the local community to begin their journey towards resource efficiency and cost savings. The program has a Facebook page that is used to promote the business partners as well as source and share the latest information relating to business sustainability. The Sustainable Business Program also has a YouTube channel that contains several video case studies of local business owners sharing their stories in developing sustainable practices and reporting on the positive impacts they have experienced as a result.

Hobart City Council

Hobart City Council's website makes extensive use of videos (Vimeo and YouTube) to communicate its messages to its varied audiences. Several of the videos feature interviews with experts, both from within Council and others outside of Council who openly discuss the issue concerned. Videos cover a range of topics from the Climate Change Project which features a video highlighting Council's leadership role and the initiatives that Council has shown on the climate change issue, through to the Visiting Hobart page that uses video to promote the Hobart lifestyle.

Mosman Council

Mosman Council's YouTube channel takes the community behind the scenes at Mosman Art Gallery, talks to architects about planning and heritage issues in Mosman and shows author evenings at the library. All content is produced by Council staff. The result is a vibrant and ever-changing presence online.

Alice Springs Town Council

Alice Springs Town Council's website has embedded two videos for users to view as soon as they click on the home page. One of the videos promotes Alice Springs as a place to visit and live, and provides users of the site with information and photos of spectacular local scenery. A second video is targeted more at local people and is informational and issues-based.

6.1.6 Flickr

Flickr is an online photo management and sharing application.

Mosman Council's Flickr photo stream shows activities as diverse as a photo essay on sporting fields' rectification, memories of Dame Joan Sutherland in Mosman, and local bushcare groups. Residents can upload their own photos that help to depict the history of Mosman.

6.1.7 Yammer

Private social networking sites such as Yammer provides a way for councils to experiment with using social media internally to improve communication, discussion and networking across council. A leading example of this application is at the City of Kingston.

Kingston City Council

Kingston City Council in Victoria was one of the first to introduce Yammer, launching the site in early 2011. There was no compulsion for staff to use Yammer, and yet after just 12 months Council reports that more than 250 employees are engaging regularly with the site.

Council adopted a deliberate strategy of making Yammer non-compulsory, yet available for staff to experiment in a safe and secure space. Introducing Yammer has given employees a greater understanding of social media and removed much of the apprehension they had felt. At the same time Council has been able to ensure that its employees also gained an understanding of Council's social media policy and procedures.

6.1.8 Google or Yahoo groups

Several councils subscribe to Google or Yahoo groups to stay in touch with specific information such as environmental planning, sustainability, or other topics. Group users find them easy to use as they receive an email notification with all new content, and they can also pose questions back to the group. Each of the professional groups has a moderator or administrator and new subscribers provide details to ensure they qualify to be members of the group.

Great Lakes Council

The Natural Systems Division of Great Lakes Council subscribes to several Yahoo groups as a way of staying in touch with other local council professionals working in the sustainability area. The groups are particularly beneficial to Council staff as they facilitate networking with peers and colleagues regardless of location, and also allow members to ask questions, exchange ideas and share knowledge with a wide network of professionals working in the field.

6.1.9 Blogs and RSS

Many councils are using blogs to communicate with citizens and other stakeholders. The advantages of using a blog include being able to explain issues in more depth, as well as having a degree of control over the message. A blog also enables councils to engage in a conversation with people who have read the blog. Also, blogs tend to be picked up by the mainstream media more often.

For example, Pittwater General Manager, Mark Ferguson blogs regularly at the General Manager's Blogspot. However, blogs can also be presented in other formats (e.g. YouTube, Facebook and from Twitter). Also, video blogs have been integrated with other social media.

City of Cockburn

In Western Australia at the City of Cockburn, CEO Stephen Cain intermittently uses video blogs to discuss issues of importance to Council or other stakeholders on subjects such as employing people with a disability, or explaining how Council has taken action to promote energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction. Council then posts the blogs on its website, on YouTube, and on its Facebook page and links to them through its Twitter account. The CEO also uses video blogs to communicate with staff on matters such as Council's new customer service charter. A link containing the video blog is emailed to all staff.

6.2 Mobile devices and apps

Applications (known as apps) for smart phones and tablets are becoming more popular. Social media enables councils to provide information directly to these mobile devices, for example, using QR codes at Tea Tree Gully. Social media also allows constituents to notify councils concerning service breakdowns and failures.

Technology-savvy council staff can develop apps, which may be licensed to other councils. There are several apps that have been developed by third party providers.

Ellen Grady and Paul Bateson have compiled a preliminary report for ACELG on apps and mobile web usage that includes an Australian and international data base of iPhone and Android apps designed for local government (Grady and Bateson, 2012).

Tea Tree Gully Council

Tea Tree Gully Council in South Australia hosted a major Civic Park Spectacular event in early 2012 and successfully used the Council's events@thepark Facebook page and QR codes to engage with the community. Council produced special posters and placed them around the park inviting event goers to 'Join the Conversation' and providing the QR code to enable them to use their smart phones to link directly to the Facebook page.

6.3 Using social media to inform councils

During the research, several councils mentioned that citizens use apps to inform council management about problems, failures, and breakdowns in infrastructure. This includes using the following channels:

- Twitter to advise of road conditions, accidents and hazards.
- TechnologyOne's iCouncil app that enables people to quickly report problems to their council such as dumped rubbish, potholes, graffiti and damaged infrastructure. TechnologyOne indicated that it has about 35–40 per cent market share of the local government enterprise resource planning (ERP) software ERP market.
- Snap Send Solve: this is a free app for an iPhone or Android device that lets users report issues such as litter, hard waste, parking, street cleaning, trees and noise and provide feedback to council in under 30 seconds Australia-wide. The app determines the relevant council using the smartphone's GPS location, and was developed by Outware Mobile. All reports from Snap Send Solve are sent from the app using the user's email address so that the council can communicate directly to fix the issue. Outware Mobile indicated that more than 30,000 people downloaded the Snap Send Solve app in Australia in its first 12 months. The simplicity of this type of app means that citizens can engage their council through quickly and easily without having to perform several separate steps, as would have previously been the case. Outware Mobile reported that many field staff who work for councils have also downloaded the app due to its ease of use to report issues.

Although these apps were developed by third parties, email messages are sent directly to the relevant council that is obliged to respond. Some councils are concerned about the potential volume of issues and enquiries which could flood their email inboxes. A number of council senior managers advised that rapid reporting of service breakdowns also creates an expectation of rapid remediation. This has the potential to distort priorities from new services to managing a backlog of repairs and maintenance.

A new system being developed by the WA Local Government Association (WALGA) aims to overcome some of these issues. To be known as, Pin2Fix, the new system will incorporate iPhone and Android apps, and websites. Pin2Fix employs positioning technology to direct community works requests to the appropriate authority and to enable each council the opportunity to promote their services and announcements to users.

Unlike similar technologies, Pin2Fix will launch with a number of components to help reduce additional workload on local government, as well as ensuring that requests are actioned in an economical and timely manner. Mitigation initiatives include facilities to link duplicate reports, individual council category mapping, enhanced email with active links, and modules to format requests with existing works management platforms. Pin2Fix is being trialled by Western Australian councils in September 2012, ahead of a public launch one month later. Preliminary discussions are underway to enable Pin2fix to be available to local government in all States and Territories.

6. For a case study outlining Brisbane City Council's response to the January 2011 floods (*Social media breaks new ground for flood crisis*) go to: <http://www.iken.net.au/communities-of-practice/community-engagement-and-social-media/case-studies/social-media-breaks-new-g>

6.4 Using social media to inform the community

This section looks at the ways in which councils are using social media to inform their communities.

6.4.1 Emergency management

Recently, social media has been used effectively for emergency management such as in the Queensland and NSW floods⁶, at Brisbane City Council and Queanbeyan City Council respectively.

Brisbane City Council

Brisbane City Council demonstrated the power of Twitter as a fast and effective communication tool during the Brisbane flood of January 2011. It used Twitter as one of its social media tools to quickly and accurately engage with residents and businesses that needed to evacuate. Council reported that Twitter enabled it to share important information with Brisbane residents, which instilled confidence and positioned Council as a central source of truth on flood related issues. Council also used Twitter to coordinate volunteers during the clean-up phase of the flood recovery efforts by creating their own hashtag, #bnecleanup.

Queanbeyan City Council

During the 2012 floods in Queanbeyan, Council together with the State Emergency Services (SES) issued warnings through radio and also used social media to inform residents on road closures and evacuation notices. Both Council and the SES regularly updated their websites, and Facebook and Twitter accounts. Council recorded 2500 hits to its website in one day, with about 20 per cent of those coming via links on social media. This number represented a significant increase on the average hits per day of around 400. In this particular case, Council's communication manager was actually located 600 km away in Melbourne, yet could still manage the instant communications between Council, the SES and the community using Council's Twitter account.

6.4.2 Events

Councils use apps to notify people about events, for example, at the City of Sydney.

City of Sydney Council

City of Sydney Council uses apps to promote events and provide event-goers with value-added services such as interactive programs and GPS functionality. Council has a number of apps, including one for Sydney New Year's Eve and its annual Art & About Sydney. Council is also developing a new app for Sydney Food Trucks, which will help Sydneysiders find mobile food offerings in the city after hours.

During the Sydney Chinese New Year in 2012, Council used Instagram with great effect by inviting event-goers to share the sights and flavours of Chinese New Year against the hashtag #CNYSYD. Council then showcased the images on the official Sydney Chinese New Year website:

www.sydneychinesenewyear.com/instagram

6.4.3 Libraries

Many council libraries across Australia have embraced social media, providing a wide range of services for users. Examples include the libraries at Mount Gambier and Mosman (see following page).

Mount Gambier Library

Mount Gambier library in South Australia provides an excellent example of how a regional library can integrate social media into its marketing communications strategy to create both a destination that people want to go to and a sense of community.

In addition to using mainstream media such as the local and regional newspapers (where the Library also publishes a free monthly column) radio stations (both local and regional ABC) and WIN TV's news service, the library also has an active Facebook page and a Twitter account and produces two blogs to promote its facilities, activities, and events. The strategy is integral in helping the library achieve its objectives of creating a place for everyone and regularly records door counts of 37,000 in a region with a population of just 24,000 living in Mount Gambier, plus about 8500 in the surrounding area. Social media is responsible for over 50 per cent of library event participation and is the prime place to market/promote any library program.

Mosman Library

Mosman library in Sydney has been using social media for some time as part of an integrated communication strategy to inform, promote events and activities, engage with the community and drive traffic back to its website. Social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, Flickr (for posting pictures of library events and programs), YouTube and Vimeo (for short films and webcasts of author events) are popular with users of the library. E-Newsletters are also very popular and are followed by mainstream journalists to tap into the latest happenings in the area.

Mosman library facilitates the Mosman Readers group <http://www.mosmanreaders.net> where people can provide book reviews and exchange thoughts and ideas about their favourite books, and the Mosman Memories of your Street site <http://www.mosmanmemories.net> that encourages members of the community to contribute information and photos of their memories of living in Mosman. Mosman Memories has evolved into a resource that is now helping people track down old neighbours and friends. Talks around the practical use of web technologies, like using social media for genealogy research and Facebook for parents, have helped build capacity in the local community and generated relationships between the library and community groups like the local camera club and orchestra.

6.4.4 Parking and other information

Councils (for example, Lane Cove and Parramatta) have developed apps for parking management, which are convenient for local residents and visitors.

Lane Cove Council

During 2011, Lane Cove Council in Sydney developed the LaneCoveAlive app making it easy for citizens to quickly find out about shopping, dining, services and parking in Lane Cove. The app has been customised to create direct access to images, email, websites and direct dial to 260 local businesses, in the Lane Cove Alive project footprint. The app provides retailers with the opportunity to offer specials and post events well in advance, and 'real time' car parking assistance through electronic tracking in Lane Cove. It uses GPS location and directional assistance using Google maps that is especially useful for people looking for dedicated parking for seniors, disabled persons, or parents with prams.

Parramatta City Council

Parramatta City Council in NSW has developed two free smart phone apps which aim to make parking and getting around in Parramatta easier. Parra Smart Parking App is a free mobile application that offers live navigation to car spaces, using the smart phone GPS to display nearby car parks. It also enables users to touch on any of the locations to view car park details including up-to-the-minute occupancy rates. The Parra Shuttle Bus Tracker app allows users to view live information about where the bus is travelling in real time, as well as route maps and bus stops. Users can view multiple bus routes simultaneously in the one application.

6.4.5 Advertising local government jobs across Australia

The Local Government Association of South Australia (LGASA) is promoting the use of a national local government job Twitter group (#OzLGJobs) following liaison with other State-Territory local government associations to explore the potential use of Twitter as a tool to promote job vacancies across and between councils.

6.4.6 Community consultation

Local government is required under planning and development control procedures to consult with the community about major development initiatives and applications.

Planning officers are increasingly integrating social media into planning processes and planning associated community engagement. In many councils areas, residents and visitors can scan the local area with a mobile phone app and camera and see, in real time over a live image, an icon above all properties with a development application (DA) at council. This is very useful for people intending to buy or rent property in the area.

The local environment plan (LEP) process also involves consultation using both traditional and social media. Examples of such planning applications include the councils of Pittwater and Mosman.

Pittwater Council

Pittwater Council is a leader in the use of DA web-based applications with tracking tools such as MasterPlan Enquirer.

Mosman Council

Mosman Council's community consultation for the draft Local Environmental Plan, MosmanLEP.net won the 2010 Urban Planning Achievement Award from the Planning Institute of Australia. The award recognised the varied nature of the consultation, which included new and traditional media.

Councils are required by legislation to consult with communities and inform them of key decisions or changes made by council. Also, councils voluntarily engage communities at other times (Herriman, 2011). Social media is now playing an increasing role in community consultation. Councils are using social media to encourage public interaction and feedback on proposals and to prompt discussion within the community.

Councils are also using social media to drive people back to the council website which has further information about particular issues. In the process, the website and social media will be designed to try and persuade people to become involved or “have their say”. Good examples of this integration include the councils of City of Sydney, Mosman and Adelaide City.

City of Sydney Council

City of Sydney has a website for online consultation www.sydneyyoursay.com.au together with a dedicated Twitter account specifically for consultation (Twitter.com/sydneyyoursay).

Mosman Council

In March 2011, Mosman Council launched its Big Ideas initiative. It seeks to harness the creativity and innovative thinking of Mosman residents. It allows people to log their own ‘big idea’ for Mosman’s future, as well as vote and/or comment on other people’s ideas. Big Ideas is an ongoing community conversation that will provide a continual feed into Council’s planning processes. Like all social media, it is available 24/7.

Adelaide City Council

In April 2011, Adelaide City Council launched a three-stage project called Picture Adelaide aimed at engaging with the community on strategic planning for the City. Social media was seamlessly integrated into the overall engagement strategy.

In stage 1, Council provided a free PictureAdelaide.com.au app (which enabled people to take a photo, locate the spot on an embedded Google map and provide comment) to encourage community participation as well as promoting it using Facebook and Twitter. Over 3000 ideas were submitted that sought to shape three main futures for the city: a Creative Future, a Business Future, and a Community Future.

Stage 2 of the engagement project (Adelaide: One City, Many Futures) used the ideas gained from stage 1 to seek the community’s input into helping to define the city’s future and input into developing a suite of key strategic documents. For example, it sought to confirm and clarify exactly what people wanted and expected from a proposed future as a Creative City. Stage 2 also sought feedback on a draft vision, outcomes and strategies for Council’s Strategic Plan 2012–2016 and requested feedback on potential transport options and city ‘hot spots’ for planned activation.

Stage 3 will include both traditional and online engagement tools to seek final feedback and input into four draft strategic documents (Strategic Plan, Integrated Movement Strategy, Structure Plan and Business Plan and Budget). Social media will be utilised as part of a comprehensive media campaign to promote opportunities for the community’s input to ensure Council is truly reflecting the views of the community.

6.5 Summary

This study has found that the local government sector in Australia is integrating social media into their communication strategies. Councils are using social media to:

- Communicate with many different stakeholders at a time of their choosing. They are doing this to undertake the four functions on the communication matrix: to inform, to promote, to engage and to consult.
- Target discrete sections within the community such as local businesses, residents, mainstream media, community groups, or State and Federal government agencies, as well as others in the local government sector across the world.

- Communicate a message to many thousands of people instantly (as was the case during the Brisbane floods in January 2011) and create meaningful two-way dialogue with a very small group of people who share a common interest.
- To receive valued feedback on a range of issues.

Several councils have reported that part of their annual communication reviews includes assessment of opportunities to replace some traditional communication activities with social media channels proven to be more effective in reach, timeliness and outcomes. Councils are also collecting data to enable better comparisons about the cost effectiveness of social media.

7 Social media benefits, barriers and implementation issues

This section looks at the benefits of social media, and also some of the issues that need to be considered when adopting and implementing.

7.1 Benefits

Social media has the potential to reinforce the benefits and outcomes beyond using traditional communication channels alone. Social media, for example:

- Enables councils to raise their profile, enhance its reputation, and successfully and effectively promote council activities.
- Allows council staff to learn about the issues that are important to the community without the need to conduct official market research. By listening to the social media conversations, and participating in, as appropriate, council staff can tap into the topics that people are discussing. Very often they have been able to correct misinformation.
- Gives councils up-to-the-minute market research on the community's attitudes and behaviour towards certain issues.
- Enables councils to disseminate information throughout the community on a wide range of council news, activities and events, thus saving time and costs.
- Facilitates conversations and offline activities such as reading groups and people interested in promoting sustainability.
- Allows councils to swiftly, easily and cheaply interact with different groups within the community, and to successfully reach out and connect to hard to reach groups within the community such as young people. This enables councils to form trust-based relationships with their citizens.

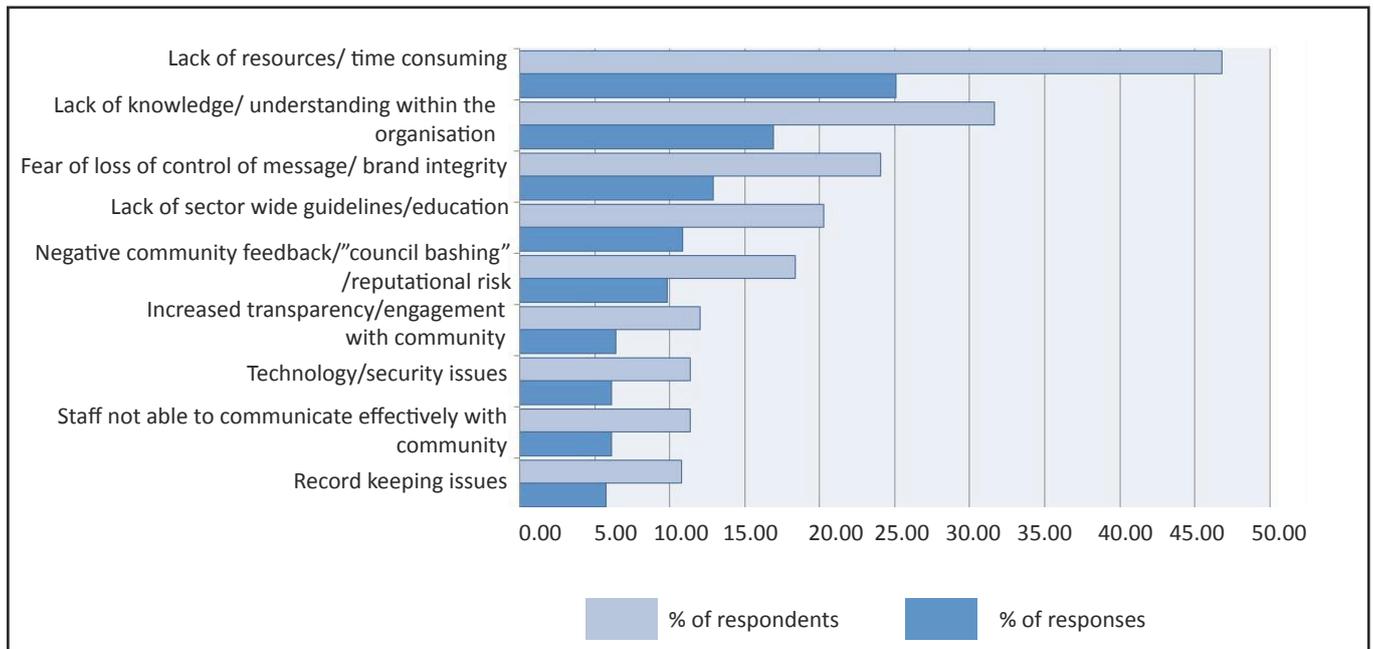
Although some respondents to the study expressed apprehension about receiving potentially negative comments from the community through social media, a greater number countered this concern by contending that it was far better for the council to know what is being said as it gives the council the opportunity to join in the conversation and put its point of view. More often than not, those councils that did participate in the social media conversations reported significant positive outcomes.

7.2 Barriers to adoption

In the ACELG national online survey of 2011, participants were asked to identify potential barriers to adopting social media. One of the most common barriers identified concerned the requirement to provide resources to manage social media and a belief within councils that they had insufficient resources or time to devote to managing social media channels.

Other significant barriers included a lack of understanding about social media within the organisation, fear of loss of control of the message, lack of guidelines and sector-wide education, and the possibility of receiving negative feedback from the community. The full list of barriers identified by councils is outlined in Figure 7 on the following page.

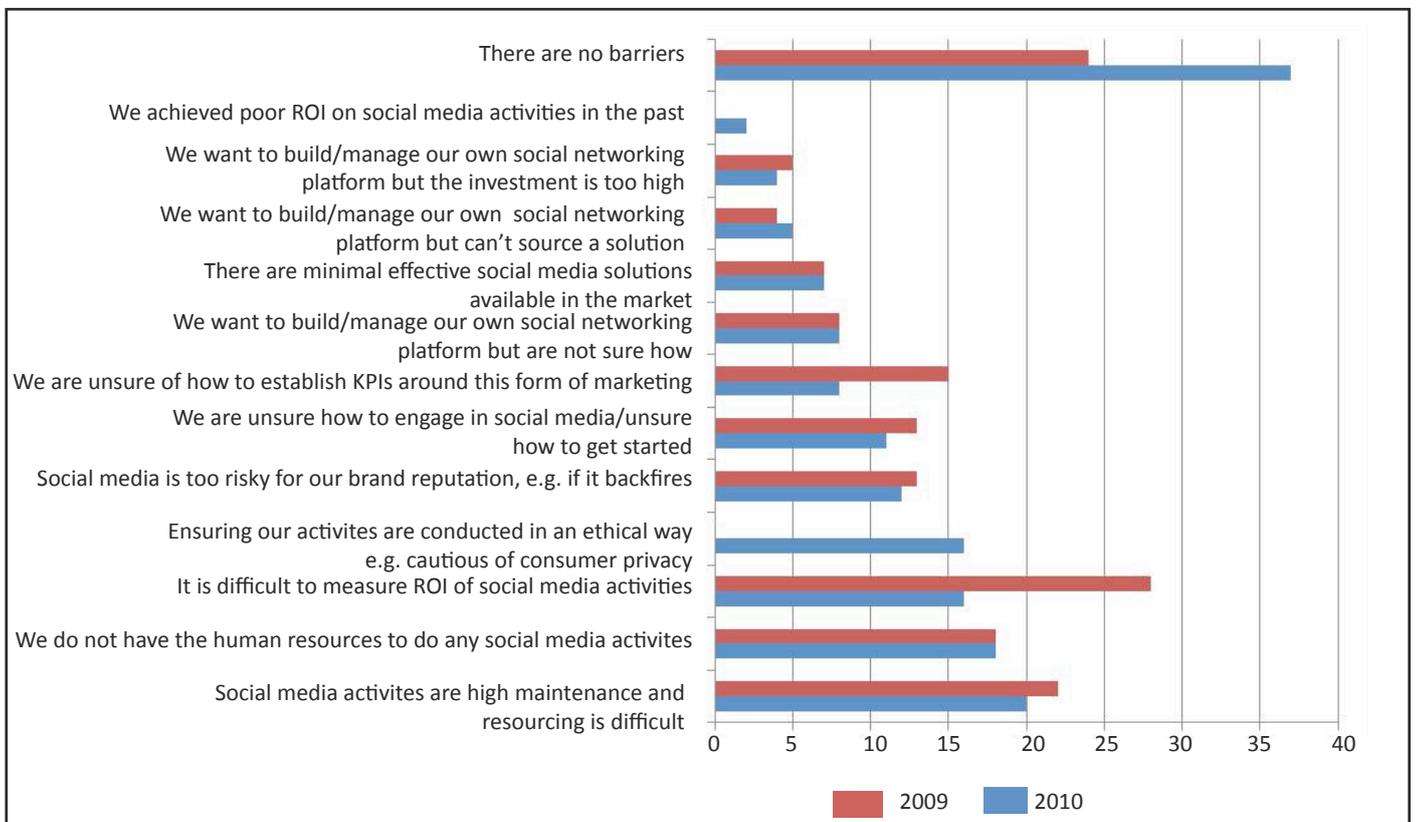
Figure 7: Barriers identified by councils to use of social media



Source: Purser, K. 2012.

The barriers identified by local government appear to be consistent with barriers identified by the private sector. Research undertaken by Nielsen identified a number of barriers faced by Australian private and public businesses in adopting social media (Nielsen, 2011). Private sector barriers to introducing social media are outlined in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Private sector barriers to the adoption of social media



Source: Nielsen. 2011.

The Nielsen research reports that the perceived risks have fallen significantly between 2009 and 2010 and, significantly, the number of businesses that reported no barriers increased from 24 per cent to 37 per cent.

The findings from the in-depth interviews for this study indicate that a similar situation is occurring in local government. Many council employees reported that as councils become familiar with social media and understand how it can be used as a cost-effective channel of communication, perceived barriers fall away.

Barriers such as social media activities requiring resources and staff time that are not available, the 'risk' factors involved with using social media, and lack of understanding of how to engage in social media all broadly correspond to barriers identified in the ACELG national online survey of local government use of social media.

7.3 Main concerns for adoption of social media

The following key findings are drawn from the extensive consultation program including results of the ACELG national online survey concerning barriers to adopting social media, and in-depth interviews.

Not all council employees are enthusiastic adopters of social media. The findings of this research point to quite a deal of confusion and apprehension within councils and amongst council employees about using social media. The following concerns were noted during the research:

- Negative comments being aired so publicly, and how council should respond?
- Additional workload involved with social media. There is a need to monitor social media channels, response times, frequency rates, and tone of conversation. There is a need to be authentic and transparent. And there is a need to ensure that any information that a council posts onto social media is factually correct.
- Social media conversations are permanent.
- Raising the community's expectations, and potentially not being able to meet them. People in the community are usually familiar with using social media. As many council staff interviewed for this study pointed out, a council needs to have well developed policies in place and ensure they also understand the community's expectations prior to launching a social media presence.
- There is concern about additional workload, internet security risks, how to react if a negative comment is received from the community, and even understanding how to use the different social media tools.

These issues are expanded upon in the following sections.

Many council staff commented throughout the study that their council had started using social media in a limited way, often by opening a Facebook page or starting a Twitter account, and usually on a "try it and see" basis.

It is interesting to note a similar pattern in many councils across the country where the early initiative to start using social media was taken by an enthusiastic individual who used social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter privately and believed that council should also have a presence on these channels. These individuals, who effectively became the 'champions of change', understood the potential of social media and the importance of monitoring what was being said about council out in the community. Sometimes these experiences were very positive and the social media channels were adopted more widely across council and integrated into their corporate communications.

Interviews with councils that had overcome some of the above concerns revealed how important it was for the council leadership to become involved in the discussions around social media. For example, social media was placed on the agenda for executive meetings, further information was sought and understanding was created about the way in which council could use social media. Also, social media policies were prepared and council employees were trained to ensure they understood the policy. All of these councils reported how social media was taken seriously by senior management, and regarded as an opportunity to assist councils better communicate with all of its stakeholders.

Several council employees indicated that with the benefit of hindsight and understanding about the power of social media as a channel of communication, if they were just starting out again to use social media they would take a more strategic approach and integrate it into their corporate communication strategies. This message was a common theme that kept recurring through the study.

7.3.1 Lack of understanding of how to use social media

This was a common issue for both private businesses and councils. Even councils that are now using social media as part of the way they do business mentioned the issue of needing to develop ways to overcome the apprehension that many people in the organisation feel in the beginning.

Councils reported having developed social media policies and introducing appropriate education and training.

7.3.2 Apprehension about lack of control of the message

Loss of control of the message is often cited as an area that causes great concern to businesses and councils alike.

Social media can actually give councils a degree of control over the message. Council becomes the publisher of the information and can often explain details more thoroughly, in their own words, rather than having statements misinterpreted and published incorrectly by others.

7.3.3 Community making negative statements about council

If this is a concern, the citizens involved will be making the negative statements regardless of whether council is using social media; the only difference is that councils will not be aware of them.

Councils can turn this around to their advantage. By listening to the community and understanding the issues that are important to them, councils can join in the conversation and show the community that it is listening.

Also, councils can correct misinformation that may be being spread throughout the community. Several councils have indicated that by being on social media they can quickly correct inaccuracies, or in the case of a service issue, council can attend to the situation quickly.

In turn, the community will then pass the correct information onto their own network, which works in council's favour. Several councils reported how people who were critical of council have openly thanked council for its quick action and in turn have become strong supporters of council's work.

7.4 Adoption and implementation strategy

The decision to start using social media should be a strategic decision. In this way, council will have worked out how social media will fit into its business plan. Barriers should not be seen as ‘deal breakers’. These are areas requiring management attention in implementation and adoption. They can be addressed through the introduction of good governance, social media policies, systems and procedures as well as investments in building capacity and capability for social media.

There is, nonetheless, a need for caution against diving straight into using social media without first being prepared. This entails fully considering how social media works and why, the different target audiences and their expectations, how council will use and support social media (such as its policies, protocols, resources, staff training, response times, etc), and what council hopes to achieve. In this way, council will place itself in a strong position to ensure it enjoys success by using social media.

In the national survey, some councils indicated they had introduced a social media platform such as Yammer internally to help staff communicate, share and collaborate and to experiment with the tools. These councils found that using social media in-house provided a safe environment for staff to learn how to use social media, and importantly gain an understanding of the formal council protocols and expectations. It then made it easier for staff to enter into communicating through social media with an external audience.

7.4.1 Social media policies

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the need for councils to develop a social media policy, even if the council is not yet using social media. A social media policy will outline the processes and procedures relating to access to and use of social media platforms by council staff. In other words it will guide staff in their use of social media.

In the ACELG national online survey sent to all councils in Australia, about half the councils that responded were developing a social media policy. One quarter had already developed a policy, and a further quarter did not have a policy at all.

Those councils that had or were developing a social media policy indicated they began by first referring to policies developed by other organisations. In this way, they used the “borrowed” policies as a framework for their own. In other cases, they simply modified an existing social media policy that may have been sourced from the internet for their own use.

Some council officers that had already produced their social media policies suggested including the staff in the development of the policy. They pointed out that staff contribution to the development of the social media policy was an excellent way to get people engaged in the process and to start people thinking about what it would mean for them working in the organisation. This approach often meant that staff had a degree of ownership, which made implementing the policy easier.

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) prepared a discussion paper for its members that dealt with using social media to conduct council business (Kelly, 2010). The discussion paper advises councils using social media to:

- Establish a policy to manage the unique possibilities and risks it poses and reinforce existing corporate policies.
- Review communications plans and strategies to incorporate social media including resource requirements to advise, monitor, participate and record activity.

- Review acceptable use policies for private use of social media⁷.
- Review recruitment procedures, including the use of social media for attracting and screening applicants.
- Review information security infrastructure, software, network arrangements and resources.
- Establish ongoing training requirements to take account of intellectual property and confidential information concerns, records requirements, conflict of interest, security provisions, equal opportunity and occupational health and safety considerations.

Social media policies should also address intellectual property (IP) issues arising from the re-publication of copyrighted material.

7.4.2 Increased transparency

This is part and parcel of using social media. The rules for operating social media are different from mainstream media. Social media tends to be open, transparent, authentic, frank and immediate. Comments are also permanent. In turn social media provides the opportunity to show people that council is listening which helps build trust and develops relationships and ownership of community projects and outcomes.

Importantly, if councils are using social media effectively, they can monitor the community views on issues and obtain immediate market research feedback on people's attitudes and opinions.

By being part of social media, councils can show the community that they are ready to engage in genuine two-way communication. This can enhance their image and reputation. Councils can even assist the community to collaborate and support each other, as was evident during the Brisbane flood crisis in January 2011.

7.4.3 Resource commitment

There are varying views concerning resourcing for social media. Some see it as a major issue that needs to be planned and budgeted for while others do not see it as an issue at all.

A review of the literature suggests that resourcing a council's social media needs to be taken seriously, regardless of how limited the council's introduction to social media might be. This does not mean that council will necessarily incur significant demands on its resources, especially if the social media program is primarily aimed at listening to the community.

Interpreting the volume and overall content of messages that flow through social media can be an expensive, and yet necessary task.

7.4.4 Information management

One of the cumulative effects of the uptake of social media by so many people and organisations is the generation of enormous volumes of information and data that are simply impossible for people to receive and absorb.

The ‘transaction’ capacity to process available information is a major challenge and was discussed by Metcalfe in the 1990s. For example, if it is assumed that every new link takes one per cent of transaction capacity, a person or an organisation will reach full capacity within 90 links. Increasing the number of people communicating without any increased transaction efficiency such as being able to read faster, or filtering the information, overwhelms people with so much data that it becomes noise.

The innovation response has seen numerous technological solutions that save people both the time and effort of having to scroll through hundreds of messages to find the few stories they would find interesting. One such example is a service used by many individuals in society known as Summify.

Summify

Summify helps people sort through all the messages from the people they follow on Twitter. Summify ranks the importance of a news story by the how the people sharing a link are related, although it points out that for the service to work best, users need to be following at least 100 people on Twitter and have more than 250 Facebook friends.

In its first 12 months of operation, Summify aggregated 4.7 billion stories.

7.4.5 Training and staff development

Many council officers interviewed during the study indicated that they considered staff training to be of the utmost importance in the implementation of social media strategies. Councils will ideally have developed a social media policy that will deal with issues of risk management and also provide guidance to staff on what is expected and how they can use social media in council.

Ensuring that employees are provided with the appropriate education and training is essential to developing good practice within a council and in gaining the maximum benefit from social media.

7.4.6 Records and documentation

Social media has given rise to a large volume of additional data that councils need to consider for record keeping purposes. The International Standard on Records Management (ISO 15489) states that to be evidence of action, records must have the characteristics of:

- **Authenticity:** the information is what it purports to be.
- **Integrity:** the record is complete and unaltered.
- **Reliability:** the contents can be trusted to be a full and accurate representation of the transaction.
- **Usability:** the record can be located, retrieved, presented and interpreted.

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

The Municipal Association of Victoria (2010) notes, however:

Like any communication created or received as part of the duties of a public sector employee, materials authored and posted on social media are deemed to be public records and subject to public records requirements. For records management the introduction of social media for conducting council business is a big development arguably akin to the introduction of email or websites in councils. The particular challenge will be in capturing potentially voluminous records hosted on external sites.

In a recent blog post, Dr Kate Cummings from the NSW Government State Records (Cummings, 2012) argued that “in this shifting business environment where the ground is moving under our feet, it is critical that a strategic approach is adopted”. In conclusion to her blog post, Cummings stated that “when using web 2.0:

- Consider your business.
- Consider your levels of risk.
- Consider the information you need to do and account for your business and how long you need to have access to this information for.
- Consider the inherent values, risks and problems with the web 2.0 applications you use.
- Use all this information to develop powerful web 2.0 recordkeeping capacities for your organisation to empower its decision making and information use and reuse capacities for many years to come.”

7.4.7 Governance, performance measurement and risk management

Social media requires a governing body to ensure compliance with rules and procedures and alignment with strategy. This could be undertaken by a specialised unit within either the IT, finance or communication department or division of council. It should have a role to monitor, measure, and report on the progress of social media initiatives. Several publications have been released recently on social media metrics (Sterne, 2010).

Councils should implement a formal risk management process to avoid creating liabilities through inadvertent use of information or intellectual capital generated from social media strategies. The Municipal Association of Victoria’s (Municipal Association of Victoria, 2010) view on risk management is summarised as follows:

Councils will need to take a risk management approach that balances the benefits and risks of using social media in determining whether or not to use social media. The decision to authorise its use should be a business decision made by the executive management team with inputs from all players. If a strong business case can be established for using social media the goal should be to facilitate its safe use with effective and appropriate policy controls backed up by comprehensive training and education programs.

7.5 Centralised versus decentralised approach

Councils need to consider whether all official social media activity will be managed centrally by one area, or whether its use will be decentralised throughout the organisation.

During the consultations for this study, councils provided examples of both centralised and decentralised approaches to adopting a social media program. Every situation was different. Approximately half of the responding councils indicated that official social media accounts are managed by a small group usually located within the communications team.

Other councils indicated that different business units within council operate their own social media accounts separately. In other situations, council officers pointed out that where there are separate accounts across council, the communications team tries to ensure a coordinated approach by organising regular meetings with social media managers to share knowledge and lessons learned.

The important point that most survey respondents made is that any social media program needs a business case to be developed and approved by council. If council does delegate responsibility to a specific program area such as the library, planning, youth, sports and leisure, then they should prepare a business case for sign-off and gain approval by senior management.

7.6 Developing the business case for social media

This study points to the need for councils thinking about developing a social media program to also develop a business case. Several councils interviewed for the study indicated that they require a business case to be put forward to the executive before they agree to open different social media accounts.

No two social media programs are the same. The business case should demonstrate how using social media must support the organisation's current goals and objectives and support the current communication strategy.

The business case should deal with issues such as social media objective, target audience, resourcing, risk management, how social media will be used to listen and engage and at what level, recordkeeping and evaluation.

Social media operates 24/7, and some councils have guidelines on their social media pages indicating the hours that council will monitor and respond to messages. A few council employees indicated that they monitor the social media after hours, usually because they are regular users of social media in their private lives and will notice an email notifying them of some activity on the council's social media page.

8 Impact of social media on council performance

The impact of social media on commonly accepted indicators of public value have not been addressed in a systematic way in the policy literature. The emphasis to date has been on communication, engagement and enhancing participation. Elected members and senior executives are raising questions and issues about value for money, which is interpreted as efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness. Some comments on these dimensions of public value are canvassed below.

8.1 Efficiency

In public management, efficiency generally means reducing the cost of service delivery. This may be reflected in cost per unit of service (for example, processing a building or development application), or a reduction in the time taken to deliver a service (repairing a footpath, for example).

There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that social media, and particularly mobile technologies have reduced the transaction cost of services in terms of both cost and response time. Applications such as Snap Send Solve are generally cited as achieving these outcomes.

The impact of social media on enhancing internal efficiency has also been cited through enhanced collaboration and communication across organisational boundaries. Making documents available through social media enhances efficiency by potentially reducing search and access costs.

Several council officers commented during the interviews that there are reviews currently underway that are assessing the demand for hard copy printed documents which are also available on the council website. Councils are finding that they can use social media to create awareness of the existence of documents and provide direct links to the online versions thereby negating the need for printing hard copies.

There is potential to use mobile web applications for the internal distribution and dissemination of council documents. In the corporate sector, tablet applications are replacing the need to produce voluminous reports and papers for boards and committees and for conferences, seminars and meetings. There is potential for adoption of similar applications in local government.

Live tweeting during conferences is now a widespread practice and provides for instant dissemination of issues raised during proceedings and discussion. There are smart phone conference web applications. For example, 2012showcase.mobi was used at a recent conference of the Local Government Association of South Australia.

While the research for this study indicates that councils could see efficiencies being generated through the application and adoption of social media, quantified results and return on investment information was not available.

Efficiencies through savings may be challenged in some areas if social media sites have to be continuously monitored for comments and conversations and responses need to be provided. There can be significant resource costs involved in monitoring.

From the perspective of good management practice, staff should report regularly to council on the efficiency outcomes of social media application and use.

8.2 Effectiveness

Effectiveness relates to the relationship between service costs and outcomes of service (cost effectiveness), service quality, (particularly in relation to freedom from errors, mistakes, and defects), and customer/client satisfaction (service effectiveness).

Cost effectiveness can mean more service outcomes at the same cost or the same service outcomes with reduced cost. The innovative use of social media has the potential to yield significant cost effectiveness results by, for example, switching from paid advertising in the local print media to advertising through the council's website and mobile applications. Social media can direct community attention to these sites. In the consultations for the study it was pointed out that the introduction and management of social media is not cost-less. There are costs relating to technology, staff time, training, and the development and monitoring of processes and procedures.

Social media also has the capacity to target more effectively people within the community who will be interested in a particular issue. The ability of social media to embed links to a council website and the exact page can save people time searching and also ensuring that people are receiving the accurate information. In times of crisis, social media can be an effective medium for communicating with affected residents. Social media should also be expected to reduce overall cost by reducing the expenditure on production of promotional material, provide automated responses to questions and queries, online review and lodgement of documents, and online discussion through social media channels. Visualisation through various digital techniques makes explanation easier and potentially better targeted.

Service quality is enhanced by providing more accurate, timely and consistent information to individuals and groups of citizens. Clients can be more satisfied through more effective and direct interface. However, there are many people, elected members, constituents and stakeholders who prefer face-to-face contact.

8.3 Appropriateness

The 'appropriateness' of social media use in councils has been evolving quickly. As more people within the community are now communicating via online communication channels and social media, it is expected that social media is an appropriate channel for council. Communication is said to only have taken place when a message is received and acted upon. With many more people in the community now using social media to receive and send messages, it is becoming a more appropriate channel of communication for councils.

There are many different types of social media channels and understanding when one particular channel is appropriate to use for a particular message is important. Councils are using YouTube and other video on social media sites to connect with the community. Social media is becoming seen as an appropriate form of engagement and communication. This may not always be the case. Elected members and senior executives need to consider the appropriateness of social media for different situations and circumstances.

8.4 Performance outcomes

The impact of social media on overall council performance has not been addressed in a systematic way. While the potential for better decision making, better strategy, and better response is asserted by consultants and commentators on the basis of observations in business contexts, the impact in the public sector is much more difficult to discern. As the adoption and application of social media evolves, this will be an area for further applied research, study and analysis.

9 Rural, remote and Indigenous communities

Rural, remote and Indigenous communities face a range of issues, some quite particular to their own region that communities living in the major Australian cities and most major urban centres do not experience. Some of these issues include accessibility with regard to high-speed internet access, access to devices that connect to wireless, difficulty in being able to communicate in English as a first language, and culture.

9.1 Access and equity issues

The Interacting with Government study found that those living in rural/remote areas are less likely to have used the internet to contact government (26 per cent) than those in metropolitan (38 per cent) or regional (31 per cent) areas of Australia (Australian Government Management Information Office, 2011). Other factors that are relevant to internet access and use of social media in rural and remote communities are:

- Employment: those not in the workforce are the least likely to have used the internet for their most recent contact with government (34 per cent), while those in the workforce are more likely to make contact by internet (41 per cent).
- Education: 43 per cent of those who have completed, attempted, or are currently completing some form of post-secondary study used the internet in their most recent contact with government. This compares with 29 per cent who had completed high school, but no further studies, and only 19 per cent who had not completed Year 12 of high school (or its equivalent).
- Household type: households with dependent children are more likely to have used the internet to contact government (42 per cent) than other families without dependent children (32 per cent) and single adults without dependent children (25 per cent).

These factors underpin the specific problems and issues encountered by councils when introducing social media in rural, remote and indigenous communities.

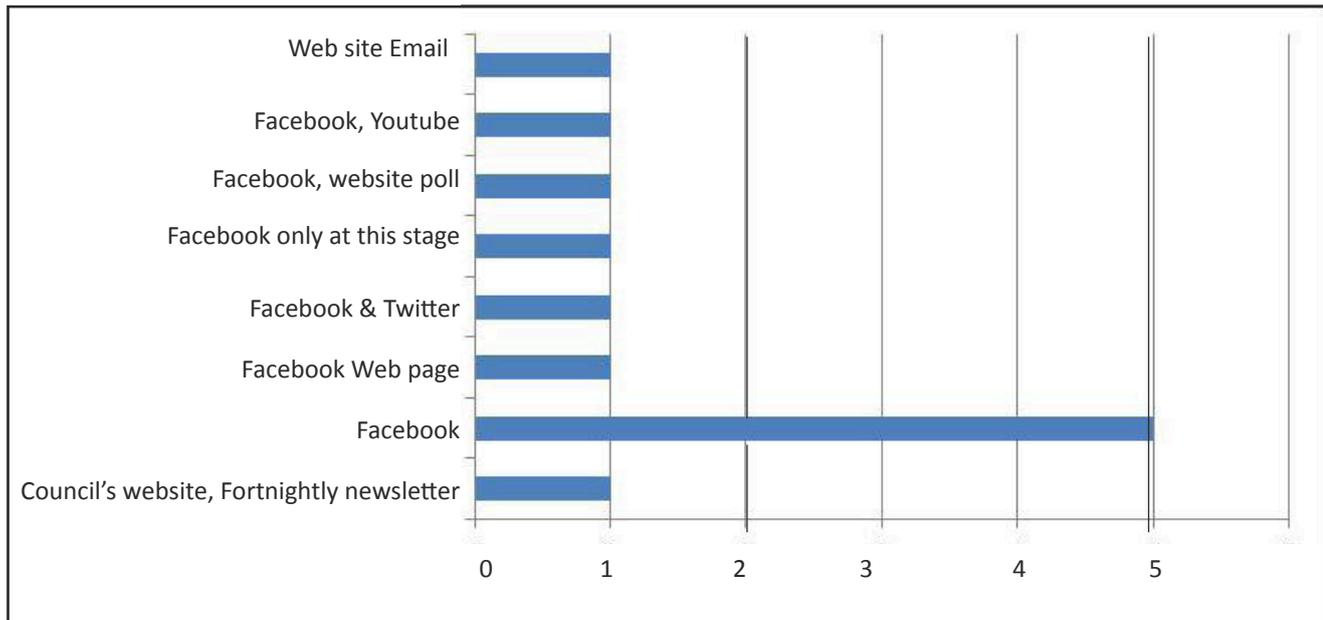
9.2 Survey results

Research for this study was informed by results from a survey designed specifically to investigate a group of 105 councils that are located in remote areas of Australia. The survey, undertaken in February 2012, as part of another ACELG research Working Project, *Community Engagement in Rural-Remote and Indigenous Local Government*, was carried out by Dr Robyn Morris of Edith Cowan University (Morris, 2012). The survey included some exploratory questions on social media use as part of that work.

The survey, sent to a group of councils in Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia, received responses from 43 councils in rural-remote and Indigenous communities. Thirteen councils (30 per cent) indicated that they were using social media to communicate with constituencies. Nine councils (21 per cent) indicated that they were considering introducing social media, and 21 (49 per cent) indicated that it was not being used.

The main forms of social media used in the 13 councils are indicated in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Rural, Remote and Indigenous Communities - use of social media



Source: Morris, R. 2012. Community Engagement in Rural-Remote and Indigenous Local Government. Sydney: Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, Edith Cowan University

The survey response indicates that Facebook is by far the most popular social media site used by rural, remote and Indigenous communities.

9.3 Issues identified

Survey respondents identified a wide range of problems, issues and challenges associated with the use of social media. Some of these issues related to the actual council while other issues related to the rural, remote and Indigenous communities. Comments from respondents are summarised below.

9.3.1 Digital literacy and access

Respondents identified that many areas do not have internet or mobile phone coverage. A lack of access to high-speed internet severely limits councils' ability to use social media and digital media for engagement purposes. Some councils indicated that they are not able to access the required technology.

The situation had been improving with the roll out of the 3G mobile phone broadband network, although other respondents mentioned that the 3G mobile network reception was limited and many missed out. Others indicated that in some areas the existing Telstra network is overloaded with limited capacity for expansion.

A major issue is that households (generally) do not have personal computers or a mobile phone. Some responses indicated that communities have access to computers through the Indigenous Knowledge Centres funded through Queensland Libraries. Another respondent also pointed out that there is virtually no access to 'community' computers in their area, which made social media use next to impossible. In addition, they noted that many have little interest in using social media to engage with council.

Generally, there are low levels of computer literacy and fluency in the use of electronic media; although one council pointed out that many young Indigenous children had access to smart phones and are quite adept in using them.

Responses also tended to indicate that people speak many different languages and that English is neither the main language of communication nor the language that most people speak competently. One respondent pointed out:

None of the main languages of communication spoken here have any traction in social media. I believe in order to use social media people would have to learn English.

The low level of literacy was highlighted by another respondent, who commented: “Many businesses in this town don’t even use email, the general population is certainly not using social media. We even get criticised for using newspaper ads and printed posters/flyers, because of low levels of literacy.”

Councils suggested that a Rural Transaction Model should be developed based, for example, on a Telecentre model. This is a community facility where people can access computers, the internet, and other digital technologies that enable them to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others while they develop essential digital skills. This is being done by the Shire of Halls Creek in the central Kimberley region of Western Australia.

9.3.2 Abuse (overuse) of social media in the workplace

The potential for excess use of social media by staff has prompted the banning of social media in some council systems. Feedback, however, indicated that banning social media has reduced the ability of council staff to interact with members of the community on a less formal basis, as well as making it hard to stay in touch with community opinion and to influence it.

9.3.3 Requirement to comply with State Government policy

One non-incorporated council commented that being within the State Government jurisdiction results in centralist types of control which makes it too hard, and therefore not timely, to use social media for information dissemination.

9.3.4 Cost of development

Councils pointed to the cost and time taken for implementation and the uncertain benefit received back. It was pointed out that the expectations on Indigenous councils have grown considerably over the past few years without any extra funding to carry out these extra roles and responsibilities.

9.3.5 Governance

An issue relating to governance was identified. This relates to differences in values between local government roles, traditional owner cultures and prescribed body corporate requirements. Each has different and not always aligned positions.

This places significant constraints on achieving aligned communications and engagement around a bureaucratic structure especially in discussion with Indigenous Land Councils with Heritage and Native Title determinations. Strategic directions of a Prescribed Body Corporate are not necessarily aligned and limit the capacity to engage.

9.3.6 Staffing and skills

Councils pointed to staffing issues, such as finding a suitable person willing to take responsibility for utilising social media, keeping information up to date, and maintaining systems.

A further issue of concern is the difficulties councils face in attracting employees to work and live in rural-remote and Indigenous communities. It is also difficult to find appropriate housing.

In mining areas, staff retention is a problem as councils are competing with the resources sector for the same employees. Companies are poaching staff with offers of more generous remuneration levels.

9.3.7 Other communication channels

In small communities, councillors continually receive informal community feedback; at social gatherings, on the street, and in phone calls. They feel that this is enough consultation.

It was also considered that radio is still the most effective media to inform Indigenous people about what's going on (in the community and 'on country').

Another council pointed out that there is a challenge for elected members in knowing how to respond to negative comments posted on social media by community members.

9.3.8 Security

One council stated the following reasons for not engaging in social media:

- Council Record Keeping Policy for retaining records in accordance with the relevant State-Territory legislative requirements.
- Community members may use Facebook (or other channels) as a means to slander council.
- Having staff make comment or responses incorrectly.

9.3.9 Community tensions

There are genuine concerns and misgivings that need to be addressed. One council commented that: Unfortunately it is believed that the use of social media will exacerbate community tensions. This is evidenced by the tensions and dysfunction as a result of mobile telephone use, especially texting. Tensions are created within family and clan groups when inappropriate text messages are transmitted which ultimately result in serious disagreements and fights, which can involve large numbers of people. Another council identified the challenge of having four separate towns within its boundaries and the potential fallout if the communities in the towns began to make comparisons using social media.

9.4 Summary of key findings

The findings from the exploratory investigation into how rural, remote and Indigenous councils and their communities are using social media are very telling.

As noted in Section 9.2, of the 43 councils that responded to the survey, 13 councils indicated that they are using social media to communicate with constituents, while 21 indicated that they do not use social media at all. Encouragingly, a further nine indicated that they are considering introducing social media.

Councils that have adopted social media use it as an additional communication platform to their website. They also use it to promote events, inform people about council decisions and as a way of easily disseminating information about urgent items or in an emergency. Other councils said that they use it to promote a positive image of council and to tell good news stories.

An important use mentioned by some respondents is the community engagement aspect of social media. It was pointed out that social media makes it very easy for people to provide feedback and comment on programs and services. In these cases, councils indicated that they use it in an attempt to open dialogue with a different demographic. They find that the community will engage with council through social media, providing counter arguments and responses to questions.

Barriers to using social media include lack of access to technology, difficulties with literacy, language issues, and problems with recruiting staff and finding suitable housing for them.

The findings from the survey of rural, remote and Indigenous councils support the findings from the ACELG national online survey, which identified a lack of resources as one of the biggest barriers to councils adopting social media. More specifically, the survey indicates that some councils in rural, remote and Indigenous communities experience many additional issues that are not experienced by other local government areas. These additional issues impact negatively on their ability to use social media. On this basis, there is a case for further work be undertaken to better understand the unique circumstances experienced by these councils.

10 Strategic ways forward and recommendations

Social media and related technologies of smart phones and tablets are increasing rapidly in use. Together they are having an enormous impact on the way people are consuming information, learning, being entertained and importantly, communicating.

The research for this report demonstrates that social media is being used to varying degrees in local government across Australia. While some councils are fully embracing social media and digital technologies and incorporating them into their organisations, others are tentatively experimenting with their use, and many are not using social media at all. Very often this wide variance is due to a lack of understanding about social media by local government, as well as concern about the extent of resources required to properly incorporate social media into a council's communication activities.

While this report finds that local government has much to gain from using social media, it is also believed that it is better that councils stop and give serious consideration to how they will use social media, rather than launching in without a clear purpose. While social media tools are readily available and often free, using social media to achieve organisational outcomes requires careful consideration and a well thought through approach. It also requires resourcing with staff trained specifically in its use.

This report urges councils to take a strategic approach to using social media. This means putting in place appropriate policies, processes, training and resources to ensure councils have the capability to take advantage of the many opportunities that social media offers councils both to support the organisation's corporate objectives and encourage innovation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that ACELG work with its partners, the local government sector, to:

- Create greater awareness and understanding of the application and use of social media (for example, through further development of IKEN).
- Develop programs in partnership with local government associations and peak bodies to build capability in social media, including for elected members, executive staff and people involved in the coordination of services delivery.
- Identify and research areas where social media can be used to enable and even drive innovation.
- Investigate the establishment of a national award for the innovative use of social media by local government.

Useful websites

- Innovation and Knowledge Exchange Network (IKEN)
<http://www.iken.net.au/communities-of-practice/community-engagement-and-social-media>
- Talking Heads “Social media and the paradigm shift to e-democracy” video interview
[http://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/about-us/media-centre/multimedia-gallery/videos/76/social-media-and-the-paradigm-shift-towards-e-democracy#!prettyPhoto\[pp_gal\]/0/](http://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/about-us/media-centre/multimedia-gallery/videos/76/social-media-and-the-paradigm-shift-towards-e-democracy#!prettyPhoto[pp_gal]/0/)
- Gov 2.0 Taskforce <http://gov2.net.au/>
- Future Gov <http://wearefuturegov.com/>
- GovLoop - Social Network for Government <http://www.govloop.com/page/about-us>
- Defining the Convergence of media and influence www.briansolis.com
- The Dan Slee Blog <http://danslee.wordpress.com/>
- Heather Mansfield www.diosacomunications.com/bio/htm
- Devon County Council - Social Media for Councillors
<http://www.slideshare.net/carlhaggerty/devon-county-council-social-media-for-councillors>
- The Cluetrain Manifesto
<http://www.slideshare.net/agaraialde/the-cluetrain-manifesto-book>
- Wake up to Social Media
<http://www.slideshare.net/nextbyramla/social-media-presentation-755530>

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ABOUT ACELG

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

PROGRAM DELIVERY

ACELG's activities are grouped into six program areas:

- Research and Policy Foresight
- Innovation and Best Practice
- Governance and Strategic Leadership
- Organisation Capacity Building
- Rural-Remote and Indigenous Local Government
- Workforce Development

[Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government](http://www.ancelg.org.au)

PO BOX 123 Broadway NSW 2007

T: +61 2 9514 3855 F: +61 9514 4705

E: ancelg@ancelg.org.au W: www.ancelg.org.au