

Briefing Note



Social Media, Development and Governance



Key Topics

- Types of social media
- Relationship between social media and society
- Doctrine of homophily and echo chambers
- Surveillance through data trails
- Cyberbullying
- Social media and the Sustainable Development Goals
- Social media in governance
- Demand politics
- Supply politics
- Government as an overseer and a user of social media

Social media is a form of online, many-to-many, and interactive communication that affords collaborative action. It is a digital platform that transmits user-generated content. All social media share the following elements: Participation; Openness; Conversation; Community; and Connectedness.

While Facebook is the most popular social media platform, there are different kinds of social media. These include:

- social network sites (SNS) – which allow discovering information about others and enable a network of weak ties;
- blogs – online sites containing writers’ experiences, observations, opinions, etc.;
- wikis – editable Web pages using a particular software;
- podcasts – audio (and sometimes with video) files on specific topics downloaded or streamed to a computer or mobile device;
- forums – sites where participants hold discussion in the form of posted messages;
- content communities – individuals getting together online around common objects of interest;
- microblogging – posting short digital content— text, pictures, links, short videos—on the Internet; and
- messaging apps – mobile-phone-based software that allows users to send and receive information using the internet.

Social Media and Society

Social media is transforming culture. It does so by helping us: learn more from each other; crowdsource wisdom; increase appreciation of different cultures; gain visible support for our causes; and challenge the status quo. Social media also enables the sharing and preservation of minority languages and indigenous knowledge. For Australian aborigines, social media is a vital resource for community-building, helping those at risk of suicide or self-harm, and providing a powerful outlet for political activism.

Social media is a solution to unmet social needs. Social failure occurs when mutually advantageous interactions do not happen due to space and time constraints. Friendship is lost when one moves to another city for work. The life quality of the elderly will decrease when they become less mobile. Some families break up when the father or mother works in another county. Social media allows vital social interactions to continue. It gives stay-at-home mothers richer social lives. Social media also allows overseas workers and refugees to keep in touch with the families they left behind.

However, social media also comes with challenges to society.

Social media reinforces homophily – the tendency to form strong social connections with people of the same defining characteristics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity and personal beliefs). **It also supports echo chambers** – groups in which beliefs are shared in a way that contrary views from outsiders are paid no attention. Homophily and echo chambers can increase social polarization and social conflict.

Social media companies conduct surveillance through data trails as part of their business model(s). The profiles they create as a result of what users like, love, laugh at, get surprised with, feel sad, and get angry about are very accurate. These user profiles are sold to advertisers.

Social media benefits children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and even technical skills. At the same time, children and adolescents face risks when using social media largely because of their limited capacity for self-regulation and susceptibility to peer pressure. While there is worrisome evidence of social media’s negative effects on wellbeing, particularly among the young, these comes from small studies.

Social Media and Development

Social media plays the following roles in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- SDG 1 – Ending Poverty. Social media gives voice to people living in poverty by giving them a platform to share experience and co-create policies and programs.
- SDG 2 – Achieving Zero Hunger. Social media has been used in high-profile activities around hunger and nutrition like “Live Below the Line”, “Fight Hunger Social Media Campaign”, and “Spoon Selfies” campaigns.
- SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being. Social media improves health and wellbeing by 1) raising awareness and countering misinformation; 2) being a vital tool in crisis communication; 3) facilitating the monitoring of public health; 4) promoting citizen engagement; 5) providing patient support; and 6) facilitating research processes.
- SDG 4 – Quality Education. Social media improves education through 1) improved communication and collaboration between teaches and students; 2) improving learners’ literacy, communication, and reading skills; 3) facilitating search for information; 4) enhancing parental involvement; and 5) providing distance learning opportunities.
- SDG 5 – Gender Equality. Social media has been successfully used in mobilizing attention and accountability for women’s rights as well as challenging discrimination and stereotypes.
- SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation. Social media is used in clean water campaigns. It has also been used to generate and share knowledge about sanitation and hygiene for all, and ending open defecation.
- SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy. Social media toolkits can help promote facts, dispel common myths, and help spread the truth about renewable energy. It can drive the conversation on the global impact of green energy. Social media has also made possible “community-based social marketing model” (CBSM) for influencing public behavior towards renewable energy.
- SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth. Social media created jobs that did not exist before. It performs three main roles in growing the economy: democratization of information, platform for economy activities, and new ecosystem for entrepreneurs. Social media has helped small businesses to grow their market and sales.
- SDG 9 – Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. Social media can be used to facilitate open innovation and user collaboration at the different stages of the innovation funnel. It can also be used to create innovative financial services targeted at small-scale enterprises in developing countries.
- SDG 10 – Reducing Inequality. Social media is a tool for empowering and promoting social, economic and political inclusion. People with intellectual disability can benefit from its use. Social media also facilitates orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people.

- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities. Social media plays a role in providing accessible and sustainable transport systems for all. It provides public transport operators and agencies a cost-effective, reliable, and timely mechanism for sharing information with passengers. Social media can also help improve wastewater disposal.
- SDG 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production. Social media can be used in awareness-raising and education on sustainable consumption and lifestyles by: providing adequate information through standards and labels; engaging in sustainable public procurement; and, supporting environmentally sustainable behavior.
- SDG 13 – Climate Action. Social media can be a powerful tool for grassroots-based climate action. It provides a space for three important domains of climate change communication: information, discussion, and mobilization.
- SDG 14 – Life Below Water. Social media can enhance scientific literacy that is a necessary part of efforts to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources.
- SDG 15 – Life on Land. Social media provides the public with a range of different ways to comment, learn, and organize on forests and woodlands issues. Social media has successfully improved 1) public engagement and democratization processes; 2) spatial decision-making processes using data volunteered by the public; 3) the monitoring of citizen science mediated by technology; and 4) pro-environmental and other behavioral change related to woodland management and recreation.
- SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The roles of social media in peace-building are 1) lowering the barriers to entry of individuals and groups seeking to communicate; 2) increasing the speed and spread of information; 3) enabling strategic interaction and constant adaptation as each side shifts its communication technology and tactics; and 4) generating new data and information. Social media also plays a role in reducing corruption through: 1) analysis, commentary and advocacy; and 2) investigation and crowdsourcing.
- SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals. Social media data could be used to build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress. Social media analysis can complement household surveys and administrative data to ensure real-time monitoring and measurement of the SDGs.

Social Media in Governance

Social media can be a powerful tool for societies in defining and achieving their common future.

It enables political participation by providing citizens with the means to engage in discussions with each other, their elected representatives and other government officials on their common future.

Social media has created a new form of activism called “hashtag activism” – fighting for or supporting a cause through post, likes, and sharing. An example is the 2017 #MeToo campaign which highlighted the issue of sexual harassments and the need for greater gender equality.

Social media is changing social movements in three ways: 1) it provides update and real time information to activists; 2) it is a space for expressing political opinions; and 3) it is also a venue for finding and mobilizing information and joining causes. The most significant effect of social media in social movement is that it affords leaderless social movements. The 2016 South Korean candlelight vigils that lead to the ouster of President over a corruption scandal is an example of social media-powered social movement.

Social media is playing an increasingly significant role on elections and political campaigns. Globally, political parties have used social media to convey their messages, persuade voters, and mobilize their supporters. However, social media is also being used for disinformation by trolls, bots and sock puppets. As a result, the environment for reasoned political discussions is polluted.

Social media not only improves but also transforms government. Social media enables an open (in terms of access to information), social (in terms of greater interactions because of networks within and between governments) and user-centered (in terms of

content and technology) government. Among the best practices in the use of social media by governments are 1) the drafting of a constitution and laws (Iceland and New Zealand respectively); 2) e-Rulemaking – using social media to help streamline and improve regulatory management; 3) helping inform citizens about governmental decision making and involve them more meaningfully in the process; 4) promoting a more cost-effective regulatory compliance; and 5) knowledge management as exemplified by Intellipedia and Diplopedia (US) as well as by local governments in Melbourne (Future Melbourne), Dushanbe (Mometavonem.tj) and Jakarta (@TMCPoldaMetro).

Roles of Government

The two courses of action on social media for governments are overseeing and using social media.

Overseeing social media ranges from regulating it, shutting it down, and educating citizens on its appropriate use.

The regulation of social media is a contentious issue. Many are calling for the regulation of social media for failing to curb unacceptable/harmful content and failing to protect privacy. Others insist that despite these failures, self-regulation is still the most effective course of action. A suggested middle ground is co-regulation or “government mandated self-regulation” – where all social media stakeholders are involved in defining acceptable content and creating codes of conduct.

A few governments have resorted to social media and internet shutdowns during emergencies or crisis. These acts incur real costs in the economy and, at best, are blunt instruments to combat disinformation. They can also be harmful by denying citizens access to communication platforms at a time when they need them the most.

Educating citizens – enhancing their ability to understand digital technologies and equipping them to be able to distinguish between news and disinformation - is arguably the most important, long-term mission that government could take the fight against mis/disinformation.

Ultimately, each country must formulate social media policies and rules that are appropriate for their particular domestic social, legal and political contexts. It is also important that any policy action on this should ensure the solution is not more harmful than the problem.

Governments should be a ‘model’ user of social media – demonstrating an alternative and appropriate use of social media.

To be a model user, governments must 1) define a Government Social Media Policy (SMP); 2) resource the SMP; 3) build capacity; 4) measure progress; and 5) lead the change.

Ideally, a social media policy must be part of the broader strategy that harnesses the power of digital technology to achieve sustainable development and good governance goals. A good social media policy must include the following: 1) objectives and expectations; 2) governance modes and guidelines; 3) legal compliance; 4) skills and resources; 5) collaboration and community building; 6) managing risks of social media use; and 7) monitoring and measuring social media impacts.

Adequate resources are necessary to implement the social media policy. Here it is important to remember that it is not a question of how much time and energy you put in social media. What is important is how to maximize the available resources.

To help ensure success, it is vital to develop social media capacity in the civil service. It is important not only to provide them with the right skills but also give them proper guidance. Ideally, social media training is incorporated in the overall civil service training.

It is also very important to develop metrics to track progress. Measuring social media success is easier with automated tools. Some of them are built in to the social media applications themselves while others are for free.

Leadership is a key ingredient in a successful social media use in development and governance. Leaders should serve as: 1) orchestrators who drive strategic social-media utilization; 2) architects who create an enabling organizational infrastructure; and 3) innovators who are always looking at new developments that will open opportunities and spawn better ways to govern.

**This Briefing Note is an abridged version of APCICT's
Academy Module on "Social Media, Development and Governance"
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**Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and
Communication Technology for Development
5th Floor, G-Tower, 175 Art Center Daero, Yeonsu-gu,
Incheon, Republic of Korea
www.unapcict.org**