

# Government Information Management and Usage via Social Media in Israel / Gal Yavetz

## ABSTRACT

### Background

The right of access to government information is a crucial underlying foundation for promoting trust in governance and enhancing the processes of public discourse. Social media based on online social networks can greatly assist in improving citizens' access to government information, thus increasing transparency and enabling innovative forms of civic engagement and participation. Today, social media comprises an integral part of day-to-day communication for many citizens at the family, community, urban and even national and international levels. With the incorporation of social networks into the framework of many government organizations around the world, such as authorities and ministries, a new window has been opened for the exchange of information between citizens and their government representatives in a fast, accessible and informative (interactive) manner.

Although implementation of these technologies is accompanied by many challenges, and even barriers, many opportunities to disseminate information immediately and directly to different populations can also present themselves. The research literature in the field describes the many challenges facing government organizations as they work to adopt these platforms. These include: barriers related to corporate bureaucracy, working with international companies and corporations that represent third parties, and even obstacles related to the systematic adoption of these sources of information into citizens' behavioral relationships to government information, taking into account varied factors of prior government trust, privacy and digital literacy issues among the population.

In Israel, many government agencies have embraced social media as a channel for communicating with citizens and disseminating information. Previous research examining the Israeli government's use of these technologies has focused on aspects related to election campaigns, as well as the

general political activity of Knesset members and local authorities. However, in light of the many challenges and opportunities inherent in online discourse between government organizations and citizens, the need for more current research, specifically focused on how national and wide-scale government information is disseminated on social media, has emerged. The main goals and research questions that guided us in this work were to characterize and analyze how government information is transmitted to citizens - the usage, strategies and barriers involved in the adoption of these social networking tools by government ministries on the one hand and citizens on the other. This study seeks to outline the state of access to government information in Israel via online social networks from a variety of directions and perspectives: through analysis and examination of the information itself, the decision-making strategies of government decision makers operating in this field, and the perceptions and experiences of Israeli citizens who employ social media to obtain this information.

### **Research Methods**

This study is the first of its kind to examine the management, dissemination and acquisition of government information through social media in Israel, by employing a Mixed-methods approach. Through the use of quantitative and qualitative content analyses, by conducting in-depth interviews with administrators on the one hand and with users on the other, and by use of an online questionnaire examining the patterns of action and use of government information of citizens in Israel, we have adopted a Case Study approach to illustrate the existing situation by cross-referencing many different sources of information. The study was conducted in a multi-stage manner, divided into four main phases.

In the first phase, we conducted a comprehensive content analysis that began with a review and mapping of all the social-digital tools operated by government organizations in Israel. During this phase, we completed a comparative quantitative content analysis of the activities of 46 ministries and government agencies, focusing on Facebook as the leading platform for Israeli offices. Next, we examined the frequency of distribution of publications at the offices, engagement rates and responses, types of information, media configuration, and referrals made by the offices over a six-month period. In all, a total of 6,292 Facebook posts were checked quantitatively. In addition, we

conducted a qualitative analysis of the records with the highest engagement rates from each firm, thus creating and classifying 230 different posts.

In the second phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with 15 executives and decision makers in government offices who were responsible for operating the social platforms, gathering information, editing and disseminating it online. In the third stage of the project, we conducted a user survey by distributing an online questionnaire to citizens who were regular users of social media in Israel. 202 participants responded to this questionnaire, which analyzed their findings on the needs, behavior and assessment of government information on the Internet in general and on social networks in particular. In the fourth and final stage, we sought to deepen the findings of the questionnaires, to confirm and validate them through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 15 Israeli citizens who regularly use social media.

### **Main Findings**

The findings of the first phase of the study revealed several notable conclusions. We found that government agencies that adopt a sharing strategy, through openness to user feedback and criticism, are more active and efficient than those who do not follow this method. We also found that most Israeli government agencies and offices refer to internal pages within Facebook, such as sharing existing content or additional pages, while only a small number of offices refer to official government websites. In addition, we found that much of the information shared by government organizations is visual, such as images and/or videos, and that this type of content yielded the highest user engagement rates. Lastly, we found that the most popular content dealt with Policy and Events or Symbolic Information. Policy and Event content contained informative updates about policy changes, new initiatives, and invitations to events sponsored or organized by the various offices. Symbolic message content included references to national dates and events, as well as expressing greetings or congratulations to various entities.

The findings of the second phase, which were based on in-depth interviews with managers and decision makers, indicated that most government ministries follow a regular policy of disseminating information on social networks, but without presenting the terms of access that are available to citizens. In addition, while the status of social networks in general and of Facebook in

particular has become stronger among digital executives, it is evident that the status of official government office sites has weakened.

The findings of the third phase of the research, which was based on the submission of an online questionnaire, offered a number of insights into user methods of searching and assimilating government information. We found that the majority of respondents did not use social networks as a tool for seeking or locating government information, and an even higher percentage of respondents did not proactively contact a government office through social networks for service. Most of the respondents testified that they were mostly exposed to governmental information unintentionally, mainly by accident, through sponsored ads and random content.

Not surprisingly, together with this, we found a significant positive relationship between digital information literacy and the government information exposure index on the internet: the higher the digital information literacy, the higher the visibility and consumption of online government information. However, contrary to the presumption, we found no correlation between the digital information literacy index and the government information exposure index on social networks.

We also found that the younger the social media users, the more likely they were to be exposed to online government information. Another notable finding at this time indicated a positive relationship between citizens' political ability (political efficacy) and the extent to which public information on social networks in particular and the internet in general is disclosed and incorporated.

The objectives of the fourth and final phase of the study were designed to deepen the findings of the questionnaires, to confirm and validate their results through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with Israeli citizens who use social media. From the findings of this phase, we found that the users are interested in a multitude of sources and channels for disseminating information, even in a way that makes information accessible to populations and audiences with lower digital literacy. In addition, users indicated general dissatisfaction with the usability of existing official government sites, with some even resorting to alternatives from commercial companies or social associations to acquire new information. Despite the multitude of social media sources, users do not proactively approach government agencies through social media for services

and personal information, due to concerns about privacy and a general lack of trust in the platform and even in the offices themselves.

### **The Importance and Contribution of this Study**

The importance of this study lies in the need to understand the deepening interrelationship and every-growing ties between government organizations and online social platforms. The steadily increasing day-to-day use of online social networks by government offices on the one hand and citizens on the other brings with it a genuine need to understand these relationships, and to describe and examine users' patterns of action, as opposed to the practices of decision makers and practitioners in the field.

Using varied qualitative and quantitative research methods, this dissertation is the first serious effort to explore in depth how day-to-day government information is managed, disseminated and communicated to citizens in Israel through social media, as well as to examine these same citizens' perception of this process. The research findings shed light on how decision makers in government offices and organizations perceive social media, as opposed to how those citizens who use these services perceive them.

The findings of this study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge dealing with citizens' information needs and behavior toward acquiring government information, understanding the limitations and barriers for citizens associated with using these tools, and even the opportunities available to decision makers to improve information delivery, quality, and accessibility.

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