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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Social Media to help identify emerging complaints about service provision – Evidence Synthesis

1. Introduction

1.1 The internet offers a plethora of possibilities for customers to voice their opinions and exchange information about products or services. Typical social media channels include blogs, microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), wikis (e.g., Wikipedia), and multimedia sharing services (e.g., YouTube and Flickr) (Sadeghi, 2012, Scott, 2006 and Wilcox et al., 2011). Millions of messages are posed daily on such sites making them valuable sources of opinions and sentiments.

1.2 As may be expected, the private sector has been ahead of the public sector in harnessing social media's benefits. However, use of social media in the public sector is increasing. It is now the norm for national and local governments to use social media in some format. As of November 2014, 28 out of 34 OECD countries had a twitter account for the top executive institution and 21 had a Facebook account.

1.3 The type of use varies; many agencies use social media for their own communications. Fewer use social media for a dialogue with citizens; to listen, understand and use the messages. In researching this area it is evident that there are many ways of using social media to engage with citizens. Examples range from full co-production of policies using crowdsourced wikis (e.g., Canada took this route to develop their policy on social innovation) to using social media for online debates or campaigns (e.g., debating how to lower debt and campaigns healthier eating). In order to keep the scope manageable and relevant, this paper focusses on the specific use of social media as a platform for complaints, but it is apparent that there are numerous potential areas of future interest and research.

2. limitations

2.1 As the use of social media is a relatively new area, there has been little in the way of robust research into its impacts. Although there have been a number of recent studies, most necessarily rely on data which is a couple of years old. As such, the uptake of social media in the samples is low and does not reflect the current situation. Additionally, as the numbers using social media in the data are low, it is difficult to draw robust conclusions.

3. Rationale for using Social Media for complaints

3.1 A 2013 report by NESTA suggested that the government should shift from a delivery model to a 'relational' model in which there was an open dialogue with citizens, particularly in the case of complaints. Social media provides a useful platform by which to make this shift and the technology allows a more two way relationship that would not have been possible a decade ago.

3.2 Whilst recognising that this area of technology is particularly fast moving, a report from the Public Engagement Working Group (2012) provides an indication of the scope for social media use. A survey of Welsh public sector organisations found that 81% were using social media. When asked how they could extend their use of social media, the most common response was customer feedback (52%).

3.3 The 2016 UK Customer Satisfaction Index indicates that national public services have low levels of primary interaction with customers via social media when compared to other sectors. Public services fare badly in terms of customers' satisfaction with telephone interactions. This suggests that there is an opportunity to increase social media interactions to the level of other sectors, and that this could help to shift some interactions from the problematic channel of the telephone.

3.4 The Office for Rail and Road (ORR 2015) postulates that a long-term downward trend seen by transport operators in complaints could be due to an increase in the number of people taking to social media to vent their frustrations. The ORR state that it's not possible to record complaints on via social media at this point, but that should be the long term goal as they offer a rich source of information.

3.5 The Institute of Customer Service reports that there was a dramatic rise in the number of customers who took to social media to complain about a product or service between 2014 and 2015 (2015). The survey they conducted found that 12% of social media users had used Twitter or Facebook to complain in the previous three months. With this in mind, the growing importance of social media use is evident.

4. Complaints in other industries

4.1 A report from the ORR (2015) looked at other regulatory bodies and their requirements for complaints procedures. They found that there were no requirements (by the Finance Conduct Authority, Ofcom or Ofgem) for providers to allow complaints via social media. However, the energy companies in particular do record Twitter complaints and have specific Twitter feeds from their customer services team.

5. Channel choice

5.1 Reddick et al (2014) found that citizens tended to use web sites for information retrieval but the telephone for individual problem solving. However, Reddick came to these conclusions on the basis of a survey published in 2012 which still found low levels of social media uptake. We know from the private sector that social media is increasingly used as a platform for problem solving and the resolution of issues. Given the marked dissatisfaction of citizens with public sector telephone services, the opening of social media as an alternative seems like a positive move.

5.2 Despite the increasing penetration of ICT into daily lives, there remains a digital divide in terms of access to the internet and technology, and having the knowledge and skills to use it. Reddick et al (2014) finds that the divide is related to channel choice and suggests offering many channels or offering initiatives to build ICT skills.

6. The link between social media and satisfaction

6.1 Looking at e-government in general, Anthopoulos et al (2007) reported that e-government tended to increase the levels of satisfaction with government as a result of transparency, time reduction and service personalisation.

6.2 There have been numerous studies into the link between reviews on social media and traditional measurements of satisfaction in hospitals. One study by Greaves (2013) looking at hospitals found it possible to identify salient topics from online patient free text comments using Machine Based Learning. When these were compared to traditional survey measures of satisfaction with hospitals there was a positive relationship or association. This suggests that online comments could be used as further evidence alongside traditional survey methods. Greaves suggests that eventually hospitals may be able to harness this information to develop a close to real-time early warning system for poor care. Glover

(2015) found that hospitals with lower re-admissions rates were also rated more highly on Facebook (in the US).

6.3 Where effective online complaint management takes place in the public domain, Einwiller et al (2015) indicate that it provides an opportunity to win back the complainant as well as appealing to others and shaping reputation.

7. How do organisations respond to social media issues?

7.1 Maritz research (2011) surveyed 1,298 US twitter users who have used twitter to complain about a brand. They found that around half expected the organisation to read their tweet, but only around one third had received a response to their complaint.

7.2 A recent study by Einwiller et al (2015) found that almost half (47%) of the complaints voiced online received no response from the company or organisation. This shows that even corporate companies are only moderately responsive to online complaints. Maritz Research (2011) found that of those who had complained via twitter and had a response, only 4% didn't like hearing from the company. Almost three quarters were satisfied with the company's response. Of the two thirds who hadn't had a response to their complaint, 86% would have wanted to hear from the company (in relation to their complaint).

7.3 In terms of responsiveness, Einwiller found that the average response time for social media complains was 7 hours, with half of complaints responded to within an hour. However, Einwiller's analysis showed that speed of response was not correlated with satisfaction. This is further explored in a small survey¹ undertaken by Stránská et al (2015) which showed that social media complainants expect a relatively quick reply; one third of respondents expect a company's reaction within an hour, over half are willing to wait one day and only 10 percent two days or longer. We can conclude from these studies that complainants would ideally like a response within an hour, but a response time of up to approximately 10 hours does not impact upon satisfaction.

7.4 Stránská further explored behaviours and expectations in terms of dissatisfied customers and found that one in five dissatisfied customers complain on the respective

¹ The survey was undertaken in the Czech Republic on a sample of 200 people.

company's Facebook page. The main advantage of this is seen as the speed of making the issue public. The survey also highlighted the fact that care needs to be taken by companies when responding to a complaint on social media; failures can lead to an escalation of the problem. Over half of those surveyed said that a pre-planned phrase response was the biggest mistake a company could make. Einwiller found that complainants who received gratitude (thanking them for their complaint) and those who were asked for more information were significantly more satisfied than those who didn't. Expressions of regret or apology had no impact on satisfaction. This result is perhaps surprising as it goes against the common belief that an apology is sometimes all that is needed. Einwiller suggests that an apology may not be successful because it is expected. It is worth noting that this is the finding of one study; this area is worth further exploration.

7.5 Einwiller notes that a facilitated transfer to a team able to handle a specific complaint can increase satisfaction, but shunting complainants does not. There is still a reluctance or inability to resolve complaints in open social media but so long as customers are actively connected with the right unit or employee, the act of transfer is not seen as negative. The area of response is explored later in this paper.

7.6 Stránská et al (2015) interviewed 12 experts in social media to investigate how complaints made using social media are best dealt with. The most relevant messages are:

- Tone of voice – it is important that those running the Social Media pages have an appropriate tone of voice which is relevant to the community and also consistent.
- Timing – as discussed with regard to what people expect, timing is key. Social media users expect a response far more quickly than using traditional complaint methods. This can be especially problematic if the work is contracted out and the agency then has to consult with the WRA. The consensus was that the complainant should be contacted within one hour to acknowledge their complaint, with a view to a resolution within 24 hours.
- Branding – although social media administration may be outsourced or done by a separate team to the helpdesk, the linkage is important to maintain the same feel and tone. Also, when planning who should undertake the administration, qualified, experienced professionals are recommended (there are many examples when the use of under experienced staff have caused widespread corporate damage)
- Response platforms – use the same platform for the response as the complaint was made in. This could then lead somewhere else if necessary.

8. How can social media help

8.1 There are many ways in which social media can help a company or organisation. In terms of monitoring social media for complaints or feedback, the main benefit can be seen as managing enquiries and feedback in a timely manner (Kennedy 2014). If some issues or common questions can be solved in the public arena, an organisation can reap the benefits of telling many people in one go. The information would then be searchable and would help future potential complainants who have a similar issue.

8.2 Obviously, however, if many people are raising the same issue, there is a problem with the information or the processes that they've been instructed to go through. By aggregating the data organisations can identify trends and problem areas. This is highlighted in a study by New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and researchers and Columbia University used online reports of 'sick', 'vomit' or 'food poisoning' to identify unreported foodborne illnesses (Harrison et al 2014). As a result, they identified three establishments where health code violations were rife. Although this type of analysis was very time consuming, it indicates that online feedback can be used to focus on trending terms and look for common themes (to see if certain types of complaint are linked to particular areas).

8.3 Hays (2015) reached a similar conclusion when investigating tweets regarding the 2014 NHS England public awareness campaign of the care.data project (data from patients was to be stored centrally). Hays argued that the analysis of tweets allowed concerns to be identified and methods of overcoming them could have been enabled. The study also highlighted the danger of not considering public opinion, especially when designing a new system. However, Hays also advises against using Twitter as a stand alone source as contributors may lie more heavily on one side of the debate. This is also highlighted in the study of Obamacare below.

8.4 Customer services which are delivered via web based platforms tend to be considerably cheaper than the more traditional methods (Kennedy 2014), despite the fact they are likely to encourage more engagement. As such, by harnessing social media as a viable channel, an organisation can bring down costs.

9. Challenges and Cautions

9.1 Anthopoulos et al (2015) demonstrated the caution in interpreting tweets, as well as the danger in not responding appropriately. In the case of the failure of the launch of the Healthcare.gov website in the US (also known as Obamacare), Anthopoulos found that high levels of tweets were linked to key failure points in the project's timeline but that there was evidence of the lack of a corresponding proactive communications management plan. Also, the tweets were not independent of one another. The study suggests that there was a 'very strong twitter-based evidence of a well-orchestrated communications management process by the opposition' which outweighed any defensive or neutral voice. This highlights the need for a proper social media communications plan and prompt response to negative/complaint tweets. In some cases, the lack of such a plan could inadvertently aid a negative fireball effect caused by re-tweeting. Complaints can be seen as early warning signals to allow an organisation to take corrective action before a crisis occurs.

9.2 When considering the use of social media for complaints, it may be worth noting that different social media platforms are likely to be used by different population groups. Einwiller et al (2015) noted that males tended to complain via twitter, whilst females used facebook more often. The same study also found that the response frequency by companies to complaints was slightly higher for Twitter (55%) than for Facebook (51%).

9.3 Kennedy (2014) highlighted the difficulties and expertise needed in analysing social media feedback. The report states that although the data are of demonstrable value there are also challenges and barriers to their use. These include the fact that little is known about the social media user, the limited experience of use in the public sector, the lack of resources and the fact that many tools are 'black box' in nature. This final limitation is important and drawn out by a number of reports. There are a variety of free and paid for analysis tools, but all pull together information in slightly different ways. To the non-professional it is difficult to make sense of these differences or to identify what might be the most appropriate package for use. Kennedy concludes that social media should be used in addition to, rather than in place of more traditional public contact methods.

9.4 The ORR (2015) identify some of the challenges when monitoring Twitter for complaints:

- Separating general dissatisfaction from specific complaints – the ORR gives an example of a tweet *'how do your bosses sleep at night knowing how disgusting your service is. Robbing people daily'*. The ORR points out that this would be logged as a

complaint if searching for Twitter for negative words. However Twitter is a platform for sharing thoughts – how do we distinguish between when people are simply using Twitter as an alternative to conversation (this comment may just as easily have been made to a fellow passenger) or when Twitter is used in the hope of getting a response?

- On a similar vein, interpreting some messages on Twitter is difficult if monitored/recorded automatically – computer programmes cannot identify sarcasm.
- There are also difficulties with the identification of Twitter complaints – unless customers use the organisation hashtag or directly mention the organisation then their issue may go unnoticed. The importance of having a memorable and simple hashtag is obviously key here, but also, there could be a benefit from having a specific customer services hashtag so that customers feel their Tweet is likely to get to the right place. Research by Porism (as part of the ‘Opening up’ work programme) attempted to analyse Tweets about council services but found that only 1.5% of Tweets contained enough geographical information to identify the council to which it related. The inability to pinpoint specific councils was compounded by the fact that English is Tweeted worldwide so Tweets could relate to anywhere, commonly Tweeted words are ambiguous and can’t be pinned to specific councils, and few councils promote hashtags.
- One potential perverse incentive is the fact that a highly active Twitter feed from an organisation is likely to elicit more complaints in Twitter form from customers who feel they’re likely to get a response.

10. Openness and transparency

10.1 In terms of what is expected with a social media presence, Lovari et al (2015) found that Italian municipalities Facebook pages were generally viewed as one-way, top-down tools rather than being seen as for open dialogue. The study suggests that government Facebook sites should be more transparent, in particular providing regular updates and responses to citizens’ suggestions and complaints as well as authorizing citizens to publish posts on Facebook Walls (especially given the design of Facebook for networked sociability).

10.2 The one way nature of public organisations’ use of social media is supported by Walters et al (2011). Walters finds that, despite claims of interactivity on Twitter,

government agencies primarily use it for one-way communications to inform and educate rather than for two-way interactions.

10.3 On the wider issue of transparency and trust, studies have shown that e-government for a particular agency may boost the confidence of those who already have trust in that agency (Morgeson et al 2011).

10.4 Reddick et al (2014) found that concerns about privacy did not deter people from using social media when contacting the government.

11. Security

11.1 There is no consensus as to whether the use of social media should be retained or catalogued to comply with the law. It is clear that government organisations must put in place sufficient data collection methods for them to be able to comply with the Freedom of Information Act. There are also risks involved with using platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Picazo-Vela et al (2012) point out that the government must protect personal information but by using Twitter and Facebook there may be a lack of clarity and ownership of such information.

12. Ethics

12.1 There is a body of research concerning ethics within the social media area. Bekkers et al (2013) suggests that three areas have to be considered when undertaking social media monitoring; perceived privacy, the method of monitoring and the covert nature of monitoring. In terms of privacy, the issue is whether people perceive their comments to be in the public domain or private to the 'group' or forum. Bekkers investigated two forms of monitoring. The first involved a string of keywords for broad online monitoring, the second was to search a specific set of forums on an almost permanent basis. There are privacy issues with the second of these approaches which could be addressed by informing participants of the monitoring presence and purpose. The final issue, covert monitoring, could be addressed by public organisations publicly reporting their monitoring on an annual basis.

13. Impact

13.1 As somewhat expected given the fast moving nature of the area, there is a lack of cost/benefit analysis, or measures of success regarding the implementation and use of social media in government (Institute of Public Administration of Canada 2010).

14. Examples

14.1 In such a fast moving area it is not easy to pinpoint agencies that are ahead of the game. However, the Danish Tax Authority - [@Skattefar](#) (translated as 'Tax Daddy') is mentioned in blogs and articles and having a good social media presence. Likewise, the Spanish National Police Force are also known for building a good relationship with citizens through social media. Both of these are general examples rather than areas of complaint in particular.

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