Looking Beyond Likes: 
Increasing Citizen Engagement with Government Facebook Pages

By 
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Executive Summary
Government use of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, has become common practice over the last five years. However, as governments adopt social media tools as a way to connect with citizens, these efforts fall short of creating meaningful engagement. Government Fan Pages emphasize government driven, one-way information dissemination instead of two-way collaboration and exchange with citizens. This paper looks at a sample of North Carolina city government Facebook Pages to identify features that support two-way interactions between government and citizens that may contribute to increased engagement and participation.
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Background
Social media sites are characterized by the creation of a public/semi-private profile within a defined space, the ability to connect with others who share this space, and user-generated content (Mossberger and Wu 2012; Boyd and Ellison 2007). Social media networks emerged as part of a broader collection of Web 2.0 technologies that allow web-based interaction and collaboration among users that are “inexpensively storable, shareable and participatory” (Mergel 2013, 169; O’Reilly 2005). Web 2.0 tools evolved in the late 1990s and early 2000s from static, non-interactive Web 1.0 tools through which users could view, but not create content (Nabatchi & Mergel 2010). The use of social media by government, or Government 2.0, is seen as a low-cost way to increase citizen participation, transparency, accountability, and service delivery in the public sector. Social networks create new possibilities for online participation as channels that support “bidirectional interaction among government and citizens” (Nabatchi & Mergel 2010). However, the impact of these tools depends on a variety of factors, including the quality of content, specific local government practices, and citizen response. Governments using social media may ask for input from citizens, but this does not necessarily create an “authentic relationship between the bureaucracy and the public” (Morse 2006). Ultimately, a government’s social media presence does not guarantee engagement with citizens.

Public engagement is often described as a spectrum with increased citizen involvement and influence as you move across levels. The lowest level, inform, involves only one-way communication from the government to citizens, while the highest extreme, empower, places decision-making in the hands of the public (IAP2 2007). Moving away from the low participation range of the spectrum requires a shift from one-way “information exchange” to two-way “information processing” models that enable knowledge sharing and meaning making for citizens. (Lukenmeyer & Torres, 7) Social media has the potential to increase public participation, but many governments fail to use social media for anything other than a tool for one-way informing from government to citizen. To make the most out of social media’s dynamic communication capabilities, governments need to go beyond simply sharing information to actually engaging with citizens.

Governments at all levels routinely use the most popular social networks, including Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, to reach a broad audience. Facebook is the largest social network community, with 974 million members worldwide and 168 million users in the United States as of December 2012 (SocialBakers.com n.d.). Between 2009 and 2011, Facebook use by the 75 largest cities in the United States jumped from 13% to 87% (Mossberger and Wu 2012). This rapid growth reflects the increased use of social networks by the public: 65% of adult Internet users also use social networking sites. Of these users, 89% had a Facebook account (Rainie 2012). In 2007, Facebook introduced Fan Pages as a way for private and public organizations to communicate with the public efficiently and inexpensively (Strecker 2011). For local governments, Facebook can be a channel to disseminate information as much as it is a place to hear what the public is saying about government. Among North Carolina municipalities with populations greater than 10,000, 74% use Fan Pages as a way to connect with citizens (UNC School of Government 2011).

Pages are designed to imitate the standard Facebook Timeline user profile. Facebook users “like” a Page to connect with organizations on Facebook and, in turn, these Pages can post content into a Fan’s newsfeed or send direct messages, depending on the individual user’s settings. Liking a Page is distinct from liking content. Fans can “like” pieces of content posted by Pages or friends as a way to give positive feedback on content without leaving a comment.

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1 To promote consistency across Facebook, “Fan” Pages were renamed “Like” Pages in April 2010 (Social Bakers n.d.). Despite this change, most of the features remained the same.

2 Timeline replaced the traditional Facebook Profile for individual users in August 2012.
Individual content items can be liked without liking the Page itself. Depending on a Page’s setup, fans may be able to post directly onto the Page wall, but Page administrators can disable comments to moderate content and control discussion on their Page. However, users can always comment on posts made by the Page or write recommendations about the city that will appear on the Page.³

The number of likes a Page has is often considered a measure of the overall success of a Page, with more likes associated with higher value and legitimacy. However, evaluating a Page based on its total number of likes is a superficial measure that does not provide information about engagement, popular content or what users are saying. To improve understanding of Page activity, Facebook introduced “People Talking About This” in October 2011 to track the number of unique users who created a “story” on a Page in a seven-day period (Inside Facebook).⁴ This new metric does more than simply count likes by capturing how users are “engaging” with the Page and posted content. Ultimately, “People Talking About This” emphasizes the need to look at a range of factors when analyzing interaction and engagement on Facebook.

Social media has the potential to be a tool for governments to connect citizens in a way that enables two-way information processing and increased participation. Designed for interaction and exchange, social media is a place for governments to share and receive information from citizens. However, based on analysis of Pages, government use of social media is often limited to information dissemination that does little to genuinely engage citizens. To move beyond informing and toward engagement, governments need to think strategically about ways social media can be used to increase citizen engagement.

The role of the Internet on citizen participation and engagement is often discussed but the specific effects of social media have only just begun to be examined (Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero 2012). Research on social media and engagement is generally based on evaluating government-side quantitative measures, such as the number of fans a Page has at a given time. However, since social media is based on two-way interactions, that research falls short of examining the engage potential of Pages by looking only at how well a government uses a Page to inform. (Strecker 2011; Mossberger and Wu 2012; Kand and Gearhart 2010). To understand and explore the citizen perspective and to examine the potential of Pages as spaces to engage, this study seeks to identify what, if any, relationship exists between the interactions of citizens and government on Facebook that may lead to engagement, and what characteristics of Pages support engaged interaction.

**Methodology**

To evaluate the role of Fan Pages in government-citizen interactions, the usual measures of engagement—likes, comments, and shares—were expanded by the response to information posted by either the government or citizens on the Page. These elements, along with features that inform, such as posts, photographs, and videos, take a more comprehensive look at engagement through Fan Pages. Data collection was conducted in two phases: an electronic survey of Fan Page visitors and a content analysis of city Fan Pages reported in the survey. A recruitment email was sent to local government public information officers on the NCPIO listserv requesting they post a link to the survey on their city’s official Fan Page. All city Fan Pages were eligible to post the survey, however, posting the survey was at the discretion of the

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³ Facebook policy requires Pages allow user comments on wall posts.

⁴ Other common stories include posting on a Page wall, liking, commenting or sharing a Page’s post, mentioning or tagging a Page, checking in, writing a recommendation, and sending a “RSVP” to a Page event.
public information officer. Because the survey request was sent out via a listserv, the total number of posted links on Fan Pages is unknown.

The variables used for the Fan Page content analysis were based on prior research studies that identified key features of Pages that can contribute to engagement (See Appendix A; Strecker 2011; Mossberger and Wu 2012; Tufts forthcoming). There were 27 questions in the survey, with questions divided into four sections: the respondent’s self-reported assessment of their general Facebook use and specific use of Pages, self-reported degree of civic participation and involvement, questions related to the participant’s opinion on the legitimacy and value of government Pages, and optional demographic questions. (See Appendix B) Of the 71 surveys started, only 50 (63% completion rate) were complete enough to provide useful data for analysis. Pages selected for in-depth analysis were chosen based on survey responses as one of the questions asked respondents to name the city they were referring to for the survey. Twelve Pages were analyzed over a six-month timeframe with every post recorded and categorized, along with the number of Fan interactions and city responses to these interactions. Of the Pages examined, six are highlighted in Figure 2.

**Findings and Discussion**

With 50 survey responses representing only 12 cities, the data collected from the survey sample and Page analyses are too small to draw generalizable conclusions about the role of Pages in fostering citizen engagement. Because of self-selection bias, survey responses may not be an accurate representation of the opinions of average citizens. As a result, the analysis is limited to descriptive statistics because meaningful statistical analysis would not be valid. However, suggestions for ways local governments can increase the engagement potential of their Pages can be identified.

Findings based on survey responses indicate:

- 86% of respondents agree Pages are good places for city governments to post information.
- 78% of respondents agree Pages are good places for engaging citizens.
- 88% of respondents agree Pages help citizens stay informed about current events and public affairs.
- 88% of respondents agree Pages help citizens stay informed about their local community.
- 86% of respondents agree Pages provide information to citizens that they otherwise may not have known about.

Forty percent of respondents reported visiting their local government’s Page with some frequency between once a week to a few times a month. The most common responses report visiting the Page “only if something pertinent [was] posted in newsfeed”, “if pushed there by a post in my feed” or “I wait for it to show up in my FB notifications.”

Sixty-eight percent of responses represent the Town of Chapel Hill. This high response rate, relative to other jurisdictions reported, is less than one percent of the total 3936 Fans of the Town of Chapel Hill’s official Fan Page. This reach, or the number of people who see a post, is small in relation to the Town of Chapel Hill’s total population of 58,000. One factor behind the increased response rate for
the Town of Chapel Hill was the use of multiple channels to share the survey to citizens. Along with posting the survey on the Town’s Page, information about the survey and links to it were publicized on the Town of Chapel Hill’s website, weekly e-news, and Twitter account. (See Appendix B) This multi-channel approach pushed the survey out to a wider audience and presented the information in different formats, likely driving more traffic to the survey.

For high-volume Pages and active users, information tends to get lost, or quickly “buried” among all the other content. Comments from the survey indicate users are aware of content posted by a government Page only when it appears in their newsfeed. For this reason, it may be worthwhile to actively promote important content posted on Pages.

Analysis of Pages indicates a relationship between the types of content posted and Fan engagement. Pages that post significant numbers of photographs and videos generate more interaction and response from Fans. This finding supports previous research that photographs are factors for increased engagement but video posts are also emerging as an important source of engaging content (ICMA 2012). Among the six Pages with high levels of user activity listed in Figure 2, four posted videos on their Pages. With the exception of the Towns of Chapel Hill and Matthews, these cities had more instances of citizen comments and citizen shares than Pages that did not post videos. Despite posting far fewer photographs and videos than other cities in the table, Chapel Hill’s multi-channel approach is a likely factor to its relatively high level of user engagement. The high frequency of responses to citizen comments from the Town of Matthews may have positively influenced citizen engagement despite the low volume of videos and photographs posted by the city.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Asheville</th>
<th>Burlington</th>
<th>Chapel Hill</th>
<th>Matthews</th>
<th>Newton</th>
<th>Rocky Mount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start Date*</td>
<td>12/8/09</td>
<td>12/19/08</td>
<td>10/20/08</td>
<td>6/29/09</td>
<td>10/7/09</td>
<td>1/22/09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videos*</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos*</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>2854</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>7368</td>
<td>1363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fans*</td>
<td>8595</td>
<td>2417</td>
<td>3696</td>
<td>1231</td>
<td>1623</td>
<td>2863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posts by city</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Likes&quot; on city posts</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>899</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User shares</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users allowed to post</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User comments on city posts</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>city responses to comments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 - Comparison of cities' level of Page activity

Among all cities, Rocky Mount was more likely to use Facebook as a tool for both engaging and informing citizens. Of the cities listed in the table, only Rocky Mount allowed users to directly post onto their Page (See Appendix C). Going beyond just enabling user-generated comments, Rocky Mount also regularly responded to comments and questions posted by citizens on their Page. Responding to comments is one approach governments can take to transform a Page from merely informing toward more two-way engagement because it shows government is listening to what the public is saying.

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5 Page data was collected for all activity that occurred June 1st - November 30th, 2012. Most variables are limited to information from this specific month time frame, but variables marked with an asterisk include information for the entire lifetime of the site.
Recommendations
The analysis of Facebook Pages, along with the survey data and insight gathered from attempting the survey, point to several recommendations for local governments seeking to use Facebook beyond a channel for informing and more as a tool of engagement.

- **Use multiple channels to effectively reach your audience:** The relatively high response rate for the Town of Chapel Hill was driven, in part, by a multi-channel communication strategy. Social media works best when it is used along with, and not in place of, traditional forms of communication. Develop a unified communication platform and create integrated campaigns, using both traditional and new media, to cross-promote content. Maximize the audience by sending information out through as many channels as possible.

- **Push content out to cut through the noise:** Users are more likely to notice content that shows up in their newsfeed. Facebook users are often overloaded with information so it is important to think strategically about how to disseminate content. Highlighting content, such as through paid Facebook advertising or “organic promotion,” are ways to prevent information overload and buried content. Promoted posts appear higher in the newsfeed, increasing the likelihood users will notice the post.

- **Post dynamic content:** Visual content, such as photographs and videos are popular and are likely to elicit a reaction or response from users. Asking questions or posting surveys and fill-in-the-blank statuses, tactics used on the U.S. Air Force Recruiting Page, are other ways to foster interaction and engagement with citizens. See Appendix D for examples of U.S. Air Force Recruiting posts.

- **Be interactive:** In order to make a Page a place of interest and information for citizens, local government administrators should be prepared to interact and engage with citizens through this medium. Facilitate interactive communication, connection, and public engagement by responding to comments, answering questions, and creating events to invite fans to offline activities.

Conclusion
Social media has limitations and while it may be a good tool to inform, it may not always be the best tool for engagement. However, if the goal is to go beyond informing toward at least some degree of engagement, then it is important for governments to make the effort to provide citizens with meaningful opportunities to engage. Facebook and other social media tools are designed to spark conversations and interactions between users. Citizens want, and to some degree expect, at least some interaction with their government through Pages. For government, the traditional approach of using social media as a one-way information broadcast from government to citizen fails to use this resource to its full potential for engagement. If governments want to use Facebook and other social media as meaningful engagement tools, they need to take it a step further and enhance opportunities for two-way engagement.

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6 “Organic promotion,” refers to the news feed stories automatically created from the actions taken by people on a specific Page.
Reference List


Perlman, Bruce J. 2012. Social Media Sites at the State and Local Levels: Operational Success and Governance Failures. State and Local Government Review 44(1), 67-75.


Appendix A
Content Analysis Variables
* Adopted from Mossberger & Wu 2012, Strecker 2011, and Tufts Forthcoming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Facilitation</th>
<th>Citizen-Driven Interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link to Facebook from city website</td>
<td>Number of fans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start date of page</td>
<td>Number of likes on city posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of postings by city</td>
<td>Number of citizen shares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of photographs posted by city</td>
<td>Citizens allowed to post directly on page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of videos posted by city</td>
<td>Number of citizen direct tags/posts on page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence of comments policy</td>
<td>Number of citizen tagged photographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of city responses to citizen comments</td>
<td>Number of citizen tagged videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance of third party application tool to post</td>
<td>Number of citizen comments on city posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citizens allowed to make recommendations on page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Questionnaire

1. What city are you referring to for this survey?

2. Are you a resident of this city?
   - Yes
   - No

3. How often do you access Facebook?
   - Never
   - Every Few Hours
   - Once a Day
   - Once a Week
   - 2-3 Times a Month
   - Few Times a Month
   - Other

4. How often do you visit the official Fan Page of your city government?
   - Never
   - Every Few Hours
   - Once a Day
   - Once a Week
   - 2-3 Times a Month
   - Few Times a Month
   - Other

5. Have you "Liked" your city's Fan Page?
   - Yes
   - No
6. How often do you use Facebook to Like a post or picture put up by your city, send a message etc.?  
Never  
Every Few Hours  
Once a Day  
Once a Week  
2-3 Times a Month  
Few Times a Month  
Other

7. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to seek specific information about a community issue?  
Never  
Every Few Hours  
Once a Day  
Once a Week  
2-3 Times a Month  
Few Times a Month  
Other

8. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to search for information about your local government?  
Never  
Every Few Hours  
Once a Day  
Once a Week  
2-3 Times a Month  
Few Times a Month  
Other

9. How often do you use your city's Fan Page to participate in, or read about, political discussions?  
Never  
Every Few Hours  
Once a Day  
Once a Week  
2-3 Times a Month  
Few Times a Month  
Other

10. How often do you re-post information from your city's Fan Page on your profile page?  
Never  
Every Few Hours  
Once a Day  
Once a Week  
2-3 Times a Month  
Few Times a Month  
Other

11. Within the past twelve months, have you: voted in a national election?  
Yes  No
12. Within the past twelve months, have you: voted in a local or state election?
   Yes    No

13. Within the past twelve months, have you: contacted a government official?
   Yes    No

14. Within the past twelve months, have you: volunteered on a community project? (e.g. community gardens or coaching youth sport teams.)
   Yes    No

15. Within the past twelve months, have you: volunteered for non-political groups? (e.g. Habitat for Humanity or the American Red Cross.)
   Yes    No

16. Within the past twelve months, have you: attended a public hearing, town hall meeting and/or city council meeting?
   Yes    No

17. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Facebook and Fan Pages are appropriate places for city governments to post information.
   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree
   Neither Agree or Disagree
   Agree
   Strongly Agree

18. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: Local governments should pay more attention to what citizens say on their Fan Page.
   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree
   Neither Agree or Disagree
   Agree
   Strongly Agree

19. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page is a good place for engaging citizens.
   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree
   Neither Agree or Disagree
   Agree
   Strongly Agree

20. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page helps citizens stay informed about current events and public affairs.
   Strongly Disagree
   Disagree
   Neither Agree or Disagree
   Agree
   Strongly Agree
21. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page helps citizens stay informed about the local community.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neither Agree or Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements: A Fan Page provides information to citizens that they otherwise may not have known about.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Neither Agree or Disagree
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

23. What is your age?

24. What gender do you identify with?

25. Ethnicity origin (or Race):

26. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

27. What is your political affiliation?
Appendix B
Multi-channel approach example used by the Town of Chapel Hill.
Appendix C
Examples of Fan Page interactions between the City of Rocky Mount and citizens.

What night will the kids be trick or treating?

October 27, 2012

What night will the kids be trick or treating?

Rocky Mount–Government Offices

Hi Jennifer, the City does not organize trick or treating activities, but we would encourage celebration on the actual holiday, Oct. 31, 2012.

October 29, 2012 at 12:10pm

Great, thank you!

October 29, 2012 at 12:20pm via mobile

Are there any updates on the possible expansion of the recycling cart program? I am wondering because I have not heard anything else in awhile.

Rocky Mount–Government Offices

July 22, 2012

The recommendation to proceed has been made and will be discussed during the City Council’s Committee of the Whole meeting tomorrow. We will keep you updated. Thanks.

July 22, 2012 at 10:38pm
Appendix D
Examples of dynamic content posted on the U.S. Air Force Recruiting Page

Fill in the Blank: The plane I would most like to fly is

ASVAB Practice Question: A car uses too much oil when which of the following parts are worn?

A. Pistons
B. Piston Rings
C. Main Bearings
D. Connecting Rods

Do you have questions about joining the Air Force? Ask in the comments below.