

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO IMPROVE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT WITH GOVERNMENT

by Steven Michael Polunsky, Texas A&M University

“You’re not listening to me.” “There’s nothing I can do to have my voice heard.” Elected officials frequently hear such complaints from constituents, and many voters who remain silent also harbor such sentiments. Their frustration or cynicism toward government leads them never to share their concerns with decision makers. But what if there were an easy way for citizens to share opinions with decision makers at optimal moments, when their views might really count? New forms of social media – especially Twitter – may offer just such opportunities.

Barriers between Government and the Public

Legislatures seek public input in a variety of ways – most visibly by holding a public hearing in which members of the public are invited to testify, usually in person, to a panel of legislators considering a particular topic or piece of legislation. At hearings, legislators may ask questions or may choose not to. The public usually can submit written testimony or exhibits, which may be distributed to all the panelists or held by the committee staff until needed.

Yet even when well attended, public hearings can erect barriers. A hearing must be held at a particular time and place, which may or may not be convenient or accessible for concerned members of the public. If a hearing is recorded, the oral testimony may be available later to legislators and the public; but the written testimony or exhibits may not be widely or easily available. The physical and logistical setup for the hearing, combined with possible conflicting events or demands for the legislators’ time and attention, may prevent legislators from asking questions, following up, or even hearing the initial testimony in full.

The Innovation of Twitter

The first message using the social media platform known as Twitter was sent on March 21, 2006, and widespread attention came when more than 60,000 tweets were sent each day during the technical conference where it formally debuted in 2007. Twitter allows anyone who registers with the site to send messages of up to 140 characters at a time. There is no charge for registration, and a person who only wishes to read the posts of others does not need to register. People can access Twitter in real time – as the tweets are sent – or later in an archival or historical fashion.

Today, Twitter has 218 million active users sharing 500 million tweets per day – messages that briefly convey thoughts, opinions, pictures, and links to further information. Twitter has gained acceptance among the general public as a method of communicating quickly and easily. Legislators also are known to use Twitter to express opinions and share information with the public. Some legislators and legislative offices also receive information via Twitter and avail themselves of statistical and analytical information regarding the reach of any particular tweet.

A Texas Committee Uses Twitter to Enhance Legislative Hearings

Government is considered transparent when the public can see how decisions are being made. Beyond simple transparency, government can become interactive when the public has ways of participating in decision-making as it occurs. Twitter can be deployed for both purposes, as exemplified by innovations tried from 2010 to 2013 by the Texas Senate Committee on Business and Commerce, at the behest of its chair, Senator John Carona. Some tweeting conveyed information in a transparent way:

- In Texas, state open meetings laws generally require legislative committees, as deliberative bodies, to post public notice of the time and place of meetings. The Business and Commerce committee would post this notice and then immediately issue a tweet with a link to the official posting. As more information became available, further tweets were sent.
- When a hearing was called to order, committee staff would announce that with a tweet, and as each witness was called, another tweet would be issued, marked with the time. This created a “time stamp” for the order of witnesses. Anyone who wanted to view the recorded hearing could use the series of tweets to identify when the subject or witness of interest came up and could be located on the full tape. If testimony had been submitted prior to the hearing, a link could be included in the tweet. According to Tweetreach.com, 14,689 people saw at least one tweet related to a January 10, 2012 hearing, with a total exposure of 28,911 impressions.
- Twitter allows a user to filter or group tweets through the use of a word or group of characters preceded by the pound sign (“#”), referred to as a hashtag. To facilitate this usage (while aligning with the generally accepted hashtags for tweets about the Texas Legislature), the committee included #TxLegeBC in its tweets.

Beyond such efforts to notify the public, Twitter can also be used to communicate information from the public to willing legislators or their staffs. Experimentally, several Business and Commerce hearings in 2012 featured a computer monitor facing the members of the committee with a relevant Twitter feed. A website called Twitterfall was used to constantly refresh the feed and format the display. Committee members could read the tweets and, if they so desired, recognize or react to them in real time. In essence, this method provides an instant feedback loop, allowing the public to comment on witness testimony or committee activity as it unfolds.

Early Results and Future Possibilities

In this Texas experiment, tweeting postings and witness appearances proved very popular with the public. The instant feedback loop was less effective, due to ambivalence on the part of the legislators and limited publicity to let citizens know that their real-time comments could be posted in this way. But similar experiments can be tried again, with more effort put into making the public aware of opportunities to participate by Twitter as hearings proceed.

All uses of this new medium of course require publicly outlined policies to ensure compliance with laws regarding open records and retention of records. In addition, policymakers should consider whether using Internet-enabled social media could have the unintended effect of disenfranchising citizens without ready access to the Internet, unless active steps are taken to bridge the digital divide. With proper use, however, Twitter shows real promise for improving citizen understanding of and engagement with government.