



Social Media Strategy: Understanding Social Media, IT Strategy, and Organizational Responsiveness in Times of Crisis

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The ability to effectively and efficiently interact with the business environment is key to organizational success. To this end, organizations increasingly use IT to enable new, improved flows of information both within and across organizational boundaries. Social media (SM) technologies hold great potential for enabling new forms of communication with distant actors. For this potential to be fully realized, however, investments in technology should be made alongside changes in organizational practice and design. While all IT strategies should complement high-level organizational goals and identify the organizational changes necessary to realize them,¹ this is particularly the case with SM strategy, as it necessarily challenges traditional forms of organizing and blurs organizational boundaries.

We define SM strategy as the use of specific forms of IT to leverage distant knowledge in order to achieve organizational goals. The very notion of SM implies that SM strategy entails more than just facilitating high-level organizational goals; as it must make the organization more integrated with its environment, organizational redesign is always needed.² In this article, we illustrate how capitalizing on the promises of SM may necessitate significant changes in how the organization relates with key external actors.

While SM technology can facilitate faster, more transparent, interactive flows of information when strategically used,^{3,4} it is certainly no silver bullet. With more ways than ever to capture information, organizations find themselves increasingly inundated with data.⁵ Thus the challenge for many managers has shifted from dealing with information shortage to dealing with information overload. To be efficient, organizations must successfully select, filter, and make sense of otherwise overwhelming information. Deliberate SM technology use can ease this managerial challenge, but mindlessly throwing SM technology into the mix will often do more harm than good.

In this article, we show how macrostrategic, transformational investments in SM technology allow organizations to effectively respond even during dramatic events. In particular, we outline and discuss three key strategic pillars that managers should take as guides when devising SM strategies:

- 1. Organizations should respond *with their environment rather than to it*.** In SM, the organization is no longer master; it must partner with key actors in its environment. Managers should therefore view the business environment as *integral* to its response to a particular event, instead of as an external contingency to dominate and control. Only when organizations actively let the business environment shape organizational practice through their SM use are real benefits of SM technology likely to arise.
- 2. Organizations should not invest in SM technology but SM-driven change.** Instead of digitizing cowpaths, managers should view SM as a strategic opportunity for IT-based organizational transformation. The managerial challenge is to look beyond traditional organizational structures — structures formed largely around a view of the external environment as a contingency to control — and see knowledge in the business environment as a force to channel through SM-driven organizational change.
- 3. Organizations should rethink organizational boundaries.** As organizations become more integrated with their environment, organizational boundaries blur, and efficient organizational responses increasingly depend on external actors.⁶ Managers should therefore foster partnerships with the key actors within their business environment and put necessary transorganizational structures in place to facilitate efficient co-responses to external events. This again emphasizes the need for managers to view the environment as vital to their organizational practice, rather than as something that exists in opposition to it.

PILLARS IN PLAY: A CITY RESPONDS TO AN EPIDEMIC

Our formulations of the three strategic pillars are based on a multiyear study (2006-2013) of IT-based organizational change within a Swedish municipal organization, MuniPal. In our study, we traced MuniPal's strategic effort to use IT to improve citizen service and become a citizen-centric organization. In particular, we drew on a critical event that unfolded in the latter parts of the study.

In 2011, citizens within MuniPal's jurisdiction started showing symptoms of winter vomiting disease. As time passed, the problem steadily worsened, reaching a peak in April 2011 during a drastic turn of events. At this point, the symptoms — later discovered to be caused by *Cryptosporidium* contamination in the water supply — dramatically increased, affecting a large part of the population. Early figures pointed toward approximately 6,000 incidents of *Cryptosporidium* infection, but recent studies suggest that as many as 20,000 individuals may have been affected — a huge number given a city population of 70,000.

Thus, out of nowhere, came a critical test. Would MuniPal's new service organization be able to handle the crisis effectively? Would the communication channels hold? Fortunately, MuniPal's larger strategic effort to become citizen-centric proved worthwhile. Thanks greatly to reorganized communication channels and efficient use of the previously introduced SM technology, MuniPal managed the crisis well; reports of new infections sharply decreased only six days after the official state of emergency was declared. MuniPal's SM commitment was, however, ongoing and well illustrates how SM technology can improve an organization's ability to respond to changes in the external business environment. We found that whether an organization succeeds or not — particularly in the eyes of others — may depend on the responsiveness of external actors that managers cannot control.

In what follows, we offer more insight into the crisis that MuniPal came to face. We then conclude with a discussion, illustrated by our case, of the three aforementioned strategic pillars, which managers can use as guides as they navigate key managerial challenges associated with SM use.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TIMES OF CRISIS

Extreme cases are a valuable source of knowledge, as they tend to make the phenomena of interest more visible.⁷ For our purposes, the *Cryptosporidium* crisis

was also valuable in that it mirrored — albeit dramatically — what is increasingly becoming everyday reality for contemporary organizations. As part of larger value networks or ecosystems, organizations inevitably find themselves caught in paradoxical situations of incomplete knowledge despite information abundance. Establishing effective knowledge sharing and coordination — emergent, joint sensemaking — among multiple individuals and organizations across different levels and locations is therefore needed. Indeed, it is the key factor in an efficient crisis response.⁸

Due to the fast-changing, unpredictable nature of crises, responding to them effectively is easier said than done. As in assembling a puzzle, incomplete information must be managed by integrating various, highly localized sources of often only fragmentary information. As the *Cryptosporidium* crisis emerged, MuniPal was indeed in many ways operating in the dark. How were they to organize an efficient response to an event of which they had very little understanding? What would it entail?

Initially, the municipality relied on traditional channels of communication, such as local media and the municipal website. Realizing that the citizens were a key source of information, they also posted a survey online to gain a better understanding of the nature of the crisis. As time passed, however, they noted that these efforts would not be enough. Aided by their new citizen-centric IT infrastructure and organizational design, MuniPal began to actively communicate and integrate information across multiple channels. While a joint service center increased the understanding of both the crisis and citizens' needs by monitoring calls and service requests, the information unit — unusual in its tight coupling to front-end service, a consequence of the citizen-centric organizational design — leveraged this knowledge to proactively engage with citizens using SM technology, particularly Facebook. Their aim was to be transparent, open, and perseverant — a response that came naturally to MuniPal as open dialogue formed a key element of their new citizen-centric approach to communication.

We applied our communication strategy in practice;
we know that we should be open. It is in our bones.

— MuniPal communication officer

The organization was able to respond more or less instinctively due to the cultural change processes initiated through MuniPal's concerted effort to use IT to facilitate and integrate citizens into organizational practice. Having opened a Facebook account prior to the crisis, MuniPal indeed found it natural to utilize it

in its effort to manage the crisis. As rumors and false information spread rapidly — not only causing fear but also inhibiting MuniPal’s ability to respond effectively to unfolding events — the organization quickly turned to Facebook to engage in a then-chaotic SM space.

Information travels so quickly, which makes it easy for somebody to start a rumor that all of a sudden becomes a truth. So therefore it was very important for us to be alert, to be present on social media as well as to respond to the fears of citizens, which might spread rumors that are not true. That was our strategy.

— MuniPal information specialist

Communication Becomes a Two-Way Street

Through this engagement, MuniPal’s response increasingly shifted from one of informing — a highly traditional approach to external communication and public relations based on the sender-receiver paradigm — to one of collaboration and mutual learning — an approach more attuned with the logic of shared sense-making. In this way, the organization became involved in a public dialogue that fostered learning processes both within and outside of the organization and therefore had impact well outside the SM space. This proved key, since it allowed the organization to tap into information and knowledge not easily accessible through traditional forms of communication, as these are predominantly unidirectional. Citizens helped MuniPal better understand the cause, scope, and spread of the contamination (e.g., temporal and spatial disease patterns) and how to work with them to contain the crisis (e.g., where to locate fresh water tanks). Through Facebook, citizens and managers came to continuously increase their understanding of unfolding events and thus how to better manage their continued response. While the emergent nature of the understanding made it hard to pinpoint a single piece of information or a single event as particularly critical, the chief of citizen service was adamant that SM was critical: “Without Facebook, we wouldn’t have made it.”

Engaging the community through Facebook was seen more as a strategic necessity than a strategic choice: the citizens had already taken the discussion into the social media space, and MuniPal had to follow. What the organization did, however, was to realize the need to actively engage within this space so as to channel external knowledge and not just provide more information. They saw themselves not as informers but as having a conversation: they sought a mutual tuning of understandings among actors with discrepant, incomplete information of the shared, unfolding event.

Facebook was therefore used as a rich site for learning and adjusting of organizational practice. Through its active engagement, MuniPal was also able to establish a shared arena where matters relating to the crisis could be discussed. In this way, MuniPal could better facilitate productive communication not only between MuniPal and citizens, but also among citizens themselves. This led citizens to categorize and structure existing information — for example, through crowdsourced maps — furthering the shared sensemaking process. Citizens became the municipality’s “eyes and ears” in the field.

Against this backdrop, SM technology offers key value propositions by addressing new managerial challenges. Increasingly, managers must rely on external actors, and SM can facilitate integration of knowledge among them. SM can help overcome exactly what troubles traditional communication forms: incomplete information. Efficient SM strategies capitalize on the fact that SM does not follow the sender-receiver paradigm, instead becoming a forum for shared sensemaking and emergent understandings. In this way, MuniPal’s use of SM became a shared accomplishment that integrally involved citizens.

Stumbling Blocks

MuniPal’s response to the *Cryptosporidium* crisis was primarily a success story, but it was not successful in all respects. Due to the fast-paced information flows enabled by SM technology, organizational communication structures were truly put to the test. While internal reorganization proved capable of supporting these flows — thanks largely to the integration of the citizen service and information units, two traditionally separate functions — interorganizational collaboration was lacking. Whereas citizens expected to find and discuss all answers in one place, organizations largely restricted their own communication to information directly related to their particular role in the larger response network. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that although the crisis stretched across jurisdictions (e.g., police, health administration, hospitals, public administrations), only MuniPal had a SM strategy capable of addressing events of this magnitude. Furthermore, communication officers were often reluctant to post information on issues they were not familiar with, due to the risk of posting “bad information.” As a result of the various organizations’ inability to produce a unified front, citizens came to question the reliability of certain information (e.g., because of information discrepancies between sources), and thus an otherwise successful crisis response produced negative experiences for some.

While such difficulties are not inherent to organizational responses that apply shared sensemaking to address incomplete information — poor information quality is always a challenge — they clearly show the need to think beyond the single organization when pursuing strategic SM use. Although MuniPal successfully managed to integrate the citizens in a shared response to the unfolding event, their failure to integrate other public and private organizations in a similar way hampered their response.

THREE STRATEGY PILLARS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The aim of this article is to offer key insights into the complexities of strategic SM use and provide a guide to the associated managerial challenges. Through our multiyear study of MuniPal, we showed how strategic investments in IT-based change allow organizations to respond effectively to external events and identified three strategy pillars for strategic SM use. We now discuss each of these pillars in more detail and offer illustrative examples of how they mattered in our study.

Don't Respond to Your Environment; Respond *with* It

As strategic SM use involves participating in arenas where managers are no longer masters, it requires a shift in how managers perceive their environment and changes therein. While organizations may have grown accustomed to operating within well-defined, organizationally controlled structures, SM technology demands new firm strategies and tactics due to the way it inevitably positions organizations as mere nodes in complex networks of actors.⁹ Instead of treating the environment as an external contingency to dominate and control, managers should instead implement strategic change aimed at involving key external actors as collaborators. The real benefits of SM will only be achieved when managers actively let the business environment affect organizational practice.

Our case study shows how SM can prove key to effective organizational responses to emergent crises when organizations realize the need to view the environment as integral. SM technology provided MuniPal with an adaptive public arena in which information and knowledge could be shared, gathered, and continuously reflected upon by participants both within and outside the organization. In moving the discussion to an arena where citizens were already present, the municipality was able to tap into and shape external information flows on SM. This not only helped MuniPal access distant knowledge, it also allowed them to make

better use of their traditional communication channels (e.g., Web and news media) as the shared sensemaking afforded by the strategic use of SM gradually improved both the quality and appropriateness of broadcast information. In particular, SM helped quell rumors and ease fears: while false information troubled MuniPal initially, their active engagement alleviated these issues quickly as corrective information could be given as needed.

Our study furthermore shows how SM technologies helped involve citizens in organizing the response. Throughout the incident, citizens frequently created and shared knowledge and collaborated with the authorities to make sense of the crisis; for example, by filling out surveys and structuring information. They also attempted to create crowdsourced maps so as to better pinpoint and understand instances of the infection. Key learning processes clearly took place both within and outside of MuniPal, processes without which the crisis would not have been effectively contained and ultimately resolved. Most importantly, MuniPal let these processes directly affect its organizational practice. Rather than as an isolated activity — management of an SM space — MuniPal saw SM as part of a greater response.

Don't Invest in SM Technology; Invest in Organizational Transformation

SM technology is not a panacea. In order to tap into the power of SM, managers must transform their internal operations and let new and improved flows of information shape organizational practice.¹⁰ To this end, managers must first develop a clear understanding of how SM relates to their organization's strategic intent and identify how SM technology can bring about strategic change in organizational practice and design. SM fundamentally breaks with the sender-receiver paradigm, and managers must embrace that change in order to capture value from SM and apply it toward shared sensemaking with external actors.

The value SM offers organizations is therefore tightly linked to the ways managers use it to tap into distant knowledge critical for organizational practice and view it as an occasion for transformational change. Especially where strategic intents include organizational capabilities such as responsiveness, this will require holistic, horizontal transformations across organizational structures and integration of traditionally disparate organizational units to enable interorganizational communication flows. Fragmented approaches to SM have limited potential to bring organizational value as the new information flows facilitated by such

technologies tend to be at odds with traditional structures formed around the sender-receiver paradigm of communication and an associated view of the environment as something to control rather than integrate.

MuniPal well illustrates how strategic SM use may necessitate concerted macrostrategic efforts. As noted, the municipality's investment in SM media was coupled with a larger strategic change initiative aimed at improving the way service was delivered to citizens. Through this effort, the organization not only became more citizen-centric, it also came to implement a shared service center that it integrated with the unit responsible for internal and external communication. Traditionally, these two separate functions had operated under radically different logics: a service-based logic implies two-way conversation, while a sender-receiver logic implies one-way dissemination. With the change, information and knowledge could flow seamlessly in and out of the organization. For example, if many people called the front-end service center with similar questions or concerns, online and offline communication shifted to address the emergent information gap. This allowed MuniPal to provide information more attuned to the needs of the receivers and also motivated shared sensemaking where information was incomplete. The traditional *modus operandi* for municipal organizations in similar cases is to broadcast information — assumed to be near-complete — through such channels as radio, TV, and Web. But in the face of incomplete information, MuniPal realized the need to participate in the already ongoing SM dialogue to both address false information and learn about the crisis together with the citizens.

The organizational transformation that preceded the crisis was integral to MuniPal's successful response. The study therefore shows the critical importance of viewing social media investments as part of broader initiatives, both in terms of the value they provide for the organization (e.g., to improve citizen/customer contacts and organizational responsiveness) and in terms of the strategy work through which such initiatives are developed (e.g., putting necessary organizational structures in place). The municipality's concerted, macrostrategic efforts to this end proved essential in two key ways:

1. As a citizen-centric organization, MuniPal realized that addressing the crisis entailed more than just containing the contamination. First and foremost, their job was to provide satisfactory service to citizens.
2. As part of their strategic transformation, MuniPal established tight links between external and internal

communication on the one hand and front-end citizen service on the other. The integrated communication flow provided valuable cross-pollination, improving organizational performance at both ends of the organization.

Social Media Necessitates Rethinking Organizational Boundaries

Organizations increasingly find themselves part of complex value networks or ecosystems, which creates problems of incomplete information. Consequently, shared sensemaking may be required before any coordinated action from multiple actors in multiple organizations can take place. While intraorganizational change may alleviate some of these issues, managers should also identify key partners external to their organization and work with them to implement necessary interorganizational structures.

Our study of MuniPal shows how SM strategies should consider the larger interorganizational network. As noted above, several organizations were directly involved in addressing the crisis, but only MuniPal strategically leveraged SM in its response to the crisis situation. Ironically, MuniPal's efficient response even led to a negative overall responsiveness when others failed to keep up with the increased pace afforded by SM technology. Citizens often expected to get all critical information from one place, but the existing transorganizational communication channels and collaboration networks could not facilitate such a unified front. This came to negatively affect citizens' experience of MuniPal's response both online and offline, suggesting that a lack of interorganizational integration may pose a key obstacle to strategic SM use. Organizations should therefore seek to integrate and align their SM initiatives within broader strategic transformations not only internally, but also externally to form key partnerships.

SUMMARY

In this article, we have addressed SM strategy and in particular how organizations can leverage SM technology. In so doing, we show that SM entails a different logic than traditional communication channels built around the sender-receiver paradigm, as the former begins with the assumption of incomplete information. Thus SM can facilitate shared sensemaking and emergent, collective understandings of unfolding events. Only when these emergent understandings influence and are influenced by other organizational practices,

however, is macrostrategic value likely to emerge. In other words, organizations should not just “look at” or “engage in” SM, but rather use it to adapt organizational practices toward emergent needs, whether these originate within the organization or its environment. The ability of SM to facilitate such tuning is indeed at the core of its value proposition.

Our findings underscore the importance of viewing SM investments as part of broader strategic initiatives (e.g., citizen-centricity), both in terms of the value that they are supposed to provide an organization (e.g., improved citizen communication) and how such investments are implemented (i.e., implementing necessary changes in organizational practice and design). While our identification of three SM strategy pillars adds to our understanding of SM strategy, additional studies are warranted. We hope this article will feed additional studies on the macrostrategic role SM technology can play in organizational settings. For practitioners, these pillars represent useful guidelines to strategic SM use, and so refinement will be appreciated by researchers and practitioners alike.

ENDNOTES

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