

**Case studies on best practice in  
Australian Government social media teams**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Government communication through social media has become more interactive and consultative, giving citizens the opportunity to express views, ask questions and potentially even receive government services through the channel. Today the focus is on ‘engaging’, but as this thesis explores, defining and measuring engagement activities is a difficult task for social media teams in government departments. To better understand the workings of public sector social media teams, this research project provides a comprehensive insight into the employees and processes of two leading Australian Government social media teams – within the Australian Taxation Office, and the Department of Human Services. The thesis presents findings from interviews with six social media workers from these two agencies, and presents the results of an online survey of 47 workers from Australian federal public sector social media teams. The results show that workers in government social media teams want to engage with the public in an open and transparent way, to help people, do a good job, and use social media platforms conventionally, with personality and creativity. Yet it becomes clear that there are significant barriers that limit success along these lines, not least of which is that measures of effectiveness are varied, and at times missing or misunderstood.

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## **DECLARATION**

This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for award of any other degree or diploma. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:           Amanda Dennett

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

For more than a decade, Australian Government agencies have been using social media to monitor public views, disseminate information, and engage with citizens. Yet Australian-focused research into the federal public sector teams, processes, and policies, that enable this engagement remains largely unrepresented in academic literature. Much of the existing literature centres on case studies from the United Kingdom (UK), Europe, the United States of America (US), and more recently Korea. This research aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the workings of Australian Government social media teams.

Over time, government communication through social media has become more interactive and consultative, giving citizens the opportunity to express views, ask questions and potentially even receive government services through the channel. There has been a shift from early government use of social media for ‘listening’, and similarly simply joining the conversation is no longer enough for any organisation (McCosker 2017). Today the focus on is on ‘engaging’, but as I will explore in chapter four, defining and measuring engagement activities is a difficult one for social media teams.

I have worked in federal government communications in Australia for more than 14 years, including 10 years in specific social media and digital communication roles. This experience, working at both the communication practitioner and executive leadership levels, has sparked my interest in better understanding the workings of public sector social media teams and a desire to try to identify the characteristics of best practice operations. There is still much research to be done to help Australian Government social media teams improve processes and engagement, as well as manage resources and risk.

Public servants, traditionally those in communication, marketing, online, or media teams, have been responsible for delivering these evolving strategies. In many cases, these employees have paved the way for those working in the field today, setting benchmarks and establishing the processes that federal public sector social media teams now follow as the standard. However, this research will show regular and organised information-sharing between agencies about these

practices and benchmarks remains elusive. As government use of social media has evolved, so too have the skills of the employees within public sector communication teams. Currently, workers in social media teams need to have a variety of skills, including core community management skills and practices, as well as capabilities in data extraction and analysis (McCosker 2017).

To better understand the workings of public sector social media teams, this research provides a comprehensive insight into the employees and processes of two leading Australian Government social media teams – one at the Australian Taxation Office, the other at the Department of Human Services.

The Australian Taxation Office (ATO) collects revenue, administers the goods and services tax (GST) on behalf of the Australian states and territories, administers the major aspects of Australia's superannuation system, and is the custodian of the Australian Business Register (ATO 2019a). The ATO has used social media since 2008 to communicate with taxpayers, tax agents and specialists, and the broader Australian public. The agency now has more than 255,000 followers of its Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn accounts. In addition, the agency's online forum, ATO Community, provides a platform for taxpayers, tax professionals and ATO employees to ask and answer questions in a moderated environment (ATO 2019b).

The Australian Government Department of Human Services provides access to social, health and other payments and services, and is responsible for the development of related service delivery policies. The department delivers its services through Centrelink, Medicare and Child Support agencies (DHS, 2019). The department has used social media since 2009 to communicate with its customers and the broader Australian public and now has more than 292,000 followers of its Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn accounts.

I present findings from discussions with six social media workers from these two agencies. I also present the results of an online survey of 47 workers from Australian federal public sector social media teams. By combining these data sets we gain an insight into how the size, business, leadership, and resourcing of teams contribute to their success, or hinder it.

The results show that workers in government social media teams want to engage with the public in an open and transparent way, to help people, do a good job, and use social media platforms the way they are intended to be used – that is, with responsiveness, personality and creativity.

Despite the increased prominence of online issues such as ‘fake news’, government employees largely remain optimistic about the opportunities social media presents and the impact their own agencies’ use has (Medaglia & Zhu 2017). Yet, it has also become clear that there are significant barriers within a government context that limit success, not least of which is that measures of effectiveness are varied, and at times missing or misunderstood.

This work offers suggestions for public sector social media teams on how to achieve best practice. Interviews and online surveys were conducted with the aim of determining the ideal mix of processes, resources, and employee skills needed to create a best practice social media team within an Australian Government agency. A review of related literature is presented, along with an overview of social media use by Australian federal public sector agencies, and the findings of my research. Finally, I draw on other research on public sector social media from across the world to make assessments and recommendations about what best practice social media looks like in the context of the Australian public sector.

## **Chapter 2: Review of related literature**

A review of existing literature was undertaken at the start of this research project and continued throughout. Online searches were undertaken using Google Scholar and the Swinburne University of Technology library. Key databases used included: Communication and mass media complete (EBSCOhost); Communications and mass media (Gale); Ebook Central (ProQuest); Computers & applied sciences complete (EBSCOhost) and Cambridge Core. Key search terms included: social media; social media government; government communications; citizen engagement; online participation; public sector communication; social media work; citizen trust; online democracy; Gov 2.0; and e-government. Reading across this breadth of topics led to some new and meaningful article discoveries, as I sought out further details on some of the research referenced in the journal articles I was reviewing.

In this section I present a review of related literature, beginning with varied definitions of social media and the evolving nature of social media work. Next, I summarise some of the key themes in academic research into government social media, including adoption and engagement, measuring effectiveness, as well as the risks and barriers to social media implementation.

### **2.1 Defining social media**

Social media is widely used by individuals, governments, business, and the media, to communicate, do business, and share content with others. At their core, social media platforms are “centred around social interaction...unlike traditional media, social media relies on user-generated content, which refers to any content that has been created by end users or the general public as opposed to professionals” (Bertot et al 2012, p. 30). For government agencies ranging from the local to national level, social media enables the public sector to gather information and feedback from citizens to aid policy development and collaborate with them to find solutions to government problems (Mergel 2013).

Definitions of social media, particularly those relating its application by government agencies, have evolved over time. Government 2.0 (Gov 2.0) research in the early 2000s focussed

primarily on delivery of services through e-government and online service transactions. Academic interest in Gov 2.0 represented the explosion of participatory Web 2.0 technologies available to citizens during this time, and the latest steps in government use of the internet and social media to communicate with them (Guillamon et al. 2016). Yet it became clear even during this initial research that social media use by public sector agencies is a defining part of Gov 2.0 implementation in many countries (Bertot et al 2012).

Early definitions of Gov 2.0 described a decentralised and democratic online environment, where “communication is multidirectional and interactive, data is dynamic, [and] users can be producers of content” (Gardini et al 2012, p.122). There was a focus on the role of social media ‘users’, including the idea that social media enables citizens to be partners or ‘co-producers’ when interacting online (Linders 2012). While there are long established examples of citizen co-production, for example neighbourhood watch programs, social media brings new opportunities for citizens to contribute to government business and self-organise in new ways (Linders 2012). However, there have been limited examples of governments facilitating this type of citizen coproduction in practice, which I explore later in this chapter.

In recent years, definitions have evolved to describe social media as enablers of communication and engagement. Today, users of social media consume and share content multiple times per day and expect the same of others they interact with (Sensis 2018). As governments continue to implement social media strategies to engage with the public, there is a greater likelihood that government-citizen communication will be less broadcast and more conversational and interactive than through traditional communication channels (Hong 2013). Furthermore, social media offer governments a new approach to create transparency and accountability, indeed there is evidence that a high level of Facebook use by local governments demonstrates that citizens have greater oversight of government processes, data and information (Guillamon et al 2016). Examples of government social media use are explored throughout the rest of this chapter and in chapter three.



## 2.2 Social media work

The work undertaken by government communication teams has evolved along with the changing technology and media environment. Traditional activities delivered by public affairs officers within in-house government communication teams include: organising events; writing and delivering communication plans; liaising with the media; writing media releases; preparing publications and website content; and producing staff internal communication strategies and materials (Turnbull 2007). This type of work has generally been supported by the outsourcing of some communication activities to PR and advertising companies, particularly the delivery of large-scale departmental information campaigns (Turnbull 2007).

Since the introduction of social media platforms, responsibilities of public affairs officers have expanded further to include social media management, data analysis, and even some elements of online customer service. Yet this is an area of limited research. In their paper on developing strategies to use social media in government, Picazo-Vela et al. interviewed six workers from the Puebla Sana state government health service in Mexico to gain an understanding of their social media practices and how employees adapted these practices along the way, responding to the constraints imposed by each social media platform (Picazo-Vela et al 2016). This need to be adaptable and responsive to the dynamic social media environment can be at odds with traditional communication practices within government (Mergel 2013).

Not only are the roles of communication workers evolving, the changing nature of their skill sets and strategies for using digital platforms for communication are also contributing to changes within their organisations and the media landscape more broadly:

“Social media platforms and new professional roles in social media work play a central role in defining and shaping the contours of the contemporary organisation. Whether as a matter of influence, analytics and insights, brand and community development or crisis management, organisations are striving to use social media more effectively and, in turn, are playing a part in reshaping the digital environment” (McCosker 2017, p. 1).

This evolution is also reflected in the hours of work expected of those in social media teams. While “social media platforms in themselves don’t produce 24/7 ‘around the clock’ digital labour”, their ongoing availability can present challenges for organisations (McCosker 2017, p. 12). Traditional government and business services have been delivered from 9am to 5pm on weekdays, and perhaps some extended weekend or evening times depending on the service or during a peak period. Yet often the social media accounts established by agencies on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other platforms are available to citizens and customers 24/7. While there are some examples of government teams embracing social media to give citizens access to, or the appearance of, 24/7 services, these appear to be limited in practice and can lead to “a blurring of work life-balance lines” (Zavattaro & Sementelli 2014, p. 262).

### **2.3 Social media and citizen engagement**

Citizen participation and engagement in government activities has long been considered an integral factor in the delivery of effective public sector communications. Yet in recent years, government agencies around the world have experienced a decline in public trust.

The Phillis Review of government communications in the UK in 2003 found that citizen trust in government information had declined, and that an increase in the number of ways governments can communicate, including the introduction of 24/7 media reporting, had put a strain on existing communication systems (McNair 2007). The review, which has been influential in the evolution of government communications more broadly, including in Australia, recommended that “modern government communications should be based on openness, not secrecy, and on more direct, unmediated communications with the public” (Turnbull 2007, p. 128).

Since then, with the advent of social media platforms, the global communication environment has become even more challenging for public sector communication professionals to navigate. Not only is there a 24/7 news cycle to manage, but also a large volume of real-time (often uncensored) questions and feedback published by citizens across an array of social networking sites. It is standard practice for governments to have an online presence, and most also have official social media accounts. The nature of social media platforms provides governments with

the opportunity to communicate with citizens in an open and transparent way, however there is contention in existing literature about whether this has been truly achieved to date and whether a failure to do so has the potential to further negatively impact trust in government. While I do not directly resolve this tension in this thesis, I have sought to understand to what extent Australian Government agencies actively engage in communication with citizens through social media. In the context of this complex online environment, it is unsurprising that citizen participation and engagement remains one of the more thoroughly explored topics in academic literature related to government social media use.

It has been shown that the online availability of governments can positively influence the public's relationship with them, as they are more likely to be perceived as transparent, responsive to citizens' input, and accessible and accountable to citizens (Hong 2013). By their very nature, social networking platforms enable engagement. Social media “have the potential to improve citizens' access to government information and thereby decrease information asymmetry between government functionaries and citizens” (Eom et al 2018, p. 110).

Social media engagement has been a process of learning and adaptation for public sector agencies around the world. In her extensive research on use of social media by federal government in the United States of America, Mergel uncovered a willingness by social media directors to engage in the online conversations about government that were already taking place, however this was still an evolving area of work for agencies (Mergel 2012).

“Agencies and departments are becoming more responsive the more they interact with citizens and special audiences through social media channels. They not only push out content but also better understand the need to actively listen to conversations and discussions about their own activities—without being actively involved in the conversations...Once they improve their listening capacity, agencies and departments can actively intervene—either by counteracting rumors or by responding directly to citizens' needs” (Mergel 2012, p. 133).

Engaging with citizens and raising awareness of government policies or services appear to be central aims for many of the social media initiatives implemented by public sector agencies. In an analysis of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube use by municipal governments across 119 Italian municipalities, citizen awareness of, and engagement with, these social media accounts were compared across platforms (Agostino 2013). YouTube rated highest on awareness and Facebook highest on engagement, and it was found the characteristics of social media platforms themselves make them important tools for public administrations, both for enabling citizen access to government information and providing the public a channel through which to influence policy reforms (Agostino 2013).

As an extension of engagement, empowerment theory, which includes concepts of control, participation and motivation, has also been used to assess effectiveness in making government social media initiatives more popular or otherwise to citizens (Aladalah 2015). While rapid improvements in technology and the internet may further enable digital citizenship and participation in Australia (Aladalah 2015), scholars also argue access to social media alone does not empower citizen engagement nor improve government transparency and responsiveness.

“Despite the expectation that using social media in the public sector contributes to enhancing public values including government responsiveness, it remains controversial whether social media use actually leads to such effects in practice” (Eom et al 2018, p. 109).

Yet there is some evidence that when citizens do choose to engage with government through social media, their satisfaction with those interactions is linked to their level of trust in government (Kim et al 2015).

A critical consideration for governments in using social media for citizen engagement is to ensure equal access to digital platforms, or else risk empowering only those who already have the means to participate (Linders 2012). Survey results in the US show less than 10 per cent of the population are active online contributors (Linders 2012). Another US study on government websites and social media’s influence on the public’s relationship with government, found that

83 per cent of respondents had no experience engaging with government through social media platforms (Hong 2013). While these results are not a positive demonstration of the impact of public sector social media initiatives, there is an argument to be made that citizens choosing to follow government accounts on social media or engaging in online conversations are “a trivial yet elemental step of more in-depth citizen participation in the decision-making process and provision of citizen input into government performance” (Hong 2013, p. 353).

## **2.4 Measuring social media adoption and effectiveness**

A key theme in literature on public sector social media is measurement – specifically the rate of social media adoption by governments and effectiveness of its use as a communication and engagement tool. For example, a European case study aimed at understanding the extent to which social media has been adopted by the national governments of France, Germany, Italy and the UK found that while all four have implemented some initiatives, with varied levels of maturity, there is a prevalence for one-way delivery of online services over true multi-directional engagement with citizens (Gardini et al 2012).

The use of marketing measurements to evaluate the success of social media communications by governments has gone some way to demonstrating the impact of these initiatives. A survey of Korean citizens who were eligible to vote and used a government Facebook page found that a citizen’s perceived value in social media to interact with a public agency has an impact on their satisfaction with government services as a whole (Park et al 2016). Perceived value and utilitarian value are concepts generally used to evaluate consumer behaviour and the marketing activities of private companies. Perceived value (as defined by Holbrook 1999) is a key marketing measure that determines customer behaviour and choice, while utilitarian value describes the more functional and practical aspects of a service and the idea that if something is easier to use or access it will be considered to be more useful or satisfying (Park et al 2016). However, there is also an argument that traditional measurement tools and the marketing approach to measuring effectiveness does not readily translate to the government context (Mergel 2012).

“Government needs to look at social media metrics from a different standpoint than other industry sectors do. The impact of outreach and engagement activities can be measured only in connection with an agency’s mission” (Mergel 2012, p. 127).

Throughout existing literature there are clear emergent themes on measuring effectiveness – it is important to do, and government social media teams around the world believe that their work is effective, yet they often cannot show evidence for this because they are not using effective measures of success. For example, research into social media use by four local councils in Victoria, Australia showed that while social media managers and executives from the councils believe social media is valuable for community engagement, they find it difficult to demonstrate that their initiatives are working well and have no uniform way of measuring success (Omar et al 2014).

Thorough research into government social media use in the US identified federal departments and agencies have three core objectives in using social media applications – participation, collaboration, and transparency – however there are often no formal evaluation metrics in place to assess whether or not these are being achieved (Mergel 2012).

“At this time most social media directors in the U.S. federal government state that they do not actively measure what kind of impact their social media activities have... moreover, a majority of the interviewed social media directors are unclear about whether they are reaching the audiences their agency mission statement targets” (Mergel 2012, p. 130).

Governments dedicate numerous resources to their communication activities, and while social media has sometimes been seen as an affordable way to reach a large number of people, the reality of social media work is that it can be time and resource intensive. It is significant therefore, that although almost every federal agency and department in the US has several official social networking accounts, it is unclear to what degree the use of these channels improves an agency’s reach, reputation, effectiveness, or trustworthiness (Mergel 2012).

This isn't to say that there is no measurement or analysis work being undertaken by social media teams. Analytics are often used effectively to aid in decision making, inform planning for peak periods of activity, and to prepare for conflict and crises (McCosker and Milne, 2014). Medaglia & Zhu argue government initiatives on social media have to be continuously evaluated not only against criteria of efficiency and effectiveness, but also for their ability to provide public value and preserve government legitimacy (Medaglia & Zhu 2017). However, there is limited evidence to show that this is happening in practice, as I discuss further in chapter five.

## **2.5 Risks and barriers to social media implementation**

For the past ten years, social media has provided opportunities for communication and engagement between citizens and governments, yet there have been risks and barriers to the implementation of these initiatives. One example is the public nature of social media interactions, which can lead to increased attention on government operations that agencies may wish to minimise or avoid (Mergel 2013). This reputational risk can make agencies wary of engaging in social media conversations for fear of receiving comments, complaints and questions that they do not want in the public domain. In addition, government social media activities have evolved in a changing and uncertain environment. Continuous technological change along with the third-party nature of social networking sites, means public sector agencies face uncertainty both in developing social media strategies and implementing them each day (Mergel 2013).

The potential risk of loss of public trust is a significant barrier to governments using social media to engage with citizens. Australian Government agencies are required to effectively manage and preserve privacy and information security in line with the 13 Australian Privacy Principles, however this can be difficult due to the scale and frequency of personal information that is shared by some users of social networking sites (OAIC 2019). In addition, governments are under pressure to maintain information quality and integrity in fast-paced online environments, some of which can be vulnerable to virus attacks and unintended release of information (Bertot et al 2012).

In using social media as a key channel for communication with citizens, many agencies around the world have simply had to accept the risks associated with its use. In response, public sector agencies have implemented risk management plans and governance frameworks to provide guidance for workers on how to address issues as they arise. Some agencies have found it easier to use or adapt existing media or communication policies and processes to guide their social media activities, however these are not always effective. As an example, the highly regulated and process-driven approach that U.S federal governments use to manage traditional communication activities has not translated well to the “fast and furious exchanges on social media sites” that users expect (Mergel 2013). In addition, Bertot et al argue that it remains difficult to ensure these keep pace with the continually changing social media environment.

“Though agencies are increasing their use of social media technologies as a way to extend government services, further reach individuals, offer government information, and engage members of the public in government efforts, agencies are in large part doing so through an antiquated policy structure that establishes the parameters for information flows, access and dissemination” (Bertot et al 2012, p. 31).

Digital and social media technologies are often associated with the disruptive transformation of organisations, work, and our society more broadly (McCosker 2017). For governments, technology has the potential to enable faster and more efficient delivery of information and services to a greater number of citizens. Yet, governments also have an enduring responsibility to ensure they make information and services easily and consistently available to citizens, including those offered through social media (Linders 2012). As governments increasingly focus on the digital delivery of services, there is potential to further marginalise those in the community who do not have access, or cannot afford, the technology and devices need to access these services.

As this chapter discussed, there has been evolution of public affairs officer responsibilities to include social media work. The measurement and evaluation of social media activities has been well covered in academic literature, however it is generally agreed that methods and standards for this are often ad hoc. Finally, a discussion of the risks and barriers relating to the implementation of social media strategies by government agencies was presented.



### **Chapter 3: Social media use by the Australian Government**

In this section, I provide an overview of existing literature on social media use by Australian public sector agencies. While there are a large number of social media initiatives currently underway in Australia across local, state and federal government levels, this topic has achieved limited representation in academic research. There has been a solid focus on social media use during election campaigns and by politicians (for examples, see Bruns 2017; Burgess & Bruns 2012), but not on the implementation of public sector social media campaigns or the operations and processes of the communication teams responsible for them.

Social marketing is not a communication practice that is unique to social networking platforms. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Australian Government agencies such as the Department of Health and Aged Care were using social marketing on large-scale public information campaigns, such as alcohol health awareness, in order to affect behavioural change (Turnbull 2007). Tactics to deliver these campaigns included the combined use of television advertisements; media engagement; website content; and events and expos.

Over the past 10 years, government agencies in Australia have increasingly used social media to share social marketing-style messages with the public. This strategy makes sense, as Australians are some of the most avid users of social media in the world. According to the Sensis Social Media Report 2018, 60 per cent of Australians use the internet more than five times per day. Eighty per cent actively use social media, and of those, 34 per cent access social media sites more than five times per day. Australians also expect to access information and services from companies and brands online, and 64 per cent of consumers are more likely to trust a brand if it interacts positively on social media (Sensis 2018).

Using social media became a priority for Australian public sector agencies with the Declaration of Open Government (the Declaration) on 16 July 2010. It established the key principles of ‘informing, engaging and participating’ and gave public sector agencies a mandate for using Web 2.0 technologies to deliver information and services to citizens, as well provide opportunities to collaborate with them on policy development (Tanner 2010). The Declaration

also signalled a significant change in the way the Australian Government had traditionally communicated with citizens. Today, the australia.gov.au website features a listing of dozens of social media accounts managed by public servants on behalf of the federal government (Australian Government n.d).

The two agencies presented as case studies in this research – the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) – have each been the subject of previous academic research. Research on the effectiveness of the ATO's eTax Facebook page, which has since been discontinued, found the agency was using the channel to broadcast information rather than to facilitate two-way engagement with the public. Although comments were allowed on the Facebook page, the agency would not respond to specific tax questions through the platform (Alam et al 2011). While the spread of positive to negative comments was relatively even – 35 per cent of comments were positive, 37 per cent were negative – it was found that the Facebook page did not meet the agency's aim of improving community perceptions of the ATO (Alam et al 2011). It is worth noting the ATO was an early adopter of social media in Australia, and produced and published guidance for staff on using social media to communicate about tax issues in 2008 (ATO 2008).

A research study by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation documented the daily social media monitoring tasks by the communications team at Centrelink, now part of DHS. Worker processes were observed and recorded by researchers, then used to inform the creation of an online dashboard to automate this process and make it more efficient for government social media managers (Paris & Wan 2011). Further research on DHS found it uses its numerous social media accounts to engage with citizens and encourage changes in customer behaviours, for example by encouraging them to use digital services rather than phoning a call centre. The department had begun measuring the success of its social media activities, including exploring sentiment analysis and 'return on reputation', however it was identified that further research in this area is needed (Ciancio & Dennett 2015).

Research into the use of Facebook pages by six Australian government agencies in 2011 found there were similarities in their strategies for engaging with the public, despite key differences in

target audience and the type of content shared on each account (Alam & Walker 2011). None of the organisations were using Facebook for consultation or decision-making, instead the focus of content was announcing and informing (Alam & Walker 2011). The agencies evaluated were the ATO, Australian War Memorial, Tourism Australia and the Department of Defence accounts for Army, Navy and Air Force.

Finally, a case study of the Murray Darling Basin Authority's use of social media to disseminate information to passionate community and industry stakeholders from geographically diverse locations found the aim was to understand and change community attitudes about water management for Australia's largest river system (Johns 2014). However, the research does not provide detail on how the success of the campaign was measured, and whether it achieved the aim of controlling the policy conversation and improving connections between stakeholder groups. There is room for greater exploration in academic literature of the social media interactions between government communication workers and stakeholders about community issues and policy development.

This research aims to broaden the scope of existing literature on social media use by the federal government in Australia by exploring the experiences and views of workers within public sector social media teams.

## **Chapter 4: Research design and methodology**

In this chapter, I outline my approach to conducting research into best practice in Australian Government social media teams. Methods include face-to-face interviews with employees from two federal agencies, the Department of Human Services and the Australian Taxation Office, as well as an online survey of Australian Public Service (APS) employees and contractors who work on social media. I present my research questions and detail how data from interviews and the online survey were collected and analysed.

I naturally drew on my knowledge and experience in public sector social media work while conducting research activities. This enabled me to empathise with the stories and examples shared by case study interview participants and pose clarifying questions where appropriate to better understand their individual and team issues and processes. Throughout all research activities I took a reflexive research approach – through conscious self-reflection I have sought to understand and be clear about my potential influence on the research process (Hennink et al 2011). My work experience brought some benefits, for example I was able to easily build rapport with interviewees, however I also had to be mindful of my questioning so as not to influence or lead their responses.

### **4.1 Research questions**

To understand what constitutes best practice within Australian Government social media teams, it is necessary to determine the structure, processes and mix of staff skills within these teams, as well as reported barriers and measures of success. The following research questions were used to develop interview and online survey questions for employees in public sector social media teams:

RQ1 - What are the reported benchmarks that guide best practice within Australian Government social media teams?

RQ2 - What are the guidelines, strategies and approaches that support and impact the work of Australian Government social media teams?

RQ3 - What are the risks, limitations and barriers that impact the work of Australian Government social media teams and how might these be overcome?

Research activities included collecting information about government social media projects through interviews with government employees from the two agencies, as well as a wider-scale anonymous online survey for employees to gather information about the skills and experiences of public sector social media teams.

#### **4.2 Face-to-face interview selection and methodology**

DHS and the ATO were selected as the two case study agencies for this research project. Both are large government agencies, each with an established social media presence used to engage directly with a large number of citizens online. Both agencies have been featured in previous academic research (as summarised in chapter three) however much of this is now outdated as social media accounts and platforms have changed over time and government processes and strategies have matured. For example, the ATO eTax Facebook page case study referenced in the literature review has since been closed and a broader ATO social media presence established in its place. A core strategy of the eTax page was to broadcast information and not respond to specific tax questions (Alam et al 2011). Yet this research project has found that the ATO social media strategy has evolved significantly since this time to one that includes an active online community dedicated to answering tax questions as an alternative to traditional phone and face-to-face service channels. However previous research on these agencies still provides a potential benchmark against which to measure the evolution and maturation of government social media activities.

Participants for individual interviews were identified and recruited using convenience sampling, leveraging professional contacts I have developed during a 14-year career in Australian Government communication teams. Interview duration was approximately one hour per

interviewee, and they were conducted in the ATO offices in Brisbane, and the DHS offices in both Canberra and Brisbane. The interviews were semi-structured in that several core questions were asked of all participants; however some aspects were explored in greater detail than others depending on the experiences each interviewee. This approach recognises that social media use may be different for each agency, and allows participants to discuss issues and provide examples in a way that best suits their experience.

The aim was to interview two employees from each of the government agencies in order to gain their insight into the depth of engagement government has with citizens through social media, how the success of this work is measured, and what, if any, are the barriers to social media implementation by government. One interviewee from each agency would be a decision-maker for social media, the other an operational employee who manages day-to-day social media activities. In the context of this research project and the Australian Public Sector, a decision-maker is defined as an employee at the Executive Level 2 (section manager) level or a member of the Senior Executive Service (branch manager) level with strategic leadership and line management responsibilities. An operational employee is defined as an employee at the APS 4 to Executive Level 1 level, who would typically be responsible for day-to-day social media management activities. Some of the more senior levels in this category (APS 6 and EL 1 levels) may have some team management responsibilities. In the end, interviews were conducted with three employees from each agency, acknowledging changes in staff over time (for example, the key decision maker at the ATO now leads a different team but had relevant insights for this research) and the breadth of social media work delivered (for example, social media marketing, versus online community management and social media customer service).

The method of interviewing employees at both the operational and decision-maker level used in this research project is similar to the approach taken by Omar et al in their research into the use of social media by local government agencies in the state of Victoria, Australia (Omar et al 2014). The aim was to understand what differences and similarities might appear in the experiences of employees across these levels – for example, would there be tension on issues relating to team resources, or about the value and effectiveness of social media as a communication channel. Using this method for research into federal government use of social

media also allows for future comparisons across levels of government in Australia, which is an under-explored area of research.

### **4.3 Online survey selection and methodology**

To support the case studies of these two agencies, an online survey of federal public sector social media employees in Australia was also conducted. These anonymous responses provide a comparison point for case study information and present information about the broader experience of social media teams in the Australian Government.

An online survey was created using Qualtrics and participants for the online survey were recruited via email using convenience sampling, leveraging the researcher's professional network, as well as snowball sampling through social media posts. In both cases, participants were encouraged to pass the survey on to their APS colleagues who also work in social media, helping to identify an otherwise difficult to identify group (Hennink et al 2011).

The online survey used a voluntary opt-in model, which had anonymity as the default setting. No identifying information was collected. There were no restrictions on age (above 18 years), gender, socio-economic status or ethnicity of participants, but with a preference for diversity. Participants were asked to self-assess their eligibility to participate as an employee of Australian Government agency, whose primary job role is social media strategy or social media management. To assist with this, the first question of the survey asked whether the person is employed in the Australian Public Service – those who responded with no were told they are ineligible to complete the survey.

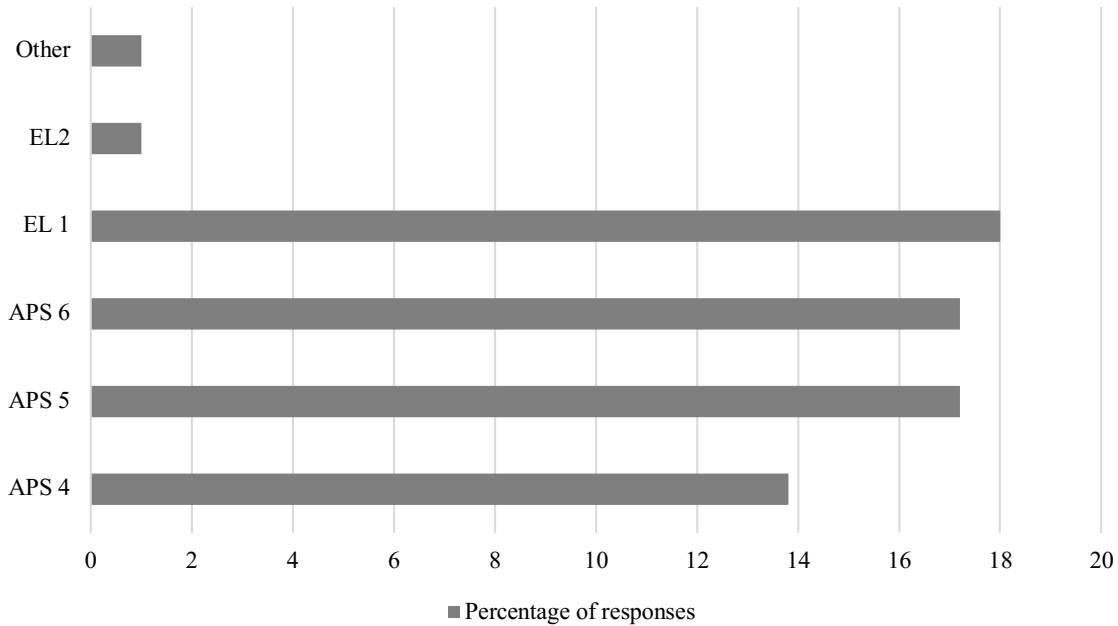
Quantitative results from the online survey were analysed and results delivered in tables and graphs. Themes and differences in responses were identified, and may be based on an organisation's size, the skills of the team and the worker or manager level of the employee.

There were 50 responses to the online survey, 47 of which were employees of the Australian Public Service. Respondents were from the following APS agencies:

	Agency / Department	Number of survey respondents
1	Austrade	1
2	Australian Bureau of Statistics	1
3	Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission	1
4	Australian Signals Directorate	1
5	Australian Taxation Office	7
6	Australian War Memorial	6
7	Bureau of Meteorology	2
8	Clean Energy Regulator	1
9	Commonwealth Ombudsman	2
10	Department of Education and Training	2
11	Department of Human Services (becoming Services Australia)	16
12	Department of Industry, Innovation and Science	1
13	Fair Work Ombudsman	1
14	IP Australia	1
15	National Film and Sound Archive of Australia	1
16	Productivity Commission	2
17	Sport Australia	1
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>47</b>

**Table I: List of respondents’ Australian Government workplaces**

Online survey respondents ranged from the APS 4 to EL 2 level. The vast majority were at the operational level (APS 4 to EL1) – only one respondent identified as an EL 2 and there were no respondents from the Senior Executive Service (SES).



**Table II: Substantive APS level of online survey respondents**



One respondent selected 'other' and identified themselves as a "contractor – EL1 equivalent".

Job classifications in the APS are based on the work value of the duties performed (APSC 2018). These are APS 1 – 6 operational roles, EL 1 and 2 middle-management roles, and SES Band 1 – 3 which are generally the Secretary and deputy-level roles across government agencies.

#### **4.4 Coding and presenting the data**

Case study interviews were manually transcribed and analysed to identify key themes in responses. My approach to analysis was a mix of inductive process, working within the established concepts and issues in existing literature, as well as deductive process, as recurrent themes and ideas were raised by interview participants as they shared their work experience (Timmermans & Tavory 2012). As expected, coding categories evolved as a result of the topics raised in interviews, including team processes, managing risk, and staff skills. The use of analytics for business reporting, as well as the way respondents describe work practices and issues, was also a focus. Findings are presented in the context of the experiences of social media workers in other research interviews, including those in the Victorian State Government and the US federal government (Omar et al 2014; Mergel 2013).

Multiple choice answers to online survey results were also manually coded, then cross-analysed to determine whether there are similarities in responses depending on agency size, team structure and skills, policies and resources and other factors. Free-text responses were analysed and coded according to theme, and where appropriate these were also aligned with themes from case study interviews. Aggregated data from the online survey are presented in a tables and discussion throughout chapter five.

#### **4.5 Limitations and dependencies of this research**

While every effort has been taken to ensure the collection of data for this research has been independent, voluntary and rigorous, there are some limitations and dependencies to note.

The researcher is an Australian Government employee, currently at the Australian War Memorial and previously at the Department of Human Services, and has worked in government communications and social media for 14 years. Federal government communication networks, particularly those relating to social media, are small and so the majority of the interviewees from the two case study agencies (four out of the total of six) were known to the researcher. This was identified early on, including during the ethics approval process, as I planned to leverage existing positive professional relationships with employees from both teams in the hope they would agree to interview. I was mindful of this issue during interviews. Participants were assured anonymity in the writing of case study results to enable them to speak freely about work, teams and process.

The views of members of the SES are not represented in this research. Although it was an aim to collect the views of executive leaders in the APS, both through interviews and the online survey, the case study agencies did not make available for interview employees above the EL 2 level, and no SES chose to complete the online survey. This limits the ability to draw conclusions about the leadership view of social media for government communications, however this topic was discussed in the face-to-face interviews with employees from the two case study agencies. Employees were asked about what support or otherwise they have received from their agency's leadership, and what they believe their views about social media to be.

Ensuring an appropriate and representative sample of views has been collected in this research project has been difficult. By their nature, anonymous online surveys mean that a detailed identification of respondents is difficult. The response rate of 47 completions is substantial, as the network of federal public sector social media teams is relatively small, however there are only 17 agencies represented (see table I) from a total list of 114 entities covered by the Australian Public Service Act 1999 (APSC 2017), most of which appear to have official social media accounts.

For these reasons the survey and interview samples cannot be considered as a truly representative. A different and more detailed approach to survey recruitment would be required to deliver it, including a potential partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC). This remains a potential topic for further research.

## **Chapter 5: Research findings**

In this chapter, I present the findings from face-to-face interviews with six employees from the ATO and DHS. Alongside the experiences, issues and trends discussed by employees of these two agencies, results from an anonymous online survey of 47 government social media workers provide an insight into whether these are unique to larger service agencies or a common factor across Australian Government social media teams.

### **5.1 Organisational structure, staff skills and work processes**

This research aims to increase understanding about the structures, skills and processes within public sector social media teams in Australia. To date, there has been limited published research on the experiences, operations and work environments for these teams. I developed the following research question to guide my investigation on this topic:

RQ2 - What are the guidelines, strategies and approaches that support and impact the work of Australian Government social media teams?

Within the APS, social media work is undertaken by public servants and contract staff located within government communication teams – those responsible for communication strategies, media relations, web publishing and other public affairs activities. Online survey respondents were asked to choose from a list what best describes the team they work in, and the results were varied (see table III). Only 10.3 per cent of respondents work in a team that is dedicated to social work alone.

Description of work team	Percentage of respondents
It's a social customer service team, we respond to questions on social media but proactive content and strategies are created by another team	5.2
It's a digital team, we do social media and other video/rich media production or website development	10.3
It's a media and social media team	15.5
It's a marketing and social media team	3.4
It's a communications and social media team	20.7

**Table III: Respondents' descriptions of their team**

Four of the 47 respondents chose 'other' and gave free text responses, providing a deeper description for the types of communication activities undertaken by their teams. Two identified their teams as "media, publications and web", while another said "a digital project team, with responsibility for social media, communications and marketing elements related to the project". These responses help to highlight the varied structures of social media and communication teams within the APS. Whether these teams work solely on social media, or also deliver other communications, seems to depend on organisational size and responsibilities. In general, it appears larger agencies have dedicated social media teams, seemingly because they have larger communications teams and a broader range of service or policy information to distribute through online channels to a wide public audience.

Indeed, the number of workers in social media teams varies significantly amongst Australian Government agencies. In this study, the size of teams range from two to 25 people (see table IV). At DHS there are around 25 staff working on social media content and strategy, social media customer service and media relations. The ATO has a team of five dedicated to work on their ATO Community platform, another team of eight staff working on social media content and strategy, while their social media customer service activities are outsourced to a third party provider that also answers phone calls from the public.

Number of people in team or immediate work group	Percentage of respondents
2	12
3	5.1
4	15.5
5	6.9
6	12.1
7	1.7
8	6.9
9	3.4
10	3.4
11	1.7
12	1.7
25	1.7

**Table IV: Number of people in respondents’ immediate team or workgroup**

Evidence shows that in general, public sector social media teams are small. Almost 70 per cent of online survey respondents work in teams with 6 or fewer workers. This can present issues relating to burnout in busy teams, staff difficulties taking leave, and limitations on succession planning for teams. These will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

At the ATO, social media functions are performed by two separate teams, which are closely aligned with the agency’s media team. During interviews, employees highlighted the benefits of having proactive social media, customer care, and social media listening activities happening together within the one team, primarily because issues or messages can quickly shift from one channel to the other and require a coordinated response from the agency.

“The interconnectivity between those three components is so critical. Because something comes in from the media and we don't even know about it, next minute we're getting smashed on [social media] enquiries. But you know, without joining those, you know we would essentially have to operate as a hybrid team from three different areas anyway” (ATO employee in interview).

Indeed, the co-location of workers in communication teams can lead to more effective and efficient processes (Picazo-Vela et al 2016). However it is interesting to note that while social media functions are centralised at both the ATO and DHS, each has social media workers located at a number of different locations across Australia and speak on the phone or instant message each other throughout the day to help them manage the team’s work.

DHS recently merged its media and digital media functions, and is cross-skilling workers to manage media enquiries and social media content. This change process has had its difficulties – interview participants described reluctance by some team members to reskill – however overall it is seen as a positive that will lead to better communication outcomes and more engaged workers.

“I am probably the biggest advocate for cross-skilling. I myself have worked in the website space. I've worked in marketing. I worked in the media team. I've done internal communication...and then I've moved into digital media. I think because I have got those cross-skilling tools I instantly know where things need to go next. And I think that's where sometimes if you're in your own little bubble it's really difficult to see beyond, you know, and to have an understanding and appreciation of why things have been developed in the way they have. So I actively encourage all my staff, particularly those who've been in a team for a little bit, to go out and cross-skill” (DHS employee in interview).

From interview and survey results, as well as existing research on Australian public sector social media, the hybrid media and social media approach at DHS appears to be a unique one, particularly for a large department. There is room for further research to determine whether this hybrid-style team leads to social media and communication best practice.

The skills of individual workers within government social media teams appears to be an important factor in their success, and evidence shows the backgrounds and work history of workers influences the approaches teams take to their social media engagement activities. For example, at DHS the majority of social media have a communications-related degree, including some that have entered through the department's graduate program. In addition, there are now workers in the team with customer service delivery backgrounds that have worked in the department's call centres and have been trained to respond to social media queries. This mix of skills is representative of the service delivery focus of the department and the types of interactions workers have to respond to through social media. This also reflects a trend in the Australian communications sector more broadly as “organisations are increasingly restructuring to incorporate social media work within core operations and communications activity, and as a new avenue for service delivery” (McCosker 2017, p. 7).

Leaders from both the ATO and DHS highlighted the importance of having teams where workers have a mix of backgrounds and skills. There is a high representation of workers with policy or customer service backgrounds within their social media teams, likely a reflection of the service delivery focus of each agency.

“If I think about who we've got in the team, both are a strength. I think to understand your audience, the communication background is probably more important because the beauty of social media is that you have to engage with your audience. If you make a mistake, you know you'll learn very quickly that actually that's not the way they want you to communicate with them. You know that trial and error of posting content you'll learn that. I think the benefit of having people coming with the customer service delivery background is they get that upfront, they get how to communicate the business side of things” (DHS employee in interview).

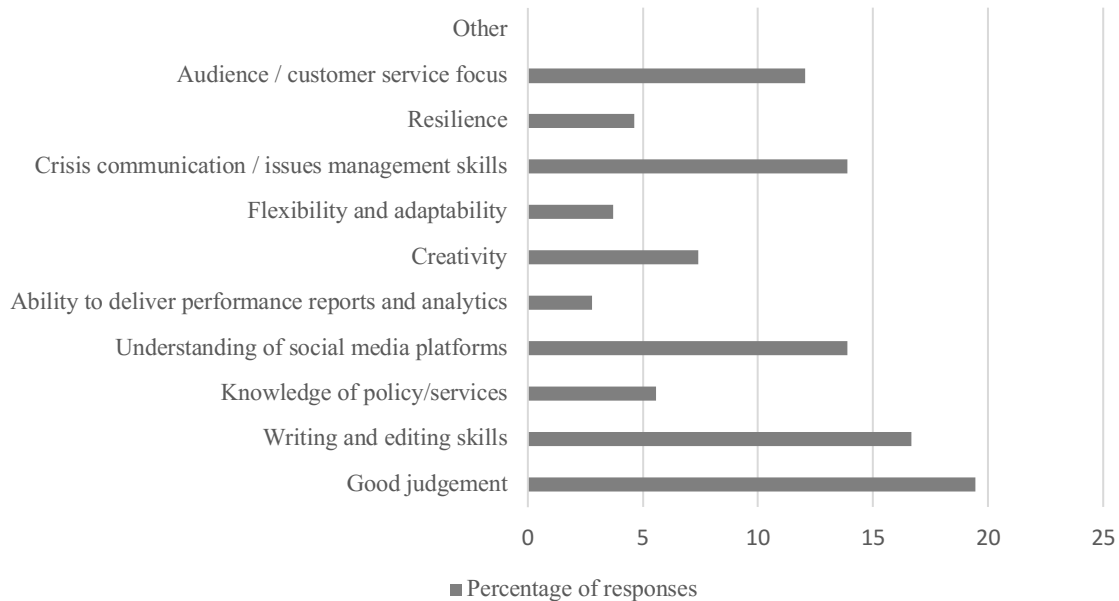
In addition, evidence shows the backgrounds that team members come from influence the way they approach work. For example, the research background of one social media worker at the ATO meant the team had an early focus on data and analysis - reporting up and using it to make decisions and negotiate with internal stakeholders on content.

“I guess when I came into the role I took the approach, because I'd come from a research background, I needed the data. That was really important to me and that hadn't really happened prior to that yet. So that was the point where we said we're not going to run your post again unless you can prove that it was effective last time.... Or we'd have people who would say ‘what we really want to do is name and shame the bad businesses that aren't paying their taxes’. Great, but when we do that, because we've done it in the past, we actually saw 15 people stop following us. You know, the impact is much bigger if they're not getting any of [the messages]” (ATO employee in interview).

Forty-three per cent of online survey respondents identified themselves as a media or communication manager/adviser with responsibility for social media as well as other communication activities, and seven per cent identified as the leader of such a team. Within

Australian government social media teams, it appears the daily content production, moderation and responding to comments is done by teams where this is only part of their overall job role. Twenty-nine per cent identified as a social media manager/adviser with responsibility for social media only, while one respondent identified as the leader of such a team. Two respondents (or 3.4 per cent) selected ‘other’ in response and provided a free text description of their role – one identified as a “social media customer service officer”, the other said “teach digital”. While non-members of the APS were not eligible to complete the survey, the respondent that teaches digital may not be a current public servant but completed the survey anyway. Fifteen per cent of respondents chose not to answer this question.

This project asked public sector managers and employees about the skills they believe social media workers require, the ability of teams to retain these workers, how tasks are allocated across teams and agencies. Online survey respondents were asked to identify what they think are the most important skills needed by staff working in Australian Government social media teams. They were given a list of 10 choices and asked to choose up to three. In addition, an ‘other’ option provided to enable respondents to add a new skill, however no respondents took up this option.



**Table V: Skills needed by workers in Australian Government social media teams**



Notably, resilience scores quite low in the survey results however the need for resilience and concerns about team member ‘burnout’ due to busy social media work, was a significant topic of discussion in interviews with ATO and DHS employees. This may be as a result of the work level of respondents: all six interviewees were at the middle-management level (EL 1 and EL 2) while the majority of online survey respondents work in more operational level roles (APS 4 to APS 6). There was acknowledgement from ATO and DHS workers that the teams consisted of high-performing individuals who were often unable to take leave. This is explored further later in this chapter.

As digital and social media technologies evolve, organisations and social media roles are co-evolving (McCosker 2017). Discussions with interview participants revealed workers often see themselves as connectors between citizens and the agencies they work for, and at times take on an advocacy role to champion organisational change for the benefit of the public. There is evidence of this in online survey responses about the way agencies approach their social media activities.

Description of agency’s approach to social media	Percentage of respondents
We have a social media policy for staff but the agency doesn’t use social media proactively	1.7
We share official messages (eg media releases) but don’t actively respond to questions	3.4
We share informational updates and actively answer questions through social media as an alternative to other information/service channels	13.8
We post regular content for the purpose of engaging with our audience and we respond to their questions in an open and conversational way	48.3

**Table VI: Respondents’ descriptions of their agencies’ approach to social media**

One respondent selected ‘other’ and said ‘but not in all platforms, Twitter is broadcast only’. I have interpreted this to mean that while their agency may respond actively online on other social media platforms, their approach to Twitter is broadcast only. This data shows that workers in Australian Government social media teams see themselves as responsive to questions on social media and that they are open and conversational in their online interactions with the public.

Similarly, engaging with citizens, being responsive to questions online, and the early identification of issues were recurring themes in interviewees from the ATO and DHS about the benefits of their social media work. Both agencies gave examples of social media providing the first alert of an issue with an online service or an error in a letter, allowing them to respond quickly online while alerting internal stakeholders to get things fixed. Employees saw this as a benefit for both citizens and the organisation:

“You know, we've got that direct line of communication with the customer group that not many other groups have. The immediacy of the channel, having direct customer feedback and then being able to identify those issues much earlier than you otherwise would have, you know, and all of that comes down to protecting the reputation of the department”  
(DHS employee in interview).

Yet in contradiction with these sentiments of immediacy and responsiveness, many Australian public sector social media teams operate only within traditional business hours. This must present limitations on the ability for government to be truly responsive if some social media posts go 12 or more hours overnight without being addressed or, in the case of potential service issues, escalated for urgent attention. I explore this in greater detail later in this section.

Workers in public sector social media teams take on the role of advocate within their organisations for transparent, timely and targeted communications. APS social media workers have expertise in strategy and content development, as well as insight into the required tone of messages to ensure they connect with online audiences. For some employees, having social media work split from traditional marketing and communications work is considered a strength:

“If we were part of the marketing comms group rather than our branch, I should say that would be more difficult to push back and say no on things. I think it definitely helps having us separate and being able to focus purely on the communities and our audiences per channel. Because they're even different each of the channels, whereas marketing comms have that broader overview and they are addressing, you know, trying to reach

people through multiple channels with their communications. You definitely have to have that more in-depth knowledge of the channels” (ATO employee in interview).

This is an important skill for social media workers to possess, as “not every type of government content might be suitable for distribution and communication through social media channels” (Mergel 2013, p. 333).

Attempts to create content that aligns with a trending topic or leverages a pop-culture reference appear to have grown over time as social media teams, and their colleagues in internal business units, grow in confidence. For example, several online survey and interview respondents identified police forces across Australia as best practice at using humour and pop-culture references to build millions of online followers, which they can then reach at other times with serious and critical policing updates. However, this remains an underutilised tactic for our two case study agencies because of the nature of the government services they deliver.

Responsiveness and prioritisation of social media work is seen those in public sector social media teams as a key measure of success. Indeed, government responsiveness on social media has been linked to their increase trust in public services (Eom et al 2018).

“I think that best practice social media in government, I think it's really it's about being transparent and responsive to your audience. That's really critical, like responding to customer queries. Not having it looks pretty bad, you know, if you've got people asking. You've got a fancy social media page but you're not responding to customers. Having a strategy in place and making careful informed decisions when deciding to create accounts - not creating accounts just the sake of having an account on Facebook but having a purpose behind it” (DHS employee in interview).

Both the ATO and DHS receive a high volume of queries through social media, hundreds per week on average and in the thousands during peak periods, and both use the same online platform to queue social media queries by priority. Top priority is given to threats of suicide or self-harm, media issues and service issues, so they can be quickly addressed to minimise

potential negative impact. For example, interview participants from both agencies spoke about a process to quickly addressing posts from the public that relate to suicide, self-harm or other crisis issues. These posts are queued as high priority so they can be immediately actioned to minimise potential harm. While each agency has a clear protocol for social media workers to follow, this is an emerging issue for the industry as workers in online moderator roles are increasingly exposed to difficult content online. The issue and has been highlighted in recent news coverage about content moderators at Facebook (Hern 2019). This was not explored in significant detail in this research project and is a potential area for further research.

Both case study agencies, and most of the online survey respondents, identified that their team has policies in place to manage the clearance of content before it is published via social networking sites, however these can vary greatly between agencies and even depending on the type of content being released. Generally, queries that are sensitive, are complex and require clarification by an internal expert (for example, detailed policy information) or queries from journalists or media outlets, are escalated to a more senior member of the agency's social media team for action. Those online survey respondents that identified clearance is required at the SES level for standard queries, also rated onerous clearance processes as a top issue affecting their work (see table VII).

At the ATO, proactive content is generally created by employees in the marketing and communications team, using a template and in consultation with the social media team, and may go through several rounds of editing between the teams to get the content and tone of the messages right.

“We don't require executive clearance, generally the SES delegate downwards. Generally speaking, it is the director [EL 2 level]. If it's more technical then the comms team contact the business line and liaise with them and we pretty much leave it to their discretion – whatever process they use within their own team, because obviously the risks are higher and lower” (ATO employee in interview).

At DHS, the way content is cleared for public release through social media varies depending on whether the content is a planned proactive message or a response to a question from a member of the public. For proactive content the social media team has an established process, endorsed by the Secretary of the department, that helps ensure content is approved at the appropriate level in a timely way. A social media worker describes the tiered nature of the process and how they use it to facilitate approvals from various internal business units:

“Yes, they're all ranked and they've got a number next to them. So, we'll identify which one we think it is and what's the relevant clearance based on that...and we refer to it in our email. Often it's included, or at least a snippet from it is put into the email, so they can see kind of where it sits and you might trigger their memory for the [clearance process] document” (DHS employee in interview).

This can be at the middle-management (EL 1 or 2) level for standard messages that are developed using existing content, for example materials published on the department’s website, through to executive level clearance (SES Band 1 to 3) for complex or sensitive messages. Arriving at an established process required members of the department’s communications executives to meet with colleagues across the organisation to present evidence about the need for its implementation and “to give people the opportunity to raise concerns and address any of them” (DHS employee in interview).

“We do have to do a fair bit of clearance. However that's not so much an issue nowadays because lots of steps were made in the last several years to streamline clearances and educate business and the executive on the need for efficient and quick clearance processes” (DHS employee in interview).

Both case study agencies have similar approaches to clearing reactive social media messages – those that are in response to a question from a member of the public. At the ATO, this work is generally outsourced and responses are managed by workers from a third-party organisation that also answers the agency’s phone calls. Only the more complex queries, of those that are sensitive or from a media outlet are escalated to a member of the agency’s social media team to action. At

both agencies, sensitive or complex content requires clearance from executive staff (SES level) before being posted.

At DHS, a process exists where staff at the APS 4-5 level in the social customer service team can respond to online queries directly without clearing their response first. Processes ensure that responses are taken from pre-approved sources, such as website content or other resources, to ensure their accuracy:

“That is using previously cleared stuff, or that's using their knowledge and interpretation as well as pre-cleared stuff. So to that extent they do have the freedom to really publish whatever they want” (DHS employee in interview).

One benefit of this approach is that social media workers are able to inject their own knowledge, tone and greetings to the replies, providing a more personable reply that citizens may receive from governments through other online channels. These staff go through a training period before being able to post responses without clearance. This involves having another staff member in the social media team at the APS 6 or EL 1 level review all of their responses, and the sources that content was taken from, before being published. This is an approach to minimising social media risk by providing quality assurance on the accuracy of responses as well as coaching new staff on tone and social media etiquette.

Despite the 24/7 nature of the modern news and social media cycle, and the opportunities for immediacy that social networking sites provide, public sector social media teams are generally operating only within traditional business hours. The DHS social media team generally responds to questions on social media on weekdays from 8.30am to 6pm AEST. This can vary, for example at DHS work times increase around during June and July as people are required to lodge tax returns and assessments are made about their eligibility for child care subsidies and other family support payments. The ATO has similar hours of operation on social media but has established an automated alert system so that one of the team's managers is alerted if certain words are mentioned on its official social media accounts. For the ATO Community, content is moderated before it is published on the site, so any comments received overnight are held until

the following morning. Employees at both agencies are compensated for out-of-hours work.

Further to this, 36 per cent of online survey respondents identified that their agency did not have a process in place to monitor social media accounts outside of traditional work hours. There also are examples of agencies where employees engage in social media monitoring work out-of-hours but under informal arrangements - for example, 8 per cent of online survey respondents said they did out-of-hours monitoring work but are not paid to do so, nor do they receive time off in lieu of this additional work.

It appears that while workers in public sector social media teams see the value of immediacy in social media communication and aim to be responsive in their online engagement with citizens, they primarily offer this service only during business hours. While resourcing 24/7 responsiveness would present a challenge for government, particularly for smaller agencies, this example of applying a traditional government operating model on a dynamic and open communication channel is a missed opportunity that demonstrates a lack of true engagement and responsiveness.

## **5.2 Measuring success**

A central aim of this research is to gain an understanding of how Australian Government social media teams measure and report on the effectiveness of their work. In order to understand how various government agencies measure their work and what benchmarks, if any, they have established, I posed the following research question:

RQ1 - What are the reported benchmarks that guide best practice within Australian Government social media teams?

As highlighted in chapter three, existing research on social media use by governments around world shows that while workers believe their social media activities are valuable, the measurement of social media activities is often ad hoc and the metrics put in place by third parties (such as Google or Facebook analytics) are of limited value (Mergel 2012). There is also

evidence of this in online survey responses from APS employees, as demonstrated by these comments from two respondents: “sometimes for campaigns we set targets and monitor results as we go. We could definitely be smarter about how we do this” and “we dont [sic]. Repeated attempts to implement reporting frameworks have failed”.

Where measurement and reporting does occur, social media workers in the APS are using the analytics provided by the social networking sites themselves, or through third party platforms used for managing content publishing or responses. And, they are measuring similar things. When asked to briefly describe how their team measures the effectiveness of its social media activities, 55 per cent of respondents mentioned ‘engagement’ (the number of likes, shares and comments a post receives on social media) data as a key measure. The vast majority of all responses mentioned some or all of these other measures: post reach (the number of people for whom a post appeared in their social media feed); audience growth (the number of additional followers or subscribers gained or lost over time); click-through-rate on website links included in social media posts; and the number of comments received in response to a post.

However, there is less confidence amongst social media workers in the goals set for campaigns or individual posts, and whether or not the results they are measuring prove success. Words such as ‘benchmarks’, ‘KPIs’, ‘comparisons’ and ‘targets’ relating to social media performance was mentioned by only 30 per cent of survey respondents.

“We complete evaluations, however we don’t currently have any benchmarking across the board to compare so we can evaluate our success. Our definition of success is not clear. There is a benchmarking guide being developed for this purpose” (online survey respondent).

Similarly, there are external factors that make developing benchmarks and comparing data difficult for social media teams.

“We don't have an easy way to pull out and measure what we're doing. You've got the obvious the engagement rate, you know how many likes or shares. It is really having the



time to sit down and analyse all the things we've done, what makes a good post. Because we also don't have control over the algorithm and you don't have control over what else is happening in social media. It can be difficult to assess 'what was that successful or was it not?' And I think that's something that, you know, when we've talked to other departments they grapple with that as well" (DHS employee in interview).

At the ATO, there are established processes for gathering the social media analytics provided by each platform. This is done through a number of third-party platforms the team uses to do social media listening (identifying conversations about the agency on social media platforms that may be outside of its official accounts), publish proactive content, and queue social media queries. Performance over time has been used as a measure to benchmark the performance of proactive content published on the agency's social media accounts.

"We have our own benchmarks that give a rough indication of how our posts performed and looking at similar time last year, for example or comparing this tax time to last time. We've also got monthly benchmarks. So, marketing comms professionals or whoever it may be can go back and look exactly like 'Oh this time last year you performed this way'. We also break it up between audiences, so this is the business benchmark that month plus is the individual's audience benchmark, that sort of thing" (ATO employee in interview).

The social media team at the ATO is unable to be responsive to requests for analytics from across the organisation, so they publish social media analytics on the agency's internal document-sharing platform and encourage their marketing and communications colleagues, as well as others across the business, to view and use that data as needed.

"We do encourage staff to dig more deeply than the engagement percentage. I encourage them to look at the comments themselves underneath [an individual social media post] because that can give a good indication of whether it's positive or negative sentiment... Fifty comments that say this is rubbish, it looks like high engagement but it's not the right kind" (ATO employee in interview).

At DHS, social media performance reporting is done regularly – weekly at an organisational level along with other services such as call centre and website data, as well as monthly at the business unit level.

“We get the stats manually out of Facebook Insights and Twitter analytics and has them in a spreadsheet so that we can report on them weekly in the General Manager’s weekly report, which goes up to senior executives. In terms of looking at the accounts more holistically, each account will have a monthly report done that is fed to various stakeholders, whether it be the comms team, or some business areas get the reports” (DHS employee in interview).

Monthly reports include a section on key learnings and recommendations where social media workers provide summarise what has worked well and what hasn’t, as well as providing contextual information that may have influenced the result.

These experiences are consistent with Mergel’s findings from interviews with federal government social media workers in the US. It is clear that whatever analytics are collected by agencies, interpretation by an employee with knowledge of the organisation’s mission is essential. They also trend towards using anecdotal evidence to show their work is having a positive impact (Mergel 2012).

Indeed, hearing about issues first was identified by interviewees as a key benefit of government social media use, particularly for the employees at DHS. It appears that over time, examples of service or policy issues being identified and resolved through social media have been reported to senior executives to help cement the place of early government social media teams as central to business. Ten years on from this early work, interviewees said their reporting is performance and strategy-based, rather than seeking validation. As one described it:

“We’ve got buy-in from all across the whole department, I think for the value in what we do. So I don’t know that it’s about validation. We do feed into a lot of reports. I think it’s good to highlight too, so that we’re in the front of his mind when they are going to

meetings or forums or whatever it might be. We want to be at the front of their minds so I guess we need to keep reporting and highlighting the work that we're doing – not that we would ever be forgotten. There's too much happening in our space and media...we're front of mind when decisions are being made” (DHS employee in interview).

However, once again the data collected to report on this is often anecdotal. It appears that agencies do not actively measure the broader impact of the process of identifying issues through social media and escalating them early, for example by translating this into potential reputational gains or cost savings related to preventing an error. This kind of measurement is an opportunity for further research and could provide communication and social media professionals with a model for presenting clear evidence on the positive impact of their work on business operations.

For the two case study agencies, the performance of workers responsible to answering public queries online is also an important measure of success. Government responsiveness online can lead to improved trust and citizen satisfaction (Hong 2013). At DHS, there are benchmarks for workers in ‘social media customer service’ roles and they are provided with statistics on the number of queries they have answered each day.

“Coming from the Smart Centre [call centre] background there was always a dashboard where they could see how they perform, how they're tracking ahead of time there. How many calls have taken whatever it might be, you could always see how you were tracking during the day. So often they want to know how you're tracking how they perform [on social media] because they want to make sure that they're hitting or getting as close as they can to our benchmarks” (DHS employee in interview).

At the ATO, expectations for response times are set into a service level agreement with their external provider. This ensures responses are completed the same day, generally within a couple of hours, and even faster during the busy tax time peak. More complex or sensitive queries are escalated to an ATO employee in the social media team who manages this response work, to investigate and clear a response through internal stakeholders. This is acknowledgement that

social media workers have important skills and knowledge in communication and issues management, internal organisational process, and good judgement.

“I kind of have changed over the years. I can remember having an argument with my exec at the time that it was gonna take 10 years for me to train anyone in tax technical knowledge. So that's why I had to take someone from the call centre to do those response roles. But the guys have since made it work with someone in the team moving from one of the [social media content] writing roles over to heading up and doing that main response role fairly successfully. So, I'd say that the complementary skills will always be necessary” (ATO employee in interview).

This project has found that Australian Government social media teams are actively and regularly measuring the performance of their proactive content and social customer service responsiveness. However, the same issues about collecting and interpreting analytics that appear in existing academic literature are also experienced by APS social media workers. Centralised advice, where public servants can access examples of benchmarks or case studies they can use as points of comparison to their own work would be beneficial. This concept is discussed further in chapter six.

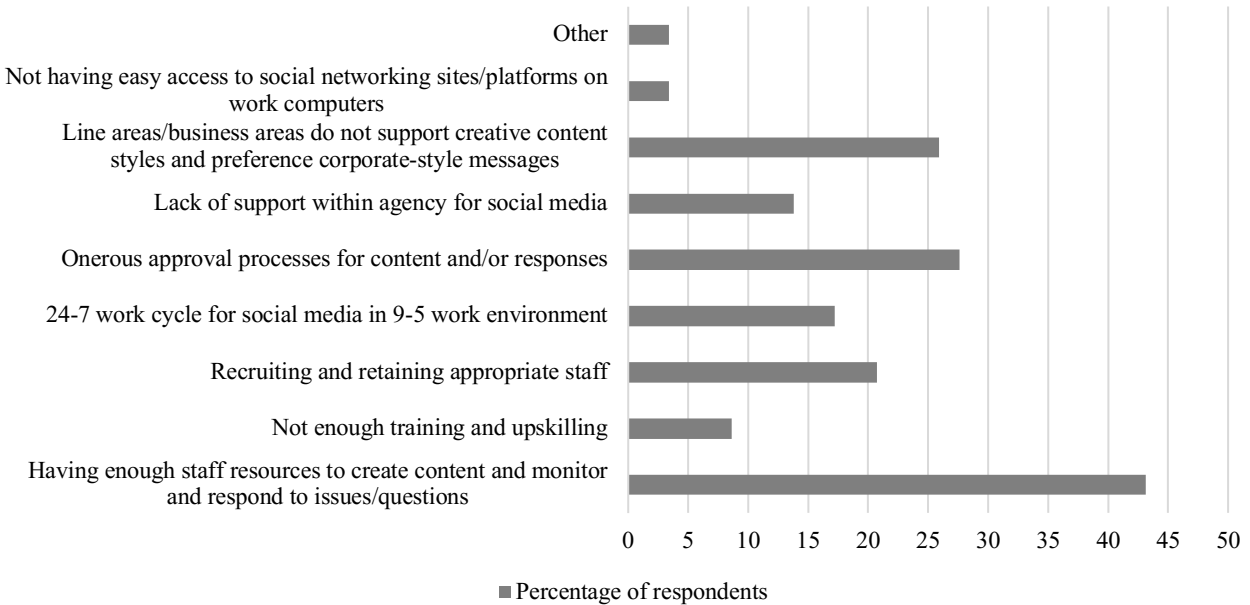
### **5.3 Risk and barriers to implementation**

More than a decade since on from the delivery of the first social media activities by federal public sector communication, media and online teams, there are still significant risks and barriers to implementation identified by workers in APS social media teams. To guide my exploration of this topic in interviews and the online survey, I developed the following research question:

RQ3 - What are the risks, limitations and barriers that impact the work of Australian Government social media teams and how might these be overcome?

Online survey respondents were asked to identify what they believe to be the top three issues facing Australian Government social media teams. Overwhelmingly, a lack of staff resources

was the highest rated issue, and on a related note, recruiting and retaining appropriate staff came in as the fourth-highest rated issue. Second was onerous approval processes for content and/or responses, and third was internal line areas/business areas giving preference to corporate-style messages (fact-based, detailed content about policies or services that is serious in tone) over creative and more social media-appropriate content.



**Table VII: Top issues facing Australian Government social media teams**

Despite the varied sizes of social media teams within the Australian Government, a lack of resources was listed as a top issue by both online survey respondents and interviewees from the two case study agencies. Efficiency measures and limitations on public sector staffing, including the requirement for agencies not to grow their employee numbers (Hamilton 2018), has created difficulties for social media teams across the APS as they implement and maintain successful online engagement projects.

“We have been 100 percent told you cannot increase your FTE [full-time equivalent, non-contractor, employees]. We’re a very small team that now has to utilise our creative minds to come up with better solutions that’s gonna take the pressure off us. We want to step away from responses and moderate more. As communities grow they should become

more self-sufficient but at this time our community needs a lot of handholding” (ATO employee in interview).

These efficiency measures contribute to an uncertain and high-pressure working environment for social media teams in government. Issues relating to staff care and burnout were discussed in several of the face-to-face interviews. There was acknowledgement and pride from employees of both the ATO and DHS that their social media teams are high performing and have been at the forefront of delivering new communications and services during a time of technological change. However, at times this has led to staff burnout as employees have expended significant energy advocating for change with internal stakeholders and managed difficult and constant conversations online. A lack of support from leadership and other internal stakeholders was raised by interviewees as a significant challenge for social media workers, and one that had contributed to staff turnover. One ATO employee described how to agency’s experiences with an early and now-closed social media project had led to greater risk aversion for current online community managers.

“It was an extremely difficult [former] channel to manage and a lot of work that had been let go through to the channel was inappropriate. So it seemed every single day every single person in this [new and current] community manager role has had to sort of fight their way to get stakeholders to agree to something. And that has really...it's not fun. I did it for a long time and now that that really messiness has moved away it’s a lot nicer to look through [the community] to see the continued growth and traction” (ATO employee in interview).

Negotiating with internal stakeholders to deliver more creative and engaging content was also raised as an issue by both interviewees and online survey respondents. When dealing with their communication and marketing colleagues, social media workers have difficulty getting them to recognise the differences between social media platforms and how content is treated there. Interviewees identified that in a busy environment, these negotiations can fall by the wayside so that the same piece of content can go out across multiple channels in a less targeted way than they would usually recommend.

“You treat them exactly the same, you don't treat them as unique channels. And you just send the same message out on the same day for a whole month, and you send that through in a Word doc and then you get it back, and you send it to one place for approval and then another place for approval. Whereas, if you're looking at testing you probably have to spend more time thinking about what is it that you're wanting to test, what are you going to change? Are you going to name multiple images? Do you need to present one thing as a video rather than an image? So it's a lot more work I think. And in a busy environment it's hard to prioritise that over the busyness” (DHS employee in interview).

In addition, there appears to be a risk aversion within business areas and line areas for creative messages, and through clearance processes these areas instead preference corporate-style messaging that contain facts or detailed information about government initiatives or services. This creates tensions for social media workers, as their analytics and examples show that these dry, corporate-style messages do not perform well on social media, yet they have to work with internal stakeholders to ensure they agree to the publication of some regular content so the accounts can remain active.

“Wish we could do more and be more proactive with coming up with creative content because when we do it works really well. It definitely depends on who is in the business a long time because we do come up with ideas that then get pushed back: ‘No we're not doing that’. Which is a real shame. I believe we get those areas that are definitely risk averse, but that's the way it goes. Like, we are the channel owners, we won't publish something and unless we approve it , but by the same token we won't publish something that the business line hasn't clear yet either” (ATO employee in interview).

There is also a tension in larger government social media teams when it comes to creating multi-disciplinary teams. In some case, employees are recruited for certain skills, such as data analysis, or asked to specialise in their role to ensure core deliverables can be delivered across a multi-disciplinary team. However, this specialisation can lead to boredom for workers who have less variety in their job roles, as well as difficulty with team succession planning. There were examples provided of team members being unable to take leave, or use flex leave they had

accumulated for working additional hours, either because of their specialised roles or because they felt like they would be leaving work that other team members would have to take on.

“We had massive issues around succession planning. And it was really difficult for anyone to ever take time off because they did become the experts and there was no one else that could do it. Like, every one of them would have hours and hours, hundreds of hours [of accumulated flex leave] and get into a mess. But they also feel like they can never take it” (ATO employee in interview).

Management of self-care for employees and resilience training was discussed, and approaches to this are varied. As mentioned in chapter three, only 4.63 per cent of online survey respondents identified resilience as a top skill required in social media workers however this was a key theme in face-to-face interviews with employees from the two case study agencies. At the ATO, team leaders regularly check in with workers to ensure they are coping with the demands of responding to queries on social media.

“I think there is that time limit really on how long someone can do [a social media job role], and maybe even that role in terms of [social media] customer care. So, there's a lot of unspoken things that we do, like constantly checking in if that person's okay. Switching it out so that they're not the only one who's getting bashed if there is something big in the media, you know, we pull them off that and someone else does it for a bit. Try to rotate channel loads” (ATO employee in interview).

There is a similar approach at DHS to checking in with social media workers, including ensuring they have time out from conversations online that may be contentious or particularly busy. In addition, the team has also undertaken formal resilience training that is available to employees across the department, as well as seeking out additional training from Lifeline on self-care for social media workers and learning how to deal with sensitive online conversations.



While all interviewees spoke about the importance of measuring and reporting on social media performance, there was acknowledgement that this work can be time consuming and as a result can fall to the bottom of a busy team's list of priorities.

“It's also the gathering of the data as well that we find tricky, you know it is a manual process and when you're busy those things fall by the wayside” (DHS employee in interview).

To help manage workloads and varied responsibilities, the workers on the ATO Community divide their day according to tasks. Mornings are spent moderating and responding to public queries that have been submitted overnight, and afternoons are spent on data analysis, reporting and other tasks. While this helps team members deliver on their work, it does mean that they are less responsive to online queries in the afternoons.

“What we found is we were constantly in response. Everything else is getting left. We weren't getting any of our business as usual done. We weren't doing any of our maintenance, such as certifying responses or writing labels. We have reporting limitations because we are a small team and some of the reporting through the system that we have is very clunky and not very user friendly. So we found that if we split the day in half and actively concentrated on the responses in the morning and actively concentrated on the BI [business intelligence] in the afternoon” (ATO employee in interview).

For both of the case study agencies, discussion about where in an organisation the social media function should reside came up with each of the interview participants. Although social media teams have remained embedded within each agency's communication functions, interviewees expressed that there had been questions raised internally at various times about whether or not the function should move to service delivery teams. This has occurred in recent years as each agency's use of social media has evolved from broadcasting messages into a channel for information and service delivery.

“So I guess in the [social media customer service] response side, this scaling up of operations is a challenge now and it will be into the future. So I guess managing staff at the level that they are and in the work that they're doing isn't necessarily a skill that lies in the communications division or in the media branch. So the management of performance and behaviours in that space is a challenge. So I guess any ongoing work that's happening there is just discussions around where does that actually sit moving forward. Does it sit in the Communication Division? Is it a service delivery function? If it does sit with us, then how do they get managed? We don't have the formal scheduling and rostering tools that service delivery have to be able to know on any given day how many people we should have doing what work at what time” (DHS employee in interview).

These issues are important considerations for government agencies as team operations and the volume of questions from the public increase over time. Yet while social media service delivery may present difficulties for communication teams, there is still a strong sense that they must retain responsibility and oversight of an agency’s social media accounts to help ensure consistency in messaging and tone and to protect and manage reputation.

In this chapter, I presented the findings from face-to-face interviews with six employees from the ATO and DHS, as well as the results from an anonymous online survey of 47 government social media workers. These findings provide an insight into the employee skills and team processes within Australian Government social media teams, as well as the risks and barriers they face in delivering social media strategies.

## **Chapter 6: Recommendations for best practice social media**

In this section, I offer suggestions for Australian public sector social media teams on how to achieve best practice, drawing on this new research as well as existing international literature.

### **6.1 Establish clear strategies, set measures and report regularly**

It is recommended that agencies implement a strategy for their social media work with measurable objectives, if they do not already have one, and report regularly on whether or not objectives are being met. The continuous evaluation of government social media initiatives is essential, not only to measure their efficiency and effectiveness, but to ensure they are providing value to the public (Medaglia & Zhu 2017). The experiences uncovered through this research show that teams are undertaking some measurement activities, but these appear largely ad hoc. These findings align with comprehensive research into the workings of US federal government social media teams undertaken by Mergel (2012). She found that insights into the impact government agencies are having as a result of their social media use seems to be come from spot checks of numbers, rather than regular reports, and random reading of citizens' comments to provide anecdotal evidence (Mergel 2012).

To assist, it is also recommended that a centralised list of benchmarks be created for APS employees to access and reference in their strategies and reporting. This would greatly improve social media workers' ability to measure activities with confidence, and enable agencies to compare and evaluate their work against the performance of other agencies with a similar size or service offering. Having such tools in place would enable workers to follow evolving themes in social media and to frame content delivery and interact with audiences online using an evidence-based approach (Mergel 2012).

This type of centralised service could record and publish benchmarks on a range of social media activities, including: marketing campaign performance; responsiveness to citizens' messages; periods of demand for information through social media, as well as case study comparisons on more complex initiatives such as online policy consultations. These would likely evolve over

time as government social media strategies in Australia and across the world continue to develop.

Centralised data on social media performance, issues and demand would also assist Australian Government agencies to plan for peaks and better predict potential issues, as well as develop business cases for the correct level of resources for their teams. However, this would require a new level of information-sharing by public sector agencies that is not currently the norm.

Best practice recommendations on how to collect and report on social media data, using a range of tools and within a government context, would also be beneficial. While many agencies count the changes in their numbers of likes and followers on Facebook and Twitter and similar statistics, these measures do not go far enough to evaluate the true effectiveness of social media efforts (Mergel 2012). More than this, it is essential that the measurement tools and benchmarks used by government social media workers connect their social media activities to their agency's mission and objectives (Mergel 2012). Without this critical step, social media workers cannot be certain that their strategies and tactics are supporting the government's priorities of the day.

## **6.2 Adequately resource and skill social media teams**

The issue of employee numbers and adequate resources for teams is an issue that impacts much of the Australian Public Service and has resulted in increased use of contract staff and consultants (Easton 2019). Within this context, it can be difficult for social media teams to successfully make the case for increasing resources. As a result, the opportunities social media offers government to engage with citizens cannot be fully realised.

Several years ago, it was perceived that the ability of information to spread through the actions of social networks and potentially become viral has cost-saving potential for government (Mergel 2012). Examples of this in practice are rare, and while paid advertising on social media is often more cost-effective than traditional advertising, this simplistic view of cost-saving for government fails to take into account the requirement to moderate and facilitate discussions online.

In some cases, respondents to the online survey conducted for this research project work in a team where one person is responsible for creating and publishing social media content, responding to questions online, and delivering other communications work each day. The dynamic nature of social media means that work with longer deadlines can remain incomplete if issues arise online that require immediate attention. While this may be a necessity to ensure responsiveness and to manage reputation, this is not a sustainable model for government communication teams. It is essential that “once platforms are chosen, there should be appropriate staff dedicated to developing, implementing and updating the social sites” (Zavattaro & Sementelli 2014, p. 262). To address this issue, agencies could implement controlled trials that measure the desired communication outcomes against social media maintenance costs (Mergel 2013) in order to determine the best approach for delivering a variety of social media strategies.

A mix of skills is needed within social media teams including: writing, editing, graphic design, video production, judgement, and a customer focus. Yet within government agencies, workers with these skills can sometimes be distributed across different teams or business units, making the development of integrated content difficult. While it is unrealistic to suggest that all agencies immediately establish multi-disciplinary social media teams, having this as a future goal can help influence recruitment decisions so that teams are well-rounded, and aid in establishing better working relationships across teams with complimentary skills. In addition, up-skilling or cross-skilling can be beneficial in a number of ways. At DHS, this is taken a step further to ensure the team recognises when individuals are developing their skills or acquiring new ones:

“We are always finding opportunities for cross-skilling. It's a real focus and we make sure we really celebrate it when people are going out of their comfort zone, whether it's doing digital media work for media natives or vice versa” (DHS employee in interview).

Creating an environment where teams and individuals are empowered and supported to learn new skills creates variety in work, provide employees with a sense of improvement they advance in their careers, and ensure government agencies can remain responsive to the changing social media environment and citizen expectations. The hybrid media and digital media team at DHS is

a good example of a move in this direction, and while they are still working on cross-skilling staff, this model will ensure the department can deliver consistent messages across a range of communication channels.

### **6.3 Do your homework to manage risk**

With the ubiquity of social media activities today, including those initiated and managed by government social media teams, there is little excuse for operating without the necessary governance and risk management frameworks in place. However, the realities of resourcing in public sector social media teams, as outlined in this paper, mean that often this work is not done or is not maintained as platforms and laws change. It is recommended that teams conduct an audit of their social media governance and risk management plans to assess what they have, what they need to update, and what is missing that they should implement. In the absence of centralised guidelines, teams should consider what frameworks would be support their work, for example: rules on who in their agency is responsible for social media, what to do when an issue arises on social media including out-of-hours, how online interactions with citizens are moderated and appropriate records kept. In addition, other guidelines that government agencies must follow, such as the Australian Privacy Principles (OAIC 2019), should be used as a reference to ensure that any frameworks developed for social media ensure that citizen privacy and information security is managed appropriately.

Australian Government agencies have done well to implement and maintain a high volume over social media accounts over the past 10 years (Australian Government n.d). Even within the traditionally risk-averse government environment, agencies are demonstrating they have been flexible enough to evolve and adapt as social media technologies, and people's use of them, changes over time. Much of this has been driven by the social media workers advocating for change within their agency, and the support they have from their leaders directly impacts the success of their strategies.

“We were very lucky that at the time we had an executive who completely understood social media, how it worked, was on board was using it and believed in it, and believed that we were competent to do our jobs and was able to tell that story to the others. There wasn't a day that went past where this particular executive wasn't having a conversation with another exec about social media and he had lots of other things in his portfolio.... continual fighting even in our own house around whether he should own it or whether marketing and comms or media should own it. The reason we were able to make some decisions around some of that stuff was purely because he fought for us to be able to do that” (ATO employee in interview).

While some leaders, as above, provide much needed support and advocacy for social media work, there is evidence that within Australian Government social media teams this is not the norm. The risk-averse approach that many members of the SES take to participation on social media platforms may be the result of the aforementioned lack of clear governance frameworks and processes in a number of agencies. To help minimise the concerns of government leaders, it is recommended that social media workers ensure “platforms should be part of a strategic governance program and not simply offered for the sake of offering” (Zavattaro & Sementelli 2014, p. 262). Clearly articulating in strategy documents how social media activities support an agency’s priorities is essential to secure support from APS leaders.

It is also recommended that members of the SES increase their knowledge and understanding of existing social media practices so they can better support the communication activities of their agencies. Indeed, when leadership support is present in an agency, there are enhanced opportunities for leveraging social media for citizen engagement, building trust and reputation.

“We get that real-time feedback straight away, whether it's through engagement. It's not always good but it's fine. It's just real time capturing of feedback... I would say it has a massive role in reputation management for the department. Being able to defend where there's criticism but also just highlight positive things that we are doing, whether it's celebrating our staff, or just about departmental initiatives, whether we're listening to

customers and making improvements, or actually actively making a difference raising money or whatever it may be” (DHS employee in interview).

Concerns about government social media use arise from a lack of understanding of the platforms and/or a lack of hands-on experience in using them (there are very few members of the SES with professional or work-related social media accounts, even fewer that actively manage these themselves). However, there can be greater risks for government leaders in not supporting social media initiatives. For example, by having an official government presence on social media, agencies have the opportunity to counteract potential negativity from ‘unofficial’ accounts that can have negative reputational impacts (Agostino 2013). By participating online, agencies give citizens an official social media channel through which to raise their concerns, minimising the power of unofficial accounts.

#### **6.4 Formalise networks for sharing best practice and benchmarking**

At present, there are no formal networks that enable Australian Government social media workers to share best practice, strategies and benchmarks for their work. One existing group, the Communication Cross Agency Network or ComCAN, has quarterly meetings where public sector communication professionals meet and give presentations to share their knowledge with others, sometimes on the topic of social media (APSC 2018). This network is Canberra-based; there may be related networks elsewhere across Australia however none were identified through this research. A dedicated network for social media workers, including those whose speciality is social media customer service, does not exist. It is recommended that one be established, to enable greater information-sharing and to encourage comparative performance measurement and even cross-skilling between agencies rather than only within them.

In the absence of this, social media workers have found other ways to gain information from colleagues and share their knowledge with others. In some cases, this involves peer-to-peer information-sharing across agencies:



“We don't have a formalised sharing, but it's ad hoc, we develop relationships with individuals in other agencies and you might share ideas and processes with them. You know, I had someone approach me from an agency a few weeks ago asking us about our clearance processes...we're happy to share them to help develop theirs” (DHS employee in interview).

While in other cases, agencies look to other government agencies around Australia and the world, as well as private sector examples, in order to stay up to date with social media trends and best practice. However, depending on the agency and its strategy, finding appropriate examples can be difficult.

“We like to look at best practice as often as we can. The issue we have is we are, oh I think we're the second tax [online] community in the world. The only other country that's in front of us is Estonia. Estonia is extremely innovative for a lot of tax and super issues. So we have really no one else to kind of compare ourselves against. We always we look for similar fields, so we look for financial services, banking etc. The meeting I was just in was actually benchmarking us in comparison to those like subjects, which I found was really really exciting. But we're just in a very unique situation, and we are constantly looking for literature [to find similar examples]” (ATO employee in interview).

A further important consideration is how traditional indicators of return on investment can be measured in government environments with no brand competition and only the quantitative measures produced by the social networking service providers. For example, agencies look at the raw data of their number of likes on Facebook and the number of followers they collect on their Twitter account. In an attempt to interpret these counts, some social media workers try to determine whether a connection exists between a specific event and an increase in likes or followers or between the click-throughs received from information the agency posts on Facebook and the additional hits these posts generate on the agency's traditional website. However, as outlined in chapter five, there is rarely consistency in how this is measured within or across agencies. It appears there are limited examples of agencies being able to link social media

activities to large-scale efficiencies, cost savings, reputational gains or other business drivers that could provide more meaningful evidence of return on investment.

## Chapter 7: Opportunities for future research

There is a need to continue research into government use of social media in Australia, given the volume of official accounts in use by federal public sector agencies, and the high social media usage rates by citizens (Sensis 2018). While the case studies presented here offer a new insight into Australian Government social media teams, there are further opportunities to compare this with the experiences and work practices of teams at the local, state and federal level. This may uncover key similarities or differences that impact communication outcomes. This analysis also has the potential to identify opportunities for improvement, innovation and greater efficiency in work practices for public sector social media teams.

More detailed research into the resourcing and responsiveness of public sector social media teams across all levels of government in Australia would be beneficial. In particular, the hybrid nature of some social media teams where workers have a mix of communication and customer service skills and backgrounds, or conversely, teams where workers have either communication or customer service skills but are required to do additional social media work outside their skill set as the needs of online audiences change. Public engagement levels and response timeliness were not a focus of this research project, however existing literature references that DHS and the ATO both appear to reply to many comments from the public on the same day they are received, and sometimes within an hour of the question being posted (Ciancio & Dennett 2015). There is an opportunity to further measure how responsive agencies are to comments and issues on social media. Indeed, there would also be strong value in further exploring how responsiveness has come to be a measure of performance, and how appropriate or worthwhile this metric is in demonstrating effective social media strategy and delivery. Consistent and responsive government services are important for reputation management, however it would likely be difficult for smaller government agencies to commit to, and resource, the same level of social media responsiveness as larger service delivery organisations. While government agencies may not necessarily be competing with each other for social media audiences (Mergel 2013), it may be the case that some larger agencies with numerous social accounts may make it harder for smaller agencies with important messages to reach an audience.

There is a need for more detailed research into the risk management practices of Australian Government social media teams. Some public sector agencies establish relevant governance frameworks to support social media risk management, yet often where they do exist they are unable to keep pace with rapidly changing technologies (Bertot et al 2012). Results from this research study show that the level of sophistication in this area varies greatly between Australian public sector agencies. Governments are implementing social media projects with limited resources and staff, potentially increasing their exposure to risk (Omar et al 2014). There are likely practices happening at the local, state and federal levels that need to be improved, while some agencies may have governance processes that offer new and efficient ways of managing social media work and risk.

There is also room for further research in methods for measuring the success of Australian public sector social media initiatives. There are some mentions in current research of possible communication and marketing measures relating to awareness, sentiment and audience reach, however there is limited understanding amongst social media managers about whether their work is having an impact (Omar et al 2014; Mergel 2013). This is particularly relevant as some agencies have begun using social media to encourage changes in citizen behaviour. This quote from interviews conducted for this research project provides an example:

“All of our messaging is about digital options, so making sure people are aware of and able to use the digital options: self-service, helping them become self-sufficient; and helping them move away from traditional service channels” (DHS employee in interview).

Analysis of whether social media helps agencies achieve a desired outcome, change citizen behaviour, or collect an accurate representative view on a policy issue, would improve academic discussion of the effectiveness of social media use by governments.

Finally, there continues to be a significant gap in research about the citizen experience of Australian Government social media use. Why and how Australian citizens are using social media to deal with government agencies remains underexplored in academic literature. There is

also a lack of understanding about whether citizens are seeking out this channel for interactions, or rather finding unsolicited government information in their Facebook news feeds.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive insight into the workings of two leading Australian Government social media teams – one at the Australian Taxation Office, the other at the Department of Human Services. In addition, the results of an online survey of 47 workers from Australian federal public sector social media teams are presented. By combining these data sets we gain an insight into how the size, business, leadership, and resourcing of teams contribute to their success, or prevent it.

For more than a decade, Australian Government agencies have been using social media to monitor public views, disseminate information, and engage with citizens. Yet Australian-focused research into the federal public sector teams, processes and policies that enable this engagement remains underrepresented in academic literature. This research fills a gap by providing an in-depth case studies and analysis of the workings of Australian Government social media teams.

The results show that workers in government social media teams have evolving job roles and skill sets that present both opportunities and challenges for managers of these teams. The highest valued skills are: good judgement; writing and editing skills; crisis communication / issues management skills; understanding of social media platforms; and audience / customer focus. Interestingly, resilience as a skill was rated low by survey respondents, most of which were at the APS 4-6 level, while managers of social media workers valued this skill more highly due to the sometimes intensive a repetitive nature of these job roles.

At DHS, the ATO, and most other agencies surveyed, there are processes in place to manage the clearance of content, escalation of issues, and mitigate risk, such as a roster for out-of-hours social media monitoring. However, there still remain some agencies without these policies and frameworks, and without a strong network of information-sharing and best practice between government agencies.

Discussions with social media workers show they want to engage with the public in an open and transparent way, to do a good job, and use social media platforms the way they are intended to be

used. Government employees largely remain optimistic about the opportunities social media presents and the impact their own agencies' use has (Medaglia & Zhu 2017), however existing approaches to measuring the social media effectiveness makes proving this impact difficult (Mergel 2013).

I presented details on the risks and barriers that limit the success of Australian government social media initiatives, including how an enduring lack of support from leadership and internal stakeholders resulted in onerous experiences for social media workers and reduced responsiveness. I also discussed issues relating to the appropriate resourcing of public sector social media teams.

This work offered suggestions for public sector social media teams on how to achieve best practice, drawing on data from interviews and online surveys with Australian public service employees. A review of related literature was presented, along with an overview of social media use by Australian federal public sector agencies. I presented the findings of my research and referenced other research on public sector social media from across the world in an effort to better understand the workings of government social media teams. Finally, I discussed opportunities for further research in this area, particularly related to citizen priorities and experiences in engaging with governments through social media channels.

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