“To Listen, Share, and to Be Relevant” - Learning Netiquette by Reflective Practice

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Department of Sociology and Political Science,
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway
Halvdan.Haugsbakken@svt.ntnu.no

Abstract. Over the years, organization researchers have researched use of Social Network Sites (SNSs) in organizations. Organizational research on use of SNSs in public organizations is a growing research field. To expand the latter research stream, this paper explores a trend in the Norwegian public sector, the creation of so-called “betas”, competence groups in social media. This trend illustrates how public employees have started to work professionally with social media. The paper examines a case showing how the members of a beta group affiliated to a municipality, developed a social media strategy to master the unwritten rules of communicating on social media. The paper exemplifies this by analyzing how the beta group members interacted on various SNSs to learn netiquette and used this user experience to provide municipal employees a moral compass to interact online, which had to be created by performing processes of *reflection-on-action*. Their social media strategy was expressed under the self-designed catchphrase – “to listen, share, and to be relevant”.

Keywords: Norway, SNSs, public organizations, user behavior.

1 Introduction

Since the end of the 2000s, Norwegian public organizations have started to work professionally with social media. As part of this development, we find a franchising of social media competence groups, so-called “betas”, in various municipalities and state-owned companies. The betas are few, but have formed as the result of local bottom-up initiatives or are the creation of top-management priorities. Normally, the betas consist of employees with university education in media and communication studies and are affiliated to IT or Communication Departments. The betas specialize in a wide range of matters, but they have foremost worked with approaching and creating legitimacy for use of social media in organizational life. For example, they have authored local social media guidelines fitted for use in public organizations and acted as instructors for colleagues who wish to learn more about social media.

In this way, the betas have set social media on the agenda, but this can come with a catch. Adopting social media strategies in organizational life can be a challenge, especially when there are few frameworks around that can be implemented by a top-management initiative. And when that is reality, public employees working with social media have been compelled to create social media strategies *themselves* through bottom-up initiatives, which has involved reflecting on their own social media behaviors and practices that they perform as ordinary users. This online engagement seldom takes place in a contextual vacuum; it is socially negotiated by exploring cultural impulses in the social media landscape and by looking to how colleagues in neighboring public organizations approach social media, approaches that play an important role in how local social media policies are eventually expressed in the end.

In this regard, the focus of this paper is to exemplify such a case through a beta's work, called the Beta Group (BG). The BG is affiliated to a Norwegian municipality, named the Echo Organization. The paper pays attention to the ways the BG members engaged on three different SNSs to learn netiquette. Netiquette can be seen as the unwritten rules for good user behavior or role performance and are a "recipe" to manage online identity and create online community awareness on social media. Online engagement helped the BG members to formulate a local social media strategy and enacted as a moral compass for colleagues who were unfamiliar with using social media, which was expressed under the catchphrase, "to listen, share, and to be relevant".

To explore the above case, this is covered over the following sections. The next part takes in hand relevant theory and research horizon. Thereafter, the methods used to complete the paper are outlined, before data analysis is addressed. The final part concludes the data analysis.

2 Relevant theory and research horizon

In organizational research on social media, one has not adequately framed how practitioners in organizations are challenged to make sense of social media by personal *retrospection*; moreover, what role personal retrospection plays in creating local social media strategies. Instead, other research themes are given emphasis. For example, organization researchers focus on suggesting frameworks, technical definitions, describing technical features, and the potential ways that SNSs can bring benefits and changes to organizational life. Here, McAfee's [1] Enterprise 2.0 and Tapscott and Williams's Wikinomics [2] are influential contributions.

Therefore, one needs to develop a research lens by using a *reflective practitioner perspective*, which can be illustrated by the work of Schön. Schön [3] introduced the concepts *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*. *Reflection-in-action* can be described as the ability of a practitioner to reflect on feelings, emotions and prior experiences to attend to a situation more directly, while reflection-on-action is a "post-reflection-situation", where the practitioners analyze their reaction to the situation and explores the reasons around them and the consequences of their actions. Reflective practice is a practice-based professional learning where persons learn from learning from professional experiences, than merely reproducing knowledge from formal learning and knowledge transfer. The framework emphasizes that learning is part of an ongoing cyclic pattern of experience and the conscious application of lessons learned from personal experience, where the end-goal is to reach a higher level of understanding. And in this way, reflective practice is an experimental learning where self-organizing and auto-didactic features are central elements.

There can be good reasons why organization researchers could take advantage of the above approach. For example, social media tends to manifest as *ambiguous* and requires ongoing sense-making in order to be managed. Here, reflection can help in understanding the processes that influence how social media policies are created.

But organization researchers have approached SNSs differently. Much organization research appear to be inspired by a social capital framework and many studies are making initial findings on how SNSs are used in organizations.

For example, a body of studies have mapped how SNSs are used internally in large IT companies. Hewlett-Packard designed an enterprise SNS, which was tested on employees, being part of a larger R&D project. Here, IBM's Beehive project is groundbreaking work, reporting successes [4] and interesting research papers. Characteristically, one can read about how Beehive has been implemented and tested on employees, where researchers have documented basic SNS user behavior on detailed levels. Research focuses on an entire SNS [5] or particular features, like tagging systems [6] and user profiles [7]. Many Beehive research papers somehow use a social capital perspective [8], as the links between SNS use and connecting strategies figure as a recurring theme. Researchers record that IBM employees use Beehive as a platform to expand their professional networks; they use it to communicate with colleagues across organizational levels [9]. IBM employees carry out a range of search and retrieving practices [10] and use Beehive as a knowledge repository [11].

Another body of studies gives insights on how employees use SNSs to streamline their online behavior to work practices and organizational affiliation [12]. For example, if an employee uses Twitter, one is cautious on what information is shared to an external audience [13]. Researchers have examined the challenges in adopting organizational SNSs. It is not uncommon to come across findings showing how employees still prefer communicating on e-mail and chat software and silently monitor SNS streams [14]. Hence, we find the usual user pattern; that a core group adopts SNSs and maintains network activities, while a larger user group uses “older” ICTs.

A research literature studying the ways SNSs are used in public organizations is growing among researchers, the e-government field. Research suggests frameworks on how public organizations should adopt SNSs [15,16,17]. Studies establish that public organizations adopt SNSs in attempts to create dialogue with citizens [18], but are predominantly creating an online presence [19]. Bonsón et al. [20] examined Western European local governments’ Facebook pages, only to find that much of the published content did not seem to be relevant for citizens. Reddick and Jaramillo [21] found that Canadian citizens use SNSs and had high service expectations, demanding timely updates of information and responses to private inquiries. Reddick and Norris [22] showed that a public organization used SNSs as a one-way communication channel, although aiming at creating a public dialogue. This is also confirmed by Mossberger and Crawford [23] and Saulles [24], where the latter one found that English local government agencies used SNSs to perform a “push-out-information” communicative strategy. Cumbie and Kar [25] conducted a survey of local government’s use, but results illustrated that many public organizations merely register and had an online presence. Joseph [26] documents the same tendency among US government agencies, a finding consistent with studies of how Norwegian municipalities adopt Facebook [27].

To conclude, public organizations use SNSs as bulletin boards and interact with citizens by using formal communicative strategies. This is not far from the ways one communicates with government agencies on phone or e-mail.

3 Methods

The paper is based on a field study in the Echo Organization’s IT Department, carried out from October 2011 to June 2012. There, I followed the work of the BG members. I used ethnographic methods, consisting of qualitative interviews, participative observation, and collecting of written and digital items.

The paper makes use of interview data from three informants, the head of the BG and two members. The data analysis is based on six individual interviews. The BG Head was interviewed four times, while two interviews were conducted with the other members. The interviews lasted from one to three hours and were recorded on a digital recorder. The interviews were semi-structured. An interview guide was used.

After interviewing, the interviews were transcribed and patterns established. The data was first coded into smaller topics and then grouped into larger themes, showing different approaches to what role reflective practice plays in use of SNS and learning netiquette. To complete this task, the sociological data analysis technique constant comparative method was used [28].

4 Data analysis

The data analysis section takes in hand three themes, showing how the BG members used a reflective practice to learn netiquette and to formulate their social media strategy, “to listen, share, and to be relevant”. Each theme explores how the BG members used a particular SNS, which in turned shaped a particular user experience they used to express their local social media strategy. The first part tells how the BG members tested the SNS Elgg in the Echo Organization, which reflects a “*discovery approach*” to SNS use and conditions for implementing SNS for internal communications in organizations. The second part examines how the BG members used Twitter as public employees. This user experience mirrors an “*awareness*” theme, where the BG members attained a greater understanding on how one communicates externally on a new SNS where online community rules are not yet set. The third theme displays how Facebook use reflects a “*streamlining*” theme, showing that public organization imprint its formality on SNS use, as a way to accept a technology into its governing apparatus.

4.1 Background of the Beta Group

The BG was formed in 2008 as a grassroots initiative in the Echo Organization. Today, it is a permanent social media competence group. The members are early adopters of technologies. The BG consists of four persons, two males from the IT Department and one male and one female from the Communication Department. The members are in their 30s and all have master's degrees in media studies. The BG is not a full-time assignment. The members spend about 30–50 percent of their work time on it. An overview of the informants' backgrounds is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. The BG's current crew.

NO.	GEN	DEP	POS.	EDU	ITLE
1.	M	IT	Leader	Master	Consultant
2.	M	IT	Member	Master	Training Consultant
3.	F	Communication	Member	Master	Adviser
4.	M	Communication	Member	Master	Adviser

4.2 Theme 1: Discovering netiquette by using Elgg

The BG members' first experience with SNS started in 2009 with Elgg, an open source SNS often used for educational purposes. At the time, the BG members had little knowledge of SNSs. Social media in general surfaced as ambiguous too, including the ways you engage on social technologies. But they had to start somewhere; as the Echo Organization is a large purchaser of IT systems, the BG members approached their subcontractors to find out if they offered relevant technologies and frameworks:

I-1: We have IT subcontractors that operate all the software for us here in the municipality. But we found out that we had to do it by ourselves. Our IT subcontractors didn't work with social media at all, but only sold large packages and big software programs.

This represented a discovery, and later, a challenge, as they encountered a "theory-practice-gap" in their field. This gap is not dissimilar from how teachers experience the value of their education – that formal competences provided by education systems do not always match practice. In the BG's case, this applied to that the resources the Echo Organization normally use to stay updated on changes in the technology landscape – the services offered by IT companies, which their subcontractors also use to maintain IT services – did not provide clues to how to use SNSs in organizational life.

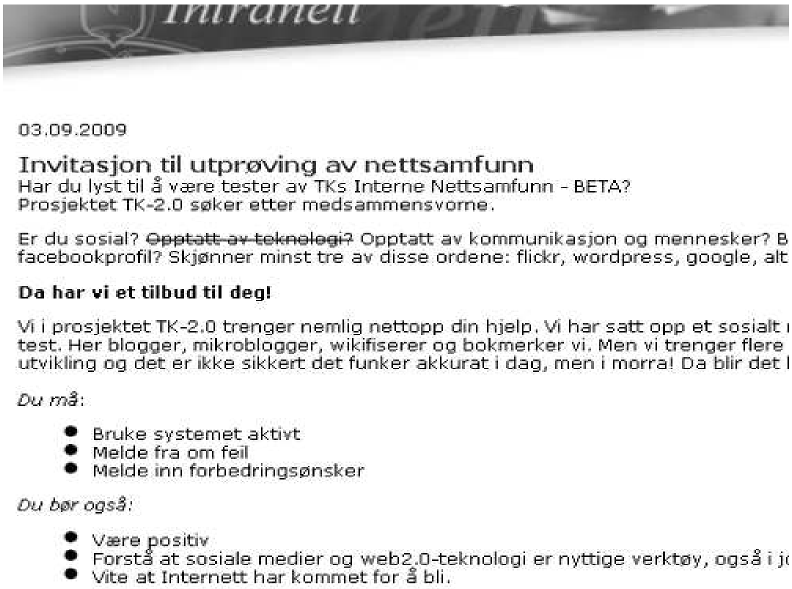
The approach to problem-solve this, was to start using the SNSs themselves. This consisted of conducting a "trial-and-error" practice, which first followed a test environment approach of new technologies. Here, the BG decided to implement Elgg themselves. Elgg had features that could meet organizational requirements, as it had microblogging features and tagging systems. But to test Elgg themselves, the BG in a contradictory position. They had no technical training or experience from computer science. They specialized in strategy and organizing. In so doing, they had to learn Elgg from scratch and struggled with getting it technically configured first. Afterwards, they recruited some colleague to test Elgg, who they saw as super-users:

I-1: We made a story about it and published it on our intranet. We said that we were a testing of an internal SNS, a kind of "Facebook at work". We asked if anyone was interested in getting involved and have their say. We wanted 20 test subjects or so. They were people from different parts of the organization.

The BG acquired several "learning outcomes" from testing Elgg. It taught them a great deal on the challenges about internal communication in organizations:

I-1: We noticed quickly that getting 20 different persons from the Echo organization together was not the best move. Different people from different areas worked with different things, so it came very apparent that people from the City Archive were talking about things that were not [relevant] to those working at the Education Department.

Figure 1: Ad used to recruit users to testing of Elgg.



The BG also acquired other user experiences. For example, the super-users had different motivations for using Elgg. Some participated because they had one thing in common, new technologies. They were not motivated by that Elgg could be used to exchange professional experiences on an ongoing project or find competences.

Instead, the testing of Elgg brought organizational boundaries to the forefront, reflecting that different user groups have different technology beliefs. These manifested around key words introduced by the test-subjects who did not share a passion for new technologies, the "Elgg quitters". They argued that Elgg was "not relevant" and represented a "distortion".

This experience gave ideas to understand the dynamics of netiquette and how to include reluctant employees to become SNS users. Now, the BG members had insights on how to start working on creating arguments, which played on emphasizing the benefits of using SNSs. A SNS is not only a platform, a *technology*, but offers access to *social resources*, meaning that embedded in network technologies are ties. Here, SNSs can be used as a stage to reduce internal departmental boundaries and get coworkers with dissimilar backgrounds to connect with each other. To work on this level, required a different approach. The BG had to become advocators to show that online socializing can bring out distinct profits in strong or weak ties. Having an online social network is advantageous, which skeptical users seldom think of first. This meant that the BG members had to labor positive arguments, which stressed the value of bonding with colleagues across organizational levels, either informally and formally. In other words, it does indeed have a value to share something on a "Facebook at work".

4.3 Theme 2: Awareness of netiquette by engaging on Twitter

The BG members' engagement on Twitter shows a different path and use of personal reflection to learn SNS user behavior. Their learning experience differs as it dealt with mastering the intricacies of external communication in organizations, which is characterized by an *awareness* mode. This started in 2009, when the BG members created personal and official municipal Twitter accounts for the Echo Organization.

The BG members describe their first user experience as starting with an explorative approach in the private sphere, to be reshaped to a professional use. They started using Twitter because it was "natural" and other social media professionals used it.

On the onset, Twitter users tweeted anonymously and were few in numbers:

I-1: The culture was that everyone followed each other. It was important to have many followers. If someone followed me, I followed them back. English was the main language, as there were not that many Norwegians on Twitter. There has been a change as we started to tweet in our mother-tongue.

This period is experienced as positive. The online atmosphere was "friendly", governed by a digital small talk code. Central to the Twitter netiquette was *informality*, which sometimes was seen as too "overenthusiastic":

I-4: There is a netiquette on how to communicate on Twitter. In the beginning, it was a very cozy and informal. You had a lot of, "thank, you for that!", "absolutely fantastic!", "you are so nice!", "thank you very much for retweeting me!", "fantastic!", tweets like that.
R: Very enthusiastic?
I-4: Yes, a bit "circule jerk", as they call it on reddit.com. Whatever you say, you get positive feedback, no matter how silly it is.
R: Does it appear genuine?
I-4: Slightly pompous and excessive.

This gave insights on how user behavior establishes itself in online communities. Twitter users *shared* and seldom enforced self-censorship on themselves, but participated in a dialogue. But when new actors enter the stage, the conditions change. New community norms are introduced, which carve in boundaries, setting premise for inclusion and exclusion. The new Twitter users established distinctions between "work" and "private"; they addressed each other directly by use of @replies and mentions; the former friendly irony and humor changed into a rare commodity; users tweeted under full names, resulting in that Twitter users instead became cautious on how they interacted:

I-1: In the beginning, my Twitter stream consisted of people interested in Web 2.0. It was a small group. There is another word for it, "early adopters". But now, that group has managed to get other people to use Twitter, like "social media experts" and journalists. That brings changes.

Another member explains:

I-4: Now, it's harsher. They use Twitter as a discussion forum, although it's not suited for that. Twitter users have to be more expressive, since you only have 140 characters to state your opinion. Tweets develop into strong statements and you get polarized discussions.

Hence, the BG members saw the Twitter stream as an extension of the public debate. This contributes to learn about how the apparatus of an organization adopts a communication platform designed for individuals and short messages – which can be seen as poles a part. This brings up contradictions. As a public organization, the Echo Organization can meet negative criticism, which citizens air on Twitter. Because of this, the BG's coworkers are reluctant in adopting Twitter. They fear that they will be overwhelmed with negative criticism and inquires. But underneath the administering of official municipal Twitter accounts – which has become part of work practice and is under the BG's control – another reality surfaces:

R: During a workweek, how much work does Twitter monitoring involve?
I-4: Very little, maximum a tweet a day.
R: That's not much?
I-4: It's very little. We don't talk about using major resources.
R: It's almost like responding to a chat message or an email a day.

I-4: Yes. Often there are tweets about the Echo Organization, which I have to redirect to other departments. That's not much work either. The thing that's time consuming are things that I don't know the answer to. And I don't know who knows what. For that, I have to use Yammer and do internal enquiries. And often I get response from a colleague.

Administering official Twitter accounts is seen as a "digital switchboard", a new front desk function, because citizens contact them about topics that are the responsibility of a department. This can be enquiries about formal admission routines to a kindergarten, for example, meaning that negative criticism is rare. Twitter monitoring thus brings up the question on whether an employee should be passive and answerer all tweets or pursue a proactive role and engage with citizens:

I-4: We were inspired by a social media professional who visited us the other day. She talked a lot about listening. First, you have to join the conversation. We understood that part and that you should be relevant. You should share things that give a benefit to our citizens. We didn't manage doing that when we first joined Twitter. How do we know what if it's relevant? It's about listening. You must find out what interests the citizens and those who follow you on Twitter. What are they talking about? And then it's about being proactive. Let's take snow plowing, for example, which is a hot topic these days and is easily exposed for criticism. Why haven't there been plowed for snow here and there, why haven't the municipality salted the roads? Instead of just receiving criticism, one can be proactive and engage with the matter in advance. Not only be reactive and respond to tweets. We have no resources, they argue in the Echo Organization. We can't use our manpower on it, because there is a debate on a discussion forum somewhere. They talk a lot about that here, that we don't stand up. Public claims against the Echo Organization are neither denied or confirmed in that regard and somehow allowed to flourish. It's the same on Twitter, if there is some outspoken criticism we have to deal with it.

4.4 Theme 3: Streamlining netiquette to formality on Facebook

The third theme demonstrates a different approach, which foremost reflect a *streamlining* of netiquette to fit the formality associated with a public organization. In other words, to help public employees who interact with citizens to uphold a certain common code of conduct, public organizations normally write guidelines. The same has been done for Facebook use. Although the Echo Organization has general guidelines for administering of official social media accounts and how employees should interact on social media, there are separate Facebook guidelines, which the BG members have contributed to make. These state that:

When creating a FB page, one should think through and implement the following:

- FB is a channel of communication with the inhabitants of the municipality.
- FB is a supplement to other channels, and not a replacement. All information should be publicly placed primarily on the municipality's official website. On FB, we can publish links to these sites.

We want to achieve increased availability:

- as we reach more groups of users
- as we are present in more channels

and increase the possibility to have dialogue with citizens:

- we can quickly provide answers to questions
- we can get better insight into the population's needs and point of view

and effective dissemination of information:

- we use multiple channels
- users spread information to their friends

The Facebook guidelines have many communicative strategies. For example, when an employee creates municipal Facebook page, there follows a defined set of responsibilities. An employee must identify a target group; there are defined roles and responsibilities in administering a page; department managers are content owners and legally responsible; any page requires ongoing monitoring and inquiries from users have to be redirected to the responsible in which an query concerns; all online inquiries have to be answered; there is a defined response time for when an inquiry needs to be answered, which is set "as soon as possible and within the next work day"; administrators should set up alert notifications to their email, so that they are aware when a new post is published and that one always has an overview of what's going on a Facebook page. The guidelines contain recommendations on how to deal with criticism and Internet trolls. Public criticism directed on employees should be deleted immediately, but general criticism should be replied to, and be done so by answering factually to correct errors.

In contrast, the Facebook guidelines have a practical side and are an outline of a new job description. This means that creating a Facebook page is a call for organizing work. Facebook pages need monitoring and updating, meaning that someone has to perform that task. This work falls on those who take the initiative in creating a Facebook page. This brings up contradictions. For example, the BG members aim at creating a dialogue with the citizens, but Facebook pages often turns into an information repository:

> I-3: We want our Facebook pages to be a collaborative platform, but they are bulletin boards. We seldom get any online interaction there. Perhaps it's the way we write our updates, what we allow, what people are willing to share. There are not so many users who enter our pages and interact there. We want to achieve that goal, but we're not there yet.

This means that administering Facebook pages is a front-desk management task, as we saw with the BG members' experience with Twitter. Faceworking is an office clerk duty, similar to working at a customer call service center, a digital switchboard:

> I-3: Often we don't know the immediate answers to the many inquiries on our two Facebook pages. There are questions that concern the whole Echo Organization. That's what the switch board operator knows best, because they get questions all the time. They can connect a citizen's inquiry to the right person. They probably use about 10 seconds on what we spend half an hour doing, because we do not know who has the answer right away. So we have to do a lot of detective work, to find out where we should redirect inquiries.

The BG members get perhaps one or two inquires each week, meaning that the work is minute. Public criticism is scarce too. The main conundrum is to create conditions for online participation, something that is demanding as Facebook users limit their online sharing to "likes". This means that one is confronted with the challenge to become a creative content producers that can spark interaction:

> I-3: I login on Facebook each morning. I see if anything has happened. Nothing. Then I do other things. Later in the day, I take a look if anything has happened. Nothing. I do some other things I have to do. It's a quiet the day, I go onto the website and see if there's anything that might be of interest that we can publish. Do we have it, I put it out right away. We want to publish more, we want to add more. I try to figure out something that we can publish. I work with it. If there's a question, I usually don't' know the immediate answer. I write a question on Yammer, so that everybody in can see it. I then get answers that help me to respond on Facebook. It doesn't take much time and administrating on my part is little, really.

5 Conclusion

The main goal of this paper has been to suggest new insights on how SNSs are used in organizations, a growing research stream in organization science. Although research is making initial findings on how SNSs are used in organizations, the paper has argued for a case where practitioners use personal reflection to create communicative strategies for use of social media in organizational life, a knowledge path that has not been adequately explored by organization researchers. This brings to the forefront considerations on how frameworks for use of social media in organizational life are eventually implemented or created. In adoption and implementation processes of social media strategies in organizations, we have to acknowledge that process of reflection-on-action have greater meaning that we like to believe, although many would agree on this is important. The reflective practice approach gives away small details on the benefits and disadvantages with social media. The case teaches us that particular contexts and platforms shape different user experiences and give various ideas on how to present your online identity. Finally, the analysis reveals that SNSs tend to still take on the role as bulletin boards and represent a new "phone line" or front desk function, requiring continuous management and maintenance by someone.

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