

Summary

Social Media (SoMe) has become an important communication form for elected officials in Norwegian municipalities and counties. Through SoMe, the elected officials reach a large population without requiring considerable resources. The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) wanted to acquire greater insight into how elected officials can use SoMe as a tool to exert political leadership and dialogue with citizens. It was of particular interest to investigate the subject with respect to the leadership role and the representational role, as well as gathering good examples for further inspiration and learning.

The project explores three main questions:

1. How can elected officials use SoMe as a tool for creating an inclusive democracy – more precisely, for initiating dialogue or involving the population?
2. How can elected officials use SoMe as a tool to practice the leadership role?
3. How do elected officials use SoMe as a channel for dialogue with citizens or pressure groups during meetings in elected bodies?

Additionally, it has been important to identify potential challenges that may arise when using SoMe. These include challenges related to representativeness, the relationship with the councilor, follow-up dialogue with citizens and forward input into political processes.

The data material consists of both quantitative and qualitative research collected in the period of January to March 2017. Findings in the report are based on a representative survey, in-depth interviews and focus groups with three informant groups; 1) elected officials, 2) citizens, and 3) councilors. Additionally, a manual mapping of the Facebook profiles of elected officials who participated in an in-depth interview was conducted.

Key Findings: Phase 1

The first phase consisted of an omnibus survey with a representative sample of 2173 elected officials in Norway, conducted by Norgesbarometeret. The questionnaire intended to reveal the proportion of elected officials using SoMe as a channel for dialogue and involvement with citizens, as well as which SoMe channels they prefer. Furthermore, the extent of elected officials' use of SoMe as a tool for citizen dialogue during meetings in elected bodies was of interest. In relation to the latter, it was relevant to look into whether this may rise challenges in the relationship with the councilor. Below are the main findings from the survey.

84 percent of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "SoMe are a useful tool for citizen dialogue". However, **only half of the respondents reported they had invited citizens to dialogue through SoMe**. As many as 82 percent reported they use SoMe as a tool to spread information to citizens about political issues in the municipality or county council, while 36 percent said that they use SoMe as a tool to encourage citizens to make proposals for solving political issues.

The survey revealed that **Facebook is the most preferred SoMe channel for citizen dialogue**. 78 percent of elected officials prefer to use Facebook to communicate with citizens, while only 11 percent use Instagram, 10 percent use Twitter and 7 percent use LinkedIn or other SoMe channels. Further examinations were therefore limited only to comprise the SoMe-channel, Facebook.

89 percent have experienced ongoing dialogue between elected officials and citizens through SoMe during meetings in the municipality or county council. However, only a minority (six percent) have experienced that such dialogue happens to an extensive degree.

Few have found that the use of SoMe has led to challenges related to the relationship with the councilors. Among the potential issues, we found that: 11 percent have

experienced challenges related to responsibilities and clarification of roles, 6 percent related to guidelines for journaling, and 4 percent to the councilors' duty to investigate.

Key findings: Phase 2, 3 and 4

The second phase involved 34 in-depth interviews with 28 local politicians and 6 councilors. The third stage included three focus groups with 14 citizens, and the final phase consisted of a manual mapping of 28 local politician's Facebook profiles.

Facebook as a tool for dialogue and involving citizens

The survey shows that citizen dialogue over Facebook typically follow one of five patterns, where the first two are far more common than the latter ones:

- 1) ***Citizens initiate a dialogue over "messenger"***: In half of the cases, the citizens themselves take the initiative to dialogue. This primarily happen through "messenger" when they have a need for addressing a specific case.
- 2) ***Elected officials initiate adialogue over "messenger"***: There is, however, many examples of elected officials that caters to individual citizens over "messenger". This tend to happen after a citizen already has shared interesting thoughts and opinions in the comment field to the elected officials` status update on Facebook. Alternatively due to an interesting discussion in an open/closed group or forum. Dialog over "messenger" is often preferred in cases where the elected officials wish to discuss freely, without comments and interruptions from others.
- 3) ***Elected officials publish Facebook posts that leads to discussion***: Most elected officials use Facebook as a channel to spread information about issues in the municipality. However, few use the opportunity to ask citizens about their thoughts and opinions. Still, many citizens share inputs and suggestions in the comment field, which in some cases leads to further discussion and dialogue.
- 4) ***Elected officials encourage citizens to share their opinions through status updates***: In connection with ongoing matters in the municipality or county council, it happens that some elected officials publish Facebook posts or status updates where they directly encourage citizens to share their thoughts.
- 5) ***Elected officials encourages to involvement through Facebook groups***: Only a few encourages to dialogue and involvement by sending an invitation to an open or closed Facebook group. Among the examples, is Facebook-groups related to ongoing cases in the local authority or bigger plans and strategies suggested by the municipality.

It emerges few examples where elected officials use Facebook as a tool for letting citizens decide what issues to address.

Common for all respondents is that Facebook function as a "listening post", where they get insight into what type of political matters that concern and engage their citizens. Several are also experiencing that being present on Facebook creates greater intimacy to citizens in their own municipality. This is explained by the ability to; share from their politician every-day life, honor local initiatives, being present when needed and quickly respond to inquiries characterizes best practice.

Facebook as a tool to exercise the Leadership role

Several parameters were used to illuminate how elected officials can practice the leadership role on Facebook, such as; how they bring input further into political processes, how they follow up inputs and suggestions from citizens, as well as their ability to moderate discussions - both spontaneous and self-initiated. It was also relevant to investigate the extent to which elected representatives experience challenges related to representativeness and the relationship with the councilor. Below follows a brief presentation of the main findings:

Among elected officials who participated in an in-depth interview, **six out of ten enter that they normally forward input to their party or directly to the city council.** Input of minor matters are typically solved on the lowest possible level, while more important feedback are discussed with the council or with members of their own political party. If necessary, the elected officials pass on information to the executive officer in the administration. In exceptional cases where the information affects the councilor's responsibility, they forward inputs in accordance with standard work practices.

If elected officials take initiative to dialogue or discussion with citizens, **the majority give the impression of having good follow-up procedures.** The same applies when citizens address an issue over "messenger". However, **there is room for improvement in terms of following up comments and input from citizens in the comment field to the elected officials Facebook posts.**

There are many examples of political debates that has escalated on Facebook, taking a completely different direction than intended. In cases where the elected officials initiate the debate themselves, they try to moderate along the way and end debates they no longer perceive as constructive. Many have experienced unpleasant comments or untrue criticism. As a result, **elected officials have become extra cautious about what to share on Facebook.**

Facebook is primarily used as a supplement to other forms of communication, such as public meetings, email and phone calls. When elected officials handle inputs and suggestions over Facebook, they **ensure good representativeness by evaluating inputs in connection with information generated through other communication channels.**

In line with findings from the quantitative survey, it appears that **Facebook to a low degree results in conflict of interest with the councilor.** Among the councilors, the experience is that elected officials forward important information originating from Facebook and that most are conscious of avoiding Facebook posts that may emerge as revealing or negatively geared toward the councilor as a private person.

Use of Facebook during meetings in elected bodies

Some have pointed out that there exists dialogue on SoMe between elected officials and citizens during the municipal council's decisive meetings. KS wanted more knowledge about the extent and form of such dialogue. Moreover, it was of interest to examine what type of challenges this may bring in terms of responsibilities and role clarifications between the elected officials and the councilor. Below are the main findings.

Few have experienced that elected officials use Facebook for dialogue with citizens during meeting in elected bodies to a large extent. However, there is a positive attitude towards using Facebook during council meetings and both the councilor and the elected officials believe that all information that is correct and constructive should come forward in the assessment of a case.

The majority of information that is shared during meetings are classified as additional information or party posts that are not critical for the outcome of the case. This contributes to the fact that councilors and elected representatives have experienced few challenges related to distribution of responsibilities, duty to investigate and/or journaling. Common is also that both believe input should be collected in advance, as handling inputs that may be crucial to the outcome is a demanding exercise during the proceedings.

Best Practice

Elected officials who succeeds in performing political leadership and dialogue with citizens have established a platform where they actively inform, invite and forwards input. Best practice is characterized by the elected official's ability to create a two-way communication process, which can be described by a continuous five-step model:

- 1) The elected officials **listen** to discussions and comments on Facebook in order to capture the voice of the community.
- 2) The elected officials **are in dialogue** with citizens on a daily basis, through either messenger, open discussions, forums or groups.
- 3) Through conversations with citizens, elected officials get a deeper knowledge of current issues, and **receives input and suggestions** on matters that they can follow up in the political process.
- 4) The elected officials **collects and communicates** input and suggestions to their political parties or further into the municipal or county council
- 5) The elected officials **follows up citizens** with information about where and how input will be forwarded, and provides a rationale for what the municipal or county council has decided.

Evaluations and recommendations

Below we present our evaluations of elected officials' use of Facebook for citizen dialogue and involvement, as well as our recommendations for how they can succeed in practicing the leadership role and the representational role on Facebook.

The potential of using Facebook as a tool for citizen dialogue and participation is significantly larger than today's use. Lack of time and capacity are two key reasons for why elected officials fail to exploit this opportunity. To succeed in performing political leadership and citizen dialogue through Facebook, they need to set aside considerable time to share, get feedback and follow up dialogue. A central characterization of best practice is the ability to create a meeting place with citizens over time. In addition, the elected officials provides good content that engage citizens to participate in discussions. Ideally, they also have a clear strategy for what issues they prefer input on and from whom, as well as when in the process it is convenient to get it.

Based on the findings in this examination, we have identified three simple steps that can help elected officials to succeed in using Facebook as a tool for political leadership and citizen dialogue. We have based the recommendations on elected officials who use Facebook as a supplement to traditional involvement channels and that does not have an ambition of being a role model in accordance to "best practices." The points are ranked by order of importance, where point one and two should be a prerequisite for elected officials who wish to engage and be in dialogue with citizens on Facebook.

- 1) **Provide clear descriptions of political status updates:** Elected officials may benefit if they give short descriptions of the political cases they share and refer to on Facebook. In order to ensure high participation in the discussions, each status update should include information about the political case, why it is shared and why it matters for the citizen, organization, company etc.
- 2) **Following up comments on shared status updates and Facebook posts:** To create engagement, it is crucial to signal that input and comments are noticed and taken into consideration. Comments from citizens should be followed up by an answer, like, emoji or by a question.
- 3) **Encourage citizens to share feedback and suggestions:** In addition to creating Facebook groups, elected officials can ask questions directly to their citizens by using status updates. When using this method, it is important to explain why they wants involvement and how they handle the input.