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Knowing your publics: the use of social media analytics in local government

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Abstract

The analysis of social media data promises significant new ways of knowing publics, but an understanding of the value of social media analytics for different organizations in practice is only just emerging. Drawing on research conducted with two city councils in the UK, this article examines the current and potential use of social media analytics in local government. We outline a range of purposes that social media analytics might serve — from communication and public relations to public consultation and engagement — and consider the factors that shape or are likely to shape how analytics tools are adopted. We conclude by pointing to a democratic dilemma facing local government: at a time of austerity measures and budget cuts, reaching out to the public and fostering public engagement becomes more important just as councils have fewer resources to invest in it.

Keywords

Social media, digital data, analytics, public engagement, local government.

Introduction

The analysis of social media data seemingly offers significant new ways of knowing publics. People's use of social media and the web generates a vast source of data that can be mined for new insights into how publics communicate and behave, what they think and feel, and how they relate to one another. At the same time, critics warn that the analysis of digital data is primarily a means of surveillance and control, something that may be employed by states to monitor populations or by private corporations to accumulate knowledge about their consumers to maximize profit [1, 2, 6, 33]. In this article, we consider whether a different relationship between digital data and public life may be established by considering how local governments can use social media analytics to know and connect with their publics.

Whereas much discussion of digital data operates at a general level, we stress the variable and contingent nature of the digital in this article and the need to focus on the specific ways social actors use and interpret social media analytics and data [9, 29]. Given the still emergent nature of social media analytics, we also emphasize the need to take an exploratory approach, one which asks open questions about how social media analytics *could* be used as well as how it is being used. With these goals in mind, we report here on a six-month, exploratory research project conducted with two city councils in the UK. The research involved a practical workshop, where council officers explored different social media analytics tools and methods, and a series of semi-

structured interviews to explore the current and potential use of social media analytics and data within the organizations.

Our research suggested that analytics tools may be used across various local government departments and areas. We outline four main organizational purposes that social media analytics might serve — for communication, public relations, customer services, and public consultation and engagement — all of which involve making 'the public' present to the organization in different ways and with different potential implications and effects. As we describe, the use of analytics to evaluate and inform organizational communication had already begun to establish itself, while the use of social media analytics for customer services is expected to become more important in future, as councils make greater use of social media for customer enquiries and feedback. While there was enthusiasm about using social media analytics for public consultation and engagement, this form of use is the most difficult and challenging to realize, especially against the backdrop of recent austerity measures and financial constraints at local level.

1. Social media analytics and the public

Claims about the potential of social media analytics to generate new forms of knowledge are widespread. The analysis of social media data by private corporations is well established, where the gathering and analysis of data about consumers for advertising and other purposes is critical to commercial success [1]. Social media analytics are also being debated in the social sciences as a means to analyse social processes, relationships, and behaviour [19, 30, 31].

Closest to our concerns, some commentators have discussed the use of social media data to understand publics and public opinion. Anstead and O'Loughlin [3] analyse the emergence of what they term 'semantic polling', describing how consultancy firms are analysing online data through social media in order to track public opinion during election periods, while Bruns et al. [8] examine the use of digital methods to map the 'networked public sphere' (see also http://mappingonlinepublics.net). Gillespie [14] discusses how representations of the public generated through data – what he terms 'calculated publics' – are an increasingly conspicuous way of thinking about publics. He gives the example of Twitter's algorithm for Trends, which claims to represent – even if in just a crude form – what different geographical publics are discussing at particular moments in time [14, p. 189].

In the growing debate about social media analytics, it is important that we do not lose sight of the complex and contingent nature of the digital and the different ways data may be used. We must, as Ruppert et al. [29, p. 31] propose, 'be attentive not only to the digital in general terms, but to the more specific mobilizations which allow the digital to be rendered visible and hence effective in particular locations'. They argue for 'a heterogeneous understanding of the digital, one that does not seek to ascribe fixed characteristics to it, but which emphasizes the contingencies by which it can be mobilized and deployed' [29, p. 40]. Certainly, to understand social media analytics, we need to look beyond the 'tools' used for generating and analysing data. Software matters and has different properties and assumptions built into it, but given what we know from social studies of technology about the social shaping of technology, we can expect the

way software is interpreted and used by actors in different contexts to vary [18, 24]. As Fountain [12, p. 155] emphasizes in her work on technology use in government, it is important to distinguish between 'objective technology', as in 'hardware, software, telecommunication, and other material systems as they exist apart from the ways in which people use them', and 'enacted technology', as in 'the way that a system is actually used by actors in an organization'. We need, therefore, to study how analytics tools are enacted on the ground and what practices and discourses shape or are likely to shape their use. Couldry [9, p. 892] has called this type of research 'social analytics': 'the study of how social actors are *themselves* using analytics - data measures of all kinds, including those they have developed or customised – to meet *their own* ends, for example, by *interpreting* the world and their actions in new ways'.

In this article, we focus on how social media analytics tools are and could be used in local government in the UK. Like other public sector organizations, local government authorities face the challenge of how to keep in touch with a complex and changing public. Following budget cuts, this task has become more challenging in recent years, yet arguably more important [20, pp. 23-25, 25]. As Lowndes and Squires [21, p. 402] explain, 'at a time of rapid and fundamental change a shared and real-time understanding of the impact on local citizens and local communities is essential, especially informing any re-design of services or re-allocation of scarce resources'. Local governments (including our partner organizations) already adopt various methods to connect with their local publics outside election times, such as consultations, citizens' panels, and consumer-feedback mechanisms [4]. Social media data provide a potentially significant new

way for these organizations to know and understand their publics. Among other things, analysing social media data may provide access to new groups, including 'hard-to-reach' groups who might not participate in conventional public engagement exercises.

An institutional perspective would suggest that existing and already established practices and discourses in organizations are likely to shape how new technologies are used [22, 23]. Commentators have suggested therefore that the way technology is used in government will tend to reproduce the way things are done already, resulting in 'business as usual' rather than substantial change. As Fountain [11, p. 89] explains, 'individuals in institutions tend to enact new information systems to reproduce routines, rules, norms, and power relations if institutional rules are clear and now alternative uses are visible in the environment'. Reporting on a survey of English local authorities, for example, Ellison and Hardey [10] find that most local authorities use social media to broadcast information rather than to engage the public in dialogue. They explain the conservative use of social media as a consequence of established media practices: 'local communication strategies remain embedded in assumptions about marketing and publicity anchored to traditional understandings of media practice' [10, p. 15]. However, as important as they are in theoretical terms, the institutional aspects of organizations do not entirely predetermine the way technologies will be interpreted and used any more than the properties of the tools do. Within structural constraints, actors still have the ability to make different decisions and they can reflect upon and change institutional practices and discourses [13, 17, pp. 89-134]. One aim of our research — especially

through the workshop but also the interviews — was to create a space 'outside' existing institutional practices so that our research participants could reflect upon the potential uses of social media analytics in their organizations and how these uses could relate to and perhaps contribute to changing current practices.

Understanding how social media analytics connects with the public has important implications for democracy at local level as elsewhere. Gillespie [14] argues that the representations of the public generated through digital data do not simply mirror the public 'out there', but also construct it in particular ways. He asks, 'how do these technologies, now not just technologies of evaluation but of representation, help to constitute and codify the publics they claim to measure, publics that would not otherwise exist except that the algorithm called them into existence?' [14, p. 189]. In one respect, the constructed nature of 'the public' is not new: 'the public' is not something that can be known without technologies of representation (such as opinion polls and elections) or representatives (such as elected politicians and activists) who claim to represent it [5, 27, 28, 32]. But then not all ways of representing the public — digital or otherwise — are equal. The problem is not so much that the public is represented through digital data, but that the public — for particular commercial and other purposes — is being made present in ways that make little room for democratic agency and reflection. Examining and thinking critically about the different ways analytics may construct the public becomes vitally important in this context.

In the next section, we describe our research project and methodological approach. We then report on the findings of our research, outlining the different organizational purposes that social media analytics might serve and the different factors that shape or are likely to shape how analytics tools are used.

2. Our research[1]

Our research involved working closely with two city councils in the UK over a six-month period. We selected the two councils partly because of convenience: the research team had established access and made good connections with key contacts through previous research. We also thought the councils would be good sites to conduct exploratory research into social media analytics. At the time of our project, both organizations were in the process of reviewing and drafting new social media policies and their participation in our project was designed to feed into this process.

We began our research by identifying key individuals to work with. We contacted the managers of the communications teams of both councils. We also made contact with the museums group of one of the councils to explore how social media analytics might be used in a particular service. Our initial conversations indicated that social media analytics tools were being used in some parts of the organization, but they were not being used widely and many members of staff were unfamiliar with them. In order to consider how social media analytics might be used by the organization as a whole, we decided we

[1] Ethical approval for this research was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Performance, Visual Arts, and Communications, University of Leeds.

would need to introduce our research participants to social media analytics tools and some examples of how they could be used in practice.

Working with our key contacts, we organized a one-day workshop for council officers, which introduced tools to identify, analyse, and visualize social media data and which explored some examples of the types of results that can be produced. The workshop was attended by 13 representatives from several departments in our partner organizations, who were recommended to us by our key contacts through a snowballing sampling method. The aim of the workshop was both to demonstrate how social media analytics tools work and to create a space for members of the partner organizations to reflect on their value. The workshop presented a range of tools. We used NodeXL and the free, open source tool Gephi for social network analysis and visualization; DataSift to harvest, and aggregate data from a variety of social media platforms; and IssueCrawler to identify issue networks (that is, networks linked by interest in specific issues, rather than social networks). Two commercial and paid-for social media insights tools were also presented: Meltwater Buzz (which costs approximately £7000 per year to license, excluding VAT) and Brandwatch (which offers various packages, starting at around £500 per month). Finally, we introduced some other freely available software, including Social Mention (http://www.socialmention.com/), Topsy (http://topsy.com/), and TweetReach (http://tweetreach.com/), which aggregate content from social media sites and provide data such as sentiment, reach, top users, sources, and the numbers of comments on a given topic. The data the tools analysed were all classed as 'social media data' in so far as they drawn from social media platforms or user-

contributed content on websites, such as local forums and the comments sections of local newspaper sites.

As well as providing research participants with an opportunity to experiment with the tools, we presented some examples of the types of results the tools can generate. Before the workshop, working with our key contacts, we conducted network analysis of some council social media accounts and of influential local sites identified by our key contacts. We also investigated a few specific topics, connected with council policy issues, initiatives, and events, which our key contacts had identified as salient. By presenting some indicative examples and findings to our research participants, our aim was both to demonstrate the use of the tools and to generate reflection and discussion about potential uses of social media analytics.

Following the workshop, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to explore our research participants' views of social media analytics and its potential application to their work. Six interviews were conducted with people who had attended the workshop. We conducted seven additional interviews with people who were not present at the workshop, but who received copies of a report summarizing the project and who were selected for interview by our key contacts in each organization on the basis of the perceived relevance of analytics for their work. The departments from which interviewees were drawn were communications, customer services, public engagement, research and intelligence, city development, and the museums group.

3. The uses of social media analytics

Our research identified various ways social media analytics could be used by the two councils. Analytics tools produced insights that our research participants felt contributed to and supplemented their existing knowledge of local public networks and discussions and could be valuable to a range of council departments and areas. We distinguished four main purposes that social media analytics may serve, all of which make the public present to the organization in different ways and with different potential implications for and effects on organizational decision making.

1. Organizational communication

The first and most obvious reason for using social media analytics is to improve the way the councils communicate with the public. Analytics tools can trace how far social media messages travel and the degree of public engagement different messages generate. Interviewees described how they could also use analytics tools to develop a better understanding of their online audience and of how messages circulate in the local public sphere, identifying key 'influencers' who are well connected in social media and web networks.

2. Reputation and public relations

A second use of social media analytics is for public relations and to manage the reputation of the councils. Through social media analytics, the council can identify complaints from members of the public or negative publicity that might pose a risk to its reputation. Some interviewees described how the council could adopt a more positive and proactive strategy, where they locate positive feedback about the organization and publicize positive outcomes.

3. Customer services

A third use of social media analytics is in relation to customer services. While the number of people who currently use social media for customer enquiries and feedback is low, there is a shift towards online platforms ('channel shift') in both councils. As a result of channel shift, the volume of customer enquiries received through social media is expected to rise significantly. Interviewees described how analytics could be used to manage this data effectively, alerting customer services to issues related to specific areas or services. The councils may also be able to detect trends and patterns in aggregated data and feed these insights into council decision-making.

4. Public consultation and engagement

A final use of social media data identified by our interviewees is for public consultation and engagement in policymaking. Interviewees felt social media analytics could be used to identify views and issues that do not make their way to the councils through formal channels such as citizens' panels and consultations. As one interviewee explains:

> So, say the council has a corporate consultation on budget and there's an online form on the website for people to fill in; what else is happening beyond that? People who can't be bothered to fill the form in, what are they saying? Is there a way we can capture that information and add it into the mix that this is what people in the city think? Yes, you may not necessarily capture all of it, and you can't capture conversations people are having face to face that you

> don't know about; but you can try and capture a bit more. You're not just going on what comes back in. […] So, it's about trying to capture a wider range of views. (Council B, Public Engagement)

Ambitiously, another interviewee suggested that the public could be engaged in the 'co-design' of policy, which entails moving from a top-down model of engagement to a more participatory one, where the public is involved in setting the agenda and formulating policy:

> … rather than us saying we're going to introduce this new initiative, or we're thinking about closing a building, or something like that, we need to get people involved at an early stage in that co-design, get public opinion about what is it they want from public services, how do they want them shaping, how do they want to design them with us. (Council A, Intelligence)

Referring to social media analytics software, she says that 'Tools like this would be really helpful in supporting us do that' (Council A, Intelligence).

Social media analytics can therefore serve a range of organizational purposes in local governments: insights about the public drawn from social media data can be used to inform communications, public relations, customer services, and public consultation and engagement in policymaking. Enthusiasm was expressed for all these uses, but our interviews suggested that some uses were more likely to be adopted than others, especially in the short term. Following institutional accounts of technology use, we might assume that uses of analytics that fit more closely with established organizational practices are more likely to be taken up, while more

innovative uses, which involve a greater shift in organizational practices and investment of time and resources, are less likely. As one interviewee put it, some uses of analytics are in the 'hard to do box' (Council A, City Development).

For our research participants, the pressure on local government resulting from recent budget cuts and constraints makes innovative uses of social media analytics especially challenging. As one interviewee explains:

> to try and build some new activity into what you're doing is challenging. That's not to say you shouldn't try and do it; it just means you've got to try and stop doing something else. I think it's probably broader for the public sector. Certainly the feeling here is you've got fewer people trying to do the same amount of activity as there was before, and almost increased activity. So, increased expectations with reduced staff and reduced funding. It's not meant to be as whingey as it sounds, because there is still a lot you can do as an organization with a budget of over £1 billion; but I think there is, my perception is there is a pressure on staff that wasn't there two or three, four years ago. So, you actually had more time to discuss things, for instance, or you might have two or three people working jointly on a project; whereas now you'd have one person doing it. It just feels time is more precious, so trying to carve out some time to do something new is challenging. (Council B, Public Engagement)

However, innovative uses of technology are not ruled out entirely in this context.

Rather, as we describe below, innovations that can be associated with bringing about cost savings and greater organizational efficiency in the councils are likely to be prioritized over others.

The use of analytics to evaluate and improve how the councils communicate with the public aligns well with already established practices. In fact, communications teams were already adopting analytics tools for this purpose, even if not formally or systematically. For example, a Communications Officer described how she uses analytics to understand local publics and networks:

> One of the ones that I really like allows you to map your followers, so you can kind of zoom in on all your Twitter account followers, so you can see that people are primarily in the UK, and you keep zooming in and zooming in […] and you keep going and you can actually take it right down to the business Twitter accounts on the actual streets, so it gives you like a very visual map of who's following you. And I really like that one, I think that's quite helpful to see'. (Council B, Communications)

She went on to say, 'And there are a couple of others that tell me a little bit about my followers, what time of the day that they log on, so I knew that my followers logged on between eight and one, so primarily that's when I put my updates on, at that time, so quite basic information, but quite useful as well to know' (Council B, Communications).

Analytics tools were also used in the councils to assess and demonstrate the value of social media communication to others. For example, one interviewee from the other Council explained how he used TweetReach to demonstrate the cost-

effectiveness of social media to senior managers:

> So actually, could you use that information when some of our senior managers or service areas are saying 'our social media's a waste of time' would it back up the argument that maybe it isn't a waste of time? […] TweetReach, that's something that I was aware of and it did make a difference because it did provide the back-up that supported what we were doing. So we could see how many accounts we'd reached compared to how many we would have done if we'd have printed leaflets for instance. So there we had an instant response on 'we've saved money' […]. (Council A, Communications)

The museums group described how social media analytics could be used in their service to provide evidence to external funders as well as to council managers:

> We have to do quarterly reports and we report on our web usage, projects we've been working on, but also we need to report better on social media. That will then feed into, for example, the reports to the council, but also to our funders like the Arts Council because we have to report quarterly to them, and they're actually funding this whole department of digital media, so they want to see that as well. (Council A, Museums)

Interviewees suggested that communications teams could circulate data gathered from social media to other council departments and areas for other reasons. For example, content that may represent a reputational risk to the councils may be

shared with press and media teams, while customer feedback about particular issues could be sent to the customer services department or to particular council services. However, these processes were not formalized in either council and social media data are not currently reported on or shared systematically.

As noted above, the numbers of people who use social media for customer services in the two councils were low, but this was expected to change over the coming years. At the time of the research, there was an emphasis on 'channel shift' in both councils: this involves moving the preferred method of contact with members of the public from the telephone, in person, and email towards online information, web forms, and social media. This shift was described in part as a result of changing public expectations and practices:

> the social media stuff was very much driven from about 12-18 months ago, our approach to customer access, which was recognising that customers wanted to do more for themselves and they wanted to interact when it was beneficial to them, not when we were open – the change in expectation, customer expectations and social media, the demand and response far quicker than they get if they email us. We could either let that happen to us and not be prepared, or we could be better prepared going forward, so that's where it sort of came from. (Council A, Customer Services)

However, channel shift is not just a result of changing public expectations and practices. The hope is that replacing more costly forms of contact with the web and social media will bring cost savings and so here technological innovation is

associated with greater organizational efficiency.

As a result of channel shift, the councils are preparing for higher volumes of social media traffic in future. The same interviewee explained that, 'it's still relatively infant in its development. I think in – I don't know – two-three years' time it'll be the norm, just based on the growth. To be really honest, us, we wouldn't have set up a […] team to deal with social media enquiries even 12 months ago' (Council A, Customer Services). Given the low volume of traffic currently, social media analytics tools are not being widely used, but interviewees felt that they could be employed to good effect in future. As already noted, analytics could help customer services to deal with enquiries and feedback in a timely and more effective way and the aggregation of data could be valuable in terms of detecting patterns and trends in large datasets. Insights could be gained by overlaying social media with other forms of data, such as demographic data.

Having been introduced to the software tools by our project, interviewees recognized that social media analytics is not necessarily straightforward to perform. Using social media analytics effectively is not just time-consuming, but also reliant upon knowledge and expertise. Some of the more complex tools we presented (identified by participants as NodeXL, Gephi, and DataSift) can be especially difficult to use. One problem is that councils may not have the resources and expertise to dedicate to more sophisticated forms of social media analytics in relation to customer services. As one interviewee explained:

> The other thing we lack are the skills to turn that into insight and intelligence. There are very few people in the organization who have

> that sort of ability, so that's a skills gap, I think, as well. The gap is primarily, I think, a result of history in the sense that we've had fairly manual processes around data collection and that's taken all the time and therefore we haven't focused on the insight and intelligence, plus there is a skills gap in getting the right people to do that work and to have that understanding. (Council A, Customer Services)

If using analytics in relation to customer services would be difficult, its use for public consultation and engagement would be the most challenging. Our research participants were generally enthusiastic about the prospect of using social media as a way to consult and engage the public, especially given the growing use of social media for communications. However, social media analytics was not being used for this purpose at the time of the research. Using social media analytics for public consultation and engagement would require a significant investment of council resources, but — unlike customer services — it is not associated discursively with bringing about immediate cost-savings and greater efficiency.

Interviewees recognized that social media users are not fully representative or inclusive of all the social groups that make up their local publics. There are significant exclusions or absences in social media data: those who are not connected to the internet will not be reflected in the data, while those who are not active contributors will be less visible than the 'super-participants' [16] who can dominate social media discussions. Still, it was hoped that new groups and issues that were not known to the organization may still be identified in this way and so social media analytics could be used to complement existing methods of public consultation and

engagement. However, there are various challenges the councils face in using social media analytics for public consultation and engagement.

Firstly, where data are not directly linked to the council, identifying relevant social media content from the mass of data available is difficult. Local data can be isolated through the use of location data and metadata, but not all social data contain location information: a location-aware device with location services turned on is required and users need to have agreed to their location being shared. Alternatively, location data can be derived from social media platforms but such information is not widely available [15]. As a result, when geographical filters are applied, much potentially relevant content is excluded (such as local people writing comments on newspaper websites, forums, blogs, and in most cases Facebook and Twitter too) and the amount of data is reduced considerably. In addition to using location information, a common strategy is to use keywords to find data. But locating relevant data in this way involves a complex process of trial and error that is time consuming and reliant on expertise. Searches may either be too specific, producing small quantities of relevant data, or too general, producing larger amounts of data but not all of which is relevant. Of course, it is also difficult to know what data may be absent. One interviewee described the problem as follows: 'The question I suppose is, is there is anything missing? That's almost a Catch-22 because – if it's not there, you don't know it's missing' (Council A, Museums).

A second challenge is how to interpret the data generated. One interviewee described how the tools are useful in catching 'background noise', but that it is quite difficult to draw practical conclusions from it for policymaking:

> I mean I think the information is very good, how much we can actually use it at the level that it's at I think is probably less helpful other than maybe a general awareness. Sometimes we have to deal with specific subjects and specific topics and they usually come through via complaints. So somebody will usually complain about something and we'll have to pick that up and deal with it. Through consultation we'll get positive and negative and we can build that into the decision making process. What this does is this picks up on a level of sort of background noise and that's useful but it's also quite difficult to get the context for it. (Council A, City Development)

Without further investigation, the result is that the data do not take a form that is likely to be immediately useful to policymakers or others in the organization.

Finally, analysing social media content that has not been directed to the council raises concerns about surveillance and the privacy of users. While social media and web data may be 'public' in one respect, the public may not expect data that they produce in one context will be used for different purposes in another, and so the principle of 'contextual integrity', in Nissenbaum's [26] terms, may be violated. As boyd and Crawford [7, p. 671] note, 'just because it is accessible does not make it ethical'. While this was not perceived as a pressing concern since neither of the councils monitored and analysed social media systematically, our research participants recognised this problem. One interviewee said, 'I don't think people quite realise actually how much stuff can be gathered on them. It's good if you want

to find out that information, but not so good if not' (Council A, Museums). As already noted, our partner organizations were in the process of reviewing and drafting new social media policies at the time of our project. The new policies would include guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of account managers, on reporting formats, and on what tools would be used. Ethical guidelines and policy in relation to social media and privacy will be necessary here, especially if the use of analytics becomes more established in the councils.

One way to address these challenges, both access to relevant data and the ethics of social media analytics, may be for the councils to move beyond using their social media accounts for communications and customer services and to use them for public consultation and engagement. In other words, the councils could host and engage in more discussions via social media, which would ensure both the relevance of the data and that the public know they are engaging with the council (maintaining the principle of 'contextual integrity' [26]). As we noted above, research conducted by Ellison and Hardey [10] has found that most local authorities use social media to broadcast information rather than to engage the public in dialogue. In our interviews, we found enthusiasm for using social media in more innovative ways, but the priorities and resources of the councils currently appear more focused on using social media for communication and customer services than for public consultation and engagement. There may also be some uncertainty and concern about using social media for public engagement. One interviewee from the Museums group, for example, explained the potential dangers of dealing with political issues: 'I don't want us to fall foul of any controversies or any complaints that the service or the council might have for the way we've gone about things. Or we've responded to

something political for example. You've got to be very, very careful' (Council A, Museums). Clearly, significant time and resources are needed for councils to address such issues and to use social media and social media analytics more fully for public consultation and engagement.

Conclusion

Social media analytics tools are heterogeneous in their uses and effects. Local governments may use analytics tools in various ways — for communications, public relations, customer services, and public consultation and engagement — all which of which make 'the public' present to the organization in different ways and with different potential implications for and effects on organizational decision-making. Of course, how councils use social media analytics tools in practice is an empirical question. However, as we have described, the use of social media analytics is likely to be shaped by existing organizational practices and by financial constraints that make certain types of use (those associated with cost savings and greater efficiency) more likely than others.

Against the backdrop of recent budget cuts at local level, Janet Newman [25] points to the need for local governments to connect with their publics. She emphasizes the value of the 'connective work of public-making', viewing it is a way of 'mitigating the material effects of austerity by fostering protest and dissent against cuts' and a 'route towards addressing the affective consequences of austerity — disaffection, powerlessness, and disconnection' [25, pp. 523-4]. Social media analytics could play a valuable role here, as a complement to, if not a replacement for, existing methods of public consultation and engagement. But then local

government faces a practical democratic dilemma: at a time of austerity measures and budget cuts in the public sector, reaching out to the public and fostering public dialogue becomes more important than ever just as the resources to invest in it are diminishing.

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