WORKSHOP REPORT

Social Media for Health and Emergency Preparedness in British Columbia: Findings from a Meeting of Provincial Practitioners

SEPTEMBER 2023

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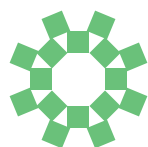
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Social media plays a significant role in public health communication. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the public turned to government and allied government groups for health guidance, much of which was provided and amplified using social media-based strategies. As the pandemic wore on, a small but increasingly vocal proportion of the public became distrustful of and frustrated with government groups and pandemic measures (Lukacs et al., in preparation). Social media has since served as an outlet for sharing dissent, distrust, misinformation, and animosity (Statistics Canada, 2023; Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

In 2022 the Pacific Institute on Pathogens, Pandemics and Society (PIPPS) initiated a multidisciplinary program of research to study the experiences and challenges of employees of government and allied-government organizations who created and deployed social media content during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three interconnected projects were undertaken—a knowledge synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on government social media use, a survey and interviews with health-related social media practitioners in British Columbia, and an in-person workshop, hosted in Vancouver, that brought practitioners together to connect, share experiences and brainstorm new ways of working together. Output from the first two phases include a briefing note and a peer-reviewed paper (Lukacs et al., in preparation). It is noted that as a part of our process, this report was provided to meeting attendees for their feedback.

This report details the findings from the April 2023 in-person workshop. Four key recommendations emerged from our work that are directly relevant to organizations promoting public health and emergency messaging via social media. These include:

- Providing more opportunities for social media skills-based training
- Improving intra-organizational communication and engagement
- Increasing supports around the mental health of staff on the front line of social media work
- Supporting the creation of a formal *Community of Practice* for social media professionals across a spectrum of agencies to foster research collaboration, documentation and sharing amongst social media staff within and between agencies

By investing time and resources in training, employee networks and occupational mental health, employers have the potential to strengthen social media capacity, meet organizational aims and improve communication efforts for target audiences.

THANKS

We would like to sincerely thank the presenters for sharing their experiences and research as well as the attendees for sharing their time, knowledge, and perspectives with us. We also thank the meeting organizing team, including Gladys We, Simran Purewal, and Megan Yung who assisted with facilitating group discussions. We also thank Vicki Farally for her support of this work and for facilitating connections with relevant organizations throughout the province.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an increasingly important source of information in recent years. More than 80% of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 49 use social media regularly, with most using at least two platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) (Schimmele et al., 2021; Statistics Canada, 2023). The varied utility of these platforms to provide insight into public needs and concerns, to share information, and to facilitate interaction and engagement has led to an inevitable growth of social media use by government and allied-government groups. Additionally, social media used for crisis communications plays an integral role in public safety risk management and delivery of emergency services.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crisis that tested the government's use of this medium for both acute scenarios, such as closures, as well as for public education around exposure prevention and personal protective measures. Notably, our recent research suggests that although governments adopted and generally increased their use of social media, they may not have been able to take advantage of the full gamut of platform functionalities, which may have limited impact and effectiveness (Lukacs et al., in preparation).

Drawing on the findings from qualitative interviews with social media practitioners, the PIPPS Social Media team organized a workshop to dive deeper into many of the issues highlighted by study participants. There were many commonalities between individuals working across a range of different government affiliated agencies. While challenges varied, the interviews also uncovered innovation and problem-solving strategies that the PIPPS team felt would be important to share. The workshop was designed to allow participants to voice their experiences, meet others who faced similar challenges, and brainstorm potential solutions for future emergent health threat scenarios.

WORKSHOP DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

The workshop, entitled "*Social Media for Health & Emergency Preparedness in BC",* was held April 27th-28th, 2023, in Vancouver, BC. The majority attended in-person with some remote participation via Zoom. Participants were invited from provincial government and allied agencies around the province that provided information to the public during the

COVID-19 pandemic. Funding for the workshop was provided by the Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) and PIPPS.

The explicit goals of the workshop were to bring people together to:
- Share their experiences working in social media during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Provide networking opportunities for individuals working in government and allied-government institutions in the social media communications domain
- Discuss the potential formation and structure of a formal *Community of Practice* for social and digital media staff

The workshop was held at the Segal Graduate School of Business and the Morris J. Wosk Centre for dialogue at SFU. Thirty people attended, including guest speakers. The workshop was structured around formal presentations followed by small group discussions and a large group feedback session to reconvene and reflect. The participants also discussed the creation of a *Community of Practice*. Lunches, dinner, and snacks were provided to keep the group together and build connections.

FORMAL PRESENTATIONS

PIPPS researchers presented the findings from the qualitative interviews done with social media practitioners. This research found that the pandemic accelerated social media use by governments and many felt they needed more formal training to ensure they were doing their work effectively. Many practitioners noted experiencing online threats and abuse while engaging in moderation and public facing activities. Interviewees described staffing shortages, increased workload, and increased stress. The need to constantly create content in a short time frame was especially challenging, particularly given the volume of information that needed to be conveyed. Finally, the approval structure needed to release public facing information via social media was often described as too inefficient to allow teams to respond to issues in a timely manner. A publication from this research is in preparation.

The Digital Democracies Institute (DDI) at SFU delivered a presentation on the ways that artificial intelligence can be used to detect online abuse via social media. This capacity was highlighted in a case study done by DDI researchers on the rise in online hate towards Asian communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the subsequent rise

in counter-speech from community members. This work showcased methodologies that can model, track, and understand diverse speech on the internet in ways that may be useful for practitioners seeking to track community engagement with issues in real time.

Health Canada/the Public Health Agency of Canada presented on lessons learned managing social media during a pandemic. Representatives discussed how their organization managed public interactions and misinformation, their use of livestreams for public engagement, and how they pivoted to utilizing social media platforms in novel ways during the pandemic.

Ottawa Public Health presented on engagement and interactions with community members. They spoke about the importance of building relationships, the use of humour and empathy to share messages, the challenges of communicating about everyday health topics, such as sexual health, even during the pandemic, and creative collaboration with community members to reach a wider audience.

ROUNDTABLES

Two roundtables were organized with the themes of "*challenges and opportunities*" and "*a community of practice*" to further explore attendee experiences and opportunities to create practitioner support for social media communications in the future.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Attendees provided information on the challenges they encountered sharing information with the public using social media. Many of the ideas shared in the Social Media Survey were reflected during these conversations. Key challenge areas identified by participants included: receiving conflicting messages from various groups within and outside of their own organization; losing audience/followers due to a range of reasons; facing difficulties building an audience/following; dealing with generational differences in followers; staff shortages; navigating approvals; and the impacts of their work on mental health.

Several solutions were proposed and discussed to overcome these challenges. For example, opportunities to share information and ideas across agencies may minimize the occurrence of varied and inconsistent messages. Attendees also discussed different engagement strategies to cope with generational gaps in audience members, retain and recruit followers, and make decisions

about messaging in a quick and flexible way. Some attendees mentioned the use of influencers to boost engagement. While influencers offer a valuable opportunity to engage with new audiences, the time constraints of vetting potential influencers and the costs associated with contracting their time were viewed as barriers. Others mentioned the use of followers as influencers of their own kind.

To cope with staff shortages, attendees mentioned solutions including recycling content within and between agencies, organizing weekly meetings within larger organizations to collectively boost important messages, and the creation of decision-making algorithms to help manage content selection, creation, and moderation. However, these solutions were not without difficulties. For example, when recycling content, attendees mentioned that ensuring that content was still timely and did not clash with any current events was paramount.

In dealing with approval processes, participants shared how these varied across organizations. Many individuals mentioned the importance of communication, and of sharing the intent behind messaging campaigns with supervisors. To do this, some participants noted that they took the time to prepare a convincing pitch with supporting evidence from research.

Overall, participants were enthusiastic about the solutions and strategies proposed by their colleagues, but agreed that while useful, many of these solutions and strategies required time up-front, careful thought, and evaluation. This meant that their utility was limited in the absence of additional time to implement them.

Finally, in dealing with mental health impacts, participants discussed how their work was often challenging due to the "front lines" nature of a public-facing position during a polarizing time for government and government-allied offices (i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic). They were often exposed to negativity, distrust, and animosity, but the task of filtering through this content to identify and respond to questions and meet public needs was a crucial and unavoidable aspect of their work. Attendees discussed how sharing and connecting with team members in a supportive context alleviated the burdens of this difficult work.

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE (COP)

Communities of Practice are important community-driven approaches that provide opportunities for members to share experiences and resources and that can help to build capacity in a field or skill. Given that the field of social media communications practice is a growing and continuously changing work landscape, attendees discussed the value of a CoP to support their work and their colleagues. While there was broad support for a CoP, there was less resolution regarding the specific structure that this community would take.

IDENTIFIED BENEFITS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Improve Research Capacity. Attendees discussed the importance of research as an area of focus for the CoP. The research could prioritize both topics of communication (e.g., the necessity of continually addressing a current issue), or effective methodologies (e.g., humour as an effective communication tool). Attendees indicated that conducting research was time consuming, although it came with many rewards. A CoP would facilitate collaboration across organizations and streamline these efforts to reduce duplicating this work across entities.

Mental Health. Attendees discussed the mental health implications of their work. One attendee raised the concern that it was difficult to work in social media because there was significant pressure to boost engagement but doing so required increased interaction with the public. These interactions entailed many rewarding moments but also required sifting through negative and difficult content. This content was described as "*death by a thousand cuts*". Participants shared that it was reassuring to meet with others with similar experiences and to talk with one another to find ways to cope. Many mentioned that they were better able to manage the mental health burden of the work by connecting with others, and "*sharing the pain*".

Risk Management. As social media is a rapidly changing platform, being able to better navigate the ups and downs of the changing field through collaboration was identified as a potential purpose for a CoP. In addition, attendees reflected on the risks that they, their colleagues, and the content-experts and influencers featured on their social media sites were exposed to (e.g., doxing, threatening messages, etc.). They indicated that

practices varied from organization to organization, and that in some instances, improvements could be made to safeguard employees and associates. Connections would allow for attendees to share experiences of effective organizational policies.

Bridging a Critical Gap: Although other CoPs exist, attendees identified that their work was not captured by what is already offered. For example, attendees are not at liberty to share social media content in the same way as independent or private organizations. As individuals who worked in government or allied-government groups, their role was more specific, and the stakes when they shared information were higher. As such, they felt that a space to work with others that had similar constraints and experiences would be mutually beneficial.

STRUCTURE OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Attendees came to a consensus that in-person meetings, such as the one organized by PIPPS, were extremely valuable and rewarding experiences. However, they also felt that they would benefit from a semi-structured virtual space to attend seminars or talks and discuss timely topics, as well as a virtual space in which they could share and collaborate freely over time with less obligation. For this reason, a successful CoP might include both: annual or biannual meetings; quarterly or bimonthly virtual meetings; and a platform that could support online communication (e.g., Microsoft Teams or Slack).

Leadership was also an important aspect of a CoP structure that was discussed. Recognizing that attendees were already managing many responsibilities, identifying an individual or organization to manage such a community would be vital to ensuring timely coordination. Based on these conversations, this role would likely need to be filled by someone on a part time basis (e.g., 0.25 – 0.5 FTE) and could be supported by CoP membership (e.g., Chairs and co-Chairs).

Importantly, it was evident that a CoP structure would need to be determined by members of the CoP. Next steps for such a process would involve consultation with potential members and a survey to gather perspectives and feedback.

EVALUATION OF WORKSHOP
Following the workshop, participants were provided with the option to complete a survey regarding their workshop experiences. Responses were generally positive, with some comments providing feedback regarding the structuring and moderation of meeting activities.

- Attendees indicated that they found it validating to hear about similar experiences from employees at other organizations and interact with and learn from community members regarding concerns, challenges, and solutions.
- A few mentioned that they particularly appreciated presentations on communications best practices from their colleagues at various agencies.
- Participants responded that they were able to take away tips and shared experiences to strengthen their own practice.
- Individuals felt that it was good that the meeting occurred in person, and many indicated that they would attend another time if it was offered.
- The accessibility of a hybrid format was also appreciated.
- Finally, respondents emphasized the value of creating a community of practice.

As part of this evaluation process, this report was also provided to workshop participants for their feedback prior to publication.

PIPPS' APPROACH TO SUPPORTING GOVERNMENT AND ALLIED GOVERNMENT SOCIAL MEDIA PROFESSIONALS
A better understanding of the unique position of frontline social media and communications workers in government or allied-government institutions will require an investment in research. Support for these individuals will require opportunities for collaboration and training. PIPPS is currently engaged in five areas to support employees in these roles. We gratefully acknowledge funding from CIHR and PIPPS, which is enabling the following programs:

(1) The **social media research project**, an ongoing, iterative project in which we aim to better understand the needs of social media employees in these institutions. We have conducted this work through a triple lens approach: at the broad (surveys), fine (interviews), and interactive (focus groups and roundtables) levels.
(2) **This workshop**, which provided an opportunity for individuals and organizations to learn, connect, and discuss with one another.
(3) **Modules and infographics**, created in collaboration with research and industry professionals, and shared with participants and community members through YouTube.
(4) Assistance with the creation and **development of a CoP** for social media professionals.
(5) Support for partner-identified **knowledge translation, knowledge synthesis,** and **research opportunities**.

CONCLUSION
This meeting of individuals working in social media communications in government and allied-government organizations was a first, foundational step towards developing a CoP. In this novel area of work, employees have needs that may be unintentionally overlooked by employers.

Highlighting experiences and challenges is constructive, but the real benefit comes with offering authentic and effective opportunities for individuals to share, connect and discuss their challenges and innovations. These steps will not only improve employee well-being but will also have an impact on competency and capacity to work in times of stress or urgency.

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

SUGGESTED CITATION
Lukacs JN, Nicol A, Byers KA. 2023. Social Media for Health and Emergency Preparedness in British Columbia: Findings from a Workshop of Provincial Practitioners.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the learnings of this Workshop, several recommendations have emerged that can support social media practitioners working in health and emergency preparedness in BC. These recommendations are relevant to the Ministry of Health, Health Authorities, municipal governments, and allied government groups.

1) **Support a community of practice:** Our work revealed that many individuals felt that they were the first in their companies to have certain experiences, and that they were relieved, enthused, and interested to find that others were having similar experiences. A CoP would provide much needed peer support to employees in this area.

2) **Provide Social Media skills-based training:** This workshop and our research indicates that training needs exist both within organizations (e.g., how to write posts with "organizational voice", or an organization-sanctioned social listening software), and outside of the organization (e.g., how to engage audiences). This will require a continued investment both from within organizations, and outside, to ensure employees are supported in their activities.

3) **Improve intra-organizational communication processes:** One major challenge raised by participants was that although they were expected to react quickly and flexibly to news, the channels of communication between themselves and other individuals in the organizational hierarchy were often inefficient. Few participants proposed solutions to this, but concrete changes in organizational communication channels that streamline and elevate the importance of publication of crucial messages on social media to be in concordance with traditional or print media may be of value.

4) **Support Mental Health:** Employees in this area have specific and targeted mental health needs. They are at risk of burnout and acute stress due to the online negativity, harassment, and unique work pressures that they face. Scaffolding mental health supports within organizational structures is critical to assist those who may be experiencing negative mental health impacts related to their work.

5) **Support research collaboration, documentation, and sharing:** It appears that many social media employees rely on research to create content as well as justify its importance. The creation of research collaboration opportunities, uniform documentation guidelines, and protocols for how individuals in these public organizations can share their work may be of value (e.g., sharing an evidence-based decision-making algorithm for comment moderation publicly, or with other professionals).