Social media policy guidelines for agricultural extension and advisory services

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GFRAS Interest Group on ICT4RAS
2016

Social media has reformed communication all over the globe. While personal communication have already been revolutionized through this web and mobile based Web 2.0 technology, the highly interactive platforms of social media have moved beyond to create, share, discuss and modify user generated content and influence opinions (Kietszmann et al., 2011). People always had opinions but in an age where Facebook has 1.4 billion active users and 500 tweets are sent out daily (Kemp, 2015), they have a platform to express it to a global audience. And this has opened up a new vista for businesses and organizations that have to communicate with their clients on a daily basis.

Agvocacy have been given an altogether new meaning by social media. For agricultural extension and advisory services (AEAS), social media presents a huge scope not just to communicate to the farmers better and with efficiency, but also to act as innovation brokers in Agricultural Innovation Systems (AIS). And not just for the organizations, social media has made it easier for farmers to communicate with extension professionals, experts and peers in real time. And with this increased potential to share views and ideas and easy access to information, discretion becomes important for organizations to maintain professionalism in a new social world.

Selection of social media

With increasing popularity, social media platforms are also increasing in numbers each day. Kaplan and Heinlein (2010) classified social media into six different types – collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual social games, and virtual social worlds. Under-standing various forms of social media platforms, the functional traits of different activities on those platforms, and fundamental implications of those functions is very important to engage effectively on selective social media platforms. The honeycomb of seven functional building blocks of social media functionality and implications of that functionality helps to understand how different levels of social media functionality can be configured (Kietzmann et al., 2011) (Fig. 1). Also, to efficiently use these platforms and reach the intended clients and stakeholders, selection of the social media platform needs to be done deliberately after deciding the goals of the organization, understanding the intended audience, their preferred medium, the type of information and media that will be communicated, economic status of the clients, availability of offline content, technical and educational literacy of clients, and ease of access. But most importantly, training the employees and developing clear guidelines are key to create quality content and manage communication in social media platforms.

Policy guidelines for using social media

Social media guidelines exist to guide the employees affiliated to an organization to behave a certain way online to maintain organization's professionalism. They are not detailed instructions of behaviour but some general dos and don'ts for the employees to effectively communicate online with clients and stakeholders and should in no way restrict the use of social media by the employees. Policy guidelines help communicate the organizational goals to the

Fig. 1 Social media honeycomb (Source: Kietzmann et al., 2011)

Social Media Functionality

Implications of the Functionality
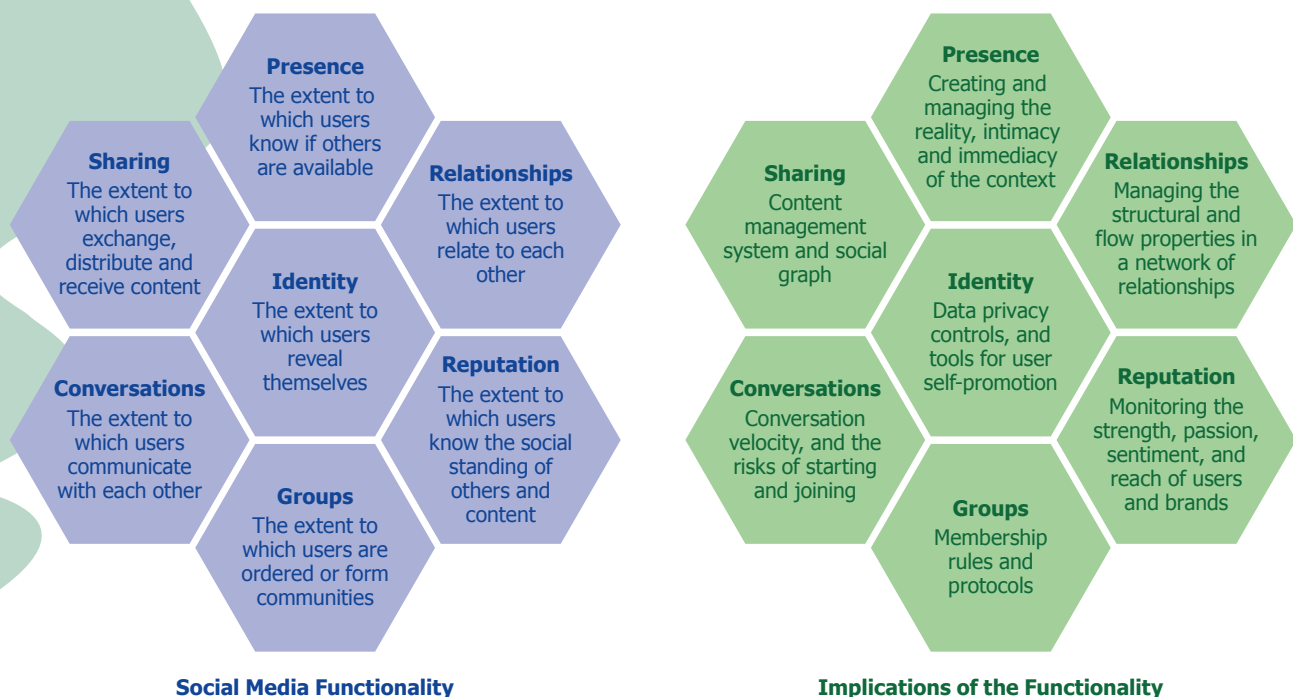
employees and organizations with defined measurable goals report higher satisfaction from their social media engagement (Basart et. al., 2014). The following guidelines present some generic acceptable behaviour for extension professionals and others while using social media on behalf of an organization:

1. **User engagement:** Conversation is the crux of social media engagement and that should be the desired goal for any organization's social media handle. In many groups, number of active participants are very less and for that, strategies needs to focus on increased user participation through fast replies to queries posted, commenting on posts made by others, engaging in discussions, mentioning clients in posts and comments, etc.

2. **Maintaining professional courtesy:** While posting online, one needs to be credible, respectable, honest, authentic, and professional all the time. Accepting mistakes and being accurate with information posted are very important.

3. **Privacy policies and behavioural decorum:** These policies need not be much different online or offline but, since online content can travel far and wide in very little time and have a much wider audience, maintaining discretion is the key.

4. **Personal or professional:** While posting for organization, one needs to be very clear about the employer's/organization's opinions about the matter and post as such or be neutral. Also, posting personal opinions on organization's account should be strictly avoided.

5. **Choice of social media tools:** Choice of social media tools and platform depends completely on preference of target user and not that of the organization or the communication officer. Same goes for content too which should depend on the demand or preference and interest of intended clients.

6. **Personal social media footprints:** Sharing personal opinion on own social media platforms by employees are fine as long as they come with disclaimer of personal endorsement and opinion. Since posting controversial opinions may reflect on the organization too, opting for personal discretion is the best way.

7. **Dealing with negativity:** Social media attracts positive as well as negative statement and there will always be some dissatisfied customers posting their opinions on the platform. Handling negativity online with positive comments, assurances and actually acting on the grievances and posting about the resolved issues can be helpful ways of dealing with such situations.

8. **Productivity:** While social media attracts the concern of unproductive use of time, for AEAS organizations, when done for the job can never be too much as communicating with clients in the real job for extensionists. Increased user engagement shows the success of the online engagement in creating informed communities and so needs to be encouraged at organizational level.

9. **Confidential and proprietary information:** Social media increases transparency in system but then again, there are confidential and proprietary information that may harm an organization if made online for public access. So, information shared needs gatekeeping and some monitoring at times.

10. **Maintenance:** Maintaining social media platfoems is a round the clock job Reviewing social media accounts of organizations by special committees and analyzing the results can make the account more informative and dynamic, thus more useful to the users and target audiences.

11. **Value measurement:** Social media's contribution to achieve organization's effectiveness should be studied. While website analytics tools can be used to measure the engagement tracking number of referrals, number of pages viewed, amount of time spent on the site, etc., the impact of the accounts can be measured by number of followers of the accounts/pages/handles, response from target audience to the posts, analysis of the comments made by the users, and social listing research by independent agencies. The methods to quantify the value organizations receive from their investment in social media helps to better strategise the activities.

12. **Intellectual Property Rights and legal considerations:** Maintaining IPR laws and regulations and giving due credits to information sources while sharing them online gives credibility to the information as well as helps avoiding controversy. Also, depending on the operating country, government regulations and other related regulations also needs to be considered before sharing information online.

Communication dynamics in social media are completely changing and so needs to change the communication strategies of AEAS organization. Social media policy guidelines help the organizations to strategically plan the communication strategies for better engagement. Employees needs to be encouraged to use social media platforms on behalf of their organizations to increase visibility of the organization and commu-

nicate organizational goals, objectives, actions and success and at the same time help them maintain uniformity while communicating online on behalf of their organizations. On an organizational level, there still exists a high amount of sceptical attitude towards use of social media, mostly for the lack of understanding about this technology that still persists. Social media policy guidelines can help clear the misunderstanding and make social media an integral part of organizational communication.

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Correct citation
Saravanan, R. and Suchiradipta, B., 2016. Social media policy guidelines for agricultural extension and advisory services, GFRAS interest group on ICT4RAS discussion paper, GFRAS: Lindau, Switzerland.

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