The Nature of Government Tweets for Conveying a Message to the Public

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ABSTRACT
Governments wish to keep certain types of information concealed from the public due to a variety of different reasons. Government agencies that protect secrecy often have a difficult time connecting to the public (WGPC, 2014). Secretive, or perceived secretive government organizations often fall into the nebulous realm of uncertainty for the information consumer. This results in a great deal of misinformation and disinformation being thought of as correct (Hernon, 1995). These types of wrong information are ubiquitous on the internet and even more so on social media, where rumors are often passed as truth.

Since 2008, the US government is moving toward a more transparent, open, and easily accessed information base through social media (Transparency and Open Government, 2013). Agencies across the government are adopting various types of social media communication. However, bureaus that primarily focus on security and safeguarding secrets struggle with how much to share and which platforms of social media are the ‘best’ for their message to reach the public. The internet and social media are full of misinformation, which creates an environment of mistrust to the entity holding the secrets, namely the government. Misinformation is information that is accidently misleading, whereas disinformation is a deliberate intent to deceive or mislead (Hernon, 1995).

Studying the juxtaposition of method, theory, and concepts is necessary to better understand the flow of information to the public. From the perspective of the government, it is beneficial to understand how to provide information to the public through a cost effective means without exposing national secrets or making the country vulnerable to attack. From the consumer perspective, it solves the need of trustworthy, verifiable, and transparent information, and gives the opportunity to participate in government while maintaining privacy. Information dissemination and understanding is not a ‘top down’ concept anymore, and it behooves a government to know how their citizens want to communicate and interact with the State to acquire information.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Transparency is the intentional access and allowance for interpretation of information, so as to make informed decisions (Moreno & Molina, 2014; Relly & Sabharwal, 2009; Armstrong, 2011). Transparency allows for the public to have a chance to shame and ridicule the government (Fox, 2007) and gives way to the possibility of feelings of distrust due to the exposure of the embarrassing parts of government that are arguably better left hidden (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). However, transparency can also allow for public participation and feeling ‘a part of’ the governmental process that leads to
feelings of good will towards the government (Lathrop & Ruma, 2010).

Privacy is the allowance of access to information to certain individuals or entities with access privileges (Bellman, 1979); such entities include credit companies, friends in social media networks, school administrations, healthcare providers, and insurance agencies. Security is the intentional action of keeping an asset safe (Garcia, 2007). The world was turned on its head by the advent of WikiLeaks, which created a frenzy of security reassessment measures. Julian Assange believes that governments around the world are keeping secrets from the public that the public has the right to know (Sifry, 2011). Secrets are intentionally concealed information one entity keeps from another (Bok, 1989). Praise has been given to WikiLeaks because it ‘levels the playing field’ between the government and the people (Pieterse, 2012) and gives a greater check on the democratic process (Shane, 2010). WikiLeaks has its own set of copycat actors such as Bradley’ (Chelsea) Manning and Richard Snowden. The members of the press were divisive on the coverage of both actors to the point of comparing Manning’s trial to a ‘crucible’ (Babatt, 2013) and demanding swift execution for Snowden (No Sympathy for Snowden, 2013). The active insider is one of the most difficult of adversaries for secrecy, because they have access to sensitive material and are not under the same scrutiny as the regular person outside of the security system (Garcia, 2007). Both Manning and Snowden were insiders who knew the system and used modern technology such as burnable CD’s and thumb drives to pass on classified information.

The cases illuminated the issues with modern technology for safeguarding secrecy and security. Social media is a wild beast that rides on the wave of current popularity. The platforms of communication rise and fall in favor, but one thing remains the same; the mode of instant communication to a network of individuals through online and mobile devices (boyd & Ellison, 2007) is a valid form of communication with foreseeable longevity. Social media was instrumental in disseminating information quickly for WikiLeaks and the other mentioned cases. It was also critical for organizing protests for the Occupy movements (Juris, 2012) and the Arab Spring uprisings. Social media is in still its infancy (but growing at an precipitous rate) and scholarship varies widely on its impact and use. Most of the government and social media studies focus on the mundane forms of information usage. Wigand (2011) argues that open communications within government to the people by means of social media is an effective form of communication and societal participation. In this respect, the government is opening a dialogue with the public with the information (Hale, 2008). Hale (2008) views ‘true transparency’ as not a public relations stunt, but as a systematic divulging of information from an institution to the public. Likewise, Florini (2002) asserts that transparency leads to international peace and to legitimate and effective governance. She argues that transparency decreases the need for security between nations, which frees capital for other economic endeavors (Florini, 2002). Lee and Park (2014) argue that social media is spreading quickly and that the nature of the government and public through social media is an important aspect of social discourse. Whether a blog, twitter stream, or Facebook, the US government to a greater or lesser degree has embraced social media within its domain. The implementation of social media use in the government is agency/department dependent (Howto.gov and USA.gov). The Obama administration has embraced social media as an outlet of information. The administration’s memorandum Guidance for Agency Use of Third-Party Websites and Applications defines the purpose of the act to “to help Federal agencies to protect privacy, consistent with law, whenever they use web-based technologies to increase openness in government” (2010). Lathrop and Ruma (2010) stated, “Obama’s memo was a signal moment in the history of open government, issued by a president who gained office in part by opening his campaign to allow his supporters to shape its message, actions, and strategy using online tools”(xix).

Government is now ‘open’, but how much secret information that should be declassified is not made public? Zafar and Naseer (2014) build upon this argument with the addition that social media is a cost effective form of communication, which is excellent for the government, and gives the feeling of ersatz, not ‘real,’ participation (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). They argue the concept of the phantom public is within this type of participation and it gives the perception of participation that aids in the ‘good feeling’ for government. Veit and Huntgeburth (2014) studied public participation in the government in Germany and discovered that Zavattaro and Sementelli are not entirely correct. In Veit and Huntgeburth’s study, the German citizens who gave information to the government through social media-for instance reporting water or road issues-felt a greater connection to the government (2014). This type of social media is deemed a boon for the government, because they do not have to hire as many people to watch and report on such issues. However, this is not always the case.

Information and communications scholarship informs our thinking of the tensions of transparency, secrecy, privacy, and security through the methods of information seeking behavior. Dervin (1999) looks from the perspective of the consumer of information and describes the process of sense making. Sense making is taking into account the aspect of the consumer (memories, personal experience, etc.) into the information being sought and received. Wilson’s model (1999) focuses on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ people seek information. He studies the reasoning and process of the information seeking arguing that people bring all of the

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1 Manning was charged and sentenced with the name Bradley, when referring to her case the name Bradley is used.
aspects outlined in previous types of research modeling, but the end goal is important to the full understanding of the information seeking behavior. These methods of information seeking behavior directly correspond with the issues of transparency, secrecy, privacy, and security. The issues dwell within a mixture of Dervin’s concepts of the information gap and the bridge, Wilson’s concept of the end goal and Habermas’ theory of communicative action. Secrecy, privacy, and security exist in the gap area, unknown, and as such are shrouded in uncertainty. Transparency is the bridge to the information gap. The end goal is the reasoning for seeking the information (to inform, to expose, to educate others, etc.). The consumer of information possesses these traits prior to searching. The end goal of fact checking and education is important as the person attempts to bridge the gap of knowledge for understanding.

Social media is rather pliable to the different stages of methods of communication. Information in this aspect of theory is the instigator of action. It can be the rallying point for a social issue and as a forum of public and semi public opinion, and it has the potential power to physically bring people together for a common action. Good examples are the occupy movements, Arab Springs, Flash mobs, ‘bat kid’, the shootings in Ferguson, MO. These are rather large examples of calls to action, for the medium also has the power to mobilize only those within the social network for even the minutest of task. The point is that social media is pervasive and persuasive within the information seeking behavior and can be employed at any stage. Social media can hit the teleos stage by either information the social media network of the information-seeking task or by stating the intent and asking for opinion or advice. The normative phase is achieved by utilizing the social media network to help in the avenues of searching. Social media can be used in the dramaturgical phase as social capital for the knowledge gained by either demonstrating the knowledge, offering the knowledge pathways for self-edification, or through stating a biased opinion without truly referencing the knowledge although sought and read (hubris).

This heightens the notion of the ‘public sphere’ and what constitutes public opinion (Ku, 1998). The public sphere is the meeting place where issues and concerns are discussed within a community (Ku, 1998). Within the frame of this research the public sphere exists in digital media communication devices.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The intention of this research is to increase understanding of the communication and information phenomenon of secrecy, to break the dichotomy barrier of ‘them (secrecy) vs. us (the public)’, and to discover the attributes of trust to the government institutions. The work will illuminate the state of consciousness in the field of government secrecy of complying with the federal mandate of transparency while still remaining secure. The study uses Wilson’s information seeking behavior model with Jürgen Habermas’ theory of commutative action to describe the interplay of trust, transparency, secrecy, social media, and government agencies. Social media fits within any part of the information seeking process: it can exist to query a network of friends or colleagues for outlets of information, or to educate and inform the same group of people (or different depending on social media usage). The research aims to discover how social media can be effectively used as a medium of communication within government secrecy in a manner that garners trust and understanding by means of tone of messages.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What is the tone of information deriving from the government agencies (CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA) in twitter messages?

RQ2: What is the tone and response from the consumer of the social media message via twitter derived from the CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA?

SUBJECTS

The subjects are those who participate in various factions of government under security protocol who tweet for their organization, and the general public that participates in Twitter within the confines of the government agencies’ feeds. The study does not focus on the people, only their tweets. This study analyzes the tone of the parent tweets from the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, International Atomic Energy Agency, and National Security Agency (CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA). The study does not look at individuals within the agencies tweets or tweets of branch agencies (such as state chapters of the FBI).

Twitter Analysis

The purpose of the Twitter analysis is to ascertain the tone of the social media deriving from traditionally secretive government agencies (CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA) and the tone of the public response. Tone, for this research, is defined as style, manner, and distinction of the messages in written communications, which significantly influences the interpretation of the message and its persuasiveness that impact responses (Iyer & Debevec, 1991). The researcher conducted a content analysis of the Twitter feeds and responses of the CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA. The social media included in the study is the Twitter feed from CIA, FBI, DHS, IAEA, and NSA between June 2014-June 2015. The month of June of 2014 was chosen because it was the debut of the CIA to Twitter. This is important because the research could see the advent of a Twitter account and its change over a year’s time and compare it to established accounts by similar agencies. The
study captures the tweets of the afore ascribed agencies from the beginning of June in order to capture the Twitter activity of the agencies immediately prior to the CIA’s joining of Twitter and throughout the CIA’s first year on the social media.

The research focuses only on organizations and not individuals. The reasoning is that a corporate message is fundamentally different than an individual. Also, high-ranking government officials’ personal social media accounts are not always cultivated by the particular individual, but by media experts; therefore, to keep consistency only organizational Twitter account were included in the study.

The parent Tweets were captured using NVivo software. The Twitter responses from the public could not by captured easily with NVivo; therefore, a code was created for the study that scrapes the unique tweet identifiers from a given user. The program parsed the text contents from each of the tweets captured and stored it in a database. The database stored each tweet response with the parent tweet, but without personal identifiers for the public responses. The database is stored on a dedicated personal server owned by the researcher under password protection and firewall. Personal identifiers or any other demographic information was not captured with the computer code. The personal identifiers of the tweets are not retained. A number is assigned to each of the respondents to insure confidentiality and for ease of discussion of results.

The study used constant comparative grounded theory (Glasner and Strauss, 2009) where the researcher codes for key words (such as artifact, community, outreach, etc.) to determine the framework and tone of the messages. The participants were placed into three broad categories: government agency, commenting government agency, and the general public. An open coding system was used to determine the tone of the messages from the agencies and the responses from the public users.

Limitations
This research is not a representative population for the US, or is a comprehensive ‘voice of the people’; however, the online and social media communities are the focus of the research due to the government initiatives to offer digital communications and the greater accessibility of information and communication of said information through rapid modes of digital communication.

Preliminary Findings
The preliminary results from the content analysis indicated interesting categories of message tone. The parent tweets from government agencies was either informative, purposefully humorous, or retweeting other government agencies. The Tweets from the government show a great deal of construction of message for its audience. The tone from commenting government agencies was predominately cordial, usually ‘patting’ other agencies on the back for good work, or adding ‘factoids’ to their own Tweets. The response from the parent tweets by the public is widely varied. A great deal of the comments had little to do with the parent tweet and were usually crass, rude, and vulgar, or ‘conspiracy theory-esque’. Some of the comments from the public were constructive or congratulatory. The results of this study are used in the second phase of future research where the retweets and favored tweets by the public are analyzed for sentiment.

REFERENCES


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