

Executive Summary

In 2019, an estimated 2.8 billion people were using social media worldwide¹. The three most popular social media platforms were Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp². In Hong Kong, there are currently 5.8 million active social media users, representing around 78% of the population³.

It is generally believed that social media provides a tool for governments to disseminate public and policies-related information, as well as to facilitate interaction with citizens. From the perspectives of policy explanation and public connection, using social media effectively might enable better governance.

There are many examples as to how the Hong Kong SAR Government (HKSARG) uses social media. One important development was in 2008 when the Policy Address mentioned the intention of developing online media platforms for the collection of public opinion. Another notable example was in 2018 when the Government introduced social media as an additional channel to collect views during the Policy Address consultation exercise.

The HKSARG's performance on social media, however, has always been criticized. Worse still, its posts tend to elicit negative rather than positive comments. The ability of the Government to use social media to gauge public sentiment and deal with emergencies during the recent social events has caused public concern as well.

The HKSARG has used social media for ten years. It is timely to examine the performance of the Government in this area, and explore what changes could be made to help improve its governance.

In conducting this research, data was collected between February and April 2020 through: overseas literature reviews on related areas; an on-line survey of 1,028 members of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (aged 15-34); and exclusive research interviews with 4 academics and experts.

¹ Statista. (2019). Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2021.

² Statista. (2019). Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2019, ranked by number of active users.

³ We Are Social & Hootsuite. (2019). Digital 2019: Global Digital Overview.

Main Discussion

1. The HKSARG should be proactive and open-minded towards using social media to take full advantage of its role in governance.

Social media provides a convenient tool to spread information and messages quickly and widely. However, findings from surveys conducted overseas, and the viewpoint of the academics and experts in this research study, concluded that governments faced limitations when using social media. Examples included: decisions needed higher-level approval; very detailed posts; and a conservative presentation style.

This research study also noted that a large majority (952) of the total respondents (1,028) had found HKSARG information on social media. A significant proportion (55.9%) said Government information was not updated quickly enough, and (77.0%) the posts were not attractive enough.

Social media emphasizes inventiveness. The HKSARG has always been put into embarrassing situations on social media. This may discourage the Government from exploring other ways of using social media. While social media is commonly used nowadays, the HKSARG should adopt a proactive attitude, including a plan to nurture talented people in the field, to take full advantage of the role social media can play in governance.

2. The HKSARG lacks a whole strategy in using social media. Improvements should be made to the Government's social media presence and transparency in the overall performance of the pages.

The HKSARG has used social media for years. However, after collecting information from various sources (online searches, email enquiries to relevant government departments, and interviews with experts), this research study indicates that the HKSARG lacks a whole social media strategy. Two other problems need to be addressed:

2.1 The information about the Government's social media presence is not sufficient enough.

Previously there was a page on the Government website (Gov.HK) providing information about the government bureaux & departments that had set up an account or pages on different social media platforms. A symbol of the relevant social media and hyperlinks were also provided. However, this research study has learned that the page is no longer in service. This research study also noted that government bureaux and departments' websites have their own ways to indicate where the public can find them on social media. Visitors might easily overlook the information when browsing the websites.

Also the public need to "go" to different social media platforms to obtain the relevant government pages, in addition to visiting the official websites for direct hyperlinks. Given that the page's name does not necessarily match the department's name, the public might need to spend more time searching for the pages.

2.2 The transparency of the overall performance of pages is not satisfactory.

This research study has learned that the Government's Public Sector Information Portal (data.gov.hk), provides thousands of datasets of public service information for free viewing and use by the public. This portal though, does not cover data about the performance of the Government's page. In fact, there is no direct data portal where the public can conveniently access information about the page performance of the government bureaux and departments. This includes the number of posts and the engagement rate. This might hinder the role of the public in monitoring the performance of the pages.

3. The HKSARG needs to put the characteristics of interactivity and responsiveness of social media into practice to improve the quality of its public opinion absorption and policy explanation.

3.1 Nearly a third (29.2%) of respondents might express more opinions if the Government used social media more effectively. Yet, the Government received a low performance rating for not being able to ascertain public sentiment on social media.

With the proliferation of social media, the HKSARG once mentioned that it would explore step-by-step the most effective ways to use social media to share the work of officials and take heed of public views.

Nearly a third (29.2%) of all the 1,028 respondents in this research study said that they might express more opinions if the Government used social media more effectively. Respondents were also asked what their main expectation was when using social media to connect to the HKSARG. A similar percentage (the largest single proportion: 29.3%) said that they expected to get a response.

A low average rating (2.09 points, on a 0-10 scale, where 5 indicates a pass) was given by the 952 respondents (who had found HKSARG information on social media), regarding the performance of the Government in providing platforms for public engagement on social media. The rating for gauging public sentiment was even lower, at an average of 1.53. Close to 70% (69.2%) of this group thought the Government had persisted in disseminating information on social media but that interactivity was lacking.

3.2 Government posts on social media relating to labour, welfare, housing and education were among those which respondents were most concerned and thought that the Government did not perform well in explaining its policies.

A significant proportion of the 1,028 respondents, said that they were most concerned with Government posts related to labour/ welfare (48.5%), housing (37.3%), and education (32.3%). Close to 40% (39.4%) believed they might understand official decision-making better if social media was used

more effectively.

The rating by the 952 respondents, of how well the Government explained its policies on social media, stood at an average of 2.35 (well below the pass mark of 5).

Explaining policy while canvassing support from the public is one of the major responsibilities of the Principal Officials of the political team of the HKSARG. Young people are receptive to receiving information and learning about government policies on and via social media. The Government (in particular the Principal Officials) needs to strengthen its policy-explanation ability on social media in order to gain the support of the young generation and society as a whole.

4. The Government is inefficient when it comes to dispelling rumours or disseminating facts via social media. Respondents had reservations regarding the performance of the Government in clarifying disinformation on social media.

An average of 1.97 was given by the 952 respondents, regarding the performance of the Government in clarifying disinformation on social media, a rating far below the pass mark of 5.

This research study also noted that the Government's Facebook page entitled "添馬台 Tamar Talk", aimed at making facts known, only had 16,000 followers after three months of operation. The average number of views of each video under the series entitled "睇真 D • 知多 D" (which serve a similar purpose), on the related department's Facebook page, was less than 20,000 during the same time period. The number of views on YouTube and Instagram was around 1,000 respectively.

Moreover, this research study noted that, on the Facebook platform, some government bureaux and departments did not have the blue "Verified" badge (a tick mark) next to their page name (the badge means that Facebook has confirmed the account, or the page, has a real identity and is not fake).

Currently millions of people are using social media in the city. It seems that there is much room for improvement regarding the capacity of the

Government's pages and content to dispel rumours or make facts known. There is also room for improvement in verifying the Government's pages on social media, to reassure the public by identifying them as genuine. The social media world is full of fake news and misinformation. It would be of great benefit to the HKSARG to ensure that the information they provide that reaches the public on social media is trustworthy.

- 5. The approval rating of the HKSARG has been low in recent years. Social media has become one of the platforms where people vent their discontent towards the Government. The Government should get serious about its governance performance to rebuild public trust.**

Various surveys of different institutes in the city have uncovered a low approval rating of the HKSARG in recent years. Experts and academics, who were interviewed as part of this research study, believed that social media has become one of the platforms where people vent their dissatisfaction of the Government.

Many deep-seated problems of the city have emerged. Together with the recent social events, the relations between the Government and the public have continuously deteriorated. The Government needs to get serious about its governance performance to rebuild the long-term trust of the public.

It is worth mentioning that some overseas government leaders have put great effort in managing their social media pages, in particular making good use of the human touch when connecting with the public. This research study noted that respondents thought the Government had performed poorly in building its public image on social media (average of only 1.68). What the government leaders mentioned above have done might provide insights for the HKSARG and the Principal Officials of how to manage their pages more effectively.

Recommendations

The intended aim of this study is to put forward possible measures that could facilitate the HKSARG's use of social media for better governance. Based upon the findings and discussion above, this study proposes the following recommendations:

1. Review and develop a strategy on the HKSARG's social media use to enhance its role in governance.

The HKSARG has had a social media presence for ten years. We recommend a review of the Government's work in this area. It is hoped that some key performance indicators could be proposed to measure future improvements. We also recommend the Government initiates a strategy to use social media with a forward-looking perspective. The strategy would serve to direct the goal, resource allocation and people nurturing etc. when using social media in future.

We believe the Policy Innovation and Co-ordination Office would be the ideal unit to lead the review work. Its track record of handling innovative projects, and its collaboration across bureaux and departments could help the outcome to be more effective.

2. Provide a one-stop information portal of the names of the account or pages that government bureaux and departments have set up on social media. This will make it more convenient for the public, and facilitate connections between the Government and the public.

With the wide use of social media, more bureaux and departments have set up accounts or pages on different social media platforms in recent years. We recommend that the-now discontinued one-stop information platform, that used to provide the names of all bureaux, departments and agencies with social media accounts, should be reinstated. There is an increasing number of such accounts and all relevant links and logos that enable easy access by the public should also be available. This could also facilitate the connection between the Government and the public. The platform should also provide information about the relevant performance of the pages (i.e.

number of posts, engagement rate etc.), to enhance the transparency of the effectiveness of the page/s.

3. Strengthen the interactive elements of the HKSARG's pages on social media to make them more lively and dynamic.

The HKSARG was criticized for lacking interactivity when using social media. Its posts were generally considered not attractive enough. We recommend strengthening the interactive elements of the content of the HKSARG's pages. The major measures include:

3.1 The Principal Officials of the political team of the HKSARG set up personal pages on the major social media platforms for more interaction with the public. This could also provide them with a channel for adding the human touch to get closer to the public.

3.2 The bureaux and departments organize more interactivity on their pages, such as inviting KOL (Key Opinion Leaders) for co-operating with/ participating in Social Media Challenges, and designing symbolic features or mascots to encourage more positive responses from the public.

4. Arrange more specific posts and job placement to improve the quality of the pages' management.

We recommend (1) the provision of more specific posts of social media management; (2) the provision of more job placements related to social media for young students. This could attract more talent who can help manage HKSARG's social media pages, while making good use of the creativity of young people to improve the operation and look and feel of the pages.

5. Keep on delivering information with solid data and facts on social media as the foundation to rebuild public trust in the long term.

We recommend the HKSARG make the best use of its solid data and facts to continuously explain policy and decision-making on social media. This could help the public understand more about the work of the Government. This could also help minimise or reduce the doubt, suspicion or uncertainty that might arise during the implementation of policies. In the long run, it could lay a foundation for building public trust.