



A Conversation About Social Media for Local Leaders

Why Local Governments Use Social Media

You've probably noticed that many of the places people once turned to for local information have changed. Local newspapers have closed or reduced coverage. Local radio and television no longer cover day-to-day local issues the way they once did. For better or worse, social media has stepped in to fill part of that void as we transition from one medium to another.

Today, social media helps local governments keep residents informed and connected. It can share service alerts, promote community events, recruit new employees, remind residents about programs and benefits, explain policy decisions, support economic development, and highlight the work happening across the organization.

It also provides something communities have always needed: a way for residents to see what their local government is doing and to share what matters to them.

When used well, social media can strengthen communication between local government and the people it serves. But as these platforms have grown, they have also created new challenges that many local leaders are still learning to navigate.

The following pages are designed to guide a conversation about those challenges. How can we approach social media in a way that supports effective leadership and strong communities?



Your Goals

Which of the following do you believe should be the goals of our social media?

- ☐ Explaining policy decisions and the work of our elected officials
- ☐ Keeping residents informed about services, programs, and community events
- ☐ Providing emergency alerts and important service updates
- ☐ Listening to community concerns and feedback
- ☐ Promoting the community and supporting economic development
- ☐ Helping residents understand the work their government does and the people behind it
- ☐ Recruiting new employees and building interest in public service
- ☐ Other: _____

How important is effective social media to you in achieving these goals?

- ☐ Mission Critical
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Moderately Important
- ☐ Not a Priority



The Reality Of Social Media

Social media platforms operate in a very different environment from traditional public engagement. Understanding these dynamics can help local leaders respond thoughtfully rather than react to the loudest voices online.

Some key realities of social media include:

- Attention drives visibility. Posts that trigger strong reactions (outrage, conflict, or highly relatable content like cute animals) are more likely to spread widely.
- Every post (initially) carries the same weight. Unlike traditional media, social platforms have no editors or gatekeepers. A rumor, opinion, or fact can appear equally credible.
- Most people watch but rarely post. Studies consistently show that the majority of social media users simply observe rather than comment or create posts.
- The instinct to respond is real. Elected officials and staff alike often feel pressure to address visible criticism quickly.
- The attention economy favors people over institutions. Social media users tend to embrace authentic content from individuals and creators more than crafted messaging from organizations.
- Trust in the messenger often outweighs the message itself. People are more likely to believe information shared by someone they know or follow, even when the information is incomplete or incorrect.

The STPs: The Same Ten People

Let's start with a thought experiment.

Imagine our community is about to get a Costco.

For most residents, this is good news. Affordable groceries. Good paying new jobs. A reason to stay local instead of driving to the next town over, and the tax revenue that comes with it supporting our local services. If you asked almost any family in our community, they'd probably say: great, when does it open?

Now think about what happens on social media.

Within hours of the announcement, the comments arrive. Traffic concerns. Environmental objections. Worries about what it means for local businesses. The thread grows. The same names appear, some familiar, some hiding behind a username. The noise keeps building until it can start to feel like the people we serve are adamantly opposed.

This is the STP problem in a nutshell.

The people who can't wait for that Costco to open? They're not in the comments section. They're at work. They're picking up their kids. They heard the news, shared it with a neighbor over text, and as busy people do, moved on with their day.

Meanwhile, a small vocal group is getting inside our heads. Feverishly pounding their keyboards, creating the impression of broad opposition when the reality is something very different.

You might ask: why doesn't the quieter majority just speak up?

It's simple. They're not seeing the noise. Less than 7% of Americans have ever joined a Facebook Community Group. The average active Facebook user skews significantly older than our median resident. The silent majority isn't engaging because they aren't even in the room where the argument is happening.

The challenge isn't that these voices exist. Every community has them. The challenge is when local government begins making decisions based on a small, loud, non-representative subset rather than the broader sentiment of the community it actually serves.

Guarantee that when that Costco opens, the lines will be around the block. And they'll probably include a majority of the STPs.



The Silent Majority	The STPs
Are active across a broad range of social media platforms. Facebook is not primary for them.	Live their online lives primarily on Facebook.
Are busy with their lives but do pay attention to the broad direction of their community and the work of local government.	Read every agenda. Attend every meeting. Address council during public comment. Take satisfaction in the attention they receive online. And remain myopically focused on minutia rather than the bigger picture.

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to consider these individually, then discuss together. These are deliberately difficult questions, and answering honestly is important to recognizing the effects of problematic social media.

When you think about criticism on social media directed at us, how would you characterize the source?

- ☐ It feels broadly representative of our community
- ☐ It tends to come from a recognizable, recurring group
- ☐ I honestly can't tell who is behind most of it
- ☐ I try not to pay attention to it

How much do online comments and community groups currently influence policy decisions?

- ☐ More than they probably should
- ☐ We reference them but keep them in perspective
- ☐ Rarely as we have other ways of gauging sentiment
- ☐ This is something we haven't formally discussed as a team

When weighing an important decision, how deliberately do you consider the Silent Majority alongside the voices you're actually hearing?

- ☐ We actively discuss who isn't in the room and what they might need
- ☐ We try to, but the loudest voices tend to dominate the conversation
- ☐ We rely mostly on what feedback we see rather than seeking broader input
- ☐ This is a gap we recognize but haven't found a good way to address yet



Why Do We Share

Where the Real Conversation Is Happening

Picture a working parent in your community. Late thirties, maybe early forties. Two kids, a full schedule, and a phone that never seems to leave their hand.

They saw a neighbor's Instagram post about the new park breaking ground. They shared it to their story with a string of emojis and tagged three friends who also live in the neighborhood. It didn't arrive as an official announcement from their local government. It arrived as a recommendation from someone they trust, a neighbor who was genuinely excited about something good happening in their community.

When the fire broke out at Fred's place, they were capturing video of the flames as your fire crew arrived and saved his home. It wasn't drafted, approved, or scheduled. It was raw, emotional, and real — unfolding in real time for everyone who followed them.

These are the people you serve, communicating in the language of modern social media. They are engaged and paying attention. They are already telling your story, reacting to your decisions, and forming opinions about the direction of your work. They're just doing it in places that feel invisible to anyone whose primary frame of reference is a Facebook comment section.

While the STPs are dissecting the choice of parcel for the new park, or debating response time statistics in a thread fewer than fifty people will ever read, these organic stories have already reached deep pockets of your community without ever touching a Facebook feed.

Comments vs. Shares

There is a simple way to think about the difference between comments and shares.

Comments tell you who is loud. Shares tell you who is listening.

A post that generates hundreds of comments but few shares is largely staying in one place. The same people, the same conversation, the same room. It may feel like engagement, but it is mostly noise cycling within an existing audience.

A post that gets shared travels. It moves through DMs, text messages, and in the feeds of people who have never visited your Facebook page or a community group. Every share is a neighbor telling another neighbor something worth knowing.

Think about the last post your organization put out that you genuinely felt proud of. Something that reflected your community well. Do you know if it was shared? Do you know where it went or who it reached?

If the answer is no, that's not unusual. Most local governments are measuring the wrong things. Comments are easy to see. Shares feel invisible. But invisible doesn't mean unimportant.

Creating content worth sharing isn't about going viral. It's about giving the Silent Majority something they'd want to pass along to someone they care about. That's a very achievable bar. And it starts with understanding what they actually value.

Reflection Questions

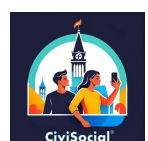
Take a moment to consider these individually, then discuss together.

What do you believe average residents are most likely to share with someone they know?

- ☐ Policy announcements and council decisions?
- ☐ Alerts and service updates?
- ☐ Stories about people in our community and the work they do?
- ☐ Visible examples of our work in action?
- ☐ Detailed information to help them get up-to-speed on complex issues?

If you had to honestly assess your current social media content, how much of it feels like it is something akin to a compelling story, versus a piece of information?

- ☐ We are mostly sharing information.
- ☐ We share 50% information and 50% compelling stories.
- ☐ We are sharing mostly compelling human led stories.
- ☐ We have a lot of flyers and walls of text that probably don't reach a lot of people.



Our Platforms

What You Think You Know, and What's Actually True

Most local government social media strategy is built around a single assumption: that Facebook is social media. It's where your page lives. It's where residents comment. It's where the STPs hold court. And for a long time, that assumption was close enough to be useful.

It isn't anymore.

YouTube

The most widely used social media platform in America isn't Facebook. It's YouTube. 84% of U.S. adults use it, crossing every age group, income level, and demographic line.

You probably use YouTube yourself, but don't think of it as social media. That's the problem.

YouTube is where your residents go to understand things. How their government works. What a new development means for their neighborhood. It is arguably the most powerful social media platform available to local government.

Facebook

Time spent on Facebook rises consistently with age. Users between 55 and 64 spend an average of 45 minutes a day on the platform. Younger residents check in, scan, and move on to wherever they actually live online. Facebook is a specific slice of social media; older, more likely to be retired, with more time to engage and a platform that rewards their engagement.

Your working parent in their late thirties isn't in that comment section. They were there for four minutes this morning before the kids woke up to check in on their own mom-and-dad.

The people you're hearing from the most are not the same people you need to reach the most.

Instagram

Millennials are 30-46 years old, and likely the majority adult age cohort in your community. Two thirds of U.S. adults between 30 and 49 are on Instagram. These aren't just young people. They are homeowners. Parents. People raising families in your community. This is where the Silent Majority spend a meaningful part of their day.

If you want to reach the people most likely to line up for that Costco on opening day, Instagram is where the conversation is happening.



TikTok

In 2019, before TikTok became dominant in the U.S., Americans spent about 33% of their social media time watching video. Today that number is 61%. Every platform you use has fundamentally restructured itself to chase the short-form video format that TikTok pioneered.

The video your older community watches on Facebook? It was more-often-than-not created on TikTok first, shared to Instagram Reels, then made its way to Facebook weeks later. TikTok is where social media creativity is born. Everything else is downstream from it.

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to consider these individually, then discuss together.

When a constituent raises a concern about something they saw on “social media”, which platform are they almost always referring to?

- ☐ Facebook (90%+ of the time)
- ☐ It varies depending on the issue
- ☐ A mix of platforms (outside of just Facebook and Next Door)

Where does your team spend the majority of its social media time and energy today (excluding the posting of meetings and live-streams on YouTube)?

- ☐ Facebook, almost exclusively
- ☐ Facebook and Instagram (we share mostly the same content on each)
- ☐ We use a mix of platforms to communicate and each has a specific content strategy

The goal of our current social media presence is to:

- ☐ Connect with our existing audience of concerned and engaged citizens
- ☐ Reach the broadest possible cross section of our community
- ☐ We haven't formally defined a goal
- ☐ This conversation is making us rethink what our goal should be



Our Storytelling

Social Media Didn't Add Video, It Became Video

Laura lives in your district. She's 42, has two kids, one in middle school, one in third grade, and her day doesn't slow down until well after dinner.

When it finally does, Laura doesn't reach for a newspaper. She doesn't open Facebook. She opens Instagram, and she scrolls. Not to stay informed. Not to participate in anything. To decompress. She's watching someone pipe buttercream roses onto a six-layer cake she will never attempt to make. She's saving a reel about a ten-minute evening skincare routine. She's half-watching, half-present, and genuinely relaxed for the first time since 7am.

In the morning, before the house wakes up, she rolls out a yoga mat and pulls up YouTube. This is different. She chose this. She has 30 minutes and she knows exactly what she came for. A familiar instructor, a flow she's done before, something that belongs entirely to her before the day takes over.

This is what integrated social media use actually looks like. Not a civic act. Not a political one. A deeply personal one, woven into the margins of a life that doesn't have many margins left.

Now consider what you are putting in front of her:

- A Canva flyer announcing the next council meeting.
- A paragraph explaining the new stormwater fee.
- A graphic with your logo in the corner and a date in bold.

On Instagram, these don't read as information. They read as ads. And she has spent years training her thumb to swipe past ads before her brain has fully registered what they were selling.

It isn't that she doesn't care about her community. She filmed the fire at Fred's place. She shared the park groundbreaking to her story and tagged three neighbors. She is paying attention. She just isn't paying attention to content that looks like it was designed for a bulletin board.

Earlier we noted that Americans went from spending 33% of their social media time watching video to 61% in just a few years. That shift didn't happen because people suddenly became passive. It happened because video meets people where they already are. It speaks the language of the moment.

Now imagine this.

Laura is scrolling Instagram on a Tuesday night and a 45-second clip appears from a member of staff, the City Manager or Elected Official.



No studio. No lower-third graphic. Just someone sitting in their car talking directly to the camera about what they're working on and why. It took three minutes to record.

She watches it to the end. Not because she was looking for it, but because she is invested in her community.

She doesn't comment. She watched it, and might share it with a friend. And the next time her local government appears in her feed, she'll recognize it.

She isn't expecting production value. She's craving authenticity and connection, something only organic video content can provide.



Reflection Questions

Take a moment to consider these individually, then discuss together.

How would you describe your organization's current use of video on social media?

- ☐ We produce regular video content across multiple platforms
- ☐ We post video occasionally but it isn't a consistent part of our strategy
- ☐ Video is largely absent from what we do

Thinking about the content we currently post, and thinking about Laura scrolling Instagram on a Tuesday night, how much of what we produce would stop her thumb?

- ☐ Most of it! We're creating content that feels human and authentic
- ☐ Some of it. We have moments but they're inconsistent
- ☐ Honestly, very little. Most of what we post would scroll right past her
- ☐ We're not sure. We've never thought about our content through that lens

What do you believe is the biggest barrier to producing more video?

- ☐ We don't have the staff capacity or technical skills to produce it
- ☐ There are concerns about message control and staying on script
- ☐ We haven't prioritized it but there isn't a specific obstacle
- ☐ We've tried video but it doesn't seem to resonate. We don't have confidence in our approach



What This Means For Us

If there's one thing to take from this conversation, it isn't that anything we've been doing is wrong. It's that the environment around us has changed.

For a long time, it made sense to focus on what we could see. Comments. Meetings. Public feedback. Those were the clearest signals available, and responding to them was the responsible thing to do.

Those signals still matter. But they are no longer the full picture. And in most cases, they are not representative of our whole community. The way residents consume information has changed faster than most local governments have been able to adapt. That isn't a failure of leadership. It's the reality of operating inside institutions that move deliberately while the platforms around them move constantly.

But awareness without a response is just a more informed version of the status quo.

The question in front of us isn't whether to change. It's what we're willing to agree on together before we decide how.

A few principles worth aligning on:

(1) Can we agree to measure reach, not just noise? Comments and public comment periods will always have a place. But they are not a reliable measure of what our community thinks or needs. This requires looking for signals beyond the loudest voices to ground our decisions and operations, even / especially when Facebook erupts?

(2) Will we create content for the people who aren't engaging, not just the ones who are? Laura isn't in the comment section. She isn't at the meeting. She is paying attention in her own way, and she deserves content that meets her there. This may require additional learning and resources.

(3) Can we strive to make our work visible in ways that feel human? Not every post needs to be polished. Some of the most effective communication we can do is a real person, talking plainly, about something that matters. This requires a degree of collective courage and trust between us.

(4) How will we define what success looks like before we measure it. Likes and follower counts are easy to track and largely meaningless. Reach, shares, and whether residents feel informed are harder to measure and worth pursuing. This requires mutual patience and an agreed upon data-set.



Final Reflections

Take a moment to consider these individually, then discuss together.

Which of these principles feels aligned with where we see our social media? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Seeking reach beyond visible engagement
- ☐ Creating content for residents who aren't actively participating
- ☐ Making our work visible in a more human way
- ☐ Defining success before measuring it
- ☐ Building shared data-set that we agree to measure our progress with

Which feels furthest from where we are today, and most important to address first?

- ☐ Measuring reach beyond visible engagement
- ☐ Creating video content for residents who aren't actively participating
- ☐ Making our work visible in a more human way
- ☐ Defining success before measuring it
- ☐ Building shared data-set that we agree to measure our progress with

Other _____

Given everything we've discussed, where do you land on the question of prioritization of social media?

- ☐ Modern communications should be a top priority. We need to get this right.
- ☐ We are doing fine on social media and could optimize to get better.
- ☐ We should not change our approach based on this conversation.

Where do you land on the question of investment — in time, resources, and leadership attention?

- ☐ We should look at a more significant investment to expand our team and add resources.
- ☐ See what can be done with existing resources and perhaps a small investment to improve.
- ☐ We need to spend money elsewhere and this is not a priority.



One Final Reflection

This conversation was designed to be uncomfortable in places. Not to assign blame, but because the communities you serve deserve leaders who are willing to sit with hard questions together.

You've just done that.

Before you close this guide, take a moment. No agendas, just turn to one another and answer this honestly:

What struck you most? And what do you want to be different a year from now?

Not for the organization. Not for the next council meeting. For the residents who are out there right now, paying attention in ways you may not have fully seen before today.

That's where this conversation was always headed. Not to a plan. To a shared commitment to the people who depend on you, including the ones who will never show up to tell you so.



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