

OLD WATCHDOG, NEW TRICKS: HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES ARE TRANSFORMING THE MODERN OMBUDSMAN

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Social media are connecting millions of people around the world to each other and to their institutions. They are ideally suited to the work of ombudsmen – but many fear that these very public tools can't work within the ombudsman's traditional bounds of confidentiality and impartiality. The Office of Ontario Ombudsman has embraced these technologies and found the benefits far outweigh the risks.

SOCIAL MEDIA – THE DEBATE IS OVER

Today's classical parliamentary ombudsman owes much to Lars Mannerheim, the world's first modern ombudsman, who in 1809 gave us the Swedish title still used around the world today. In many ways, our role in helping ordinary citizens access the corridors of power is unchanged from 200 years ago – as are the problems people face with heavy-handed governments and bureaucracy.

For most of the last two centuries, the nature of an ombudsman's work did not vary greatly from Mr. Mannerheim's time. Ombudsmen dealt with complaints only in writing, working in relative secrecy, reporting to their legislatures once a year or less. Even the advent of telephone and email did little to change traditional processes. The public could only reach the ombudsman – and vice-versa – in very limited ways.

Like our core values of independence, impartiality, confidentiality and transparency, these methods are tried and true and have instilled our offices with credibility. But to remain credible and relevant in an increasingly digital world, the ombudsman must embrace 21st-century tools to engage the public.

The classical ombudsman model and 200-plus years of helping citizens is the legacy that we build on. It is a legacy we are proud of. But as you might know if you are a bit of a computer geek like me, the word "legacy" also has another meaning today. In the world of computers and software, this is the definition of a "legacy system":

Legacy system: A legacy system is an old method, technology, computer system or application program that continues to be used... even though newer technology or more efficient methods of performing a task are now available.¹

That is not the kind of legacy we can be proud of. So we must ask ourselves as ombudsmen, are we operating a legacy system? Or are there more efficient methods available for performing our work? Absolutely. And they are nothing to fear.

¹ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legacy_system

Originally, ombudsmen were created to give the average citizen access to the corridors of power. But everywhere we look, social media has now put that access right into the hands of everyone with a cell phone or computer.

We saw this in Egypt and elsewhere, throughout the “Arab Spring.” On a more mundane level, we see it in the private sector, where consumers publicly post complaints about everything from poor restaurant service to shoddy products – and expect immediate responses. Citizens cannot only speak to the powerful, they can topple them. If ombudsmen are not part of this conversation, we become irrelevant; just another useless “legacy system.”

When my office began using social media in 2009, there was still a great deal of debate about social media. Facebook and Twitter started out as trendy ways for students and teenagers to socialize – were they appropriate for serious public officials? Many governments, including the one I oversee, had banned the use of social media by employees. Fortunately, because we are independent, that ban had no power over my office and we were able to dive right in. Much later, after our government relaxed that ban, the Premier of Ontario thanked me for “helping to lead the way” in using Twitter and Facebook.

Today, I would argue, there is no more debate. Would you debate whether or not your office should have a website? Or use email? Or the telephone? It is no longer a question of whether you “should” use social media. The only question is how it should be used – and we are only just beginning to explore the possibilities.

Even governments understand this – and we all know how stodgy and recalcitrant governments can be. The U.S. Digital Government Strategy says:

The public expects to be able to interact with government anytime, anywhere and on any device, so agencies must ensure they can live up to these ever-increasing customer demands.²

Good advice. And why should the people expect any less of their ombudsman than they expect from their government? Indeed, I think they should expect more.

Social media tools are ideally suited to the ombudsman’s role. The ombudsman, by definition, has a human profile. Whether you are called ombudsman, or public protector, or *protector du citoyen*, or citizen’s representative, or *provedor de justica*, your very title lets the people know that they have a human being to turn to, not just another bureaucratic office.

² U.S. Digital Government Strategy: <http://www.howto.gov/customer-service/digital-government-strategy-agency-milestones>

Through social media, the people can see that profile. We can speak to them directly, effortlessly. We can let them know about our work, the results we've achieved, the difference we've made for others – thousands of people at a time, even if we are sitting at home in our pyjamas (and so are they).

THE WIRED OMBUDSMAN IS AN EFFICIENT OMBUDSMAN

I have always believed that you cannot be an effective ombudsman unless you are a visible ombudsman. Your work gains credibility with exposure. This increases the ombudsman's power of moral suasion, which is the greatest power we possess.

Those of you who have attended our training course, Sharpening Your Teeth, will already be aware of how my office has used the tools of social media – primarily Twitter and Facebook, but also YouTube, Flickr and others, as well as collaborative reference sites like Wikipedia – in our investigations as well as our communications.

Indeed, that is one of the hallmarks of our approach: The public face we present to the world, through our communications, is integrated throughout our process. It is not an afterthought, once an investigation is completed. It is part of our strategy from the beginning. We might call for complainants to come forward on a particular issue. We might seek out groups or individuals on social media who could have valuable evidence. We might let stakeholders know that an investigation is nearly done, or a report is nearly complete, or that we are about to hold a news conference.

The key to this approach is that it is from the top down. I am the Ontario Ombudsman, and so the @Ont_Ombudsman account on Twitter is me. It is not my Communications staff, issuing press releases. It is me – and it says so: “André Marin tweets personally unless otherwise noted.”

Most of the time – about 85% of my tweets – my messages and comments are work-related. General information about what I am working on, perhaps about what meetings I've had that day or a speech I'm preparing. The other 15% of the time, often on weekends, I tweet about things outside of work – my daily workout, something in the news, a movie I saw, my son's latest soccer game. It's not private information, but it lets people see that I am a real person.

I make myself available to answer public questions – not formal complaints, but general questions. This has been extremely well received, and it's an efficient way for me to interact with people. Years ago, our office would organize town hall meetings or open houses for the public to ask questions of their ombudsman. Those kinds of events have value, but with social media, I can have a “digital town hall meeting” on Twitter in the time it takes me to make and drink a cup of tea. One of the things I like about Twitter is its concise format – messages are only 140 characters, so questions and answers must be clear and to the point, no rambling.

On our other social media platforms – such as Facebook and YouTube – I participate regularly, but the day-to-day work of monitoring and creating content is mostly done by our Communications staff. Our senior managers also monitor our accounts and are available, through their iPhones and iPads, to address any contentious issues that might arise from our followers and fans.

And we do not stop there. Embracing technology is a theme that permeates every part of our office. Social media are not just a fun new add-on to our work, but part of our general drive to work smarter and more efficiently. We customized software for managing all our complaint files, we ensured that it integrated with emails, digital records and phone recordings, and we created forms to allow people to complain to us right from their smartphones or tablets, through our “Ombudsman app,” the mobile app version of our website.

Our staff are able to interview people long-distance through the video calling service Skype – which we have also used to make speeches, hold meetings and even interview prospective employees. We have also reached tens of thousands of viewers through YouTube, with video summaries of our reports, press conferences and speeches – and we also broadcast these events live wherever possible, using our own equipment.

Together, these tools act as force multipliers – allowing us to do more with less; great news in times of universal government austerity. The logistical details have evolved over time, as our following grew and we found new ways to use the tools. The process has been enlightening. The results have been nothing short of remarkable.

INCREASED INTERACTION, TRANSPARENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY

We have seen a steady and dramatic increase in complaints to our office, in tandem with the increase in our social media following. I am convinced that part of this is because of our greater availability and openness through social media. When we announce an investigation or release a report, the public reaction on Twitter and Facebook is immediate – and a wave of formal complaints generally follows.

Using social media has increased and improved our interaction with stakeholders. We are able to find and interact with interest groups and people with valuable evidence who might not have heard of us before. And social media provide us an extremely efficient way to keep them informed about steps in our process – for example, when we have completed a preliminary report and sent it back to the organization under investigation for a response. Although the report is confidential, I can tweet about the fact that it is completed and that we are awaiting a response. This is not something that would be the subject of a traditional news release, but it is welcome news to the stakeholders in that particular investigation.

In fact, using social media has even enhanced our interaction with the news media. Many of our followers are journalists, and they are quick to pick up on developments in investigations they are interested in. The benefits are twofold – we can reach thousands of followers directly and instantly, and hundreds of thousands indirectly through the mass media, all through a few tweets. More information is shared, with less investment of time and resources, on all sides. Social media certainly aren't a substitute for the news media, but they have revolutionized the way the news media work. Journalists know that no one in the public information business today can function without being plugged into social media – and the same should be true for us.

BENEFITS OUTWEIGH THE OBSTACLES

From experience, I can say that the benefits of using social media and new technologies have far outweighed the risks and costs. Many of the fears that public officials have expressed regarding these technologies have proven unfounded; although there are many examples of mishaps and mistakes that have been made, these are generally attributable to failures of common sense, not failures of the medium or technology.

Certainly there are areas of legitimate concern. We don't accept formal complaints through social media, for example, because of confidentiality. We remind our followers not to share too many personal details. And we remove messages that are libellous or inappropriate.

Another that is particularly relevant at a world meeting like this one is the question of access – are social media truly democratic, or are they tools limited to those lucky enough to have fancy computers, smartphones and wifi?

It's true, not everyone has access to these tools, or wants it. They might be limited by ability, income, geography or government policy. We can't assume that social media reach everyone. But neither should we assume that these technologies are the tools of only the young, the educated and the elite.

The top 10 countries using Twitter, according to a July 2012 study,³ are the U.S., Brazil, Japan, the U.K., Indonesia, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Spain and Canada. The top 5 cities are Jakarta, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, London and New York. These are diverse populations, where millions of people are using mobile phones to communicate and access information in ways never before possible. And bear in mind, a great many of these are people who cannot be reached by traditional media like newspapers and television – they either don't have access to them, or they have

³ Semiocast, Paris, July 2012:
http://semiocast.com/publications/2012_07_30_Twitter_reaches_half_a_billion_accounts_140m_in_the_US

stopped using them. Social media allow you to reach out to a different audience than before, and vice-versa.

TIPS

I am often asked for tips on how to use these tools. There is a whole new industry of consultants who give advice in this area, and many long, legalistic policies have been written to govern it – which in my view are largely unnecessary. The best advice is the simplest – use common sense. Social media should be used in the same way as any other tool you use in your office, from telephones to email – carefully and sensibly. The same goes for policies for your conduct and that of other employees: Using social media is like speaking in public. Don't do or say anything you would not do or say publicly, but don't put up with behaviour from others that you would not tolerate publicly, either. Be courteous, be professional, be smart.

CONCLUSION

Using social media and new technologies has increased our visibility, our productivity, our ability to gather evidence, our connection with stakeholders, our interactions with traditional media and our reputation as an innovative, approachable, effective office.

From a relatively small investment of time and staff, and a modest investment in technology, we have reaped enormous benefits. We have saved money on self-promotion, travel for speeches and investigations, and outreach events, while reaching new audiences and attracting more people who need our help. We have also gained an ability to listen to people's concerns outside of the formal complaint process, allowing me to better fulfill the ombudsman's role as a barometer for brewing storms affecting the government I oversee. I am more connected than ever to the public I serve.

From that perspective, using social media is not just a choice for the modern ombudsman – it's a duty. I strongly recommend all ombudsmen embrace these tools if you have not already. I guarantee that back at your offices, some of your staff are already itching to get started. What are you waiting for?