Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce a framework for understanding how millennial social media use preferences can help public administrators change their delivery ethos to foster meaningful micro-encounters in digital spaces to then create public value. Ideally, these micro-encounters encourage public values creation from both the user (government) and audience side. Traditional government social media use often is one-way push without much care for dialogue and discussion. This revised framework shifts that thinking from the social media creation phase, allowing public administrators to use the tools in a more creative way.

Design/methodology/approach – The approach to the paper is theoretical, meaning the theoretical framework brings together lines of scholarship that have previously run parallel: millennial social media use preferences, government social media, and public values creation.

Findings – The theoretical framework offers propositions for future inquiry. The framework shows how traditional public sector social media use fails when it comes to creating meaningful spaces for interaction, which ideally is the purpose of social media.

Practical implications – The framework offered herein can help practitioners change the way they set up and even currently use social media tools to engage with the public. Though the framework is based on millennial social media preferences, any generation can benefit from a more open, inclusive platform that strives to foster public values such as collaboration, dialogue and transparency.

Originality/value – The theoretical framework generated for this paper brings together usually separate literatures to create a more holistic picture of social media use for public administrators.

Keywords Public administration, Millennials, Social media, Digital governance, Public values, Government social media

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The era of e-government has ushered in many changes to public administration. Organizations began adopting digital government strategies to better connect with the publics they serve (Gil-Garcia and Pardo, 2005; West, 2004). As the digital era has progressed, social media became a critical part of the public administrator’s toolkit given the ability to connect government-to-government and government-to-people (Mergel, 2013). As social media became more prominent in public organizations, much of the original research tried to figure out the how and why of digital adoption (Brainard, 2016; Mergel, 2013; Zavattaro and Bryer, 2016). More recently, studies are moving beyond the how and why into areas such as digital transformation, innovation, and coproduction through social media (Criado et al., 2013; Mergel, 2018). What we see, then, is movement toward using social media to ideally create public values such as transparency, innovation, agility, responsiveness and more (Bannister and Connolly, 2014).

Social media can be understood as part of the smart technologies toolkit governments are using to connect with stakeholders. As Mergel et al. (2016) argue, big data are part of the smart technologies movement because government agencies (if they are transparent), people, and researchers, have access to larger scales of data now than in the past. Part of the big data
umbrella includes data analytics, which relies on socially generated data via internet platforms such as social media platforms or collaborative webpages (Mergel et al., 2016). For example, Mergel and Desouza (2013) use Challenge.gov to show the power of smart technologies to harness public opinion related to open innovation. A key part of open innovation is the use of crowdsourcing technologies such as social media. Challenge.gov was launched during President Obama’s administration to crowdsource ideas related to big questions and problems facing government (Mergel and Desouza, 2013).

We see manifestations of these smart technologies in practice almost daily. For example, if you own a smartphone it will suggest words or phrases to you as you type text messages. Digital apps on cellphones, too, have artificial intelligence capabilities built in that can help you, say, find a parking spot or report a pothole to the local government. So-called smart cities rely on information technologies to connect stakeholders and make itself more responsive to changing demographics, infrastructures, policies and practices (Chourabi et al., 2012). Social networking and sharing capabilities have given rise to crowdsourcing, so Park and Johnston (2017) examined the role of these informal networks during disaster response. Data analytics and informatics allows even novices to crunch data and share information that has broad implications across boundaries (Park and Johnston, 2017).

While all the technological developments surrounding smart technologies and big data are important for public administration and management, we also need to realize that fundamentals are key. When it comes to social media as a smart technology that facilitates big data and coproduction, straying too far from the basics can be alienating for users (Zavattaro and Sementelli, 2014). As such, in this paper we focus on social media as a smart technology to ideally foster public values through collaboration. Yet, a disconnect still exists in the adoption stage when the logic of social media is not fully appreciated (Brainard and McNutt, 2010). Often, the public value aspects of social media are not considered when agencies think about adopting or adapting a social media strategy (Mergel, 2013). Even today many public organizations hesitate to stray too far off message (Zavattaro and Bryer, 2016).

We argue in this theoretical paper that thinking specifically about how to use social media to create public values changes the logic of how governments use the digital platforms. Governments can move beyond a simple push-style of social media use to one that explicitly takes into account public values such as collaboration, transparency and connectivity. To do so, we argue that public organizations can begin looking at how millennials use social media.

It is often easy to dismiss the stereotypical millennial as unmotivated, narcissistic and/or entitled. Providing a more complex understanding, Gagnier (2008) shared the results of a survey asking millennial participants their views of democracy and their ability to participate in democratic processes. A key finding was that millennials want to “generate their own solutions” (Gagnier, 2008, p. 36) to society’s pressing problems and are more likely to be involved when their peers lead the way. Knowing this, what would it look like if instead of dismissing an entire generation, public administrators learned from millennials how to transform service delivery, democratic interaction and, thereby, public value and public values?

To achieve this, we offer a theoretical framework that weaves together millennial technology preferences with the concepts of micro-encounters and public value/s, which in turn would influence how social media success is measured. Our framework addresses a gap in the literature, whereby more research is needed to understand how public administrators use – and might use – social tools to interact and engage with citizens (Criado et al., 2017). We argue that if we shift our thinking about the tools’ purpose, then government social media could become sites for micro-level interactions (understood as contact between government professionals and community members, Stout and Love, 2017) that can enhance...
public value/s (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007; Nabatchi, 2012) if delivered in a context relatable to digital natives (Dodd and Campbell, 2011). This is an important change in logic as public agencies facing the so-called “silver wave” of retirees might not have a pool from which to replenish empty offices if this trust and disconnection remain at all-time lows. As such, government organizations must be both proactive and reactive if they want to attract the best talent and seek to restore some trust in institutions.

**A note on concepts**

This theoretical paper explores the micro-level application of social media in the public sector, as this level is where organizations can affect the most change based on tapping into psychological attachment to social media (VanMeter et al., 2015). We offer propositions for switching the ethos of public agency social media information delivery. We intend for other scholars to take this theory, test it, and refine it.

We draw on the literature on millennial characteristics and social media use, government use of social media for citizen engagement, and micro-encounters. Though these literatures have developed in parallel, we bring them together to develop a model of millennial use of social media and a model of government use of social media, which we can compare to identify overlap and differences in social media use. This comparison helps us to define the problem we address: that there is a gap in the ways in which millennials and governments use social media and that these tools therefore are not being used to create optimal public value. What might it look like if public administrators learned from millennials how to transform government service delivery, democratic interaction and, thereby, public value/s? Using the literature, we develop a new framework for government use of social media along with propositions to be tested and refined by future researchers.

An important conceptual note is in order. We use both public value and public values. Public value is simultaneously a broad and contested concept. New public management stressed public value in a market-efficiency sense of the term, emphasizing doing more with less and creating a better customer service experience for citizens (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Moore (1995) articulated public value as a movement away from new public management-like reforms, which relied heavily on marketization, back toward what should be considered the foundations of living democratically (Rawlings and Catlaw, 2011), including a sense of satisfaction and public relevance and efficacy on the part of the participating citizen.

Using the language of public values (plural), we rely on Jørgensen and Bozeman’s (2007) conceptualization. As they note, much of the public values literature still borrowed logic from Moore (1995) and other economic-based views. Analyzing existing literature, the authors find a mutual relationship between identified values, citizens, public administrators and politicians. The idea is that values contribute to society and can transform interests into decisions via public administrators, politicians and citizens. Denhardt and Denhardt (2000) capture a combined sense of public value and public values (public value/s) by stressing a movement toward viewing people as citizens, not customers or clients, who can participate in and reinvigorate democracy and public service.

**Millennials, digital natives and social media – mind the gap**

Millennials were born between about 1981 and 1997 (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2018, millennials range in age from 20 to 37 years old. They are now attending college, participating in the workforce and raising families. With such a broad range of ages and, therefore, life experiences and stages, it is appropriate to think of this group as composing Old Millennials and New Millennials (Debevec et al., 2013). The Great Recession ushered in the Young Millennials, who differ significantly from the Old millennials. Young millennials, according to Debevec et al. (2013), tend to be more self-centered and self-indulgent, which,
the authors note, might be to “offset the negative economic climate around them” (p. 29). Additionally, Young Millennials are less civically engaged and less engaged with and/or in politics than Old Millennials (Debevec et al., 2013).

We can also talk about millennials in terms of their relationship to technology. Digital natives, the common term for those born after 1988, are immersed in technology in a way that pervades their lives. In fact, they report anxiety when separated from social media (Twenge, 2013). They use technology to do everything from interacting with friends via social networks to ordering goods and services via mobile apps. While not confined to digital natives, pervasive technology use creates people who are comfortable with rapid information and innovations that are changing the ways they work and learn (Bennett et al., 2008). Holtzclaw (2014) explains that this generation, rather than seeing technology as novel, wants experiences and a feeling of community connectedness via information and communication technologies. One problem, though, is that “millennials are skeptical of mainstream media and other institutions (government and otherwise) […]” (Holtzclaw, 2014, p. 20).

Digital natives tend to rely on social media, understood as tools that make possible collaboration, facilitate knowledge sharing and allow for dialogue and information exchange (Bryer and Zavattaro, 2011). Some examples include Facebook (social networking), Twitter (microblogging), YouTube (video sharing), Instagram (photo sharing) and Pinterest (information sharing). These and other platforms are tools that can allow for dialogue and collaboration, but once deployed they are only as interactive as users make them (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). As such, design is crucial (Buregio et al., 2015; Hilts and Yu, 2010) to create public values in a social media space. Fully 90 percent of adults aged 18–29 in the USA use some social networking sites (Perrin, 2015), so studying the tools is of paramount importance given their pervasiveness. There are no marked gender, race or socio-economic differences among users, and those in the 18–29 bracket (squarely in the millennial generation) still make up the largest segment of users (Fry, 2016; Perrin, 2015).

Loader et al. (2014) explain that millennials are often thought of as disenchanted with government but crave participation in democratic processes such as rallies, protests and boycotts. In other words, millennials want to participate but in ways some in government might not see as traditional, such as voting or attending a public meeting. “It is a model of the citizen as someone who should be seen to support the representative system through their dutiful actions but whose voice should not be heard” (Loader et al., 2014, p. 144, emphasis in original). Networked young citizens are well connected, engaged and involved in ways they see fit. They embrace public values in a different way, so our theoretical framework helps appreciate that kind of engagement. As Loader et al. (2014) explain, the networked young citizen will participate in non-hierarchical networks, lifestyle politics, projects they see important and self-actualization via these participation mechanisms. We argue that missing these important traits leaves digital government practices behind.

Examining literature related to millennial use of social media, we identified several trends worth noting: their need for immediacy and instant gratification; their emotional attachment to social tools; and their desire for authentic relationships. We should note, though, that research is mixed on exactly how the millennial generation uses social media (Bolton et al., 2013). Studies are split on whether millennials tend to be more active or more passive on social media, if they enjoy posting continually or usually take in information (Bolton et al., 2013). Therefore, we do not mean this section to be a blanket statement that generalizes across the entire generation. Rather, we intend this section to explain the tendencies within this generation, particularly among digital natives, that public organizations could consider when developing an audience-specific social media strategy. As readers will see below, there is much crossover between the three patterns identified in the literature.
Immediacy and instant gratification
Social media culture creates a sense of immediacy. People post a photo, for example, and eagerly wait for “likes” to appear. Typically, millennials have what Leung (2013) called social and affection needs, posting items to show their lives and encourage others. Leung (2013) also found recognition needs – respect and support – as important. Social media immediacy also allows millennial users to create community and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007) by overcoming both time and space constraints. Relatedly, a 2012 study on the use of news apps by college students (Batsell, 2012) showed that millennials want immediacy in the information they receive. The study found that when there is breaking news, college students will bypass news apps altogether and go straight to news websites where information is constantly being updated (Rosengard et al., 2014).

Emotional attachment to social media
Next, millennials have an emotional connection – either positive or negative – to social media. As VanMeter et al. (2015) note, “In that social media prominently facilitates people ‘connecting’ with other people, as well as connections with organizations, causes, companies and brands, it logically could be a new medium by which individuals find relationships that offer comfort, safety and security” (p. 32). To the extent that social media is the gateway to many relationships, the social media tools themselves are of extreme importance. That deep attachment can lead people to form stronger bonds with organizations, via frequency of checking and posting, that can lead to more trust, knowledge sharing and word-of-mouth recommendations. On the other hand, VanMeter et al. (2015) found that people often experience anxiety when separated from their social media, resulting in the phenomenon we see around us: people on their devices in all possible circumstances and surroundings.

Authentic relationships
The final pattern worth detailing involves authentic relationships. Research indicates that millennial social media users want to enjoy authentic, or at least seemingly authentic, relationships. As Smith and Gallicano (2015) note, engagement in the social realm needs to go beyond simple likes or shares, which are passive forms of interacting with organizational content. Indeed, millennials often consider their engagement with organizations in terms of relationship (Smith and Gallicano, 2015), which means how organizations measure success needs to reflect these preferences.

Kang (2014) found that engagement can lead to increased organizational trust and loyalty. Overall, effective engagement will create positive feelings in users, enhance affective commitment and lead to personal empowerment. This sounds like a hard task to achieve, but Men and Tsai (2015) found that organizations focusing on engaging with followers via social media were perceived as more transparent and authentic, leading followers to support the organization and defend it against critique. That emotional connection comes from organizations presenting a human appearance, tone and voice (Men and Tsai, 2015). When organizations present themselves as more relatable, rather than always towing a brand line, then users are more likely to develop positive relationships and trust with the organization (Men and Tsai, 2015).

Government social media use: the status quo
With millennial social media preferences outlined, we now provide a brief overview of how government agencies typically use social media. In 2009, then President Obama ushered in the era of digital government at the US federal level, issuing the Open Government Directive “to hardwire the values of transparency, participation and collaboration
into the DNA of the Federal Government” (Office of Management and Budget, 2010, p. 54). Social media is perhaps uniquely able to serve as vehicles for these values. Most of the federal agencies have presences on a wide array of social media sites, as do state and local governments worldwide.

Much of the public administration literature starts with the (often implicit or sometimes explicit) normative assumption that government agencies should use these technologies and, because they are “social” technologies, their full array of bells and whistles for public value creation via citizen engagement. This was especially prevalent in the early literature (Brainard, 2003; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006; Bertot et al., 2010). Hence, studies have focused on the extent to which government agencies have used, or used successfully, social media for different kinds of engagement.

Hand and Ching (2011) investigated whether city social media use in the metropolitan Phoenix area was promoting and fostering civic engagement. They found that city Facebook pages adopted a tone of “speaking from power” (Farmer, 2003a, b) in which cities used the technology primarily for single direction, city to citizens, announcements and public relations efforts. Further, they found that cities structured their posts and the posts of citizens in one particular format thus limiting the ability of users to tailor their content. In a mixed methods study, Brainard and Derrick-Mills (2011) investigated online government–citizen interaction in the Washington, DC police department. They found that, in terms of the numbers of posts, the department and residents were about equal – that is, neither citizens nor the police department dominated the online space. Their qualitative analysis, however, showed that the pages consisted mostly single posts (by both police and citizens), and very little interaction.

In a follow up, five years later, Brainard (2016) found that in the intervening years, the police department had come to dominate the online space by posting an overwhelming majority of posts. Thus, over time citizens were coming to have a marginal presence in the online space. Similarly, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) in a survey of more than 2,000 adults found that while government use of web technologies was positively related to citizen trust of local government, it was not so at the federal level. Finally, Morgeson et al. (2010), using consumer satisfaction data, a cross-sectional citizen sample and structural equation modeling, found that while agency social media use was positively related to citizen confidence in particular agencies, trust was not generalized to government broadly.

While we know that, for the most part, social media use by government has not enhanced citizen engagement or the government–citizen relationship, what does it do? Figure 1 shows how government organizations currently use social media. The figure starts by showing that how government agencies conceive of and think about social media is developed by its expert staff and that they typically see social media as a one-to-many broadcast space. Thus conceived, government organizations typically push out information quickly (Mergel, 2012). We want to be clear: this is not a bad strategy. There often is a need...
for this kind of information push, especially in a crisis situation. Information on social media needs to be accurate, and agencies do not need to use the tools to be responsive right away, especially if the situation is unfolding. Social media is vital for crisis communication before, during and after an event (Houston et al., 2015). Again, we do not discount the importance of push strategies, but we argue that using these technologies this way – to broadcast information – on a day-to-day basis may be a missed opportunity for engagement with positive outcomes for governance.

Next, we see that in addition to a push strategy, government agencies often deploy multiple social media platforms and tailor their information to those platforms, as shown in the second component of Figure 1. Thus, for example, drawing on the literature reviewed above, a police department may use Facebook for a naming contest for its new K9 while using Twitter for live traffic updates. The focus, in this case is on messaging for the platform, rather than the audience. That is what we mean when we say that government organizations use platform-specific rather than audience-specific posts.

Third, when used in this way social media may create public values such as agency effectiveness, user orientation, professionalism and timeliness (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). These values come from the Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) inventory and are achieved using a mostly push-style social strategy. Government organizations in that space see their role as simply sharing information rather than moving into areas such as dialogue, accountability or transparency.

Finally, the fourth component of Figure 1 shows that when trying to measure their success on social media thus conceived and used, agencies tend to measure specific outputs: the number of “likes” and/or “shares,” the number of followers and/or fans (Kagarise and Zavattaro, 2017). Output measures are tracked because they are simple and can show growth over time (Kagarise and Zavattaro, 2017), but they do not capture the kinds of engagement that scholars have sought nor the kind of emotional attachment that millennials seek in their social media use.

In short, government agencies tend to use social media for information distribution using a push strategy (Mergel, 2012) or for transactions such as questions and answers (Brainard and McNutt (2010). While there has been much hope and anticipation about using social media for democratic dialogue and deliberation, studies consistently show that this has not been achieved, except in rare circumstances (Brainard, 2016; Mergel, 2013; Zavattaro et al., 2015). For example, users may post questions that will go unanswered by an agency or an agency will pose a question to users but not return to the “conversation.” In the absence of sustained (or even any) interaction, there can be no authentic relationship building.

Table I shows the differences in the ways millennials use social media and the way that government agencies use social media. While millennials enjoy the immediacy of social media, government agencies are usually slow to respond, if at all. While millennials use social media for self-expression, agencies tend to use social media for information distribution. While that is an important service, it does not provide a forum for self-expression or the emotional connection and authentic relationship based on that expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Millennial expectations</th>
<th>Agency use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Usually slow and/or non-responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-expression</td>
<td>Centered on Information distribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic relationship</td>
<td>Not usually for relationship building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional connection</td>
<td>Not a forum for emotional connection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A path forward: a revised framework for government social media use

The two parallel research literatures reviewed above tell us that public organizations generally use social media in a way that does not meet the social media needs, desires and expectations of millennials. These include the desire for authentic relationship, emotional connection, self-expression and a sense of immediacy. How might public organizations change their use of social media to accommodate millennials’ expectations and, thereby, create public value? We propose a new framework, seen here in Figure 2. As noted, this is a theoretical paper so it is focused more on building a workable framework for future studies, and by doing so the framework challenges domain assumptions (Morse and Ventriss, 2018) that social media in government is only good for one-way pushing of information because of noise. According to Stivers (2000), theory is not just hypothesis testing but “is part interpretation and part critique” (p. 132). Interpretation, for her, is sense-making, while critique, naturally, is challenging underlying assumptions. This research is a work of interpretation as it takes “a more or less inchoate bundle of events and processes – what might be thought of as a situation or group of situations – and putting a frame around them based on more or less conscious assumptions about what is likely to be important, significant or meaningful (Stivers, 2000, p. 132).

With Figure 2, we present a theoretical framework that weaves together assumptions made in literatures that currently run parallel – millennial use of social media, and government use of social media. Our frame is public values created through micro-encounters. With this theory, we argue that the first step requires public organizations to re-think how they conceptualize social media at the adoption stage. Even if an organization already has a social media plan in place, it could be worth revisiting to see if it matches the characteristics above.

As described above, public organizations generally conceive of social media as tools with which to distribute information. The outputs they measure include the number of followers, “likes” and shares. While that is a valuable service, government agencies might also think of social media as a forum for creating meaningful encounters. Given the specific desires and expectations of millennials, public organizations will need to populate with audience-specific messages and content that facilitate the kinds of online experiences that millennials crave: authentic relationship, emotional connection, self-expression and immediacy. That in turn, we suggest, will lead to development of public value/s, including trust, dialogue, engagement, democratic and a better government–citizen relationship (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). To understand whether they are succeeding in this new endeavor (Figure 2), public organizations will need to measure outcomes – such as dialogue, engagement, etc. – in addition to the traditional outputs of likes, shares, views and followers as detailed below.

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**Figure 2.** Revised theoretical framework: a proposal for a new model of government social media use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization of social media</th>
<th>Content Strategy</th>
<th>Public Value</th>
<th>Outcome Measurers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source of conceptualization: Millennial preferences and expectations</td>
<td>Pull/networking strategies</td>
<td>Democratic exchange</td>
<td>Sentiment analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media used as site for micro encounters</td>
<td>Population specific</td>
<td>Public engagement</td>
<td>Original user posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based on millennial preferences and expectations</td>
<td>Will of the people</td>
<td>Amount/nature of dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examples of content</td>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Level of engagement – retweets, shares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogue, users supply some content</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Network analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequent updates</td>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>Digital dashboards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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What are micro-encounters?

In Figure 2, we begin with the literature above on millennial social media preferences to create or enhance social media use logic. Instead of basing an adoption logic only on agency expertise, it is based upon millennial values such as immediacy, connection and authenticity. This moves us toward more pull and networking strategies (Mergel, 2012) instead of only push strategies. Further, it would entail creating and responding to comments and user-supplied content, providing frequent updates and interactions, and other opportunities for interaction. Once that logic is in place, it changes the way social media can be used to create public values.

As such, we argue that social media can be spaces to create meaningful micro-encounters. Public encounters often take place via face-to-face interaction (Bartels, 2013) with street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). In that space, coupled with scientific management views, we often see a power-laden encounter that puts citizens in a passive space relying on expert public administrators to guide them. For Stout and Love (2017), this is what an institutional governance structure looks like – interactions that are “hierarchically ordered and canalized by role expectations” (p. 134). Public encounters often have an air of authority and intimidation given citizens will be asked to conform to rules and laws (Bartels, 2013).

This air of authority became even more prevalent in the era of new public management, from which the monetary view of public value emerged. In NPM-style organizations, citizens were turned into customers and public administrators into entrepreneurs. Peters and Pierre (2000) argue that citizens, clients and government agents themselves all now were empowered to act in different ways. Turning citizens into customers actually puts them at both a rhetorical and practical disadvantage, given customers are often passive consumers rather than active participants in democratic processes. Public encounters, then, are often writ large with tension, power dynamics, and pressure. We also saw above that these power dynamics are often replicated online, in the social media sites of public organizations.

For public organizations to change the way they engage with the public and particularly with millennials, we must instead reimagine what public encounters can achieve. Bartels (2013) advocates for a communicative approach to creating public encounters, moving the focus to the content of the encounter itself. What happens during the encounter is inherently relational, dynamic and changing (Bartels, 2013). For Stout and Love (2017), they argue similarly for a relational ontology that sees people as the core of democratic ideals, and therefore public values. Stout and Love (2017) define integrative governance as an ongoing, relational, dialogic process that brings together governance actors in a mutual space to share ideas. Central to integrative governance is a reduction of power dynamics to create a setting in which actors can share in decision-making and information-sharing processes (Stout and Love, 2017). Public administrators, then, become collaborators and brokers rather than power-wielders. If public encounters are approached from this relational perspective (Bartels, 2013), the transactional and authoritative aspects of collaboration are replaced by mutuality (Stout and Love, 2017).

In our conceptualization, we translate the micro-aspect of public encounters into a digital space. As Bartels (2013) notes, the focus is on the encounter, and social media encounters are quite public. This means that an agency can use emotions to create connections to followers (Zavattaro et al., 2015), or they can still choose to ignore comments and risk alienating followers. Most social media encounters mirror the more formal, institutional and transaction as Stout and Love (2017) describe. Instead, Zavattaro et al. (2015) found via sentiment analysis that emotions and levity actually engender more meaningful user-government interactions yet agencies tend to shy away from that approach. We do, of course, see exceptions to static use – police departments sharing funny videos, agencies participating in #CityHallSelfie day, and more. Usually, though, most public sector agencies...
maintain a serious veneer, and even those that use social media to convey sentiment are
nevertheless simply pushing it out to people, thus missing a chance to create dialogue with
users to create public values of trust and openness.

Genuine collaboration is difficult for several reasons. First, it involves sustainability
(i.e. a long-term plan) and action in offline spaces (Mergel, 2013) as well as online spaces.
Second, it involves suspension of negative assumptions about government (by citizens)
and citizens (by government) (Brainard and Derrick-Mills, 2011). Third there are concerns
about what employees say, and when and how they say it, thus bringing up First
Amendment concerns (Jacobson and Tufts, 2013). Fourth, public agencies often hesitate to
use the full power of social tools given the chance for negative comments (Zavattaro and
Bryer, 2016). Thus, most of what we see is one-time comments or sharing posts (retweeting
or reposting) (Mergel, 2013).

Reconceptualizing social media as a site for micro-encounters that reflect the social
media desires and expectations of millennials would necessarily change the content of
those sites. In the private sector, brands elicit content from users in order to draw on the
exploration of one’s online identity. As Serazio (2015) notes, “Soliciting such self-
exploration can take a number of digital forms, which are fundamentally an effort at
intertwining an emergence sense of self (and for youth, this is still an embryonic,
unstable stage) with a branded identity” (p. 608). Public organizations can design their
audience-specific social media strategy to include more frequent updates, more options for
people to supply content and to receive feedback on that content from others. This would
satisfy millennials’ desires for immediacy.

Knowing that millennial users will be checking the pages regularly, content will need to
be kept fresh. Soliciting content from users, in addition to agencies providing their own
content, would be one way for public agencies to ensure that content is updated. Agencies
could also make use of notifications features, in order to calm anxiety among users who
might have anxiety about missing that updated content. This would serve millennial
expectations for attachment and self-expression.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that all government agencies need to take this
approach. Nor are we arguing that the agencies that do take this approach should dedicate
all of their social media presence to it. Everyday posts, though, can be micro-encounters
when: content is creative and fresh, when public administrators respond to posts in a timely
manner, and users want to come back for more.

Based on the research discussed above, we offer the following proposition:

P1. Reconceptualizing their social media as spaces for meaningful micro-encounters
will shift the way public organizations use those spaces from information
distribution to pull strategies including, for example, user-supplied content, and
interaction and dialogue.

Using social media micro-encounters to create public value/s

The next part of the framework focuses on public value/s. If public administrators
can view social media as platforms for creating meaningful public engagement at the
micro-level, and develop a content strategy that mirrors that view, then this should lead to
increased – indeed a different kind of – public value/s creation. It is worth reminding the
reader that we are using both concepts: public value, as a sense of public relevance,
satisfaction and worth and importance (Moore, 1995); and public values, which are the
normative ideals and principles of public-ness, public interest and fairness that can be
created and shared by public administrators, citizens, and other organizations.

Public value and public values work in a virtuous cycle by which public value begets
public values, which in turn beget public value again.
While it might seem settled, public values definitions, applications and limitations are still being researched and discussed (Fukumoto and Bozeman, 2018). Three core problems are an inability to agree upon core public values, motivations behind policies and practices (if they serve public values or personal interest of the lawmakers), and evaluation of public values achievement (Fukumoto and Bozeman, 2018). Alford and Hughes (2008) indicate some of the confusion lies in the name—that public means government should deliver the value. While government actors are a component, myriad actors can create public values. Similarly, the word value indicates a calculable resource, and while it is true people do make tradeoffs to participate, there also should be a focus on the process for creating meaningful participation (Alford and Hughes, 2008; see also Nabatchi, 2012).

Public values as normative ideals move us beyond core values of efficiency and effectiveness central to new public management (Bryson et al., 2014). Arguing for a new approach to public management, Bryson et al. (2014) note that public value emerges from discussion and dialogue. In this view, citizens become active problem solvers rather than passive customers. Public values are understood as “those providing normative consensus about (a) the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens should (and should not) be entitled; (b) the obligation of citizens to society, the state, and one another; and (c) the principles on which governments and policies should be based” (Bozeman, 2007, p. 13). Bozeman notes that individuals can hold public values, and conflicts in those values are where we see policy failure at the macro-level (Bozeman, 2002).

Conflict, then, is a central part of public management and administration. As such, administrators can try to design public participation opportunities that include as many voices as possible (Nabatchi, 2012). Nabatchi (2012) calls for more deliberative communication that moves beyond the traditional two-way dialogic exchange as a means to foster public values creation. In a deliberative style, as many voices are heard as possible and each given equal credence. While not easy, these kinds of exchanges could foster more deliberative democracy, especially if the stakeholders are educated and interested in the discussion (Gastil and Dillard, 1999).

This cycle of value and values creation through deliberation and collaboration can occur on social media as well—if designed in that manner. Seeing social media as micro-encounters can promote public values such as dialogue, user orientation (composed of timeliness and friendliness), innovation, openness and user democracy (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007). Each post becomes a chance to interact with someone and enact public values: to share information, to crowdsourc ideas, to find policy ideas, to use social media as part of evidence-based decision making—in other words, to create public value. In Figure 2, people using the tools co-create ideas. Rather than depersonalizing these public spaces (Zavattaro and Sementelli, 2014), social media can, when used this way, reduce the divide between expert and novice, as transformational government suggests (King, 2014). This exactly meets the social media desires and expectations of millennials for authentic relationship, emotional connection, immediacy and self-expression.

On the other hand, Giroux (2011) sees inherent problems with the rise of new media technologies and an inevitable public values clash. Giroux (2011) asserts that a neoliberal, market-based logic exacerbated by instant access to technology removes individuals from public problems and erodes public values. Couple that with the erosion of government service provision (i.e. privatization and hollowing out), and there is, Giroux (2011) argues, a serious problem with using digital technologies to recover public values. Most politicians and public agencies, as well as individuals, use the tools to push (Mergel, 2013) and perpetuate their own lives rather than the common good. Given the noise inherent in a crowded social media world, Pieper and Pieper (2015) argue that democratic legitimacy could erode instead of strengthen, and participants in digital deliberative spaces are likely...
ones interested in a topic already rather than bringing in potentially new, fresh opinions. It does not mean, though, that the ideal – the public value – of deliberative democracy should be dismissed (Pieper and Pieper, 2015).

While we do see these concerns manifest, we instead argue that a shift in the creative ethos from the government agencies can involve people when they see opportunities for engaging in real content and idea creation. Both of those ideas borrow from millennial social media logic detailed above. Millennials want immediacy and connection – and most public agencies do not give that to them and, subsequently, all other users. Instead, based on the literature, we propose that:

*P2*. Seeing social media as spaces for positive micro-encounters and using them as sites for networking, dialog, interaction, etc., will contribute to public value/s such as democratic exchange, openness, accountability and trust.

*From output measures to outcome measures*

With social media now seen as a space to create public value/s through micro-encounters, additional measurements are necessary for showing success. In the current model, agencies typically turn toward surface-level measures such as number of followers, shares or likes (Zavattaro *et al.*, 2015) yet we know there is more to social media beyond those numbers. While important, those existing measures need additional balance with the social side of the tools. We need measures that capture the metrics plus the social aspect (Kagarise and Zavattaro, 2017). In this section, we rely on public value/s to guide suggestions for additional measures of social media success. Again, we are not suggesting that counting followers and likes go away; indeed, these are crucial for agents to show funding principals. But those numbers, we argue, only tell part of the story. We also are not claiming to have solved the measurement conundrum here either. We offer propositions based on existing literature and practice to offer suggestions for additional measures of success.

Borrowing Peters *et al.*’s (2013) framework, developed from a marketing perspective, agencies can begin creating this public value link. The core of their framework, derived from social learning theory, is social value – that is, how social media tools can create value even when used as a marketing and communication device. Here, we see that the functions are not mutually exclusive. Viewing social media as spaces for meaningful micro-encounters captures the social function. Their framework is based on what they call S–O–R: stimuli (the content input), organism (social media tools themselves) and response (measurement metrics). Peters *et al.* (2013) note the dyadic ties formed via social networking sites are crucial to create the social value/s. Now, social media managers are responsible for creating stimuli and organism use – what content goes on what platforms and for what purpose.

Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007) offer a public values inventory that can guide content creation (stimulation) for social media sites (the organism). Their list includes, but is not limited to, values such as citizen involvement, transparency, dialogue, ethics, equity, user orientation, innovation and listening to public opinion. These are cornerstones of what social tools can do when viewed as micro-encounters and not just spaces to push information. “By giving policy makers a privileged ‘interface’ for ‘hearing society’s voice’ directly where the crowd chooses to discuss and express its opinion, the proposed approach enables an innovative way to gather, evaluate and decide upon society’s input” (Charalabidis and Loukis, 2012, p. 92).

Using these, for example, one can envision a city sharing a Twitter post about a public meeting and taking feedback via tweets. On Instagram, a county might post photos of wetlands and ask the public for their own photos. Mergel (2012) gives another example of
the US State Department using #AskState on Twitter to take questions from followers or those searching for the hashtag. That is an example of openness and dialogue. Of course, these chances for micro-encounters open up negativity and other harassing behavior, but even those are opportunities to solicit feedback from the commenter if deemed appropriate. If someone, for example, posts that they dislike the city, it could engender positive social capital to ask them why and see what happens.

How can organizations measure this interaction? Again, we do not dismiss the importance of concrete follower numbers, as those show exposure and growth. Our framework, however, requires going deeper and delving into those measures. For example, organizations can assess unique visits, comments, sharing to other social media sites or geographic location of followers to show reach (Charalabidis and Loukis, 2012). Another element to assess is the public value/s created via social interactions. This becomes more logical if social media is seen as spaces to create micro-encounters. As such, knowing the social value/s created is critical to see what kinds of encounters work to increase engagement (Briones et al., 2011). Posts with photos and videos create more engagement with followers (Zavattaro et al., 2015), even if that engagement is comments such as “nice shot!” That is still reaching someone who might not see value in government before the post.

Moreover, organizations also can assess the public value of transparency. Dashboards, for example, are digital tools that organizations can use to show progress in certain areas (Elias and Federman, 2016). According to Elias and Federman (2016), digital dashboards include: data visualization, data simplicity (graphics instead of large files, for example) and shared social elements, all of which help organizations achieve strategic public value/s goals. Through dashboards, organizations can show public progress but also assess for themselves progress on key policy goals.

Another proposed measure involves sentiment analysis (Zavattaro et al., 2015). Sentiment analysis typically relies on machine-learning strategies to measure emotion in textual content. Where machine learning fails, though, is if, for example, a Facebook user wrote, “So happy the government is tearing up my street again.” The machine would likely read that as happy given the adjective, but the post shows sarcasm to service provision. Despite the potential pitfalls, machine-learning sentiment analysis removes much of the human error found in content analysis, relying instead on constant training to pick up emotions. Sentiment analysis could be a way for public organizations to see if their programs are creating public value/s based on what users organically post rather than, say, a traditional feedback survey.

Network analysis, too, is another way to measure social media outcomes rather than only outputs. Social network interaction measures can examine elements such as number of ties, tie strength, information exchange and support, to name a few (Gruzd and Haythornthwaite, 2013). While this could be complex, there is free software available that people can use to get a better understanding of their influence. In this way, public sector organizations might be able to see influencers in the area and use their following to share government information (Freberg et al., 2011).

We recognize that there are constraints to this outcome measurement approach. A public organization might not have the necessary resources to develop and assess content in this manner. Social media contains a large number of data points that might be hard to collect and evaluate in a meaningful way that affects policy or practical change (Charalabidis and Loukis, 2012). Nonetheless, we derive from the research, the following proposition for social media evaluation is:

\[ P3. \] Understanding success at creating public value/s will benefit from the addition of outcome measures, including measures of dialog, interaction, etc., to provide managers with targeted information to improve social media content quality.
Conclusion and discussion

Government agencies do not use social media in ways that millennials find attractive and useful. Millennials desire a sense of immediacy while government social media use is usually sluggish and even non-responsive. Millennials feel entitled to self-expression, while government social media use is usually centered on information distribution. Millennials want authentic relationships while agencies do not incorporate relationship building tools or behaviors into their social media use. Finally, millennials exhibit a sense of emotional attachment to the social media tools themselves, while government typically does not use social media in a way that serves that emotional connection.

We seek to revise the common framework of public sector social media strategies by borrowing use preferences from millennials and viewing the tools as spaces to have meaningful micro-encounters that can create public value/s from both the government and user perspectives. Public values – principles of democratic participation, transparency and the like – and public value – a sense of public relevance, usefulness, significance and meaning – could exist in a virtuous cycle wherein one reinforces and begets the other. If this is the case, then additional qualitative outcome measures would be necessary in order to understand whether the new approach is successful in creation of public values/s. In addition to using current standard metrics, such as likes, follows, and shares, agencies would also need to use metrics to better understand unique visits, comments, dialogue, social sharing to other sites and collaboration.

Our theoretical framework offers propositions for future research. First, one could test whether there is a relationship between a reconceptualization of social media as spaces for meaningful micro-encounters and the way that agencies populate those spaces (new content strategy). That is, we could seek to learn whether this new conceptualization of social media spaces leads to a different type of content – content that is dialogic, based on exchange, collaborative. A possible study could include interviews or focus groups with social media managers to see if they consider the tools as mechanisms to create micro-encounters and, thus, public value. Content analysis of existing social media pages, in another example, could categorize the kinds of posts and comments to see how they might have changed longitudinally to foster public values based on collaboration and discourse.

In another possible study, we could then seek to learn if this new kind of social media use fosters public value/s creation through dialogue, democratic exchange and increased public engagement. Studies could survey social media users via, for instance, MTurk to see their opinions on various government social media sites, then measure the results against existing public values. Finally, one could experiment with how adding qualitative outcome measures to quantitative output measures, might provide government agencies with the kinds of information they need to further improve their use of social media for public value creation.

The revised theoretical framework here offers a path forward and a mechanism to balance immediate social media needs, such as sharing information, with more innovative ways to use the platforms. Implementing this framework would enact Criado et al.’s (2013) call to seek this balance, as they note, “The continuous development of micro-experiences devoted to promote participation in specific jurisdictions or policy arenas should be accompanied by attention to more general efforts to deliver democratic innovations using social media in government” (p. 324, emphasis added). We argue that public organizations need to affirmatively and pro-actively create these micro-encounters to show the value of social media for both internal users and external stakeholders. Borrowing millennial logic helps push that forward. When that happens – when people see the platforms as worth their time – innovative and creative uses can begin. This, we argue, ideally builds trust, engagement, openness and accountability – that is, public values and public value – between all parties.
References


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Further reading


About the authors

Staci M. Zavattaro is Associate Professor of Public Administration in the School of Public Administration at the University of Central Florida. She currently serves as editor-in-chief of Administrative Theory & Praxis. Her research examines how public agencies use public branding and marketing strategies to foster organizational reputation. She also examines public sector use of social media. Her current research includes two book projects focusing on neighborhood branding and marketing, as well as Staci M. Zavattaro is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: staci.zavattaro@ucf.edu

Lori A. Brainard is Associate Professor in the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy & Public Administration at George Washington University. Her work focuses on how ordinary people, grassroots advocacy organizations and government agencies use the internet to activate and mobilize for change and to disseminate information, conduct transactions and engage in community building and collaboration. Her current research focuses on how police departments use social media to engage with residents and how Millennials in general and Black Millennials specifically use the internet to engage in public life.