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The core issue with social media lies within its very architecture: the algorithm. Local governments need 100 per cent unrestricted and unfiltered reach for critical information. Social media platforms need user attention – even if that means prioritizing sensationalism over substance. *Photo: Adobe Stock*

Beyond likes, shares, and follows

Why local governments need to rethink social media

by **Matt Livingstone**

For many local governments, social media has become the default platform for disseminating information, from infrastructure alerts to community event announcements. It is convenient, seemingly cost-effective, and offers a communication channel to citizens. However, this reliance comes at a significant, often overlooked, cost.

As platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) grapple with internal turmoil and shifting priorities driven by Wall Street and shareholders, local governments are increasingly placing critical communication in the hands of companies prioritizing profit over public

service. This is a gamble with potentially devastating consequences for our communities and democracy.

The core issue lies within the very architecture of social media: the algorithm. These algorithms are not designed to inform. They are engineered to “engage.” Content that generates clicks, shares, and comments rises to the top, regardless of its importance. A vital public notice can easily be buried beneath a viral meme or political debate. This is not intended malice, but it is a fundamental conflict of interest.

Local governments need 100 per cent unrestricted and unfiltered reach for

critical information. Social media platforms need user attention – even if that means prioritizing sensationalism over substance.

AI Content Tsunami Comes Ashore

A new growing and potentially far more dangerous issue lies with how social media platforms are embracing large language models (LLMs) to curate, moderate, and create content and interactions.

As reported in *Forbes*, Facebook and Instagram, Meta-owned platforms, are now being flooded with AI (fake/synthetic) user accounts while Meta is rolling out a wide array of AI tools

to help users create AI characters with the explicit intention of attracting a younger audience. Meta, the parent company of Facebook, was recently awarded a patent that allows their AI to keep a deceased person's account active with synthetic posts.

TikTok is also whole-heartedly and hurriedly embracing the fake/synthetic AI generated character (profile/user) wave with its own tool called Symphony, which allows users to generate AI videos with fake AI generated "avatars" and artificial actors for a fee. TikTok is encouraging the generation of fake users and content. They are also aggressively monetizing it in the process, demonstrating that most social media platforms put profit over people, regardless of age.

Data Privacy: An Unstated Partnership

Beyond the algorithm, data privacy concerns loom large. When a government uses a commercial social media platform, it is inherently entrusting citizen data to a third party.

While platforms offer terms of service agreements, these are often complex and subject to change. What data is being collected? How is it being used? The answers are rarely transparent, and the potential for surveillance, targeted advertising based on civic engagement, and even manipulation, is real. Citizens deserve assurance that their interactions with local government are not being commodified and exploited.

Exacerbating this issue is private and sensitive data being coupled with AI and algorithms. Citizens' own data is being used against them. It manipulates them and crafts untruthful narratives that lead citizens to echo chambers and into the deep wells of misinformation that abound on all social media platforms.

Lack of Control, Unreliability

This presents a critical vulnerability: a lack of control coupled with inherent unreliability. Local governments are wholly dependent on the policies and infrastructure of these U.S.-owned platforms – entities subject to shifting domestic political pressures and potential geopolitical instability.

Sudden policy changes dictated by corporate interests or legal mandates can disrupt vital communication channels overnight, while alterations to API

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access can cripple integrated services. Beyond internal factors, reliance on a global platform headquartered in a single nation exposes governments to risks stemming from international conflicts, sanctions, or evolving foreign policy. Outages – whether due to technical failures or deliberate actions related to global events – leave citizens vulnerable during critical moments.

Entrusting essential communication to a third-party foundation subject to these external forces is a precarious position with potentially catastrophic consequences. The recent volatility at X serves as a stark illustration of how rapidly platforms can change, leaving users scrambling for alternatives and jeopardizing established communication networks.

Social Media Is Not Free

Free social media has evolved into a substantial cost centre for most local governments. Costs for content creation, content and message management, social advertising and message boosting dramatically increase the cost of "free" social media.

For example, the City of Toronto recently signed a no tender contract for two years with Hootsuite, an enterprise social media management tool, for over \$434,000 per year. This figure does not include the salaries or benefits of 100 staff who manage 110 social media accounts. It also does not include the advertising purchased on social media platforms.

As reported by NBC News, the federal government of Canada's advertising spending has dramatically shifted toward digital media, with 63 per cent on digital media versus 39 per cent on traditional media. This spending trend is seen at virtually every level of government.

While social media may be seen as free or low-cost, the truth is that many organizations have invested in more salaries, benefits, and other budget resources to support their social media accounts. It is not free.

The move away from traditional communication methods further exacerbates the information void for individuals who do not wish to participate on social media or do not have the resources to access the internet on a regular basis. Yet governments have neglected to find new sources of information distribution, further locking them into expensive social media ecosystems while creating an information void for many Canadians.

Questionable Analytics

A social media platform's number 1 priority is advertising revenue. According to one CNBC article, to generate massive amounts of advertising revenue, most platforms use convoluted and questionable metrics to inflate their actual numbers. In fact, the article said Facebook's description of its "potential reach" function says estimates "aren't designed to match census population or other sources" and could differ depending on factors like how many accounts are used by a person.

According to TechRadar, automated bots that are used by millions of accounts typically focus on engagement farming: liking, following, and commenting to inflate perceived popularity. TechRadar reports social media's API tools make bot creation extremely easy and, despite using "sophisticated" detection tools, social media networks allow millions of dormant accounts to remain undetected until they are activated for specific campaigns.

Social media platforms use audience numbers that include over-estimated

audiences that, in turn, use fake or synthetic accounts driven by bots to increase reach and impressions. These are both numbers used by social media platforms to sell advertising.

Protecting Vulnerable Populations

Concerns extend far beyond technical glitches or policy shifts. Recent decisions by X leadership – specifically, allowing the proliferation of explicit AI-generated images depicting women and children – demonstrate a disturbing disregard for basic decency and public safety. This is not simply a matter of content moderation. It represents a fundamental erosion of trust and a normalization of harmful behaviour.

For local governments using X to communicate with their constituents, this should create an untenable situation. How can they responsibly share information on a platform actively enabling the creation and dissemination of deeply disturbing and potentially illegal content? The risk of inadvertently exposing citizens – particularly vulnerable populations – to such material is unacceptable.

Scam messages and schemes have seen a dramatic increase on Facebook in recent months. This activity can most likely be attributed to the increased use of automated tools, including AI, to filter out these activities. Unfortunately, scammers have access to similar tools. It is questionable that Facebook genuinely cares about this problem, given its history to dealing with questionable content (as seen in “Facebook’s History of Controversies,” published by ROSMAN), especially when that

questionable content spends a lot of money on Facebook ads and purchased boosts to ensure their content is pushed to the top of users’ feeds.

First Focus on Children reported that *The Wall Street Journal* investigated TikTok algorithms by creating over 100 automated accounts. They found that the video feed started the same way for each user, with very popular videos being shown first. However, reporters found that as the algorithm developed, certain accounts were continuously shown disturbing content, including videos encouraging eating disorders, sexualizing minors, and romanticizing suicide and depression.

As reported by *MIT Technology Review*, the ongoing deterioration of U.S.-owned social media platforms – fuelled by misinformation, political polarization, and concerns about the well-being of children – further exacerbates these risks. These platforms are increasingly becoming echo chambers, eroding trust in institutions and hindering constructive dialogue. Entrusting vital government communication to these environments only amplifies these negative trends.

Alternative to Social Media

The answer lies in dedicated solutions – purpose-built platforms designed specifically for government communication. These platforms prioritize accessibility, security, privacy, and transparency above all else. They offer features tailored to the unique needs of local governments:

- **Guaranteed reach** – Ensuring every citizen receives critical information, regardless of their social media habits.

- **Robust security measures** – Providing free access to information without the need for account creation. There are no personal trackers, ads, or algorithmic bias.
- **Direct control** – Allowing governments to manage their communication channels without fear of censorship, disruption, or the caustic comment culture of social media.
- **Accessibility for all** – Providing options for citizens with limited internet access.

Responsible citizen engagement requires a different approach – one rooted in public service rather than profit maximization. Yes, alternatives cost money, but they cost far less than what many local governments spend on social media. And they will lead to better-informed, trusting citizenry who will be more inclined to engage with their city beyond likes and swipes.

Moving beyond likes and shares is not about abandoning digital communication. It is about prioritizing the safety, security, privacy, and well-being of our communities. It is time for all levels of government to reassess their reliance on social media and invest in made-in Canada solutions that truly serve the public interest. The future of informed citizenship depends on it.



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Matt Livingstone (mliving@cityapp.ca) is the founder DMKware Inc.

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