

# Open Government Policy and the Social Media Use in Government in Canada: Implementation Disconnect

Maria Gintova, Ph.D.  
Ryerson University  
[maria.gintova@ryerson.ca](mailto:maria.gintova@ryerson.ca)

Paper presented at the 2019 International Conference on Public Policy (ICCP4)  
Concordia University

Montreal, Canada

DRAFT

## Abstract

Since its initiation in 2010-2012, open government policy in Canada has been focused on three major streams of initiatives: open data, open information and open dialogue. Although many open data commitments were implemented, to date, the open dialogue stream of initiatives remains a work in progress (Clarke and Francoli 2014, 2017; Roy 2016, 2017). This issue is not new for Canadian government agencies. Scholars note that government leaders and officials lack an understanding of the need for public engagement in government decision-making, regardless if it is virtual or in person (Clarke 2012; McNutt 2014).

This paper explores the connection between open government policies of the Government of Canada and the Ontario Government, and existing government social media practices. It specifically looks into if and how the use of social media by two largest immigration agencies in Canada – Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration (MCI)<sup>1</sup> – has been impacted by the open dialogue stream of open government initiatives. The results discussed in the paper are derived from several qualitative research methods: six semi-structured interviews with public servants, content analysis of IRCC tweets and Facebook posts, and the analysis of IRCC and MCI social media documents.

The findings of this research confirm those from literature. The existing open government policy is not the primary reason for the government use of social media. Canadian government agencies see social media primarily as a customer service tool and note the efficiencies it brings for reaching out to target audiences.

**Key words:** open government, social media, open dialogue, public engagement, policy implementation

---

<sup>1</sup> Until 2018, MCI was a standalone ministry. It is now merged into the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services that currently has responsibility for immigration policy.

## Introduction

As many countries around the world, Canada has committed to open government to making government more inclusive, responsive and accountable (Open Government Partnership 2019). Initiatives under the umbrella of open government include making government data publicly available, improving the delivery of public services and encouraging public participation in government decision-making (Clarke and Francoli 2014). As a member of the Open Government Partnership (OGP)<sup>2</sup>, Canada has developed a policy framework and commitment to impact change. Federal and provincial governments across Canada are implementing open government policies and initiatives. For example, the Government of Canada has implemented *Canada's Action Plan on Open Government (2012-2014)*, *Canada's Action Plan on Open Government 2.0 (2014-2016)*, *Third Biennial Plan to the Open Government Partnership (2016-2018)* and launched its *2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government*. However, to this day, making government data publicly available remains a priority, while implementation of other open government initiatives, including public participation commitments do not receive enough attention (Clarke and Francoli 2014, 2017; Roy 2016, 2017). Other countries, such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand experience similar challenges (Evans and Campos 2013; Price 2017; Stewart 2018).

It is also interesting to see how the Government of Canada's initiatives within the open dialogue stream have changed over time. In 2010-2012, social media was viewed as a primary vehicle for public engagement and conducting public consultations on public policy. Moreover, the emphasis was on ensuring that government agencies and the public were engaged in two-way interactions on government social media platforms. Now the approach to public engagement has shifted. In Canada's *2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government*, it is acknowledged that social media is one of the many ways to engage with the public and the Government of Canada is committed to use a variety of in person and online platforms (Government of Canada 2018).

At the same time many federal and provincial government departments and agencies in Canada have invested significant resources in order to build up their presence on different social media platforms (Clarke 2012, McNutt 2014). They are currently using a variety of different social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn to share

---

<sup>2</sup> OGP is an international non-profit organization that secures open government commitments from its member countries, promotes accountable, responsive and inclusive governance (Open Government Partnership 2019).

information about existing programs and services as well as connect with the public. However, as research shows, most communication of government agencies that occur through social media is aimed at recommunicating information already available on the government websites (Gintova 2019). Thus, evidence suggests that government agencies in Canada do not use social media for public consultations as well as for public engagement in policy making and/or public service delivery (Francoli 2014, 2017; McNutt 2014).

Therefore, there is a disconnect between the official Government of Canada open government policy and individual government agencies approaches to social media use. This study focuses on understanding of this disconnect in more detail, particularly on understanding if open government policy and principles are operationalized by individual government agencies in their approach to and practices on social media. It builds on previous research in a Canadian context and examines the following research questions: if and how the use of social media by two largest immigration agencies in Canada –IRCC and MCI – is related to the open dialogue stream of open government initiatives.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it discusses existing literature and open government policy documents. Second, it outlines the methodology for the study and describes data collection procedures and coding schema. These are followed by a discussion of key findings and recommendations for future research.

### **Open Government**

In the most basic sense, open government is aimed at creating a system of transparency, public participation and collaboration between government and the public (McDermott 2010). Although President Obama's Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government published in February 2009 is considered to be "a signal moment in the history of open government" (Lathrop and Ruma 2010: xix), the history of increasing transparency and accountability in government is quite long (Clarke and Francoli 2014; Lauriault and Francoli 2017).

The notion of open government as a synonym for accountability and transparency in the public sector has evolved after President Obama introduced the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government. According to Francoli (2011), governments around the world are now under pressure to "open up". This pressure comes from the within the government, citizens and

media as well as international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the OGP.

However, governments now are facing a new reality with growing accessibility of the Internet and growing use of social media by the public. Francoli (2011) notes that governments are interested in productive use of these new technological capabilities and are making them an important component of open government agenda. At the same time, as open government has a broader goal of “better governance”, information-communication technologies (ICTs) should not be viewed as a primary way of achieving transparency, participation and collaboration but rather should serve as an enabler to “opening up” government. Craft (2013), however, notes that ICTs set new expectations for relationships between government and the public as well as for participation, service delivery and disclosure of public sector information and data.

Government vision for the use of ICTs in implementation of open government initiatives has evolved over time. The change in approach is especially significant for public participation and engagement stream of open government initiatives. In 2010-2014, governments across the globe developed open government policies to declare that the use of social media would make it much easier for the public to participate in policy development and public service delivery. However, more recently, these policies have re-focused on the broader public engagement initiatives, which do not necessarily involve the use technology and specifically social media. Thus, social media has become one of the many possible tools for public participation and engagement rather than being the primary technology to ensure public participation in policy-making and/or public service delivery.

The next section explores how Canada’s open government policy, and specifically, its public engagement commitments have evolved over the last ten years. It explores the shift from the use of social media in government for public engagement on public policy matters to a broader focus on a variety of public engagement initiatives.

### **Canada’s Open Government Policy**

Introduction of open government policy in Canada revived interest in government use of ICTs. *Canada’s Plan on Open Government* that was introduced on April 12, 2012 used to be the only policy document that called for implementation of ICT initiatives across all federal government departments. Similar initiatives have also emerged across Canadian provinces,

territories and municipalities. Currently, these initiatives are primarily focused on open data, however, the province of Ontario announced its own comprehensive open government policy.

The Government of Canada is currently implementing its fourth open government action plan titled *Canada's 2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government*. It is aimed at further advancing open government principles, promote openness, transparency, and accountability in the Government of Canada, and build on the foundation of the three previous action plans (Government of Canada 2018).

Action plans on open government define commitments of the Government of Canada and outline implementation milestones. Although first two action plans on open government were focused on three streams of activities: open information, open data and open dialogue, the third and the fourth plans are organized based on guiding principles and commitments. Most of the commitments, however, still fall into three original priority streams. Table 1 compares streams/priority areas on open government for the Government of Canada.

**Table 1. Canadian Federal Government Definitions and Open Government Priorities**

Activity Stream/Priority Area	Action Plans 2012-2014 and 2014-2016	Action Plan 2016-2018	Action Plan 2018-2020
Open Data and Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Open Information</i> aimed at proactively sharing government information and making it more accessible and searchable for users.</li> <li>• <i>Open Data</i> aimed at making raw government data available in machine readable formats.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Open by Default</i> aimed at making government data and information available in open, standardized, digital formats and providing easy and standardized access to it.</li> <li>• <i>Fiscal Transparency</i> aimed at greater transparency of government spending providing information on it in reusable formats.</li> <li>• <i>Innovation, Prosperity, and Sustainable Development</i> aimed at making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>User-friendly Open Government</i> aimed at improving openness of the federal government data.</li> <li>• <i>Financial transparency and accountability</i> aimed at increasing transparency of government spending and contracting.</li> <li>• <i>Corporate transparency</i> aimed at implementing the Agreement to Strengthen Beneficial Ownership Transparency.</li> <li>• <i>Digital government and services</i> aimed at applying the principles of openness to the Government of Canada digital services.</li> </ul>

		<p>agricultural and geographical data, information and the results of scientific research available to the public. This area also includes building partnerships with provincial, territorial and municipal governments to create common standards and principles for open data and information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Open science</i> aimed at making federal science, scientific data, and scientists more accessible.</li> <li>• <i>Healthy democracy</i> aimed at strengthening international capacity to identify and responding to evolving threats to democracy and championing diversity of content, and quality and transparency of information online.</li> <li>• <i>Access to information</i> aimed at providing easier access to information held by the Government of Canada.</li> </ul>
Public Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Open Dialogue</i> aimed at engaging Canadians in two-way interactions with the Government of Canada on government policies and public service delivery by using social media platforms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Engaging Canadians and the World</i> aimed at using new technology to engage the public in policy development process and promote the principles of open government globally.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Feminist and inclusive dialogue</i> aimed at supporting greater inclusion and diversity by including the voices and experiences of marginalized and under-represented communities.</li> <li>• <i>Reconciliation and open government</i> aimed at ensuring that government decision-making process includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis perspectives.</li> <li>• <i>Open government community</i> aimed at working with partners in government and the public to share lessons learned and support collaboration to advance open government.</li> </ul>

Source: *Action Plan on Open Government (2012-2014)*, *Action Plan on Open Government 2.0 (2014-2016)*, *Third Biennial Plan to the Open Government Partnership (2016- 2018)* and *Canada's 2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government*.

All four action plans on open government emphasize that the Government of Canada strives to be “open by default” (Government of Canada 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018). This principle is also stated in the core policy document on open government – *Open Government Directive*. The directive specifies mandatory requirements and activities for federal departments aimed at ensuring that Canadians have access to most of government information and data. This is a core document for the open government policy in Canada and federal departments and agencies have to implement its requirements within five years (Government of Canada 2016).

When compared to other priority areas of open government, the area of public engagement does not have as many commitments as open data or open information streams. However, the number of commitments in this area has significantly increased in 2016-2018 and 2018-2020 action plans. It is also important to note that although the first and the second action plans emphasized the need to use new technology to increase public engagement, 2016-2018 and 2018-2020 action plans mostly focus on the need to enhance public participation and inclusion in policy-making rather than emphasizing the role of technology in this process. This priority change could be associated with a lack of achievement in the use of social media for public engagement purposes in previous years. Table 2 summarizes public engagement commitments as outlined in action plans on open government.

**Table 2. Public Engagement Commitments of the Government of Canada Action Plans on Open Government**

Action Plan 2012-2014	Action Plan 2014-2016	Action Plan 2016-2018	Action Plan 2018-2020
Consulting Canadians: developing and implementing a new interactive platform to simplify access and participation in public consultations	Next generation consulting with Canadians: developing new and innovative approaches and solutions in order to facilitate access to federal public consultations	Engage civil society on open government: developing and maintaining a mechanism for dialogue with civil society on open government	Feminist and inclusive dialogue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• test ways to make government engagement and consultation processes more open to everyone;</li> <li>• implement Gender Based Analysis Plus in public engagements and consultations;</li> <li>• build capacity to design, facilitate, and support more open and inclusive dialogue;</li> </ul>

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engage Canadians on gender equality;</li> <li>support of women's organizations;</li> <li>increase access to gender and inclusion data;</li> <li>include marginalized populations in Government of Canada policy design processes;</li> <li>ensure that the National Action Plan on Open Government is as inclusive as possible by conducting an analysis of gender-based impacts of all commitments.</li> </ul>
Open Regulation: increasing public engagement on regulatory activities by providing annual regulatory plans for each department and posting service standards		Enable open dialogue and open policy-making: enhancing citizen participation within and across government initiatives	Reconciliation and open government: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>work with Indigenous peoples to advance open government;</li> <li>build capacity for Indigenous communities to use data and research for own needs;</li> <li>work with Indigenous peoples to identify ways in which transparency around consultation and engagement activities can be enhanced.</li> </ul>
		Promote open government globally: undertaking leadership roles to promote open government principles in the global open government community	Open government community: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrate global leadership during Canada's term as lead government co-chair of the OGP Steering Committee;</li> <li>help to advance the responsible release and use of open data in OGP countries;</li> </ul>
		Engage Canadians to improve key Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) Services:	



		consulting with the public on matters related to CRA to ensure that it delivers high quality services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support international events to drive peer learning and measure open government impact internationally;</li> <li>• build capacity for governments worldwide to design more inclusive open government initiatives;</li> <li>• strengthen collaboration with other governments in Canada and expand the existing working group to include representatives of national municipal organizations.</li> </ul>
--	--	---	--

Source: *Action Plan on Open Government (2012-2014)*, *Action Plan on Open Government 2.0 (2014-2016)*, *Third Biennial Plan to the Open Government Partnership (2016- 2018)* and *Canada's 2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government*.

Despite fewer commitments in open dialogue stream, the Government of Canada did not complete these activities during implementation of the action plans of 2012-2014 and 2014-2016 (Francoli 2014; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2017). Moreover, some of the commitments were carried over to the third and fourth action plans and the Open Regulation commitment was dropped.

The federal Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat notes a few successes in the open dialogue stream of the action plans. In May 2016, the department issued the new *Policy on Communications and Federal Identity* and the *Directive on the Management of Communications*. These documents emphasize the need to use digital media as well as social media and the web for government communication (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2017). However, they advocate for the use of social media in general rather than call for development of concrete implementation plans to ensure public engagement in the development and implementation of policies, programs and/or public service delivery on social media platforms.

Research on open government in Canada has been highlighting these implementation challenges. Researchers have raised concerns with the goals and structure of action plans on open government. Craft (2013) notes that open information and open data commitments significantly

outnumber open dialogue initiatives. According to Francoli (2014, 2017) the main reason for the lack of implementation of open dialogue commitments is the primary focus on open data initiatives and technological solutions. She states that the Government of Canada views open government as “a subset of open data” (Francoli 2014: 9) and that implementation of other commitments creates only incremental changes in open government practices (Francoli 2017; Roy 2016). Thus, the major emphasis is on making government data and information open in order to generate value for the public (Johnson et al. 2017) as well as mandatory reporting on open government progress. However, more attention needs to be paid to public engagement and open information initiatives (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat 2013, 2017).

Another important issue is the way the role of social media is viewed – it is primarily considered as a tool for public engagement on policy-making. Neither of the action plans acknowledge the role it can play in public service delivery. The closest commitment to this approach for the use of social media in government is CRA’s initiative to consult with Canadians – commitment number 22 in the third action plan on open government. CRA was focusing its efforts on three initiatives for public engagement: (1) measuring satisfaction with tax publications and related data, (2) clarification of rules for charities’ political activities, and (3) understanding gaps preventing indigenous Canadians from accessing tax benefits. However, this consultation was carried in a form of an on-line survey and the response rate was low (Karanicolas 2019). Thus, the importance of social media in providing customer service, engaging users of services, and improving public service delivery is not currently reflected in the Government of Canada open government policy documents.

Nevertheless, government agencies across Canada have included social media in their communication strategies and practices. They use their social media accounts to reach out to target audiences and provide information about government programs and services.

### **Agency Specific Social Media Documents**

Government agencies in Canada develop their own social media documents outlining their approach to the use of social media and the purposes of its use. Most of them are for internal use only, such as social media strategy and social media guidance. However, as per requirement of the *Technical specifications for social media account*, the Government of Canada agencies establish and publish own terms of use as well as privacy requirements for social media accounts.

IRCC social media use is regulated by *Terms and Conditions* document published on the official Government of Canada website. This document explains how IRCC interacts on social media. It also outlines rules government social media users have to follow when interacting on IRCC social media platforms.

Terms of use apply to all IRCC social media accounts and are available in both English and French. Currently, IRCC maintains 24 social media accounts. Twitter and Facebook accounts include generic accounts as well as International Experience Canada and Passport program accounts available in English and French. IRCC also manages four YouTube accounts, two LinkedIn accounts and four Instagram accounts. English and French accounts are managed separately.

The *Terms and Conditions* document acknowledges that IRCC uses “social media accounts as an alternative method to interact with users and stakeholders” (IRCC 2019). It is also recognized that social media is a “24/7 medium” but the department is active on its social media during workdays only (IRCC 2019). In addition, IRCC is committed to respond to questions within two business dates. However, the department can post new content outside of business hours (IRCC 2019).

Furthermore, IRCC’s *Terms and Conditions* outline when the department does not respond and/or interact with the users of its platforms. These include questions and comments about politics, questions about individual cases and messages containing personal information. The department also reserves the right to block users and/or delete posts, including posts that violate the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, are offensive and/or express hateful message, contain coarse language, encourage illegal activity, contain an advertisement and encourage illegal activity (IRCC 2019).

Thus, IRCC declares that it uses social media for interaction with the public, specifically to answer people’s questions. The terms of use do not mention any approach to the public engagement on social media – the approach to the use of social media that open government policy in Canada has been calling for.

As a government agency of the Province of Ontario, MCI did not have to follow requirements on social media use established by federal government. Moreover, in October 2013, the Province of Ontario launched its own open government initiative that was selected by the OGP for a regional open government pilot program in 2016 (Government of Ontario 2019a). Open

government commitments in Ontario included initiatives on open data, open information and public engagement. However, public engagement initiatives were mainly focused on creating special web platforms for public consultations and a consultation directory and did not call for the use of social media to interact with the public. Thus, social media use in the government agencies in Ontario was not directly related to the open government policy.

Nevertheless, the Government of Ontario has developed and published *Social Media Terms of Use* which all government agencies in Ontario must follow. However, the document states that some of the Ontario government social media accounts may have more detailed terms of use or different hours of operation and that users should check individual accounts to obtain these terms of use (Government of Ontario 2019b).

According to *Social Media Terms of Use*, “some” government agencies would not respond to users’ posts or private messages. Moreover, Ontario government does not make a commitment to respond to every question or being able to answer each question completely and accurately but “will try to respond” to questions during business hours (Ontario Government 2019b).

Terms of use also include requirements for posts on Ontario government social media accounts: for example, no personal information, hateful and/or offensive comments, unauthorized advertising and/or spam messages are allowed. At the same time, Ontario government states that it may not respond to posts that violate these rules. However, no other topics that would not receive a response are identified.

In July 2017, MCI did not have own terms and conditions of social media use, and references the Ontario Government *Social Media Terms of Use* on its social media channels. The ministry, however, used to have a separate set of terms of use for its Facebook account, which stated that MCI could not commit to “replying to all comments and/or moderating all discussions on Facebook” (MCI 2016).

It is also important to note that since this research began, MCI changed all its social media accounts, splitting its Twitter account into two separate accounts – one for citizenship and one for immigration. MCI Facebook also changed from being solely focused on the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program to a generic “Ontario Immigration” account. Similar to IRCC, the ministry started to manage English and French accounts separately. In addition, MCI also had a Flickr account.

Thus, Ontario government acknowledges that government agencies should review and respond to user comments on social media. However, it also makes an exemption for unidentified government agencies that do not have to interact with the public on social media. There is also no direct link between government-to-citizens interactions on social media and the open government initiatives in Ontario.

It is clear from the review of existing open government and social media policy documents in Canada and Ontario that there is a disconnect between official open government policy and its focus on public engagement and individual agencies' approach to use social media to respond to people's questions. Therefore, social media use by immigration agencies in Canada and Ontario is a result of specific agency efforts and investments and is not directly related to open government initiatives.

### **Methodology**

This paper presents some findings of a larger study that relies on several qualitative research methods: content analysis of social media data, analysis of government documents, and semi-structured interviews with public servants and government social media users. The results discussed below are derived from analysis of IRCC tweets (N=1,893) and Facebook post (N=244) as well as six semi-structured interviews with public servants. MCI social media data were excluded from analysis due to technical difficulties with gathering accurate data (data collected in the beginning of the study would not be comparable to data collected after MCI split its Twitter account and repurposed its Facebook account).

However, it is important to note that there was a significant difference in terms of number of posts between MCI and IRCC social media accounts. The IRCC Twitter averaged 3,965 tweets per month compared to the MCI Twitter with 326 tweets and the IRCC Facebook averaged 1,822 posts a month compared to 27 posts a month on the MCI Facebook page. Moreover, at the time of data collection, MCI allowed users to ask questions by using private message functionality on Facebook and IRCC did not. Therefore, although these collected data provided important insights on the use of social media platforms by a provincial immigration agency (e.g. lack of immigration specific focus and limited interaction between government and users), they could not be compared to the data retrieved from IRCC social media platforms due to the limitations discussed above.

*Social Media Data Collection and Coding*

IRCC social media posts were collected for a period of one year (September 2015 to August 2016). Social media data discussed below were collected from IRCC official social media accounts: English language generic Twitter and English language generic Facebook. However, it is important to note that the vast majority of conversations on government policies and the delivery of programs and services unfold on non-government social media.

Tweets, posts and interview transcripts were analyzed by one researcher. All data were coded manually. Manual coding of social media data was done to ensure that detailed information about the posts was captured alongside general categories of posts. Every other tweet (N=1,893) and Facebook post (N=244) was coded to more accurately capture the differences in use during specific promotional campaigns and “regular” time.

A sample of 100 tweets and 20 Facebook posts was initially coded. The same codebook was applied to tweets and Facebook posts. Two of the categories, (i) information and (ii) retweets/sharing of third-party content, were developed based on the research literature, while the remaining category, (iii) responses, emerged from the data.

*Interview Data Collection and Coding*

Purposeful sampling was used to select public servant interview participants who were recruited through online government employee directories. The sample included public servants who were directly responsible for providing government social media content and their direct supervisors - IRCC (N=3) and MCI (N=3). All public servant participants interviewed for the study were professionals with background in communications and media. Moreover, all of them worked with social media prior to their current role. It is important to note that I interviewed all public servants who were responsible for social media in IRCC and MCI on a full-time basis. Several other staff who supported social media teams were either employed on a casual basis or were not a part of the core social media team.

All interviews were conducted in person in Ottawa and Toronto. Public servant participants were interviewed at their work location and responded to interview questions on behalf of their agency. Interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes. All participants received an initial invitation to participate in the research followed by a follow-up email with details of the interview and location and the consent form. Five interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of

participants and I took notes during one interview as the participant preferred not to be taped. Public servant interview participants were not compensated for their participation.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Nvivo 10 – a qualitative data analysis software – in order to ensure that emerging “open” codes (Corbin and Strauss 2008) are grouped into broader categories. The hierarchical structure of codes allowed to differentiate between standalone and related themes, thus, avoiding duplication in coding (Bazeley 2007).

A combination of deductive and inductive methods was used to prepare the codebook for the analysis of interview transcripts. Deductive codes originated from the review of research literature (Clarke 2012; Mergel 2013) and policy documents while inductive coding was based on research questions.

## **Findings**

### *Social Media*

The results show that IRCC interacted with users but only on its Twitter and only in a limited way. On Twitter, IRCC provided answers to certain user questions but did not participate in policy discussions, thus, limiting the use of social media to a customer service function (Gintova 2019). Facebook users, however, did not receive any responses to their questions and were only able to follow department’s updates. The only exception to this was a special campaign - public consultation on the future of immigration in Canada that ran on all IRCC social media between 5 July and 5 August 2016.

Therefore, the two main reasons for the IRCC use of social media are to provide information about existing programs and services and to respond to user questions. However, there is a significant difference in the use of Twitter compared to Facebook: Twitter is considered to be a tool for providing responses to questions while Facebook is primarily used for broadcasting information (Gintova 2017). Moreover, IRCC overwhelmingly responded to “neutral” questions only - questions about programs, services and operations and did not engage in policy discussions.

### *Interview Insights*

Findings from the interviews further develop social media data findings. It is important to note that all public servant participants recognized that social media is here to stay, and they were

looking for ways to use it more efficiently within existing resource limitations and rigid government hierarchical structures. This section discusses the most important themes that came up during interviews with IRCC and MCI public servants.

### Reasons for Adopting Social Media

Both government agencies created their social media accounts in 2008-2010. In the very beginning, however, the main consideration was to use these platforms as a promotional tool to share information and post press releases. As participant # 1 from MCI noted:

When we first started over Facebook page ... it was just a promotional tool, it was basically to give information, share information, encourage people... it was targeted to youth but it was also targeted to agencies that serve youth.

IRCC approach was quite similar: social media was solely oriented to provide informational updates. Originally, the IRCC Twitter was mostly used to publish news releases and the IRCC Facebook was devoted specifically to Canadian citizenship. There was also “no real concerted effort to develop content, strategies or use this social media presence to complement paid advertising campaigns.”

Over time, both government agencies realized the benefits that social media can bring in terms of cheaper ways of running promotional campaigns and reaching out to audiences. For IRCC, this realization came in 2015 with the need to promote the newly developed program to attract skilled immigrants to Canada – Express Entry. As participant #3 from IRCC noted:

We thought we knew the potential for social media to help us reach audiences, this system was quite transformative...with Express Entry we were going to seek the best and brightest literally and being in the place competing with other jurisdictions to recruit the talent... it changed what was expected of us, so we wanted to take full advantage of social media to help support our strategies to deal with it.

It also became obvious that the need to interact with users of the platforms meant the need for dedicated resources. This changed the approach to staffing social media positions within the agencies: there was an understanding that there should be a designated team responsible for creating social media content and maintaining social media accounts. Participant # 2 from IRCC stated:



In December 2014, we decided to split the accounts by language and started using channels to promote the Express Entry... I was asked that we would use the channels to promote all our programs and services and everything else and we proceeded to do that. So, it would be really since March 2015 we use the accounts in the way they are recognizable today.

At the time of the interviews, social media teams in IRCC and MCI had two permanent staff who were directly responsible for creating social media content and maintaining the accounts. However, the job titles of MCI public servants did not reflect their social media duties - they had more generic communication/media job titles.

### Three Main Social Media Goals: Customer Service Tool, Marketing Tool and Alternative to Call Centre

Both IRCC and MCI saw social media as a platform for providing information and customer service. They were aiming to deliver up-to-date correct information about programs and services. As participant # 2 from IRCC participant explained:

We tend to focus on our channels more as client delivery opportunities rather than discussion on policy. So, we do acknowledge criticism... but we don't engage with these people because there are more appropriate ways for them to be engaged.

She elaborated:

We also get questions asking us to justify our policy decisions, which we do not respond to those because this is not the [right] place for the discussion [on] why we make policy decisions.

Social media was also not seen as a service delivery channel or a way to engage public in discussions about policy. IRCC participants stated that the official website is the service delivery channel and the main objective of social media responses is to point where the correct information is located on the website or to provide clarification in the language that is used. At the same time, IRCC took into account the needs of the department social media users. As IRCC participant # 2 observed:

At the same time, there was a lot of conversation in the media about unemployment in Canada, layoffs like issues in the West. And so, you kind of know what's coming. So, as much as you want to communicate about what you are doing, you also want to make sure that you are delivering what your audience wants to hear.

MCI participants' insights echoed those of IRCC. Participant # 1 noted that the use of social media as in a customer service capacity is the "safest way to approach it". However, MCI considered its Facebook page primarily as a customer service tool "as opposed to a more general information channel". As participant # 2 from MCI explained:

It was created to let international students know that [the immigration program] existed. We posted content but realized that people were un-liking the page and they tended to prefer that we are there in a customer service role.

Therefore, social media was not considered as a platform to engage the public on policy-making and/or public service delivery. It was only seen as a medium for providing information about government programs and services. The main focus of immigration agencies was on its customer service and information provision.

Another important social media goal for government immigration agencies identified during interviews is the role of social media as a marketing and promotional tool. According to participants, part of the senior management buy into social media use could be attributed to the low cost of running promotional campaigns and promoting programs on social media as opposed to traditional advertising campaigns. At IRCC, there was also a desire to compete with other countries for immigrant talent. As IRCC participant # 1 noted:

[Senior management] understood that there is a need to do marketing, outreach, run ad campaigns and have social media to have conversations and have visibility of our new system. We took advantage of that shift to run the pilot and then keep going beyond Express Entry.

At MCI, promotional campaigns varied based on the ministry's demands. Program areas asked social media team not "to push out information" when they had too many applicants. However, "when they [were] looking for more people to use services than we push out this information." This, information "push" plays an important role in existing approach to social media use by government immigration agencies.

All interview participants noted the importance of social media as an alternative to call centre. Both IRCC and MCI viewed social media as a tool that could considerably reduce the volume of calls to the call centre to obtain information, which does not require the need to share personal information. Therefore, although it does not fully replace the function of the call centre

agents, it should help to ease their workload and reduce waiting times for those who are trying to reach the call centre.

MCI participant # 1 also noted that the Ministry “noticed a direct correlation between a number of calls and the activity on this Facebook page.” She elaborated:

We realized that people needed clarification about a particular program, [so that] they can more effectively apply to this program. Before we started the page, we received a lot of calls [regarding] how an international student who studies in Ontario gets a chance to have permanent residence. And the application process was not necessarily easy to understand. When we started the Facebook page, we perceived [two goals]: to decrease the number of calls and communicate the information in a more effective way...It did work –number of calls went down and number of applications went up.

IRCC participants did not specify if the volume of calls for IRCC call centre went down after the department started to interact with users on social media but mentioned that this is an important priority. IRCC participant # 3 stated that as a part of providing client service, social media team was expected to respond to generic questions that did not contain any personal information. Therefore, social media is aimed at re-routing people’s questions, saving money and relieving pressure off the call centre. There is also an assumption that migrants who are located outside Canada and thus do not have access to the call centre will turn to social media in order to get answers to their questions. Therefore, in addition to savings on paid advertising, it is expected that in the long term, social media will help to reduce costs associated with the call centre. There is also hope that these savings might result in additional resources available for the social media team.

Thus, reducing using technology to cut down costs is one of the primary goals of government. However, social media is not seen a service delivery channel nor a tool for leveraging public opinion to improve public service delivery.

### Social Media and Open Government Policy

Interview participants from IRCC and MCI did not believe the use of social media in their government agency was directly related to open government policy. However, there was an understanding that there was a need to “respond to [the public] on a personal level.” At the time when I was conducting the interviews, neither of the government agencies was using social media

to engage public in consultations on policy issues – the primary goal of social media use as per the public engagement/open dialogue stream of the open government policy. As stated by IRCC participant # 1:

We certainly did not go out there and say – we want to improve our client service, electronic tools, do you have any advice for that. We haven't done that, it's going to take more time.

However, they also believed that what they did on social media aligned with the spirit of open government. As described by IRCC participant #2:

I don't think there is an intentional linkage between open government and social media, I don't think that open government was in any way a catalyst to using the accounts. I think just the same type of principles and also the communication policy stipulates that we use a variety of different media to communicate with Canadians, this is somewhere where Canadians and other audiences are active and it is free of charge media for people, this is really from the [communication] policy side of things. But I don't think that open government thing... really [ever] came into consideration.

Open government policy in Ontario is a more recent development than at the federal level. This can explain MCI participant #2 position on the link between open government and the use of social media: "Open government...is a part of why we don't block conversations on Twitter." MCI participant # 1 noted that the implementation of open government in Ontario was in its early stages and there was no clear understanding what it involved: "Open government in Ontario is open data and open dialogue... this is just starting to roll out, so we'll see how that works".

Thus, both IRCC and MCI viewed social media as a new tool to provide customer service to clients, therefore, expanding the number of options people can use to communicate with government. Furthermore, the use of social media is not directly related to open government policy and the discussions on its potential for public participation in policy-making and/or public service delivery have not yet begun at the time this study was conducted.

### **Discussion and Future Research**

As the findings show, there is no direct link between open government policy in Canada and social media use by government immigration agencies. This, however, might not be true for other policy domains and further research is required to explore how open government commitments are implemented by different government agencies. However, it is important to note

that public servants from IRCC and MCI confirmed that open government policy has informed social media use in government by promoting more transparency and creating space for the dialogue between government and the public. More specifically, immigration agencies are using social media “in a customer service function” to respond to people’s questions and to keep the public informed about available programs and services. They are not engaging on policy matters or controversial issues. Furthermore, immigration agencies are not yet ready to engage with the public to advance policy-making and/or public service delivery.

Therefore, the findings of this study confirm those from literature. Government officials do not see social media being used for public engagement in government decision-making (Clarke 2012; McNutt 2014). However, given the interest of Government of Canada to include marginalized and under-represented populations in government decision-making (Government of Canada 2018), leveraging social media potential might be worth considering after preliminary consultations with these populations.

## References

- Bazeley, Patricia. 2007. *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*. SAGE: London, UK.
- Clarke, Amanda and Mary Francoli. 2017. “Digital Government and Permanent Campaigning” in *Permanent Campaigning in Canada* edited by Alex Marland, Anna Esselment, and Thierry Giasson. 241–258. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- . 2014. “What’s in a name? Questioning the homogeneity of ‘open government’ programs across seven countries.” *Journal of e-Democracy and Open Government*. 6(1): 248-266.
- Clarke, Amanda. 2012. “‘Open dialogue’ and the Government of Canada’s use of social media: bureaucratic barriers to democratic engagement in the digital age”. Paper presented at the 2012 Canadian Political Science Association Annual Conference University of Alberta Edmonton, Alberta June 14.
- Corbin, Juliet and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. 3rd edition. SAGE: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Craft, Jonathan. 2013. “The Promise and Paradox of Open Government in the Harper Era” in *How Ottawa Spends 2012-2013: The Harper Majority, Budget Cuts and the New Opposition* edited by G. Bruce Doerny and Christopher Stacey. 209-222. McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal, QC.

Evans, Angela M. and Adriana Campos. 2013. "Open government initiatives: Challenges of citizen participation." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*. 32(1): 172-185.

Francoli, Mary. 2017. "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Canada End-of-Term Report 2014-2016." Retrieved from: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/canada-end-of-term-report-2014-2016>

--. 2014. "Independent Reporting Mechanism Canada: Progress Report 2012-13". Retrieved from: [http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Canada\\_final\\_2012\\_Eng.pdf](http://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Canada_final_2012_Eng.pdf)

--. 2011. "What Makes Governments 'Open'?" *JeDEM*. 3(2): 16-29. Retrieved from: <https://jedem.org/index.php/jedem/article/download/65/85>

Gintova, Maria. 2019. "Use of social media in Canadian public administration: opportunities and barriers." *Canadian Public Administration*. 62(1): 7-26.

--. 2017. "Social Media Use by Government in Canada: Examining Interactions of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada on Twitter and Facebook." Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Social Media & Society, Toronto, ON, Canada — July 28 - 30, 2017.

Government of Canada. 2018. "Canada's 2018-2020 National Action Plan on Open Government". Retrieved from: <https://open.canada.ca/en/content/canadas-2018-2020-national-action-plan-open-government#toc11>

--. 2016. "Third Biennial Plan to the Open Government Partnership". Retrieved from: <http://open.canada.ca/en/content/third-biennial-plan-open-government-partnership>

--. 2014. "Canada's Action Plan on Open Government 2014-16". Retrieved from: <http://open.canada.ca/en/content/canadas-action-plan-open-government-2014-16>

--. 2012. "Canada's Action Plan on Open Government". Retrieved from: <http://data.gc.ca/eng/canadas-action-plan-open-government>

Government of Ontario. 2019a. "Open Government Partnership program". Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/open-government-partnership-program>

--. 2019b. "Social Media Terms of Use". Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/social-media-terms-use>

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. 2019. "Terms and Conditions - Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada." Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/terms-conditions.html#interact>

Johnson, Peter A., Renee Sieber, Teresa Scassa, Monica Stephens and Pamela Robinson. 2017. "The cost(s) of geospatial open data". *Transactions in GIS*. 21(3): 434-445.

Karanicolas, Michael. 2019. "Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM): Canada End-of-Term Report 2016-2018." Retrieved from: [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Canada\\_End-Term\\_Report\\_2016-2018\\_EN.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Canada_End-Term_Report_2016-2018_EN.pdf)

Lauriault, Tracy P. and Mary Francoli. 2017. "Openness, Transparency, and Participation" in *Understanding Spatial Media*, edited by Rob Kitchin, Tracey P. Lauriault and Matthew W. Wilson. SAGE: London, UK.

McDermott, Patrice. 2010. "Building Open Government." *Government Information Quarterly*. 27(4): 401-413.

McNutt, Kathleen. 2014. "Public engagement in the Web 2.0 era: Social collaborative technologies in a public sector context." *Canadian Public Administration*. 57(1): 49-70.

Mergel, Ines. 2013. "Designing a Social Media Strategy to Fulfill Your Agency's Mission." *Public Manager*. 42.1: 26-29.

Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration. 2016. "Terms of Use/Posting Guidelines." [achieved version, no longer available]

Open Government Partnership. 2019. "What Is the Open Government Partnership." Retrieved from: <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about>

Price, Steven. 2017. "New Zealand End-Of-Term Report 2014–2016". Accessed October 13, 2018. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/new-zealand-end-of-term-report-2014-2016>

Roy, Jeffrey. 2017. "Digital government and service delivery: An examination of performance and prospects." *Canadian Public Administration*. 60(4): 538–561.

--. 2016. "Data, Dialogue, and Innovation: Opportunities and Challenges for "Open Government" in Canada." *Journal of Innovation Management*. 4(1): 22-38.

Stewart, Daniel. 2018. "Australia Mid-Term Report 2016-2018." Accessed October 13, 2018. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/report/australia-mid-term-report-2016-2018-year-1>

Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. 2017. "End-of-Term Self-Assessment Report on Action Plan on Open Government 2014-2016". Retrieved from: <http://open.canada.ca/en/end-of-term-self-assessment-report-action-plan-open-government-2014-2016>

--. 2013. "Implementation of Canada's Action Plan on Open Government (Year-1) Self-Assessment Report". Retrieved from: <http://open.canada.ca/en/implementation-canadas-action-plan-open-government-year-1-self-assessment-report#toc16>