

**STANDING IN A CROWDED ROOM SHOUTING AT NO ONE:  
HOW THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA USES TWITTER TO ENGAGE  
ALBERTANS.**

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores Government of Alberta attempts to engage citizens using Twitter in 2018, and how successful any attempts at engagement were.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Mixed-methods content analysis using @YourAlberta as a case study; quantitative analysis of 1,339 tweets guided by DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology, followed by a qualitative analysis of successfully engaging tweets (n=238), and analysis of the 5 most successful tweets in comparison to best practices.

**Findings** – Consistent with other government social media research, @YourAlberta tweets were primarily one-way. 18% of tweets were attempts at engagement. Of those, 76% were considered successful, though overall engagement was low. @YourAlberta generally follows best practices when attempting engagement via Twitter.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings are limited to the @YourAlberta account. The study did not analyze the total reach of @YourAlberta tweets. The study also used a limited definition of engagement. Future research could analyze other social media channels, and further explore what government engagement through social media looks like.

**Practical implications** – The findings suggest considering changes to the Government of Alberta's social media engagement approach to better align with its Communications Policy; specifically, abandon the desire to manage participation, and take a more social perspective to social media.

**Originality/value** – There is a scarcity of published research on Government of Alberta social media practices. This paper may inform future research on government social media communications, as well as discussion between Government of Alberta communicators regarding future social media strategies.

**Keywords** – Government, Twitter, Alberta, engagement, social media, communications, participation, democracy, typology

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In December 2018, a representative of the Brazeau County Council — a municipal district in central Alberta, southwest of Edmonton — published an open letter addressed to Alberta’s then-Premier, Rachel Notley. In the letter, County Reeve Bart Guyon raised concerns about the Government of Alberta’s engagement process surrounding proposed changes to Bighorn Backcountry, a group of recreational areas on the eastern borders of Banff and Jasper National Parks. He expressed disappointment that recent public information sessions were not engagement opportunities, but were “a session with backdrops and government speakers” (Guyon, 2018). Guyon (2018) concluded the letter by requesting Premier Notley “make a simple change to allow an open and honest dialogue with Albertans.” It was a stark example of citizens eager to participate in a governance decision that impacted them, but being prevented from doing so by the government engagement process.

Citizen participation in the process of governance is a fundamental part of a democracy (Diamond, 2004). The avenues for civic participation, however, are controlled and defined by the government. For example, options for communicating with the Government of Alberta are limited to consultations, reading government news releases, sending a message via email or web application, or by phone, such as the general government phone line (310-0000), or specific offices like the Ombudsman’s Office or Premier’s Office (Government of Alberta, 2019). While a link to the government’s social media channels appears on every page of its website, social media does not appear to be encouraged as a communications tool for connecting with government in the same manner as other channels even though social media are becoming popular communications tools for both citizens and political figures.

While in the past, it was much easier to control civic participation because traditional avenues like letter writing had barriers such as being time-consuming, the introduction of social media has both significantly reduced barriers to participation and opened new avenues for speaking directly to elected officials (Shirky, 2008). At the same time, there is an increasing demand from the public to have more input into how they are being governed (e.g. Kiss, 2014; Linders 2012). As in the Brazeau County example, there appears to be a growing dissatisfaction in the system of engagement where governments dictate where and when they will accept civic participation, especially if those opportunities are only session backdrops with government speakers. With social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook being so ubiquitous and easy to use for conversations and discussions – not only between citizens and government, but also between citizens themselves – the official channels of civic participation are rapidly becoming obsolete.

### **Purpose of Study**

This study explores how the Government of Alberta uses Twitter to contribute to the goals laid out in its Communications Policy (Government of Alberta, 2018) to “understand and meet the needs and interests of Albertans” (p. 15) through public engagement, and having audience-focused and “social” social media channels (p. 14). This study also addresses a significant gap in research regarding the Government of Alberta’s communications practices, particularly how it uses social media. It examines the various types of messages the government puts out through its primary Twitter account, @YourAlberta, and quantifies how many times the government attempted to engage Albertans in 2018. This study also examines if those attempts were successful or not, and explores the characteristics of the most successful tweets in order to identify a path for success the government may follow in the future. Finally, this study adds an

Alberta perspective to the growing body of research on the social media practices of government agencies around the world, how social media may be used as a tool to engage citizen participation, and how governments have responded to increasingly pressures from both citizens and global organizations like the Open Government Partnership to be more open and transparent, more responsive and engaging of their citizens, and more democratic in the digital age.

The study focuses primarily on the government's use of Twitter; while the Alberta government does use other social media platforms, such as Facebook or Instagram, Twitter was selected because of the ease of collecting data from the platform, and because more people follow the Twitter account, increasing observable engagement opportunities. As a result of analyzing only one government channel, however, the findings will not necessarily be generalizable to all government communications or social media accounts, though the findings will still be an insightful first step in examining the ways in which the Government of Alberta attempts to engage citizens or not. Further, this study does not make any commentary about what the government should or should not be doing with its accounts. Instead, it remains primarily descriptive, but does provide some initial observations on how to increase public engagement through Twitter if the Government of Alberta wishes to do so.

### **Literature Preview**

There has been significant research into social media, government communications and the overlap between the two. There are countless avenues and approaches to the topics that could be taken; however, three theoretical fields in particular are drawn upon in this study: democratic theory, public administration theory, and communication theory. The primary question of how governments use social media to engage with citizens is explored over four major themes. First, the definition of engagement and participation in government is debated, with perspectives from



citizens as well as governments contributing to the discussion. The introduction of social media into the political sphere is also addressed, specifically the power of social media to significantly reduce barriers to participation.

Second, the theme of expectations, both from a citizen and government perspective, is explored. For example, as governments are increasingly modeling their social media use after private corporations, citizens are in return increasingly expecting the same amount of access and responses they receive from those private corporations.

The third theme is how social media impacts trust. Trust in government is vital for governance, and social media can be an important communications tool to build credibility and encourage opportunities for participation. But if citizens cannot trust the process of government engagement, cannot trust the intentions governments present when they say they want to engage, and cannot trust that citizen concerns will be heard and acted upon, then they are less likely to want to participate in governance activities.

Finally, the literature discusses worldwide trends of government social media use, laying the contextual groundwork for exploring how the Government of Alberta uses social media to engage with citizens.

This study was inspired and guided by DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) "Towards a typology of government social media communication: Democratic goals, symbolic acts and self-presentation." Other studies that played significant roles include: Kiss' (2014) "Responding to the 'New Public': The arrival of strategic communications and managed participation in Alberta" for its perspective on how the Government of Alberta's engagement process is heavily political and managed – and for being one of the only peer-reviewed articles on Alberta I could find; Mergel & Bretschneider's (2013) "A three-stage adoption process for

social media use in government” for their succinct, and in my experience accurate, description of how government social media accounts begin as more engaging, but become less so over time; and Linders’ (2012) “From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen co-production in the age of social media” for his exploration of how the shift to digital communications opened the door to new forms of citizen participation in government activities.

### **Methodology Preview**

Though there is ongoing research regarding social media and politics in Alberta, such as the Poli Volume project led by University of Alberta political scientist Jared Wesley, there is a paucity of published research regarding the Government of Alberta’s communications practices specifically, including how it uses social media and how it engages citizens. As a result, this study is an exploratory analysis of the Government of Alberta’s communications behavior using @YourAlberta, as a case study. The study uses a mixed-methods content analysis on tweets posted by the account in 2018; first a quantitative analysis guided by DePaula et al.’s (2018) typology is applied to the tweets, followed by a qualitative analysis of successfully engaging tweets to examine their characteristics. Denscombe (2010) notes that a case study is appropriate for exploring the “complexity and subtlety of real life situations” (p.55), which the @YourAlberta Twitter account certainly deals with. Further, Denscombe (2010) points to content analysis as a good way to quantify the content of straightforward text through clear methods. As this study is primarily concerned with the textual content of tweets in relation to engagement, and the quantity of the occurrence of specific types of text, a content analysis was determined to be the best approach. A survey strategy targeting Albertans, or potentially a phenomenological strategy exploring the perspectives of government staff to determine their views on engagement could have been other approaches to take in this study. However,

following the advice of Denscombe (2010), these approaches were not considered feasible for the scope and intent of this project.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, citizens are increasingly calling on their governments to be more engaging and responsive, and open up new channels for civic participation. Social media has been seen as one of those potential new channels for governments to engage with citizens, and as government use social media more, the expectation that governments are open to conversations using social media continues to grow.

Currently, there is a lack of research into how the Government of Alberta communicates with its citizens, both in general and through social media. This study is an exploratory first step in addressing that gap. Over the next five chapters, this study will examine how a single Government of Alberta Twitter account attempted to engage with Albertans, how successful those attempts were, and the characteristics of tweets that saw the most success. Using the primary Alberta government Twitter account (@YourAlberta) as a case study, this research uses content analysis on a purposive sample of @YourAlberta tweets to explore the extent to which the government engages Albertans through Twitter. The content analysis is guided by DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology of government social media communications to code and categorize tweets and determine engagement.

In Chapter 2 we review a selection of literature related to government and social media use, focusing primarily on the issues that impact engagement. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the research design and methodology used in the study. The findings of the study are presented, analyzed and discussed in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the study, laying some groundwork for where research in this area may go in the future.

The next chapter explores a selection of literature regarding the interaction between governments and social media. A brief analysis of key themes that emerge from the literature is included, concluding in three research questions that guide the study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Social media has become a significant part of everyday life. In the third quarter of 2018, Facebook reported 2.27 billion monthly active users (Statistica, 2018a) and Twitter had 326 million monthly active users (Statistica, 2018b). Over 72% of Canadians own a smartphone (Newzoo, 2018), a key tool for social media use. These facts underscore the ubiquity of social media for Canadians.

For governments, the rise of social media has become both an opportunity and a concern. On one hand, social media is a powerful communications tool, allowing more control over how messaging reaches audiences, reducing costs and increasing efficiency. On the other hand, using social media carries expectations and implications — being open, transparent, accessible, participative, interactive and engaging, for example — which have not been entirely embraced by government communicators. At the same time, citizens are increasingly calling for more opportunities to be involved in government decision making, and greater access to those in power. How governments are responding to these pressures, particularly through their communications practices and use of social media, is an important area for study as we attempt to understand our world following the social media revolution.

This review explores a selection of literature regarding the intersection between governments, citizens, social media and engagement through four major themes: Political participation influenced by social movements and reduced barriers to participation; the communications expectations in government and citizens impacting participation; the relationship between social media and trust; and the one-way use of social media by governments around the world.

Following the literature review is a brief analysis that connects these themes to the context of the Government of Alberta, the focus of this study. The chapter concludes with a look at the future of research into this subject, and how I propose to explore the Government of Alberta's engagement of citizens through social media.

### **Field of Study Overview**

Three fields of study make important contributions to the topic of social media and government. First, democratic theory provides a broad perspective on how and why social media communications can be important to both citizens and governments. It also provides important insight into the duty of citizens and government, and where communications, including social media, can help bridge the two.

Public administration theory and governance are also key areas, providing insight into government communications philosophies, and the changes in public administration over the past 20 years have a direct link to the challenges governments are facing today with social media. For example, if governments take the perspective of service provision, then the type and style of communication will be significantly different than if governments approach governance from a collaborative perspective.

Finally, communication theory, including strategic communication and public relations, contributes important ideas such as building citizen trust in government, government credibility, and engagement, and points us towards frameworks of analyzing governments' social media communications.

### **Methodology**

Following Booth, Papaioannou and Sutton's (2016) literature search model, I began by developing a list of keywords related to my research question. The keywords were sorted into

groups based on themes and entered in various combinations into the University of Alberta's EBSCO database. Terms and phrases were combined and searched using Boolean logic, such as *e-government AND social media; participatory culture AND social media AND government; engagement OR listening AND government; civic AND citizen AND duty; duty to government AND citizen; democr\* AND social media OR digital media*. These searches were recorded to avoid duplication.

My search method also included a reference search within key articles. I used the reference lists of the articles, as well as how the references were used in the articles, to identify new articles that were relevant to my research question. Following these searches, I used Google Scholar to perform limited searches for supplementary literature not already captured. This search was used to fill any obvious gaps in the collected literature. Finally, a brief search was done using Google to find grey literature that contributed to the themes.

**Search parameters.** To keep the search manageable, the following parameters were used to limit results:

***Peer-reviewed:*** Ensuring that the articles reviewed were appropriately vetted by experts was important to maintaining a high academic standard.

***Year of publication:*** Popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were publicly launched in 2006, so I primarily limited my timeframe to articles published after 2009. However, the timeframe was expanded when appropriate for supplementary articles.

***Language:*** I limited my search of documents to those in English.

***Relevance:*** I chose to limit articles based on their relevance to my research interest, the Government of Alberta, culturally and by topic. For example, articles related to government

communications in Westminster-style political contexts were kept, while articles concerned with other political systems (e.g. studies that explored Chinese social media) were discarded.

*Organizing the data:* As articles were collected and read, I recorded each article's citation, type, summary, key themes, and personal notes in an Excel spreadsheet. This helped with easy recall of each article, the ability to organize based on emergent themes, and the ability to draw connections between articles.

## **Literature Review**

An oft-cited definition of social media comes from Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010):

Social media can be used to refer to both the enabling tools and technologies and to the content that is generated by them. Social media include but are not limited to blogs, wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), micro-blogging services (e.g. Twitter), and multimedia sharing services (e.g. Flickr, YouTube) (p.266).

Exploring the democratic implications of social media is a complex and multi-layered issue, with scholars divided on the contributions social media makes to citizen engagement. On one side, scholars feel the Internet, and specifically social media, is not an appropriate space for democratic participation (or political discussion and deliberation, e.g. Rishel, 2011). In some cases, scholars argue that it can threaten democracy (Dahlgren, 2018; Gayo-Avello 2015; Grill, 2011; Omidyar, 2018).

On the other side, scholars argue that communicating with governments through social media is a legitimate form of political participation (e.g. Toscano, 2017) and that social media can create legitimate spaces for deliberation between the government and the public (e.g. Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). Halpern and Gibbs (2013), for example, found that social media like Facebook and YouTube “provide deliberative spaces and encourage political participation” (pp.



1166-1167) particularly when platforms allow participants to be more identifiable and networked (p. 1167). Other scholars, like Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010; 2012), note that social media can help promote government transparency and accountability, giving citizens more opportunities to monitor government actions. Social media has also been found to help involve more citizens in government processes, such as through participatory budgeting (Gordon, Osgood & Boden, 2017) or municipal transportation planning (Majumdar, 2017).

Despite this disagreement, four key themes emerge from my review of the literature regarding social media, citizen engagement and democracy: participation, expectations, trust, and government engagement.

**Participation.** Participation in political activity emerged as the most important theme in the literature. For example, Diamond (2004) notes “the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life” is a key element in a democracy (paragraph 1). However, there does not appear to be a clear definition of what “participation” means; governments, such as the Government of Canada (2014), point to voting as a primary form of political (or civic) participation, while most scholars seem to agree that expressing an opinion is an important aspect of participation.

Diamond’s (2004) discussion of participation, for example, includes gathering information, monitoring how politicians use their power, and expressing opinions. Gayo-Avello (2015) suggests that the act of “expressing your political views and discussing them with others” constitutes a form of participation (p. 12). Vicente and Novo (2014) limit their definition of participation to reading or giving opinions about social and political issues, signing online petitions or taking part in online consultations. Zuckerman (2014) suggests that civic participation falls within a matrix with one axis representing more or less involvement, and the

other representing action or expression (which could include sharing via social media). Turcotte (2015) suggests that exercising one's rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, specifically the rights of freedom of speech, association, peaceful assembly, and thoughts, beliefs and opinions, are useful measures of civic participation.

*Citizen perspective.* While voting is often perceived to be the primary mode of civic participation (e.g. Government of Canada 2014), some scholars note that, often, citizens are not satisfied with that limited role, instead looking for government to be more open and participatory. Cunningham (2001), for example, points to the social movements of the 1960s in the United States as the birthplace of participatory democratic ideas. Citizens — particularly women, African Americans and those opposed to the Vietnam War — were increasingly unhappy with the government and felt they couldn't adequately express their concerns. The perceived failure of government to appropriately represent and respond to citizen concerns led to the rise of activist neighbourhood groups that worked to provide forums for political expression, such as community meetings or protests, and take control over affairs that impacted them (Cunningham, 2001). In Alberta, the combination of a deteriorating economy, poor investment decisions by the government, and an increased interest by Albertans in environmentalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to an increased demand for government transparency and citizen participation in decision making (Kiss, 2014).

More recently, Ess (2018) notes that the early days of the Internet brought promises of greater democratic freedom of expression and “open democratic deliberation” (p. 94). However, Ess (2018) says “these dreams have all but evaporated in the face of a complete collusion between transnational capitalism, platform providers and governments bent on complete surveillance” (p. 96). Though often citizens are complicit in these processes, there has been a

pushback against ideas like total surveillance (spurred on by events like Edward Snowden's revelations about the U.S. National Security Agency), and citizens appear to be seeking more control over their lives, such as the protection of their personal information and the ways in which they are governed (Ess, 2018). More importantly, pressure appears to be mounting on governments, both nationally and internationally, to increase regulation on social media platforms in an effort to protect democracy (Ess, 2018).

Dahlgren (2018) notes that many western governments saw a decline in civic participation in the 1990s as trust in government eroded, and citizens increasingly felt powerless to change ineffective governance. Zuckerman (2014) challenges this idea slightly by stating "it's not that people aren't interested in civic participation. They're simply not interested in feeling ineffectual or helpless" (p. 155). Thijssen and Van Dooren (2016) add that for youth, civic participation isn't declining; rather it is moving to new spaces as youth are not interested in participating through channels that replicate offline systems. This parallels earlier findings from Dahlgren (2005) that "many citizens have refocused their political attention outside the parliamentary system, or they are in the process of redefining just what constitutes the political, often within the context of social movements" (p. 155).

***Blurring boundaries.*** Vatikiotis (2014) notes that one reason social media is seen as an important tool for civic participation is that it is practically ubiquitous and easy to use. As a result, social media bridges all aspects of our lives, effectively removing the distinct public and private spaces where political action occurs, leading to new forms of political participation. For example, political expression in traditional public spaces, like town hall meetings, can now be done directly on a politician's Facebook page from the privacy of home. This blurring effect is echoed by Falkheimer and Heide (2014) who point out that not only are the boundaries between

forms of communications (e.g. marketing, public relations) becoming less clear as a result of social media, so too are the roles of citizens: “There is no longer a clear and given border between communications professionals and laymen” (p. 344). In essence, political participation need not be entirely dominated by politicians and activists in public forums like legislatures or community meetings; social media gives everyone the power to voice their opinion and participate at any time, on any subject, from anywhere. Social media now connects nearly all aspects of our lives, removing borders and barriers, leading to new relationships between traditional institutions and the people (Dahlgren, 2005; Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; Linders, 2012).

***Reducing barriers to participation.*** Another reason why social media has become an important tool for political participation is that, unlike information and communications technologies (ICTs) of the past, such as the telephone or television, social media has a significantly lower barrier to entry; to participate in social media all you need is a computer or smartphone and an account. Further, social media gives every citizen with an account the ability to create and share any form of content, providing more opportunities for citizens to start or participate in ongoing conversations about government, often putting citizens into the role of “citizen journalist” (Bertot et al., 2012; Dahlgren, 2018; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Luna-Reyes, 2017; Skoric, Zhu, Goh & Pang, 2015; Vicente & Novo, 2014; Warren, Sulaiman & Jaafar, 2014). And, unlike any other ICT, social media’s low barrier of entry also provides more opportunity for more citizens to be involved in decision making processes by reducing participation limiters like location and time, as well as increasing buy-in from citizens (e.g. Gordon et al., 2017; Majumdar, 2017).

Reducing the barriers to participation has led to criticism about the impacts of this type of participation, and the convictions of the people choosing to participate through social media. New Yorker columnist Malcolm Gladwell (2010) for example, posits that social media is too “safe” for any meaningful impacts to occur by using it; for Gladwell (2010), high-risk activism, the kind that brings about significant social change, requires more commitment to a cause than social media can elicit. More importantly, critics have raised concerns that “slacktivism” is primarily a way for people to feel good about themselves, having little impact on political processes (Štětka & Mazák, 2014) and can actually replace or “derail future engagement and social change” (Wilkins, Livingstone & Levine, 2019, p.97). While most researchers seem to agree that collective action is a key component of social change, the type of action, as well as the efficacy of low-cost actions such as liking a tweet or changing a profile picture, remains up for debate.

**Digital divide.** Though social media allows more citizens to participate in theory, in unequal societies, this is often not the case for many individuals and groups. Many scholars note an increasing digital divide between those who have access to the Internet and social media, and those who don't (Bertot et al., 2010; Friedland, 1996; Gayo-Avello, 2015; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Hall et al., 2018; Khan & Krishnan, 2017; Thomas & Streib, 2003; Vicente & Novo, 2014). According to the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (2018), nearly 90% of Canadians have access to the internet, and 86% have a broadband connection in their home. However, that leaves at least 14% of Canadians without access. And while 72% of Canadians may use a cellphone (Newzoo, 2018), 28% do not. Rishel (2011) notes that social media serves to reinforce the power structures we have in society, as those with access to the technologies are the only voices heard. This is echoed by Vicente and Novo (2014) who found that access to

digital technologies was a primary factor in the decision to participate online. Scholars such as Davison, Wagner and Ma (2005), warn that if government communications move entirely online, a significant portion of the population may be prevented from participating in the democratic process, including having their interests represented and their voices heard.

**Expectations.** The second major theme to emerge from the literature can be categorized as the communications expectations citizens and governments have regarding each other, and the role each is expected to play in political participation.

**Government expectations.** Government expectations of citizens' roles have been shaped by a governance approach called New Public Management, now used by most western governments (Linders, 2012). New Public Management began in the 1980s and 1990s as governments began to transition from traditional public administration approaches – based on ideas of industrialization, political theory and the citizen as voter and constituent – to administration based on economic theory, the power of market forces, and the citizen as a customer (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2014). Under New Public Management, an increased focus was placed on efficiency and providing services to customers. Capitalizing on the new technologies at the time, many governments began to provide services via the Internet, including communications, though as Davison, Wagner and Ma (2005) note, there was a “scramble to get as many services or web pages up with little regard to quality, service level or appropriateness for the citizenship” (p. 282). When it was introduced, social media quickly became a key element of government communications (Bertot, Jaeger & Hansen, 2012).

According to Abdelsalam, Reddick, Gamal and Al-sharr (2013), under a New Public Management approach, “the role of technology for government is to be more responsive to its citizens” (p. 408). Governments use new technology, including social media, to deliver more

services, and there is no role for citizens in governance (Abdelsalam et al., 2013, p. 408). Although in this model, governments' expectations of citizens fall entirely within a "business/customer" relationship, the literature suggests that governments are under pressure to stop treating citizens as customers and find new ways of incorporating citizen participation in governance, such as through e-governance (Abdelsalam et al., 2013; Davison et al. 2005).

One response by governments has been to commit to more transparency and collaboration with citizens (Avery & Graham, 2013). New legislation, such as the Open Government Directive in the United States (Karakiza, 2015; Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013; Mossberger, Wu & Crawford, 2013) and similar legislation in Australia (Holland, 2015) and the United Kingdom (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015), is forcing politicians and government communicators alike to use social media differently by mandating governments be more "inclusive, responsible and accountable to citizens" (Open Government Partnership, n.d.a). For example, in order to be part of the Open Government Partnership, which Canada is, governments must endorse the Open Government Declaration, declaring they will "increase access to new technologies for openness and accountability" and "identifying and promoting the use of alternative mechanisms for civic engagement" (Open Government Partnership, n.d.b). The United States' Open Government Directive instructs legislators that their Open Government Plan "should include proposals for new feedback mechanisms, including innovative tools and practices that create new and easier methods for public engagement" (Orszag, 2009).

Despite many governments' apparent desire to be less dialogic (e.g. DePaula et al, 2018; Mergel, 2014), pressure from citizens, as well as federal and international governments, appear to be fueling a push to be more open and participative to meet the changing expectations of citizens.

*Citizen expectations.* For citizens, communication expectations have been shaped by several factors, including the government and the private sector. Social media platforms themselves impact expectations by their design; Twitter, for example, allows only 280 characters in a tweet, and Halpern and Gibbs (2013) note that Facebook may be better for democratic deliberation than Twitter because it is less anonymous.

Because of social media's potential as a marketing and customer service tool, private organizations have quickly moved to capitalize on that opportunity. Maben and Gerhart (2018) note several successful examples, such as Best Buy, Lowes and Nordstrom, where organizations demonstrate engagement, listening, and responding skills, leading to an increased affinity from customers. As a result, citizens have become accustomed to being able to voice concerns to companies and have them dealt with directly through social media (Maben & Gerhart, 2018). The ability to access practically any organization through social media, anytime, has become normal, and in some cases, such as WestJet's Social Care team, has been used as another marketing tool (see Hounslow, 2016).

With private organizations offering citizens significant access and interaction, and governments treating citizens as customers, it is no surprise that citizens have the expectation that governments be as accessible as private organizations. As Davison et al. (2005) point out "customers [have] a general experience of the 24/7 world where they can do anything, any time and anywhere. As citizens, it is likely that they will expect a similar level of service from e-government" (p.283). Maben and Gerhart (2018) note that for private organizations "followers expect to be heard and to receive a quality response in kind" (p. 111). Zuckerman (2014) adds to this by noting that because people have "grown up on participatory media" (p. 156) and are accustomed to sharing their opinions widely through social media, they expect to be able to do



the same with government. Many scholars note that governments contribute to this by opening social media accounts in the first place, effectively signalling to citizens that the door is open to interact with government like any other organization (Breyer, 2011; Evans, Franks & Chen, 2018; Gordon et al., 2017; Holland, 2015; Khan & Krishnan, 2017; Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013; Toscano, 2017; Vicente & Novo, 2014).

**Social media and trust.** The third major theme is how social media impacts trust in government. Trust is important to the proper functioning of government because it impacts citizens' responses to public policy (OECD, 2018) and citizens must be able to trust government information and services. Further, governments rely on trust to carry out a political mandate smoothly. And trust is a key component of political legitimacy, as the people must trust in those they allow to govern and represent them.

While social media is only one aspect of government activity that can contribute to trust, several scholars see great potential in it. Bertot et al. (2010) argue that social media and other technologies are transformative, particularly in relation to transparency and anti-corruption, both of which relate to trust. Here, social media gives the public more methods of keeping tabs on government activity leading to greater accountability. Breyer (2011) notes that increasing public participation in decision making, which can be facilitated through social media, increases trust as well as government efficacy. Generally, there appears to be agreement that the more governments can do to respond to increased calls for openness, accountability and transparency (Karakiza, 2015) by using social media to facilitate participation (such as in Gordon et al., 2017 and Majumdar, 2018), the greater the opportunity to build trust.

However, several scholars feel the negative aspects of social media have the opposite effect. Dahlgren (2018), for example, notes that because information moves quicker in an

information environment, it is challenging to find trustworthy information. Because of this, Dahlgren (2018) suggests that we are becoming more polarized in our thinking by ignoring information we dislike, or, when we cannot ignore information, we distrust it. This is exacerbated by the fact that people tend to gravitate towards others who share their opinions and political beliefs, a tendency that is significantly enhanced by the Internet (Jaeger, 2006). As members of these “filter bubbles” (Dahlgren, 2018) continue to discuss a topic, the beliefs become further entrenched and move towards extremes in the absence of opposing viewpoints (Jaeger, 2006). Participants are less likely to trust any other information. Further, Omidyar (2018) points out that social media can be used to spread false or misleading information, which damages trust in all other information.

Some scholars also note that *how* governments use social media can have a negative effect on trust. Porumbescu (2016) found that the more detail governments provide online, the more critical people will be of it, and therefore less likely to trust it. Further, how a message is presented, as well as what is presented, impacts citizens' feelings of trust in the message and the government.

Evans et al. (2018) found that, while social media has the potential to help build citizen trust in government, the ways in which governments use social media currently don't appear to contribute to trust building. Rather, trust building in this sense needs to be reciprocal. Ultimately, Evans et al. (2018) conclude that building trust is a two-way street, and governments must be willing to trust citizens as much as they want citizens to trust them. This conclusion supports the findings of Warren et al. (2014), that social media significantly reduces the barriers to political participation, particularly expressing opinions and exchanging ideas, which has led to citizens building greater trust in each other online, but not with governments.

**Government engagement.** Despite a lack of agreement on the definition of participation, there is apparent agreement that participation is actions taken by citizens (e.g. voting, writing letters, tweeting). The opposite side of the coin is government action to include citizens in decision making, solicit feedback or otherwise seek to involve citizens in conversation, which is often described as engagement. Citizen engagement is an important factor as governments move to be more open, transparent and accountable (The Transparency and Accountability Initiative, 2014). For the purposes of this study, I take the approach that citizens participate, and governments engage.

When discussing how governments use social media to engage with citizens, scholars often use a model that divides the communications into three categories: push, pull or networking strategies (e.g. Mergel, 2014; Mossberger et al, 2013). “Push” refers to governments “pushing” information to citizens without any expectation of return. “Pull” involves slight interaction by governments, such as retweeting or commenting, though information push is still a dominant activity. Finally, networking strategies are highly interactive, with significant commentary between governments and the public (Mossberger et al., 2013, p. 355).

Overwhelmingly, governments use social media in “push” form (Bonsón, Torres, Royo & Flores, 2012; DePaula, et al., 2018; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Holland, 2015; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Majumdar, 2017; Mergel, 2014; Mossberger et al., 2013; Waters & Williams, 2011; Zavatarro & Sementelli, 2014). This behaviour appears to be nearly universal to any democratic government using social media. Holland, (2015) for example found that local councils in New South Wales, Australia, generally push out information through social media and ignore interactions from the public. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) found similar results with local government leaders in Leeds, England, noting that politicians appear open to the idea

of social media to engage with citizens, but don't have the skills or resources to properly engage. In her study of social media adoption in U.S. government agencies, Mergel (2014) found that while in the early stages, some agencies' social media accounts were more engaging and dialogical, over time the accounts become institutionalized, with strict rules and policies that ultimately limited use to the pushing out of information.

DePaula et al. (2018) found, however, that many government social media posts do not fit appropriately within "push" "pull" or "networking." Citing research on social media posts that are more symbolic or self-presentational, DePaula et al. (2018) developed a new typology for categorizing types of communication that updates the three-category model to include a fourth: symbolic and presentational communication (p. 99). In their study of more than 1,400 Facebook posts from local government department accounts in the United States, they found that symbolic or self-presentation were the second most common types of government communications, after one-way information pushes. Their results indicate that governments do not view social media as tools for collaboration, but rather tools for self-presentation.

### **Analysis of Literature Findings**

The push by citizens for more political participation, combined with the ubiquity of social media and its ability to bridge multiple aspects of our lives, has led to an increased pressure on governments to use social media in ways that respond to the needs of citizens and engage them in political processes.

This pressure can be viewed as a positive force, as citizen participation is vital to a properly functioning democracy. The definition of participation, however, is not always clear. While governments, such as the Government of Canada (2014), limit their definition of how citizens can participate in the political process to actions like voting, citizens are demanding a

greater variety of opportunities to be involved in governance decisions. These demands have been driven by perceived failures of government (e.g. Cunningham, 2001; Kiss, 2014) as well as a pushback by citizens to a governance approach that places them in the role of customers instead of citizens (Bryson et al., 2014; Linders, 2012).

It is clear there is a growing divide between citizen expectations of what political participation should look like, and the types of engagement governments are willing to do to solicit and support that participation. Possibly in part because of the failure of governments to meet their expectations, citizens have sought alternative spaces for political participation, such as neighbourhood activist groups (Cunningham, 2001) or online communities. Social media has made this significantly easier to do, allowing citizens to create more spaces and content, share more ideas and opinions and gather more information than ever (e.g. Luna-Reyes, 2017). While it was much easier to control political activities in the past – governments have traditionally had more resources to provide services, have been able to dictate “appropriate” spaces for political discussion (i.e. the legislature or in the news media), and the channels for political participation, like the news media, have been controlled by a small group of elites – the ubiquity and relative equality of social media has opened the door to new modes of civic engagement (e.g. Vatikiotis, 2014). If governments are going to continue to claim to be democratic, and democracy relies on citizen participation, then arguably an evaluation of a democracy should include the extent to which government engagement efforts match the avenues of participation that citizens are attempting to employ.

New civic engagement connects all four themes of this review. Citizens want to be partners – or as Linders (2014) puts it “co-producers” – in governance, and “actively engaged in creating what is valued by the public and good for the public” (Bryson et al., 2014, p. 447).

Governments, for now, want to be able to deliver services more effectively and efficiently. The most effective way to bridge these two perspectives is through engagement. However, trust is important to getting people involved and engaged in the process (Skoric et al., 2015), as citizens are not likely to participate if they do not believe in the process or its outcomes. Social media has, and can be, an effective tool in both connecting governments and citizens as well as building trust, significantly reducing the costs of participation and increasing government transparency and accountability.

**Government of Alberta communications.** Like other governments, the Government of Alberta is under pressure to be more engaging in its communications. Albertans' concerns about the economy, environment and government spending described by Kiss (2014) remain, and arguably have intensified. For example, a 2017 survey from Mainstreet Research found that nearly 60% of Albertans surveyed were unhappy with the way the Alberta government was handling the economy (Mainstreet, 2017). Given those concerns, it is reasonable to assume that the desire to be more involved in government decision making also remains.

In 2018, the Alberta government updated its communications policy for the first time since 2007. In the updated policy, the government outlines its commitment to providing Albertans with clear, accurate and relevant information in a timely manner (Government of Alberta, 2018). It lays out the roles and responsibilities of each member of government that handles communications, and details a number of principles and practices that guide how the government communicates with Albertans.

While much of the policy focuses on providing Albertans with information, suggesting the Alberta government is following other governments in primarily communicating with citizens in a one-way fashion, three sections of the policy stand out in contrast to this approach.

First, under the heading “Communications principles” the policy states: “[Communications and Public Engagement]<sup>1</sup> and the broader [Alberta Public Service] collaborate to provide to elected officials clear communications to and from the people of Alberta. Communications formats are chosen to meet Albertans’ needs” (p. 9). This statement suggests that consideration is being made, in principle, to the needs of Albertans and for using government channels to receive communications back from Albertans. Taken at face value, it suggests the government is open to citizen participation through the channels chosen by citizens. The policy confirms this in the “Government channels” section. In it, the government policy states that its social media channels will be “social” and “reflect the two-way nature of social media” (p. 14).

The third section of note, “Public engagement,” outlines the official channels for “understand[ing] and meet[ing] the needs and interests of Albertans” (p. 15). The policy identifies consultations and public opinion research as primary methods of seeking public participation in the government process – that is, engagement. However, it is interesting to note that the policy also says “departments will ensure that engagement activities are aligned with government priorities and support government’s key themes and messages” (p. 15). This suggests that the topics that might interest Albertans are not the priority; engagement, in this case, is still heavily shaped by government interests, something Kiss (2014) calls “managed participation.”

These three sections suggest that the Government of Alberta is at least aware that it should be open to engaging citizens to encourage participation. However, there is limited knowledge of how the Government of Alberta engages with Albertans. Almost no research could be found related to the Alberta government and communications. There is significant opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> Communications and Public Engagement (CPE) is the central communications entity of the Government of Alberta. It replaced the Public Affairs Bureau in 2017.

for communications researchers to delve further into the communications practices of the Government of Alberta, and determine if it is fulfilling the promises made in documents like its communications policy.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a brief overview of some of the literature related to the interaction between governments and social media. It explored areas of democratic theory, public administration theory and communications theory to help situate us for a study of the social media practices of the Government of Alberta.

Four major themes emerged from the literature review. First, participation is a vital part of democracy, but the definition of political participation is unclear, particularly as it relates to social media. While citizens are increasingly looking for more opportunities for participation, and social media provides a good avenue to do that, governments appear hesitant to pursue that avenue. Tied to this is the second theme of expectations. Under the public administration philosophy of New Public Management used by most western governments, digital channels are primarily used to provide services to citizens, who are viewed as customers. Citizens, in response, have developed the same expectations for communications with governments as they have with private corporations — expectations of responsiveness, listening, and keeping the “customer” happy.

The third theme to emerge was the impact of social media on trust. Trust, particularly of government information, is important for proper government functioning, legitimacy and credibility. However, the use of social media brings with it implicit trust issues, such as the spread of misinformation or “fake news,” and the role social media plays in creating polarization and filter bubbles. When viewed through the lens of attempted engagement, scholars note that



trust is important on all sides, but remain divided as to whether or not social media helps or hinders the building of trust.

The final theme to emerge is the trend of governments around the world using social media in a one-way fashion, choosing to send information out, but rarely using social media to engage participation from citizens. Communications scholars often refer to the types of social media communications in three ways: “push,” “pull” or “networking.” Overwhelmingly, governments employ “push” types of messages through social media. DePaula et al (2018) add another category, “symbolic presentation” to the list to describe messages that go beyond pure information presentation to include messages meant to celebrate or boost the profile of the government.

**Research questions.** The focus of this study is the Government of Alberta’s social media practices, and addressing the gap in knowledge regarding the government’s attempts to engage citizens using social media. Guided by our findings in the literature, and using a definition of social media engagement that equates it with soliciting information or discussion from citizens, this study will explore three questions:

- RQ1: To what extent does the Government of Alberta attempt to engage the public through the @YourAlberta Twitter account?
- RQ2: Of the tweets determined to be engagement attempts, to what extent were those attempts successful, as measured by likes, retweets, or replies?
- RQ3: Of the tweets determined to be successful attempts at engagement, what are the characteristics that may have contributed to their success and how closely do they align with recommended best practices?

There is no doubt that social media carries significant implications for governments, particularly in relation to citizen participation and democracy. As this review has shown, governments overwhelmingly use social media to push information out, even while citizens grow increasingly interested in greater participation, dialogue and power in political spheres. Social media presents numerous opportunities, not only for building networks and communities, but for building trust in governments and more effective services for citizens. If governments wish to continue to provide effective services, and remain part of the conversations regarding governance, they will need to take an active role in engaging with citizens. Social media can be a powerful tool to that end.

The question of how the Government of Alberta fares in this regard remains open. This study is meant to address the gap in information about the Alberta government's social media practices by exploring the extent to which the Government of Alberta is engaging with citizens using social media, if at all. The results of this study will help inform discussions about the future direction of social media communication in the Government of Alberta, provide a strong foundation for further research, and, hopefully, help the Government of Alberta better respond to the needs and expectations of its citizens.

In the next chapter, we discuss the research design and methodology used in this study to explore those questions.

## Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

### Introduction

In Chapter 2, we reviewed a selection of literature related to the interactions between government communications and social media. We found that, while citizens are increasingly calling for governments to be more open, accessible and engaging, and that social media has tremendous potential to facilitate political participation in new and interesting ways, governments primarily use social media in a one-way information provision manner. The literature also indicated that there is a lack of information specific to the Government of Alberta, which is the primary focus of this study.

Exploring how the Alberta government has responded to the pressures raised by citizens, and what, if any, effort it makes to engage citizens through Twitter is this study's ultimate goal. Research from Kiss (2014) indicates that Albertans are just as interested in participating in governance decisions as anyone, and analyzing the government's attempts at engagement via Twitter can give us some insight into how it has responded to these pressures. Therefore, this study uses the Government of Alberta's @YourAlberta twitter account as a case study to answer three questions:

- RQ1: To what extent does the Government of Alberta attempt to engage the public through the @YourAlberta Twitter account?
- RQ2: Of the tweets determined to be engagement attempts, to what extent were those attempts successful, as measured by likes, retweets, or replies?
- RQ3: Of the tweets determined to be successful attempts at engagement, what are the characteristics that may have contributed to their success and how closely do they align with recommended best practices?

This chapter begins with an overview of the study design, including the data source, data collection, the instrument used for collection and coding, and the procedures of the study. The chapter concludes with an overview of data analysis and a brief discussion of the limitations of the chosen methodology.

### **Design**

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to explore the research questions using the @YourAlberta Twitter account as a case study. The analysis employs a typology of government social media communications developed by DePaula et al. (2018) to guide a quantitative content analysis of tweets posted in 2018, categorizing tweets to determine the extent to which the government attempts to engage Albertans through Twitter. This is followed by a qualitative analysis to determine what characteristics of the tweets made them successful in engaging participation from the public.

The case study strategy was selected because, as Denscombe (2010) notes, case studies are useful for studying in detail a specific instance of something (p. 53), allowing researchers to focus on relationships, social processes and subtleties that other approaches may not be able to capture. Case studies also work well with mixed-methods approaches (Denscombe, 2010; Murthy, 2016). Case studies are meant to produce a “holistic” view of the case rather than an examination of single factors (Denscombe, 2010; Pickard, 2017) and allow for multiple research and analysis methods to be used within the strategy, and fits well with small-scale research (Denscombe, 2010, p. 62; Norander & Brandhorst, 2017). And, case studies work best when the boundaries of the case and the data therein are well-defined. In this study, @YourAlberta was selected as a single case from multiple government twitter accounts, and a single year’s worth of tweets was selected as the sampling frame. Both are distinct and self-contained units that lend

themselves well to case study research. This kept the scope of the research manageable, allowed the freedom to use multiple methods to approach the research questions, and provided a good opportunity for theory-building as it relates to Government of Alberta social media approaches.

Analyzing publicly available tweets was appropriate for this study as the tweets can be considered specific actions that are or are not engaging. Other research designs that involved input from participants, such as interviews, surveys or focus groups with government communications staff, would produce data that represented staffs' *perceptions* of engagement but not necessarily demonstrate actual engagement.

**Data source.** Social media is a channel for both citizen participation and government engagement, therefore it was selected as the focus for this study. Twitter was selected over other channels, such as Facebook or Instagram, because in my experience with Government of Alberta social media communications, Twitter is used most often and is more likely to provide a wider variety of message types, thus producing richer data. Facebook posts, for example, are often one-way information provision, and government communicators rarely participate in the comments.

The Government of Alberta has 26 Twitter accounts, divided between ministry accounts (e.g. @AlbertaCulture) and accounts for specific programs or services, such as 511 Alberta. @YourAlberta was selected for this project because it uses the username "Alberta Government," and is managed by the Communications and Public Engagement (CPE) office, the Alberta government's central communications office. While other government Twitter accounts could also provide some insight into engagement attempts, they are limited by a focus on a specific topic, such as the environment, emergency alerts or international diplomacy. @YourAlberta presents itself as the primary representative of the Government of Alberta, and so is the best account to study for a more accurate sense of the Alberta government's attempts at engagement.

## HOW THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA USES TWITTER TO ENGAGE ALBERTANS

@YourAlberta was created in April 2009. As of March 8, 2019, the account produced 9,798 tweets, was following 3,268 other accounts, and was followed by 112,948 accounts. It is one of the most active, and most followed, of any Government of Alberta Twitter account (second only to @AB\_EmergAlert, the Alberta public emergency alert system which only deals in emergencies). The account typically posts between four and six tweets, including retweets, per weekday, and one or two per day on Saturday and Sunday. Tweeted topics includes new government policies or funding, government activities (not specific to any particular ministry), information on emergencies or special events (e.g. holidays or special days).

The CPE social media team managing @YourAlberta is staffed by four Communications Specialists reporting to an Assistant Director of Social Media in the Content Branch of the Outreach Division. The Communications Specialists are responsible for monitoring Twitter for issues that may relate to the Alberta government, including questions from the public, coordinating a schedule of tweets that address topics the government is interested in sharing with the public, and collecting and drafting content for tweets. While @YourAlberta tweets do not include identifying characteristics indicating which Communications Specialist drafted the tweets, from personal experience, I know that each of the specialists are assigned specific topics and themes, such as “social” or “economic.” Retweeting is done by all members of the team.

**Ethics.** Article 2.2 of the Panel on Research Ethics (2014) Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 states:

Research that relies exclusively on publicly available information does not require Research Ethics Board review when a) the information is legally accessible to the public and appropriately protected by law; or b) the information is publicly accessible and there is no reasonable expectation of privacy.

As this study exclusively used publicly available tweets, no ethics approval was required.

### **Data Collection**

The sampling frame of tweets selected for this study was every tweet posted by @YourAlberta between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2018, a total of 1,339 posts. This included retweets, quote tweets and replies to questions. For RQ1, the sample of tweets analyzed was the entire sampling frame of 1,339 tweets. For RQ2, the sample studied was tweets categorized through DePaula et al.'s (2018) typography into the *input seeking* and *online dialogue/offline interactions* categories. For RQ3, the sampling frame was tweets captured for RQ2, and the sample was tweets that were determined to be successful attempts at government engagement.

The larger sampling frame of all @YourAlberta tweets posted in 2018 was purposive and chosen for several reasons. First, Merrigan, Huston and Johnston (2012) note that content analysis should begin with the collection of a representative sample (p. 131). The sample from 2018 constituted more than 13% of the total tweets published by @YourAlberta (1,339 out of approximately 9,700 tweets), which is comparable to DePaula et al.'s. (2018) sample of 10% of U.S. government Facebook posts. Second, because of staff and government changes, which could impact the writing style of tweets, it was not appropriate to randomly select tweets from the entire population of @YourAlberta published tweets. Further, a full calendar year was a convenient and distinct unit of time. A full year also allowed the capture of multiple types of events, such as the introduction of a new budget, various announcements, and reactions to holidays. This time frame included periods of high activity – for example in March when Alberta

and B.C. began a trade dispute over the Trans Mountain pipeline – and periods of less activity, such as in July and August.

## **Procedures**

**Collection.** The tweets were collected directly from @YourAlberta’s Twitter.com stream using the search terms “from:YourAlberta since:2018-01-01 until:2018-12-31.” However, this search did not capture @YourAlberta’s retweets, so the online storytelling application Wakelet, was also used to collect tweets and verify all tweets and retweets were captured. A new “collection” was created in Wakelet and a “search by user” for @YourAlberta was run, producing all tweets to date posted by @YourAlberta. Tweets from 2018 were then manually added to the collection. Once all of @YourAlberta’s 2018 tweets and retweets were collected, the text from each tweet was copied from Twitter and pasted into the Excel spreadsheet tool. The type of tweet and number of replies, likes and retweets were also recorded.

**Other approaches.** The program NVivo was tested using the NCapture web tool but discarded because, while it made capturing tweet content easy, it failed to capture all tweets published – specifically, replies to others made by @YourAlberta. This was important because *online dialogue* is a subcategory in DePaula et al.’s (2018) typography, and is defined as “Response by the department to user comment on a department post” (p. 102). Without the ability to accurately capture all types of tweets, NVivo could not be used.

Other methods of collecting tweets were also explored but dismissed in favour of manual collection. For example, tools that required more advanced knowledge of the Python programming language, such as twarc, rtweet or George Washington University’s Social Feed Manager, were not considered.



For RQ2, the sample of tweets analyzed were those coded as *citizen information*, *fundraising*, *online dialogue*, *offline discussion* or *offline collaboration*. These categories involved direct conversations with the public, and so were considered attempts by the government at engagement.

The sample for RQ3 was drawn from the sampling frame of tweets collected in RQ2. In this phase, the five most successful tweets, as determined by citizen interactions with the tweets, were selected for further analysis.

**Instrument.** Tweets were collected and categorized in an Excel spreadsheet designed by the researcher (Appendix A). The columns of the spreadsheet are divided into 11 sections:

1. A numerical value to track the number of tweets collected,
2. Date and time of the tweet,
3. Text of the tweet,
4. Primary code (*reserved for the coding phase*),
5. Secondary code (if necessary) (*reserved for the coding phase*)
6. Type of tweet (retweet or original content),
7. Who is being retweeted in the event of a retweet,
8. Number of replies,
9. Number of retweets,
10. Number of likes, and
11. Notes.

On a second sheet in the spreadsheet, each of the 12 subcategory titles were put into a table and associated with an Excel =COUNTIF formula to count the frequency of occurrence for each code. For example, to calculate the frequency of tweets coded as Public Service

Announcements, the formula was =COUNTIF(Sheet1!D:D, "Public Service Announcement").<sup>2</sup>

A similar formula was created to track the types of tweets (e.g. =COUNTIF(Sheet1!F:F, "Original Content")).<sup>3</sup>

**Coding.** Murthy (2016) notes that when coding social media content, it is important to do so systematically and rigorously (p. 15). This helps reduce coder bias, though it is possible that any applied framework can have bias built into it. Even so, I felt using an established typology framework to code tweets in this study brought useful structure to the research, allowing for the exploration of the data in more robust ways.

DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology uses four broad categories to define types of government social media communications: *information provision*, *input seeking*, *online dialogue/offline interactions* and *symbolic presentation*. Each of the four broad categories is divided into subcategories to allow for as much specificity as possible when coding. A summary of definitions and coding rules appears in Table 1.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that in this instance, the primary codes appeared in column "D" of the researcher's spreadsheet tool.

<sup>3</sup> The type of tweet appeared in column "F" of the researcher's tool.

<b>Table 1</b>	
<i>Summary of definition and coding rules for each type of communication.</i>	
Adapted from DePaula et al. (2018), p. 102.	
<b>Information provision</b>	<b>Public service announcements:</b> Providing recommendations for safety, public health, and well-being (e.g., “check your heat for the winter”; “eat vegetables”; “don't smoke”).*
	<b>Operations &amp; events:</b> Tweet related to government operations, programs and/or policy, as well as event information. Events must include date and time and/or have links to more information.
	<b>Social sharing:</b> Tweets providing information related to government’s interests, but not about what the government specifically is doing. Third-party information the government supports and wants to share with others
<b>Input Seeking</b> <i>(Attempt at engagement)</i>	<b>Citizen information:</b> Specifically requesting for information or feedback from citizens.
	<b>Fundraising:</b> Tweets that ask for donations or contributions to a cause, that may or may not be directly connected to the government.
<b>Online dialogue</b> <b>Offline interaction</b> <i>(Attempt at engagement)</i>	<b>Online dialogue:</b> Response by @YourAlberta to user comments on government tweet.
	<b>Offline discussion:</b> Event to discuss particular policy issue, creating a forum for discussion, and/or invitation to community to meet government officials.*
	<b>Offline collaboration:</b> Asking individuals to become involved in a government related activity; help carry out or volunteer for a project, or program of the government department.*
<b>Symbolic presentation</b>	<b>Favorable presentation:</b> Seeks attribution of likability, competency or worthiness. Reporting of positive activity performed by the department, with positive imagery or self-referential language of gratitude (e.g. “we have the best”; “we accomplished so much this year”).*
	<b>Political positioning:</b> Taking a clear stance on a political issue (e.g., “rights of women should be supported”; “marriage equality law should be passed”).*
	<b>Symbolic act:</b> Expressing congratulations, gratitude, condolences. It includes celebration of holidays or trivia questions; references to cultural symbols (e.g. 4th of July, football game).*
	<b>Marketing:</b> Encouraging individuals to acquire or use an item or service presented by government. May include elaborate presentation of features of the item or service, or significant justification for their use.

*\*Language as appears in DePaula et al. (2018)*

Table 1

In her discussion of content analysis process, Holman (2017) recommends that coding categories be mutually exclusive and exhaustive, and that the coded units (in this case,

@YourAlberta tweets) be placed in one and only one category (p. 247). This approach is echoed by DePaula et al.'s (2018) coding rules, which recommend posts be categorized as mutually exclusively as possible. They also purposefully did not double code messages that were *input seeking* or *online dialogue/offline interaction* as *information provision*, even if there was public service, policy or event information contained within posts, as special care was required to not code every government post as “information” (p. 102). These rules were followed as closely as possible in this study.

Special attention was paid to government replies as two types emerged: replies to citizens tweeting unprompted questions or comments, and replies to citizens who themselves have replied to a government tweet. Tweets in the second type were automatically coded as *online dialogue*.

### **Analysis**

**Research question 1.** The sample of tweets was analyzed using content analysis, guided by codes developed by DePaula et al. (2018). Content analysis is “a quantitative process for analyzing communicative messages” (Maier, 2017a, p. 243). It can be used on any text and is used to “quantify the contents of that text” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 281). Kirby, Greaves and Reid (2006) describe content analysis as a “technique used for the systematic and focused measurement of content [which can be] virtually any form of recorded content” (p. 154). As Merrigan, et al. (2012) note, “content analysis focuses on messages rather than the individual or groups who send and receive messages” (p. 126). The advantages of content analysis are that it is a flexible method, and is useful for studying communications in non-traditional settings (Maier, 2017a, p. 243). Good content analysis is also systematic and objective, and the analysis of

existing texts helps to avoid issues found in methods dealing with participant research, such as participant bias or poor memories (Maier, 2017b).

However, content analysis also has disadvantages. Denscombe (2010) notes that content analysis tends to remove the text from its original context, which can impact the interpretation of the text. Content analysis on its own cannot be used to draw causal conclusions (Maier, 2017b). It is also challenging to draw generalizable conclusions from content analysis (Maier, 2017a). Despite these drawbacks, the exploratory nature of this study, the flexibility required in answering the research questions, and the non-traditional nature of the data all support the use of content analysis in this study.

The analysis of government social media communications through the lens of a communications typology is common in communications research (e.g. Mergel, 2013, Mossberger et al., 2013). As noted in the literature review, when analyzing the content of government communications via social media, scholars traditionally categorize them into three categories – push, pull, and networking strategies. DePaula et al. (2018), however, added a fourth category, symbolic-presentation, which they have shown to be a distinct and important category (p.100). For this reason, DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology was used as a basis for the content analysis codes.

Following coding, simple descriptive statistics were run using Excel to count the frequencies of occurrence of tweets within each subcategory. As established in the previous chapter, engagement in this study refers to actions taken by the government to solicit feedback from citizens or otherwise attempt to include them in conversations. Therefore, under this typology, government tweets categorized as *input seeking* or *online dialogue/offline interaction* were considered engagement attempts, as those categories involve interactions with, or

solicitation of information from, citizens (RQ1). The remaining two categories, *information provision* and *symbolic presentation*, do not require any active public participation to fulfill the intent of the messages (e.g. transmitting information) and so tweets in those categories were not considered attempts at engagement.

**Research question 2.** Tweets coded as *citizen information*, *fundraising*, *online dialogue*, *offline discussion* or *offline collaboration* were considered attempts by the government at engagement. These tweets made up the sample for RQ2, determining the extent to which these attempts succeeded.

Success, in this context, was defined by any interaction by the public with a tweet in this sample. This definition follows Twitter's definition of engagement, "[the] total number of times a user interacted with a tweet [...] including retweets, replies, follows, likes, links, cards, hashtags, embedded media, username, profile photo, or Tweet expansion" (Twitter, 2019). Likes, retweets and replies were the only data reasonably accessible for this study, so for the purposes of RQ2, a tweet coded as an engagement attempt was successful if it received at least one like, retweet or reply.

**Research question 3.** Based on the results of RQ2, RQ3 focused on providing a more in-depth analysis of the most successful attempts at engagements. Five tweets that received the most engagement within the two broad categories considered engagement were selected for closer analysis. The determination for tweets selected in this phase were tweets with the highest interactions across all three categories (likes, retweets and replies). Tweets with interactions in all three categories were favoured over tweets with only one or two, even if the numbers in a single category were higher in comparison.

While there is no “magic formula” for making a popular or highly engaging tweets, there are aspects of web content that scholars and experts agree contribute to an increased chance that a tweet will be engaged with. For example, in their study of predicting the popularity of web content, Tatar, de Amorim, Fdida and Antoniadis (2014) present several features of web content that could lead to higher popularity and engagement. These features include keywords or phrases that refer to controversial topics, discussion of popular topics, people, places and organizations, language that evokes strong positive or negative emotions, and ease of shareability. In a blog post on composing effective tweets, Twitter Australia agrees with many of Tatar et al.’s (2014) points, particularly evoking an emotional response (@TwitterAU, 2016). The author also adds advice such as keeping messages simple, using a human voice, including creative elements, providing audiences something to do, and using hashtags. Marino and Lo Presti (2018) also place a high value on the content of social media for increasing engagement, noting that when content focuses on emotion, sentiment and creating a shared set of values, it can reinforce the brand of the institution (p. 57).

Therefore, based on the predictive results found by Tatar et al. (2014) and recommendations made by @TwitterAU (2016), Marino and Lo Presti (2018) and other scholars, when analyzing tweets to understand what makes them more engaging than others, we should expect to find the following characteristics:

- The tweet evokes a strong positive or negative emotion;
- The tweet uses simple language and/or is constructed simply (e.g. few characters);
- The tweet is informative, educational, inspiring and/or entertaining;
- Includes creative elements, such as multimedia (e.g. photo, video, gif);
- Discusses a popular topic/person/organization/location;

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- Provides readers with something to do/encourage participation;
- Uses hashtags (correctly);
- Uses a “human” voice.

For RQ3, then, the qualitative analysis focused on describing the characteristics of the most successfully engaging tweets in relation to the best practices established above. This analysis contributed to a hypothesis of what characteristics the government should include in tweets in order to increase the possibility of engagement from citizens, which is discussed in the next chapter.

**Pilot test.** A pilot coding test was run on @YourAlberta tweets from December 2018 to test the study design. A total of 73 tweets were coded, including 51 original content tweets, and 22 retweets.

The pilot test revealed some coding challenges. Specifically, several tweets included aspects from multiple categories, and could reasonably be double coded. For example, a tweet from December 21, 2018 reads:

Is getting more energy efficient one of your New Year's resolutions? #DYK that Albertans investing \$1 in energy efficiency are seeing a \$3 return? Together, we're saving \$360 million in energy costs. Learn more about easy steps you can take in 2019: <https://www.encyalberta.ca/>

The first sentence is a question, which could be categorized as seeking information from citizens (*input seeking*). The second and third sentences refer to the features of investing in energy efficiency, which would be categorized as *branding and marketing*. The final sentence drives readers to more information related to an agency of the government, which could be categorized under *operations and events*. Following the pilot study, it was decided that tweets



would be single coded wherever possible, and double coding would only be used in rare instances where an obvious choice could not be made.

**Reliability and validity.** Although DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology provided a coding framework, applying codes to tweets is a subjective exercise and the biases of the coders must always be accounted for. Maintaining a high level of reliability and validity in the study also strengthens the results and contributes to replicability in the future.

Content analysis often uses more than one coder to ensure reliability (Holman, 2017; Maier, 2017b). For this study, an independent coder was recruited to code 10% of the tweets collected in the first phase of collection. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa. The inter-reliability results of the coding are presented in the next chapter.

Coding was repeated on a selection of the sample data three weeks following the completion of coding to ensure intra-coding reliability.

### **Design Limitations**

Although it was determined that a case study using content analysis was the most appropriate approach to guide this research study, there are some limitations. As noted above, Denscombe points out that content analysis tends to remove the text from context that can impact interpretations. This study specifically focused on the text of tweets, and not imagery or video, which could potentially have an impact on how the tweets are coded.<sup>4</sup>

A second limitation of content analysis is that it is usually not generalizable. As this study uses purposive sampling and focuses on describing a single Government of Alberta unit, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the Government of Alberta or the @YourAlberta account.

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<sup>4</sup> Although this may be the case, it was determined during the pilot test that in the majority of instances, imagery or video in tweets replicated the information present in the text and did not fundamentally impact coding.

Third, the study relies on a single typology developed by a third party. Although the typology has gone through the rigors of peer-review, it is still only a single source, and the first to include a fourth category of social media communications types. Its definitions and descriptions are subjective, and the typology may need further analysis to determine if the categories are appropriately exhaustive and accurately descriptive. Future research designs using a typology may consider using DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology as one of many sources in creating a more comprehensive typology to analyze government social media use to achieve as objective an approach as possible.

Finally, citizen interactions were quantified, but not qualified. For example, not all replies are equal, and one could debate whether a one-word comment is as valuable as lengthier replies. However, as the research questions are concerned primarily with extent of engagement and not quality, the act of replying to a tweet, regardless of content, constituted citizen participation. Future studies could explore the quality of engagement, effectiveness from the perspectives of citizens, and the ways in which engagement contributed to specific policy outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

This research study is an exploratory analysis of how the Government of Alberta uses Twitter to engage with the public. Using the primary Alberta government Twitter account (@YourAlberta) as a case study, this research utilizes content analysis on a purposive sample of @YourAlberta tweets, guided by a typology of government social media communications developed by DePaula et al. (2018). Through this, three questions are explored:

- RQ1: To what extent does the Government of Alberta attempt to engage the public through the @YourAlberta Twitter account?

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- RQ2: Of the tweets determined to be engagement attempts, to what extent were those attempts successful, as measured by likes, retweets, or replies?
- RQ3: Of the tweets determined to be successful attempts at engagement, what are the characteristics that may have contributed to their success and how closely do they align with recommended best practices?

A quantitative analysis was used to determine the frequency of tweets that appeared in each category of the typology, with frequency of tweets in the *input seeking* and *online dialogue/offline interaction* categories determining the extent to which the Government of Alberta attempts to engage Albertans through the @YourAlberta Twitter account. The engagement tweets were then analyzed for their levels of success, determined by the number of likes, replies or retweets. Finally, the five most successful attempts at engagement were analyzed and compared to recommended best practices for creating highly engaging tweets.

In the next chapter, we review the findings of the study, and discuss the implications for the Government of Alberta and future research.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction

In our literature review chapter, we established that governments are increasingly under pressure from citizens and other global forces to be more open, transparent and engaging through social media. Citizens increasingly want more say in how they are governed, and social media has become an important channel for communications with, and from, governments. This study explores how the Government of Alberta has responded to those pressures.

In the previous chapter, we outlined the research methodology and analysis approach guiding the study. Using the primary Alberta government Twitter account (@YourAlberta) as a case study, the study used content analysis on a sample of @YourAlberta tweets guided by a typology of government social media communications developed by DePaula et al. (2018). Tweets were then analyzed for how successful they were in engaging participation from citizens.

This chapter presents the results of the study of the extent of the Alberta government's public engagement attempts through the @YourAlberta Twitter account (RQ1), the extent to which those attempts are successful (RQ2), and the characteristics of successful tweets (RQ3). Overall, the data shows that @YourAlberta favours one-way communications, similar to other governments, and that engagement numbers are very low. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings, including two notable findings, limitations of the study, and where future scholars might take this research.

### Data Analysis

Using the primary Alberta government Twitter account (@YourAlberta) as a case study, this research used content analysis on a purposive sample of @YourAlberta tweets, guided by DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology of government social media communications. Tweets

determined to be engagement were analyzed for their levels of success, determined by number of replies, retweets and likes. The five most successful attempts at engagement were then qualitatively analyzed and compared to recommended best practices for creating highly engaging tweets.

In RQ1, the sample of tweets was coded using rules and categories derived from DePaula et al.'s (2018) typology of government social media communication. The text of 1,339 tweets posted by @YourAlberta in 2018 were copied from Twitter and pasted into an Excel spreadsheet, organized by date. Because categorizing and quantifying occurrences was the goal, which content analysis is suited for (Denscombe, 2010), a quantitative content analysis was selected to analyze the tweets. The tweets were analyzed and coded across 12 subcategories of the typology, and subsequently four broad categories, based on the textual content of each tweet. The frequency of each category's occurrence, as well as the percentage of total tweets each category made up, were collected and calculated in an Excel spreadsheet.

For RQ2, the tweets were further organized into "engagement" and "non-engagement" categories based on their coding in RQ1. Tweets coded into the broad categories of *input seeking* and *online dialogue/offline interaction* were considered attempts at engagement as they involved encouraging participation from followers or otherwise sought to include followers in conversations. Tweets coded as *information provision* and *symbolic presentation* were not attempts at engagement as the information was delivered primarily in a one-way direction with no expectation of reply or participation.

Within the attempts at engagement, RQ2 also examined successful and unsuccessful attempts. A successful attempt at engagement was determined using Twitter's (2019) definition of engagement, the "total number of times a user interacted with a tweet" through replies,

retweets and likes or clicks on the tweet. In this case, any tweet that received at least one interaction was considered a success. All interactions were treated equally; therefore, tweets with the highest number of replies, retweets and likes combined were considered more successful attempt at engagement. The mean number of replies retweets and likes was generated using Excel's "Average" formula, and the "STDEV" formula was used to generate the standard deviation for each category.

RQ3 examined the five most successful attempts at engagement, drawn from the sample of successful tweets determined by RQ2. To determine the five most successful tweets, the sample from RQ2 was extracted from the main coding sheet and placed in a separate sheet. The tweets were then sorted by number of replies, and the five tweets with the highest number of replies were separated and pasted into a new Excel sheet. This was repeated with retweets and likes, until a total of 15 tweets were collected. The number of replies, retweets and likes were then summed for each tweet, and five tweets with the highest combined total were selected for analysis as the best examples of successful engagement.

It should be noted that the top four tweets had interactions in all three categories. However, the tweet with the fifth highest interaction total did not have any replies. The tweet with the sixth highest interaction total had interactions in all three categories, though its total interactions was lower than the fifth by three points. In this case, the tweet with the sixth highest interaction total was selected for analysis over the fifth because it had a broader range of interactions (three categories vs. two).

**Reliability and validity.** Generally, reliability refers to how consistent or repeatable a measure is (Trochim, 2006). In this study, reliability refers to the extent to which the codes used most accurately represented the nature of the tweet's message, and that the data is approached as

objectively as possible. Validity refers to whether coding scheme used is measuring what you intended to measure, and the codes are simple enough to explain the phenomenon being observed (Maier, 2017b). In this case, validity refers to both the appropriateness of the coding, as well as the appropriateness of the use of tweets in this context, including how accurately the tweets from 2018 represent the Government of Alberta (Denscombe, 2010).

For this study, an independent coder was recruited to code 10% of the tweets collected. The use of more than one coder is common in content analysis to ensure reliability (Holman, 2017; Maier, 2017b), and the degree to which the independent coders agree upon the codes used can be used as an indication of the quality of the rating instrument, as well as the coders' abilities (Warrens, 2015). The tweets coded by the independent coder were selected at random by using a random number generator to generate a number between one and 14, and then selecting every  $n$ th tweet, where  $n$  is the random number (e.g. fifth, fifteenth, twenty-fifth, etc.). In total 134 tweets were coded by the independent coder.

According to Warrens (2015), Cohen's kappa ( $\kappa$ ) is the most common statistic used for assessing inter-rater reliability, and so it was therefore used in this study. Using the labels developed by Landis and Koch (1977), the analysis of inter-coder agreement found "substantial" agreement between the coders ( $\kappa > 0.61$ ) overall. Across the four broad categories, the inter-rater reliability analysis yielded almost perfect agreement for the input seeking category ( $\kappa > 0.81$ ), substantial agreement in online dialogue/offline interaction and information provision categories ( $\kappa > 0.61$ ), and moderate agreement in the symbolic presentation category ( $\kappa > 0.41$ )(Table 2). Though the kappa scores for *information provision* and *symbolic presentations* were lower than *input seeking* and *online dialogue/offline interaction*, it is important to note there was substantial

agreement and moderate agreement in the categories, respectively, which are acceptable thresholds for inter-coder reliability.<sup>5</sup>

Coding was repeated on a selection of the sample data three weeks following the completion of coding to ensure intra-coding reliability.

**Table 2**

*Inter-coder reliability scores*

<b>Broad category Kappa</b>	<b>Cohen’s <math>\kappa</math></b>
Information Provision	0.64
Input Seeking	0.91
Online Dialogue/Offline interaction	0.75
Symbolic Presentation	0.47

Table 2

**Data Presentation**

In total, 1,339 tweets posted by @YourAlberta between January 1 and December 31, 2018 were analyzed in this study. This included original tweets as well as retweets, but did not include tweets that were deleted, such as tweets with errors, or advertisements with a limited schedule. Of the 1,339 tweets, 47% were original content; that is, tweets that were created and posted by the team behind the account. 28% were retweets of other accounts, most often other government accounts. In general, @YourAlberta retweeted specific accounts less than 10 times each in 2018, with two notable exceptions: the Alberta Emergency Alert Twitter account (6% of all retweets) and Premier Rachel Notley (43% of all retweets). About 1.6% of @YourAlberta tweets were quote tweets.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Following the independent coding, I met with the coder to discuss discrepancies and overall coding approach. We reached an agreement on definitions and interpretations and how codes should be applied, and that approach was used to code the rest of the tweets and adjust previous coded tweets to match the new understanding. Following this iterative process, the final inter-coder reliability was almost perfect ( $\kappa > 0.81$ ).

<sup>6</sup> Retweets with additional commentary from @YourAlberta.



In 2018, @YourAlberta replies to questions or comments made up 22% of all tweets. Replies were most often used to provide more information on a topic, including addressing specific concerns about a government program or policy raised by citizens.

**RQ1: To what extent does @YourAlberta attempt to engage citizens?** The results of the application of DePaula et al.’s (2018) typology to Government of Alberta tweets, and the extent to which the government attempted to engage with citizens, are presented in Table 3. In general, @YourAlberta favoured the use of information provision-style messages, and rarely attempted to engage Albertans in discussion or other collaborations.

**Table 3**

*Distribution of tweet types based on DePaula et al.’s (2018) typology.*

Large Category <sup>7</sup>	Sub-category	<i>n</i>	% of total	Large Category <i>n</i>	% of total
<b>Information provision</b>	Public Service Announcement	127	9.5	635	47.4
	Operations & events	490	36.6		
	Social sharing	18	1.3		
<b>Input seeking</b>	Citizen information	36	2.7	36	2.7
	Fundraising	0	0		
<b>Online dialogue/ Offline interaction</b>	Online dialogue	137	10.2	202	15.1
	Offline discussion	14	1.1		
	Offline collaboration	51	3.8		
<b>Symbolic presentation</b>	Favourable presentation	198	14.8	466	34.8
	Political positioning	30	2.2		
	Symbolic act	221	16.5		
	Branding & marketing	17	1.3		
<b>Total</b>		1,339	100	1,339	100

Table 3

**Information provision.** Of the 1,339 tweets and retweets @YourAlberta produced in 2018, 47% were coded as *information provision*. This included public service announcements,

<sup>7</sup> Table categories based on DePaula et al.’s (2018) typology of government social media communications.

posts about normal government operations, and posts that shared links to websites outside of government on topics the government felt might be of interest.

Within *information provision*, tweets coded as *operations & events*, such as announcing a new policy, new funding for an organization, or the creation of new parks, were the most common type of tweet, accounting for 36% of all posted tweets. An example appears in Figure 1. *Public service announcement* was second at 9%, followed by *social sharing* at 1.3% of all tweets.



Figure 1. An operational tweet announcing proposed changes to post-secondary education

**Symbolic presentation.** The second largest category of tweet types was *symbolic presentation*, which included four subcategories (*favourable presentation*, *political positioning*, *symbolic acts* and *branding/marketing*) and made up 35% of all tweets. These tweets used language presenting the government in a positive light, acknowledged a holiday or social event, or took a clear position on a political issue. Almost 17% of @YourAlberta tweets were coded as *symbolic acts*, tweets recognizing a holiday, expressing condolences, or demonstrating gratitude

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(Figure 2). Nearly 15% of @YourAlberta's tweets were coded as *favourable presentation*.

Tweets in this category were often very similar to *operation and events*, but used language that was self-referential and explicitly linked government actions to positive outcomes (Figure 3).



Figure 2. A symbolic tweet



Figure 3. A tweet using favourable language

Just over 2% of tweets were coded as *political positioning*, where @YourAlberta expressed, or retweeted, a clear position on a political issue. For example, @YourAlberta tweeted or retweeted messages related to the Trans Mountain Pipeline and a campaign to encourage other Canadian provinces to support it. Finally, slightly more than 1% of tweets were coded as *branding and marketing*. These tweets primarily marketed the @511Alberta twitter account and the 511 Alberta mobile app to Albertans to increase the dissemination of public service announcements.

**Attempts at engagement.** This study considered tweets sorted into two of the broad categories, *input seeking* and *online dialogue and offline interaction*, as attempts by

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@YourAlberta to engage citizens in participation. These tweets asked for input on specific topics, invited citizens to provide feedback on surveys or through town halls, or encouraged citizens to participate in a government-related activity (Figure 4). In total, 18% (238) of @YourAlberta tweets were considered attempts at engagement.



Figure 4. A tweet encouraging participation in a government program (awards nomination)

**Input seeking.** *Input seeking* was divided into two categories: *citizen information* and *fundraising*. Tweets that asked for information from citizens on a specific topic, such as for personal information to help with an issue, were coded as *citizen information*. In total, 3% of @YourAlberta tweets were *citizen information* and fell into two areas: encouraging Albertans to participate in a survey, or asking specific citizens for more information, often about a complaint the person had made earlier. Although *fundraising* was also a subcategory within *input seeking*, no tweets were found in 2018 that fit into that subcategory.

***Online dialogue and offline interaction.*** *Online dialogue and offline interaction* accounted for 15% of @YourAlberta tweets divided across three subcategories: *online dialogue*, *offline discussion* and *offline collaboration*. 10% of @YourAlberta tweets were *online dialogue*. In general, these were tweets from @YourAlberta that were direct responses to a comment left by a citizen on a @YourAlberta post.

In total, 1% of @YourAlberta tweets were coded as *offline discussion*. These were generally tweets advertising or inviting citizens to a consultation session or town hall meeting. Tweets that invited citizens to participate in an ongoing government program, such as nominating citizens for awards, were coded as *offline collaboration* and made up 4% of @YourAlberta tweets.<sup>8</sup>

**RQ2: To what extent were engagement attempts successful?** To answer RQ2, the extent to which government attempts at engagement were successful, Twitter's definition of engagement – the “total number of times a user interacted with a tweet” (Twitter, 2019) through replies, retweets and likes or clicks on the tweet – was used to determine “success.” While the number of clicks was not able to be seen through Twitter's interface, it was decided that any tweet receiving at least one reply, retweet or like was a success. Tweets with no interactions were “unsuccessful.”

238 tweets were coded into the *input seeking* or *online dialogue and offline interaction* categories, and therefore considered attempts at engagement. On average, @YourAlberta tweets that attempted engagement received 1 reply (SD = 2.7), 3 retweets (SD = 7.7) and 3 likes (SD = 10.1). When comparing the total number of interactions received by all engagement attempts, most tweets received between 1 and 20 interactions. Only one engagement attempts received

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<sup>8</sup> Although the category is labelled “offline collaboration” it was decided that “offline” could refer to activities not done through Twitter, and not, strictly speaking, entirely off the internet.

more than 81 interactions, and only one received more than 100. The complete distribution is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Distribution of interactions across engagement tweets*

# of interactions	0	1-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	100+
# of tweets	58	159	10	7	2	1	1

*n* = 238

Table 4

From the 238 attempts at engagement, approximately 76% were “successful,” receiving at least one reply, retweet or like. Of the successful attempts, 45% received at least one reply, 34% received at least one retweet and 54% received at least one like. Only 12% of the successful attempts at engagement received at least one of each reply, retweet and like at the same time.

**RQ3: Characteristics of successful engagement attempts.** RQ3 explored the characteristics of the most successful attempts at engagement. In this case, the most successful tweets were selected by combining the total number of replies, retweets and likes of each tweet and selecting five with the highest numbers for analysis.

As noted in the previous chapter, Tatar et al. (2014) identified several factors that contribute to the popularity of web content, including the content itself (e.g. phrasing, the topic, or emotions the content is meant to evoke), the popularity and characteristics of the content creator, and how easy it is to share the content. Experts like Tatar et al. (2014), Marino and Lo Presti (2018) and @TwitterAU (2016) agree that evoking strong emotions is more likely to get people’s attention and increase engagement. Other characteristics of tweets likely to increase engagement are:

- The tweet uses simple language and/or is constructed simply (e.g. few characters);
- The tweet is informative, educational, inspiring and/or entertaining;

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- Includes creative elements, such as multimedia (e.g. photo, video, gif);
- Discusses a popular topic/person/organization/location;
- Provides readers with something to do/encourage participation;
- Uses hashtags and/or account tagging appropriately;
- Uses a “human” voice.

*November 17, 2018 – New Edmonton oilers/Calgary Flames licence plates.*



*Figure 5*

The most successful attempt at engagement in 2018 focused on specialty licence plates featuring the logos, colours and taglines of Alberta’s NHL hockey teams, the Edmonton Oilers and the Calgary Flames. This tweet has all the characteristics of successful tweets listed above: The language is simple, and the tweet is short. There is a creative image to draw attention and entertain. The topic involves two popular sports teams, and the tweet encourages participation in an activity – ordering new licence plates – both in the language used (“Order a new [...]

specialty plate...”) and by providing a link to more information. Most importantly, the tweet evokes strong emotions, particularly the emotional attachment of Albertans to sports teams and the competition between the two teams. For example, one reply to the tweet reads “Let’s beat Calgary on sales. Go Oilers go.”

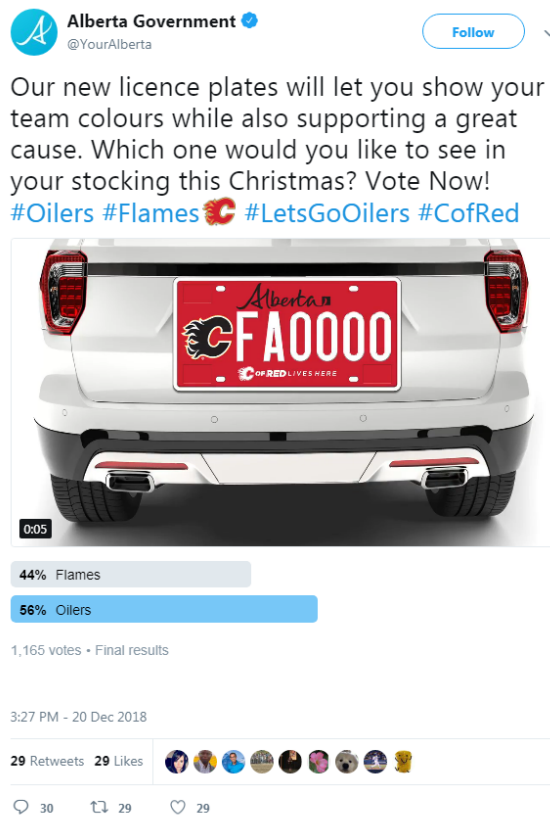
One aspect missing from this tweet is the use of relevant hashtags, though the tweet does include tagging of the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers Twitter accounts. If the goal is to maximize exposure to the tweet, tagging team accounts may be appropriate, as a retweet by either or both accounts would potentially expose the message to an audience of 1.5 million.<sup>9</sup> However, if the tweet had also included relevant hashtags (for example, fan-focused hashtags like #LetsGoOilers or #CofRed) it is possible that more people could have been exposed to the tweet, potentially increasing engagement numbers.

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<sup>9</sup> As of this writing, the Edmonton Oilers have more than 808,000 Twitter followers, and the Calgary Flames have more than 615,000.



*December 20, 2018 – Oilers/Flames licence plates.*



*Figure 6*

The second-most successful @YourAlberta tweet in 2018 was also about the Oilers and Flames specialty licence plates. Like the previous tweet, it has many of the characteristics of successful tweets. The language is simple; in three short sentences, the tweet gives the relevant background information (the government is offering new license plates, the license plates are in “team colours,” the purchase of the plates also supports a “good cause”), encourages readers to consider which plate they would like, and direct readers to participate in the poll. The tweet is informative and entertaining, providing a participatory activity for readers. The use of a gif demonstrating the various styles of the plates is also entertaining and attractive. The topic is emotionally evocative, again, drawing on the passion Albertans feel for their favourite team, as well as the competition between the teams. Instead of tagging team accounts, this tweet uses four

hashtags related to the hockey teams, two generic (#Oilers, #Flames), and two specifically used by fans of each team (#LetsGoOilers, #CofRed).

The combination of an evocative topic (hockey teams) with an activity (poll) and high visibility and share-ability (appropriate use of hashtags) contributed to making this tweet a successful example of engagement by @YourAlberta. Notably, though only 30, 29 and 33 people replied, retweeted and liked the tweet, respectively, 1,165 people participated in the poll.

*November 2, 2018 – Support for people with developmental disabilities.*



Figure 7

This tweet has many, but not all, of the characteristics expected from a successful tweet. It includes a graphic to attract attention, provides information about an upcoming event, and encourages participation, both in the tweet (by providing a link) and in the events themselves. Further, the replies this tweet received suggest that the topic (improving support for people with developmental disabilities) is emotionally evocative. Most of the replies were negative in tone,

critical of either the way government provides support for people with developmental disabilities, or the government in general. It is likely that much of the engagement the tweet received, particularly retweets, was due to readers interested in spreading the word about the community sessions. Based on the replies, most of the engaged Albertans appear to be part of, or connected to, the people with developmental disabilities community.

Missing from the tweet are hashtags or account tagging, which may have limited engagement. Arguably, the language used in the tweet could have also been simpler, using shorter sentences and words. The language could have also been warmer and more active, that is, more “human.” For example, the tweet text could be reversed to emphasize that the government values the feedback from Albertans on this issue, such as “We want to hear your thoughts on how we can improve supports for people with developmental disabilities. Here’s how you can get involved in conversations in your community [link].”

*June 20, 2018 – Local election reform survey.*



*Figure 8*

Although this tweet is the fourth most successful attempt at engagement issued by @YourAlberta in 2018, it is missing several characteristics of successful tweets. The tweet does include a visual element to draw attention and provides readers with something to do (participate in a survey). However, while the language is simple and the tweet is short, the voice used is very factual, robotic and passive, speaking as if the government was removed from the encouragement to participate, describing events rather than acknowledging it is part of them. A more “human” sounding tweet might put @YourAlberta (a representative of the government) into the context of the action, use inclusive language and phrases that are more personal. For example: “We want to hear your thoughts on local election reform. Fill out our online survey and tell us how we can improve elections in municipalities, school boards, Métis settlements and irrigation districts. Deadline is July 31 [link].”

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Local election reform, while an important subject, is arguably not a particularly popular topic. For example, no news stories could be found in a Google search on the election reform survey – although there was news coverage of the subsequent outcomes of the survey, which contributed to Alberta Bill 23: *An Act to Renew Local Democracy in Alberta*. However, for the small group of people interested in the subject, it may be a relatively emotional one, which could account for the high number of retweets. Readers passionate about local election reform may have retweeted to encourage their followers (who are likely to share interests) to participate.

Finally, this tweet did not include any hashtags or account tags, which may have limited its reach. The success of the tweet was primarily due to retweets from a small group of engaged citizens.

### *March 28, 2018 – Senior Service Awards.*



Figure 9

This tweet received a high number of likes, but few retweets and only two replies, though it does have most of the characteristics of successful tweets. The topic of senior citizens can be, for some, an emotional one. The tweet also includes a graphical element, though the photo is not as creative or interesting as other tweets. As with the other top engaging tweets, followers are invited to participate in an activity, and provided with more information and a link to do so. The language is simple and informal; for example, rather than use proper sentence structure at the beginning of the tweet such as “Do you know someone...” the tweet uses the conversational and informal “Know someone...” Finally, the tweet includes two hashtags that are appropriate for the topic, and likely helped in the tweet’s success.

### **Discussion**

In this exploratory study of one of the Government of Alberta’s Twitter accounts, the majority of messages posted by @YourAlberta focus on government operations, events, and symbolic presentation. In general, the Government of Alberta appears to be focused on one-way communications through Twitter, and not on engagement with Albertans. This finding is consistent with other studies of government communications (e.g. Bonsón, et al., 2012; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Holland, 2015; Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Majumdar, 2017; Mergel, 2014; Mossberger et al., 2013). Importantly, these findings are consistent with DePaula et al.’s (2018) analysis of U.S. Facebook accounts. Like DePaula et al. (2018), this study also found that *information provision* tweets were the most common type of tweet produced by @YourAlberta in 2018 (47% of all tweets) followed by *symbolic presentation* tweets (35% of all tweets).

The Government of Alberta did attempt engagement through Twitter, however, to varying degrees of success. Nearly 18% of all tweets were engagement attempts, such as asking citizens to participate in surveys or nominate other citizens for awards. @YourAlberta appears to

have had success using a poll in combination with a popular topic, Alberta sports teams, receiving 30 replies, 29 retweets and 33 likes, and more than 1,100 votes in the poll. Although @YourAlberta only used a Twitter poll once in 2018, the results suggest that opportunities for increased engagement may exist through the use of polls, particularly if the topic is of interest to Albertans.

The characteristics that made attempts at engagement successful closely followed best practice advice offered by Twitter itself, among others. The most successfully engaging tweets dealt with emotionally evocative topics, such as sports teams or election reform. They involved some form of creative graphical element. Most were written in a relatively informal or “human” voice, and they provided an avenue for participation, such as a survey, poll or award nomination. This is not surprising, as participation in something usually comes from an emotional core; people don’t often engage with something they do not care about.

Although @YourAlberta did make some attempts at engagement, the engagement numbers could be described as low. Though “good” engagement is subjective, an average of 1 reply, 3 retweets and 3 likes per tweet suggests there is significant room for growth in terms of engagement. The account has nearly 114,000 followers; assuming at least half of those followers see each tweet at some point and have an opportunity to engage with the tweet, this means that 0.01% of @YourAlberta’s followers are engaging with any given tweet.<sup>10</sup> Given this low rate, we can conclude that, in general, the messages posted by @YourAlberta are not very engaging.

There are several possible reasons for low engagement numbers. For example, many @YourAlberta tweets may not include enough of the characteristics of highly engaging tweets

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<sup>10</sup> Several assumptions must be made here, including the assumption that most of @YourAlberta’s followers are not bots. This consideration also does not factor in the reach of tweets beyond @YourAlberta followers that comes from being retweeted, even if it is only nine times.

explored in RQ3. Further, some scholars note that Twitter is not a good medium for political deliberation or participation (Gayo-Avello, 2015; Jaeger, 2006; Rishel, 2011). It is also possible that the @YourAlberta administrators do not view Twitter as an appropriate space in which to converse with Albertans. This approach would be counter to the government's Communications Policy, however, particularly the spirit of communicating with Albertans through channels of their choosing, and being "social" on social media.

The lack of engagement may also be connected to a lack of resources, including time and expertise. Certainly, it is far quicker to take information from a press release and push it out through Twitter; it is far more time consuming to design an online poll or respond to hundreds of questions every day. Further, engagement – particularly engagement that involves evoking strong enough emotions for participation – can be risky, and government agencies are typically averse to risks that could give other political parties fuel for criticism. It is much safer to simply present facts, such as a policy announcement, than it is to invite unpredictable input from the public. Conversations or online polls expose the government to higher consequences, including political, if something goes wrong with the communication.

Another explanation for low engagement is that the Government of Alberta has followed the model of government social media adoption outlined by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) and Mergel (2014) and has, as a result, become less engaging. In this model, social media accounts begin with the experimentation of lower-level (non-executive) communications professionals who use language and approaches that reflect their personal Twitter use. As time passes and the government account becomes "official," it enters what Mergel and Bretschneider (2013) refer to as the "Institutionalized" phase. In this phase, communications through social media accounts are highly formalized, and "no online interactions are left to occur randomly"



(Mergel, 2014, p. 167). Messages are mostly one-way (“push”), there is a focus placed on representation rather than interaction, and typically a form of limited customer service (Mergel, 2014). From my personal experience with the Government of Alberta, I know this was the path taken by several ministry social media accounts, and it would follow that the same occurred for @YourAlberta.

One of the most interesting results of this study is that it appears to underline the power differential that exists within the structure of communications to and from the Government of Alberta as indicated by Kiss (2014) in his discussion of “managed participation.” The government remains in control of the timing, topics and methods of sending out tweets that provide opportunities for citizen participation; attempts by citizens to engage in conversations or advocate for changes in policy can be easily ignored, especially as they often appear as individual comments rather than a collective outcry. Low engagement to government tweets meant to be engaging could therefore be a reaction to this power differential; Albertans could be satisfying their need to raise concerns about the government by using other channels, such as Twitter communities or Facebook groups, shifting the power to control the conversation away from the government.

**Notable findings.** Two findings were particularly notable in this study. First, several tweets were found that did not appear in the normal @YourAlberta timeline that had substantially higher engagement, generally reaching 200-300 replies, retweets and likes. These tweets could only be found by opening a reply @YourAlberta had made to a comment on the original tweet. Otherwise, the tweet was, in effect, deleted. I contacted a colleague who is an administrator of the @YourAlberta account who informed me that these tweets were advertisements, and were only visible for a certain period of time before being removed from the

Twitter stream. As advertisements, these tweets had far greater reach than normal, and were also specifically targeted to certain populations. In the few I was able to find, they were also significantly different from other tweets in their language, topic choices, and creative elements, similar to how a newspaper advertisement is more colourful, evocative and eye-catching than a news story.

These tweets were notable because they add another layer to the question of engagement and what that means for government organizations. These types of tweets were not considered in this study, and future research may want to focus on how advertising and regular communication on Twitter diverge or overlap, raising questions around issues such as paying for engagement or followers, and further blurring boundaries in government communication and engagement.

The second surprise, while not a finding of the study per sé, was the recognition of my own unconscious bias that crept into the coding of tweets. The definition of what was favourable language and what was operational was highly subjective, and I found that my experience working in government communications led to a preclusion to code many operational tweets as *favourable presentation*. When challenged by my independent coder on these decisions, I could only cite an assumed knowledge of the intent of the tweet's writer, based on experience, rather than the text of tweets as presented. This bias contributed to the low kappa scores in the *information provision* and *symbolic presentation* reliability scores above. When the coding of a sample of the tweets was repeated, a conscious effort was required to not let that bias further influence the study.

**Limitations and future considerations.** Though this study was a good first step in better understanding Government of Alberta communications, there were some limitations. For example, the study focused on a single case of Government of Alberta social media use and the

findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other Alberta government accounts. Future scholars could explore Facebook and/or Instagram use to see if similar patterns emerge on those channels, or run a comparison across channels, including other ministry accounts, to see if certain channels are more or less engaging.

A significant limitation of the study was that the examination of the specific number of people who were exposed to each of @YourAlberta's tweets, either through retweets or otherwise, was out of scope of the project. It is possible, for example, that a tweet could be retweeted only 10 times, but one or more of the retweeting accounts could have millions of followers. A complete social network analysis of @YourAlberta and its followers could potentially reveal a new layer of "hidden" engagement not captured by Twitter's metrics, driven entirely by the number, reach and engagement of influencer accounts tied to @YourAlberta.

This study also treats replies, retweets and likes as equivalent when considering measures of success. One could argue that replies require more effort or engagement than retweets and likes, and should be given more weight when considering successful engagement. This would impact any future replication of RQ2 and RQ3. The decision to treat replies, retweets and likes the same also did not account for the quality of each, which could also be an avenue for future study. For example, some retweets or likes could have come from bots, and could reasonably be excluded from consideration when looking at actual engagement. Similarly, replies from Albertans could be scrutinized further, with more weight given to longer or more thoughtful replies.

Further, only replies, retweets and likes were considered when analyzing engagement. Other engagement indicators, such as link clicks, new follows, or profile clicks, were not considered. The actual engagement numbers for @YourAlberta, as calculated by Twitter's

internal analytics may present a different story, and the @YourAlberta team may use other metrics, particularly link clicks, to determine success, rather than replies, retweets or likes.

Finally, this study examined communication from a single side only — that of the government. An important question that should be explored is what Albertans expect from government communications in the age of social media. A secondary question might be: How do Albertans want to interact with the government? These questions are important, particularly when considering engagement, because they begin to factor in the preferences and desires of the other half of the conversation the Government of Alberta is trying to have. The data suggests @YourAlberta is not engaging; asking Albertans what would be engaging seems like a reasonable first step to address that, and echoes the first rule of communications: “know your audience.”

### **Conclusion**

This study is an exploratory first step in analyzing and evaluating the Government of Alberta’s social media use. Through the use of content analysis on a case study of tweets from @YourAlberta, this study found, consistent with other studies, that the Government of Alberta primarily delivers messages in a one-way fashion, and very few messages can be considered attempts at engagement. Of those attempts, just over two-thirds could be considered successful, though the levels of engagement received by @YourAlberta tweets is low. While @YourAlberta does appear to follow some of the recommended best practices in crafting tweets, such as the inclusion of graphical elements and giving followers something to do with the information being presented (often following a link), it is likely that the overwhelmingly one-way approach is limiting citizen participation in communications efforts through Twitter.

The next chapter concludes this report by summarizing all the elements of this study into a final discussion about the implications of these findings, recommendations for government engagement through social media, and areas of research future scholars may consider based on this work.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

How governments engage with citizens is an important aspect of democracy. While citizens are increasingly calling for more participation in the government decision-making process, the opportunities for participation remain limited, and entirely government controlled.

Social media's ubiquity, and its ability to cross the boundaries between public and private interactions, has led to citizens attempting to use it to participate in government, primarily by expressing opinions at the government; though research into the use of social media to include citizens in decision-making process has shown that it can be a positive experience for all parties (e.g. Gordon et al., 2017; Majumdar, 2017). However, many governments have resisted the call to use social media in a more dialogical fashion, preferring instead to use it as a broadcast tool to transmit information in a one-way fashion.

The Government of Alberta faces a similar situation. Kiss (2014), for example, showed that Albertans have been increasingly interested in being a part of government decision-making. At the same time, there have been shifts in global perspectives of government transparency, openness and interaction as government shift service delivery into the digital realm. However, there does not appear to be significant research into how the Alberta government has responded to these pressures from a communications perspective, a gap this study attempts to address. Specifically, this study examined the Government of Alberta's use of Twitter in 2018 through three research questions:

- RQ1: To what extent does the Government of Alberta attempt to engage the public through the @YourAlberta Twitter account?
- RQ2: Of the tweets determined to be engagement attempts, to what extent were those attempts successful, as measured by likes, retweets, or replies?

- RQ3: Of the tweets determined to be successful attempts at engagement, what are the characteristics that may have contributed to their success and how closely do they align with recommended best practices?

This final chapter summarizes the key findings of the study, provides a discussion of what the findings may mean for the Government of Alberta, identifies some areas of future research that this study points to, and concludes with a final thought on the implications of the study results.

### **Summary of Findings**

Echoing the findings of DePaula et al. (2018), Holland (2015), Mergel (2014) and several other scholars, this study found that the Government of Alberta primarily used Twitter to communicate in a one-way manner. Tweets that could be considered attempts at engagement, such as asking or answering questions or inviting citizens to offline activities, were rare, occurring less than 20% of the time.

As a result of attempts at engagement being rare, or perhaps because of it, citizen participation in tweets meant to be engaging has been very low. Although about 76% of attempts at engagement received at least some interaction from the public, the total number of interactions was rarely more than 20. On average, attempts at engagement received one reply, three retweets and three likes. Though this study was not able to examine the total views on each tweet that may exist via networked connections, if we consider that the @YourAlberta account has nearly 114,000 followers, there could be a debate as to whether these engagements are “successful.”

That said, a few @YourAlberta tweets were more successful than others, primarily because they included aspects recommended by experts for creating engaging tweets. Some of these characteristics included emotionally evocative subjects, like sports teams, simple language,

using creative elements and providing readers with something to do. A tweet that used a Twitter poll asking readers to decide between an Edmonton Oilers or Calgary Flames license plate, for example, received more than 1,000 interactions on the poll itself.

These findings suggest that, though the Government of Alberta rarely attempts to engage Albertans through Twitter, if given an emotionally evocative topic and an appropriate outlet for participation, a significant number of citizens may do so.

### **Findings in Context**

These results are not surprising; as noted, many other studies have shown similar results from government agencies around the world. However, no other known study has evaluated and quantified the types of communications used by the Government of Alberta, on Twitter or otherwise. This study places an Alberta perspective on an issue that appears to impact government as a whole: responding to pressures to be more open, transparent, engaging and responsive in an age where digital technology is quickly erasing boundaries between public and private, and all but eliminating traditional barriers to participation in governance, such as time or location. As an exploratory first step in better understanding the communications practices of the Government of Alberta, this study may serve as a foundation for future research into how Alberta in particular has responded to these pressures, and hopefully will play a role in helping the Government of Alberta chart a new path towards more open, dialogic and community-minded communications.

The results could have an explanation in relation to previous research. For example, the results support Bertot et al.'s (2012) findings that government communicators recognized the benefits of using social media to communicate with the public, especially in providing “customer” services, but the adoption of social media moved faster than policy and official



practice could keep up. Other scholars, such as Ess (2018), Rishel (2011) and Gayo-Avello (2018) suggest that social media has too many drawbacks, such as contributing to polarization, to be an effective tool for democratic deliberation. In this case, @YourAlberta may consider engagement a fruitless effort, or the one-way information provision approach could be a reaction to negative online experiences and subsequent risk-management approaches by high-level managers, similar to those found in Mergel's (2014) study of government agencies.

The findings also appear to confirm Kiss' (2014) concept of "managed participation," where the means and methods of citizen participation are heavily controlled by the government, and very often of a political, rather than public interest, nature. Ironically, Kiss notes this type of strategic communications only serves to undermine credibility and make subsequent communications efforts more difficult. This may be working in concert with Thijssen and Van Dooren's (2016) findings that people, particularly youth, aren't interested in participating in online processes, like engagement, that only replicate offline processes. If the Government of Alberta is interested in using social media to help increase credibility, and potentially engagement through social media, @YourAlberta may need to abandon the desire to manage the participation on social media, and take a more social perspective.

### **Future Direction**

There are several directions that future researchers could take the topic of government and social media explored in this study. For example, this study explored only one Alberta government social media account over a single year. Future research may look at multiple accounts over a larger period of time. Future research may also look more in depth at the types of interactions @YourAlberta received to better explain how Albertans interact with the account; this study treated all interactions equally, which may have limited insights into the interactions.

## HOW THE GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA USES TWITTER TO ENGAGE ALBERTANS

More research could be done into the reasons why the Alberta government (and other governments) fall into the pattern of a primarily information-provision approach, and whether or not there are ways in which governments can overcome this and use social media in a more social and community focused manner. Finally, how the recent change in government in Alberta has impacted the use of government social media may also be an enlightening area of study.

This study raises a number of important questions that Government of Alberta communicators may consider exploring in the future as well. First is the question of how the government wants to be seen by citizens – as a collaborative, open and citizen-focused entity, or as inaccessible and closed system of information delivery. Are government communicators satisfied with only transmitting information out, even though citizens are increasingly demanding to be part of the conversation? Given the results of this study, is the Government of Alberta truly fulfilling its responsibility to be more open, transparent and accessible as demanded by both the Government of Canada and citizens alike? Are Albertans satisfied with the form of “managed participation” that government communicators continue to perpetuate through social media? Could the strength of social media in helping facilitate discussion and build communities be leveraged better to accomplish the goals of good governance? These are only a few of the questions that the Government of Alberta must address as it comes to terms with how to appropriately and effectively integrate social media into its communications practices.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study was a first foray into examining how the Government of Alberta was using Twitter to communicate with Albertans. Primarily, the study quantified the types of communications the government engaged in through the @YourAlberta Twitter account and examined the extent to which the government attempted to engage citizens. Second, the study

examined the extent to which those attempts were successful in getting engagement through likes, retweets or replies. Finally, the characteristics of the most successful tweets were analyzed and compared with a series of best practices for engaging tweets identified by several experts. The findings showed that the Alberta government did not attempt to engage citizens often, opting instead to primarily take a one-way information provision approach with tweets. This is consistent with what several other researchers have found in other governments using social media around the world. In the instances where the government did attempt to engage Albertans, it was not particularly successful; even the most successful tweets received a reaction from a small fraction of @YourAlberta's total followers. Even so, these tweets were successful primarily because they followed many of the best practices for engaging tweets: they used simple and "human language," gave readers something to do, included highly visual elements, and dealt with emotionally evocative topics. The findings suggest that there may be opportunities to increase engagement through the use of more interactive elements such as polls, though much more research into what this may look like – as well as work to build @YourAlberta as a place where participation is expected – needs to be done.

This is an important first step, however, addressing a gap in the literature as it relates to Alberta. Hopefully the results of this study lead to further discussion between government communicators as to where @YourAlberta, and possibly other government social media channels, may go in the future. It is clear that citizens want more access to government, and social media can be an excellent way to manage that, if done correctly. The Government of Alberta's (2018) Communications Policy states that "government social media will be social" (pp. 13-14), and this study has hopefully set a helpful benchmark from which @YourAlberta administrators can take the account towards that goal.

That goal is not just about putting the “social” back into “social media,” it is also about helping create a more democratic government. As Diamond (2004) said, a key element of democracy is the active participation of citizens. Digital media, particularly social media, offers several ways to facilitate participation, from something as simple as taking in feedback, to more complex engagements like participatory budgeting. But the most important aspect of social media is that it places all participants on the same level; all have the same access to Twitter, all have the same opportunity to speak, and limitations of time and space are eliminated.<sup>11</sup> In this new dynamic, “social” refers to community, sharing thoughts and ideas reciprocally and working with others to achieve a common goal. It is the difference between having a back-and-forth conversation with multiple people at a party, and standing in the corner of a crowded room, shouting at no one.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, only being able to provide feedback in an engagement session held on a specific date at a specific location.

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**Appendix A – Coding Sheet Sample**

		Tweet Text	Primary code	Secondary coding	Tweet type	If Retweet, who?	Replies	Retweets	Likes	Notes
1	Jan 1 2018	Happy New Year! Wishing you and yours a wonderful 2018.	Symbolic act		Original Content		4	2	13	
2	Jan 2 2018	Changes to Alberta’s Employment Standards Code are now in effect. Details for employers are available via a free online webinar - sign up now for sessions throughout January: <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/employment-standards-webinars.aspx">https://www.alberta.ca/employment-standards-webinars.aspx</a> ... #abbiz	Operations & events	Offline discussion	Original Content			22	10	
3	Jan 2 2018	Our list of 85 reasons to love Alberta Parks is a great place to start building a bucket list that will keep you healthy, active and connected to nature in the New Year: <a href="https://goo.gl/64fEtY">https://goo.gl/64fEtY</a> #ABparks	Favourable presentation		Retweet	Alberta Parks				
4	Jan 2 2018	Hello, IQAS cannot provide a statement about assessment results prior to completing the assessment process. Info on the application process is available online: <a href="http://www.alberta.ca/iqas-immigration.aspx">http://www.alberta.ca/iqas-immigration.aspx</a> ...	Operations & events		Reply		1			
5	Jan 2 2018	New rules say employer must provide five days unpaid. Employer can choose to make them paid if they want to.	Operations & events		Reply		1		1	
6	Jan 2 2018	Knowing the signs of an opioid overdose can help save a life. Call 911 if you suspect you or a loved one are experiencing these symptoms: <a href="http://bit.ly/2IA8vWN">http://bit.ly/2IA8vWN</a>	Public Service Announcement		Retweet	Alberta Health				
7	Jan 2 2018	Affected Mackenzie County residents should continue to minimize natural gas usage until further notice. Please visit the Mackenzie County Facebook page for more information and status updates. Contact 780-502-9543 if you need assistance.	Public Service Announcement		Quote Tweet	Alberta Emergency Alert	1	5	4	
8	Jan 2 2018	The value of Alberta wholesale sales increased by 15.0% to \$6.79 billion between October 2016 and 2017. Nationally, wholesale trade increased 10.0%	Operations & events		Retweet	Alberta Economic Development and Trade				

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		over the same time period. For more: <a href="http://bit.ly/2qwlw03">http://bit.ly/2qwlw03</a>							
Jan 3 9	2018	Nominate a remarkable Albertan for the Order of Excellence - our province's highest honour. Applications for this year close February 15: <a href="https://www.lieutenantgovernor.ab.ca/aoe/nominate/index.html">https://www.lieutenantgovernor.ab.ca/aoe/nominate/index.html</a> ...	Offline collaboration		Original Content		2	21	14
Jan 3 10	2018	As of Jan 1, businesses in Alberta can no longer offer or advertise UV artificial tanning to minors under 18. UV tanning before 35 increases risk of melanoma by almost 60%: <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=512315F93D528-9AB8-F906-C578AA6362736669">https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=512315F93D528-9AB8-F906-C578AA6362736669</a> ...	Public Service Announcement		Original Content		4	37	43
Jan 4 11	2018	Natural Gas Supply Alert Ended Jan04 849AM Mackenzie #23 <a href="http://emergencyalert.alberta.ca">http://emergencyalert.alberta.ca</a> #ABemerg	Public Service Announcement		Retweet	Alberta Emergency Alert			
Jan 4 12	2018	Last summer, our STEP program helped thousands of students get valuable work experience with almost 1,400 employers. Applications are open to employers for wage subsidy in 2018. The deadline is Feb 9: <a href="http://www.albertacanada.com/employers/recruit/summer-temporary-employment-program.aspx">http://www.albertacanada.com/employers/recruit/summer-temporary-employment-program.aspx</a> ... #abpse #abbiz	Favourable presentation		Original Content		1	39	40
Jan 5 13	2018	The government wants to hear from survivors of the Sixties Scoop and their families to help inform a meaningful apology. Six engagement sessions will be held across the province from Jan – March and experiences can also be shared online: <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/sixties-scoop-apology-engagement.aspx">https://www.alberta.ca/sixties-scoop-apology-engagement.aspx</a> ...	Offline discussion		Original Content			25	24
Jan 5 14	2018	Learn more about Energy Efficiency Alberta's programs including online rebates, home improvement savings and incentives for businesses: <a href="https://www.energycanada.ca/">https://www.energycanada.ca/</a> #abclimate	Operations & events		Quote Tweet	Energy Efficiency Alberta			

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15	Jan 5 2018	I would like to wish Albertans of the Sikh faith a very joyous day of celebration on the 351st anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh Ji's birth: <a href="http://bit.ly/2CJxJcA">http://bit.ly/2CJxJcA</a>	Symbolic act		Retweet	Premier Notley				
16	Jan 5 2018	Share your thoughts and priorities for Budget 2018 - the online survey closes February 2: <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/budget-consultations.aspx">https://www.alberta.ca/budget-consultations.aspx ...</a>	Citizen information		Original Content		2	3	3	
17	Jan 7 2018	I want to wish Orthodox Christians across Alberta a day filled with the most treasured gifts: family, friends, faith and traditions. From my family to yours, I wish you a Merry Christmas and happy holidays. May your loved ones enjoy good health, happiness and prosperity in 2018.	Symbolic act		Retweet	Premier Notley				
18	Jan 8 2018	Hi Jayci. Carbon levy rebates will be mailed or deposited directly by the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) in 4 quarterly payments: January, April, July and October. For more information, visit <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/climate-carbon-pricing.aspx#p184s3">https://www.alberta.ca/climate-carbon-pricing.aspx#p184s3 ....</a>	Operations & events		Reply				1	
19	Jan 8 2018	Students are back to school after the holidays. Be extra cautious in school zones and watch for buses and students. Do your part to keep kids safe. #abed #abroads	Public Service Announcement		Original Content		38	25		
20	Jan 8 2018	Alberta's labour market added 26,300 jobs (15,500 FT/10,800 PT ) month-over-month in December 2017, the largest monthly employment gain since 2011. For more details, visit <a href="http://finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/economic_bulletins/2018/2018-0105-alberta-economic-review.pdf">http://finance.alberta.ca/aboutalberta/economic_bulletins/2018/2018-0105-alberta-economic-review.pdf ...</a> #ableg	Operations & events		Retweet	Alberta Finance				
21	Jan 8 2018	Changes to Alberta's Employment Standards Code are now in effect. Details for employers are available via a free online webinar - sign up now for sessions in January : <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/employment-standards-webinars.aspx">https://www.alberta.ca/employment-standards-webinars.aspx ...</a> #abbiz	Operations & events		Original Content		1	2	1	
22	Jan 8 2018	Hi Matthew, thank you for your patience. Energy Efficiency Alberta is responsible for the Residential No-	Operations & events		Reply					

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		Charge Energy Savings program. The agency continues to contact all registrants to schedule installations. They are committed to addressing all registrants by summer 2018.								
Jan 8 23 2018		Areas of central and northern Alberta are under a heavy snowfall warning. Stay safe on the roads - check @511Alberta for updates, prepare for winter conditions and adjust driving habits accordingly. #abroads	Public Service Announcement		Original Content		1	25	7	
Jan 8 24 2018		Hi Sukhpreet, thank you for your inquiry. Please visit <a href="https://www.alberta.ca/iqas-contact.aspx">https://www.alberta.ca/iqas-contact.aspx</a> ... and fill out the online contact form with your name and file number. A member of the IQAS team will get back to you within 3-5 business days.	Operations & events		Reply					
Jan 8 25 2018		It's official! The 3rd intake for the Capital Investment Tax Credit will run from Jan. 15 to Mar. 16. For details about the program and how to apply, visit: <a href="http://bit.ly/2rm0Gpw">http://bit.ly/2rm0Gpw</a>	Operations & events		Retweet	Alberta Economic Development and Trade				