

# The Public Value of Social Media in the UK Public Sector

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**Abstract.** Over time public sector organisations in the UK have invested heavily on ICT projects to transform their services. During the last couple of years, Social Media applications have been used by the public sector as a complementary tool to make services more effective and transparent. In this context, the implementations of ICT projects have followed private sector business models and principles. Yet research shows that many ICT enabled initiatives have failed to deliver the desired outcomes for public sector organisations. While the evaluation of ICT projects in the last two decades have been primarily based on quantitative measures that focused on economic and technical outputs, recent studies have emerged that highlights the significance of creating public value through ICT projects. In this respect, social media applications can play a significant role. The aim of this study is to use public value framework as a lens to understand the impact of Social Media applications in generating public value when used in a local government context.

**Keywords.** Public value, social media public sector, new public management (NPM), services introduction

## Introduction

In the last three decades, the UK Government has implemented several initiatives to transform the management and service delivery capabilities of their public administration. These initiatives have been based on structural reforms, efficiency, control, coordination, performance management and managerial leadership [6]. Interestingly, ICT in general and electronic government (e-government) in particular was introduced in the late 1990s as a tool to improve the range and quality of public services offered to citizens and businesses and to make governments more efficient, effective, transparent and accountable [18]. Thus, e-government has increasingly become an integral part of transformation efforts in the public sector. Weerakkody et al. [42] define the e-government influenced transformation of public sector organisations as the “transformation of government operations, internal and external processes, structures and culture to enable the realisation of citizen-centric services that are transparent, cost effective and efficient” (p. 321). More recently, Social media has been used as a new channel for delivering public services that aid citizen engagement and participation. Government organisations have used social media applications and benefited from greater transparency and accountability, improved accessibility of public services, improved

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efficiency in public sector, improved quality and effectiveness of public services and empowered citizens [21]. Such use of social media to transform public services are characterised by some as 'public sector behaving similar to the private sector'. A number of studies have highlighted that government organisations use new public management paradigms as a strategy to implement their online service delivery projects [19,20,34,35]. Social media is linked with the replacement of new public management (NPM) governance paradigm to digital era governance (DEG) that enables participation, transparency, collaboration, crowd sourcing and sharing of information within government organisations and across government organisations [14]. Kelly et al., [23] outlined that in the 1980s and 1990s government policies underpinned by NPM were evaluated through financial practices used by private sector businesses and ignored other outcomes that are hard to measure in quantitative terms. Therefore, the literature indicates that evaluation of social media use in the public sector should focus on achieving desired outcomes rather than narrowly focusing on cost efficiency. The aim of this study is to use public value framework as a lens to understand the impact of Social Media applications in generating public value when used in a local government context. In line with the aim, this study will investigate the research question of how is public value achieved through the use of social media applications for local government authorities? In order to explore the research aim and research question, this paper is structured as follows: the next section will describe the evolution of ICT in Public Sector; then it will define social media within the context of government organizations; thereafter it will critically explain public value theory followed by the description of a case study and finally providing a discussion and conclusion for the study.

## **1. The Evolution of ICT in the UK Public Sector**

Over the last three decades there were several major efforts to transform the organisations and management of central government in the UK [26]. The management of public sector has been the centre of reforming attention at all times, however the pace accelerated in 1980's [3,16]. The UK government promised a reduction of waste and bureaucracy in government during this period [7,8,33,38]. In addition, the government favoured a more 'business like' approach and emphasised on the three principles of efficiency, effectiveness and economy [39]. Alongside these initiatives, in 1980's the UK government further used ICT as a vehicle to transform government organisations [14]. ICT was used to shift the public organisations from traditional hierarchical bureaucracy to a more dynamic customer focussed networks that provided better public services. A good example of an information technology project in the 1980s is the installation of 35000 computer terminals in all social security departments where 18 million benefit enquiries a year were handled [38]. The development of ICT emphasised on making the public sector more efficient, competitive, decentralised and accountable [14,19]. A large number of studies highlighted this trend as NPM paradigm and the UK government used it as a strategy to implement its ICT projects [19,20,34,35].

In the late 1990's another major set of reforms was launched under the title of 'Modernising Government Initiative' by the newly elected labour government at that time in the UK [15]. This initiative intended to be a key element in the UK public sector and meant to bring a 'step change' in the functioning of civil services rather than a continuous improvement [5]. The main aim of modernising government was to make public services more joined up, provide high quality and efficient services and design

services upon the needs of service users and not providers. The Modernising Government Initiative aimed to use ICT as its core for transformation; therefore the government developed a number of ICT strategies to improve public services labelled as e-government strategic framework, Transformational government strategy and Government ICT Strategy. The ICT alterations that occurred in the late 1980's had very limited transformative impact, yet the more recent period with development in the Internet had great implications on public services. In the current period, ICT is used to provide electronic services that publish information and enable citizens to freely interact and transact with government organisations. Furthermore, ICT is used to transform public services through facilitating collaboration and participation of different stakeholders [14]. For example, the merger of employment service and welfare benefits operations in the UK's Department of Work and Pensions and the integration of Inland Revenue and HM Customs and Excise into a single national tax agency hugely rested on extensive IT integration programs [14]. The public administration literature identified this new trend of reforms as joined-up government, whole of government, collaborative governance, new public governance, public value management and digital era governance [6,14,32,37]. These paradigms demonstrate the emergence of a new form of network governance and government organisations use ICT to support participation between the networks. In recent years, social media platforms are used as a participation tool to support the new networked forms of organisations. The benefits of social media application for government organisations include greater transparency and accountability of public sector, improving accessibility of public services, improving efficiency in public sector, improving quality and effectiveness of public services, supporting new models of governance, empowering citizens and bridging the digital divide [21,44,45]. In particular, local councils are using social media as a way to engage and communicate with huge number of residents at a local level that was previously not possible. Furthermore, other benefits of social media applications for local councils include, cost savings, boosting democratic engagement and increasing staff collaboration and communication [45,46].

## **2. Social Media in the Public Sector**

Social media refers to a set of online tools that provide platforms to create online communities to connect people and share information. Social media tools include Blogs, Wikis, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Four-Square, YouTube or Flickr and many more. Social media tools are designed to promote and to facilitate the sharing and diffusion of information through social linking and interactions among people [31]. Davis and Mintz [13] have distinguished social media applications into four characteristics. The first characteristic is user-generated social content where it enables site visitors to submit contents that others can access. The second characteristic is social networking where it allows users of social media to join together in online groups and relationships, which also enable users to see identity related information about the people to whom they are connected. The third characteristic is collaboration that allows users to engage in conversations, co-creation of content, collaborative filtering, and collective action. The fourth characteristic is cross platform data sharing which allow users to share content through transferring data across sites. Furthermore, social media can be also categorised into internal based and external based applications in a government context [9]. The internal based applications could include internal blogs, wikis, video

webcasts and other applications that are maintained and controlled by government organisations [44]. On the other hand, external based social media applications could include Twitter, Facebook, Blogspot, YouTube and other channels that are handled by third part organisations which government organisations have no control but are leveraged to engage with the citizens. In case of Governments, these social media applications are creating architecture of participation which enable users not only to be passive consumers of content and services but also active contributors and designers in their own right. The public sector agencies that use social media application often experience a high level of participation with citizen [36]. Moreover, social media platforms are used for cross agency co-operation within public sector, for example, Doctors.net.uk is an online community for doctors and medical [21]. The use of social media in government organisations have demonstrated or claimed concrete efficiency savings through encouraging users to shift to cheaper channels and increasing staff productivity [44]. Therefore, social media has a huge impact on public services and exploits connections between users, thus provide multiple opportunities to create added value to services [21].

Social media is also linked with the replacement of new public management (NPM) governance paradigm to digital era governance (DEG) that enables participation, transparency, collaboration, crowd sourcing and sharing information within government organisations and across government organisations [14]. This new form of digital era governance highlights that the end result of using social media applications should be to achieve public value. However, scholars such as Kelly et al., [23], Cordella and Bonina [11] and Sivarajah et al. [44] argue that government organisations are currently imitating private sector techniques in evaluating social media applications and mainly focusing on private values. In this respect, public sector should not imitate private sector in search for public value, instead public managers should be given the task of defining public value in the context of public sector and should reposition their organisations to create that value [29]. Similarly, governing is not the same as buying and selling goods in a market economy, thus defining public value from private sector experiences may not be appropriate in the public sector [37]. Moreover, government organisations are evaluating social media on the concept of cost efficiency and measuring media results or outputs [11,17]. For example, the amount of fans or visitors in an organisation's social media site will not generate any benefit if it is not creating public value. Thus, this form of evaluation ignores other set of outcomes desired by the public [11,22,23]. This study will develop a public value framework and use it as a lens to describe the impact of social media applications in the UK public sector.

### **3. Public Value Theory**

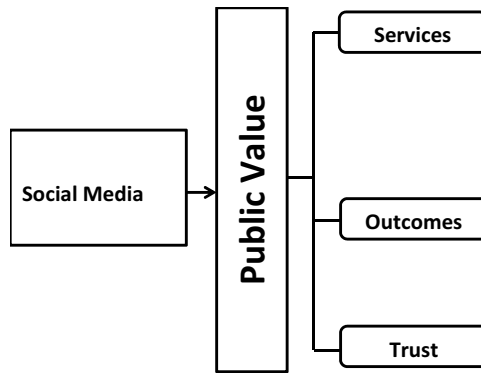
The concept of public value theory was first introduced by Moore in the US [29]. Since its emergence public value theory has grown interest among both academics and practitioners. Moore's value theory proposed a strategic triangle which posits that a strategy for a public sector organisation must meet three broad tests. First, it must be aimed at creating something significantly valuable, secondly it must be legitimate and politically sustainable, and thirdly it must be operationally and administratively feasible [2]. In the UK, the concept of public value theory was first introduced in a cabinet office report [23]. The cabinet office report observed that public value can be outlined in three broad dimensions; services, outcomes and trust or legitimacy. Furthermore, Stoker [37] pro-

posed public value as a new public governance paradigm and outlined four new propositions to guide public managers in generating public value. However, the propositions are normative and are not tested empirically in real life. O'Flynn [30] further argued that public value management tends to focus towards one best way orientation and is unclear about the level of the public sector to which it applies. Moreover, Alford and Hughes [1] suggested that public managers should not use a universally fit model for delivering public value; rather they should use an approach that focuses on what is most appropriate on the particular circumstance.

Moore's Public value framework is criticised for giving far too much responsibility to managers and demands insufficient accountability from them [43]. Moreover, Alford and O'Flynn [2] critique public value by questioning whether it is an empirically derived theory or normative prescription. Benington [4] developed an alternative public value framework and defined it in term of ecological, political, economic, social and culture aspects of value. Coats and Passmore [10] modified the public value strategic triangle into a new triangle consisting of three elements of authorise, create and measure. A study highlighted that Moore's public value framework is further developed as a public management paradigm, rhetoric, narrative and performance [2]. A recent study thoroughly observed public value theory literature and found out that there is lack of empirical investigations either of its normative propositions or its value as a framework for understanding public management practices [43]. Furthermore, there is no specific definition of the term public value and it offers no theoretical propositions to test or provide guidance on how to empirically test the term [28].

However, there are a number of studies that empirically tested the propositions of public value. Two studies used public value framework of services, outcome and trust as an analytical framework and empirically tested it to understand executive adoption of result based management within Canadian federal government [40,41]. Furthermore, Grimsley and Meehan [17] developed an evaluative design framework for electronic services based on public value framework and empirically validated the framework hypothesis on two case studies in UK. Similarly, Kearns [22] developed an analytical framework based on public value framework (services, outcome and trust) to evaluate the impact of electronic services. In a nutshell, it is observed from these few empirical studies that public value can be tested in term of services, outcomes and trust and can be used as a lens to examine different concepts. As illustrated in Fig. 1, this study will further develop public value literature and use it as a lens to understand the impact of Social Media applications in generating public value when used in a local government context.

The value created by service for users are very similar to the benefits attained from purchasing services from private sector. Services value can be achieved through cost effective provision of high quality services [23]. Kearns [22] highlighted five underlying factors that influence the perception of high quality services. These are service availability, satisfaction of services, importance of services offered, fairness of service provision and cost. Moreover, Kelly et al., [23] observed that user satisfaction is an important determinant of creating value in services and user satisfaction is formed by implying factors including: customer service, information, choice and use of services. In addition, Grimsley and Meehan [17] found that satisfaction has great impact on creating service value. It is evident from these studies that citizen satisfaction plays a huge role in maintaining value through services. The second component of public value identified by Kelly et al. [23], is the achievement of the desired outcomes or end results from public services. The value of outcomes is experienced individually by a user who



**Figure 1.** Public Value of Social Media.

is directly using the services and collectively by citizens as a community who have never personally used the services directly [17]. The public expect better outcomes from government in areas such as peace and security, poverty reduction, public health, high employment, low crime rates, clean streets, an improved environment and better educational achievements. These outcomes may overlap with services; however, services and outcomes are clearly different and should be managed separately by public managers [23]. The third component of public value is trust and it is highly valued by the public. Public managers should maintain a high level of trust between citizens and government as it is the heart of relationship between them [22]. For example, if the level of trust in public organisations increases over time, then citizens are most likely to accept government actions. A failure of trust will effectively destroy public value even if improved services or outcome targets are met [23]. Trust in government can be determined in three main ways; firstly the way politicians behave and public organisations behave, secondly the way government manages its economy and deliver services, thirdly the general level of social trust and trust in public organisations.

#### 4. Research Design

The philosophy of research adapted for this study draws on the suggestions of Yin [47], and follow an interpretive, qualitative approach. In this respect, the research approach combined the review and synthesis of literature with a secondary analysis of a social media initiative case in the UK. Firstly, due to the emerging nature of the field of research, a comprehensive and broad literature review was needed to investigate the phenomenon of social media and public value theory. This literature review enabled to scope the defined area of research and identify the void in literature and issues surrounding public value theory as a concept. Then, the case analysis helped determine the role of social media in creating public value. The revelatory case of Love clean street initiative was adopted for this research as the use of social media in public sector especially local government is only an emerging phenomenon. Furthermore, single case study is adopted as it is ideal for revelatory cases where an observer may have access to a phenomenon that was previously inaccessible [47].

## **5. Case Study: The ‘Love Clean Streets’ Initiative**

The London Borough of Lewisham (LBL) has for many years been at the forefront of using ICT and Internet or mobile based applications for engaging with citizens for a range of local community and neighbourhood issues. Using social and mobile media, citizens can interact with the council to report antisocial behaviour such as fly tipping, graffiti and hate crimes as well as other concerns that may affect neighbourhood safety and wellbeing such as animal fouling, dead animals, empty properties etc. LBL intensified their efforts to use social media and related applications particularly in the two years leading up to the London Olympics in 2012 with a ‘Love Clean Streets’ initiative, from January 2010 to January 2012. The objective of the ‘Love Clean Streets’ initiative was for LBL to become a social-networking hub for London and help deliver an environment that reflects London as a world class city for the 2012 Olympics and beyond. By doing so, LBL was aiming to empower residents, council staff, local businesses, NGOs and politicians to engage in their local environment by uploading photos and other information via smart phones or other devices and to participate in debates with peers and civil servants in relation to keeping London’s streets clean. Through the use of ICT, social and mobile media, LBL intended to provide a robust way for local authorities to process information relating to local streets and deal with it on a real time basis, while at the same time keeping the public informed of progress. This was facilitated through links with and sharing existing data through a public Application Programming Interface (API).

From a public value perspective, in pure financial terms, the council has made significant savings as a service provider and the citizens have seen an increase in the way services are delivered and local community issues are dealt with. The reported investment in the ‘Love Clean Streets’ initiative is around £200,000. This compares with benefits recorded so far of: 87% reduction in time taken to process a case; 70% reduction in report handling costs (telephone handling per case costs on average £5.10, compared to £4.10 for web forum and smart mobile with photo £1.50); 21% reduction in environmental casework; 30% increase in resident satisfaction; more than fourfold decrease of land at unacceptable standard; 73% reduction in graffiti; graffiti removal time reduced from average of 2.78 days to less than 0.5 days; fly-tip removal time reduced from average of 2.5 days to less than 1.0 day; elimination in staff overtime to collect missing rubbish bins from £300,000 in 2006 to £0 today; saving of £17,500 by replacing physical inspection with mobile application; and increased trade waste income of £20,000, etc. [12,24,25,27].

In addition to the financial benefits and improvements to services, LBL has significantly increased citizens’ engagement with the policy making processes at the council. For instance using a number of methods, including email and twitter citizens are able to consult local council members with their suggestions or questions/problems that need addressing. Key issues raised by citizens during such consultations are made available through the council public forums so that citizens can track the progress. In terms of social media, citizens have the opportunity to follow the council using Twitter and as of 10 April 2014, LBL had 3968 tweets and more than 10,000 followers. In addition, the council’s Facebook site is liked by more than 1000 users and offers an open platform for local citizens and other stakeholders such as local businesses and NGOs to engage with council workers. A review of the Facebook site for LBL indicates that a wide range of issues are discussed and opined upon covering themes from welfare, social benefits, housing, childcare and schooling to environment and planning and socially

innovation through community participation in car sharing to providing shelter for the homeless.

## 6. Discussion

Public Value theory has emerged within the public policymaking debate where it encourages public participation and engagement. Social media tools are used by government organisations to create public value through engaging citizens. A review of literature suggests that public value generated through any government initiative should be evaluated in term of services, outcomes and trust. The Love Clean Streets Initiative by the London Borough of Lewisham used social media tools to engage citizen within their local council. The love clean streets initiative has created service value through citizen satisfaction. Citizens are satisfied as it has provided them a choice of reporting environmental crime by using mobile phones and through social media tools or via the council website [24]. As a result, it makes it easier for citizens to report issues that affect them and freely interact with their local council using any method which is convenient for each individual user. Furthermore, the clean street initiative ensures that council residents are satisfied by improving customer services. While previously the council took three days to remove graffiti, now it takes less than a day after a report is filled through any of the different methods [25]. These figures indicate that since 2005 the clean-up rate has significantly improved by 87 per cent and the proportion of residents rating the street cleaning service as 'good' or 'excellent' has increased by 18 per cent [25]. Therefore, it is evident that public value is created through providing efficient and effective customer services.

The love clean streets initiative has also created value through achieving the desired outcomes of the citizen within their local council. It has provided better outcomes in term of reducing the level of crime in the community, improving public health by reducing the risk of public ill health through keeping the environment clean, improving peace and security through citizens' involvement in reporting any suspicious act in the neighbourhood and improving the environment of the local community as whole [12,24,27]. The love clean street initiative has reduced the number of environmental crimes, for example the council is preventing those committing graffiti in advance before it happens. The figures indicate that graffiti in the council of Lewisham fell by 73 per cent from 2006 to 2010 [25]. The Love Clean Street enables two-way interaction with the service and citizens can report local environmental degradation and the council then provides information on how it has responded on each individual report. In this respect, citizens can monitor progress of any issues and in return it increases the level of citizens' trust in their local council [12]. The amount of reports made via love clean street initiative has increased from 1,140 in 2003 to over 6,500 in 2007 [25]. Furthermore, the increase in citizen's satisfaction and the achievement of desired outcomes has no doubt contributed to improving trust [17,23]. In a nutshell, the London Borough of Lewisham has used social and mobile media in the case of love clean streets initiative and in return it has helped the council to generate value through achieving better services, outcomes and trust. Table 1 highlights how public value is generated through the use of social media initiative by a local government authority in the UK.

The table below presents the key drivers for the use of social media by the council and the creation of public value for the users of this initiative in terms of services, outcomes and trust. Thus, highlighting the need for such social media initiatives to create



**Table 1.** Public Value of Social Media: Case Study Analysis

Case Study Analysis: The ‘Love Clean Streets’ Initiative by The London Borough of Lewisham (LBL)			
Drivers for using Social Media	Public Value		
	Services	Outcomes	Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Better citizen engagement (two-way interaction)</li><li>– Improve citizen satisfaction</li><li>– Speed of Dissemination</li><li>– Allow for greater transparency</li><li>– Enhance Trust between citizens and public authority</li></ul>	The initiative adds value to the services offered by the council through the result of citizen satisfaction achieved by providing efficient and effective customer services through its social media platforms. For instance, the clean street initiative ensures that the citizens are satisfied as it provides them a choice of reporting environmental crime by using mobile phones and through social media tools or via the council website.	The outcome value of the initiative is the achievement of social and economic benefits for both the community and the council in the long run. The initiative allows for better outcomes by enabling citizen participation in reporting issues through Twitter and Facebook thereby reducing the level of crime in the community, improving public health by reducing the risk of public ill health through keeping the environment clean, improving peace and security through citizens’ involvement in reporting any suspicious act in the neighborhood and improving the environment of the local community as whole.	The citizen perception of trust in government authorities is likely to increase as a result of the availability of this initiative and allowing two-way interaction between citizens and the council and thereby improving transparency. For instance, allowing citizens to report local environmental degradation and the council then providing information on how it has responded on each individual helps increase citizen satisfaction and the achievement of their desired outcomes contributes to improving trust.

public value for users and if the use of these modern technologies are to be effective among the citizens and help enhance the services offered by public authorities.

**7. Conclusions**

This research has investigated the evolution of ICT in the UK public sector through a comprehensive literature review and secondary sources. It found a radical shift in the delivery of public services in the UK during the past three decades. In addition, most of the UK public sector transformation efforts in recent years have been enabled though the use of ICT and in particular online and mobile services. The paper highlights the use of social media within a local government context in UK’s Public sector and the benefits obtained thereby. Moreover, this paper has argued that the public sector has been evaluating its ICT projects through using outdated private sector principles which focus on cost efficiency and ignoring other important outcomes desired by the public. Therefore, a public value lens was used to overcome this limitation and validated through a secondary case study of “Love Clean Streets” social media initiative by the Lewisham Council in the UK. This study found that the use of social media applications within the local council has helped in creating public value in terms of services, outcomes and trust. Theoretically, this paper has contributed to the field of public value

theory and social media applications by developing a theoretical lens for evaluating the impact of social media on value creation. From a practical perspective, this paper offers policy makers a high-level reference to understand how social media applications can generate value for citizens. The findings and discussion presented in this study need to be interpreted with the limitation in mind that the results emerged from one initiative in a large council in the UK which was obtained through secondary research. Therefore, any attempts to generalise these findings should be made with caution and preferably after more research is done to empirically explore the results. In this respect, future research is planned to empirical investigate the public value of social media application using several empirical case studies.

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