

# Civic Social Media: A Detailed Case for Classroom Use

**Stephen Carradini**

*Arizona State University*

**Abstract.** This paper discusses a complex case built from a semester-long, multi-section, online, civic social media service learning project. Due to the case's detail, this case can be used in multiple types of TPC courses, such as content management, translation, policy, introductory technical communication, and more.

**Keywords:** Case, Content, Pedagogy, Service Learning, Social Media

In Fall 2018, I partnered with the City of Glendale (AZ) via a university-wide initiative named Project Cities to conduct a semester-long service-learning project in two sections of a Social Media in the Workplace course. Students created social media policies and plans for a city government. The students learned much about working in a real-world environment. This article describes a pedagogical case developed from the experience to use in future classes. TPC programs with courses such as Introduction to Technical Communication, Content Management, Translation in Technical Communication, and Civic/Public Technical Communication could employ this detailed, open-ended case.

While "case" and "case study" have many uses in research and teaching, case is used throughout this article to mean an activity where a teacher gives "students problems in real-world communica-

tion set in organizational contexts that replicate in detail their technical and professional roles” (Couture & Goldstein, 1984, p. v). Thus, I will use the terms “pedagogical case” formally and “case” informally.

### **Civic Service Learning**

This pedagogical case particularly concerns social media use in a civic environment. Social media has become part and parcel of technical communication work, being more often mentioned in technical communication job listings studied by Eva Brumberger and Claire Lauer (2015) than medical writer and grant/proposal writer. Research on social media in technical communication reflects this development (refer to Miller et al. (2020) for an overview).

One of the many roles of professional technical communicators in social media is sending information of civic importance (Potts, 2013; Richards, 2018). Civic concerns in the technical communication classroom have grown as “technical communication instructors increasingly seek to supplement and balance their focus on teaching pragmatic documents and institutionally expressive genres like feasibility reports with learning about critical citizenship” (Mara, 2006, p. 216).

Technical communication students can interact with civic spaces through service-learning projects, where students work with a partner organization (Sapp & Crabtree, 2002). Online classes can participate in these opportunities as well (Soria & Weiner, 2013). Service learning provides students with experience outside the classroom and external motivation. However, coordinating service-learning projects can be difficult for the teacher to handle and sustain logistically (Cushman, 2002), while “high-risk and unpredictable” community-based projects may fail (Brizee, 2020, p. 346).

### **Case Context**

While a pedagogical case cannot replace the value of a service-learning project, pedagogical cases can offer a detailed context for work when the instructor identifies that a semester is not right for service learning.

I developed this detailed pedagogical case regarding social media in a civic organization for future classes after the successful, complex logistical experience of running a two-course, online service-learning project in Fall 2018. The case offers a way for students to produce work for a real context that previously existed, without the needs and risks of a service-learning project. The case is described below, speaking directly to students. The quotes from the director are real and used with permission.

## **The Pedagogical Case: City Social Media**

Social media faces a seeming lack of policies, rules, or regulations for people and organizations. However, rules and regulations regarding social media have begun to appear since the public emergence of Facebook in 2006. These policies, rules, and regulations are not uniform. Local, state, and federal jurisdictions vary and sometimes contradict. Some rules are passed down from court cases but are not yet enshrined in law. Rules are rarely collected into a single list. Coming up with a comprehensive set of policies, rules, and procedures that follow applicable laws takes research.

Organizations developing professional social media must respect these rules as they communicate with multiple online audiences to reach the organization's goals. Speaking to diverse audiences requires taking into account content, tone, timing, context, and more. As a result, writing a social media plan is a complex effort.

The City of Glendale is aware of these policy and implementation difficulties. Amid these concerns, they seek to hire a social media manager. In preparation for hiring that social media manager, they have hired you to help them address policy and implementation issues in advance. There is strong buy-in from all levels of the city. They are aware of what they don't know, and want to learn.

### **Policy Needs**

The City of Glendale is particularly concerned with policies surrounding:

- Hate speech vs free speech
- Legal obligations surrounding retention of social media records
- Emerging legal concerns that the city may not know about

In particular, the Public Affairs Director is concerned about hate speech: "I know there are laws surrounding this, but am not sure if they have been clear enough. What one person may consider hate speech just because it's negative may still be protected under free speech." (Public Affairs Director, personal communication, May 30, 2018)

The City also wants suggestions for best practices in social media management. The City would like to be informed on which best practices should be implemented as pre-existing rules for the incoming social media manager and which ones should be left up to the incoming social media manager to decide on.

## **Implementation Needs**

The City of Glendale wants a plan that covers four goals:

1. The City wants to be able to have purposeful communication.
2. The City wants to bring news and information directly to the people rather than going through the media or others.
3. The City wants to engage with citizens and answer their questions on a platform they are already at to do other things.
4. The City wants to reach the maximum amount of people possible.

Glendale is a diverse city with many populations. While the City wants to reach the maximum amount of people possible, the Public Affairs Director identified four demographics of particular focus for the city: the Hispanic community, the retired community, the business community, and visitors. Reaching these audiences may require different strategies. The business and visitor communities are heavy internet users with strong amounts of internet access, while the retired community (10% of Glendale's population is over the age of 65) and the Hispanic community (37% of the Glendale population) may have less internet access and/or use the internet less.

In addition to specific demographic groups, the City is interested in a particular psychographic group: "The day to day resident who has no interaction with their local government." The Director describes this type of citizen via their activities: "Pays their bills online, doesn't come to city hall, isn't engaged with the city because they don't know how to or where to go for official information." This psychographic group is contrasted with a well-served population: "those individuals who have taken the time to subscribe to the various newsletters offered by separate divisions within the city, like Councilmembers newsletter, parks and rec newsletters, public works, transportation, etc." (Public Affairs Director, personal communication, May 30, 2018)

The Public Affairs Director is ready to cover the necessary financial elements of the implementation plan, as well: "The social media manager will be provided with the technology and resources they need to do their job. We have the budget to cover initial startup costs as well as ongoing costs" (Public Affairs Director, personal communication, May 30, 2018). The city currently uses Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube but does not have a systematic plan for using any of them.

For more detailed information about what the City of Glendale needs, see the Interview with the Public Affairs Director. This interview with the Director will allow you to get a better sense of what the City is looking for and how to plan your work.

## **Interview with the Public Affairs Director**

1. Three approaches to social media are tight, moderate, or loose. The tight approach avoids controversy at all costs, to the point of non-engagement with and the deleting of user posts. The moderate approach allows the social media manager to carefully engage users in certain situations once the boss has been informed of the situation. The loose approach gives the social media manager discretion to handle situations and engage constituents within the bounds of the rules. Which approach would the city like?

While there are plusses and minuses of each of those strategies, I would like our strategy to be one of looser engagement. I feel comfortable with this approach because we will have a dedicated staff person assigned to monitor and engage as their full-time job. If this responsibility was just a side project added onto someone's full time job I would be leaning more moderate. However, I think I am open to the input from you and the students on this approach.

2. Who will the social media manager report to?

The position will report directly to me, the Public Affairs Director. I report directly to the City Manager.

3. How much oversight will the social media manager have? How much freedom to choose when and what to post?

They will be coordinating the short and long-term strategy directly with me, but will have the flexibility and discretion to post and respond as they see necessary on a day to day basis.

4. What areas of content should be vetted through the administration (if any)?

If there are major announcements, emergency situations and PR crises situations, they will need to be vetted.

5. How will the social media manager receive content to post? Will it come direct from one source or from many sources?

The content will be generated from multiple departments. However, the idea for the content will have to come from the social media manager.

6. What concerns does the City of Glendale have about social media? Any apprehensions or areas that need to be addressed? This document can serve to answer outstanding questions any of the team may have; if there are any of those, please list them here.

Our biggest concern today is that we are not utilizing the mediums. I don't think we have enough experience to know exactly what concerns or issues we could come across. Perhaps the students in studying

other government or private social media accounts who have been at this for a while may be able to gather some info like this for consideration from those people or groups running those accounts.

7. What does the City currently do on social media?

We try to promote a comprehensive list of things. We promote our own city festival and events. We try to promote all of the good work that is being done for the residents by city departments. We would also like to promote our private sector partners and any non-city event going on downtown, at Westgate, at the arena or at the stadium. We want to promote the services that are available and the facilities that residents can use like parks, libraries, pools, open spaces, funding, assistance etc. (Public Affairs Director, personal communication, May 30, 2018)

### **Course Logistics: Levels, Lengths, and Modes**

TPC instructors can employ this pedagogical case in semesters of different levels, lengths, and modes that correspond to the diversity of teaching arrangements in TPC programs.

This case can work for undergraduate students in a 15-week face-to-face course. In the case's original context, undergraduates in a Social Media in the Workplace course delivered a social media plan that included audience analysis, content ideas, schedules, timelines, budgets, and other practical details. The project began early in the semester, with aspects of the project distributed over a long period of time. Given that this is designed as a one-semester project, students still had to do fairly quick turnarounds on the project deliverables.

To offer students grounding in strategy and planning, instructors can assign chapters 4 (Social Media Marketing Strategy), 5 (Tactical Planning and Execution), 10 (Social Media Analytics), and 11 (Social Media Metrics) in *Social Media Marketing* by Tracy L. Tuten and Michael R. Solomon (2017). Articles such as Hootsuite's "How to Create a Social Media Plan in 9 Easy Steps" (Newberry & Lepage, 2021), Buffer's "How to Create an Extraordinary Social Media Plan for 2018" (Lanoue, 2017), and Hootsuite's "20 Social Media Templates to Save You Hours of Work" (Aynsley & Tien, 2021) can augment the text.

Beyond this face-to-face programmatic context, many TPC programs offer courses via multiple online modalities (synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, and flexible) of variable length. This case can be used in these classes as well. In the case's original context, graduates

in a Social Media in the Workplace course produced a policy, rules and procedures document that covered legal, technical, and best-practices aspects of social media management in a 7.5-week online asynchronous course. The graduate project began in Week 1 and employed just-in-time learning to fill in the gaps in student knowledge. While this method allowed the case to run in the 7.5 weeks allotted, some students would have preferred to learn the concepts first and then put them into use later.

Instructors can assign “The City that Incorporated Social Media into Everything” (Newcombe, 2015), “Social Media in Smart Cities: An Exploratory Research in Mexican Municipalities” (Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2015), and “Usage of Social Media in City Marketing: A Research on 30 Metropolitan Municipalities in Turkey” (Gümüő, 2016) to ground the class in governmental use of social media. The OpenGov blog ([OpenGov.com/blog](http://OpenGov.com/blog)) provided further research on the topic.

### **Programmatic Fit: Assigning the Case**

In addition to fitting with the diversity of teaching arrangements in TPC programs, this pedagogical case can respond to various classes in TPC programs. This flexibility is valuable for programs that address social media by distributing the topic across a variety of program courses.

The natural home of the case would be a Civic Technical Communication or Public Technical Communication course, as concepts learned can be applied to the case throughout the course. In Introduction to Technical Communication, the case could demonstrate how real-world scenarios call for many aspects of technical communication practice. Content Management students may assess strategies for social media content planning and maintenance. Because the City asked for a plan to reach Hispanic audiences, a multi-lingual plan could fit in a Translating Technical Communication course. Dealing with the unusual style and grammar of social media could make for a unique case in a Technical Editing course.

With a few modifications, students in User Experience courses could do interviews to determine what type of user experience and content would be desirable for the various audiences mentioned in the case. Visual Communication courses could make informative graphics for social media, while multimedia courses could make videos and/or podcasts for inclusion in Glendale’s social media. Accessibility in Technical Communication students could investigate how to make social media posts accessible to the varieties of audiences suggested. All courses could integrate viewpoints from social justice to discuss

how to create content equitably and sensitively for multiple distinctive audiences with disparate needs and wants. The detailed nature of the case provides many different entry points for classes throughout the TPC curriculum.

For programs that include service learning in their curriculum, this case could provide an early experience for students to become acquainted with the process of client projects. Building use of this case into an early course on the curricular map may help develop student knowledge in advance of later projects with clients.

This pedagogical case's flexibility allows TPC programs and instructors to employ it in various classes, teaching modalities, schedules, and teaching levels. Programs and instructors can use the case as a standalone learning experience or as an on-ramp to introduce students to client project experiences. While nothing can replace the experience of a service-learning opportunity, this case provides a detailed approximation of a civic scenario for use in technical communication programs and classrooms.



## References

- Aynsley, Michael & Tien, Shannon. (2021). 20 social media templates to save you hours of work. *Hootsuite Blog*. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/social-media-templates/>
- Brizee, Allen. (2020). What happens when we fail? Building resilient community-based research. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 50(4), 339–375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281619876292>
- Brumberger, Eva & Lauer, Claire. (2015). An evolution of technical communication: An analysis of industry job postings. *Technical Communication*, 62(4), 224–243.
- Couture, Barbara & Goldstein, Jone R. (1984). *Cases for technical and professional writing*. Little, Brown.
- Cushman, Ellen. (2002). Sustainable service learning programs. *College Composition and Communication*, 54(1), 40–65.
- Gümüş, Niyazi. (2016). Usage of social media in city marketing: A research on 30 metropolitan municipalities in Turkey. *EMAJ: Emerging Markets Journal*, 6(2), 30–37. <https://doi.org/10.5195/emaj.2016.114>
- Lanoue, Spencer. (2017). How to create an extraordinary social media strategy for 2018. *Buffer Blog*. <https://buffer.com/resources/social-media-strategy-2017/>
- Mara, Andrew. (2006). Pedagogical approaches: Using charettes to perform civic engagement in technical communication classrooms and workplaces. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 15(2), 215–236. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1502\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1502_5)
- Miller, Jennifer R.; Dieterle, Brandy; deWinter, Jennifer; & Vie, Stephanie. (2020). Social media in professional, technical, and scientific communication programs: A heuristic to guide future use. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 8(1), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3375134.3375136>
- Newberry, Christina & LePage, Evan. (2021). How to create a social media strategy in 9 easy steps. *Hootsuite Blog*. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-create-a-social-media-marketing-plan/>
- Newcombe, Tod. (2015). The city that incorporated social media into everything. *Governing*. <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-integrating-social-media-roanoke.html>
- Ornatowski, Cezar M. & Bekins, Linn K. (2004). What's civic about technical communication? Technical communication and the rhetoric of "community." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 13(3), 251–269. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1303\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1303_2)

- Potts, Liza. (2013). *Social media in disaster response: How experience architects can build for participation*. Routledge.
- Richards, Daniel P. (2018). Not a cape, but a life preserver: The importance of designer localization in interactive sea level rise viewers. *Communication Design Quarterly*, 6(57–69).
- Sandoval-Almazan, Rodrigo; Valle Cruz, David; & Nunez Armas, Juan Carlos. (2015). Social media in smart cities: An exploratory research in Mexican municipalities. *48th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2015.284>
- Sapp, David Alan & Crabtree, Robbin D. (2002). A laboratory in citizenship: Service learning in the technical communication classroom. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 11(4), 411–432. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1104\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1104_3)
- Soria, Krista M. & Weiner, Brad. (2013). A “virtual fieldtrip”: Service learning in distance education technical writing courses. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 43(2), 181–200. <https://doi.org/10.2190/TW.43.2.e>
- Tuten, Tracy L. & Solomon, Michael R. (2017). *Social media marketing* (3rd ed.). Sage.

## Author Information

**Stephen Carradini** is an assistant professor of technical communication at Arizona State University – Polytechnic Campus. His research focuses on social media in the workplace, the impact of emerging technologies on professional communication, and inter/disciplinarity. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, and *New Media and Society* have published his work.