

Future of Institutions

DIALOGUE SUMMARY

Topic/Title:

Social media and the future of public institutions

Organizers:

Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

Key takeaways:

The Dialogue explored the relationship between technology, citizens, and the state, and how governments and public institutions can and/or should be using social media to improve governance outcomes (e.g., digital service delivery, citizen trust, democratic participation). The Dialogue aimed to generate proposals for how governments can leverage social media to improve governance outcomes. While politicians are utilizing social media for political means, most governing institutions are still struggling to manage and harness these platforms effectively for governing purposes.

Framing the conversation within the institutional lens is essential for understanding the impacts of social media across society and the different layers of government, and more importantly to discern the necessary response required to realize a solution. This framing allowed Dialogue participants to better pinpoint where in the institutional ecosystem the responsibility lies, whether the responsible institution is apt to respond, and what other institutions or policy levers are required to support those responsible institutions. Simply, the institutional lens forced solution-oriented thinking. This lens further forced the group to think through the necessary steps to implement those solutions. This is often where policy falls short. The institutional lens forces a holistic understanding of the institutional ecosystem, the gaps and synergies, as well as the need to be practical and action-oriented.

The two solutions that surfaced addressed the problem from opposite angles. The first proposal seeks to create a more innovative, nimble, and light touch regulatory approach toward social media networks. The approach called for government institutions to shift away from moderating content to instead focusing on how to limit reach, and therefore impact, of the channels responsible for spreading mis- and dis-information.

The second solution called for bespoke or purpose-driven social media networks. These closed-door networks would help rebuild a sense of trust and purpose that's been lost among large social media networks and would allow for a more nuanced and community-oriented approach. These small social media networks also open the door for greater citizen-to-government interaction, particularly at the local level. As these networks are private and trusted, these venues can be used to better understand citizen needs and to engage with citizens, both of which can help support more responsive government service delivery.

The challenge(s):

Today, social media is often categorized as a destabilizing factor in society, a medium for mis-

and dis-information, political polarization, and violence and instability. Its impacts are leading to worsening political dysfunction across all four corners of the globe, including by foreign interference in elections and the weakening of social bonds and trust [in governments and other individuals].

While it is hard to argue against some of social media's more nefarious societal impacts, viewing social media through a negative-only lens obscures its positive impacts [and opportunities] on contemporary society. In many ways, social media platforms have ushered in a new era of popular mobilization and civic engagement, a new generation of activists, and has become an essential tool for documenting human rights abuses, raising awareness, and for citizen monitoring of government activities, helping to strengthen transparency and accountability.

While social media has become a ubiquitous part of our daily lives — in good ways and not — governments and other governing institutions are failing to keep pace. To date, governments have focused on mitigating social media's harm to society, often through legislative means or banning access outright. Or, when it is used, its scope is limited to politicians on "transmit" mode, looking to connect with constituents, increase relatability, and advocate policy positions.

While both lines of effort are important pieces of the puzzle, the challenge remains: How can governments take proactive steps to utilize social media as a tool to improve governance outcomes (i.e., policymaking processes, transparency and accountability, improved service delivery)? Governments cannot ignore the digital future; instead, public sector leaders need to prepare for, adapt to, and design for the future of social media and its role in the 21st century and beyond.

Within this scope of the challenge and opportunity, Dialogue participants were urged to generate thoughtful and solutions-oriented strategies on what new institutions or changes to existing institutions are required to improve governance outcomes and the citizen-state relationship. Simply put, what are solutions that governments can implement now to mitigate social media's negative impacts on society, while enhancing its use as a tool to bring about positive impact?

The intended scope of the Dialogue to brainstorm ways governments can use social media to bring about better governance and positive societal impacts. The Dialogue transformed to include a look at ways governments and governing institutions can also mitigate social media's worst impacts. This reflected not only the contextualized and nuanced insights from Dialogue participants, but the broader scope of the debate globally.

Insights for the Future of Institutions

Too often, society-wide debates focus narrowly on identifying impacts, consequences, or broader challenges. First identifying the challenge, then applying an institutional lens, proved useful in that it required going beyond simply identifying challenges or problems. In this way, we can identify the specific policies required to rectify, remedy, and/or solve the challenges. Although this approach is more challenging, the results are more insightful and actionable.

In the case of social media and public institutions, Dialogue participants applied solutions-oriented thinking from the outset. This lens generated substantive insights and debates regarding the application of the solution, and how institutions can support implementation of that solution. Dialogue participants further analyzed potential risks and rewards across varying contexts. Also highlighted are the roles of the various policy levers that exist within the institutional ecosystem and the symbiotic roles that exist among them. These gaps further affirmed the importance of applying an institutional lens to the challenge. Without understanding the ways in which institutions are set up

to respond, or not, these solutions may never be realized. Institutional framing is further critical for contemporary policy debates, particularly for issues around emerging technologies, given the pace at which technology is advancing and the need for innovative and fit-for-purpose institutional responses.

Solutions

The Dialogue produced two actionable solutions:

- *Design small social media networks for purpose.* Small social media networks can be used to localize community networks and create more tangible links between governments and citizens at the local level. At present, large social media networks are optimized for revenue, not for purpose. Special purpose social networks create a space to innovate and engage, with technical and legal frameworks in place to ensure users, rather than the platforms, define the contours of the experience. The goal of bespoke social media networks is to create a healthier, more honest, social ecosystem.
- *Scale content moderation through demotion.* Social media continues to play a large role in pushing mis- and dis-information and sowing distrust, but government institutions are struggling to develop fit-for-purpose responses to mitigate these harms. Institutions must pivot their approach from addressing freedom of speech, to freedom of reach (e.g., regulating not what people can say on social media but taking actionable steps to limit their reach). Institutions, therefore, should set out a regulatory approach to work with social media networks to “demote” channels responsible for pushing mis- and dis-information across networks. Not all social media should be treated the same, however. Institutions should define parameters of what networks constitute “content creators” (i.e., YouTube and TikTok) versus publishers (i.e., Meta).

These two distinct proposals address two distinct social media challenges:

- How to mitigate the ongoing negative impacts of social media on today’s society; and
- How to use or modify social media to transform digital public spheres and bring about positive impacts. The debates around both gave rise to insightful conversations around inclusion, equity, digital government, and the future of the citizen-state relationship, including the legal and ethical frameworks required to actualize each respective proposal.

Participants:

- Jeffrey Allen, Ministry of Justice, UK Government
- Adrienne Brooks, Mercy Corps
- Selene Ceja, Office of Congressman Ro Khanna
- Stephanie Diepeveen, Overseas Development Institute
- Hany Farid, University of California, Berkeley
- Sam Gregory, Witness
- Daphne Keller, Stanford University
- Lisa Poggiali, United States Agency for International Development
- Joseph Porcelli, Nextdoor
- John Sands, Knights Foundation
- Ethan Zuckerman, University of Massachusetts