



# SOCIAL MEDIA POLITICS

## JOIN THE DEBATE

### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Politicians are open to using social media – most already use it for **self-promotion**
- Facebook and Twitter increase citizen **awareness and engagement** in political processes
- Live tweets and web streaming brings public debates to **larger audiences**
- Clear **guidance** must ensure municipal social media profiles remain politically unbiased

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Politicians thrive on **traditional ways** of “doing business”. They talk to lobby groups, meet their constituents and discuss matters during open surgery sessions. And they love to debate, testing policies and ideas through logic and argument.

But for most citizens, debates in council chambers seem rather out-of-date. Most days the public gallery rarely has more than one lonely local reporter and perhaps the occasional stalwart of local politics with a particular personal agenda.

It isn't that citizens aren't interested in their local community and how it is run. Most people are proud of where they live and want to see it improve. But long speeches? Perhaps it's time that for politicians to start expressing their views in **140 characters** or less!

Most politicians already use Twitter as a tool for **self-promotion**, reaching a much bigger audience and engaging with citizens via social media far more effectively than through more traditional channels. So initiatives to open up the political process to the scrutiny of social media will meet little resistance.

Policies may need votes after a debate, but it is a politician's duty, as an elected representative of the people, to **find out what people think**. Where better to go than social media? Municipalities can play an important part in providing a neutral “venue” for citizens to meet with politicians, perhaps also collecting posts and comments on Facebook or through exchanges via Twitter using a relevant hashtag.

You can even open up public council meeting to much bigger audiences. **Web streaming** will let people listen in from the comfort and convenience of their own homes. Live tweets can provide a running commentary on discussions and let citizens respond. Social media can even let people ask questions or make points: you just need someone in the chamber managing the accounts and relaying questions back to the debating floor.



NAME: Birgitte Städe, Communications Consultant, Høje-Taastrup, DK

MUNICIPALITY: Høje-Taastrup

PULL QUOTE: **"WE WANT PEOPLE TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS AND IDEAS, BUT IN WAYS THAT FIT WITH CURRENT LIFESTYLE AND CULTURE"**

### SOCIAL DEBATE

In a major initiative to make its decision-making process more transparent and accessible to local residents, we now stream all our open council meetings and debates live online.

The web stream is available through the municipal website, a smartphone app and the municipal Facebook page.

The Facebook page helps the town engage with its citizens and opens up discussions to a much wider audience. We publish the agenda of meeting on Facebook, so people can see what politicians will be discussing and the decisions they will have to make. Our Facebook followers can post questions about the agenda and ask for clarification or more information.

Of course, the administration must remain neutral, so we work with council members to develop clear guidelines on how to have dialogue with citizens. At present, questions on Facebook are answered by the chairperson of the relevant council committee. Political questions, for example on party policy, are answered by the leader of the political party or group.

Our biggest success so far was in 2013 when we streamed a big meeting in the run up to our municipal elections. Citizens were able to ask the politicians questions directly. This was very popular: over 1000 citizens went online to watch the meeting.

We are always trying new ways to engage citizens in the political process; we want people to express their opinions and ideas, but in ways that fit with our current lifestyle and culture. People are comfortable about posting their lives for all their friends to see. We just have to find ways to encourage this kind of openness to drive decisions at the top."



### CITY OF KARLSTAD

NAME: Karlstad, Sweden

### BETTER THAN FACE-TO-FACE?

The Swedish municipality of Karlstad has been using Facebook since 2010. The city's official page has over 23,000 "likes" and receives more than 15 comments and posts every day.

### WHAT THEY SAY

"Web streaming and Facebook are important tools for us to bring the citizens closer to the city council."

*Mayor Michael Ziegler,  
Høje-Taastrup, Denmark*

"The city of Kortrijk, Belgium uses web streaming for their city councils. This makes the decision making process transparent for all citizens. It lowers the barrier of citizen participation."

*Wouter Degadt,  
Intercommunal Leiedal, Belgium*

