

INSIGHTS

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Crafting Trust in Communications: The Case of Two municipalities in Jordan



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INTRODUCTION

This paper offers key insights on trust building communication for researchers and practitioners on how local governments and other actors can enhance trust with audiences through communication. The findings here are based on a Learning Needs Assessment (LNA) exercise that was conducted as part of the ثقة (*Thiqa*) programme, funded by Porticus Foundation and implemented by Generations for Peace (GFP) in the period between October 2023 and October 2024.

Thiqa aims to improve local municipality officials' awareness of local needs, foster actionable policies, and boost interactions between officials and diverse groups, including youth, women, and marginalized voices. By working with youth and municipality officers in two municipalities in Jordan: Alsalt and AlKarak.

The LNA employed content analysis to a biweekly sample of 65 Facebook posts by municipalities and 1,130 audience comments in the period from 23 June to 8 September 2023. To further understand communication practices by municipality officials, two group interviews were arranged with media officials at each municipality on 6 and 7 December 2023.

This analysis is based on the understanding that trust is partly built through efficient communication that fosters compliance and political support. By providing necessary information, strategic communication plays a key role in building and maintaining trust. It serves different endeavors ranging from publicizing government performance to mitigating crises. Undoubtedly, trust is the foundation for institutional rebound. For that, examining residents' reception of communication from local government becomes essential in understanding trust dynamics.

This paper is extracted from a longer research work implemented as part of Thiqa programme.¹ While this paper mainly highlights key LNA findings and presents practical recommendations for media practitioners and local policymakers in Jordan and similar contexts, it also offers key insights to researchers on the application of the conceptual framework model on analysis trust-building through communication.

¹ <https://www.generationsforpeace.org/rp-thiqa-jor-fostering-trust-through-communication-20240222/>

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THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A two-layered Communication Trust Building Model was developed to inform the LNA. The model emphasizes four elements that characterizes trust building communication (credibility and transparency, responsiveness, language and tone, and engagement). Each includes several elements (Figure 1).

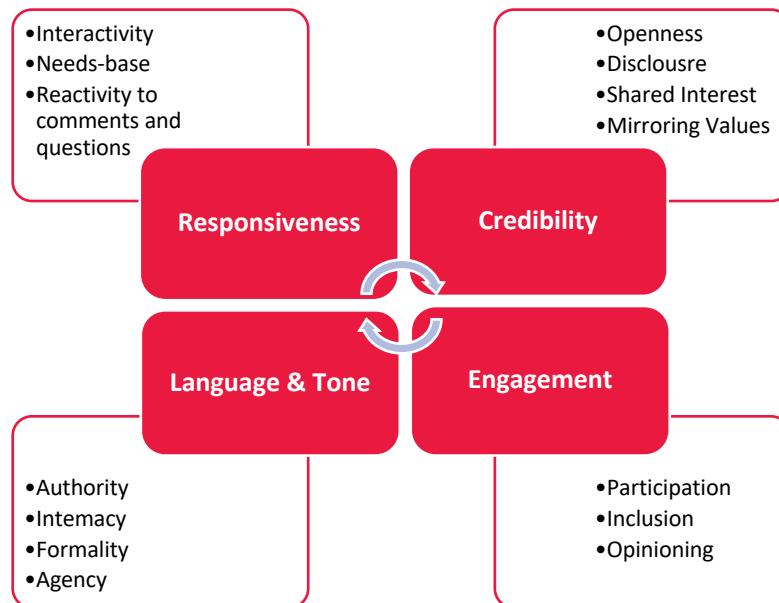


Figure 1: The Communication Trust Building Model.

First, credibility and transparency form the backbone of trust building. Although the idea that “more information is always better” is largely criticized and dubbed as a myth (Coombs and Holladay 2013, p. 218; Kim and Lee 2018; Braithwaite and Levi 1998a), failure to disclose information such as agendas, outcomes of meetings, or details on municipality activities may suggest the local government is acting in secrecy. This usually marks the black box of government operations.

Disclosure of adequate and necessary information is important for transparency and, thus, trust building. Therefore, the Model links adequacy to quality of information or what Kim and Lee (ibid) dubbed as “substantial information coupled with accountability”. If municipalities act with secrecy or they do not disclose information often enough (Braithwaite and Levi 1998a), they may increase the chances of distrust. The more information shared, the more bridged is the gap between the governing and the governed (Rebolledo, Zamora-Medina, and Rodríguez-Virgili 2017).

Second, the Model gauges the extent to which communication is responsive to audiences and whether it is inviting to community participation (Kim and Lee 2018; Rebolledo, Zamora-Medina; Rodríguez-Virgili 2017). Responsiveness captures qualitative and quantitative aspects like interactivity, responding to residents’ needs, and reactivity to comments and questions.

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Third, the Model assesses the extent to which communication is friendly and relatable in terms of linguistic and paralinguistic features such as emojis, humour, use of nonverbal cues for multimedia, and expressions of endearment. Finally, the Model assesses engagement in whether communication fosters informed participation by local community and whether it's inclusive and features multiple groups' achievements and activities (Rebolledo, Zamora-Medina, and Rodríguez-Virgili 2017).

The four elements in the Model organically interact. For example, responsiveness can serve engagement and language serves credibility.

A second layer was added to the Communication Trust Model to examine (dis)trust expressions in audience reactions to municipality communication. This encompasses confidence in officials, their competence, and the communicated information, as well as positive sentiments and encouragement towards the information shared or the services/delivered. Trust is also reflected in the intention to participate in municipal activities or comply with municipal requests. Conversely, expressions of distrust involve accusations, skepticism, complaints, and indifference (Moti 2019; Alkhoury, n.d.) (Figure 2).

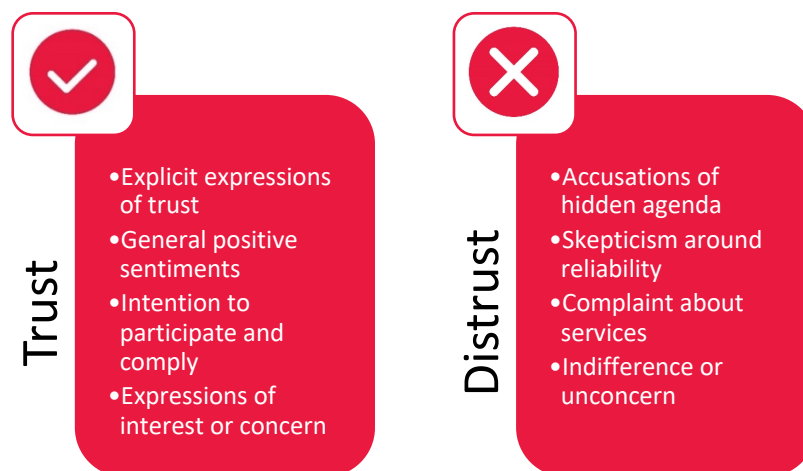


Figure 2: Expressions of Trust and Distrust.

The following sections summarize key findings of how this Model and expressions of (dis)trust are demonstrated in the Alkarak and Alsalt municipal Facebook communication to guide their media officials.

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DIVERSE THEMATIC FOCI REFLECTS UNCLARITY ON PURPOSE OF POSTING

Consider both quantity and quality of communication when building trust through the communication strategy of the municipality. The frequency of communication and adequacy of information are critical to keep citizens updated and engaged. However, maintaining a balanced frequency is essential, ensuring that citizens receive sufficient information without feeling overwhelmed by the volume of content. More importantly, the quality of information as shown in the trust building model are essential to preserve the trust built.

Municipalities post on various themes. While it might be challenging to establish any causality, this variance suggests uncertainty among municipalities regarding the intended purpose of social media posting. The analysis reveals a lack of shared understanding on the strategic goals of their online presence. Learning encounters can provide municipalities with an opportunity to explore and define the purpose of their social media engagement.

Figure 3 reflects the various thematic areas of municipality posting. The most recurring theme for Alkarak municipality was providing general information, whereas for Alsalt announcement of services dominated (over 54% as opposed to only 10% in Alkarak). This can be attributed to the fact that the municipality of Alsalt benefits from a more substantial budget and financial resources, leading to its responsibility for a greater number of public services. In contrast, Alkarak municipality operates with financial revenues three times smaller, and some of the public services it is expected to provide have been delegated to the government (MoPIC, 2017). Alsalt seems to use social media primarily for that purpose either announcing new services or sharing an update about municipal activity (Figure 3). These services included debris removals, clean-ups, pest control fogging...etc. The second most recurrent post in Alsalt is municipal activities, like a visit of an Italian delegation or another featuring a ceremony to reward employees.

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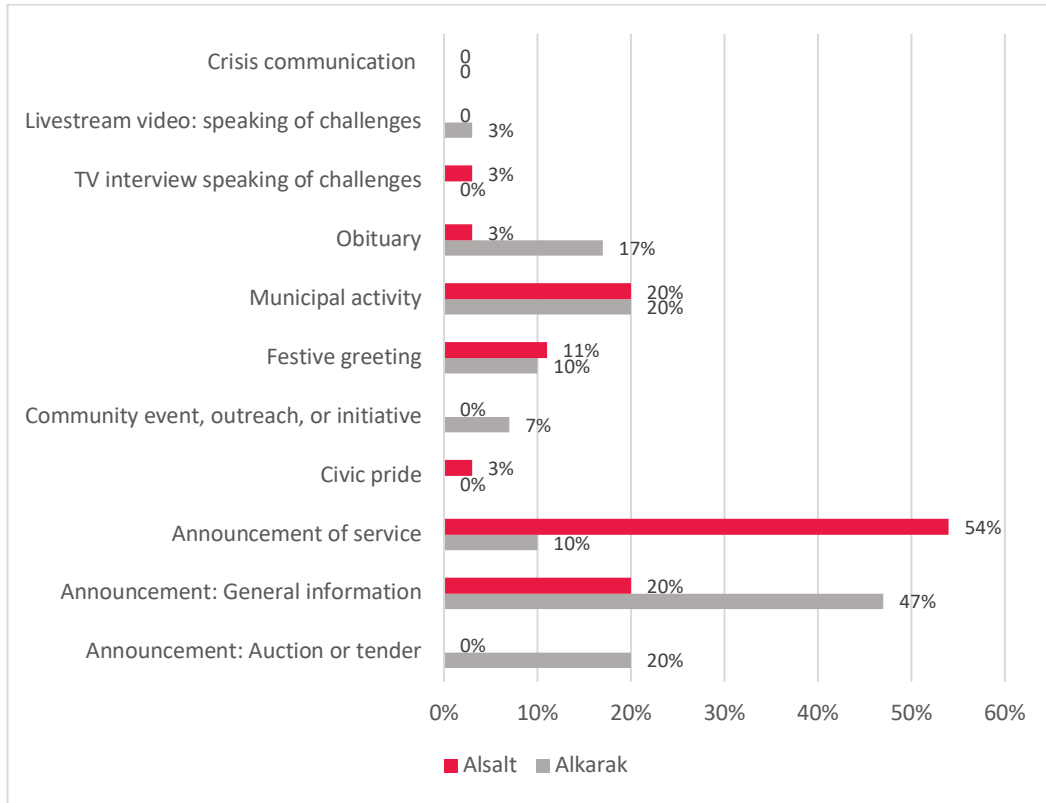


Figure 3: Thematic variation of the posts published by the municipalities.

The posts frequently contained text and photo of the official sealed announcements. The way the municipality perceives its role could be reflected on the actual performance on the ground. For example, according to Alkarak official website, Alkarak municipality clearly stated its role in providing additional social services related to citizens’ occasions, including weddings and funerals to the local community. Consequently, Alkarak municipality engaged with social occasions for local citizens (obituaries or happy occasions) in published posts six times (17%) more frequently than its Alsalt counterpart (3%) (see Figure 3). This comes in line with the municipality’s tasks published on their official website on providing social services related to citizens’ occasions.

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HUMANIZING MUNICIPAL ACTIVITIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Giving a human face to municipal activities by showing and including municipality officials in social media posts could increase trust and accountability noticeably. Audiences are more likely to connect with, and trust individuals than faceless systems. This also increases accountability and recognition of employees and stakeholders.

By showcasing the people behind certain decisions or actions, such as the mayor, elected officials, municipal staff, or community members, municipalities make these decisions/ actions more relatable and understandable to the residents, especially for typical municipal activities that involve bureaucratic processes, regulations, and decision-making that seem distant or impersonal to the average resident.

Most trusting comments in both municipalities' pages were general positive sentiments like "Well-done!", "God bless your efforts", while some commenters thanked their friends and relatives who accomplished certain tasks recognized in published posts. Evidently, these positive comments were addressed to staff members working in the municipality.

Notably, the mayor was mentioned and praised more often compared to others, indicating that leaders usually receive special attention from the audience, hence playing a vital role in increasing trust with residents. Therefore, it is recommended that mayors take a more visible and positive role in official communications. Giving a human face into the stories and announcements increased personal connection with residents. Nevertheless, the visibility of mayors should be balanced with the visibility of other officials to avoid any authoritarian implications.

Beyond expressions of trust, humanizing the communication with residents encourages their engagement and improve their level of interaction, involvement, and interest in municipal affairs. This technique touches on multiple elements of credibility and transparency component in the *Communication Trust Building Model* including openness and disclosure. Ultimately, these activities enhance trust that is the foundation of effective governance and community relations. When residents trust their municipal government, they are more likely to believe in the legitimacy of its actions, comply with regulations, and support its initiatives. Humanizing municipal activities contributes to trust building by creating transparency, demonstrating empathy, and fostering open communication between the government and the community.

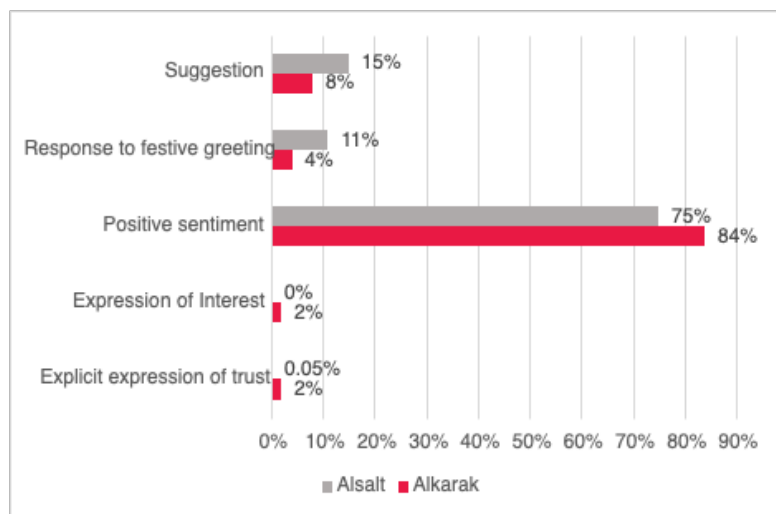


Figure 4: Expressions of trust per municipality.

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BEYOND WORDS: THE POTENCY OF MULTIMEDIA

“Images speak better than words.” Mixed media attracts audience and increases trust and transparency between municipalities and residents.

Mixed media, comprising text and photos, is the most prevalent format for posts published by both municipalities (Figure 5). Alsalt municipality has the internal capacities for mixed media formats. It employs a multimedia format (including videos and photos with text) more frequently. This reflects the understanding of one official in Alsalt municipality that “images speak better than words.”

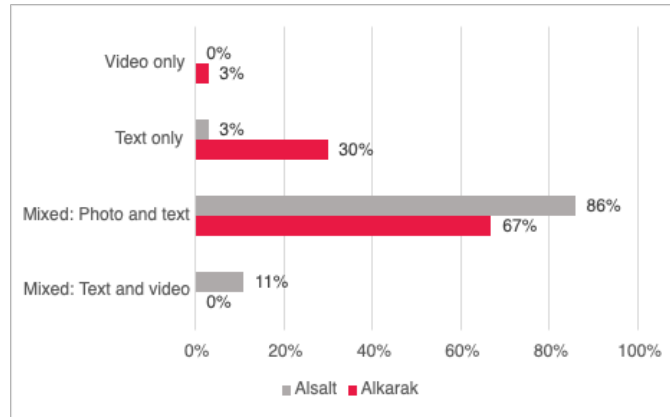


Figure 5: Posts per municipality and their format.

In terms of expressions of (dis)trust, videos generate high positive engagement (32%), as is the case with the videos (Figure 6). This type of content builds trust: 103 (94%) out of the 110 comments instigated by the video in Alkarak were positive most likely due to the transparent communication.

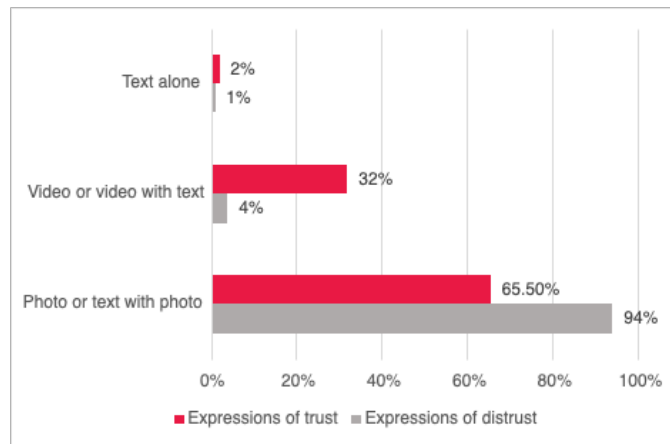


Figure 6: Post format vs. level of trust.

Visual content is key to enhance openness and disclosure in municipal communications contributing to the credibility component of the *Communication Trust Building Model*.

Mixed media posts can contribute to building trust by providing transparency in municipal activities and decision-making processes. For example, municipalities can use videos to give behind-the-scenes glimpses of city council meetings, showcase infrastructure projects, or explain budget allocations in an accessible and comprehensible manner. This transparency helps residents understand how their tax money are being spent and reinforces the credibility of the municipality. Trust in governmental institutions is strengthened, when residents perceive their local government as transparent, responsive, and accountable.

Moreover, visual aids such as infographics or interactive maps can simplify complex data and policy information, making it easier for residents to understand and engage with municipal initiatives. Additionally, multimedia content allows municipalities to showcase their achievements, address community concerns, and solicit feedback in real-time, thereby enhancing the overall transparency of government operations.

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FROM TALKING AT TO TALKING WITH: EMBRACING TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION

Municipalities need to go beyond sharing information to actively seeking input and fostering meaningful dialogue with their audience. This shift requires a proactive approach that goes beyond broadcasting messages to actively engaging with residents, soliciting their feedback, and involving them in decision-making processes.

Both municipalities had only few posts where they either crowdsource opinions or consult with participants. The invitation to participate in discussions on social media occurred only twice with Alkarak municipality asking residents to contribute to keeping the city clean (Table 1).

Nature of engagement	Alkarak	Alsalt	Totals
Crowdsourcing opinions	3	1	4
Invitation to participate	2	0	2
Youth-generated activities	3	0	3
Totals	8	1	9

Table 1: Forms of engagement with the audience by municipalities.

Municipalities often struggle with one-way communication, where information is disseminated to the residents without sufficient opportunities for feedback or interaction. This traditional approach to communication leads to disengagement and frustration among residents who feel their voices are not heard or valued by their local government.

Municipalities can leverage various interactive tools to facilitate two-way communication including live-stream dialogues, polling tools, and social media commenting features that offer opportunities for real-time interaction between municipalities and residents. These tools allow for synchronous (real-time) and asynchronous (delayed) discussions, catering to different preferences and schedules among the audience.

Crowdsourcing is another valuable approach for gathering opinions and feedback from the community. By tapping into the collective wisdom of residents, municipalities can gain diverse perspectives, identify emerging issues, and generate innovative solutions to complex challenges. Crowdsourcing platforms, online surveys, and community forums provide avenues for residents to contribute their ideas and feedback on various municipal initiatives.

Explicit expression of trust occurred 5 times in response to Alkarak municipality posts, while only once in Alsalt. Residents expressed interest or concern seven times in Alkarak, while this did not occur at all in Alsalt. The higher expressions of trust (explicit or implicit) could be linked to the higher level of engagement by Alkarak team with their audience compared with Alsalt counterpart. For example, Alkarak municipality media officers engaged 21 times compared to 10 times by Alsalt counterparts (Table 2).

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How the municipality engaged with audience	Alkarak		Alsalt	
Accepting criticism	1	4.7%	0	0%
Taking action	0	0%	1	10%
Promising to take action	1	4.7%	3	30%
Dismissing claims	0	0 %	0	0%
Providing information	19	90.5%	6	60%
Totals	21	100%	10	100%

Table 2: Municipalities engagement comments with the audience.

Effective two-way communication requires municipalities to be responsive and attentive to the concerns and feedback provided by residents. This entails acknowledging feedback, providing timely responses, and taking appropriate action based on community input. Responsive communication builds trust and confidence in local government and demonstrates a commitment to listening and addressing the needs of residents. By active engagement and transparency, municipalities demonstrate their commitment to accountability and democratic principles.

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MISSING FEMALE VOICES IN SHAPING THE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Encouraging female engagement on social media contributes to promoting inclusivity and representation in municipal communication efforts. It sends a message that women's perspectives, voices, and contributions are valued and respected by local government authorities. But municipal communications fail to achieve this.

The language used on social media by both municipalities was inclusive by default. That is, the use of language that is neutral (not exclusionary, sexist, or patriarchal). Yet, males dominated the discussions. Both municipalities attracted four times more male commenters compared to females (Figure 7).

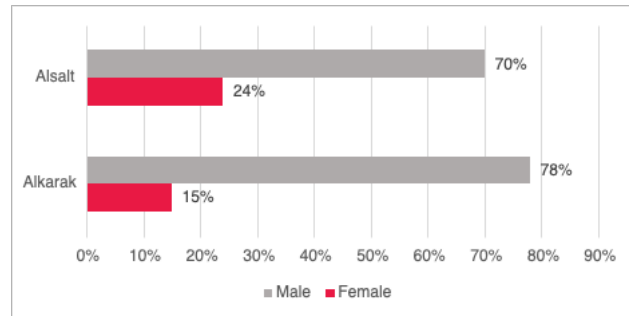


Figure 7: Commenter's reported gender per municipality.

This poses questions on either municipalities' poor active engagement with female residents, the unwelcoming environment or safety concerns of online spaces for females, or a general trend of female disengagement in public issues addressed by the municipalities.

This is a striking gap in the communication practices of both municipalities. Targeted communication towards females is weak or non-existent, calling for further research into strategies used by the municipalities, and a larger assessment among female residents.

By actively encouraging female engagement, municipalities can address disparities in social media engagement between men and women and ensure the voices and perspectives of women are adequately represented in public discourse. Developing content specifically tailored to match the interests of female residents is essential for attracting and retaining their engagement. This could involve creating content on topics that are relevant to women's experiences and aspirations.

Featuring women leaders and role models in social media content can encourage female engagement. By showcasing the achievements and contributions of women in leadership positions, municipalities can inspire other women to become more actively involved in civic life, leadership roles, and decision-making processes. This assertion aligns with the findings from a study by Hachelaf and Bondokji (2024) exploring the potential of alternative media in championing youth agency. The study conceptualizes youth-led media as a public space showcasing different elements of civic and political engagement along with the broader expressions of agency. The research advocates equity of opportunity to express and demonstrate youth leadership across genders.

Engaging with female residents on social media can also help municipalities build trust and strengthen community relations. By creating an open and inclusive digital space where women feel heard, respected, and represented, municipalities can foster a sense of belonging and ownership among female residents.

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TURNING THE TIDE WITH STRATEGIES THAT ADDRESS AUDIENCE CRITICISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

To address criticism, skepticism, and negative feedback from audience on social media, municipality staff members should be equipped with strategies and techniques for handling negative comments professionally and constructively. This includes acknowledging concerns, providing accurate information, and addressing grievances in a timely and empathetic manner.

The analysis reveals gaps in media officials' ability to manage negative comments and maintain audience engagement. Media officials in both municipalities acknowledge their capacity gap in this area. (Alkarak and Alsalt media officers, 2023). Further, the analysis reveals only one case of Alkarak municipality accepting criticism (Table 2 above), suggesting a need for capacity-building for media officials in this area. Managing negative comments improve the interactivity and reactivity to comments and questions which are critical elements of responsiveness component in the Communication Trust Building Model.

It is essential for municipalities to maintain positive audience engagement to foster trust and transparency. Media officials should be skilled in cultivating constructive dialogue, responding to inquiries promptly, and highlighting positive stories and achievements of the municipality. This involves creating engaging content, initiating meaningful conversations, and actively seeking input from to demonstrate responsiveness and openness.

To manage contentious interactions and navigate complex communication challenges with the residents, media officials need further training in:

- conflict resolution
- active listening
- and de-escalation techniques.
- crisis communication
- reputation management
- media relations

Further, the analysis reveals essential gaps in digital literacy and media skills. This includes:

- understanding the dynamics of social media platforms
- utilizing analytics tools to monitor audience sentiment
- crafting effective messages tailored to different digital platforms.

Dealing with negative and distrustful comments can be emotionally taxing. It's crucial to provide training and support to build their resilience and coping mechanisms in handling challenging situations. This may involve workshops on stress management, self-care practices, and strategies for maintaining professionalism and composure under pressure. Additionally, media officials should be adaptable and able to adjust their communication approach based on the tone and context of interactions with the residents.

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CONCLUSION

This paper summarizes the results of a Learning Needs Assessment that examined trust building communication by local government actors. The paper has clarified main findings and offers key recommendations to local government actors and researchers interested in encouraging trust building through communication.

The paper analysed Facebook posts by two municipalities in Jordan: Alsalt and AlKarak in June - September 2023.

The analysis was based on a two-layered Communication Trust Building Model that examines four elements including: credibility and transparency, responsiveness, language and tone, and engagement. Each includes several elements. The four components and encompassed elements constitute the first layer, the second layer was added to the Model to examine (dis)trust expressions in audience reactions to municipality communication. Additionally, two group interviews were arranged with media officials at each municipality.

Recommendations for Media officials in municipalities:

- Consider both **quantity and quality of trust building communication** when the developing the communication strategy of the municipality with residents. The frequency of communication and adequacy of information are critical to keep citizens updated and engaged.
- **Give a human face** to municipal activities by showing and including municipality officials in social media posts. Audiences are more likely to connect with, and trust individuals than faceless systems. This also increases accountability and recognition of employees and stakeholders. This includes municipality leaders.
- **Use mixed media posts** since these engage and attract the audience while sharing of challenges with the audience contributes to increased levels of trust and transparency between the municipality and residents.
- Improve the **two-ways communication** between the municipalities and the audience. Proactive engagement and responsiveness by municipalities is remarkably low. Municipalities should go beyond sharing information to actively seeking feedback, crowdsourcing opinions, and engaging in synchronous and asynchronous discussion using live-stream dialogues, polling tools or discussions through the commenting feature on social media.
- Encourage female and other **minority groups engagement** on social media by developing content that is specifically tailored to match the interests of these resident segments. Topics that resonate with female audiences or feature women leaders or feature people with disabilities, central ethnicities, or age groups might be significant in this regard.
- Improve the capacity of communications staff members in areas of **managing negative and distrust comments** and maintaining positive audience engagement. The findings highlight high frequency of such comments while media teams ignored many of them. While ignoring comments is not necessarily a negative reaction, municipalities need to be more intentional, careful and strategic about the sensitive issue of dealing with criticism. Developing a SOP (Standard Organizational Process) becomes important in this regard. Municipality officials need also to be sensitized that a certain level of distrust is healthy and commendable. Negative comments can be seen in a positive light.

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Recommendations for researchers in the field of local administration and communications:

- The study was limited in scope. Future research employing longitudinal or larger-scale approaches could explore cumulative trust-building patterns and assess their potential causal impact on current trends in trusting institutions.
- The model offers a simple way to analyse the features of trust building through communication. It has the potential to be utilized by researchers or evaluation experts to gauge the impact of specific forms of communication on trust-building. It can also be repurposed or readjusted outside the scope of this research.
- It is important to admit that social media, while a primary focus in this study, may not serve as a completely secure or inclusive space for expressing distrust. Questions about the honesty of comments arise, especially considering that expressions of distrust may occur outside the realm of social media and should be investigated further. For that, future studies that explore trust building outside social media might also be required.

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