Using Social Media to Engage With Local Communities

Professor Susie Sykes; Professor Jane Wills; Professor Daniel Frings; Professor Andrew Whittaker; Dr Megan Watkins

BACKGROUND

During the COVID-19 pandemic local communities found themselves cut off from face to face contact with others at a time when they needed reliable information and support.

Little is known about how social media platforms have been utilised by Public Health organisations in infectious disease outbreaks (Merchant & Lurie, 2020)

EVALUATION AIMS

- Investigate the characteristics of, and techniques employed within, the ECAS Facebook digital community development approach.
- How effective is a digital community development approach during a pandemic in achieving improved health literacy, protective health actions and community connectedness?
- Capture the impact this approach had on wider public health systems

EVALUATION METHODS

Quantitative

Social network analysis of communications.

Survey of existing users (n=111)over two time periods compared to non-users n=141)

Qualitative

Interviews with Essex County Council staff (n=7), Public Health Team (n=7) & social influencers (n=4)

CONCLUSIONS

- Disseminating guidance via social media networks allows a two-way interaction providing engagement rather than simply public information with public as an amplifier for messages
- Social network interventions can act as dependable information sources which may impact beyond users and be helpful for socially isolated people
- Content needs to be high quality and need to be local and experienced influencers who are able to manage conflict and disagreement
- It offers greater levels of trust during public emergencies when trust in central authority can be compromised
- Influencers can provide local knowledge and high network centrality in a community
- The collaboration can mitigate concerns about the credibility of social media information and help to filter overwhelming "infodemics" but can also ensure that influencers retain their independence from authority.

INTERVENTION

A public health department collaborated with local social media influencers on Facebook (Meta) to strengthen engagement and disseminate core messages. The intervention was run by 18 community members with no municipal branding. It, had 13,000 communications in the first week, was followed by 55,339 people and had 37,900 members in 2020.

References: Merchant RM, Lurie N. Social Media and Emergency Preparedness in Response to Novel Coronavirus. JAMA.2020;323(20): 2011–2012. doi:10.1001/*JAMA*.2020.4469

RESULTS

Transitivity increased by 43% across sampling periods with more attention on influencers. Survey analysis revealed: 89% of users had confidence in the information provided, 54% had referred others to the page/group, 55% agreed they relied on the group. There were no differences between those using the intervention and others in relation to covid-protective behaviours or digital health literacy.

Findings show this approach combines different forms of social capital to promote engagement with communities when there is a lack of trust in information:

- Local government brings financial and symbolic capital - as a recognised authority with public accountability, impartiality and fairness
- Local social media influencers bring social capital – through social networks based upon recognised individuals, local symbols and shared local references.

Influencers and Social Capital

"I think it was much faster. It was much more agile; it was much more able ... That first week, they were absolutely superb. They were just brilliant: they were all over it. We had to move at pace: they could move at pace and they could get messages out instantly. So that sort of speed: that kind of creativity as well, that they showed, I think was very, very powerful at the start. And I don't think our more traditional routes could respond in the same way"

Wider Public Health Team

Local Authority & Symbolic Capital

'The advantages were access to information, credibility... being able to go to the head of the NHS in Essex... It made us very nimble; it made us very fast...If we'd gone in there and we'd said, 'Well, this is the answer to your question.' And they come back and said, 'Well, how do you know? Who are you? You're just a Facebook admin.' Correct. When I can say, 'And I got this directly from Public Health', we're golden'

Core Team, Social Media Influencer