



State of Israel
State Comptroller and Ombudsman
Audit Reports on Municipalities 2020

Use of Social Networks by Local Authorities and their Elected Officials

Abstract

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Background

In the past few years, the public sector, including local authorities and their elected officials, have used online social networks (mainly Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter) and conducted a direct dialogue with the public. The use of social networks streamlines and shortens the process of conveying messages and information regarding service provision in routine and emergencies to the public and makes the process of submitting complaints and inquiries by the public more efficient. However, it carries potential of risks and causing damage such as infringement of the right to privacy, free speech and equality.

Key figures

8 billion

Number of users of social networks worldwide in 2018

2.4 billion

Number of active users of Facebook worldwide in 2019, 5.6 million of which are active users in Israel

84%

Percentage of Facebook users in Israel among users of social networks in 2018

94%

Percentage of local authorities that have at least one social network account

83%

Percentage of heads of local authorities that have at least one social network account


134

Number of complaints received from the public in the years 2017 – 2019 by the Office of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman related to use of social networks by public authorities and elected public officials

3 million shekels




Total expenses of local authorities for promoting paid content on social networks in 2018 (according to the local authorities that answered our office's questionnaire)




Audit Actions

 In the months of May through December 2019, the Office of the State Comptroller examined the use of social networks by local authorities and their elected officials in the following areas: scope of use and its objectives, technical management, content posted by the local authorities and public users, and the use by heads of local authorities of social networks. The audit was conducted in the municipalities of Beit Shemesh, Haifa, Tiberius, Jerusalem, Arraba, Kiryat Gat, Ramat Gan and Tel Aviv-Yafo; in the local authorities of Pardes Hanna-Karkur and Katrzin and in the Jezre'el Valley regional authority. Supplementary examinations were conducted in the Ministry of Interior, in the Jezre'el Valley training precinct and the Ministry of Justice. In addition, in June 2019, 257 questionnaires were sent to all the local authorities in the country. By the conclusion of the audit (December 2019), 189 local authorities had responded. The audit was carried out in conjunction with the State Ombudsman Commission, which has significant experience in resolving complaints on the use of social networks by public officials and public bodies.

Key findings



-  **Preparing regulations and work plans** – Even though they extensively use social networks, the local authorities did not prepare an organized and planned process for them.
-  **Signing Contractual agreements** – Many local authorities use outsourcing to set up or operate a social network account. Some local authorities (Jezre'el Valley, Pardes Hanna-Karkur and Kiryat Gat) did not formalize their work with outside companies in agreements to protect their rights and ensure confidentiality and data security. Some of the signed contracts were missing essential details, including a prohibition on use of the information as well as designating the responsible for oversight the outsourced contractor's work.
-  **The nature of the postings** – Most of the material posted by the local authorities on social networks contains announcements and public messages and public relations. The rate of posted material that allows involvement or interaction with the public beyond being able to add a response is low.




-  **Censoring responses** – During the audit, it was found that four of the local authorities that were examined, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Katzrin, Jezre'el Valley and Tiberius, – automatically censor responses and postings in advance by use of keywords. Likewise, the Kiryat Gat, Al-Batuf and Jerusalem authorities uploaded postings without ensuring that anything in the publication infringed, as defined by law, on the laws of equality, the right to privacy and copyrights.
-  **Use of the local authorities' resources** – It was found that heads of local authorities employ authority employees to operate their personal social network accounts, which also contain political marketing, despite the prohibition against the use of authority resources for these purposes.
-  **Involvement of the Ministry of Interior** – The Ministry of Interior has not addressed the issues of the use of social networks made by local authorities and their elected officials, and has not established rules and regulations, including setting a standard format regarding this matter.






Use of social networks during emergencies – The local authorities that were examined made optimal use of social networks during emergencies to provide accessible and reliable information as the event takes place, and enable their residents to prepare themselves properly.

Digital literacy training – The Ministry of Interior offers courses and training to employees of local authorities in the area of digital literacy.

Key recommendations

-  It is recommended that the local authorities that do not use social networks consider adopting this tool in light of its centrality, accessibility and effectiveness, in regarding provision of services for its residents.
-  It would be appropriate for the Ministry of Interior, in cooperation with the Federation of Local Authorities, to examine formulation of directives and regulations to assist the local authorities and create a standard framework for content management by the users of the authorities' accounts.
-  It would be appropriate for the Ministry of Justice to monitor social network use by public bodies Including what should and what should not be allowed. It should consider the fact that these networks are owned by private international companies, and where necessary, establish regulations that will guarantee the relevance of existing laws to the digital age.

-  The local authorities should act in accordance with the law, when posting material on social networks / They should understand that the networks' interactivity creates a space with public features. When necessary they should consult with the local authority's legal advisor to ensure that their activities do not violate on public rights such as that the right of equality, privacy and public expression.
 -  The local authorities should sparingly use advance keyword filtering and prefer other tools that the platform allows, because of the real potential for harming the right of expression by filtering content in advance.
 -  The local authorities should ensure that while conducting target (the act of matching advertising content to a specific audience) and determining parameters for publication of paid advertising on a social network so as to make the publication more efficient, no actions are performed that may discriminate relevant against audiences.
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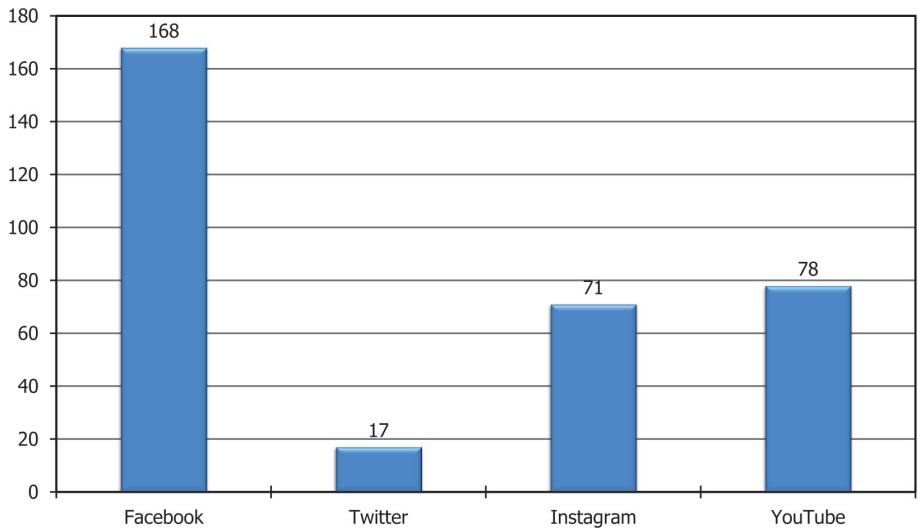
Summary

Social networks allow the local authorities and their elected officials direct, accessible and unmediated communication with the public, which increases their involvement in city-life. Nevertheless, these networks are private platforms, the use of which in the public sector, presents many unseen challenges.

In light of this, it would appropriate for the local authorities and their elected officials to use social networks optimally and efficiently to exploit their potential, use that will increase the public's trust in the local authorities and their elected officials. Nevertheless, the local authorities and their elected officials must keep in mind that their activities on social networks are bound by the regulations of public law and, therefore, they must take every precaution to prevent violation of public rights. On the basis of the information presented in this report regarding the broad and rising use of social networks and given the great importance for the local authority to maintain contact with its residents, it would appropriate for this subject be regulated properly by the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Justice.



Data regarding the use of social networks by local authorities



According to the responses given by the local authorities to the questionnaire; processed by the Office of the State Comptroller.