

**COST Short Term Scientific Mission on
International Comparison of Local Public
Sector Reforms (Work Group IV) Action 1207**

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**Host Institution: University of Oslo, Norway
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Background

This report covers a Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) which took place at The Institute for Political Science (Institutt for statsvitenskap, ISV) in the Social Sciences Faculty at the University of Oslo, Norway, hosted by Professor Harald Baldersheim. The background to the initial proposal stemmed from my PhD work examining the implications for modernisation and reform of practice at the local level through the use of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. The research visit focused particularly on comparing the impact of social media on local politicians in their relationships with both their council and local citizens and voters between Norway and the U.K. It is an area which is currently under-researched in comparative studies. My current study has developed a quantitative data base on social media use by U.K. councils and councillors, with data collected as a time series over three years. This provided a useful background to understanding and comparing practice in Norway and helped to build a normative picture of innovative practice in social media by administrations and politicians at the local level in both countries.

Norway was chosen for the STSM as it is a leading country in eGovernment: the 2012 Norwegian Ministries e-programme vision states that 'The ambition of the Government is that Norway shall be at the forefront internationally in terms of development of a digital public sector'.

One of the aims of the STSM was to understand why the narratives about local government's use of social media to reform relationships with citizens appear to be differently constituted in each country. The particularism of local government in each country sometimes makes it hard to make direct comparisons and articulate differences in a way that is meaningful. The visit aimed to use the insights gained to arrive at a better class of research questions about the impact of this new phenomenon and its contribution to democratic reform and renewal at the local level.

Activities undertaken over the two week period

- Observation of two City of Oslo Council meetings, a full council meeting and a Standing Committee on Health and Social Care.
- Three meetings with council officers and elected politicians regarding central local government relationships and practice in the use of social media for democratic reform.

- Discussions with Professor Harald Baldersheim and Professor Larry Rose, to gain information on issues in Norwegian local government such as eGovernment, centre/periphery issues, the impact of rurality, amalgamations and council size.
- Meetings with Kari Steen-Johnsen, Signe Bock Seegaard and Rune Karlsen, academics at the Institute for Social Research (Institutt for samfunnsforskning) in Oslo focussing on electronic democracy, social media use, transformative and renewal projects.
- In addition the researcher was also able to meet with young Ukrainian visitors to Oslo who were studying local government as part of the Bohdan Hawrylyshyn Charitable Foundation Program "Young generation will change Ukraine".
- Time was also devoted to using university library and council resources, both written and online, in order to enhance and broaden understanding of the country's governance.

Reflections on the Short Term Scientific Mission

The overall experience was invaluable. For me the benefit of the STSM can be summarised in three brief paragraphs:

There is tremendous value in actually visiting the country, being immersed in its daily life and visiting councils when studying local government. Reading the literature goes some way to building part of the picture, but experiencing the practical reality helps to give the whole picture. Sitting in a council meeting and observing councillors using social media in the council chamber tells a different story from an article. It has allowed me to begin to build a comparative normative picture of social media use by local councillors (outside direct service delivery functionality).

Comparative studies are strengthened by developing an understanding of the underlying similarities of the fundamental forms and practices of local government in other countries. It emphasises the sheer robustness and persistence of democratic forms. Those similarities allow us to explore the differences stemming from reform and to understand why things might or might not work if extrapolated to other countries.

Information is often in country silos and there is lots of data out there which can be accessed. Meeting other researchers in a situation which allows real knowledge exchange (rather than a hasty cup of coffee at a conference) enabled me to develop strong relationships and to exchange knowledge about data as well as transferable ways of modelling and developing metrics.

Further outputs planned

Following the visit, I have been invited to return to Norway to present a conference paper in June at the 2nd Åsgårdstrand Conference on Institutional Change entitled 'New Trends in The Public Sphere?' which is part of a project funded by the Research Council of Norway. It is intended that an academic article and one for a U.K. local government practice journal will be prepared for publication following this conference and that there will be continued knowledge exchange (actual and, of course, virtual) between academics from both countries.