

E-PARCC

COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE

Syracuse University

Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration

“Collector Bro”: Using Social Media to Tap the Power of Volunteerism

TEACHING NOTE

SYNOPSIS

The case discusses the use of social media by Prasanth Nair (Nair) as the District Collector of Kozhikode, a district in the southern Indian state of Kerala, to collaborate with citizens in implementing various welfare measures and to subsequently steer the volunteer efforts during the devastating floods in the province in 2018.

As the District Collector of Kozhikode, Nair took up various welfare initiatives under the “Compassionate Kozhikode” project. Compassionate Kozhikode was run entirely by volunteers who enlisted their services after a call to action by Nair on social media. It included initiatives such as maintaining roads, cleaning up beaches, donating goods, and volunteering the services required by welfare homes. The case goes on to describe “Operation Sulaimani”, the flagship scheme under Compassionate Kozhikode, through which food coupons were distributed to the poor and the needy. The beneficiaries could then exchange these coupons for a free meal at any of the enlisted restaurants. The case discusses some of the unique aspects of Operation Sulaimani such as the avoidance of expenditure on overhead by deploying the existing infrastructure and the complete lack of wastage of food.

This case was written by Debapratim Purkayastha and Vijay Kumar Tangirala of IBS Hyderabad. It was a winning case in E-PARCC’s 2018-2019 Competition for Collaborative Public Management, Governance, and Problem-Solving Teaching Materials. The case is intended for classroom discussion and not to suggest either effective or ineffective responses to the situation depicted. It may be copied as many times as needed, provided that the authors and E-PARCC are given full credit. [E-PARCC is a project of the Collaborative Governance Initiative](#), Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration- a research, teaching and practice center within Syracuse University’s Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.

The case details how Nair effectively employed social media to engage with the citizens of the district. It highlights his use of earthy and humorous language on social media which endeared him to the masses and motivated them to volunteer for various development initiatives. The case goes on to describe how he deployed social media in the rescue and rehabilitation of people during the devastating floods in the district in 2018. It also describes the criticism that Nair had to face for using social media as a governance tool.

TEACHING OBJECTIVES AND TARGET AUDIENCE

This case is designed to enable students to:

- Understand how people can be effectively involved in various governance initiatives.
- Identify the unique aspects of Operation Sulaimani which made it a success.
- Understand how social media can be effectively employed for collaborative public management and collaborative problem solving.

This case is meant for undergraduate and graduate students as a part of the public management and public policy curriculum.

IMMEDIATE ISSUES

- How can UV Jose and other successors of Nair as DC of Kozhikode continue to expand the Compassionate Kozhikode project?
- How can social media be effectively combined with face-to-face interactions in delivering governance services?

LINKAGES TO THEORY

The case deals with basic issues such as: Participatory governance; Collaborative problem solving; Community response grids.

Some of the suggested readings are:

1. Mishaal, D. and Abu-Shanab, E., 2015, May. The effect of using social media in governments: Framework of communication success. In Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Information Technology ICIT '15, Amman, Jordan (pp. 357-364).
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TEACHING APPROACH AND STRATEGY

This case can be used to discuss how social media was effectively used by Nair to involve citizens in solving various problems in the district. It provides ample scope to the students to discuss the distinctive facets of Operation Sulaimani that made it a success. It highlights the challenges that a public servant faces when he/she uses social media as a governance tool. Some broad questions are listed as part of the session plan:

SUGGESTED SESSION PLAN

	Discussion Questions	Time
Introduction		10 min
Discussion on Q1	1. Analyze the role played by citizens in the Compassionate Kozhikode project. Do you see any flaws in the project?	10 min
Discussion on Q2	2. Analyze the use of Facebook as a governance tool by Nair. What is governance?	10 min
Discussion on Q3	3. What were the benefits that accrued from Nair's use of social media in governance? What can one learn from his governance approach?	10 min
Discussion on Q4	4. Discuss some of the unique aspects of Compassionate Kozhikode and Operation Sulaimani.	10 min
Discussion on Q5	5. That Nair was social media savvy is evident from the Compassionate Keralam initiative. But how can his successors in Kozhikode take this initiative forward? What are some of the lessons that public servants can draw from Nair's handling of the Collector Kozhikode Facebook page?	10 min
Discussion on Q6	6. Analyze the role played by social media in carrying out rescue and relief operations during the Kerala floods.	10 min
Discussion on Q7	7. Nair faced criticism from the politicians/elected officials for his style of working and for adopting innovative methods of governance. How can his successors avoid similar criticism for the use of social media to govern the district?	5 min
Summary		5 min
Total		80 min

*Distribution of case 2-3 days before the class.

ANALYSIS

1. Analyze the role played by citizens in the Compassionate Kozhikode project.

Do you see any flaws in the project?

The role played by the citizens of Kozhikode in the Compassionate Kozhikode project is one of citizen coproduction. According to the concept of citizen coproduction, government looks at the public not as customers but as collaborators, expanding the part played by a citizen from merely a recipient of public services to an active participant in jointly addressing social issues. In the ensuing joint production, citizens contribute their time, skills, and effort to attain results, take greater responsibility, and be exposed to more risk. In exchange, they have a greater hold over resources and decisions (Linders, 2012).

The Kozhikode citizens' coproduction assumes the form of citizen sourcing – in citizen sourcing, the citizens enhance the government's responsiveness and effectiveness. The onus is on the government; however, the public has a bearing on the direction and results, updates the government where required, and may also help in the carrying out of government services on a daily basis. In the case of Compassionate Kozhikode, for instance, the citizens provided goods and services to the government mental health center and the welfare homes – these were actually the responsibilities of the government. Also under Operation Sulaimani, the needy could get meals for free; ensuring that this basic need is fulfilled is, in fact, the government's responsibility.

The role played by the citizens of Kozhikode in the Compassionate Kozhikode project can be broken down into three broad areas – service design (consultation and ideation), service delivery and execution (crowdsourcing and co-delivery), and service monitoring (citizen reporting).

Service design (consultation and ideation): Through social media, the citizens of Kozhikode contributed ideas to the framing of various initiatives under Compassionate Kozhikode – it was not only their ideas that contributed to the design of the project but also their bringing to the notice of Nair the problems that they faced in their localities.

Service delivery and execution (crowdsourcing and co-delivery): The citizens executed various initiatives under the project. Examples are of their volunteering as occupational therapists at mental health centers, as plumbers at leprosy hospitals, as maids at children's centers, and as yoga trainers at old-age homes.

Service monitoring (citizen reporting): The citizens passed on information to Nair and his team. For instance, they identified roads with potholes and informed the government of the details.

The following are the flaws in the Composite Kozhikode project:

- By putting up volunteering opportunities on its website, Compassionate Kozhikode substitutes planning with probability – the certainty associated with scheduling a

service is substituted by the probability that someone will be available to help (Linders, 2012). Public services must be carried out with the assurance that they are available for a citizen in need and not only when someone volunteers to help him/her.

- Not everyone has access to social media and the Internet. By primarily using social media and the Internet as the tool to garner ideas and to mobilize the community, Compassionate Kozhikode may not have crowdsourced ideas from those lacking access to the Internet. This segment of the population may also have been handicapped in bringing its grievances to the notice of the authorities.
- Compassionate Kozhikode, with citizen coproduction as one of its key features, runs the risk of the local government passing over its duties and responsibilities to citizens – a reason for this could be government not being able to shore up the required financial resources. For instance, under the Project 4N initiative, the government looked to sponsors and other contributors to fix the potholes. But ensuring that the roads are well maintained is primarily a responsibility of the government.

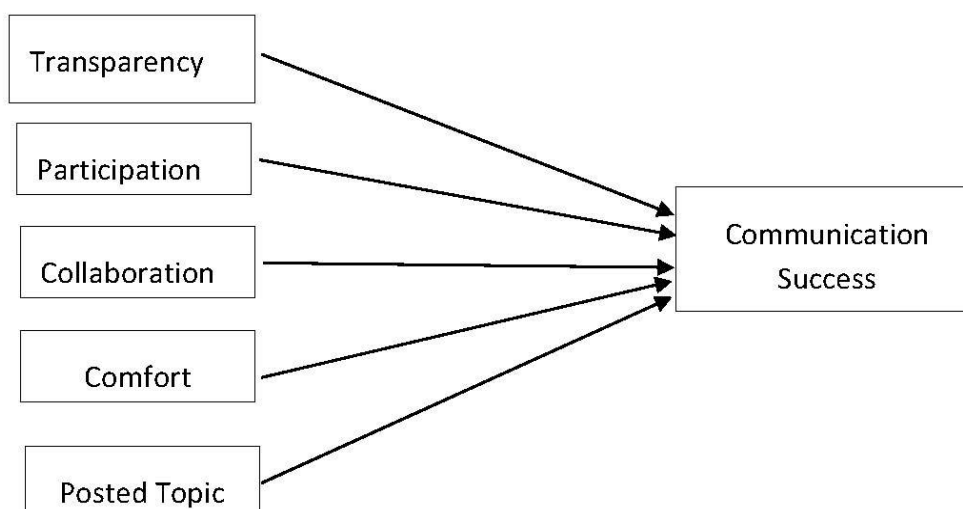
The initiatives launched by Nair, though innovative, pushed under the carpet systemic issues such as inefficient tax or public revenue system, inadequate social welfare finances, and inefficient public service delivery.

2. Analyze the use of Facebook as a governance tool by Nair.

The use of Facebook as a governance tool by Nair can be analyzed by employing the “Framework for Government’s Communication Success over Facebook” (Mishaal and Abu-Shanab, 2015) (See TN Figure I).

TN Figure I

Framework for Government’s Communication Success over Facebook



Transparency: Governments should make information available to the public to ensure that it is fully aware.

Participation: Governments should allow citizens to participate in discussions on topics of governance by opening up the dialogue, by allowing citizens to post comments on the pages, or employ surveys to garner information from the public.

Collaboration: Governments should collaborate with the citizens. Collaboration results in governments gaining from citizens' experience, knowledge, and opinions. Collaboration is a key feature of an open government as government asks the citizens to co-create or co-design a process or a service.

Comfort: When governments reach out to each citizen on a communication channel he/she is comfortable with, the communication becomes more comfortable than if the citizens are forced to go to a physical agency to avail of a service or to get some information.

Posted topic: The topic posted by the government may influence its communication with the citizens. Some of the topics may enhance the frequency and intensity of communication between the government and the citizens, and some topics may hinder citizens' communication with the government.

Communication success: Communication success can be gauged from the popularity of a page, which in turn can be measured from the number of likes, comments, shares, and replies. This will indicate the level of citizens' involvement in government initiatives.

The following is the analysis of Nair's use of Facebook as a governance tool employing this framework:

Transparency: Nair gave complete details of all government schemes on the official Facebook page. None of the citizen comments, except those which were communally sensitive, were deleted.

Participation: The citizens of the district posted their grievances on the official Facebook page. On the page, they also gave Nair innovative ideas for governance.

Collaboration: Collaboration between Nair and the citizens on Facebook enabled the ideation and implementation of several schemes under Compassionate Kozhikode.

Comfort: The citizens' comfort with using Facebook as a communication medium can be gauged from the fact that it is one of the most popular social media platforms.

Posted topic: The topics that Nair posted on the official Facebook page related to the various governance and welfare measures. And hence there was active dialogue between him and the citizens on the page.

Communication success: Nair's success with employing Facebook as a communication medium can be gauged from the fact that by July 2016, the official Facebook page had more than 225,000 followers. The success of the communication medium can also be gauged

from the fact that, as of March 2016, the Facebook page had registered more than 189,064 likes and over 8,184 individuals were conversing about the page at any given point in time. The initiative started by Nair seemed to have become self-sustaining as even after he was no longer the District Collector of Kozhikode, the number of followers continued to grow and had reached around 285,000 by January 2019.

3. What were the benefits that accrued from Nair's use of social media in governance?

The benefits that accrued from Nair's use of social media in governance were as follows:

- It improved governance. Social media enabled easy publication and easy dissemination of information related to various governance schemes. This generated transparency and created citizen goodwill toward the administration.¹ For Nair, social media enabled the quick elicitation of public opinion.
- Social media provided citizens with access to Nair. Frequently, they were able to connect with him in real time.²
- Social media enabled Nair to tap into unique resources of the public – they volunteered their time to participate in various welfare initiatives; this was besides their donating goods such as cots, wheelchairs, and radios.
- Nair's detailing various government schemes and other welfare measures on social media conserved time and money. With the information available to the public through social media, money that would have otherwise been spent putting up banners in public places would have been conserved.
- Social media enabled Nair to connect with the citizens on platforms where they spent a substantial amount of time – in tune with broader trends, citizens spent a considerable amount of time on social media.
- Social media enabled Nair to do away with the limitations of time. He could even interact with citizens outside office hours.
- Using social media to give a call for action to clean up the Pisharikavu Lake gave the citizens a sense of ownership of the lake. Citizens in other areas too got together to clean up the lakes in their vicinity.
- Social media enabled Nair to create a collaborative forum where citizens could share ideas.³ The result of these interactions was Compassionate Kozhikode. As pointed out in Exhibit I, at least ten initiatives were launched under the program to tackle various issues of social importance.

¹ Jude Hanan, "#9 from 2013: Using Social Media for Good Governance," <https://blogs.worldbank.org>, December 26, 2013.

² Jude Hanan, "#9 from 2013: Using Social Media for Good Governance," <https://blogs.worldbank.org>, December 26, 2013.

³ Tish Falco, "Taking Social Media Public: Social Media for Successful Citizen Relationship Management," www-935.ibm.com, October 2011.

- Social media enabled Nair to garner citizen feedback on various initiatives and resolve their grievances in a timely manner.
- The use of social media in governance enabled the Kozhikode collectorate to increase the efficiency of its operations. An example provided in the case study is the speedy resolution of a citizen's complaint.
- The use of social media also enabled Nair to crowdsource technologies. An example is that of techies providing models of an app intended to rein in speeding buses.
- Often public management is stalled by many constraints – funds can be scarce and the level of bureaucracy can create roadblocks to the delivery of timely services to the public. Nair circumvented some of these obstacles by directly engaging with the public over social media. For instance, instead of waiting for budgetary approvals to provide various amenities in the government mental health center, he employed social media to crowdsource the goods required.
- During the Kerala floods of 2018, Nair's use of social media helped in mobilizing volunteers and other resources to carry out rescue and relief initiatives.

Prasanth adopted the twin strategies of civil society participation and the employment of social media to carry out the entire administration of the district. His modus operandi was to analyze the existing problems in the district, organize participation from the public and civil society bodies, display the assessment on different public platforms such as social media, and prod people into volunteering and chipping in with solutions.⁴ The following are some of the learnings from Nair's governance approach:

- One has to deploy all the tools at one's disposal, including technology, to make governance as inclusive as possible.
- Citizens possess latent wisdom about how their every-day problems can be solved. All that is needed is for an enabling platform to be provided by administrators for this knowledge to be channelized.

A crucial aspect in involving citizens in governance is the experience they are provided in terms of how the administrators personally interact with them. Adopting a down-to-earth style, as Nair did, is required to sustainably tap citizen power.

4. Discuss some of the unique aspects of Compassionate Kozhikode and Operation Sulaimani.

Apart from being an entirely volunteer-driven initiative, some of the unique aspects of Compassionate Kozhikode are as follows:

⁴ Osama Manzar, "Compassion: A New Administrative Tool," www.livemint.com, March 31, 2016.

- The use of social media to mobilize citizens is a zero-cost strategy,⁵ from a technology perspective.
- The slick titles of the various initiatives such as *Tere Mere Beach Mein*, *Kozhipedia*, *Hey Auto*, and *Yo Appooppa* were devoid of any “bureaucratese” and were one of the reasons for generating excitement among the citizens.
- The project discouraged donations in the form of cash and hence prevented corruption (or perception of corruption). It also mitigated the risk of Nair himself being hounded by his detractors with allegations and insinuations of engaging in corruption.
- Team Compassionate Kozhikode followed a policy of the benefactors under the various initiatives not being photographed. This discouraged those interested in self-promotion from participating in the initiatives and contributed to the sustainability of the Compassionate Kozhikode project.

Some of the unique aspects of Operation Sulaimani are as follows:

- Large donations and corporate donations are discouraged so as to give citizens a sense of ownership of the scheme. Many of the problems (e.g. hunger) that Nair was trying to solve have a huge magnitude and may require different actors to tackle them in their own ways. People and corporations willing to donate larger sums can always be diverted to other civil society groups that are trying to tackle these social issues in their own way.
- The scheme does not entail the construction of kitchens and hence there is no capital expenditure involved.
- Also, by not having kitchens, the scheme avoids potential issues such as food wastage and concerns related to the quality of the food.
- The scheme does not negatively affect the revenues of the participating restaurants; in fact, it has resulted in an increase in their revenues.
- While initially the project was more liberal and welcoming of all people who came forward for free food, with time volunteers started maintaining a record of the beneficiaries of the scheme. This helped them prevent the system from being abused.

⁵ “What Caught the Attention of the Jury,” www.thehindu.com, March 18, 2016.

5. That Nair is social media savvy is evident from the Compassionate Keralam initiative. But how can his successors in Kozhikode take this initiative forward? What are some of the lessons that public servants can draw from Nair's handling of the Collector Kozhikode Facebook page?

Following are some of the ways in which Nair's successors can ensure that the Compassionate Kozhikode project thrives:

- They must ensure that the existing initiatives under Compassionate Kozhikode continue to be implemented properly; for instance, they should ensure the cleaning up of beaches under the *Tere Mere Beach Mein* initiative.
- They should also strive to increase the scope of the existing initiatives under Compassionate Kozhikode; for instance, they could increase the number of participating restaurants under the Operation Sulaimani initiative.
- They should continue to use social media to solicit citizen feedback on the implementation of the different initiatives.
- They should expand the scope of the Compassionate Kozhikode project by launching new initiatives with inputs from the public.
- As is the case with the existing initiatives, they should give innovative names to the new initiatives to generate excitement among the public.
- As was the case with the cleaning up of the Pisharikavu Lake wherein citizens were given a treat of *Malabar biryani*, Nair's successors must find innovative ways to motivate citizens to participate in various initiatives.
- As was the case with the cleaning up of the Pisharikavu Lake wherein Nair joined hands with the members of the local community in the clean-up of the lake, his successors should also join hands with the public in the on-the-ground execution of various initiatives.
- They must adopt Nair's approach of not micro-managing the schemes and entrust volunteers with the responsibility of steering the initiatives.
- They should ensure to the extent possible that citizens come up with solutions to the problems in their localities; they will then take ownership of implementation of the solutions.
- They should educate people on how to use social media so that more people can contribute ideas and bring problems in their district to the notice of the authorities.

Some of the lessons that public servants can draw from Nair's handling of the Collector Kozhikode Facebook page are as follows:

- Instead of outsourcing the handling of the official Facebook page and by personally handling it, Nair brought credibility to the initiative.
- If public servants intend to emulate Nair's strategy of extensively interacting with citizens through social media platforms such as Facebook, they need to adopt the

kind of humorous and earthy language used by Nair. Using a high-handed approach in interacting with citizens will defeat the very purpose of using the medium.

- As was the case with a citizen posting a complaint on the official Facebook page and getting it addressed quickly, public servants should be agile in resolving the grievances posted by citizens on social media.

6. Analyze the role played by social media in carrying out rescue and relief operations during the Kerala floods.

There are three facets to social media which make it an irreplaceable ally during natural calamities. One, unlike traditional media such as television and radio, social media enables two-way communication; this communication can be one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many (Jaeger, et. al, 2007). Two, during severe natural calamities, telecommunications infrastructure and networks cannot be leveraged adequately due to damage to cell towers, broken lines, and a high volume of traffic (Will, 2001). Internet-based networks, on the other hand, are highly useful for emergency response and recovery because it is a part of the Internet's design to keep operating despite the breakdown of major communication points; hence, it intelligently navigates traffic around clogged or nonfunctional segments of the system (Graber, 2003; Kapucu, 2004). Three, during natural catastrophes, emergency response mechanisms employing telephone, radio, or television cannot cater to the entire communication requirements of the public and responders.

However, mobile telecommunications gadgets combined with the Internet can offer greater capacity and more effective service and also generate interactive communication systems that can enable public and responders to engage in real-time communication and collaboration (Shneiderman, et. al., 2007). The huge role that social media played during the Kerala floods can be gauged from the fact that it was Nair's Facebook post that mobilized the public to volunteer their services. The concept of community response grids can be used to analyze social media's role during the natural calamity. Community response grids (CRGs) are web-based mechanisms that combine Internet and mobile technologies to aid response in large-scale emergency situations by enabling individuals to report information, responders to pass on instructions, and residents to help each other (Jaeger, et. al., 2007). As sharing of information among citizens and their helping each other are critical during natural disasters, social capital is key to CRGS. Social capital refers to the shared relationships and values and trust between individuals. WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups were critical in passing on information about stranded persons during the Kerala floods because these groups fostered social capital.

CRGs, by providing tools to citizens to help each other, reduce the burden on the stretched government apparatus. Even during the Kerala floods, citizens coming to each other's rescue by identifying the stranded would have helped the government to focus on high-priority initiatives. In case of CRGs, professional emergency responders will be responsible for implementing the emergency response initiatives whereas the community members will

back them. Similarly, in the case of the Kerala floods, the army was primarily responsible for rescuing the stranded while the volunteers employed social media to aid the army in identifying and locating the stranded. CRGs also involve citizens helping out the affected by providing, among other things, psychological support, food, and shelter (Jaeger, et. al, 2007). Compassionate Keralam similarly involved families adopting the affected families.

7. Nair faced criticism from the political class for his style of working and for adopting innovative methods of governance. How can his successors avoid similar criticism for the use of social media to govern the district?

To avoid the criticism that Nair was subjected to for using social media as a governance tool and to continue to deploy social media to deliver effective governance, his successors must take the elected officials along (O'Leary and Bingham, 2007) through interaction and negotiated action. Following are methods by which this can be ensured:

- Negotiate the ground rules for any deliberations in the future related to the use of social media.
- Negotiate the processes for overseeing the exchange of views related to the deployment of social media.
- Deliberate on the administration and allocation of duties.
- Negotiate the rules to ensure a satisfactory end to an issue.
- Along with the elected officials, identify a mechanism to resolve a deadlock.

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