

Governments, public can relate better online

While the UAE's emirates are considered regional leaders in the extent to which they've adopted the internet and social networking tools to reach out to the people, a culture of social networking needed to be instilled in government employees to use such tools effectively, panel members agreed.

Dubai: Can social networking tools be used to improve the standard of governance and the government's interaction with the public?

This was the question four Emirati social networking enthusiasts attempted to answer with a panel discussion at the Dubai School of Government (DSG) on Monday.

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His Highness Shaikh Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, was the first Arab leader to conduct a live online chat with members of the public and was one of the first leaders to set up Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Now, the government was looking for ways to further improve interaction with the public, with a two-day seminar organised by the DSG and the Emirates Information Authority.

Communication

Entitled Social Networking Technologies for Better e-Governance and Fostering a Knowledge Society in the UAE, the seminar consisted of five sessions dealing exclusively with social networking.

Mishaal Al Gergawi, a cultural commentator and columnist for *Gulf News*, said: "People on social media can't use social media to get people to use social media," suggesting that more traditional methods needed to be used to get more members of the public involved.

However, there were good examples of how UAE companies had used the internet and social media effectively to increase their visibility, he said.

All an organisation needed was someone committed to the use of social media who could champion the cause, he said.

Anisa Al Sharif, one of the four panelists and a government employee, said; "We're falling into the culture of holding the government responsible... It is both society and government that are responsible".

Amal Al Mutawa, also a government employee and a panelist, said the public needed to understand that social media was to be used to highlight problems that affected society as a whole.

Former television talk show host and journalist, Aida Al Bu Saidi, said: "You need to create the culture of [social networking] from within the internal structure [of the entity]".

"If you want to promote its use, you need to know what it is," Aida said.

"Social networking is not just for the communications department."

Panelists also discussed the challenges of social networking.

Aida said she blogged under a pseudonym. Al Gergawi said readers associated his column with his job, which his boss confronted him with.

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