An Analysis of Social Media Operation Policies in Japanese Prefectural Governments

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Abstract. This study examines the regional disparities in the use of X by Japanese prefectural governments during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the role of institutional social media operation policies. While some prefectures actively disseminated timely and frequent updates, others lagged behind, raising questions about the structural and policy-based factors underlying such variation. Through a comparative case analysis of six prefectures, Tokyo, Osaka, Aichi, Aomori, Hokkaido, and Yamagata, this research investigates the content and objectives of social media policies, user communication strategies, and legal-ethical frameworks. The findings reveal considerable inconsistencies in policy design: some governments emphasize internal operational clarity, while others focus on communication or staff guidance. Most adopt a unidirectional communication model, with limited mechanisms for citizen feedback. Legal provisions on misinformation, privacy, and intellectual property vary significantly in scope and specificity. This study underscores the necessity of developing standardized, transparent, and responsive social media governance frameworks in Japanese local governments. It advocates for further research on policy practice alignment, particularly through empirical analysis of post behavior and staff interviews.

Keywords: Social Media Operation Policies, Information dissemination, Japanese Local Government, Risk Management.

1 Introduction

This paper addresses a critical issue that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic: the significant regional disparities in both the quantity and quality of information dissemination via X (formerly Twitter) by Japan's prefectural governments. These disparities are not attributable to a single factor but are believed to stem from a complex interplay of multiple elements, including each government's digital communication capacity, organizational culture, public relations (hereinafter "PR"), and risk management systems during disasters and pandemics.

Focusing on these regional differences, this paper aims to elucidate the contributing factors by examining the social media operation policies of prefectural governments. Specifically, the study seeks to clarify the policy formulation processes and analyze the content of such policies through document analysis and comparative analysis. By doing

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so, the paper endeavors to uncover one of the mechanisms behind the disparities in governmental social media communication. The findings are expected to contribute to improving PR strategies and risk management in times of crisis.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Government Public Relations and Local Government PR

The use of social media by the Japanese government is closely tied to government PR. The origins of government PR in modern Japan can be traced back to 1947, when the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) requested the establishment of a PR Office[1]. Since then, PR divisions have been formed within both the central government and local governments[2].

PR, which initially emerged in response to practical needs during Japan's rapid economic growth in the 1960s, has come to be valued both in practice and in academic research across corporate and organizational contexts. In Japan, however, the formal introduction of PR as a discipline occurred earlier in government than in the private sector, where the concept of "広報" (=PR) was already well established. Nevertheless, government PR lacks a clearly defined institutional framework under Japanese law.

According to Noguchi[3], government PR research since the 1960s has been led by political scientists, public administration scholars, sociologists, and communication researchers. Since 1995, the scope has broadened to include city promotion, PR evaluation, and citizen participation. In 2021, the Japan Society for Corporate Communication Studies (JSCCS) launched the "New Definition of PR" project and, after nearly two years, redefined the purpose of PR from merely building and maintaining relationships to achieving organizational goals and solving social issues. PR was also repositioned as part of organizational management rather than merely a communication function[4].

Based on this diversity, government PR has been categorized in various ways. Ueno[1] distinguished "national government PR" from "local government PR" based on central-local relationships, with the latter generally referring to PR by local executive bodies. Sekiya[2] further subdivided this into three types: central government PR, ministry level PR, and local government PR, based on organizational levels. Kawai[5], on the other hand, focused on the relationship between governments and citizens, categorizing PR into three categories: "administrative service PR," "policy PR," and "community PR." As these classifications vary across scholars, this paper treats local government PR as a subcategory of government PR.

2.2 Methods of Information Dissemination in PR Activities

This study focuses on the methods of information dissemination within the context of PR activities, which are implemented as part of government PR. Both the central and local governments utilize a range of media for disseminating information, and these methods have evolved over time. Traditional "push-type" media such as printed newsletters have long served as primary means of government PR. However, with the

proliferation of the Internet, government agencies began building websites around 1996[6], shifting toward "pull-type" media by utilizing official websites as platforms for both administrative services and information dissemination.

The spread of social media platforms such as X and Facebook around the early 2010s, coupled with the demonstrated effectiveness of social media in disseminating information during the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (hereafter "3・11"), led many local governments to adopt social media as a tool for PR. Their objectives included enhancing communication responsiveness and ensuring accountability through two-way interaction[7]. Furthermore, Kanai[8] conceptualized information dissemination methods as part of the foundational framework of government PR, asserting that the diversification of media channels has significantly increased the points of connection between governments and residents, thereby contributing to improvements in the quality of information provided. Two-way communication alone is sometimes insufficient; it is equally important to understand the complex interplay among cultural context, virtual social networks, and individual behavior during times of crisis[9].

Research on the use of the social media by the Japanese government increased sharply after 3・11. During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous studies have utilized Twitter data to analyze changes in individual behavior[10][11][12][13]. While this led many governmental agencies to engage in information dissemination via social media, Sekiya[2] argues that the actual influence of such efforts remains limited. Existing research has also pointed out the lack of two-way communication in online government PR. Nishida[14] attributes this issue to the absence of appropriate social media policies and governance structures, which are necessary for establishing the legitimacy of two-way communication. In line with this, Regina E. L and Andrea H. M[15] identified key reasons why government agencies refrain from using social media, including lack of knowledge and time, absence of precedents, and rigid organizational cultures. They propose that one effective way to address these concerns is the development of clear guidelines and policies for social media participation.

In light of these discussions, this paper contends that analyzing the social media operation policies of Japanese governments has clear academic value.

3 Analysis Subjects and Methods

This study employs document analysis and comparative case analysis. First, it examines the development process of Japan's social media operation policies through a review of relevant government documents. Subsequently, it conducts a comparative analysis of the content of social media (specifically X) operation policies from six prefectural governments: Tokyo, Osaka, Aichi, Aomori, Hokkaido, and Yamagata. These prefectures were selected based on the scale of their populations (representing both urban and rural areas), their use of X (number of followers, frequency of posts, etc.), and their performance in information dissemination during crises such as the COVID-19.

According to the 2020 Population Census conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[16], Tokyo has the largest population in Japan with 14,047,594 residents. As of January 15, 2022, its official X account (@tocho_koho)

had over 1.14 million followers, the highest among all prefectures. In contrast, Osaka, which has the third-largest population (8,837,685), had fewer than 70,000 followers on its X account on the same date, suggesting a relatively lower engagement rate given its population size. Aomori stands out for being the first prefectural government to launch an official X account (@AomoriPref) on July 8, 2009, and remains active in its information dissemination efforts. Notably, it had the highest posting frequency in the country, with an average of 456 posts per month (as of January 15, 2022). Aichi also ranked second in average posting frequency and was the most active in terms of total posts during the COVID-19 (January 1, 2020 – May 8, 2023), reaching 20,979 posts. This was followed closely by Aomori with 19,136 posts, indicating that both governments were highly proactive in communicating during normal and crisis periods. Hokkaido's official X account (@PrefHokkaido) ranked third in posting frequency nationwide as of the same date and has maintained stable communication over time. Meanwhile, Yamagata demonstrated a remarkable follower-to-population ratio of 11.36%, the highest among all prefectures, with over 10% of its population following its X account (@pref_yamagata)[17]. This suggests that social media is well-integrated into the prefecture's PR strategy and widely used by residents as a source of information.

3・11 served as a catalyst for recognizing the value of X as a crucial information source during disasters. Fifteen prefectures had already launched official X accounts before the disaster. Following 3・11, the number of new accounts spiked in 2011 and 2012. After 2013, the rate of new account creation slowed, stabilizing at an average of one to two accounts per year. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, six additional prefectures: Fukui, Ehime, Yamaguchi, Chiba, Gifu, and Miyagi, established official X accounts, resulting in all 47 prefectures having an official presence on the platform. This underscores how the pandemic reaffirmed the importance of social media as a governmental communication tool.

4 The Formulation Process of Social Media Operation Policies

The operational guidelines and utilization policies for social media adopted by Japanese government ministries and local governments were largely formulated based on the April 5, 2011 directive titled "Guidelines on Information Dissemination via Private Social Media by National and Local Public Institutions." The guidelines was developed within one month of 3・11 as part of the national government's response to the crisis. Its primary aim was to clarify key considerations for national and local governments on the appropriate use of social media, particularly in the context of rapid information sharing during emergencies. It emphasized two main points: the "prevention of impersonation and fraud" and the "formulation and disclosure of account operation policies." The emphasis placed on information security suggests that this was a central concern during its creation.

Regarding the requirement to formulate and disclose operation policies, the guideline encouraged each public institution to develop its own social media policy based on references to policies used by other public institutions and private companies. This

flexible approach allowed each organization to tailor its policy to its operational context and target audience. It also implicitly emphasized that the transparency of information dissemination should be secured through clear policy statements.

Given the real-time nature of X, it was considered especially useful for obtaining disaster-related information[18], prompting the guidelines to specify best practices for using the platform. Consistent with the broader principles mentioned above, the guideline emphasized preventing impersonation and clarifying operation policies. It also highlighted the importance of maintaining information credibility. Measures such as obtaining verified account status and linking to official websites were presented as ways to ensure the legitimacy of official accounts and foster public trust. It also cautioned that following or retweeting other accounts could be perceived as official endorsement and thus stressed the importance of preserving institutional neutrality in public communications. Given its considerable influence, government PR carries the potential to affect the direction of national and local policy, and must be handled with care[2].

The formulation of operation policies was also expected to address concrete criteria such as clearly identifying the account administrator, specifying responsible departments or topics, clarifying whether individual responses would be provided, and directing users to alternative contact channels. For example, many policies stated that individual replies via comments or direct messages (DMs) would not be provided, indicating that X was not intended for two-way communication. This limitation reflects an attempt to prevent excessive administrative burden. In practice, local governments typically handle inquiries through telephone, email, online contact forms, or in-person consultations. Accordingly, X is positioned primarily as a "one-way dissemination tool."

In 2013, NISC issued a follow-up advisory to the 2011 guideline, introducing measures to address misinformation and cyberattacks. Although directed at national ministries and agencies, it did not mention local governments. The additional measures focused on enhancing information security while accounting for the characteristics of social media. These included both preventive and responsive measures, such as outlining proper disclosure protocols, preventing impersonation, securing accounts, and managing the content of official posts. Importantly, the guidelines explicitly stated that social media should not serve as the primary tool for public communication but should be used only in a supplementary role. This reflects concerns about the instability of social media platforms and the fact that their user base does not encompass the entire population. From the standpoint of ensuring continuous access and fairness, reliance on more stable communication methods was deemed essential.

Initially, the government's discussion of social media use did not center around PR but instead focused on information security. Since the 2010s, the global proliferation of smartphones and the dominance of platforms have introduced both opportunities and challenges. Alongside these developments, concerns have arisen regarding the spread of misinformation, privacy violations, and cyberbullying. As a result, the use of social media by public institutions now requires careful consideration not only as a tool for communication but also as an element of risk management. Instead of broadly limiting social media interactions, policy interventions should be designed to minimize adverse effects and amplify the beneficial aspects of social media engagement[19].

In Japan, 3・11 revealed that traditional government PR mechanisms were inadequate for meeting information demands during emergencies. This prompted a nationwide recognition of the value of social media as a critical communication infrastructure. In response, the national government took the lead in promoting the formulation and disclosure of operation policies, while local governments moved quickly to establish official accounts. Against this backdrop, social media operation policies were developed to ensure the accuracy and security of public information.

However, these operation policies are not based on clearly defined legal foundations, nor are there standardized criteria across institutions. This has resulted in significant flexibility in how the policies are formulated and applied, allowing for wide discretion on the part of individual organizations. Consequently, variations in interpretation and implementation may affect the content and practice of information dissemination. The following chapter presents a comparative analysis of actual policies from selected local governments to examine their content and identifying emerging issues.

5 Comparative Analysis of Social Media Operation Policies

The social media operation policies of each local government were collected from their official websites. The number of policy items varied significantly by municipality; some listed as few as five items, while others specified up to fourteen in detail. The terminology used to name these policies also differed, with the most common being "operation policy," although some governments used terms like "guidelines," "account policy," or "principles" (Table 1). Additionally, Tokyo, Osaka, Hokkaido, and Aichi created policies specifically for their X accounts, whereas Aomori and Yamagata developed broader social media policies covering multiple platforms. In general, these accounts are managed by the PR division, with Aichi being the only exception, where the Information Policy division serves as the administrator.

Next sections compare the policies across three primary dimensions: (1) policy objectives, (2) communication with users, and (3) legal and ethical considerations.

Table 1. Titles of Social Media Operation Policies by Prefecture

Prefecture	Title of Policy
Tokyo	X (formerly Twitter) Account Policy
Osaka	Official X (formerly Twitter) Operation Policy
Hokkaido	Official X Operation Policy
Aomori	Social Media Policy
Aichi	Official X (formerly Twitter) "Aichi Prefectural Government" Operation Policy
Yamagata	Social Networking Services Account Operation Policy

5.1 Policy Objectives

Significant differences were observed in the clarity and focus of the policy objectives (Table 2). While all prefectures except Tokyo explicitly stated their objectives, they can be classified into three main types.

Table 2. Objectives of Operation Policies

Prefecture	Objective Summary
Tokyo	Not specified
Osaka	To define operational matters regarding the official X account.
Hokkaido	To utilize X as a PR tool that facilitates real-time dissemination and amplification of information regarding Hokkaido's policies and appeal.
Aomori	To provide guidelines for staff and departments in participating on social media, enabling them to develop proper "information literacy."
Aichi	To provide various up-to-date information from the official Aichi Prefecture X account.
Yamagata	To disseminate prefectural administrative information and enhance understanding and empathy for Yamagata through friendly language and visuals, thereby improving the prefecture's public image.

The first type is clarification of operational matters, as seen in Osaka, which defines rules and standards for account management, including operational responsibility, content scope, intellectual property rights, and terms of use. The second type is information dissemination, adopted by Hokkaido, Aichi, and Yamagata, which emphasize using social media as a tool for broadcasting official information. For example, Hokkaido's objective is to promote its policies and regional appeal through coordinated media. Yamagata includes a branding component, seeking to improve the image and encourage deeper civic engagement. The third type is internal guidance. Aomori's policy aims to raise information literacy among government employees engaging in social media use.

Ideally, social media operation policies should prioritize clarifying management protocols, like Osaka's. However, many policies conflate the objectives of the policy with the goals of social media usage itself, particularly emphasizing "information dissemination" as the policy's purpose. This blurring of means and ends may stem from the rapid adoption of social media in PR strategies and a lack of clear distinction between content guidelines and operational policies.

5.2 Communication with Users

A review of the user communication policies within the social media operation policies of each prefecture reveals that most local governments adopt a non-engagement stance: they generally refrain from replying to mentions (replies) or responding to DMs. However, some include conditional statements such as "when necessary," indicating that they permit flexible responses depending on the situation (Table 3).

Prefectures that adopt a non-response policy tend to treat social media as a one-way PR tool, minimizing the risk of misunderstandings or reputational damage. In contrast,

those allowing conditional responses seek to maintain the potential for interactive communication with residents while remaining accountable for official statements. In these cases, disclaimers are often included to prevent misinterpretation. For example, Yamagata states: "Replies to user comments may be made "when necessary," while simultaneously emphasizing that such responses do not imply endorsement of a particular viewpoint. Aomori does not explicitly define a user response policy.

Table 3. Responses to Users (bolding by the author)

Prefecture	Key Policy Statement
Tokyo	No responses to replies or DMs will be made. **However, exceptions may apply when deemed necessary for administrative operations**.
Osaka	Replies or DMs will not be sent in principle. **However, responses may be made depending on the content of the campaign**. Also, "likes" and follows are generally avoided, **but exceptions apply to accounts of government agencies or affiliated organizations**.
Hokkaido	Follows are limited to national or local government accounts or public institutions. Replies and counter-replies are not made in principle.
Aomori	Not specified
Aichi	Replies and reposts will not be made in principle. **However, reposts may be made for organizations and institutions that align with the account's mission.** No DMs will be sent or responded to.
Yamagata	**Replies to user comments may be made "when necessary," but this does not imply endorsement**. DMs and responses to comments such as complaints, demands, or policy suggestions are not provided in principle. **Sharing, liking, and following other accounts may occur when necessary, but again, this does not imply agreement or endorsement**.

Although there is variability in individual policies, a common feature is the inclusion of vague qualifiers such as "when necessary." However, these criteria are rarely defined in concrete terms, leaving considerable room for discretionary interpretation by account administrators. As a result, the actual conditions under which replies are issued remain opaque. Given that official social media activity must be carried out with the accountability that accompanies public statements, local governments continue to approach communication with considerable caution. Therefore, a key issue moving forward is to clarify the standards that govern conditional responses. The extent to which local governments utilize the interactive potential of social media remains an important question.

5.3 Legal and Ethical Considerations

Legal and ethical considerations are critical elements in the social media operation policies of local governments, particularly from the standpoint of risk management. Most prefectures attempt to mitigate legal risks and maintain institutional credibility by including provisions such as "prohibited acts" and "disclaimers." However, significant

variation exists among prefectures in terms of the clarity and specificity of policies regarding personal data handling, protection of intellectual property rights, and the prevention of misinformation. Policies with detailed descriptions of these elements are better positioned to reduce legal exposure and uphold the trust of residents.

Each prefecture's policy outlines prohibited behaviors related to social media use and clarifies institutional responses to illegal or inappropriate posts (Table 4). Common examples of prohibited content include defamation, infringement of intellectual property rights, illegal activity, and posts that violate public order or morality. Tokyo and Osaka, in particular, explicitly state that they will report violators to X Corporation or block users as a risk control measure, minimizing potential risks through specific administrative measures. In contrast, some prefectures offer only general descriptions of prohibited actions, without detailing procedures for handling violations. This creates ambiguity in enforcement and grants considerable discretion to the authorities during incidents.

Table 4. Items Concerning Legal and Ethical Considerations

Prefecture	Key Items Addressed
Tokyo	Cautions; Disclaimers
Osaka	Intellectual Property Rights; Prohibited Acts; Disclaimers
Hokkaido	Prohibited Acts
Aomori	Compliance: Respect for third-party rights, protection of personal information, adherence to laws and internal rules; Prohibited Acts
Aichi	Handling of Personal Information; Intellectual Property Rights; Prohibited Acts; Disclaimers
Yamagata	Prohibited Acts; Disclaimers

Proper handling of personal data on social media is vital for both protecting residents' privacy and maintaining public trust. However, the level of detail on data protection measures varies considerably across prefectures. Hokkaido, Aomori, and Aichi specify that personal data will be handled in accordance with their official privacy policies published on government websites. For instance, Hokkaido explicitly cites its "Guidelines for the Protection of Personal Information" and highlights the importance of secure data management when using external services. Conversely, other prefectures mention personal data protection only briefly, for example, simply stating that "posting personal information without consent is prohibited." This lack of specificity raises concerns about whether sufficient protections are in place from a privacy perspective.

In addition, intellectual property rights are another important legal issue. Osaka and Aichi clearly state that copyrights and other rights related to posted content belong to the local government or original rights holders. Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution is prohibited. These provisions protect institutional rights and prevent misuse of content. In contrast, other prefectures do not provide detailed intellectual property policies, creating uncertainty about whether and how users may reuse official content.

This section has shown that, while local governments have generally adopted some level of legal and ethical risk control in their social media operation policies, there is considerable variation in specificity and strictness. These discrepancies are most

apparent in the definitions of prohibited acts, approaches to personal information protection, management of intellectual property rights, and responses to misinformation. Such differences reflect each government's approach to risk management and ethical responsibility. While social media enables rapid information dissemination and stronger citizen engagement, it also increases the risk of misinformation and legal liability. Therefore, it is essential not only to establish rules to minimize legal exposure, but also to clarify operational standards in a transparent manner that fosters public trust. Although the content of such policies is largely left to the discretion of each local government, developing shared national standards in collaboration with higher administrative bodies should be a priority moving forward.

6 Conclusion and Future Prospects

This study aimed to elucidate the factors underlying the pronounced regional disparities in information dissemination via X observed among Japan's prefectural governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the formulation and content of social media operation policies, the study employed document analysis and a comparative case analysis of six prefectures: Tokyo, Osaka, Aichi, Aomori, Hokkaido, and Yamagata. The analysis examined three key aspects: the objectives of each policy, communication strategies with users, and legal and ethical considerations.

The comparative analysis revealed three primary types of policy objectives: (1) clarification of operational matters, (2) information dissemination, and (3) internal staff guideline. Among these, the second type, treating information dissemination itself as the objective, was most common. However, this suggests a conceptual conflation between the function of social media and the purpose of operational policies. In terms of communication strategies with users, most prefectures adopt a one-way dissemination model, refraining from replying to comments or direct messages. While many policies include exceptions framed as "when necessary," the criteria for such exceptions are often ambiguous. This lack of clarity highlights a need for more transparent and standardized approaches to two-way communication. With regard to legal and ethical considerations, the policies varied widely in their specificity concerning prohibited acts, protection of personal data, and management of intellectual property rights. These differences reflect the extent to which each prefecture prioritizes risk management and ethical responsibility, which in turn affects the level of trust between governments and residents.

These findings provide an opportunity to reconsider PR strategies and risk management systems in local governments, particularly as social media becomes increasingly central to administrative communication.

Based on the findings of this study, two key areas for future research and development can be identified: First, broader comparative studies should be conducted, encompassing a wider range of local governments and policy domains. While this study focused on the prefectural level, municipalities operate in even closer proximity to residents, and the interactive functions of social media may play an even more significant role at this level. Analyzing the operational policies of municipalities will help uncover

diverse approaches tailored to local needs and characteristics. Second, there is a need for empirical research that examines the actual implementation of policies and their alignment with social media practices. Operation policies serve as official guidelines, but real-world usage may diverge. Time-series analysis of social media posts and interviews with government officials could reveal gaps or flexible interpretations between policy and practice, contributing to more pragmatic policy recommendations.

By addressing these challenges, public sector use of social media can evolve beyond simple information delivery into a more dynamic and participatory infrastructure that facilitates collaboration between governments and citizens.

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