



“Liking” Social Media

Mark A. Abramson

Highlights

- The rise of social media has provided a highly useful set of tools for government at all levels in its quest to both inform and engage citizens. New technology-based tools can engage citizens through crowdsourcing and a variety of social media platforms.
- Government now uses social media to more effectively communicate with its own employees via tools such as ideation platforms, social intranets, and wikis.
- The federal government institutionalized the use of social media by creating new policies and guidance, as well as enhancing its organizational and staff capabilities.
- In the future, government will need to devote increased attention to managing the risks associated with social media. The future is also likely to see a greater emphasis on improving the user experience and engaging citizens.

“LIKING” SOCIAL MEDIA

By Mark A. Abramson

Bob Burns began his career as a Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screener at the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport in 2002. Brand new to TSA, Burns says he volunteered for “anything and everything.” In 2008, he started a blog for TSA. Today, the award-winning Burns is a TSA public affairs specialist and the agency’s social media lead in charge of its popular Instagram account which now has 870,000 followers. In 2016, it was ranked as the fourth best Instagram account by Rolling Stone on a list of the top 100 accounts.

Photos on the TSA Instagram account include items and weapons confiscated by TSA, including a giant lobster and a life-size prop from the Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Burns says the lighthearted posts complement the serious business of keeping Americans safe. “It’s a very important balance,” Burns said. “There’s a cheekiness to it, but I also try to educate and provide travel tips. A lot of officers says that they appreciate that, that it makes their job easier.”¹

INTRODUCTION

The Evolution of Social Media

To appreciate the growth of social media, one only has to look back to 1998. At that point, the internet (then more commonly called the World Wide Web) was just five years old, the creation of Facebook was still six years away (2004), and the creation of Twitter eight years away (2006). Today, the impact of social media is clearly seen at all levels of government.

Social media is commonly defined as computer-assisted technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information via virtual communities and networks. At the federal level, nearly all agencies now invite citizens to “connect with us” on a vast array of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Digg, and Google+. In addition, nearly all agencies have internal social media platforms that encourage greater communication and engagement with employees.

Social media offers the government a new set of tools and platforms in which to both inform and engage the public. The quest for meaningful citizen engagement has been long been a public sector goal. In the past, this quest largely focused on face-to-face engagement. For example, town hall meetings

have been a staple of American government dating back to colonial times. In addition to attending meetings, citizens have had the option of visiting a government office. If an individual could not physically attend a face-to-face meeting to either gain information or comment on government activity, citizen engagement was limited to either writing a letter to a government official or agency, or simply reading about a government action in a newspaper or an official notice from government (usually delivered through the mail).

A good example of engagement “before” and “after” is clearly seen in the evolution of the public review and comment process of government regulations. Before the rise of social media in the 2000s, government began to explore new ways to engage citizens.² Up until 2002, citizens faced a cumbersome process to comment on a pending government regulation. An individual commenter would have to know the following: which agency issued the regulation, when the regulation would be published, and the deadline for public comment—they then had to review the proposed regulation either in a government reading room, or find a copy of the *Federal Register* at a local library. This changed as government entered the 21st century, as discussed below, and directly contributed to the ability of agencies to further engage the public through social media tools.

Organization of Chapter

This chapter addresses major developments in how government has evolved its use of social media between 1998 and 2018. As seen in the chart titled “Evolution of Social Media: 1998–2018,” the evolution of government’s use can be divided into three phases:

- **Early action:** This phase was characterized by government’s experimentation with the internet and the development of websites which were static and non-interactive. This early period saw new ways to engage citizens undertaken and assessed.
- **Expansion:** The decade of the 2000s was characterized by the rapid expansion of the number of websites across government, as well as the emergence of new tools, such as blogs—and new platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. During the expansion period, new strategies for engaging citizens and civil servants were deployed. This period was also characterized by the identification of barriers which hindered further expansion of the use of social media by government agencies.
- **Institutionalization:** The decade of the 2010s can be characterized by the institutionalization of social media, in which barriers were overcome by the development of new policies and guidance, enhancing organizational and staff capacity, and developing assessment capability.

Evolution of Social Media: 1998—2018

1998



2005

2005



2010

2010



2018

Early Action: The Rise of Web 1.0

- Experimentation with Internet and E-Government

Expansion: The Rise of Interaction and Collaboration

- Emergence of New Tools
- Emergence of New Strategies to Engage Citizens
- Emergence of New Strategies to Engage Employees

Institutionalization: Embedding Social Media in Government

- New Policies and Guidance
- Enhancing Organizational Capacity
- Enhancing Staff Capability
- Developing Assessment Capability

EARLY ACTION: THE RISE OF WEB 1.0

Experimentation with the Internet and E-Government

In the 1990s, the use of the internet began to spread. The early years of the internet, often termed “Web 1.0,” were characterized by static non-interactive web pages and one-way communication. Personal, commercial, and a limited number of government web sites began to appear, and some interactivity (such as guestbook pages) appeared.

During the early years (which lasted until the mid 2000s), government began to explore the use of the internet as a vehicle for citizen engagement. These early initiatives reflected a first step toward today’s world of ubiquitous social media. The term most commonly used in this time period was “e-Government,” defined as the use of electronic information to improve performance, create value, and enable new relationships between governments, businesses, and citizens. E-Government was a precursor to government’s use of social media (see further detail in Chapter Two, “Going Digital”).

A good example of e-Government’s efforts to change the way in which citizens engaged government was the creation of Regulations.gov. In 2002, the federal government unveiled its new eRulemaking program, which enabled easier access to participate in a high-quality, efficient, and open rulemaking process. The goals of the eRulemaking program were to:

- increase public access to federal regulatory materials
- increase public participation and understanding of the federal rulemaking process
- improve federal agency efficiency and effectiveness

Instead of physically visiting a government reading room or finding a copy of the *Federal Register*, citizens could now go online and visit Regulations.gov, where they could search all publicly available regulatory materials, submit a comment on a regulation, submit an application or adjudication document, download agency regulatory materials, sign up for email alerts, and access regulations.

In addition to Regulations.gov, other interesting early efforts emerged to improve engagement with citizens. In a 2004 report, *Restoring Trust in Government: The Potential of Digital Citizen Participation*, Marc Holzer and his colleagues described these early efforts: “Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to help make citizen participation a more dynamic element of the policy-making process. Citizen participation advocates are optimistic that ICTs will facilitate direct interactions between citizens and government through the integration of digital democratic applications.”³ Holzer and colleagues focused on two types of digital citizen participation: information dissemination and citizen deliberation. Their report presented two examples of citizen participation:

- **The Environmental Protection Agency’s National Dialogue of Public Involvement in EPA Decisions:** EPA conducted an experimental 10-day online discussion in 2001 on public participation. The dialogue took the form of messages posted to a website, linked together in an ongoing conversation among participants. Participants could either initiate a new discussion thread or comment on an ongoing thread. More than 1,000 individuals registered to participate.
- **CitizenSpace, United Kingdom:** This initiative sought public comments on a variety of public policy issues then facing the U.K. government. Background documents were available for citizens to review prior to commenting on specific issues. The initiative, according to U.K. officials, promoted a more meaningful discourse between elected officials and their constituents, one in which citizen feedback could be incorporated into policymaking.

EXPANSION: THE RISE OF INTERACTION AND COLLABORATION

Emergence of New Tools

Use of Web 2.0 Websites

In the mid-2000s, a new term became popularized—Web 2.0. The number of total websites passed 100 million in 2006 (in April 2018, the count was over 1.8 billion). With advances in both hardware and software, the stage was set for a dramatic increase in the interaction between users and the development of user generated content. In a 2008 report, *Leveraging Web 2.0 in Government*, Ai-Mei Chang and P. K. Kannan defined Web 2.0 as a “networked world supporting individual users creating content individually and collectively, sharing and updating information and knowledge using...diverse sharing devices and tools, and remixing and improving on content created by each other.”⁴ These new and enhanced websites allowed users to interact and collaborate in a social media “dialogue” as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community, in contrast to the Web 1.0 era where people passively viewed content.

Chang and Kannan reported that around 2008, government began to move away from relying solely on citizens to visit government-hosted portals and websites: “Reaching citizens where they are—in their communities—will... enable government to harness the collective intelligence of citizens, such as feedback on services, ways to improve the design of content and services, and ways to distribute content and services efficiently to various citizens groups.”⁵

The expansion phase was characterized by the increased use of a variety of new technologies for citizen collaboration with government, including blogs, wikis, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. During this phase, the use of social media was characterized by a “let a thousand flowers bloom” approach. As government gained more experience with new tools, the need for a consistent approach was clear.

Use of Blogs

One of the first big “success stories” in government during the expansion phase of social media was the use of blogging by government agencies. Blogging was also one of the first social media tools to be quickly adopted by government at all levels as an interactive communication device for citizens. A blog was defined as an online journal that can be updated regularly, with entries typically displayed in chronological order.

In a 2007 report, *The Blogging Revolution: Government in the Age of Web 2.0*, David Wyld examined blogs being published by members of Congress, congressional committees and caucuses, federal government leaders, governors, state legislators, city managers and mayors, police and fire departments, and college and university presidents.⁶ In an early demonstration of the future of social media communications, Wyld found that government officials used blogs as a new vehicle for communicating with citizens on their activities, expressing their views on issues, describing their contacts and travels, and providing information on their personal lives and interests.

The use of blogs has dramatically increased as an important vehicle for government to communicate at greater length than through other forms of social media, such as Twitter or Facebook. Nearly all federal websites now feature a blog on their home page. Several agencies have created separate websites devoted solely to the publication of blogs. Most notable among these websites are two by the Department of Defense (DoD)—DoD Live and Armed with Science—and the Department of Veterans Affairs website VAantage Point. In an interview with the IBM Center, Tiffany Miller, Director of Social Media and Strategy, Department of Defense, said: “Blogs allow us to give more information than we can on social media. We will ‘tease’ to these blogs on social media with engaging photos and text. People aren’t always looking for information, so it’s our job to bring it to them via social media. We are really moving away from the traditional website. Obviously, we have Defense.gov, but people aren’t necessarily going there to find out what the Department of Defense is doing.”

Use of New Platforms

Facebook

Nearly every federal agency has a strong Facebook presence and uses it as a major communication platform. Table 1 lists the top federal Facebook accounts.

A major initial challenge for federal agencies was the need to verify that Facebook pages were legitimate and operated by federal departments and agencies. For example, numerous Facebook pages had names containing the acronym “CIA”. It was difficult to tell these “fake” pages from those of the real agency. In 2014, Facebook became the first social media platform to verify all federal government Facebook pages with their signature “blue checkmark” using the Federal Social Media Registry. Other social media platforms quickly followed Facebook’s verification model.

Today, Facebook is used effectively by federal departments and agencies to convey key information to citizens and make them aware of government activities and announcements. In many cases, agency Facebook pages drive citizens to agency websites for more information and details about specific announcements. In an interview with the IBM Center, Dana Allen-Greil, Web and Social Media Branch Chief at the National Archives and Record Administration, said that Facebook and other social media sites have served to “humanize” government agencies. Reflecting on her experience, Ms. Allen-Greil said that social media offers agencies an opportunity “to touch people in unexpected ways and to show how we are here to serve the public.”⁷

Table 1—Top Federal Facebook Accounts

Agency	Followers (February 2018)
NASA	20.0 million
The White House	8.3 million
U.S. Army	4.6 million
U.S. Marine Corps	3.3 million
U.S. Navy	3.0 million
U.S. Air Force	2.6 million
Federal Bureau of Investigation	2.1 million
State Department	1.8 million
The National Guard	1.7 million
Department of Veterans’ Affairs	1.1 million

Twitter

Twitter was created in 2006 and has now become a leading vehicle for government agencies to communicate to the public. Many agencies now have multiple Twitter accounts. The leading government Twitter accounts are listed in Table 2.

Table 2—Top Federal Twitter Accounts

Agency	Account	Number of Followers (February 2018)
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	@NASA	28.4 million
White House	@whitehouse	16.6 million
Department of Defense	@DeptofDefense	5.5 million
Department of State	@StateDept	4.9 million
Smithsonian Institution	@smithsonian	2.7 million
Central Intelligence Agency	@CIA	2.3 million
Federal Bureau of Investigation	@FBI	2.1 million
Centers for Disease Control	@CDCEMERGENCY	1.9 million
Peace Corps	@PeaceCorps	1.7 million
Department of Justice	@The JusticeDept.	1.5 million
Department of Agriculture	@USDAFoodSafety	1.4 million
U.S. Army	@USArmy	1.2 million
National Science Foundation	@NSF	1.1 million

Twitter is a microblogging tool in which users write brief text updates (initially limited to 140 characters, changed in 2017 to allow up to 280 characters). Many users combine their Twitter updates with content generated in other social media accounts, such as Facebook, YouTube, or blogs. In her examination of the use of Twitter by government in a 2012 report, *Working the Network: A Managers Guide for Using Twitter in Government*, Ines Mergel wrote, “Twitter can be used effectively to involve a large number of citizens and create conversations with an engaged, networked public. The outcomes of these conversations can be new insights and even innovations in the public sector including suggestions on how to make government more effective, or rapidly accelerating emergency responses that help to improve public safety.”⁸ Twitter has become a useful tool for government to communicate to citizens during an emergency, such a hurricane and other natural disasters.

Instagram

In 2013, many federal agencies started using Instagram. Agencies quick to see the potential of Facebook and Twitter also saw the potential of Instagram and quickly built a presence. In announcing its availability to federal agencies, Justin Herman, the General Services Administration's social media program manager, said: "Instagram can be used by federal agencies as part of an overall social and mobile strategy to ensure citizens can access valuable government content anywhere, anytime, on any device."⁹

Agency success on Instagram relies on the ability to regularly post compelling photographs. Many of these photographs look into the "day in the life" of an agency, and provide an opportunity to better understand agency missions. For example, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has become a highly popular Instagram site, identifying what travelers can and cannot bring onto planes. In addition, photos of strange items confiscated by TSA have proven entertaining and received much attention. Jennifer Plozai, TSA social media manager, comments, "Our goal was...to be able to help passengers. And I think this program (Instagram) has really helped us soften the public perception of TSA."¹⁰

High-quality photographs have led to a large number of followers for other federal agencies, such as the Smithsonian National Zoo. The Department of the Interior now has 1.6 million followers and has become one of the more active federal Instagram accounts, featuring nature and animal photos. Within the department, other popular Instagram accounts include the National Park Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has been widely praised for advancing its mission through photography. Instagram gives NASA a powerful tool for publishing photographs.

In describing the Department of the Interior's Instagram account, Melody Kramer, senior digital media strategist for the department, says, "A lot of work goes into finding great photos for Interior's Instagram account. We try to share pictures of what it currently looks like on the ground at national parks and other public sites. At the same time, we try to balance the different types of photos (sunrise, night sky, wildlife, etc.), geographic location, and type of public lands."¹¹

Emergence of New Strategies to Engage Citizens

Crowdsourcing

The late 2000s saw the rise of crowdsourcing as a new tool in the portfolio of government initiatives to engage citizens. While the concept of crowdsourcing dates to 2004 with the publication of the *Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki, the term crowdsourcing was not defined until two years later. The accepted definition of crowdsourcing is "a type of participative online activity in which an individual, an institution, a non-profit organization, or company proposes to a group of individuals...the voluntary undertaking of a task."¹²

In his 2013 report, *Use of Crowdsourcing in Government*, Daren Brabham set forth four approaches to how an organization tasks a crowd:¹³

- **Knowledge discovery and management:** Finding and collecting information into a common location and format, ideal for information gathering, organizing and reporting problems.
- **Distributed human intelligence tasking:** Analyzing large amounts of information, ideal for large-scale data analysis where human intelligence is more efficient or effective than computer analysis.
- **Broadcast search:** Solving empirical problems, ideal for problems with empirically provable solutions, such as scientific problems.
- **Peer-vetted production:** Creating and selecting creative ideas, ideal for problems where solutions are matters of taste or market support.

The federal government now has increasing experience in the use of the broadcast search approach for soliciting solutions to specific problems, such as the use of prizes and challenges. Prizes have a long history, dating back to 1714 with the British government-sponsored prize offered to invent an instrument for accurately measuring longitude at sea. In his 2011 report, *Managing Innovation Prizes in Government*, Luciano Kay cites prizes as being used to accelerate the initial development of the aviation industry in the early 20th century, which included the Orteig Prize for the first aviator to fly nonstop from New York to Paris.¹⁴ Examples of the use of broadcast searches by government include the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) Challenges, the government wide Challenge.gov platform, and the Center of Excellence for Collaborative Innovation at NASA.

- **DARPA:** DARPA pioneered the development of challenges. Between 2004 and 2007, DARPA held three challenges for the development of an autonomous ground robotic vehicle (now known as driverless cars) which would perform specified maneuvers in both off-road and urban environments. The most recent DARPA Challenge was announced in April 2018. In 2019, qualified teams will compete for the top prize of \$10 million to launch payloads to orbit with an extremely short notice and no prior knowledge of the content, destination orbit, or launch site.
- **Challenge.gov:** The federal government dramatically increased its use of crowdsourcing in 2010 with the creation of Challenge.gov. The Challenge.gov website presents information on competitions (usually with financial rewards) conducted in various federal departments and agencies. Since 2010, more than 800 challenges have been held. Prizes have ranged from \$3,000 to \$20 million. In assessing the initial impact of Challenge.gov in a 2012 report, *Challenge.gov: Using Competitions and Awards to Spur Innovation*, Kevin Desouza wrote: “By addressing key issues and seizing improvement opportunities, Challenge.gov can advance the missions of federal agencies and enhance their relevancy, legitimacy, and impact by empowering citizens to help solve problems and enable the realization of goals that matter to the nation.”¹⁵

- **Center for Excellence for Collaborative Innovation (CoECI):** CoECI was created in 2011, after the success of a pilot program to determine if a crowdsourcing initiative could help NASA accelerate and augment research and development. NASA challenges are managed by CoECI, through the NASA Tournament Lab. The Lab now offers a variety of open innovation platforms that engage the crowdsourcing community in challenges to create innovative, efficient, and optimal solutions for specific, real-world challenges faced by NASA.

Co-production

The use of competitions in which citizens send their best solutions for specific problems is just one new type of citizen engagement in which citizens actively contribute to the accomplishment of a government mission. Increasing attention in the 2010s has been given to the concept of co-production. In a 2013 report, *Beyond Citizen Engagement: Involving the Public in Co-Delivering Government Services*, P. K. Kannan and Ai-Mei Chang define this new approach to engagement as “an active, creative, and social process, based on collaboration between governments and citizens and/or between citizens and citizens, that is facilitated by government to generate value for citizens through innovative services.”¹⁶

The use of social media is a key vehicle for co-production in which individual citizens or groups of citizens participate in the delivery of a government service. A good example of the use of social media in co-production is the Library of Congress’ Veterans History Project, in which citizen volunteers interview veterans to gather their first-person recollections for preservation.

Another prominent example of the use of social media in co-production is the Citizen Archivist program of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. With the support of virtual volunteers, the National Archives has increased online access to its historical records. Citizens assist the Archives in tagging, transcribing, or adding comments to the National Archives Catalog. The Archives website presents an updated list of new citizen archivist missions and newly added records. Citizen archivist missions now underway include tagging and transcribing captions from photographs of the U.S. Marine Corps activities during World War II and Korea, transcribing logbooks of the U.S. Coast guard vessels that served in the Vietnam War, and transcribing records of Watergate-related cases.

Emergence of New Strategies to Engage Employees

Just as new strategies have emerged and been used by government to engage citizens in recent years, these tools have also been used to engage federal employees. These strategies include ideation platforms, social intranets, and wikis.

Ideation Platforms

During the late 2000s and early 2010s, federal departments began to develop platforms to engage their own employees. According to Gwanhoo Lee in a 2013 report, *Federal Ideation Programs: Challenges and Best Practices*, ideation platforms include online brainstorming or social voting platforms for employees to submit new ideas, search previously submitted ideas, post questions and challenges, discuss and expand on ideas, vote them up or down, and flag them.¹⁷ Federal government ideation platforms include Idea Hub (Department of Transportation), Sounding Board (Department of State), IdeaFactory (Department of Homeland Security), and IdeaLab (Department of Health and Human Services).

Social Intranets

In addition to the ideation platforms discussed above, many federal departments created social intranets. Ideation tools can be viewed as an example of one tool on an agency's social intranet platform. In her 2016 report, *The Social Intranet: Insights on Managing and Sharing Knowledge Internally*, Ines Mergel defined social intranets as “in-house social networks that use technologies—such as automated newsfeeds, wikis, chats, or blogs—to create engagement opportunities among employees.”¹⁸ Federal government social intranets include Corridor (Department of State), Spacebook (NASA), and i-Space (Intelligence Community). In addition, Canada also created a government-wide social intranet called GCconnex for use by Canadian civil servants.

The Intelligence Community has pioneered the use of social intranet platforms. In his 2016 report, *New Tools for Collaboration: The Experience of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Gregory Treverton describes Intelink as the backbone for Intelligence Community-wide tools.¹⁹ Intelink provides platforms where the Community can use social media tools for collaboration and information sharing, such as Intelink Search, Inteldocs, IntelShare, Intellipedia (discussed below), Intelink Blogs, e-Chirp, and Jabber. Treverton presents a series of recommendations for the increased use of such sites, including making access to these type tools easier and providing more training on the use of such tools.

As part of the CoECI, NASA sponsors the NASA@work intranet site as an agency-wide virtual platform that seeks innovation by fostering collaboration within the NASA community, through the contribution of interactive discussions and submissions of solutions to posted challenges.

Wikis

The early 2000s saw the rise of wikis. While wikis can be used for citizen engagement, their greatest impact to date has been as a vehicle for government employees to share information among themselves and encour-

age deliberation. Wikis are websites which can be created, edited, discussed, and changed by users working in collaboration. The most well-known wiki, Wikipedia, was founded in 2001. In government, two wikis have received a high degree of public attention:

- **Diplopedia:** Launched in 2006 by the Department of State, Diplopedia provides a central information space for foreign service specialists to contribute their knowledge. It has proven an effective way for diplomats to prepare for new assignments by reading the posts of diplomats who previously served in those assignments. Diplopedia now has more than 25,000 entries. In an interview with the IBM Center, Andre Goodfriend, Director of the Department of State's Office of eDiplomacy, said "Each individual has the ability to share their expertise directly without having to go through someone else. We are creating a group culture of sharing information and internal transparency rather than the old model of siloed information. Diplopedia has helped encourage a culture of people sharing their expertise."²⁰
- **Intellipedia:** Launched in 2005 as a pilot project and officially launched in 2006, Intellipedia has been one of the most successful and acclaimed wikis in government. It has become a valuable tool for those in the Intelligence Community and is part of the Intelink platform discussed above. In her 2011 report, *Using Wikis in Government: A Guide to Public Managers*, Ines Mergel wrote, "The goal of Intellipedia is described by one user as providing new ways of capturing knowledge of 'what we know, what the intelligence community knows about various topics.'²¹

While Diplopedia and Intellipedia were primarily for intra- and inter-organizational use within the federal government, wikis have also been used to engage citizens by state and local governments and other nations. For example, the City of San Jose, California, used a wiki as a "virtual charrette" to improve civic engagement in urban planning initiatives for San Jose.

Identification of Challenges to Institutionalization

During the expansion years, it became obvious to the government executives charged with implementing social media throughout government that the federal government's policy apparatus had not kept pace with the rapid expansion of the use of social media by government agencies. The "let a thousand flowers bloom" approach resulted in a host of issues for managing privacy, security, and records—and Freedom of Information Act regulations quickly began to surface as agencies implemented a variety of social media tools.

In 2004, an interagency group of federal web managers came together to formally create the Federal Web Managers Council as a community of practice. The new Council built upon earlier initiatives which supported "web-master" networks. In addition, the new Web Managers Council also served an

advisory function for government policy-makers trying to resolve government-wide issues regarding the web and social media.

In December 2008, the Federal Web Managers Council developed a paper on “Social Media and the Federal Government: Perceived and Real Barriers and Potential Solutions” for use by the incoming Obama Administration in updating government regulatory policies to reflect the increased use of social media by government agencies. The Council found that the use of social media raised a myriad of legal, contractual, and policy questions for the new administration. The varying interpretations of government policy regarding social media impeded the use of these tools in many agencies. Among the challenges to be resolved were the need for:

- A government-wide digital strategy
- Government-wide terms of service agreement with social media sites
- Procurement policy on the use of free web products and services
- A policy on whether the Paperwork Reduction Act and the Administrative Procedure Act applied to social media sites

The Federal Web Managers Council’s paper served as a valuable guide for the first social media policies in the Obama White House, which began to focus on analyzing barriers to the increased use of social media in government.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION: EMBEDDING SOCIAL MEDIA IN GOVERNMENT

The late 2000s saw the “institutionalization” of social media as a permanent part of the federal government landscape. In addition, other nations also began to institutionalize social media. Institutionalization has four characteristics:

- new policies and guidance
- enhancing organizational capacity
- enhancing staff capability
- developing assessment capability

New Policies and Guidance

In response to the barriers identified by the Federal Web Managers Council, the Obama Administration began to develop a government-wide strategy and new policies throughout the first of year of the administration in 2009. These efforts resulted in a series of new government-wide policies.

- In 2010, Cass Sunstein, Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, Office of Management and Budget, issued a Memorandum on “Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act.”²² The memo said that the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) does not apply to the use of social media by agencies. The Memo explained that the use of social media and web-based interactive technologies will be treated as activities *excluded* from the PRA.
- In 2011, the President issued an Executive Order on “Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service.”²³ The order required departments and agencies to “identify ways to use innovative technologies to streamline their delivery of services to lower costs, decrease service delivery times, and improve the customer experience.” The order was followed by a charge to the federal chief information officer to develop a government-wide strategy to deliver better digital services to the American public.
- In 2012, the President issued a Memorandum for the Heads on Executive Departments and Agencies, “Building a 21st Century Digital Government.”²⁴ The memo mandated that each federal department implement a 12-month strategy to enhance their digital service delivery.

These new policies are further addressed in Chapter Two on “Going Digital.”

Enhancing Organizational Capacity

Digital service offices were formed to respond to and repair urgent technology failures, or as an alternative structural approach to rethinking processes and implementation strategies in government digital transformation efforts.²⁵ In the United States, three types of digital service teams were created, as discussed further in Chapter Two:

- **The U.S. Digital Service** was created in 2014 to focus on specific technology projects determined to be national priorities.
- **18F** was created as a team of software engineers and product managers located at the General Services Administration to assist departments and agencies with their technology initiatives.
- **Agency-level in-house digital service teams** focus on high-priority policy areas within their own department and agency.

Enhancing Staff Capability

The third aspect of institutionalization is enhancing staff capability. This takes the form of creating resource websites, communities of practice, and providing training. The newness of social media to government pointed to a

clear need for enhancing staff capability and knowledge regarding the effective use of social media to reach out to the public.

- **DigitalGov:** DigitalGov, created by the General Services Administration, provides government employees with the tools, methods, practices, and policy guidance they need to deliver effective and accessible digital services. The website was created based on the need that government staff had for:
 - Guidance on implementing digital policies and initiatives
 - Open access to modern methods, practices, policies, and tools
 - Focused training and events that help teams learn and adopt new concepts
 - Easy access to collaborate with others across government who are working on the same problems
- **Communities of Practice:** DigitalGov also serves as a resource for communities of practice which have developed over time. As of 2018, 19 communities of practice existed in which more than 10,000 federal employees participated. The federal SocialGov Community included over 1,200 digital managers and specialists at more than 160 agencies and offices, in a collaborative program aimed at improving the creation, adoption and evaluation of social media and other digital engagement programs.
- **DigitalGov University (DGU):** Sponsored by the GSA, DGU serves as the events platform for the DigitalGov community. According to GSA, DGU “provides programming to build and accelerate digital capacity by providing webinars and in-person events highlighting innovations, case studies, tools, and resources.”

Developing Assessment Capability

The fourth characteristic of institutionalization is the assessment of government’s social media efforts. In her 2014 report, *A Managers Guide to Assessing the Impact of Government’s Social Media Interactions*, Ines Mergel describes how public managers now assess whether social media is making a difference to citizens, improving their trust in government, increasing accountability, and making government communication more effective and efficient.²⁶ There are common performance measures, collection methodologies, and web analytics tools used in the assessment of government’s social media. In her report, Mergel describes how government managers can now measure the degree of engagement between citizens and agencies on social media. The use of metrics is also an important component for agencies making the business case for the continued and increased use of social media.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on our review of research on this topic over the past twenty years, we identified four key lessons:

First, as with any innovation, government agencies can be divided between innovators, early adopters, and laggards. Innovators and early adopters have a special role to play in implementing future social initiatives. Innovative agencies need to be recognized, rewarded, and encouraged to share their knowledge and experience with agencies moving more slowly along the adoption curve.

Second, agencies can become more effective and improve their performance by engaging the public through social media. By engaging citizens through social media, agencies can obtain crucial feedback on current performance and how their performance could be improved. Such engagement can also assist government organizations in developing clearer and more effective policies.

Third, the role of interagency communities of practice helps with the successful implementation of social media initiatives. Central management agencies can take responsibility for catalyzing and encouraging communities of practice on new management initiatives. Creation of interagency communities of practice serve two primary purposes:

- Providing a vehicle for agencies to share their experiences of what has worked well and what has not
- By sharing information and participating in a government-wide initiative, agencies begin to take ownership of a given initiative

Fourth, interagency communities of practice can play a key role in identifying government-wide policy changes needed in response to a new initiative. In the case of social media, a host of government-wide policies required change or updates to reflect the use of new social media tools.

LOOKING FORWARD

As agencies continue to develop their social media capabilities and strategies while expanding internal and public use, they will need to focus on several areas:

- **Managing the evolving risks associated with social media:** The government needs to develop policies, practices, and approaches for creating and maintaining trust when citizens interact with agencies on social media platforms. This will include attention to privacy and security issues related to users' identities, as well as tracking individual users across platforms to create integrated profiles of their interactions.

- **Managing the increasing convergence of the uses of social media:** Social media tools and platforms will increasingly provide the foundation for new forms of collaboration and engagement among agencies and between government and citizens. These new models of interaction could serve as powerful accelerators for how government works in the future.
- **Improving the user experience with social media:** The user experience is defined as the overall experience of an individual with using a product, such as a website or platform. The federal government will need to focus in the future on improving user experiences for:
 - **Citizens:** Government agencies now involve citizens in testing new platforms to make them easier to use, to increase customer satisfaction.
 - **Government employees:** The user experience by government employees is also crucial in that employees now seek a more consistent experience in working across multiple platforms to better serve citizens. An emphasis on the employee user experience will increase the adoption rate of social media as “the way of doing business” in government.

Addressing these opportunities will set the stage for longer-term innovations and increased adoption of social media strategies in government.

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