Gov 2.0 Revisited: Social Media Strategies in the Public Sector

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Government 2.0—or the use of social media in the public sector—has become a hot topic. Agencies and departments on all levels of government are adding Facebook, Twitter or YouTube buttons to their otherwise static—and infrequently updated—websites. It is still not clear how successful and useful social media is in the public sector and how agencies can design their own social media strategies.

The term Government 2.0 was coined by Eggers in 2005 as the way that “Unhyped and therefore unnoticed, technology is altering the behavior and mission of city halls, statehouses, schools and federal agencies across America.” He goes on, describing Government 2.0 as “A form of digital revolution that transforms government.” Only with the successful Internet campaign and use of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter of the then presidential candidate Obama the term was picked up again and is now widely used to describe the use of new forms of technology such as free and open social networking services in government (sometimes called social media or new media).

President Obama’s so-called Open Government memo from January 21, 2009 called for a more transparent, participatory and collaborative government and directed “Executive departments and agencies should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public.”

Today, Government 2.0 is the “hyped” form of the use of social media in government and by its diverse stakeholders that transforms the way that government interacts with citizens in a participatory, transparent and collaborative way. The use of social media and the actual participation of all federal departments and agencies were reinforced by the Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orzag’s executive directive giving agencies a 60-day deadline to publish their open government plans and upload their first datasets to a dedicated website called data.gov.

In April 2010, Cass Sunstein, Whitehouse advisor, published a memo that specified the use of social media in government advising the heads of the federal agencies and departments on how to handle content published and public feedback posted on social media sites under the Paperwork Reduction Act. While agencies were hesitant at the beginning, the GSA’s “Terms of Service Process for Free Social Media Products” with no-cost social media providers made it easier for agencies and departments to pick and chose the applications they found useful to promote a greater openness.

What we can now observe is a surge to use social networking services in government: almost every federal agency and department has at least one Facebook organizational page and at least one official Twitter account—many even have a dedicated social media site which aggregates all their different accounts (see for example cdc.gov/socialmedia).

Although for many agencies it has become mainstream practice to use social media applications and “be where our audiences are,” it is clear that not every agency has the same goal or a dedicated social media strategy. Some start by setting up blogs, Facebook fanpages, several Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, etc., but the actual use and outreach proves to be very diverse.

“We have to be where the people are!” From my interactions with new media directors in the federal agencies and departments, I differentiate between three different forms of social media use to promote transparency, participation and collaboration:

- The first strategy can be called push strategy: The new medium is used as an extension of the existing (usually relatively static) Internet presence and is used as an additional communication channel “to get the message out.” This results in un-moderated Twitter updates that are mainly used to publish press releases or appearances of the secretaries, unmannned Facebook walls that are blocked for public comments and sparsely populated YouTube channels.

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- The second strategy can be called pull strategy: Social media applications are used to bring audiences back to an organization’s website, where the news is aggregated (to avoid losing control of what happens with the information). Pull strategies are actively involving audiences using some degree of interaction that result in a few comments on Facebook walls and a few retweets (reuses of messages by other Twitter users) or answers to comments on responses from Twitter followers. Examples include the CDC’s use of social media tools to alert and inform the public about peanut salmonella outbreak or its H1N1 flu campaign.

- The third strategy—and at the same time the least observable—can be called networking strategy: The use of social media tools is highly interactive with a lot of back and forward between the agency and its diverse constituencies. The new media directors usually have a sense of who is following them and who they want to reach. They are using Facebook, Twitter, etc., very strategically not only to control and direct messages to their audiences, but also to have their ears and eyes on the channels in the federal agencies are being discussed and which might be of relevance to their agency’s or department’s mission. Social media tools are not only used for mere publishing purposes and are not viewed as a time sink of the already over-worked IT staff, but as a strategic information sharing and knowledge creation tool involving social media champions from different content areas.

One agency that stands out is GSA that used an informal social networking site called GovLoop.com to create a group and discuss their “Acquisition 2.0” strategy. The discussions of a diverse audience of government employees has led to the creation of the Better Buy wiki project (see betterbuy.fas.gsa.gov) that truly transforms the acquisition process of GSA multibillion dollar budget: Tenders are now “crowd-sourced”—meaning that vendors and agencies are asked to submit their revisions to the final document before it is officially released for solicitation.

How to design your social media strategy

The question now is: What does a successful social media strategy look like? On the federal level very few departments and agencies have made their social media strategies or policies publicly available, but from interviews with the current new media directors I derived a few general observations:

- It is necessary to get people on board and don’t put the use and content creation on the shoulders of the one-person IT shop, instead understand the need to socialize your strategy and find champions who are interested in experimenting with new media and include them in early efforts.

- Social media does not replace the existing traditional channels of communication with government’s stakeholders, instead it provides a test bed for new ways of interactions with citizens and public.

- Design your social media strategy around the mission and the audiences you are trying to reach and not the necessity to be out there and part of the movement. Make a conscious decision what your expectations are and if you have the manpower to actually interact and network with your audiences.

- Reach has not yet proven its value and measurement of the outcome is difficult. The pure number of Twitter followers or Facebook fans does not indicate the actual impact. It is more important to understand who follows your Twitter or Facebook profile; what do your followers do with the content and who is in the network of each of these followers: Social networks have the ability to distribute information from friends to friends and their friends and can therefore reach many more than just the few directly following your updates.
Majority of Americans Get News from Online and Offline Sources Every Day

Washington, DC—The overwhelming majority of Americans (92 percent) use multiple platforms to get their daily news.