

Chapter 3

Microblogging: An Analysis of Government Issued Policies and Best Practices

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3.1 Introduction

President Barack Obama's administration opened the doors to the inclusion of social media into the governmental agenda on January 21, 2009—his first day in office. According to the memorandum released his goal was threefold. Government that was previously closed or limited to the citizenship of the United States was to become transparent, participatory, and collaborative. The new administration wanted to foster interaction with citizens by posting interesting, vital, and emergency information using social media to develop cognitive engagement with civic-minded people. This administration entertained a new access point for an old concept; a government that could communicate directly with its people—an important foundational aspect.

In 2009, as a result of the memorandum, the new “open government” movement began a flutter of social networking on behalf of all branches of government. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches actively experimented with social media tools such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. Federal agencies were using recently developed technologies with sophisticated capabilities for interaction with individuals. These technologies allowed agencies and the public to publish comments and to add other forms of media on agency-sponsored, third party social media sites (Wilshusen 2010).

The passage of time has shown that using social media to share information has developed and been integrated into the methodologies in which the government uses to reach out to the community. The dissimulation of information is no longer reliant

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upon newspapers, anchormen, or Web-based news sites. Social media, especially microblogging, make these once fast and reliable methods of gathering information appear inert. Twitter and other microblogging platforms are able to broadcast the latest news in a simple text format. In limiting the character count of messages, they can be delivered quickly; thus providing a powerful means to receive government information and network with others who share a similar interest.

Instant feedback is a secondary factor associated with microblogging that cannot be achieved with traditional methods of broadcasting information. The follower, the one who posts and reads a microblog, is able to reply to the information posted instantly. They can request more material, ask a question, or post a comment with their perspective, developing a new form of political interaction. In a quest to meet the public where they are, Twitter, a microblogging tool, is becoming popular among politicians and government agencies to connect with constituents. It is helping to erase the boundaries between the citizens and the government. “Traditional forms of diplomacy still dominate, but twenty first century statecraft is not mere corporate rebranding—swapping tweets for broadcasts. It represents a shift in form and strategy—a way to amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyber-activism” (Lichtenstein 2010).

GovTwit, the world’s largest Twitter directory, representing all facets of government, lists over 1,200 government agencies using microblogging as a form of communication and the number has continued to grow (The List/Agencies 2011).

“As of May 2011, 13 % of online adults use the status update service Twitter. That represents a significant increase from the 8 % of online adults who identified themselves as Twitter users the first time we asked our “stand-alone” question about Twitter adoption in November 2010” (Smith 2011).

Since many federal agencies are actively using the silicon world of social media and communication, my goal is to analyze organization policies and best practices that the government has specified for microblogging. In most cases they will refer to one specific microblogging tool, Twitter. As a social media form of communication, Twitter has shown itself to be an excellent public relations platform designed to keep citizens of the United States and other countries informed.

The purpose of this analysis is to answer two questions. First, which government agencies have policies and best practices applying directly or indirectly to microblogging? Second, where can other agencies learn from existing policies to use as a guide to build their own?

Most government agencies’ policies and best practices have guidelines that only address social media, a general term used to cover all forms of online interaction. This is a key element for investigation. It is my view that instead of combining policies or suggestions for all social interaction tools under the term “social media”, each tool should have their own developed guidelines. While an interesting topic, the focus of this paper concerns only microblogging, including Twitter. Other forms of social media should be considered for future research projects.

3.2 Literature Review

During the early days of social media technology, uncertainty of the directions they would develop simplified regulations. However, microblogging has developed into a mainstream governmental activity that should now receive individual treatment in regard to policy and regulation. Layne and Lee stated that e-government is an evolutionary phenomenon and therefore e-government policies and practices should be derived and implemented accordingly (Layne and Lee 2001). Like e-government, microblogging has evolved to the point where such considerations need to be made.

Since a current analysis of government agency policies and microblogging does not exist, we must look to the past to find similar occurrences. Is there another instance when the use of a technology developed before a policy for the technology was considered? In my research, a similar occurrence shows up in the last part of the twentieth and the early part of the twenty-first centuries. Government agencies were beginning to develop “e-government” and Web sites for communication with the public, but not with any sort of unified order. The exponential growth of federal Web sites outpaced federal information management policy guidelines (Eschenfelder and Beachboard 1997). The lack of policy and guidelines for federal agency Web sites was addressed in academic articles at the time.

Based on their observations, Layne and Lee reported that e-government was unmanageable and online transactional services were in their infant stages (Layne and Lee 2001). Until adequate framework becomes available, they proposed a four-stage growth model for e-government: (1) cataloging (2) transaction, (3) vertical integration, and (4) horizontal integration. Their analysis further showed that three issues were fundamental for government consideration if they wanted to evolve into efficient and effective e-government that supports citizens’ demands: (1) universal access, (2) privacy and confidentiality, and (3) citizen focus in government management. These three considerations still exist and can be applied to the development of microblogging policies.

Eschenfelder and Beachboard discussed the need to assess US federal government Web sites, showing a concern for federal agency policies (Eschenfelder and Beachboard 1997). They asked a number of important questions regarding policy and federal Web sites. Were new policies needed, or should federal information policies be updated to more realistically reflect the capabilities of this new medium? If so, in what areas were new or updated policies more urgently required? The authors believed that careful consideration should be given to the purpose, structure, and operation of federal Web sites and that federal information policy should be re-examined. The early conclusion to this study suggested that existing policies needed to be modified to promote the most effective use of the Web to disseminate federal information. Policy makers also needed to think through the full implications of existing federal information policies and attempt to assess whether the consequences of these policies actually support the underlying social values as intended.

Wang, Bretschneider, and Gant evaluated e-government services using a different approach; they turned their focus on the citizen. Like the two previous studies, the goal was to develop an evaluation of e-government services using methods derived from analysis (Wang et al. 2005). This study made two important contributions: (1) to provide a general evaluation framework for Web-based e-government services that would be from the perspective of the public and would help answer why Web design leads to success or failure in service delivery, (2) develop instruments to be used with the evaluation model in the real e-government context. The proposed model addressed performance, which is viewed as the transaction between the information user, the task the user was trying to complete, and information itself in regard to the task.

In addition to recognizing the need for the development of policy evaluation methods, e-government policy and assessing government agency Web sites; a fourth perspective concerning transparency was considered when working with information and communication technologies (ICTs) and government agencies.

Research was focused on relationships between information and communication technology use and government transparency, the ability of ICTs embedded within e-government initiative to create a culture of transparency and barriers that ICTs initiatives presented regarding transparency (Bertot et al. 2010). Conference proceedings highlighted blogs, Wikis, Social Networking and Media-sharing, Microblogging, and Mashups as the means for citizens to scrutinize the government. The same proceeding addressed the underlying concept of social media, actively including the user in the process, reflected in the ethos of many e-government transparency efforts even when the social media approaches were not directly incorporated. Numerous transparency efforts relied on citizens collectively monitoring government officials to prevent corruption. People who used social media to communicate and made their wants and needs known to government agencies were the ones following on Twitter.

Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, and Glaisyer conducted a study of social media technology and government transparency that was concerned with policy (Bertot et al. 2010). They ascertained that social media technologies had the ability to transform authority by increasing a government's transparency and its interaction with citizens. This paper provided a selective overview of key issues, questions, and best practice government initiatives regarding social media technologies. They further discussed how this was not a new notion; the Clinton and Bush administration both focused on fostering citizen services through more effective processes and technology. The criteria the authors suggested included democratic participation and engagement, co-production, crowdsourcing solutions and innovations, transparency and accountability. There were examples given of social media and public engagement that fell under the categories of government information and services along with public engagement.

Bertot, Jaeger, Munson, and Glaisyer also pointed out new democratic models of administration with the use of social media. They contended that there needed to be a rethinking of traditional boundaries among individuals, the public, communities, and levels of government. New models included local reporting, local

problem-solving, new spheres of authority, redefinition of government processes and operations, and a shift in objectives of participation. Other boundaries they foresaw the need to change concerned redefining governmental boundaries, incorporating participation into governing, a need for new policy structures, processes, frameworks and structures, and risks of polarization. In their conclusion, they listed a number of issues that needed to be further addressed. It is the goal of this paper to answer some of the questions proposed in relationship to microblogging. Questions of interest were: What policy structures and frameworks are necessary for government use of and interaction with social media technologies? How will social media policy change how policy is generally developed?

In considering barriers to social media and e-government transparency there will always be an aspect of disagreement and contention regarding policy. Dawes' paper was a conceptual and empirical exploration of the tensions inherent in the drive to increase openness and transparency in government by means of information access and dissemination (Dawes 2010). She lists three enduring tensions associated with public use of government information, (1) tension between comprehensiveness of the data and its understandability by non-technical oriented citizens, (2) tension between the desires to ensure usefulness of detailed data and to simultaneously protect the confidentiality of data subjects, and (3) the public need and desire to analyze and understand "global" data sets versus the reality that government data is not maintained as a global asset but rather is distributed across scores of organizations and policy domains, at all levels of government. Dawes suggests stewardship and usefulness as two simple principles to use as a framework for working through a variety of goals and challenges inherent in information-based transparency initiatives.

As regards digital access to government information and compliance with the Electronic Freedom of Information Act, (Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996) an analysis was conducted of the content of agencies' electronic reading rooms to determine whether they were compliant with the law (Oltmann et al. 2006). After the signing of the act there was discourse surrounding the EFOIA and many commentators assumed these amendments would improve citizen access to government information. The authors adopted a social informatics perspective to critically examine some of this discourse and found that many of the claims had not borne out in experience. One of the problems discovered with the law was that it provided little incentive for agencies to release information in a timely manner or even to release information at all. The study concluded with few Web sites meeting the legal content requirements according to the FOIA. Since the Obama administration has passed the memorandum (Obama 2009) agencies appear to be a lot more relaxed in their sharing of information using social media technologies, such as Twitter. This could be due to the next generation of federal employee who is more familiar with technology. They may be more at ease with sharing data and therefore security is not such a concern. This is an interesting concept that could use further investigation.

Chadwick and May's study concerned the interaction between States and Citizens in the age of the Internet. It focused on three models of interaction, they were

termed “managerial,” “consultative”, and “participatory” (Chadwick and May 2003). They undertook a comparative analysis of the United States, Britain, and the European Union of policy statements on the future role of ICTs in the national government. The examination pointed out policy innovations that soon became dependent upon the key values and discourses that framed them during their early phases. Of all the three models, the one of most interest was the managerial model. In this model of interaction, ICTs are largely seen as a quantitative improvement on previous technologies and increased accountability. This showed the need for guidance and policies in regard to ICTs; this includes social media technologies such as microblogging.

One analysis addressed the idea that e-government often came with a promise to improve public administration efficiency. However, it also had the potential to alter the traditional relationship between government and citizens by creating a new virtual government-and-citizen interface (Wong and Welch 2004). It suggested there were two major sources of change for accountability, (1) global pressure of information technology and (2) an indirect impact of change brought by the domestic context. The authors concluded that as Web-based technologies become widely available and affordable, e-government would become more policy driven than technology and economic driven. Public accountability expressed by e-government would become more and more a conscious policy choice that reflected both national and organizational characteristics. This conclusion is correct and applies to more than e-government. Social media technologies are now at the point where, pressured or not, they need to develop policies.

Those who work for government agencies must place top priority on national security and the position of their individual agency. They must be able to consider what information is to be shared with the public and what is to remain within the confines of the agency. Security can be challenging in a world where everything seems freely available on the Internet. A policy concerning security and protection of government information can be a simple way of safeguarding this sort of information. Security was a very important issue soon after the events of 9/11 and during the development of ICTs during the early part of the twenty-first century.

Lambrinouidakis, Gritzalis, Dridi, and Pernul realized that a rapid technological evolution could not be problem free (Lambrinouidakis et al. 2003). They recognized concerns in respect to the extent ‘information security’ and ‘user privacy’ could be ensured and raised. They suggested a new framework for identifying and organizing the security requirements that were common to all information systems that were utilized for the development of an integrated online e-government platform. They demonstrated the feasibility of such an approach by utilizing the ‘Organizational Framework for the Security Requirements of e-government services’ for identifying the (common) security requirements for an integrated online government service. They recognized that security would increase in necessity as users who accessed services began to view the information from virtually anywhere.

A variety of different ways information could be compromised is discussed in the paper, but the one of interest concerns the security requirements for an e-government platform. The classifications were: actors per service phase, risk

levels, and security requirements. There was the interest in adopting protective measures that could effectively satisfy the identified security requirements. It further states that it was feasible to develop a uniform, but also generally applicable and easily expandable, security policy for e-government platforms. They concluded a policy could be built to support the actions needed.

A second study on national security and information rights presented the need to provide a policy, not for the national security, but for the information rights of the citizens (Caidi and Ross 2005). In their article, they advocated for bringing together what were disparate information issues under one label, namely, ‘information rights.’ Such information rights were to be viewed from a user-centered perspective and have the potential to provide an effective way to view current information issues as they related to policy, security, and civil liberties in the broader sense. They pointed out the lack of a comprehensive information policy from many federal agencies regarding Web sites and contracting out government information services to private firms as a hurdle to access to information. The conclusion was “information rights” must first be considered as more than just another concept but rather as a universally recognized body of rights similar to other accepted models and within the realm of human rights.

Dearstynne explained in his study that mismanagement of information was a central theme in understanding the vulnerability that left the United States open to the terrorist attack of 9/11/01 and the misread clues that led the United States and Great Britain into a war with Iraq (Dearstynne 2005) He listed five strategic approaches from an information management perspective that were very interesting. He suggested: (1) improve understanding of the strengths and limits of intelligence information, (2) intelligence work should draw more extensively on knowledge management and other information management techniques, (3) provide leadership to improve security agencies’ information policies, (4) foster more careful, systematic, thoughtful analysis, and (5) actively promote information dissemination and sharing.

It is not uncommon for federal agencies to use technology before policy for that technology is developed. Despite this, policy does develop after the use of the technology in one form or another. It is time to analyze the policies and best practices that have developed for microblogging thus far and apply the knowledge learned to help all agencies develop guidelines to follow.

3.3 Method

Web site design was the closest analysis format discovered in relation to policies developed for microblogging. There were a variety of methodologies used to study policy in regard to Web site design for federal government agencies. These methodologies included the citizen-centric approach, the iterative design strategy, conceptual exploration, empirical exploration, and social informatics.

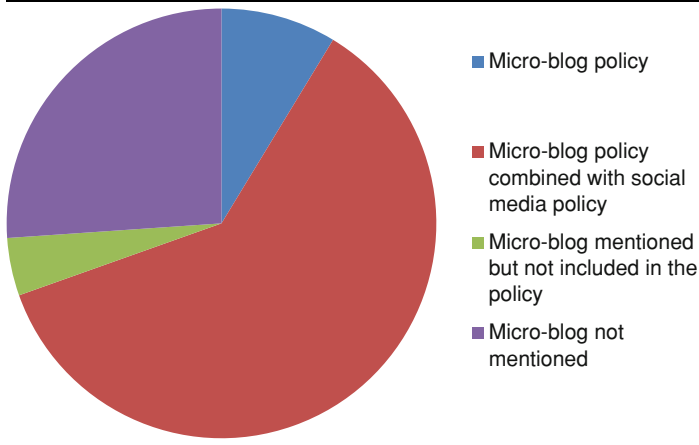
The focus of the research for this paper was to determine the policies and best practices US government agencies have for microblogging and the social media software that fall under this description. Since this analysis brought into question a number of established social assumptions concerning ICTs and the understanding of what ‘information’ represented, the author chose to use social informatics as the study design and developed a critical analysis of the material to focus on the associated professional training and discourses (Day 2007). “The critical orientation refers to examining ITs from perspectives that do not automatically and uncritically accept the goals and beliefs of the group that commission, design, or implement specific IT applications” (Kling 2002).

The population sampled in this study was federal agencies who practiced the use of microblogging social media tools. In addition, the author needed to find a comprehensive list of government agencies using social media, but not a current listing. This need was reflected in previous study that suggested policy did not develop until after the agencies had adopted and used the technology (Eschenfelder and Beachboard 1997). Using an older listing would ensure the agency had time to develop a social media or microblogging policy.

A number of resources were investigated to find a sample of government agencies that use social media. Web sites viewed included GovTwit (GovTwit), Listerious (U.S. Government), and Twitter Fan Wiki (Cousins 2010). However, the best sample of agencies using social media could be found in the Government Accountability Office’s 2011 Report, “Social Media: Federal Agencies Need Policies and Procedures for Managing and Protecting Information They Access and Disseminate” (Wilshusen 2011). This report analyzed a sample of US government agencies and documented whether they had developed policies and procedures that guided use of social media as a whole including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in the overall numbers.

Agencies analyzed for this paper were Department of Agriculture (USDA), Department of Commerce, Department of Defense (DoD), Department of Education, Department of Energy, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Homeland Security, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Department of the Interior, Department of Justice, Department of Labor, Department of State (State Department), Department of Transportation, Department of the Treasury, Department of Veterans Affairs, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), General Services Administration (GSA), National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), National Science Foundation, Office of Personnel Management, Small Business Administration (SBA), Social Security Administration (SSA), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The search for the social media policy for each of these agencies began by using the new official US Government search engine, www.search.usa.gov. The search was limited to the name of the agency, the abbreviated name of the agency and the term, “social media policy”. In an effort to exhaust all possibilities, the search engine, Google was utilized for a general search using the name of the agency and the term, “social media policy”. A final search of each agency Web site was conducted using the same terminology. The rationale for finding data in this format

Table 3.1 Microblogging policies and government agencies

related to the discussing in the literature review that agencies tend to wait till after the use of a technology to analyze use and develop a policy. These meant policies would be neither centralized nor organized. The use of modern research tools was the best method of finding what policies currently do and do not exist.

As a basis for discussing these findings, it was necessary to search for what agencies had microblogging policies and how they were treated in those same policies (Table 3.1). All agencies referenced included blogs or microblogs in one form or another in their social media policies. It is an observation that all agencies studied mentioned “social media” in either their official policy, privacy policy, or comment policy. The strict exclusion of social media technologies and the United States government appears to be an issue of the past.

3.4 Results

In an analysis of the agencies previously listed, there is the mention of blogging but not all agencies addressed microblogging. In addition, policies that were found were not in the same type of agency document and were not always referred to as “policy” or microblogging but the intent was still obvious. Policy guidelines were found in privacy policies, comment policies, open government plans, transparency initiatives, directives, assessments, Web sites, and a variety of other forms of agency documentations. It is noted that policies for social media services as well as those for microblogging were not in similar locations, making the discovering of these policies a challenge.

The initial question asked in this paper was to find what government agencies have polices and best practices applying directly or indirectly to microblogging. In the analysis of the 23 agencies reviewed, the author discovered only two agencies with a policy specifically focused on microblogging: The Department of Health

and Human Services (2010) and the Small Business Administration (2011). Each agency provides advice to when their agency should use Twitter. The HHS provides an extensive guide on how the agency should communicate with the public, how not to use the service, how to treat content, how to plan for ‘tweeting’ on their behalf, and the best uses for Twitter (Department of Health and Human Services 2010). The Small Business Administration has only a privacy policy that focuses specifically on Twitter (Small Business Administration)

Fourteen of the agencies studied included microblogging in their social media policy and discussed Twitter specifically. These agencies include the Department of Commerce (2011), Department of Defense (Deputy Secretary of Defense 2011), Department of Energy (2011), Department of Homeland Security (McShea 2009), Department of Housing and Urban Development (2011), Department of the Interior (2011), Department of Justice (2009), Department of the State (Smith 2011), Department of Transportation (2010), Treasury (2011), Department of Veterans Affairs (2011), Environmental Protection Agency (2011), General Services Administration (2011), and NASA (Hopkins 2011). The EPA provides a very detailed policy for communicating with the public using social media and microblogs (Environmental Protection Agency 2011a , b , c , d). The Department of Transportation (2010) and the Department of Interior (Lee-Ashley 2010), Department of Veterans Affairs (2011) mentions blogs and microblogs in their social media policy concerning their employees and how to communicate online on behalf of the agencies. The weakest area in regarding microblogs with this group seems to concern the security policies.

In analyzing the use of microblogging in agencies there are agencies that mention microblogging but do not include it specifically in its social media policy. Only one agency appeared to fall in this category, the National Science Foundation. The only mention of the microblog tool, Twitter, is in the Chief FOIA Officer Report (National Science Foundation 2010).

Finally, there are those agency policies that do not mention microblogs at all. These six agencies are the Department of Agriculture (2011), Department of Education (2010), Department of Labor (2010), Office of Personnel Management, Social Security Administration and the U.S. Agency for International Development (2010). These agencies mention how they use their blogs and microblogs, but do not provide any guidance to their employees or to those who follow their “tweets.”

3.5 Discussion

Each of the agencies analyzed developed their social media policy after the use of social media became a part of their agency. The initial push to include social media, including Twitter, in the standard government agency policies was not a consideration until the 2009 Open Government Directive (Obama 2009) issued by the Obama administration. Many of the agencies followed this directive by creating or modifying their social media policy.

While research has shown social media policy developing into the horizontal integration of government agencies, references to individual social media tools are still in the transaction stage, but consideration of this need to develop seems to be taking hold in some agencies analyzed (Layne and Lee 2001). Currently, only two agencies have policies specifically for microblogging, but with time and the increasing need to regulate social media and each with their own unique usage formats, some sort of guidance will develop. The Department of Health and Human Services has the most detailed guidance and use policy for Twitter and is an excellent resource for other agencies to view concerning when to use Twitter, approval for tweets, and meeting the 508 accessibility requirements (Department of Health and Human Services). The Small Business Administration only has a Twitter policy concerning privacy issues, but it is extensive and applicable to other agencies (Small Business Administration).

In analyzing policies concerning microblogging there is a very obvious need to update current policies to address microblogging (Eschenfelder and Beachboard 1997). Out of 23 agencies reviewed, only two addressed microblogging. The rest were either combined under the term social media or did not have a policy. In analyzing microblogging as a part of the agencies that do have a social media policy, in most cases those agencies only need to separate the literature they currently have according to the social media tool, in this case microblogs, and update the material. Those agencies who do not have a microblog policy can review those that do and develop successful guidelines.

There is a need for microblogs posted on Twitter and an evaluation of the citizens' response to the information. This requires a certain measure of diplomacy on behalf of the agency employee. (Bertot et al. 2010). The tensions can quickly develop because of a lack of policy (Dawes 2010; Wong and Welch 2004). Among those tensions is a lack of transparency and interaction with the citizens. The development of policy guidelines will in turn develop the comfort agency employees need to know what information to post on a microblog. Interaction with citizens over the information posted will reduce tensions.

3.6 Implications

These findings are a step further into integrating microblogging and other social media policies into the standard policy for agencies and their unified communication with citizens. Hopefully, it will become obvious that each type of social media tool needs to develop their own individual policy and not be included under the sum total heading of "social media." Each tool is unique and therefore should be treated as such.

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