

Tweeting Our Way to Transparency: The Challenge of Social Media in Government

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Tyler Whitney, Carrie Meyer, Erik Olds
U.S. Department of Energy, Office of River Protection, Richland, Washington 99354

ABSTRACT

With the advent and spreading popularity of social networking sites the U.S. Government has found itself at a crossroads of propriety, security, and transparency. Federal agencies and offices are turning to social media to better communicate and dialogue with customers, broaden networks, and increase transparency.

With the widespread use of blogging and video posting from areas of global conflict, social media has become more prevalent. Individuals have turned a common Internet tool into a method of making inequities transparent and engage the public in policymaking through the use of modern technology. Still, challenges to this strategy remain.

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Office of River Protection (ORP) remains committed to providing the public with as much information as possible. ORP's mission is to safely retrieve and treat Hanford's tank waste and close the tank farms. It is a massive undertaking of interest to a wide array of audiences. ORP utilizes YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and an e-newsletter to deliver fast and accurate news and broaden access to project information.

This paper will highlight the challenges ORP faced in embracing social media, including challenges from a security and propriety perspective, discuss the steps taken to resolve the issues, and lessons learned.

INTRODUCTION: A CALL FOR TRANSPARENCY

Upon entering the White House, President Barack Obama chose to make one of his first public acts a statement on the new approach to transparency in government. On January 21, 2009, the White House Press Secretary's office released a memo that instructed all department and agency heads to develop and implement specific procedures that comply with an Open Government Directive. An Open Government Directive has not yet been issued by the Office of Management and Budget.

The President's Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government [1] laid out the fundamental goals of the Administration as they pertain to public communication and interaction. The overarching aim of this new approach is "to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration." Under the memorandum, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Peter Orszag, was required to develop an

Open Government Directive for federal agencies and departments to use as a guidepost for transparency.

On December 8, 2009, Director Orszag issued the Open Government Directive, establishing progressive benchmarks and specific requirements for federal agencies. One such recommendation is that “agencies should proactively use modern technology to disseminate useful information...” [2]. Even before the president’s initial memorandum was released, ORP proactively sought to implement this principle by developing a strategy for the use of social and new media. Unfortunately, resistance due to cyber security challenges prevented the implementation of these media until ORP could identify methods of using social media while fulfilling its security requirements. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to see full support from the new administration in the use of emerging technology by the Federal Government.

IMPACT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media tools such as Facebook began as a popular trend for young Americans. The current reality, however, is that social media have become just as popular among older Americans as for young adults. As Michael Learmonth (reporter for *Advertising Age*) points out, among the roughly 52 million Facebook users in America, more than 50 percent are over 35 years old. “The single biggest age demographic in the U.S. on both Facebook and MySpace is now between 35 and 44. Indeed, Facebook says its fastest growing demo is 55-plus,” [3].

Globally, Facebook is witnessing impacts much larger than many would have originally imagined. Social media sites are being used to promote free speech and get information into the international spotlight in countries where the press is limited at best and traditional media are nearly invisible to the public eye. Following last year’s narrow electoral victory by incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadenijad, YouTube was a popular vehicle for individuals to post homemade videos of violence and unrest that would have normally gone unseen.

Facebook’s power to connect individuals, level the media’s playing field, and rapidly disseminate information has been credited for some democratic ripples being felt in the Arab world. The *New York Times Magazine* ran an article in January 2009, pointing to the vast use of Facebook by some 800,000 young Egyptians. In the wake of an Israeli attack on Gaza, many young Egyptians turned to the Internet, literally within minutes and hours, to express their outrage and organize protests [4]. What would have normally been a role left to political parties, the organization of street protests became an individually-generated movement, modeling the power these websites maintain over the political sphere.

CHALLENGES

As ORP began to explore options in the development of social media, the first challenge was the issue of security. As social media has evolved, so too has individual abilities to unlawfully access secured networks, potentially opening up vulnerabilities to the Hanford Site’s government network system.

After the communications staff decided to create a Facebook profile for the organization, it became clear that even accessing the Facebook website would be a challenge. Normally when a website is blocked on Hanford computers, a supervisor can request that the IT contractor lift that site's restriction for a specific employee. That is not the case with social networking sites as many of these sites provide instantaneous messaging, which can provide cyber security vulnerabilities. In fact, the contractor was at the time working to further restrict Internet use and access due to a vulnerability to hackers and other unknown threats. As the age of instantaneous information access has evolved so too has the ability of scam artists, hackers and terrorists to access sensitive information more easily. After several requests to unblock Facebook from government computers, Hanford's contractor responded indicating all social networking websites would continue to be blocked due to cyber security concerns.

Individual DOE offices began creating independent Facebook profiles after the Secretary of Energy launched his own, very public Facebook profile. As these online profiles emerged, DOE's Office of Environmental Management began developing a set of guidelines for social networking and alternative media, which will be issued to DOE site offices in the future.

Physically creating a Facebook profile for ORP was a challenge in itself. Facebook is very careful to not allow the creation of counterfeit government agency profiles. One of the safeguards it employs is a highly restrictive name selection process. When ORP was creating its Facebook page, it could not call itself the "U.S. Department of Energy Office of River Protection," "DOE Office of River Protection," or even "Office of River Protection" without verification of the agency's authenticity. Unfortunately, even when ORP staff tried to confirm the authenticity of the profile and creator, Facebook would not respond to the request or grant permission.

A further challenge was the lack of case studies and resources for government agencies building social media profiles. Had there been more examples of similar U.S. Government agencies experiencing similar challenges, it may have been quicker for ORP to determine the best path forward.

ACTIONS

Based on input from the Hanford Site IT and Security contractors, ORP determined that establishing a social media network would require a computer setup independent of its government network. ORP had one of its laptop computers removed from all government connections and purchased a wireless internet card to use with that computer. This laptop is now designated as the social media computer and can access all social networking websites without government restrictions or fear of hackers accessing DOE records, as the laptop has no connectivity with the government system.

Regarding the naming of ORP's Facebook profile, ORP ultimately titled it "River Protection Project," another title for ORP's mission at the Hanford Site. This title might not be as conspicuous or formal as a more official, government-sounding title, but it serves the purpose and helped launch the profile in a timelier manner.

ADDITIONAL TOOLS

In addition to Facebook and Twitter, ORP created an e-newsletter with the goal of reaching its stakeholders with quick information on a regular basis. Using a program contracted through a small private company, ORP is able to send newsletters through what is essentially an email. The benefit of the program is the ability to track which contacts open the email, the total readership percentage, and the times of day during which people open the email.

ORP identified about 300 key stakeholders who frequently rely on our updates for the first several newsletters. Roughly 15 percent of those who receive the newsletter open and read it, and a large number of those readers open it multiple times. The newsletter is distributed about once per month, but ORP intends to use it whenever new information is available.

RESULTS

ORP has observed an overall positive response to its new social media products. Probably the most beneficial product has been the e-newsletter, with the largest quantity of information being delivered.

While the number of followers on Facebook and Twitter is satisfactory, the actual use by followers has been marginal. Within the first several weeks after launching ORP's Facebook profile, it gained over 150 followers, but that number has just about leveled off. Twitter has fewer followers, but it is nonetheless an effective way to show the public what ORP is doing in almost real time.

An additional benefit to the newsletter and Twitter posts was realized with local media outlets, particularly the local newspaper. Reporters and the publisher of a local newspaper as well as a local television station follow our Twitter posts and newsletter, which has resulted in some positive publicity for our organization.

The reality of social media is that its primary popularity is between people, not between people and government agencies or organizations. Although there are some people that are highly interested in following cleanup work at the Hanford Site, most are not engaged enough to actively participate in online discussions about ORP's work. Maybe this trend will change, and maybe it will remain constant. Regardless, use of social media by the U.S. Government is symbolically important for those who wish to see it embrace openness and transparency.

LESSONS LEARNED

ORP is certainly nowhere close to completing its push to utilize new forms of communication; surely there will always be new tools and practices to learn. But for now, ORP is continuing to build on its knowledge of how best to capitalize on technology in the social media world. Here are a few of the key lessons learned from ORP's experience:

- Flexibility with government standards is critical to moving forward

- Growing a company's social networking profile is not an overnight process
- Constant feedback for improvement is always needed
- Creating examples within government will help other government agencies to move forward

CONCLUSIONS

Social media and alternative forms of communication are necessary additions to public participation in government affairs. U.S. Government agencies have taken positive steps under the Obama Administration to incorporate these media, even though the government may presently be behind the curve at using them to their maximum potential. ORP intends to maintain its push toward being on the front line of transparency by continually pushing out more information to the public and by understanding how to better utilize the tools it already has available.

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