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Designing Social Media Policy for Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Government agencies in the United States and around the world are increasingly looking to leverage social media to improve the quality of government services and enable greater citizen engagement. One central challenge that has emerged is the blurring line between the three types of social media use by government employees, namely agency use, professional use, and personal use. In this brief, the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany draws on its research on social media to clarify these different use types and why they matter for designing social media policy.



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- **Agency use**—Official agency use implies that an employee’s use of social media is for the express purpose of communicating an agency’s broad interests, or specific programmatic and policy interests.
- **Professional use**—Professional use implies that an employee’s use of social media is for the purpose of furthering their specific job responsibilities or professional duties through an externally focused site.
- **Personal use**—Personal use implies that the employee is using social media for personal interests, which have nothing to do with their job duties for the organization.

Issues in Technology Innovation

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The Center for Technology Innovation

Founded in 2010, the Center for Technology Innovation at Brookings is at the forefront of shaping public debate on technology innovation and developing data-driven scholarship to enhance understanding of technology’s legal, economic, social, and governance ramifications.

On paper, the boundaries between these three use types appear relatively straightforward; however, in practice they are fluid and therefore, difficult to regulate. Social media tools enable an employee to simultaneously engage in professional and personal uses. This simultaneous use makes traditional methods for overseeing employee use of the Internet ineffective, requiring government managers to rely, in many cases, on employees to self-monitor their use of social media. Navigating boundaries between personal, professional, and agency uses is also difficult because the social media environment does not distinguish between “personal” and “professional” personas. This contributes to a further loss of control by government agencies accustomed to tightly controlling official agency messages

Government professionals see a social media policy as an important first step in addressing these blurred boundaries, but are struggling with what such policies should encompass. Eight essential elements for government social media policy emerged from the project, which agencies can use to direct their efforts.



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1. employee access – the degree to which employees are allowed to access social media sites while at work and the procedures for gaining access;
2. account management – procedures for creation, maintenance, and destruction of social media accounts;
3. acceptable use – guidelines on how employees are expected to use social media tools while at work, including issues such as time of use, purposes of use, and types of equipment;
4. employee conduct – expectations for employee conduct on social media sites and consequences should a violation occur;
5. content – procedures for posting content on official agency social media pages, including creation and editorial requirements for such content;
6. security – security procedures for safeguarding government data and infrastructure;
7. legal issues – legal considerations and requirements for use of social media; and
8. citizen conduct – management of citizen-generated content on a government agency social media site.

This briefing serves as a guide for government agencies, whether they are simply beginning to consider the opportunities and challenges of social media or are in the midst of the complex process of social media policy development.

Government agencies are turning to social media tools to improve the quality of services and enable greater citizen engagement.

Introduction

The use of social media tools in government in the United States and around the world, while still relatively new, has been steadily gaining acceptance at all levels of government. Government agencies are turning to social media tools to improve the quality of services and enable greater citizen engagement. At the same time, social media present new challenges to governments who must address resulting citizen expectations and the differences in communication culture, while navigating the blurry line between personal and professional activities. Developing a social media policy can be an important first step to navigating this new space and can ultimately serve as a key enabler for responsibly and effectively leveraging social media tools. Yet, many governments are struggling with what such a policy should encompass.

To help fill this gap, the Center for Technology in Government at the University of Albany-SUNY, undertook a project designed to develop a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the use of social media in government and to identify patterns in existing government social media policies.¹ Our analysis drew on interviews with 32 government professionals and 26 publicly available government social media documents identified between October 2009 and January 2010.

The central issue that emerged is the blurring line between the three types of social media use by government. This brief outlines these uses and why these differences are important to consider when designing social media policy. In addition, eight essential elements for social media policy were identified through the project and are presented to assist in directing agencies' efforts to develop social media policy.



Social Media Use in Government

The use of social media in government is often treated generically, most frequently describing an 'agency' as the user. A closer look reveals that this description is insufficient because it overlooks the subtle and shifting boundaries between individuals and organizations using social media for personal, professional, and

¹ This briefing is based on a yearlong exploratory research project focused on social media use in government. In addition to this briefing several additional reports and related products were produced. <http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/socialmedia?proj=socialmedia&sub=summary>

official agency purposes in the government workspace. The following descriptions seek to clarify some of the differences in uses:

Employee use for official agency interests:

Official agency use refers to employee's use of social media to communicate on behalf of the agency through an official agency account. The employee is not communicating on behalf of himself as an individual, but rather on behalf of the agency or his department.

Employee use for professional interests:

Professional use refers to an employee's use of social media for the purpose of furthering their specific job responsibilities or professional duties through an externally focused site. While professional use is beneficial to the work of government by enhancing employees' capability to share knowledge and to collaborate with their peers, the site employees are using is not maintained or monitored by the agency itself.

Employee use for personal interests:

Using social media for personal interests refers to employees using social media tools to conduct personal activities that are not connected to their job duties.

On paper, the boundaries between these three uses appear relatively straightforward; however, in practice they are fluid and therefore, difficult to regulate. Social media tools enable an employee to simultaneously engage in professional and personal uses. For example, a professional might devote some of their work time to networking on GovLoop.com by sharing programmatic ideas with peers in the Acquisition 2.0 group, but may simultaneously be contributing their favorite recipe to the GovLoop.com GovGourmet group. One consequence of employees being able to engage in personal and professional uses at virtually the same time is that agencies have less capability to closely control or monitor employee activities. When an agency allows access to social media sites, managing employee use means relying on employees to strike the appropriate balance between personal and professional activities. Traditional website monitoring, such as tracking employee access to sites, blocking sites, or tracking how long employees spend on certain sites, is not as effective for social media. Relinquishing such responsibility to employees requires a degree of trust between employees and managers, which can be difficult to establish.

Navigating boundaries between personal, professional, and agency uses is also difficult because the social media environment does not distinguish between the "personal" and the "professional" persona of a government employee. In our physical world, time and distance typically separate what we do at work from our personal lives. In the social media environment this separation becomes less clear as people are connected through other individuals, events, organizations, or interests,

The difficulties connected with the shifting boundaries between personal and professional uses have real implications for agencies designing social media policies and developing social media strategies.

regardless of the “role” they play. Thus “personal” comments posted by an individual expressing views on a sensitive public policy can be potentially linked to their persona as an employee of a government agency. While using proper privacy settings is one way to manage the situation, being mindful of the fluidity between boundaries will help agencies design policies and guidelines to encourage responsible use of social media sites.

An important consequence of indistinguishable personal and professional personas is that agencies are facing greater difficulty in managing their official message as more and more government professionals, in roles other than communication staff, are using social media. In some cases this has created a situation where the public perceives the opinions and postings created by employees in their personal or professional use as an agency’s official position. While agencies can control content posted on a site they maintain, they have less ability to control messages posted by employees on sites they do not maintain. Again, trust and culture become important areas to pay attention to and agencies need to explore the positive and negative potential of these situations.

The difficulties connected with the shifting boundaries between personal and professional uses have real implications for agencies designing social media policies and developing social media strategies. Each use has different security, legal, and managerial implications and government agencies are tasked with striking a balance between using social media for official agency interests only and allowing employees access for personal and professional interests. In the following section we take a look at how agencies are addressing some of these issues.

Eight Essential Elements

Based on our analysis, we identified eight essential elements that governments need to consider when developing a social media policy:

1. Employee Access

Employee access to social media refers to the degree to which employees are allowed to access social media sites while at work using government equipment. Currently, based on the reviewed policies and the majority of the interviewed agencies, agencies are strictly limiting the degree to which employees can access social media sites. Access is being managed in two ways: 1) by controlling the number and types of employees who can request access, or 2) by designating the types of social media sites that are accessible. In other words, agencies are primarily considering the question of access from the agency use point of view, granting access only to those bearing responsibility for maintaining an official agency social media account. Of the 26 policies and guidelines reviewed, five described procedures for gaining access to social media sites. Of those five, most required employees or departments to submit an official business case justification in order to access social media sites.

Based on our interviews, the balance between unrestricted and controlled access remains a dilemma for many agencies. While some agencies may value the potential opportunities for professional development when employees are engaged in educational, collaborative, or knowledge sharing activities fostered by open access to social media sites, many still are fearful of the perceived legal and security risks. However, as social media use by citizens, businesses, and governments becomes more prevalent, agencies will need to expand their consideration of access to include professional and personal uses.

2. Social Media Account Management

Account management encompasses the creation, maintenance, and destruction of social media accounts. Lack of a clearly defined policy on account management enables situations where accounts are established on behalf of agencies without executive knowledge, organizational approval, or consideration of enterprise-wide social media strategies. Many government professionals interviewed see establishing authentic agency accounts as paramount to being seen as a trustworthy source of information to citizens and stakeholders. An account management policy should address four main areas: an account opening protocol, protocol for maintaining a list of existing official agency accounts, protocol for maintaining a list of employees with access to official agency social media sites, and password requirements for official agency social media sites.

3. Acceptable Use

Acceptable use policies are guidelines that delineate how employees are expected to use social media tools while at work, addressing issues such as time of use, purposes of use, and types of equipment. Currently, based on the reviewed policies and the majority of the interviewed agencies, most agencies are focusing on personal use and simply treating acceptable use of social media as an extension of existing acceptable use policies. Twelve of the policies and guidelines we reviewed dealt with acceptable use, particularly for personal interests. The majority of these 12 policies point toward existing policies that already dictate acceptable use of common electronic and information resources such as telephone, computer, or Internet access.

However, as the use of social media in government evolves over time, acceptable use policies may need to address the blurring boundaries around personal, professional, and official agency use. Questions, such as how much time an employee should devote to participating in peer-to-peer networking on sites such as GovLoop, are proving difficult for agencies to regulate. Only three of the 26 policies have begun to address this issue. Others we interviewed suggested acceptable employee use for professional interest is better monitored and managed by supervisors, rather than a one-size fits all policy. Either way, agencies should think about the type of guidance and culture they want to create and work with their employees to determine acceptable levels of use for both personal and professional reasons.

4. Employee Conduct

Employee conduct guidelines outline how employees are expected to behave and sets out the consequences should a violation occur. Twenty-one of the reviewed policies addressed employee conduct in their professional capacity, with the majority of them referencing existing policies by either using direct quotes or simply providing links or reference numbers on where to look further. In addition to the standard conduct code that addresses things such as racially offensive language, some of the policies addressed issues specific to social media, including respecting the rules of the venue, striving for transparency and openness in interactions, and being respectful in all online interactions. Other policies expressed an expectation of “trust” that employees will provide professional-level comments or content whether in their professional or personal lives.

While the issues of conduct at work or in an official capacity are pretty straightforward, conduct becomes less clear when agencies are trying to get a handle on acceptable employee conduct in their private space. While the majority of the reviewed policies did not address this type of situation, a small number has tried to strike a balance by instructing employees to post disclaimers on their personal and professional posts in order to distance the employee’s comments from official agency positions. In our discussions with government professionals, it became clear that while they worry about employees’ conduct in their personal communications, they are unsure to what extent they can dictate what is permissible conduct in such situations.

5. Agency Content

Agency content creation addresses the question of who is allowed to post content on official agency social media pages and what type of editorial process is required for verifying its accuracy. Addressing content creation in a social media policy is key to ensuring integrity and consistency of the official agency message. The issue came up frequently in our interviews and 14 of the reviewed documents address content creation in some way. The range of agency content creation strategies is wide with some agencies exerting minimal editorial control over their content, and others keeping that responsibility solely with the public information officer.

6. Security

Governments are working to develop best practices to ensure the security of their data and technical infrastructure in light of the new uses, users, and technologies related to social media use. Some of the reviewed policies deal explicitly with security concerns for social media, while others are more general, referencing existing IT security policies as applicable to social media. Two specific security concerns generally found in the policies analyzed and discussed in the interviews were technical and behavioral concerns.

The technical concerns addressed in the policies focused on password security, functionality, authentication of identity using public key infrastructures, and virus

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scans. Fifteen of the policies included specific requirements such as requiring users to maintain complex passwords. A few policies required a designated official to hold all username and passwords for social media accounts. The behavioral security concerns refer to those threats that result from employees' intentional or inadvertent actions when engaging with social media sites and tools. While these concerns are not new, many of the reviewed policies mentioned the need to protect confidential information and referenced the need to train their employees to avoid unnecessary risk exposure.

7. Legal Issues

The use of social media tools raises the issue for many agencies about how to ensure that their employees are abiding by all existing laws and regulations. Some policies take a general approach to legal issues, using generic text that requires all employees to adhere to all applicable laws and regulations without actually specifying which laws and regulations are applicable. Others point to specific areas of law such as privacy, freedom of speech, freedom of information, public records management, public disclosure, and accessibility.

Some policies proactively address potential legal issues by requiring the use of various disclaimers on social media sites. One example of a standard disclaimer is for use by employees when engaging in social media activities and is intended to detach the opinions and actions of individual employees from their employer. Other standard disclaimers concern public records, external links, endorsements, copyright, privacy, and offensive behavior.

8. Citizen Conduct

Social media sites, unlike more traditional media such as newspaper or radio, allow for instant two-way public communication between government and citizens. Citizens are able to directly post audio, video, and text to agency social media sites. If agencies decide to allow two-way communication, procedures for managing such content should be developed.

Eleven of the 26 reviewed policies and guidelines addressed the issue of citizen content. The documents vary with respect to how they deal with the content of comments. Some issue rules of conduct that are posted on the agency's site. These rules generally refer to limitations on offensive language, inciting violence, or promoting illegal activity. Similar rules are often already used on agencies' websites and can be reused for social media purposes. Other policies address additional issues such as who will have the responsibility for monitoring and responding to public comments.

Creating and sustaining a social media policy

As outlined above, social media present governments with both new opportunity and new challenges. The implementation of social media to improve the quality of government services and engage citizens must take into account the differences in

organizational cultures, varying citizen expectations, and the blurring line between personal and professional activities. New policy instruments are part of the resource set necessary to assist governments in their efforts to balance opportunity with challenges. Policies can help agencies manage the changes made possible by new technologies and to understand more fully how social media may change the way work is done.

However, creating and sustaining a policy for the use of social media by a government agency is not a simple task. Government professionals tasked with implementing social media in their agencies face a fast-paced innovation cycle, where the preferences of an 'online social citizenry' are in their infancy and technologies are changing more quickly than policies, management practices, and employee skill sets. Therefore, agencies should periodically review their policies to ensure that they continue to reflect the agency's changing strategy and priorities.

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