The Scouting Report: Technology Innovation for Open Government

President Obama is asking for ideas on how the government can use the Internet and new technologies to provide better, faster, more transparent and accountable service to its people.

On Wednesday, June 17, Darrell West—vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings—joined *Politico* Senior Editor David Mark in a live web chat assessing the president's Open Government Initiative, and discussing a forthcoming Brookings report comparing public and private sector innovation.

The transcript of this web chat follows.

12:30 David Mark: Good Afternoon.

Welcome to The Scouting Report, from Brookings and POLITICO. Brookings' Darrell West is here to discuss the Technology Innovation for Open Government. Darrell M. West is the vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings, and author of several books, including a highly-acclaimed biography of Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.)

12:31 David Mark: The first question is, what can the federal government learn from the private sector about technology?

12:31 Darrell West: In interviewing leaders, we found that they attribute effective technology innovation to market research and understanding what their customers want. A government official once said that he would like to do market research for his agency website, but lacked the resources to do so. Asked how he got feedback on what visitors liked or didn't like, he said that the agency monitored its complaint lines and when dissatisfaction rose, they knew they had a problem to be addressed. The obvious problem with that approach is that feedback is reactive, not proactive. If you wait until complaints start coming in, it is too late.

12:31 [Comment From Adrianna] How do you think the Open Government Initiative will impact on the US Government?

12:32 Darrell West: The goal is to improve transparency and accountability.   The White House already has set up Recovery.gov and Data.gov as tracking devices for the stimulus package. Those will give people a means to examine how the money is being spent and whether it is achieving desired ends.

12:33 [Comment From Erin] Why do you think public sector innovation has been so slow?

12:34 Darrell West: Government innovation has been slow because insufficient funds are being devoted.   Corporations spend on average a higher percentage of their budget on technology than does the public sector.   In addition, governments often have a culture that blocks rather than facilitates change.

12:34 [Comment From Fred] Does progress on this front disadvantage Americans who have no access to the Internet? How can that be solved?

12:35 Darrell West: Americans without Internet access are disadvantaged because they are not able to reap the advantages of online entertainment, business, and communications.   The stimulus package has money to extend broadband access to under-served communities but this will not necessarily close the digital divide.

12:36 David Mark: In a rapidly-evolving internet environment, President Obama is our most tech-savvy national leader to date. Does he have a special interest in technology innovation?

12:37 Darrell West: Obama is poised to become America's first truly digital president.   He displayed a great sense of innovation during the campaign and now is bringing that same sense of innovation to the public arena.   It will take awhile to implement various initiatives, but in 1-2 years, people will see agencies becoming more pro-active and transparent.

12:37 [Comment From Angela Newell] I am interested in understanding how different innovators—public and private—create value metrics for their innovations. What are the parameters that define what makes a tool or innovation valuable? Or, if value parameters do not yet exist, how do innovators anticipate measuring value? I understand that there will be different answers for different projects, but am interested in any information possible.

12:39 Darrell West: There are lots of performance metrics.   There are consumer satisfaction surveys on people's experience with online visits.   Quarterly reports are issued showing these numbers.   There also is tracking of utilization rates, such as percentage of people filing taxes online and making use of other electronic services.   OMB is starting to track costs and benefits of digital government so we can see what we are getting for the money.

12:40 [Comment From Patrice] Do you have a sense that the Open Gov directive will include changes to the Paperwork Reduction Act restraints on what agencies can ask the public (without coming under rather onerous OMB requirements)?

12:41 Darrell West: I hope we change the Paperwork Reduction Act so that government agencies can undertake surveys and otherwise get online feedback. Right now, the act precludes some forms of two-way communications. This robs the technology of some of its greatest benefits.

12:41 [Comment From Carol] What about collaboration between agencies? Will the Open Government Initiative help?

12:42 Darrell West: President Obama has appointed a chief technology officer.   Among other responsibilities, this individual is supposed to encourage inter-agency collaboration and get departments to look beyond their own particular interests.   Breaking down silos is one of the biggest challenges for technology innovation.

12:42 [Comment From Jason] Are there any local or state government innovations that could be applied on the federal level?

12:45 Darrell West: Some state and local governments have become quite innovative. North Carolina has a Silver Alert system that notifies the public of missing people with dementia or other cognitive problems. Michigan includes nearly a dozen foreign languages on its sites. Minnesota has an RxConnect that allows people to compare prescription prices. These and other examples are good role models for the federal government.

12:45 [Comment From JoAnna] Don't you think that in-person methods of engaging citizens would be more effective than online engagement?

12:46 Darrell West: In-person models of civic engagement are limited because it is hard to reach people in many areas such as inner cities or remote rural areas. Online forms overcome geographic obstacles and are much more cost efficient in terms of public outreach and citizen engagement.

12:46 David Mark: In tight budget times, will it be difficult to sell the public on investing in technological innovation?

12:48 Darrell West: People need to view technology spending as an investment that is going to save money in the long-run. The private sector produced tremendous gains in productivity over the last decade. The public sector needs to do the same thing.

12:48 [Comment From Kate] What do you think of Obama's use of YouTube? Has it been effective? Or do you think YouTube is a better platform for dogs riding skateboards?
12:49 Darrell West: YouTube is a great way to reach young people and others who are not very engaged in politics. These individuals don't read newspapers or watch television, but they love YouTube videos. The biggest virtue of new outreach tools is it democratizes communications and involves new participants in our civic process.

12:49 [Comment From dave] Do you think constituent comments submitted online will be of high enough caliber to be useful?

12:51 Darrell West: There is great variation in the quality of online comments. But what is helpful is seeing the general trends in people's reactions and identifying specific ideas that are game-changing in nature. That is how the public sector can benefit from citizen communications.

12:51 [Comment From Brit] The US is behind many other countries in Internet and broadband access. Because of this, doesn't this online collaboration leave out a large portion of our country's constituency?

12:53 Darrell West: The U.S. has lagged other countries in the speed and scope of digital access. The current administration is spending billions to extend broadband and make the United States more competitive. High-speed broadband is going to be crucial for health care and education. With high-speed broadband, doctors can email X-rays and digital images and get second opinions on medical treatment.

12:53 [Comment From Sam] Sorry for coming in late but going back to the chief technology officer. What is the difference between his job description and that of the Domestic and National

councils that have been responsible for interagency collaboration in the past? Will this official have any legal authority over the heads of each agency?

12:55 Darrell West: The CTO is responsible for interagency coordination on issues of technology and innovation.   The Domestic and National Security Councils have not always placed a strong emphasis on technology innovation so the CTO guarantees there is someone thinking about how to make government more productive, efficient, and collaborative.

12:55 [Comment From John] If the government attempts to regulate/control broadband Internet access wouldn't that create a slippery slope of what is allowed to be accessed on the Internet? I certainly hope a situation like China or Iran where the government blocks Internet websites wouldn't arise.

12:57 Darrell West: The American government is not going to be controlling the content of digital communications.   What current efforts are designed to do is broaden participation and helping more people benefit from the Internet revolution.

12:57 [Comment From John] Sociologist Robert Putnam suggests that TV and other technology are bringing about the "downfall" of social capital. With the popularity of online social networking, perhaps the definition and nature of social capital and civic engagement is changing?

12:58 Darrell West: Social media tools do have the potential to increase social capital and get more people to participate.   We saw tremendous interest and participation during the 2008 elections.   The challenge now is to keep those people interested and involved with governance.

12:58 David Mark: A few years back then-Sen. Hillary Clinton teamed up with Newt Gingrich, a former arch political enemy of her husband, to tout the need for electronic medical records. Is technology innovation generally a bipartisan affair? Are there partisan breakdowns on specific issues?

1:00 Darrell West: Health IT is an area where both Republicans and Democrats have worked together.   They do so because they believe EMRs will reduce medical errors, put people in control of their own medical information, and save money down the road.   Of course, when you get into specific details of technology innovation, there are partisan differences on how to improve health care, education, and other issues.   But technology generally is a bipartisan or a nonpartisan issue.

1:00 [Comment From Sally] How would you assess the prior efforts of presidents Clinton and George Bush? Didn't both try to open up government online?

1:02 Darrell West: Presidents Clinton and Bush did make significant improvements in the digital world.   The first government portal was set up under Clinton, and Bush was a big fan of digital government.   But under each president, the private sector was able to innovate faster than the public sector.   So although we have made significant progress over the last 15 years, there remains a lot of work to do to allow us to get the full benefits of technology innovation.

1:03 [Comment From Frank]Is the purpose of all this transparency to reduce fraud, or improve results or both?

1:03 Darrell West: Improved transparency should reduce fraud and strengthen government performance. Technology helps people become more productive and allows us to routinize tasks that are tedious and repetitive.

1:04 [Comment From Tom] Aside from health IT, are there any areas where technology has proven results for government?

1:05 Darrell West: We have seen some benefits of distance learning and telemedicine. Video conferencing saves government money on travel costs. The Kindle and other "readers" help save paper and make our economy more green.

1:05 [Comment From Diana] I'm pretty skeptical that the White House would actually listen to anything submitted through the open government initiative. What do you think?

1:06 Darrell West: Politicians often listen to feedback they get. Obama has made several mid-course corrections in ideas initially proposed so you should submit any good ideas you have.

1:07 [Comment From Joe] Regarding "constituent comments," it would be useful if the government can provide feedback mechanisms to show how those comments were incorporated or not incorporated into various actions.

1:07 Darrell West: If you go to Whitehouse.gov, administration officials do respond to specific ideas they have received and are incorporating them in policy decisions.

1:07 David Mark: Is there any one Cabinet department or federal agency that has in recent years stood out in terms of technological innovation?

1:09 Darrell West: Two of the best innovators in the executive branch have been the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency. DOT has blogs where travelers can report on their experiences in various airports around the country. And the EPA has developed electronic rule-making whereby citizens can offer comments on proposed environmental regulations. Plus the portal, USA.gov is terrific, a great gathering place of government information and services. And if you want info on government grants, go to Grants.gov.

1:10 [Comment From Sam] What's your opinion of Twitter or FaceBook for government? Useful?

1:11 Darrell West: I love Facebook and see it as a powerful tool for outreach and communications. it is like having your own personalized newspaper of events, videos, photos, and opinions for your social network. Governments are finding Twitter and Facebook useful because they connect people and allow for greater feedback.

1:11 [Comment From John] Do you think Twitter and FaceBook will affect what's going on in Iran?

1:13 Darrell West: Twitter and Facebook were great organizing tools for the Iranian opposition. Both represented routes around the official media and demonstrate how the Internet facilitates human rights and political representation. Iranian authorities were so worried about Facebook in the weeks leading up to the election they placed restrictions on public access.

1:13 [Comment From Guest] Darrell, it's your answer but regarding Twitter and Iran, you may want to point John to http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/world/middleeast/17media.html. Excerpt:

"on Monday afternoon, a 27-year-old State Department official, Jared Cohen, e-mailed the social-networking site Twitter with an unusual request: delay scheduled maintenance of its global network, which would have cut off service while Iranians were using Twitter to swap information and inform the outside world about the mushrooming protests around Tehran. The request, made to a Twitter co-founder, Jack Dorsey, is yet another new-media milestone: the recognition by the United States government that an Internet blogging service that did not exist four years ago has the potential to change history in an ancient Islamic country."

1:13 Darrell West: Good point.   Thanks for the link.

1:14 [Comment From elena] It seems like some government embrace of technology - like red light cameras - is intrusive and just invades our privacy. Where are the limits?

1:16 Darrell West: We are going to have to redo many of our legal cases in light of digital developments.   Technology provides new opportunities for personal expression, but also can be incredibly intrusive.   People have no idea how much of their personal life can be tracked through cell phones, Internet searches, and other digital footprints.   This will be a fascinating area over the next decade and beyond.

1:16 [Comment From Dan C] I understand that one of the last things that Tony Blair did in Great Britain was an effort to get public input on policy initiative. Is there a consensus on how that worked out?

1:17 Darrell West: Great Britain has been a leader in electronic government and collaborative governance (not just Blair but a whole generation of leaders).   Canada, Taiwan, and South Korea also have been leaders in using technology to improve government performance.   We have e-government reports at www.Brookings.edu that rank governments around the world.

1:18 [Comment From Rex] I do worry about low-income people who don't have access to the Internet. Don't we still need low-tech systems like toll-free phone numbers to give out government information?

1:18 Darrell West: We do need 800 numbers and free computer access at libraries and schools. There are nearly 30 percent of Americans who remain outside the digital revolution and many more around the world.

1:19 [Comment From Kate] What do you think the Obama administration could learn from the Brookings web site?

1:20 Darrell West: The Brookings website has lots of terrific content plus we are adding interactive and foreign language translation.   Websites are a great way to disseminate results and get feedback from the public.

1:21 [Comment From Debbie from Dallas] I agree with you about the enormous amount of personal information the government has access to - it's being linked, shared across government agencies, etc. What are the implications for individual rights?

1:22 Darrell West: This area will be one of the great battlefields for the next generation.   Where to draw the line between having information in a form where it is very useful and allows us to become

more efficient versus representing a threat to individual liberty.   Everyone should have an opinion on where to draw that line.

1:23 [Comment From Jeff] In a time when opinions are so divided, do you think it would be possible to reach any sort of consensus using the internet? It seems like everybody has their own unique opinion these days.

1:24 Darrell West: The Internet can't produce a consensus if there already isn't a consensus among society in general.   To some degree, technology will replicate whatever social, class, and political divisions that exist in society as a whole.   We are an expressive society and the Internet certainly facilitates freedom of expression.

1:25 David Mark: Thanks, always for joining us. Please chime in again next week for the next Brookings-POLITICO chat.