Social Media Use in the U.S. Executive Branch
(Pre-publication Copy)

1. Introduction

In January 2009, President Obama released his administration's *Open Government Initiative* where the purpose was to "ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration" (Press 2009, 1). The initiative set in motion the adoption of Social Media by Executive agencies to address transparency in government, public participation in government, and improved agency collaboration efforts. The initiative led to the creation of the *Open Government Directive* that requires assessment of the "state of open government in the Executive Branch and progress over time toward meeting deadlines" (Orszag 2009, 3b). The directive also requires each Executive agency to develop an *Open Government Plan* that includes proposed steps to improve information dissemination to the public and public participation in government through their websites and use of Social Media (Open n.d.).

Studies show that the public does interact with government online. comScore, Inc. used "behavioral and survey insights" to determine that "Federal and state agencies are now investing more heavily in their Web presence, making their sites more citizen-centric and easier to interact with. They are rapidly adopting and adapting practices from the commercial sector and applying them to their own initiatives" (com.Score, Inc. 2009, p.2). comScore, Ink. reported that "81 million Americans visited a government website in July" of 2009 based on *Total Unique Visitor* counts collected from Executive agencies (2009, p.1). A Pew Internet survey of 2258 adults 18 and older found that "some 40% of adult internet users have gone online for raw data about government spending and activities" and that "31% of online adults have used social tools such as blogs, social networking sites, and online video as well as email and text alerts to keep informed about government activities" (Smith 2010).

Commercial studies assess Social Media strategies, such as website preparation and identifying usage metrics; ROI costs; and branding strategies (Nair 2011; Saeks 2011). These studies find that success with media use is dependent upon the collection of use data from log

analyses software and customer relationship management systems (CRM) to measure success. Commercial and government studies also assess public trust, information access, and public engagement (Cullier & Piotrowski 2009; Tolbert and Mossberger 2006). Trust studies found community user attitudes were positive and users were more likely to share information with other members of online communities if they perceived that generated community information had high credibility, but more negative if users sensed the content was too commercial, offensive, or false. Also, negative perceptions could appear as posts in community and other Social Media interactions, which means commercial interests should identify negative perceptions to protect their brand's image (Colliander and Dahlen 2011; Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton 2011; Vanden Bergh et al. 2011). A study on advertising through social networking sites found that users establish trust relationships with fellow community members when advocacy comes from a trusted community member; however, community member relationship trust is not necessarily transmitted to the user product relationship where users may trust community peers but fear perceived high risk products. (Chatterjee 2011; Chu & Kim 2011).

Tolbert and Mossberger found "Citizen's attitudes toward government, including trust, are core concerns for democratic governance and public administrations" where the "evidence suggests that e-government can increase process-based trust by improving interactions with citizens and perceptions of responsiveness" (2006, p.354). Other studies have found the emphasis of government Social Media implementation for transparency in government is on use of technology and not human factors (Jaeger & Bertot 2010) and "the extent to which ICTs can create a culture of transparency and openness is unclear; however, initial indications are that ICTs can in fact create an atmosphere of openness" (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010, p.269).

Most Social Media research has focused on community relationships, the potential of the media to promote transparency and openness in government, and technological rather than individual aspects of transparency. None of these studies, however, have explored actual Executive agency adoption efforts or user engagement with the media. The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand Executive agency adoption of Social Media through agency websites and public use of the media. This study examines the types of media agencies adopt, website access point locations to internal-based media and third-party media hosts (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and others), and user participation with website and third-party hosted media applications. Study findings identify issues with website access points and public participation

with the media. This study also provides suggested recommendations to improve public participation.

2. Social Media and the Open Government Initiative

In his January 2009 issuance of the *Open Government Initiative*, President Obama stated that his "Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government" where "Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government" (Press 2009, 1). The initiative's purpose was to "ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration" (Press 2009, 1) where:

- Transparency "promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their government is doing" and discloses "information rapidly in forms that the public can readily find and use" (Press 2009, p.1). To promote transparency, Executive agencies "should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public" and "solicit public feedback to identify information of greatest use to the public" (Press 2009, p.1);

- Public participation "enhances the Government's effectiveness" and "improves the quality of its decisions" by providing agencies with access to society's knowledge base (Press 2009, p.1). To promote public participation, Executive agencies should "offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policymaking and to provide their Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information" and "solicit public input on how we can increase and improve opportunities for public participation in Government" (Press 2009, p.1); and

- Collaboration that "actively engages Americans in the work of their Government" (Press 2009, p.2). To promote collaboration, Executive departments and agencies "should use innovative tools, methods, and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of Government, and with nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals in the private sector" and "solicit public feedback to assess and improve their level of collaboration and to identify new opportunities for cooperation" (Press 2009, p.2)

The *Open Government Initiative* is based on the principles of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. The intent of the principles is to promote public engagement in government and increase information dissemination to the public.

The initiative also charged the Federal Chief Technology Officer, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the Administrator of General Services Administration with coordinating executive agencies input in developing an *Open Government Directive* to implement the President's initiative (Press 2009, 2). The *Open Government Directive* was created in December 2009 and refers to the transparency, public participation, and collaboration principles as "the cornerstone of an open government" (Orszag, p.1).

The directive requires each Executive department to create an *Open Government Webpage* with the purpose of soliciting public input in the development of an *Open Government Plan*, which is viewed as the means of moving departments towards transparency and openness in government (Orszag 2009). Department plans are described as "concrete and specific roadmaps for making operations and data more transparent, and expanding opportunities for citizen participation, collaboration and oversight" (Open n.d.). The purpose of each department's plan is to "describe how it will improve transparency and integrate public participation into its activities" (Orszag 2009, 3.1). Some examples of agency strategies to integrate public participation into the plans include:

- Department of Education: the department "encourages public participation using Web-based collaboration tools…available at ED.gov and other third-party offerings to engage the public in a discussion on education topics" (Ed.gov 2010, p.11);
- Department of Health and Human Services: "Electronic technology is…being used to gain input from the public through new Web 2.0 technologies" such as "web dialogues, blogs with federal organization leaders, microblogging (such as Twitter), video connectivity through YouTube, idea generation tools that include rating and rankings of ideas by the public, on-line collaborations tools, and hosted jams that engage a wide array of participants in an on-line group discussion" (HHS.gov 2010, 4.1); and
- Social Security Administration: "We will use our Internet site…as one platform for sharing information and providing opportunities for participation and collaboration with the public. We will also launch new platforms using a cloud environment" where potential tools and tactics include "blogs and idea tools, social media (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Podcasts, etc.), electronic newsletters, email campaign, webinars, webcasts, video and slide presentations…" (Social 2010)

Each departmental plan includes Social Media use for public dissemination and engagement; however, each uniquely describes Social Media use and implementation.

The directive also calls for the Federal Chief Information Officer and the Federal Chief Technology Officer to create an *Open Government Dashboard* to provide public access to each agency's plan and an assessment of each agency's "state of open government in the Executive Branch and progress over time towards meeting the deadlines for action outlined in this Directive" (Orszag 2009, 3b). Assessment of each agency's state of open government occurs through use of a self-reporting scorecard.

The current dashboard scorecard indicates that each Executive department either *meets expectations* or has *made progress towards expectations* in the following scored categories: *High-Value Data, Data Integrity, Open Webpage, Public Consultation*, and six areas of the Open Government Plan – *Overall Plan, Formulating the Plan, Transparency, Participation, Collaboration*, and *Flagship Initiative*. Two specific categories of the scorecard address public participation, i.e. *Public Consultation* and *Participation*. According to the most recent scorecard, each department meets expectations for *Public Consultation* and all but one department meets expectations for *Participation*. (Open n.d.)

The *Open Government Initiative* led to the creation of departmental *Open Government Plans* where most plans include Social Media as the means to improve transparency and openness in government for the American public. Many departments adopt Social Media as the means to improve information dissemination and public participation where Social Media applications promote public engagement through the use of Web 2.0 applications and user generated content (UCG) to increase government transparency (Federal 2008a,b; Meijer & Thaens 2010). In general, UGC "can be seen as the sum of all ways in which people make use of Social Media" where UGC is "usually applied to describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users" (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.3). Web 2.0 technologies typically "refer to a second generation of the World Wide Web as an enabling platform for Web-based communities of interest, collaboration, and interactive services" (GAO-10-872T). Essentially, Social Media allows virtual communities of users to evolve around common interests where Web 2.0 technologies provide support for user generated content created by users for other users (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

There are issues, however, associated with implementation of Social Media as the means to disseminate information and increase citizen participation. "Interacting via social media introduces new challenges related to privacy, security, data management, accessibility, social inclusion, governance, and other information policy issues" (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, in press). The *Federal Web Managers Council* identifies website issues where the federal government has approximately 24,000 government websites, i.e. "no one knows the exact number" (Federal 2008a, p.1). Some issues with many of the websites include (Federal 2008a, pp.1-2):

- Too much focus on organizational achievements with less focus on basic information and service delivery;
- Too many legacy websites with outdated or irrelevant content; and
- Web teams struggle to manage the amount of online government content produced daily.

"We have too much content to categorize, search, and manage effectively, and there is no comprehensive system for removing or archiving old or underused content" (Federal 2008a, p.2). The council also determined that "Many agencies focus more on technology and website infrastructure than improving content and service delivery" where "technology should not drive our business decisions, but rather help us serve the needs of the American people" (Federal 2008a, p.1). In essence, agencies need to create transparency and openness of government goals that address cultural and other barriers in developing strategies to improve the delivery of online information and services to the public (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, in press; Federal 2008a,b; Meijer & Thaens 2010).

Many agencies identify Social Media adoption as technology issues and ICT management options and view commercial based Social Media strategies as viable options for integration into their websites. Rather than focus primarily on technology and the adoption of commercial-based Social Media strategies, however, agencies should consider Social Media applications as *core government business communication strategies* designed to address transparency and openness of government goals, meet an agency's mission, and increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and transparency of government activities (Federal 2008a,b). Social Media applications should promote public engagement through the use of Web 2.0 applications and user generated content to increase government transparency by viewing Social Media applications as communication tools and not solely as technology issues and technology management decisions.