

Participation in an Age of Social Media

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This article examines the role social media will play in citizen participation.

Americans, even before they were Americans, have always practiced participatory government. The Mayflower Compact, one of the most famous examples of citizen participation in governance, was written and signed before its authors set foot on Plymouth Rock. This story continued into the 20th century with constitutional amendments that enfranchised more citizens and carries on today with the explosion of government websites used by citizens to comment on pending rules, or in private companies that enable citizens to send legislators structured data about constituent opinion on specific bills.

In the chapter that is the next four years, Americans should see participation that is ever more:

- **Widespread:** extending to more agencies and more activities
- **Actionable:** integrated more thoroughly into decision-making processes, not just as a final selection from a few limited choices
- **Open:** participants will be able to see each other and the decision-makers with whom they are interacting
- **Valued:** participants and citizen-liaisons will be recognized and rewarded for their participation
- **Encouraged:** participation will enjoy a higher profile and will be accorded more resources both from citizens and from government agencies

Of course, these changes will not happen of their own accord; only the active involvement of federal agency leadership will ensure that they are implemented and institutionalized successfully. By taking concrete steps to broaden and deepen citizen engagement, agencies can lower the barriers to participation as a culture of engagement replaces the insularity that has often defined public service. The Open Government Directive of 2009, while important, has been overtaken by the events of the three years between its signing



and the 2012 election. The winner will face an electorate that demands to be heard and a bureaucracy that has already taken the initial steps to listen.

Widespread

The website GovSM.com lists more than 200 federal agencies, departments, and offices with links to their social media accounts, including Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and others. Through many of these accounts, ecitizens can read what agencies are doing, often in real time. At least as important, though, they can leave comments and start conversations with other social media users—both from within and beyond the agencies—about the issues raised in those forums.

In the next four years, not only will Americans see more agencies activate accounts on existing social media sites, but it is likely that:

- New sites will launch that better serve the interests of citizens' participation in government

- More government offices will establish online outposts and staff them adequately to take advantage of citizen participation
- More Americans will establish their own social media presence and use it to engage their government

What agencies can do: Activate accounts in relevant social media sites to communicate agency activities and objectives; monitor social media for feedback and, where possible and appropriate, incorporate collaboration tools, such as wikis and ideation platforms. Entrust as many employees as possible with social media access, the better to monitor incoming communications from those channels.

Actionable

Americans are already helping agencies with many mission-critical tasks. Private enterprises and private citizens alike, for example, are entering government-sponsored contests to build applications and robots that perform essential tasks. And there is no shortage of individuals, companies, and trade associations that want to see their interests reflected in the rules that govern federal agencies and federal procedures.

The next four years, therefore, are very likely to see an increase not only in conversations, but in actionable information and implementable innovation permeating the public sector from every other sector of society. Sites like

Regulations.gov and PopVox, tools like SeeClickFix and Open311, and contests like NASA's Centennial Challenges and the DARPA Grand Challenge are only the beginning.

What agencies can do: Weave citizen-outreach activities into as many programs as possible, and promote outreach efforts on relevant social media platforms. Where permissible, use ideation platforms and other tools to gather citizens' ideas and let them comment on others' ideas. As an example, the White House's We the People tool is open source, and can be used by agencies for their own purposes. Develop and implement challenges to the public to spur innovation around mission-critical functions.

Open

The move to more open government—meaning that people both within and outside an agency will be able to see who is developing, discussing, deciding, or implementing policies and programs, and to see the impact of their contributions—will be driven by two powerful engines.

The first is by the volunteers themselves. Two strong motivators that open government taps into are the desire for recognition and the desire for meaning. By showing who is participating in mission-critical activities, agencies recognize volunteers and organizations. By allowing those volunteers and organizations to track their contributions and see how



they affect policies and programs, agencies demonstrate the meaningfulness of their contributions.

Agencies are the second engine, primarily because they may be required to show who has helped determine their policies and who is responsible for their programs' performance. Additionally, agencies may find experts on policy or implementation whom they want to engage proactively, and they will be able to do so only if their records are open.

What agencies can do: Use as much open source material as possible; put as much data in the public sphere as possible; use open ticket-trackers for service requests; where permissible, live stream meetings and hearings and put recordings on a specific portion of the agency website.

Valued

While recognition and meaning are powerful motivational forces, rewards—both monetary and non-monetary—are also effective. Already, there is no shortage of contests and awards, for example, the SAVE, the Sammys, and HHSinnovates awards are only three examples of prizes for federal employees. In the next four years, some government agencies are very likely to replicate these types of programs for volunteering individuals or organizations.

What agencies can do: Conduct online chats—e.g., through Twitter or Skype—with people or organizations that participate in agency activities. Allow communities that coalesce around agency issues, on Facebook for example, to nominate individuals or organizations for awards that the agency offers, and allow senior management to bestow awards on winners.

Encouraged

All four of the previous trends, if they come to pass, will culminate in the fifth: more encouraged participation. In 2008, when many of the agencies' digital participation efforts launched, it may have been enough simply to initiate a program, inform a few media outlets, blogs, and websites, and wait for people to join a conversation or sign up for a program. Today, however, failing to design and implement comprehensive outreach is a recipe for failure. Part of the story of the next four years will certainly be federal agencies joining both mainstream and niche social media sites and engaging bloggers as well as traditional media outlets to promote their participation programs and showcase their successes.

What agencies can do: Identify important voices beyond the agency's walls—influential bloggers, highly active social media presences, on and offline community leaders—and



include them in discussions of agency tasks in which they have previously shown an interest. Find NGO organizations or CSR programs that work on agency goals and invite them to participate in relevant activities. In short, normal operating procedure should include listening to and talking with individuals and organizations outside government.

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Social media are not new, but they are renewing many Americans' desire and ability to participate in their own governance. The tools for people to share their thoughts, to share their work, to collaborate both online and off are no longer exotic or constrained by tethered or spotty access to the Internet. In the pockets of more than half of all U.S. citizens are devices that not only connect to social media all the time, but have sophisticated sensors that allow their holders to generate and capture all sorts of data that can be shared with the government or other citizens.

The next chapter in American history will be written in no small part by the multitudes who have already demonstrated that they have means and desire to participate. The success of their efforts will be determined in part by federal leaders who encourage meaningful engagement, innovation around agency priorities, and the creation of collaborative networks of citizens who are able to work with their government and one another to identify and solve pressing issues. ■

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