How Federal Agencies Can Effectively Manage Records Created Using New Social Media Tools

By Patricia C. Franks

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The nation's most precious document, the Declaration of Independence, has a storied history surrounding its conservation. Although it has faded badly due to poor preservation techniques during the 19th century, it is still available for viewing in the rotunda of the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Historical documents today are more ephemeral, many existing only in electronic form. How can we ensure that historians will have access, for example, to the 2010 YouTube interview with President Obama or that records related to federal agencies' deployment of social media to aid the January 2010 Haitian earthquake relief efforts don't disappear, literally, into thin air?

What Is Records Management?

Records management is intended to preserve and provide access to government documents and records for citizens today and for the future. Paradoxically, however, it can become a barrier to greater citizen engagement with government if it is used to justify why agencies and their employees are not participating in the social media world in a more interactive, collaborative manner. Those agencies which do actively engage in a dialogue with the public face challenges involved in identifying, capturing, and preserving records resulting from their use of emerging technologies. This is due, in large part, to the lack of a governance framework, government-wide standards, and sufficient guidance and tools needed to carry out records management responsibilities, together with the increasing volume and variety of information produced.

Federal agencies that embrace social media for internal and/or external applications must manage the content created under the Federal Records Act and comply with NARA guidelines. Because the GSA leads efforts to identify and develop Web 2.0 platforms for agencies to use, agencies must also look to GSA for guidance related to social media technology and tools.

What Are Social Media?

The ultimate goal of President Obama's January 21, 2009 Memo on Transparency and Open Government was to ensure that executive departments and agencies take specific actions to encourage the sharing of information and ideas within the federal government and with citizens. The three main tenets of the directive are that government should be transparent, participatory, and collaborative.

According to some insiders, this directive created a "Wild West" atmosphere in which eager individuals, embracing the freedom to innovate, moved quickly to use social media both within their departments and agencies and with the outside world. Early government enthusiasts of social media endeavored to establish a presence without first identifying a goal. Only recently have those responsible for social media initiatives begun to ask what needs to be accomplished before selecting the appropriate tool for the task.

Social media task forces and social media teams, also called new media teams, have been formed in many departments and agencies. These groups often work independently of the information technology office and without the involvement of records management personnel. It is not surprising that many of the early social media initiatives were implemented without addressing the resulting records management challenges.

In an attempt to maintain control of their information, some government agencies have taken a more cautious approach by implementing their own in-house versions of popular networking platforms. Examples include NASA's Spacebook; the State Department's Statebooks; and GSA's latest

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e-government project, FedSpace. While providing the agencies with more control over the content and therefore the "record," government agencies may be in danger of creating a different type of challenge—Gov2.0 silos.

What Constitutes a "Record?"

Because of the volume of records created in electronic form and the increase in both FOIA requests and e-discovery requests for "information" and not "records," a growing number of individuals in the private and public sectors believe it is time to revisit the traditional definition of a record.

The more complex the information environment, the greater the need for a simple definition that can be applied easily by those responsible for creating and managing records. An accompanying challenge once the definition is agreed upon is to accurately identify a record regardless of the medium.

Due to the volume of records generated and the complexity of the platforms and formats, an automation process is desirable to avoid human error and allow staff to focus their efforts on the core mission of the agency.

Regardless of the definition used, in general a record should contain content that correctly reflects what was communicated or decided or what action was taken; and it should support the needs of the business to which it relates, so that it can be used for accountability purposes. The record should contain or be linked to or associated with the metadata necessary to document the transaction so that the structure remains intact, the business context is apparent, and the links between documents that may be held separately or combined to make up a record. The record should be:

- Authentic
- Reliable
- Usable, and
- Demonstrate integrity

Records Management Challenges Facing the Federal Government in a Social Media World

Governance Challenges

Challenge One: Records management authority and responsibility is fragmented and ineffective. Some federal agencies seem to disregard the authority of the National Archives and Records Administration. This is evident in the fact that not all agencies complied with NARA's mandatory Records Management Self-Assessment, or the statutory September 2009 deadline to submit records schedules to NARA for all existing records and new electronic records systems.

Policy Challenges

Challenge Two: The fundamental nature of information has changed, necessitating a fundamental change in methods used to manage records throughout their lifecycle. Recent

tectonic shifts in the relationship between information and society call for the following questions to be revisited:

- What constitutes a record (capture)?

- How do you determine the value of a record (appraisal)?

- How do you access and retrieve records necessary to carry out the agency's core mission and in response to e-discovery and FOIA requests (access/retrieval)?

- How do you decide on disposing of temporary records (retention/disposition)?

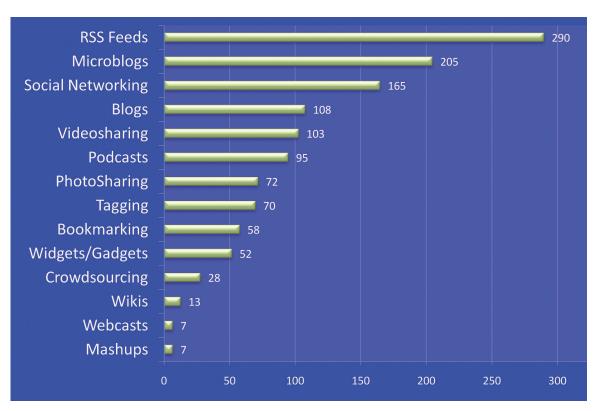- How do you preserve permanent records (preservation)?

Challenge Three: Records management programs across the federal government comprise a patchwork of individual agency policies, lacking a standard, principles-based foundation and consistent measurements. The head of each federal agency is charged with establishing and maintaining an active, continuing program for management of the records

of the agency. Departments can employ one or more Federal Agency Records Officers who assist the agency in implementing policies and programs that comply with NARA's requirements and guidance. NARA specifies the "what" and "why" and agencies provide the "how" for their individual programs. This approach results in a patchwork of individual agency polices that lack a standard, principles-based foundation.

Technology Challenge

Challenge Four: Current technology is not up to the challenge of capturing, managing, and preserving electronic records, especially social media records. A number of technological challenges face those responsible for capturing, managing, and preserving electronic records. These challenges are being addressed on the federal agency level and have the potential to duplicate efforts, create silos, and result in solutions that may be sufficient in the short term but that do not meet long-term needs.

Use of Social Media by Executive Branch Agencies

Category	Value
RSS Feeds	290
Microblogs	205
Social Networking	165
Blogs	108
Videosharing	103
Podcasts	95
PhotoSharing	72
Tagging	70
Bookmarking	58
Widgets/Gadgets	52
Crowdsourcing	28
Wikis	13
Webcasts	7
Mashups	7

Source: Franks, research conducted for this report. Number of publicly visible social media tools in use by White House and the 15 departments in the executive branch on June 26, 2010.

Capacity Challenges

Challenge Five: Adequate funding for records management solutions is not available in a fiscally constrained environment. Financial challenges face both NARA and individual federal agencies, especially in this budget-cutting environment. NARA does not have a research and development budget to develop adequate solutions or expertise to help agencies meet electronic records management challenges.

Challenge Six: Records management training for agency personnel is insufficient or non-existent. Federal employees at all levels of an agency have a role to play in creating and managing records. Use of commercial Web 2.0 tools poses additional risks, including those related to privacy and security. However, most agency personnel, including high-ranking officials, do not understand their records management obligations.

Recommendations to Transform Records Management in a Social Media World

Governance Recommendation

Recommendation One: The position of chief records officer for the federal government should be established to elevate the status of records management across the federal government.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation Two: The chief records officer should convene a workgroup with representatives from government agencies and the private sector to rethink the definition of records and the concept of records management in the Web 2.0 world.

Recommendation Three: The chief records officer should work closely with the federal government's chief information officer to ensure records management is integrated in an overarching information governance structure for the federal government.

Technology Recommendation

Recommendation Four: Information technology offices should:

- Integrate records management solutions and incorporate the costs of records management requirements

- Undertake research initiatives for the preservation of digital objects created with new media

- Seek funding for these initiatives that is supported by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)
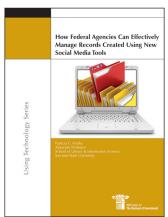
Capacity Recommendation

Recommendation Five: Records management training to mitigate the risks, such as posting incorrect or confidential information on social media sites, associated with emerging technology should be developed or incorporated into existing training programs immediately. ◘

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Using Technology Series

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