

Social Media Use by the US Federal Government at the End of the 2012 Presidential Term

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe in quantitative and qualitative terms the use of social media by the US government. During the autumn of 2012 the researchers collected and examined over 1,500 unique social media sites used by the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. This data was collected as part of a national web archiving initiative known as the End of Term Harvest, where US government websites are web archived in anticipation of changes prompted by the election. We found that social media is used heavily across all federal agencies and that they utilize a variety of social media platforms, with the most popular being Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. The qualitative examination revealed that agencies use social media to provide the public with information and to engage the public in conversation through the feedback and comment mechanisms enabled by the social media providers. However, we did not find evidence that social media is enabling high levels of collaboration between government and citizens, which was a goal stated in Obama's Transparency Memorandum.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is increasing its adoption of social media as part of its official communication on both the federal (Hansell, 2009) and local levels (Stelter and Preston, 2012). However, the content of social media in the dot gov domain or through third-party social media providers is not considered official government information, and therefore not subject to legal requirements for collection, retention, preservation and access as is official information published by the US government. Because it is not preserved, this content is considered at risk of disappearing and not being available to the public. This could be a loss to future researchers who may be interested in seeing how the government interacted (or failed to interact) with its citizens through then emergent information and communications technologies. To preserve this content, a group of organizations (the Library of Congress, the Internet Archive, University of North Texas, California Digital Library and

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the Government Printing Office) included social media in a larger project to document the web presence of the US federal government in the months preceding the 2012 presidential election. This larger project of preservation of web content is known as the End of Term Harvest (EOT), and this particular project focuses on the web archive of social media content.

In this project, we collected and studied 1,513 social media URLs from official government websites, and of those 1,364 unique URLs were included in the EOT archive. Using this social media archive, this study aims to show how the US federal government incorporates social media within its official web-based communications and how it uses social media. We pose the following research questions:

RQ1: *Who uses social media in the US government?*

RQ2: *What social media platforms does the US government use?*

RQ3: *What observations can be made of the content available from the US government via social media platforms?*

We will describe the use of social media by the US government first, and some challenges associated with its use. Second, we will describe the EOT Harvest project and our study methodology. Lastly, we will present our findings regarding the use of social media by the US federal government.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media and the US government

Social media are web-based platforms that employ Web 2.0, which is a series of design patterns and approaches to structuring web-based systems that capitalize on the networked information environment, enabling the web to better support the use, production, and circulation of information in a peer-to-peer networked arrangement (Cocciolo, 2010; Benkler, 2006). These platforms rely on individual production and user-generated content, and are designed to support participation and individuation through such mechanisms as profile pages, which often state explicit likes, interests, and friendships (O'Reilly, 2005; Cormode and Krishnamurthy, 2008). The largest and most visible examples of social media are Facebook and Twitter, whose content is almost entirely dependent on the activity and engagement of users.

The use of social media in the US government is decentralized and managed by each agency or department individually. From a policy perspective, the use of social media draws from the 2009 Transparency Memorandum issued by President Obama in his first weeks in office (Obama, 2009). The Transparency Memorandum recognized the importance of openness in government as a way to strengthen democracy and calls for government to be *transparent*, *participatory*, and *collaborative*; these principles were formalized in the Open Government Directive issued in late 2009 (Open Government Directive, 2009). While the policies that direct open

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government come from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that operates within the White House, implementation guidance is provided by the General Services Administration (GSA), an independent agency that supports the operational aspects of the federal government. GSA maintains a register of social media accounts in government (HowTo.gov, 2013b), which ironically is not made public, but does allow users to verify that an account is indeed affiliated with the US government.

The GSA Social Media Navigator (U.S. General Services Administration 2012a) provides guidance for employee responsibilities when accessing social media services in an official capacity. It is directed to GSA employees and contractors, and is designed to adhere to the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch (5 C.F.R. Part 2635), the conflict of interest statutes (18 U.S.C § 204-219), and the Hatch Act (5 U.S.C. § 7321-7326). GSA clarifies that information provided through social media may come only in addition to, and not in place of, official communication channels such as government websites (U.S. General Services Administration, 2012a). GSA offers government employees online training on the use of social media, with an emphasis on ethical aspects of social media (U.S. General Services Administration, n.d.). Government employees are cautioned not to disclose on social media information that is protected by other statutes or that could further personal interests such as endorsing services, products, or businesses (U.S. General Services Administration, 2012a). Further, adoption of social media software is subject to equal access laws. Disabled persons should have the same access rights to government information disseminated through social media channels as they do to all information disseminated by the government (U.S. General Services Administration, 2012a).

In addition to disseminating information, the government may use social media to collect information as part of conducting official business. Collecting information from the public via social media is permitted when the collection is voluntary, does not place a burden on participants, and public dissemination of results is not intended (U.S. General Services Administration, 2012b). When collecting information from the public, agencies must comply with privacy laws and regulations and specify how private and personally identifiable information will be used (U.S. General Services Administration, 2012b).

The GSA provides guidance and information on the use of social media in government, including policies, best practices, and resources (HowTo.gov, 2013c). The policies discuss risk mitigation (Federal CIO Council, 2009), term of service agreements (HowTo.gov, 2013a), and government efficiency, specifically addressing the need to reconcile with the Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) (Sunstein, 2010). This last memorandum clarifies that the PRA does not apply to many uses of social media. It describes social media as being used by agencies to engage the public by means of 'publishing' solicitations for public comment and for conducting 'virtual public meetings' (Sunstein, 2010).

The Transparency Memorandum legitimized the use of social media by the

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government as a means to support the goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration. This led to widespread use of social media by the government, which caught the attention of the web archiving team as it prepared to archive government websites at the conclusion of the 2012 presidential election.

RECENT RESEARCH ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRANSPARENCY IN GOVERNMENT

The increased use of social media in government is of interest to policy makers and researchers alike. Recent research on the use of social media in government largely centres around the three goals of Obama's Transparency Memorandum: transparency, participation, and collaboration. Although US Federal agencies have been using new platforms such as Wikis, blogs, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for a short time, they have become ubiquitous, with the Obama administration leading by example (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012). The recent research on social media in government will be discussed in terms of transparency, participation, and collaboration, and will conclude with a set of challenges.

Transparency

One of the primary goals of the proposed shift is transparency of government operations, both between agencies (Cain, 2010) and, more important, from a citizen perspective. Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010) propose that this can be an important anti-corruption tool, both in the United States and elsewhere. Such factors as the dissemination of information, timely release of materials as requested, facilitation of public meetings, and the ability for whistleblowers to make themselves heard can all work to empower the public and keep government accountable. Desirable outcomes such as administrative reform, law enforcement and social change can be effected through the use of social media, and such platforms as blogs and Wikileaks can serve as an alternative press. However, much of the success or failure of these initiatives depends on the culture of openness already in place; challenges are often more sociological than technological. Transparency also raises issues of trust, including the risk of privacy violation and the separation of professional and private roles in social media (Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

Participation

One desired outcome of transparency and accessibility of government operations is citizen participation or 'shared governance promoting democracy' (Editorial, 2012, p. 442). Kavanaugh et al. (2012) examine localized government media use to identify several current initiatives and some issues surrounding user participation. Almost one-third of all online adults in the US use social tools to keep up on government activities, which includes minorities; a 2010 Pew study shows no significant gap for Latinos or African

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Americans (Smith, 2010). Cell phone use also extends the government's reach. Kavanaugh et al. report that much local social media participation originates around issues of public safety, both at the civil and emergency level: monitoring public opinion, social convergence, community issues, response to crises, and tracking civic-related themes. This can enable agencies suffering from budget cuts to extend the government's information reach, and citizens' ability to mobilize. However, while social media can outpace the government's official apparatus and mainstream media, this also results in unchecked sources; both information and misinformation spread more quickly.

With the change in administrations has also come a shift from closed network technology to third-party applications. The Department of State has traditionally been 'the outward face of the United States to the world' (Cain, 2010, p. 17), so its origination of new technology has been a logical step. Its web presence—www.state.gov—produces and archives information for the public. It uses various social media platforms and a number of web pages for different aspects of the State Department's administration, with varying degrees of successful interaction. However, Cain (2010) indicates a need for consistent internal policies about defining the media contained within and its searchability. Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen (2012) point out existing policy instruments that advocate for those with disabilities or cultural disenfranchisement issues, which predate the government's push for citizen participation but which can be leveraged to realize these objectives.

Collaboration

Collaboration between the government and public has evolved from neighbourhood watches and an auxiliary police force to electronically facilitated collaborations, with the potential for a scenario where the 'government treats the public not as customers but as partners' (Linders, 2012, p. 446). Key opportunities for collaboration include democratic participation and engagement, where the public can enter into constructive dialogue; co-production, in which the public is involved in the development, design and delivery of government services; and crowdsourcing innovations and the development of solutions (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012).

Changing boundaries between the government and the public result in a greater diversity of relationship types. Linders (2012) identifies the need to define categories of co-production in terms of these relationships, the spectrum of public service delivery partnerships, and collaborative activities. These collaborations can move in the direction of government-to-citizen (the delivery of highly personalized decision-influencing information, embedding government capabilities such as data.gov into the greater ecosystem, and open book government); citizen-to-government (e-participation and e-rule-making input, crowdsourcing for problem solving, and citizen reporting); and citizen-to-citizen (collective action, self-service community organization, and self-monitoring in the form of evaluation and complaint platforms).

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Challenges to social media use by governments

Although social media platforms have enjoyed popular success, they pose a series of challenges to government agencies looking to use them to communicate and exchange information with members of the public. A first challenge is related to advertising. In the commercial marketplace, social media platforms have become formidable advertising vehicles, with companies of all sizes using them to connect with consumers (Li and Bernoff, 2008). Users of social media can expect sponsored advertising designed for his or her particular demographic group displayed alongside all other content. This can be a challenging environment for government agencies, which may not want their services combined with commercial offerings out of a wish to remain vendor neutral (Hemphill, 2005). For example, suppose a member of the public discusses the time requirements for getting a new passport with a government official via that agency's Facebook page. This content could be mined, and advertising for passport expediting services could be provided to the user, with the service provider willing to pay the most for the advertising space appearing the most prominently. This advertising could be useful to the user—especially if he is in a rush and can afford the service—but thwarts the government agency's attempt to not privilege one vendor over another. Figure 1 illustrates how government information and advertising coalesce on Facebook.com.

A second concern is related to privacy. For example, a user can accidentally or inadvertently reveal private information via a public function of a social media platform (e.g. attempting to discuss a private matter, such as receiving benefits from assistance programmes, on an agency's public Facebook page). Design features for redacting private information—without removing the entire online contribution outright—are often lacking in social media sites. Of course, even deleting information from a public portion of a social media website does not mean that all copies have been destroyed. The provider may have additional copies available in non-public locations.

A third challenge associated with government agency use of social media is the possibility of those sites acting as 'walled gardens', giving the commercial social media provider control over how that information is curated and made available to users, if at all (Berners-Lee, 2010). Returning to our prior example, there is little preventing a social media provider from highlighting government agency information that is amendable to advertising (e.g. passport expedition services), versus information that is less conducive to advertising. Further, there is also nothing keeping social media providers from burying (or not showing) government information if they believe it may cause the user to exit the 'walled garden' for the open internet or another 'walled garden'. Social media providers are motivated to have users spend as much time as possible within their sites because the more time users spend in them, the more opportunities for exposing them to sponsored advertising (Friesen, 2010). Any content that is not engaging or pleasant to users, which

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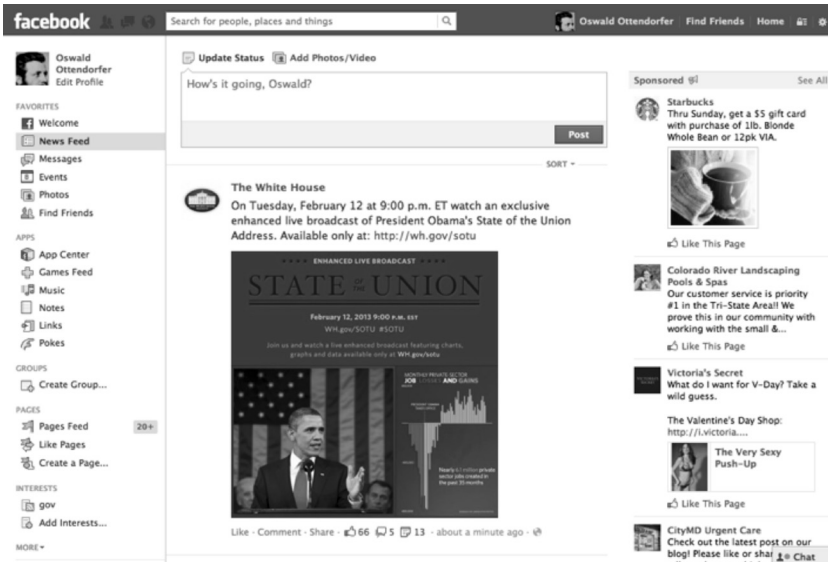


Figure 1: Government information on Facebook, with the centre column showing White House information and advertising in the right column

could be determined probabilistically from past behaviours in the social media environment, may be subject to being buried.

A fourth issue related to making government information available on social media platforms is the widespread inaccessibility of these platforms in some countries. For example, at the time of writing, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were not available at all in mainland China (at least not without the use of a proxy server outside of China and some technical know-how). US citizens living abroad would benefit from this information being available elsewhere (e.g. a non-blocked webhost or at an embassy or consulate).

A fifth issue is that social media platforms pose a challenge for government agencies because they are difficult to archive. If the information put into social media were to be considered government records, the difficulty in web archiving could complicate record-keeping practices and hinder the eventual transfer of such records to the National Archives. The difficulty of web archiving social media is caused by the information being layered within complex client-side web interfaces that don't necessarily abide by open standards (e.g. a URL or URI for identifying a piece of information) (Masanès, 2006; Berners-Lee, 2010). However, some social media are more easily web archived, such as Twitter, which uses open standards (such as the URL for each tweet) and has made deliberate efforts to be web archived (through a partnership with the Library of Congress) (Osterberg, 2013).

The last issue is related to the reliability and consistency in how govern-

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ment delivers information to citizens. Linders (2012) cites the risk that the shift to citizen collaboration may be perceived as a withdrawal of support on the government's part, adding: 'services based on Internet-facilitated volunteerism replace planning with probability—i.e. no one is "scheduled" to be available, but someone will "probably" be there to help' (Linders, 2012, p. 452).

Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen (2012) point out that while electronic access to services and information has become a common expectation, the administration's policy structure has not changed significantly to accommodate these shifts. Although the E-government Act of 2002 provides some guidelines, and the GSA offers social media providers a standard agreement for government usage, much policy regarding social media has yet to be upgraded. Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen (2012) argue that agencies are engaging in social media 'through an antiquated policy structure that establishes the parameters for information flows, access, and dissemination' (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012, p. 31). The Obama administration is aware of problems, but the trend has been to allow these technologies and sort out the issues on an ad hoc basis.

Social media, if adequately mined for data, has the ability to provide self-referential information on the responsiveness of government policy to technological change (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012) and how best to use these media to enable civic participation (Kavanuagh et al., 2012). Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes (2010) point out that adoption of ICTs can be a self-fulfilling prophecy; perceptions of their value to the public are promulgated through the same social media that are being questioned. However, all sources agree on e-government's democratic potential: engaging and educating the public, bringing services to the people, fostering a participatory democracy, and promising the citizenry as a whole consistent access to its products (Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen, 2012).

THE END OF TERM HARVEST

The dataset used in this study was collected as part of the efforts to archive the web content of the United States federal government. The US federal government maintains an active collection of information published by the federal government and preserved and collected by the US Government Printing Office. These include the laws, bills, regulations, congressional hearings, published papers, and other collections available from FDsys, the Federal Digital content management system (<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>).

Despite all these efforts, there is much that does not get captured, and information that is not subject to requirements for retention or preservation often does not get preserved. Many agency websites fall under this category. Moreover, the website of the Office of the White House is managed by each administration, and each newly elected president recreates the White House website in his own image.

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In anticipation of the 2008 presidential election, a group of open government information proponents came up with a plan to document this moment in history by capturing and preserving US federal government websites. This group is represented by the Library of Congress, the Internet Archive, the University of North Texas, the California Digital Library, and the United States Government Printing Office. During the months preceding the 2008 presidential election, the EOT captured and archived about 17 terabytes of information (the equivalent of 10 billion single-spaced typed pages). The project is described in detail by Seneca et al. (2012) and the archive can be viewed at the End of Term Web Archive (<http://eotarchive.cdlib.org/>).

Prior to the 2012 US presidential election, the EOT team prepared for another web capture. In the years between 2008 and 2012 the use of social media by the US government proliferated, in no small amount encouraged by policies set forth by the Obama administration with the Transparency Memorandum and other policy documents discussed earlier. Well aware of the penetration of social media into government, the EOT team was eager to capture these websites as part of the record of the 2012 end of term. The lessons learned from the data collected serves as the basis for the findings presented in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

Overview

Preparation for collecting URLs of social media in the US Government began in summer of 2012 and the data collection period lasted from about mid-September to the end of October, with all nominations in place by the 6 November election day. The data was collected by sixteen students enrolled in the graduate course 'Government Information Sources' taught by the corresponding author at {institution name removed for review purposes}. The students were supervised by the corresponding author, who also approved all nominations submitted by the students. The dataset created includes 1,513 URLs.

The EOT team provided the scope of URLs sought for nomination as well as detailed syntax on how to submit URLs. This included all Government agencies listed on the USA.gov A-Z list and the US Government Manual. As mentioned earlier, the GSA Registry is not publicly available, so we relied on these two sources to guarantee comprehensive coverage of all federal websites. The A-Z list is a web directory available from USA.gov, the main gateway to the US government on the web. The list is an alphabetical listing of both agencies and departments within agencies (for example, under 'A' there is a directory listing for the *Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives* and under 'J' there is a listing for the *Department of Justice*, which is the parent organization). Information on the A-Z directory is sparse, often listing nothing but the main URL and minimal information (see Figure 2). To verify the listing and get more information about the agency, we turned



Figure 2: Agency entry from the A-Z index (18.2.13)

to the United States Government Manual. The US Government Manual, in addition to being the official directory of government, is very detailed and comes in at over 1,200 pages. The Manual provides ‘comprehensive information on the agencies of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. It also includes information on quasi-official agencies; international organizations in which the United States participates; and boards, commissions, and committees’ (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012, p. iii).

Social media content from senators and members of congress not seeking reelection were also considered at-risk—as the content may disappear after the election—and thus included within the scope.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS: SELECTION OF URLS

The first stage of data collection was the preparation stage. This stage included first a discussion between the researcher and the EOT team about the nature of the project and the addition of social media websites to the web archive. The researcher prepared a written description of the workflow, which is briefly illustrated in Figure 3.

Step 1: Identifying content for nomination

The students attended a virtual meeting and presentation by the EOT team. Afterward, the class of sixteen was divided into four teams. Each team had

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Figure 3: Workflow of submitting social media sites for inclusion in EOT Archive

at least one member versed in social media, and in many cases more than one. We divided the listing of government agencies into four parts. There are approximately 500 agencies listed, so each team was assigned 125 agencies. Each team divided the agencies among its own members, resulting in approximately thirty-one agencies per student. In addition to agency websites, each group was assigned social media of elected individuals serving in the Senate or the House at that time and who were not running for reelection, and this list was also divided among the four groups. Each student examined his or her list and located the URLs of the social media used by those agencies and representatives. Each team created a shared Google spreadsheet listing the URL and other information requested on the EOT nomination form.

Step 2: Review and approval of nomination

After students added the nomination to the Google spreadsheet, the corresponding researcher reviewed each nomination. The review consisted of checking the syntax of the nomination, of opening it in a browser that was not logged into any social media websites (this is to verify that no password is required for access), and verifying authenticity of the website. Once each nomination is approved the researcher indicates that on the spreadsheet. Upon this approval, students submit the nomination.

Step 3: Submission

Once the corresponding author reviewed and approved each nomination, students began nominating using the EOT form provided by the University of North Texas, where the nominating tool was developed. The form asks for a URL and some descriptive fields such as Title, Agency, Branch of Government, Comments, Nominator and Institution.

Once submitted, the EOT team at University of North Texas preserves and archives the selected URLs.

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DATA COLLECTION PROCESS: SCOPE OF DATA COLLECTION, SYNTAX AND VERIFICATION

The scope of nominations as defined by the EOT team included social media sites sponsored by government agencies and representatives, specifically federal government websites (.gov, .mil) in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. Of particular interest for prioritization were sites likely to change dramatically or disappear during the transition of government. Out of scope of the harvest were local or state government websites, or any other site not part of the above federal government domain. Intranets and deep web content were also not captured. Also, only social media websites that were freely accessible without the need to be a registered user or have an account on the social media website were included.

The URLs submitted followed a precise syntax, since any variation of the prescribed syntax would result in overharvesting or no harvesting. For example, nominating Flickr sites requires a URL to end with a slash (example: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/barbaraboxer/>) and Facebook requires not including 'https' or a final slash. Not following the specified syntax for each social media site would result in an error message (as in the case of Facebook) or in archiving millions of documents unintentionally. For example, one misplaced '/' could result in harvesting all of facebook.com instead of only facebook.com/DeptofDefense. The instructions and guidelines containing the syntax were provided by the EOT partners, specifically from the Library of Congress, the Internet Archive and University of North Texas, and were based on their experience with web harvesting.

In cases where no social media was found, an attempt was made to find such sites using an advanced query on internet search engines. For example, the Office of the Inspector General at the Department of Commerce (<http://www.oig.doc.gov/Pages/default.aspx>) showed no evidence of use of social media, but to verify we ran a search for 'facebook site:oig.doc.gov', which returned no results. Social media sites that were not linked to from a government website were not included, since they may be predatory sites.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS: LIMITATIONS

Although attempts were made to comprehensively list every social media website publicly accessible to users, there were some limitations on our ability to achieve complete coverage. As mentioned above, in the absence of a directory for social media government websites, we could never be quite sure if we were missing sites. In addition, we also encountered some government agencies with complex and deep structures where we were not only unsure that we located every level of the agency website, but when we did, we found such a profusion of social media use that it was not possible to cover it all. An example would be the US Department of State. The Department of State maintains social media on many of the US embassies and consulates, often

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in languages other than English. Since it was not possible to manually nominate all their URLs in the time allotted, we opted in such cases for a selective approach. For example, we nominated social media for embassies that were of political interest during the autumn of 2012 (such as Afghanistan and Syria) and excluded stable countries such as Finland and Austria.

ANALYSIS OF COLLECTED DATA

To address the first and second research questions, or ‘who uses social media in the US government?’ and ‘what social media platforms does the US government use?’ we will provide tabulations of total social media webpages by branch of government, agency, and social media provider (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). URLs were imported into an Excel spreadsheet, and standard functions used to generate tabulations.

To address the third research question, or ‘what observations can be made of the content the US government makes available on social media platforms?’ we will provide a range of examples that illuminate the content the government makes available via social media

The dataset of social media URLs nominated for inclusion in the End of Term Web Archive—as well as other non-social media websites included—is available for use by researchers and can be downloaded from a digital library available from the University of North Texas.²

RESULTS

RQ1: Who uses social media in the US government?

In this project, we collected and studied 1,513 social media URLs from official government websites, and 1,364 unique URLs were included in the EOT archive. The executive branch had by far the largest number of social media webpages, which is to be expected since it is the largest branch, followed by the legislative and judicial (see Table 1).

RQ2: What social media platforms does the US government use?

The most popular platform for social media use by government is Facebook, followed closely by Twitter (see Table 3). Further, eighty-six government sites embedded social media features directly into their websites (e.g. blogging with comments from a .gov or .mil domain).

² End of Term Harvest nomination reports <http://digital2.library.unt.edu/nomination/eth2012/reports/>.

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Table 1: Social media use by government branch

Branch	URLs
Executive	1,144
Legislative	207
Judicial	4
Unclassified	9
Total social media pages	1,364

Of those URLs, 154 unique government agencies had at least one social media page. The agency with the most social media pages is the US House of Representatives (see Table 2).

RQ3: What observations can be made of the content the US government makes available on social media platforms?

Once we identified the agencies that use social media and the platforms they use, we wanted to get a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which government uses social media. In particular, we were interested in learning whether social media aids in accomplishing the goals of the Transparency Memorandum: transparency, participation and collaboration. We chose to examine the URLs we collected to find examples of the various uses of social media in government.

Most sites we examined are on the spectrum between *presence* and *interaction* as described by the CRS report (Seifert, 2003). In other words, they provide information to the public, and allow the public to comment, as is expected from the architecture of social media.

The reach of social media websites varies widely. For example, *ejournal USA*,³ a journal moderated by the United States Department of State, has 2.6 million Likes and frequent postings. Many of the postings include questions and are intended to directly engage readers in a conversation. For example, the site asks readers to provide their ideas for closing the online gender gap, a posting that received over 120 comments and over 1,900 Likes. At the other end of the spectrum is the Federal Maritime Commission, with a mere five tweets.⁴

Many agencies gear their social media to very specific audiences they are trying to target and engage, and these include non-English speakers both in the US and outside its borders. For example, the State Department maintains a Facebook account in Arabic⁵ and Farsi⁶ to engage non-US citizens, and

³ State Dept. *ejournal* Facebook account <https://www.facebook.com/ejournalUSA>

⁴ Federal Maritime Commission Twitter account https://twitter.com/FMC_gov/

⁵ State Dept. Facebook account in Arabic <https://www.facebook.com/DigitalOutreachTeam>

⁶ State Dept. Facebook account in Farsi <https://www.facebook.com/USAdarFarsi>

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Table 2: Social media use by government agency

Agency	Number of URLs
House of Representatives	128
State Department	110
Health and Human Services Department	91
Defense Department	88
National Archives and Records Administration	85
National Aeronautics and Space Administration	52
Homeland Security	36
Agriculture Department	21
Senate	21
Veterans Affairs Department	18
Army Department	17
Food and Drug Administration	17
Interior Department	14
President of the United States	14
Transportation Department	14
Commerce Department	13
Education Department	13
Joint Chiefs of Staff	13
Federal Executive Board	13
Internal Revenue Service	12
Treasury Department	12
Geological Survey	11
Architect of the Capitol	11
Land Management Bureau	11
Energy Department	10
URLs for agencies with less than 10 URLs	354
Unclassified	165
Total social media webpages	1,364

the Department of Homeland Security maintains a Twitter account geared toward Spanish speakers in the US.⁷

Agencies are taking advantage of the full capabilities that each social media platform offers, using text and visual materials as appropriate. For example, the US Army maintains a Pinterest site that engages over 6,000 followers with photographs on topics ranging from army fashion to army values.⁸

⁷ Dept. of Homeland Security Twitter account in Spanish https://twitter.com/uscis_es/

⁸ US Army on Pinterest <http://pinterest.com/USArmy/>

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Table 3: Social media platform use

Platform	Number of URLs
Facebook	430
Twitter	416
YouTube	243
Flickr	135
Pinterest	15
Google+	9
Tumblr	8
LinkedIn	4
Foursquare	3
Vimeo	3
MySpace	1
Other commercial social media platform	11
Social media features (e.g. blogging) embedded in official site	86
Total social media webpages	1,364

Even social media platforms that are not well known in the general social media landscape are used. For example, the US Department of Agriculture uses Storify,⁹ a platform that curates other social media sites, and the US Geological Survey uses GitHub, a website that allows sharing computer code.¹⁰

Government agencies that are part of the national security efforts and are not typically considered publicly minded are also making use of social media. For example, the US Missile Defense Agency maintains a Flickr account¹¹ and the US Border Patrol maintains a Pinterest account.¹²

Several agencies use social media to call for participation in offline activities such as open meetings and to submit grant applications. For example, the U.S Department of Health and Human Services Twitter account called on the public to apply for seed funding and participate in a conference.¹³

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, social media is widely used by the branches and agencies of the US government. This includes use of a variety of social media platforms,

⁹ USDA on Storify <http://storify.com/USDA/>

¹⁰ USGS on GitHub <https://github.com/usgs/>

¹¹ US Missile Defense Agency Flickr account <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mdabmds/>

¹² US Border Patrol on Pinterest <http://pinterest.com/esmietana/united-state-border-patrol/>

¹³ US Health data on Twitter <https://twitter.com/healthdatagov/>

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with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr being the most popular, and growing use of other platforms such as Pinterest and Tumblr. However, as the qualitative examples reveal, the use of social media is largely just a presence in these social media sites, and it is difficult to find examples of more extensive engagement between government and citizens through these platforms. Social media has yet to achieve the same impact as the 'We the People' petitions on Whitehouse.gov. 'We the People' allows individuals to petition the White House to act on matters of their choice, and the White House is committed to address any petition that receives 100,000 or more signatories. A recent accomplishment of the 'We The People' petition was the petition to mandate open access to all federally funded research. In response to the petition, President Obama signed a memorandum instructing federal agencies that provide grants of more than \$100 million annually to make the results of federally-funded research publicly available free of charge within twelve months after original publication (Holden, 2013).

In the social media sites analysed in this study, participation is limited to user comments between government and citizen, and collaboration at the level demonstrated by the 'We the People' petitions cannot be observed. Government social media sites offer users a potential opportunity to easily engage with agencies, which is an important step in achieving the goals of the Transparency Memorandum. However, fully reaching the goals of the Transparency Memorandum is still far off. Open platforms have yet to provide the panacea that will increase participation and collaboration between citizens and government. Further research is needed to identify the steps needed to help the government achieve these goals.

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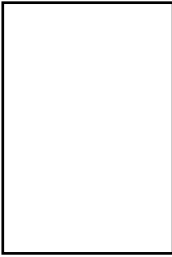
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