US Government Websites During the 2013 Shutdown: Lessons from the Shutdown Library

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ABSTRACT

This short communication describes the digital archive created of official dot.gov and official government social media websites during the shutdown of the United States federal government from 1 to 16 October 2013. It discusses the digital landscape against which the shutdown occurred, outlines the process of creating an archive of shutdown websites, and considers what the archive can teach us about the public face of government during the shutdown.

Keywords: web archives, e-government, social media, US government shutdown, US government websites

INTRODUCTION

From 1 to 16 October 2013, due to failure to enact a budget for the 2014 fiscal year, the United States government suspended operations. Only essential (i.e. emergency and life saving) government functions were continued, while all other government activity and services were suspended. The shutdown left government websites in varying stages of disarray. The presidential memorandums (Office of Management and Budget, 2013) regarding the shutdown, as well as the federal regulations (Office of Personnel Management, 2013) that govern it, provided little instruction to federal employees on how to treat their websites during the shutdown. Some agencies shutdown their websites completely, others remained accessible although no longer maintained and others still seemed unaffected, causing confusion to the public who sought services from the federal government (Bajaj, 2013, 2 October).

The absence of online government services fueled a discussion on the role of e-government, and the impact of losing e-government information and services on citizens (Chant, 2013; Jacobs, 2014; Shuler, Jaeger and Bertot, 2014). Further, the possibility that some websites were shutdown as a form of protest has been quietly debated. Since the 2012 shutdown of major websites such as Wikipedia in response to the Stop Online Privacy Act (SOPA)

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and the Protect IP Act (PIPA), the ability to withhold websites for political purposes has become increasingly apparent (Fahrenthold, 2012). Although the authors have no direct evidence that federal websites were used as political leverage, the parallels to the SOPA/PIPA related shutdowns are difficult to ignore.

We recognized that the shutdown of the federal government was a unique event and wanted to have a record of how it affected the public's access to the government's electronic services. Thus, during the shutdown, we captured and archived the official web and social media homepages throughout the federal government. This paper synthesizes some of the lessons learned from this web archive. First, we demonstrate the importance of government websites by discussing the new digital landscape against which this shutdown occurred, primarily focusing on e-government services. Next, we discuss the process of creating an archive of the shutdown websites. And finally, we discuss what the archive can teach us about the public face of the government during the shutdown.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

The term e-government has been with us since the passage of the E-Government Act of 2002. All agree that e-government consists of online interactions between government and citizens, although there are different views regarding the scope of e-government. A broad view, such as that taken by the United Nations, sees e-government as the use of information technologies for the 'provision of information and public services to the people' (UN Public Administration Program). A more narrow view distinguishes between provision of information and provision of services, and sees e-government as focusing on delivering services, such as applying for a passport, filing taxes and interacting with government regarding everyday needs (Seifert, 2003).

In recent years the online presence of government has become integral to how people interact with their elected officials. Digital media, and in particular social networking sites (SNS), have caught the imagination of the American people and affected their political activism. A recent survey from the Pew Research Internet Project (Smith, 2013) reported that SNS increase the likelihood that citizens will learn about and take action in political topics. A full third (34%) of Americans report that they engage with their government through online methods, using such platforms to sign petitions, contact government officials and express their opinions. SNS also play a role in closing the income gap between those who participate in political activities and those who don't. While people with higher levels of income and education are more politically active both online and offline, this gap narrows on SNS. The Pew study found that low-income households and high-income households have an identical level of political participation on SNS (Smith, 2013).

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CREATING THE ARCHIVE

Since time was of essence, we sought a way to capture the homepages quickly and with openly available technology tools. The immediate solution was to capture government homepages with Zotero and create a library of websites at the time of the shutdown.[2] Zotero is an open source bibliographic citation manager from George Mason University.[3] It can be integrated into a web browser and when 'add' is clicked, it will capture the webpage displayed in the browser, saving a copy of the webpage as well as the bibliographic citation. We used lists of agency homepages and social media webpages from a previous web archiving project as our basis for selection (Rabina, Cocciolo and Peet, 2013). Agency homepages were manually archived in Zotero and a macro used to web archive social media homepages, which were too numerous to do manually.

Since Zotero does not allow public access to captured digital content, we developed a standalone version of the shutdown library to allow access by researchers. It is shown in Figure 1. The library allows users to browse the archive, pull up snapshots of specific pages and download the entire library as a Zotero database. The website is currently available to the public in beta form, and we anticipate adding new functionalities as they are needed by researchers.

Figure 1: Federal Shutdown Web Archive, available at http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org

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[2] Shutdown Zotero library https://www.zotero.org/drabina
[3] Zotero website http://www.zotero.org/

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DARK, ON, AND EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

An examination of the official government websites indicate a mix of shutdowns, partial shutdowns and non shutdowns which do not necessarily correspond with what is considered essential versus non-essential. For example, all websites that went completely dark (all content removed) are included in Table 1. Websites that are heavily used by the scientific and academic communities are especially salient in this list (e.g. National Science Foundation, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Census, National Science Foundation, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Education Resources Information Center). These shutdowns prompted articles that criticize the 'idiocy of the shutdown' and the costs incurred by terminating research activities (Fallows, 2013).

In the remainder of this section, we will highlight several examples that demonstrate the inconsistencies both between and within the three branches of government.

Table 1: Websites that were dark during the federal shutdown

Bureau of Economic Analysis
Bureau of Reclamation[4]
Council on Economic Advisers
Council on Environmental Quality
Domestic Policy Council
Education Resources Information Center
Federal Trade Commission
International Trade Administration
International Trade Commission
Library of Congress
Medicare Payment Advisory Committee
National Capital Planning Commission
National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)
National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
National Park Service
National Science Foundation
Office of Justice Programs
U.S. Census
U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Geological Survey[5]

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[4] Website limited to essential information
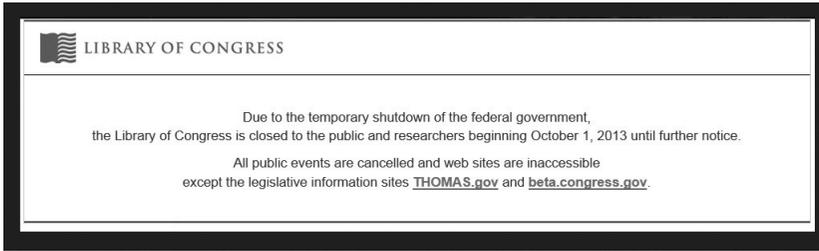[5] From website: 'Only web sites necessary to protect lives and property will be maintained'

Figure 2: Screenshot of Library of Congress website, 1 October 2013

The Legislative Branch

The Library of Congress (part of the Legislative Branch of government) completely shutdown its website, leaving librarians without the tools they require to catalogue effectively (including authority files, MARC records and the LoC OPAC), as well as eliminating all public access.

The Judicial Branch

We captured twelve official homepages from the judiciary (Table 2), and an examination of these homepages indicates that the Federal courts did not participate in the shutdown. These include both high profile courts such as the US Supreme Court, and some lesser known courts such as the

Table 2: Shutdown status of the Judicial Branch

Homepage	Status	Notice available Y/N
Bankruptcy court	Court open	Y
Court of International Trade	Court open	Y
Court of Appeals Federal Circuit	No update available	N
Federal Courts	Court open	Y
Federal Judicial Center	No update available	N
Judicial Panel on Multidistrict Litigation	No update available	N
Supreme Court of the US	Court open	Y
United States Courts (main)	Court open	Y
United States Sentencing Commission	No update available	N
US Tax Court	Partially suspended	Y
US Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims	Court open	Y
US Court of Federal Claims	No update available	N

**Figure 3: Screen of Department of Commerce, main homepage,
1 October 2013**

Court of International Trade. Homepages of non-courts from the judicial branch such as a Federal Judicial Center contained no shutdown-status updates.

The Executive Branch
Although the shutdown library includes hundreds of homepages from the Executive Branch, we will focus on a couple of examples here, starting with the Department of Commerce. The Department of Commerce includes sixteen websites for the departments within it. While the main website (www.commerce.gov) had a blackout page (Figure 3), clicking on 'Okay, continue to Commerce.gov' led the user to the Department of Commerce website. In addition, the less official Commerce blog included a detailed listing of the services that would remain open.[6]

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), which is part of the Department of Commerce, remained open (Figure 4), reportedly due to available funds (Levy, 2013). However, other Department of Commerce websites went dark, including the high-traffic Census website (Figure 5). The Department of Commerce dutifully ceased updating its social media websites, announcing they would not be maintained during the shutdown.[7]

Another example of the disparate approach to the shutdown is evidenced by the Federal Drug Administration. The Federal Drug Administration (part

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[6] Department of Commerce blog http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=WX6V3TWH
[7] Department of Commerce Twitter feed http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=9XJEPZJ2

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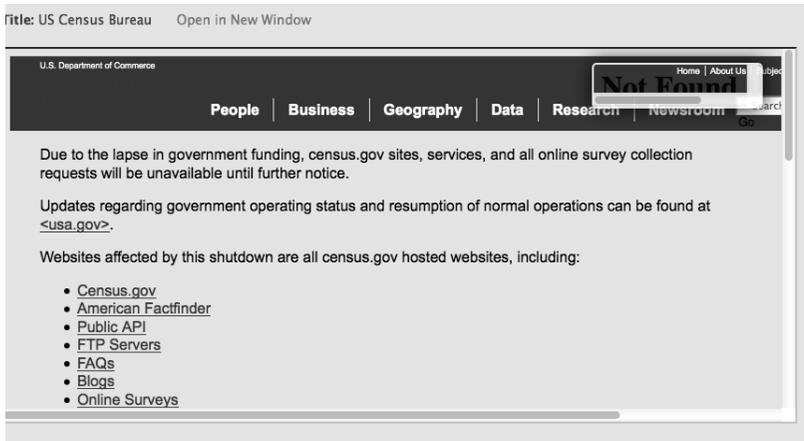**Figure 4: Screenshot of the USPTO, 1 October 2013**

Figure 5: Screenshot of Census.gov

of the Department of Health and Human Services) is an agency that plays an important role in public health and safety (e.g. food and life-stock inspection, drug oversight and more). However, it closed down and its website was no longer updated.[8] This is similar to the Center for Disease Control,[9] an agency that also plays an important role in public safety, which also closed down and no longer updated its website.

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[8] FDA homepage, 1 October 2013: http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=VSHNXIRI
[9] Center for Disease Control and Prevention homepage, 1 October 2013 http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=Z25XPC3C

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Other websites from the Department of Health and Human Services were no longer updated and provided highly visible shutdown notices. In addition to their main website[10] being frozen in time, the Administration of Children and Families,[11] the Administration on Aging[12] and the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD)[13] ceased being updated. Interestingly, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services[14] website remained functional during a shutdown, which is viewed by many as an act of protest by Republicans to the Affordable Care Act (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, 42 U.S.C. § 18001 (2010)).

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

There are countless way to parse this dataset and use it to broaden our understanding of federal government history. Also captured, although not analysed in great detail here, are the social media websites of the federal government. In the context of the shutdown, researchers can study the relationship between official websites and official social media websites and learn the extent to which agencies used social media to communicate with constituents while barred from using official websites. More generally, researchers can use the social media library to track activity trends and when agencies last communicated with the public.

Our cursory examination of the homepages highlights the decentralized approach that federal agencies took with regard to their websites. Very few websites were completely shutdown, and most websites had a notice of 'no longer being updated', or allowed users to proceed to content once they viewed the shutdown notice. It is not possible at this point to conclude that these highly visible shutdown notices are a form of political protest. Future work, such as analysing records that will be eventually deposited with the National Archives or interviews with agency staff, could reveal the motivations behind the disparate ways that websites were treated during the federal shutdown.

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[10] Department of Health and Human Services website, 1 October 2013. http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=MJ82IEU5

[11] Administration of Children and Families, 1 October 2013 http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=MJ82IEU5

[12] Administration on Aging, 1 October 2013 http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=MNVV4K2Z

[13] Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, (AIDD), 1 October 2013. http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=6JDGR9VF

[14] Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 1 October 2013 http://federalshutdown.prattsils.org/details.php?itemkey=8MM58A95)

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