PART ONE

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

INTRODUCTION

Government organizations are starting to use social technologies, such as social media, social computing, and collaboration platforms, to support their mission. Social technologies have not been as widely adopted as other forms of public information and communication technologies; however, early experimentation can be observed at all levels of government as agencies make the effort to reach out to government's diverse audiences. Typically, these innovative technologies are adopted and used for three functions or purposes: (1) to increase transparency, (2) to support inter- and intraorganizational collaboration, and (3) to enable innovative forms of public participation and engagement.

Government agencies and departments are using external social networking services, where the platform is provided by a third party and data are hosted on a third-party server or in the cloud. They are also using their own websites, which allows more control over technological features and easier data archiving and access. Both models pose challenges and in many cases adoption barriers for those agencies that might potentially be willing to follow early innovators.

The use of social media applications is being driven mainly by innovative citizen use, and government organizations are slowly adopting the tools for connecting to their audiences where those audiences prefer to receive information and news on social networking sites (Schweik, Mergel, Sanford, & Zhao, 2011).

Purpose of This Book

This book is based on exploratory interviews I conducted between 2009 and 2011 with social media directors in the agencies and departments of the executive branch of the federal government and with government IT professionals working on local and state levels, as well as with social media start-up entrepreneurs who are developing applications for use in government. The initial inquiry into the ways that new technologies are diffusing through the public sector was driven by work I conducted on the web practices of federal agencies and members of Congress during my time as a doctoral and postdoctoral Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and as a member of the National Center for Digital Government and the Program on Networked Governance (Lazer, Mergel, Ziniel, Esterling, & Neblo, 2011). These projects have led to further inquiries into the informal use of new technologies among government employees to fulfill the mission of their agencies (Bretschneider & Mergel, 2010; Mergel, 2005, 2010; Mergel, Lazer, & Binz-Scharf, 2008). Many entrepreneurial government employees are driven by a passion to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their own operations and are reaching out across organizational boundaries to learn from their peers in other agencies. They are helping each other out by sharing their local experiences with their global network and hoping to reduce redundancies (Lazer & Mergel, 2011).

Social media applications are designed with the purpose in mind to connect offline contacts online on social networking sites. My observation early in 2008 and 2009 was that many government agencies started to experiment with social media applications outside their formal IT standards and even outside their safe and sanctioned environments—with the purpose of increasing the experience of citizens involved with them and providing a new form of customer service to these audiences. Much of the innovation was sparked as a result of the successful Internet strategies during the 2008 presidential campaign, and some of the early enthusiasm was then transferred into initial experimentations by social media directors, public affairs officials, and other IT professionals. Nevertheless, the early experimentation of first movers and intrapreneurs has shown that government regulations and existing policies hindered the fast and wider spread of social media adoption. The interviews I conducted, together with my interactions online with social media professionals on Twitter using the hashtag #gov20 and the conversations I was involved in on the social networking platform Govloop.com, have resulted in several

case studies. I analyzed the rich interview data with qualitative data analysis methods and social network analysis techniques. The analysis provided in-depth insights that I was able to test in order to deepen my understanding of how and why government IT professionals are adopting social media applications.

Although many of the best practices examples presented in this book come from federal agencies, the lessons learned are also applicable by local and state governments and international governments where IT professionals are starting to implement social media.

This book serves as a handbook for the use of social media in the public sector in a way that is grounded deeply in research, combining the existing practices in social media use in government with existing theories of public administration, networked governance, and information management. The intended audience includes both academics and practitioners who seek to gain a deeper understanding of the processes, intentions, managerial challenges, and actual applications of social media in government.

This book can also be used as a primer in public affairs programs, business schools, or information studies schools. The order of the chapters reflects a course I have designed, taught, and refined since 2008 at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. The pedagogical and theoretical approach, including in-class exercises, assignments, and a reading list for a fifteen-week course are outlined in an article published in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (Mergel, 2012). The syllabus is featured on education.data.gov and a frequently updated version with traditional and contemporary readings is available on my faculty page: faculty.maxwell.syr .edu/iamergel/government2-0.htm.

For practitioners this book provides a deep dive into best practices and procedural aspects of the use of social media, but it also aims to explain the underlying theoretical dimensions of the ways in which social behavior affects adoption of social media technologies. I provide ongoing updates on new cases, emerging technology innovations, and presentation slides on my blog, *Social Media in the Public Sector* (inesmergel.wordpress.com).

How This Book Is Organized

Following this introduction, this book moves in Chapter Two to an overview of social media technologies in the public sector, providing definitions and explanations of the different technologies. The unique features of

major, currently adopted social media services, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, YouTube, and Flickr, are discussed and contrasted with traditional e-government applications.

Chapter Three then takes an in-depth look at what drives the current surge and adoption speed of social media applications in government, and Chapter Four details what are currently seen as major hurdles to the use of social media. Some of the challenges involve uncertainty regarding the applicability of existing rules and regulations. Most directives and policies cover the use of agencies' websites, but do not extend to the use of third-party portals. Chapter Five outlines the evolution of norms and necessary regulations for the safe and responsible use of new media applications in government. Norms were institutionalized with a significant time lag in relation to emergent social media behavior, and government officials set structures in place as a reactive result of continuous social media use.

The following chapters examine the organizational factors that support the implementation of social media practices in government. Findings from the adoption process of federal government agencies provide insights into how governments institutionalize the use of social media by moving from the use of early—and informal—experimentation to solid business cases in order to gain top management buy-in and then go beyond that to an institutionalized social media policy providing the context for all social computing activities. Chapter Six discusses the design of existing formal social media policies in government. A survey of publicly available documents and their year-by-year adjustments and extensions over time provide insights into the main content areas covered in policy documents. Topics include organizational roles and capacities, privacy regulations, information-vetting processes, account management, and day-to-day practices.

None of the social media activities will survive in government if they are not directly connected to an agency's mission and overall organizational goals. In order to be allocated organizational resources, such as personnel to administer social media accounts and to create content, social media activities need to be efficient and effective. Chapter Seven discusses existing impact evaluation and social media measurement techniques that are based on the current state of the art. In addition, this chapter suggests how the existing metrics can be extended with qualitative insights to increase the effectiveness of social computing activities.

Part Two of this book then showcases the three purposes for which social media applications are used in the public sector: transparency, collaboration, and participation. Each purpose is discussed in light of the existing research

in public administration and the ways in which the innovative use of social media can facilitate the applications and goals of government. The current Open Government Initiative of President Obama highlights all three functions as priority goals for all ongoing, open government activities:

1. *Participation 2.0.* Public participation and, in parallel, citizen trust and satisfaction in government have dropped to historical lows (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2010). At the same time, existing engagement mechanisms attract Internet *trolls*, and not the average citizen, creating what I call the *town hall divide.* The social media applications discussed in Chapter Eight provide alternative public engagement mechanisms that help support the open government mandate for innovative forms of participation and public input solicitation (Mergel, 2011).

2. *Collaboration 2.0.* Cooperation and coordination within and across government agencies is highly difficult with the current bureaucratic set of organizational norms and, at times, competing missions. Government agencies have few incentives, and they may lack the technological means to share information effectively across organizational boundaries. Chapter Nine therefore looks at collaboration platforms that enable government to increase collaboration across agencies and with diverse audiences and constituencies.

3. *Transparency 2.0.* Previous Open Government Initiatives have all attempted to increase the transparency of government records. The current use of open data and social media applications is also intended to increase the transparency of government decision- and policymaking processes. The cases provided in Chapter Ten show the first experiments in the smart reuse of public information and government datasets, without expensive Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

The goal of Part Two is to provide insights into what can be called true *lighthouse* projects—outstanding and relatively uncommon initiatives that challenge the existing understanding of transparency, collaboration, and participation for government agencies. These projects serve as illustrations and starting points for future inquiry by researchers and practitioners.

The adoption of social media applications in the public sector is still in its infancy. Even though the executive departments of the federal government

were tasked in 2009 to find ways to "harness new technologies" (Obama, 2009), agencies are mostly still experimenting with the use of new technologies and are reluctant to jump on the bandwagon.

The outlook for the future of social media practices in government concludes this book, in Chapter Eleven. Additional resources, including web links, web logs, and freely accessible reports sorted according to main content areas are available in the Appendix.

Companion Learning Resource

This book has a companion field guide, *Social Media in the Public Sector Field Guide: Designing and Implementing Strategies and Policies*, coauthored with Ines Mergel by Bill Greeves, chief information officer for Wake County, North Carolina. Hands-on and practical, the *Field Guide* will help readers put into practice the concepts featured in this book.