

Chapter 2

Information Policy and Social Media: Framing Government—Citizen Web 2.0 Interactions

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2.1 Introduction: Policy Goals and Social Media

Web 2.0 technologies, in general, and social media technologies in particular, open new and innovative methods for immediate and ongoing interaction between citizens and governments. The use of these technologies occurs within a broader information policy environment that establishes guidelines for access, use, management, and preservation of information. Government agencies, however, have begun using social media without sufficient consideration of this larger policy environment. Inconsistent goals and practices among related policies, combined with conflicting design values applied to implementations, have created long-term policy conflicts, particularly in approaches to defining and implementing *access*.

The capacities of social media to facilitate information, communication, and interaction between governments and citizens extend many of the principles of information access that have been central to United States policy. Deeply embedded within the founding of the United States is access to government information, beginning with the Declaration of Independence and continuing through e-government programs today (Jaeger and Bertot 2011). “The state is more than an allocator of services and values; it is an apparatus for assembling and managing the political information associated with expressions of public will and with public policy” (Bimber 2003, p. 17). A prevalent thread that weaves

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throughout the nation's information policies is ensuring public access to government information and operations, regardless of socioeconomic status, geographic location, disability, availability of telecommunications technologies, or other factors. Social media can serve to foster new depths of government–citizen interactions; however, information policy must account for unique accessibility issues to make government use of social media truly inclusive.

Social media has quickly become a primary tool to disseminate government information, connect with members of the public, and provide access to services. The US federal government has numerous YouTube channels to distribute videos from Congress, the President, and federal agencies. Many agencies have a presence on Facebook and other social networks, and send out important information via blogging and microblogging channels like Twitter. Large amounts of data are made available for public use through open data sites like www.data.gov. While the relevance and importance of government content distributed through social media can vary widely (Golbeck et al. 2010), the widespread use of social media demonstrates that these tools are likely to be important long-term components of interactions between governments and members of the public.

Given this growing use of social media by governments, traditional information policy considerations of access and inclusion should be central to the formulation and implementation of policies related to social media. If access is not available to segments of the population due to design or implementation, government social media use will create new inequalities in public interactions with government. Although using social media is intended to make government easier to reach, it may instead create new barriers. This problem is particularly pressing as many governments have argued that e-government—and social media in particular—provide reasons to reduce offline communication responsibilities and costs.

Using the US federal government as a case study, this chapter employs policy analysis to explore the laws and policies related to the use of social media by governments and government agencies, with a specific focus on the manifestations of the policies in the implementation of social media strategies. This chapter examines two kinds of evidence to understand government social media implementations. First, it examines existing law and policy for approaches to access that should shape social media implementations. This analysis suggests three predominant perspectives on access: universal service, equity of access, and literacy. The chapter then presents case studies of how these access perspectives, and the values behind them, are implemented in government social media tools.

By analyzing information policy instruments and laws relevant to social media interactions between government and citizens, as well as key memos released by the Obama administration that directly relate to social media use by federal agencies, this chapter illustrates the complexity of the existing legal framework, most elements of which were written and implemented prior to the existence of social media technologies. The policies encouraging citizen-government interaction, and the tools meant to implement this interaction, often lack harmonization with broader information policies, leading to frustrations for both agencies and citizens. By exploring the challenges of dealing with rapidly changing

technologies that have outpaced their regulatory framework, the chapter argues for the need to proactively develop policies and tools to address equity of access in a social media context. By harmonizing policy definitions and approaches to access, and using these definitions to redesign social media use by government, this chapter suggests it is possible for those formulating and implementing policies related to government social media usage to encourage equity of access.

2.2 Social Media and Government in the United States

Social media has significant potential for promoting interactions between government and citizens, as agencies increase their use of social media technologies as a way to reach members of the public in new locations, extend government services, and engage members of the public in government efforts. As social media technologies are now regularly employed by a majority of Internet users, these technologies can serve as an appropriate venue through which to promote interactions between governments and citizens:

- 86 % of 18–29 year olds use social media everyday (Madden 2010).
- 72 % of adults and 87 % of teens use text messages everyday (Lenhart 2010).
- Facebook announced that it reached 800 million active users in 2011 (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>).

As the number of users has increased there has been a growing interest in applying social media toward addressing national priorities (Pirolli et al. 2010). President Obama became a strong advocate for the use of social media when he was a presidential candidate (Jaeger et al. 2010). Both at the behest of the Obama administration and following the growth in use of social media, federal government agencies have embraced the use of social media. Government agencies are now using a wide range of social media—blogs, microblogs, sharing services, text messaging, discussion forums, collaborative editing tools, virtual worlds, and social networking services—to engage citizens (Bertot et al. 2012; Hansen et al. 2011). These tools vary dramatically in their purposes and approaches, but they rely on user-generated content and enable users to communicate, interact, edit, and share content in a social environment, promoting creation of information resources by geographically dispersed groups.

Much government activity is now focused on social media, with social media becoming a central component of e-government in a very short period of time (Bertot et al. 2010; Chang and Kannan 2008; Osimo 2008). US federal agencies have been using social media to create records, disseminate information, and communicate with the public and between agencies for several years. In addition, the General Services Administration (GSA) has even created a standard agreement for social media providers to allow for government usage of social media services.

Government use of social media offers several key opportunities for agencies and citizens (Bertot et al. 2010):

- *Democratic participation and engagement*, using social media technologies to engage the public in government fostering participatory dialog and providing a voice in discussions of policy development and implementation.
- *Co-production*, in which governments and the public jointly develop, design, and deliver government services to improve service quality, delivery, and responsiveness.
- *Crowdsourcing solutions and innovations*, seeking innovation through public knowledge and talent to develop innovative solutions to large-scale societal issues. To facilitate crowdsourcing, the government shares data and other inputs so that the public has a foundational base on which to innovate.

Though not mutually exclusive, these opportunities offer great promise and pose new challenges in redefining government-community connections and interactions. However, agencies are in large part doing so through an antiquated policy structure that governs agency information flows, access, and dissemination mandates.

Not only is the Obama administration strongly encouraging agencies to use social media to provide information, communicate with members of the public, and distribute services, it has also made a priority of public usage of social media to participate in government (Jaeger et al. 2010). Many members of the public already expect that government services will be available electronically and that government agencies will be accessible via social media technologies (Jaeger and Bertot 2010). The widespread adoption of many of these different social media tools has been emphasized in a number of different White House reports, such as *Open Government: A Progress Report to the America People* (2009), listing numerous uses of social media approaches to promote transparency across many different agencies.

Thus far, the success of government use of social media is mixed. On the positive side, 31 % of Internet users are government social media users (Pew Internet 2010). However, 95 % of these government social media users were already using more traditional government websites, indicating that government use of social media has not attracted much of a new audience. The population of Internet users interacting with government through social media—such as following government agencies or officials on Twitter—is extremely small. At the same time, however, many Internet users rely primarily or exclusively on a Web-enabled cell phone or other type of mobile device to access online content (Pew Internet 2010), indicating that there is an enormous potential population of users of government social media who already favor working through social media platforms on mobile devices.

2.3 Policy, Access, and Government Use of Social Media

The unique nature of social media technologies—and the basis of their mass appeal and strength as a government tool—lies in their ability to create an immediate and interactive dialog. But this nature also creates important policy

challenges as these technologies continue to be used more extensively both by governments and the public. Though the current policy environment addresses many issues of privacy, security, accuracy, and archiving, much of the policy related to the use of social media predates the creation of social media technologies. As a result, many of the existing policies do not adequately address the technological capacities or functions of social media. Furthermore, as social media provides new ways to combine previously unavailable and/or separately maintained data, there are now cross-dataset concerns that impact multiple policy issues. Finally, social media comprise private ventures with their own acceptable use, data use, accessibility, and privacy policies that often do not conform to federal requirements.

The Obama Administration is aware of and trying to address at least some of these policy shortcomings. Since April 2010, OMB has issued three significant memos regarding federal agency use of and interaction with social media technologies:

- Memo M-10-22 (Guidance for Online Use of Web Measurement and Customization Technologies) promotes the use of measurement and customization technologies to promote website analytics and customization of the user experience. Consistent with other statements by the Obama administration, this memo emphasizes the perceived benefits of enabling the use of social media technologies. There are still prohibitions such as tracking individual-level activity outside of the website, sharing the data with other departments or agencies, and cross-referencing the data with personally identifiable information.
- OMB Memo M-10-23 (Guidance for Agency Use of Third-Party Websites and Applications) accounts for the increasing amount of Internet activity that occurs on third-party sites, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media. As specific social media sites, such as Facebook, have become important platforms for information exchange, government agencies have created a presence on them. Agencies have also begun including third-party widgets, modules, snippets, and plug-ins on their own websites. These are mini applications with dynamic content or services that are embedded within another Web page. Finally, many social media and related sites offer Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) that allow other programs and sites to call upon their content and services. These support “Mashups” that combine data from different sources into an integrated user experience. M-10-23 encourages the use of all of these sorts of third-party materials, while emphasizing the need to also consider user privacy. Third-party sites, however, raise a range of privacy, security, and accuracy issues, as well as long-term concerns about data usage, records schedules and archiving, and preservation (Bertot et al. [2010](#), [2012](#)).
- An unnumbered Memorandum (Social Media, Web-Based Interactive Technologies, and the Paperwork Reduction Act) clarifies that “certain uses of social media and Web-based interactive technologies will be treated as equivalent to activities that are currently excluded” from the Paperwork Reduction Act

(PRA). The memo is needed because the vagueness of the original law that specifies that the PRA applies to the collection of information “regardless of form or format,” but does not define information. Later OMB regulations excluded three types of activities discussed in the memo that were not considered “information”—general solicitations, public meetings, and like items.

These memos—and the GSA *Social Media Handbook* (2010)—emphasize certain policy issues and bypass others. While issues like privacy, security, web analytics, and definitions of information under the PRA are important to government usage of social media, issues of access, and inclusion in government-to-citizen interactions through social media are utterly missed in these policies. In general, the adoption of social media is affected by education level, age, socio-economic status, gender, and race (Hargittai 2008; Zhou 2010). The area of access and inclusion has been a long-term challenge for e-government development around the world (Jaeger and Thompson 2003, 2004; Powell et al. 2010), and these challenges are not reflected in the memos and handbook related to social media.

2.4 Access in Public Policy

For social media to increase access to government information and services and to successfully facilitate civic participation, members of the public must be able to access and use social media technologies. Public usage of social media is predicated on (Bertot et al. 2010):

- Universal access to the technologies (which at a minimum necessitates a device and Internet access at a speed sufficient to support social media content);
- The development of technology, programs, and Internet-enabled services that offers equity of access to all users; and,
- Information and civics literacy necessary to understand government services, resources, and operations.

These three kinds of access might be summarized as **universal service, equity of access, and literacy**.

A large amount of existing policy relates to access to government information and services online, and while these policies predominantly predate the existence of social media, their reach extends to agency interaction with and use of social media technologies. These policies establish the requirements of access, but provide no specifics that can be applied to social media. Some are extremely broad; the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the E-government Act of 2002 both include assertions that access to information and communication technologies being used online and to e-government content should be available to all members of the public. Clearly, government social media interactions fall under these broad directives.

Various populations are also the subject of policies promoting access that predate, but should be applied to, government use of social media. For example, Executive Order 13166—Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency—requires that agencies provide appropriate access to persons with limited English proficiency, including use of social media technologies to communicate and collaborate with members of the public. This policy objective is meant to address the fact that there are highly pronounced gaps in e-government usage among people who predominantly speak a language other than English, as little e-government content is available in non-English formats. For example, 32 % of Latinos who do not speak English use the Internet, but 78 % of Latinos who speak English use the Internet (Fox and Livingston 2007).

Many policies that establish the precedent for equity of access to e-government relate to persons with disabilities. As the most disadvantaged population in the United States in terms of computer and Internet access, percentages of computer and Internet usage among persons with disabilities have remained at levels below half of the equivalent percentages for the rest of the population since the advent of the Web (Dobransky and Hargittai 2006; Jaeger 2011; Lazar and Jaeger 2011). Yet, one of the laws related to equity of access for persons with disabilities reveals the disjunction between access policies that should apply to government use of social media and the ways in which the government is currently using social media. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires that electronic and information technologies purchased, maintained, or used by the federal government to meet certain accessibility standards designed to make online information and services fully available to people with disabilities. Social media companies rarely comply with the accessibility requirements of Section. 508, yet this inaccessibility has not been a deterrent to the use of social media by government agencies.

As a result, for persons with disabilities, social media often means a reduced ability to participate (Howard 2011; Lazar and Wentz 2011; Wentz and Lazar 2011). Government agencies are simultaneously trying to reach citizens through inaccessible third-party social technologies, and embedding these technologies in their own sites, negatively impacting the accessibility of their original sites. This disjunction between access policy and social media usage by the federal government demonstrates the need to identify and consider factors that can enable a policy environment to serve all populations in government-to-citizen-social media interactions.

2.5 Policy Harmonization and Social Media

Bringing social media usage by government agencies in line with existing access policies is the first essential step in ensuring that government-to-citizen interactions through social media are inclusive of all segments of the population. To navigate the discrepancies between traditional information policies that govern government information flows, access, and interaction, one suggested solution is a

process of harmonization (Shuler et al. 2010). Though the concept of harmonization has been proposed as a general approach for reconciling the laws, regulations, and practices related to e-government, it can be especially useful within the context of access to information, communication, and services through social media. In the government social media context, the long-established core democratic principles intended to foster equity of access should serve as the basis of the harmonization of laws, practices, and regulations (Bertot et al. 2012).

A key example of a problem resulting from the lack of harmonization in the government use of social media can be seen in soliciting comments on proposed regulations. Some agencies now solicit comments through social media about proposed regulations, but are not able to respond to questions people pose in reaction during the notice and comment period due to laws preventing them from responding to questions in the notice and comment period. However, such inaction is antithetical to users' expectations for social media, where they assume that they should receive a response to their questions, creating a direct conflict between two policies. As a result, many of the people posing the questions about the proposed regulations do not understand why no one is responding, which then serves to reduce future participation in government online by making users feel that their input is being ignored.

Existing policies related to access must also receive greater attention when agencies decide to use social media technologies. Agencies may not be aware of the range of policies related to access or the implications of those policies. This situation could be greatly improved by the creation of a guide to provide clear guidance to agencies about the policies that must be considered in the adoption and use of social media. Even with the GSA *Handbook* (2010), there is still need for a cross-agency social media guide specifically devoted to relevant policies and their implications, as the *Handbook* does not encompass the full spectrum of relevant laws and policies, nor does it adequately address user issues, such as equity of access (Bertot et al. 2012).

When the adoption of new technologies by government agencies challenges current information policy, it indicates that the policy development process is not fleet enough for the pace of rapid technological change. As government agencies continue to adopt new technologies, the development of more responsive information policies that is based on principles, rather than tied to specific technologies, will be vital to ensuring that policies can remain relevant. A harmonized policy context will be better positioned to react to and account for technological change. The aforementioned recent memos issued by OMB are a first, insufficient attempt to harmonizing the federal government's policies towards social media technologies.

2.6 Policy Approaches to Social Media Access

Since social media is being used to facilitate governance, provide access to vital government information and services, communicate with the public, and promote civic participation, equity of access to social media will be necessary to prevent

citizens from being left out of these new government-to-citizen interactions, particularly as the availability of outlets for conducting similar interactions offline are rapidly diminishing. As the federal government considers ways to regulate its own implementation and usage of social media, the approach to access that is used in policy may result in very differing foci and access outcomes. Social media encompasses dimensions of communication, information, and a range of technologies and can be understood from different perspectives based on these areas. Under terms such as universal service, universal access, universal design, and universal usability, these approaches to access focus on different parts of the connection among the user, the technology, and benefits accrued to society.

The fact that social media relies on the backbone of the telecommunications infrastructure indicates that the **universal service** approach would follow the approach taken in many laws and regulations, most prominently the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The approach of universal service—often used interchangeably with universal access—has been articulated in telecommunication and computer science contexts as the goal of making technology equally available to all, focusing on challenges such as infrastructure and geography (Jaeger 2011; Shneiderman 2000). The language of universal service can be found in government policy documents, business plans of communication companies, and computer science research, among others.

However, universal service overlooks issues of economics and usage. The access that is available has to be affordable to those who need it; otherwise, many people lack meaningful access. Once access is available and affordable to all, citizens still need to be able to use the resources to which they have access. Universal service does not overcome barriers to access like disability, language, literacy, and digital literacy, among others (Kanayama 2003). Given the uses of social media by government, a universal service approach would still leave many citizens unable to participate.

Another potential approach to the regulation of government use of social media is **universal design**. This approach focuses on the inclusive design of the root technologies needed to support government use of social media. Universal design has its roots in making commercial products and architecture more inclusive, taking focus away from the traditional design approach of creating things for an imagined average user. The use of standards in design enables and creates order only for those who meet the standards (Burgstahler 2008; Moser 2006). Instead, universal design focuses on making “products and environments welcoming and useful to groups that are diverse in many dimensions, including gender, race and ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, ability, disability, and learning style” (Burgstahler 2008, p. 3).

Universal design has not been typically applied in information and communication policies, but it is present in many disability rights regulations (Jaeger 2011). For example, policies mandating curb cuts on sidewalks not only support wheelchair access, they help parents with baby strollers, people with rolling luggage and shopping carts, bicyclists, and rollerbladers and many others (Zeff 2007). However, given that universal design does not address issues of affordability of access

or digital literacy, it is not a stand-alone policy approach for access to the government use of social media.

Another concept that could be employed in policy to promote government-to-citizen interactions through social media is the concept of **universal usability**. Derived from the study of human–computer interaction, universal usability focuses on the creation and implementation of technologies in ways that they can be accessed and used by most, if not all, people. Established information technologies—postal services, telephones, television—successfully provide universal usability; that is, the vast majority of the population has access to, can use, and regularly does use the technology (Shneiderman 2000). As such, universal usability attempts to bring successful approaches to information access from the physical world to the virtual world, so that information technologies are designed to provide the same kind of widely usable products from the outset.

The concept of universal usability, however, suffers from the fact that it is based on inclusive design. As the government has already widely adopted a range of social media technologies that are based on openly exclusive designs, a policy based on universal usability of social media would also need to require the redesign of many social media technologies before the government can continue using them. In taking such an approach, the government would be following the lead of certain institutions of higher education that refused to adopt certain technologies, including some social media services, until the technologies are made inclusive (Jaeger 2011).

2.7 Design Values Evidenced in Implementation

The current mix of accessibility perspectives shaping e-government social media outreach is evidenced by the various tools in use today. The social values harbored by technologies' designers and hosts are often reflected in their design and deployment (Friedman 1997; Knobel and Bowker 2011). While a broad study of the accessibility values reflected in government social media tools is clearly needed, it is possible to readily identify examples that suggest the diversity of access perspectives currently applied.

The **universal access perspective**, as exemplified by the Telecommunications Act of 1996, emphasizes availability of social media to citizens. The universal access perspective values physical and logistical access to government materials. Key social media features that exemplify the universal access perspective include:

- Providing access to traditionally paper materials;
- Providing search of historical and current materials; and
- Enabling sharing of materials through social media tools.

An example of this perspective in action can be found in the use of Facebook and Twitter widgets in the Federal Register website (<https://www.federalregister.gov>). The Federal Register is a daily newsletter of proposed rules, public notices, and articles published by federal agencies. The Register's site

is meant to increase the availability of agency publications and information. It digitizes each section of the Register and allows for searching of articles dating back to 1994. Under “User Information,” the site hosts write that they built the site to “overcome the technical limitations of the official edition and to demonstrate how a new version can more effectively convey regulatory information to the public.” The stated goal is to increase availability of information by making the contents of the Federal Register electronic and searchable.

To this end, the site designers include a number of social media tools, including an RSS feed subscription feature and buttons for sharing articles via Facebook and Twitter. Social media tools are employed as part of the Register’s outreach to further broadcast the contents of the Federal Register and therefore increase availability of the materials. Social media tools are not explicitly used to increase understanding of the material or to cross social or demographic boundaries that might fetter access. The use of Facebook and Twitter for sharing by the Federal Register is an example of a focus on availability in government information and social media use.

The **equity of access perspective** goes beyond availability to emphasize cultural, language-, or need-based access to social media. The equity of access perspective values access to government information across demographic, cultural, or accessibility barriers (Lievrouw and Farb 2003). Key features of the equity of access perspective include:

- Availability in multiple formats (especially hosting information outside of proprietary and sometimes inaccessible social media formats);
- Access features for users with disabilities;
- Translation into languages other than English; and
- Explanatory materials to help users navigate government resources.

For example, the Disability.gov website (<https://www.disability.gov/>) provides social content such as videos, forums for public participation in White House conversations and social media news, and resource feeds. The site’s designers address the accessibility challenges of these materials directly through both policy and site design. The site’s designers describe their social media policy as follows:

Social Media Alternate Formats: Disability.gov understands that third-party social media platforms and websites may not be accessible to all users, including those with disabilities. Therefore, all information posted by Disability.gov on any of its social media accounts will be made available on the site. Please visit the *Disability.gov Social Media* section, located in the Disability.gov *Newsroom*, for alternate formats of information posted on Disability.gov’s social media accounts.

Providing a section of the website dedicated to replicating information shared with inaccessible tools illustrates that Disability.gov’s designers value access across social and physical barriers. It is likely that site managers’ awareness of their user base influenced their values and their equity of access perspective in deploying social media tools.

The **literacy perspective** focuses on helping citizens to use their access to social media. The literacy perspective values education and information about government processes as well as helping users to understand and use technological features. Key features of the literacy perspective help citizens:

- Understand what e-government features do;
- Understand why e-government initiatives are important; and
- Participate in e-government initiatives.

Although many e-government websites include comprehensive civic literacy sections as well as Web tool how-tos, there are fewer deployments of social media tools explicitly devoted to civic or content literacy. Examples of e-government social media tools approached from the literacy perspective are the tools hosted by Regulations.gov (<http://www.regulations.gov>). Regulations.gov provides social media tools to encourage citizens to participate in the rulemaking process. These include the “Exchange” tool, which is a discussion forum on federal agency initiatives. The Exchange forum allows for customized profiles, so that users can learn about, track, and discuss specific agency initiatives and rulemaking of interest. Citizens can interact with each other as well as agency officials through the Exchange dialog. By using social media tools for explicit citizen involvement, Regulations.gov approaches their task from a literacy perspective, fostering civic engagement rather than simple access to government documents.

Universal access, equity of access, and literacy perspectives are not mutually exclusive perspectives. Indeed, on many government sites, there are sections dedicated to helping users understand e-government materials side-by-side with digitized documents and social media outreach. However, individual social media projects tend to skew towards one values perspective. These examples illustrate how a values-based framework can illuminate the nature of access to government information provided by social media tools. Consciously harmonizing the values built into social media projects across these three spectra would produce the most balanced approach to accessibility of e-government materials.

2.8 Conclusion: Intersections of Law, Access, and Design

The recent development of social media means that many important government usage issues have yet to be fully realized, much less understood. However, the more attention paid to ensuring that government social media initiatives include as many members of the public as possible, the fewer individuals will struggle with barriers to usage once the technologies are entrenched in government operations. As social media becomes an increasingly important channel through which to receive government information services and communicate with government agencies, struggling with access may have large consequences for those with limited or no access. There seems a real possibility that digital divides that currently separate social groups by presence and quality of access to computers, the

Internet, and broadband may be replicated in social media (Jaeger et al. 2012). The development of a social media divide could have significant negative consequences for those on the wrong side.

There are many challenges to policy approaches and design values that will shape access to and usage of social media by members of the public and particularly disadvantaged populations. Early evidence suggests that these challenges are significant. Government agencies have adopted social media, expecting members of the public to begin using them. This approach has led to a user base comprised almost exclusively of people who were already regular users of other e-government technologies, while approximately two-thirds of Internet users do not think government use of social media is a worthwhile use of government funds (Pew Internet 2010). Though hesitations toward usage may be tied to a range of issues—content, awareness, and interest, among others—the issues discussed in this paper emphasize the first step in adoption: whether social media services will be inclusive or exclusive at the outset. Technological developments historically benefit the already technologically privileged (Hanson 2008; Mackenzie 2010). Government usage of social media seems to favor those who already have access to other technologically based means of government interaction, and those with the information literacy to be comfortable with existing social media.

As policies are created in relation to those tools, there are several key considerations that will shape the inclusivity of social media interactions between the government and the public:

- Development of policies that prioritize the universal usability of government social media activities.
- Emphasis on design values in government social media technologies that address considerations of universal access, equity of access, and literacy.
- Adherence to existing policies intended to ensure equity of access to government information and technologies, such as only employing social media technologies that comply with Section 508 accessibility guidelines.
- Efforts to promote awareness of government social media activities coupled with outreach to members of populations disadvantaged in terms of access.
- Creation of social media programs that reach members of the public on the types of technologies they have access to and literacy using, such as mobile devices.
- Harmonization of policy objectives and design approaches into an across-agency, integrated social media approach that promotes public-government interaction.

As government usage of social media increases, attention to these considerations will take on greater significance, particularly if social media becomes a primary means by which governments want to interact with members of the public.

While examples in this paper have been drawn from the United States, the issues at hand are of consequence to any government currently using, or planning to use, social media as a key means of conducting the business of government. Though policies and implementations will vary between nations, the choices made in policy and implementation will heavily shape the levels of access to, and

inclusion in, government activities through social media. The general move internationally toward bringing government information, communication, and services online—while simultaneously reducing offline equivalents—makes access issues an essential consideration in government uses of social media. If certain populations are not included in the implementation, they risk being left out of key government information, communication, and services.

Government usage of social media has rapidly increased in a short period of time, but with little research about implementation, perceptions, and usage. Further, research into the access issues faced by different populations, the policy perspectives on access that shape social media policy, and the design values evidenced by implementations of government social media will be important in documenting, framing, and improving interactions between governments and members of the public in the Web 2.0 environment.

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