

What Are Social Media, and Why Should Government Pay Attention to Them?

On December 6, 2010, the Virginia State Police (VSP) issued an Amber Alert for twelve-year-old Roanoke County, Virginia, resident Britney Mae Smith, after police found her mother murdered in their home. Police believed that Britney was traveling in her mother's car and traveling with her mother's thirty-two-year-old boyfriend, Jeff Easley. After releasing the formal Amber Alert through traditional communication channels, the VSP public relations team also posted the alert on the agency's Facebook page, instantly publishing the information to its 24,000 fans. Along with the alert, the agency posted photos of Smith and Easley and a description of the vehicle.

During the next several days, Facebook users shared the information about the alert with their personal networks as investigators followed up on thousands of leads. Fortunately, Britney was returned home safely, and Colonel Steven Flaherty, superintendent of the VSP, credited social media with assisting the police in the case: "Social media certainly enabled law enforcement to reach beyond our borders, our normal footprint. Britney Smith's disappearance and her search started with an Amber Alert. This outreach quickly, very quickly, spread with the effective integration of social media, the traditional media, and the traditional Amber Alert emergency alert system."¹

*On January 12, 2011, Facebook announced that it would begin issuing Amber Alerts as an opt-in newsfeed notification for users, thanks to a partnership with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and the U.S. Justice Department.*²

So what are social media? And why should government care? The fundamental component of all social media—or the next generation of the interactive Internet—is a cultural shift, enabled by social networking platforms that transform linear give-and-take communication into a collaborative discussion. Over the past several years the rise of social media and their associated tools and methods have driven a new information paradigm and a new form of collaborative engagement in the public sector that has dramatically affected the ways in which governments communicate, build relationships, conduct business, and send and receive news and information.³ The use of social media is oftentimes referred to under the umbrella term *Web 2.0*, which describes applications that allow for online interaction, including online social networks, joint content creation, and content sharing.⁴ And although the terms *Web 2.0* and *social media* are closely associated with Internet technologies, these technologies are simply means to an end.

By December of 2008, the Internet had surpassed newspapers as the public's resource for daily news.⁵ The earliest social networks evolved with a specific audience in mind (for example, MySpace was devised for teens and the earliest version of Facebook was for college students). Today's social media networks, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, have evolved around communities and connections that people share and have become a common point of reference in our culture. Today, blogs, wikis, and media sharing sites, such as Flickr and YouTube, and even raw data mashups are competing with traditional media and information sites. These have become the new resources that citizens use to gather news and information or to connect with events and organizations they care about (consider, for example, the use of social media in the emergency response to the earthquakes and tsunami in Japan in 2011).⁶

Social media have proven their staying power in that they have become tightly integrated into our lives. Traditional media now rely on social media accounts of events, as they occur, to provide updated information.

Colleges and universities have begun incorporating social media tools and concepts into the core curricula of their classes, understanding that digital

literacy is a requisite for the future workforce. People across the globe are turning to social media to join the conversations that are of interest to them.

Through social media, citizens connect to a global community, carry on conversations, share ideas and information, and collaborate on whatever project holds their interest, whether it be a simple photo album, a blog, a school campaign, or a political revolution—like those that erupted in the Middle East in early 2011.⁷ Those revolutions showed us that citizens, engaging in social networks, can have a massive, historic impact on their government. If governments cannot be a part of the active dialogue, they can at least listen. Hearing citizen sentiments will help them to determine whether or not existing policies are successful or need to be changed in order to more accurately represent constituents' requests.⁸

So why do those in the public sector need to pay attention? Social media may have once been a small ripple in a big pond. But that ripple has evolved into a massive wave of acceptance and use in online communities, education, media, and the private sector. This wave is here, today. The time is at hand for governments to decide if they want to ride the wave on their own terms, or risk being knocked down by it as it passes over.

Government 2.0—the use of social media in the public sector—is not just a fad. Instead, it has become an international phenomenon, going far beyond the U.S. context. Government agencies across the globe and at all levels are learning to adapt these new principles and technologies into their respective missions and goals. If agencies are interested in maintaining a flow of information with constituents and providing usable services, they must take the time to understand what social media are and learn about the relevant tools and how they are being applied in government today. At that point agencies can make an informed decision about how and when and why they will choose to use or not to use social media to meet their organizational goals.

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