

Commentary:**Is the Government Cool Enough to Tweet?**

The current Administration is a huge advocate of social media. Its use of blogs, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and live webcasting is making these technologies increasingly popular. The belief in a more open government is the driving force for the use of these technologies, but since when did government agencies become hip enough to use social media?



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Take the use of Twitter for example. Twitter lets users send and receive brief updates, which are capped at 140 characters of text. The average Twitter user is between the ages of 18-34 – ironically, also the age demographic least likely to vote on Election Day. Twitter is popular in part today for the obnoxious but interesting tweets of celebrities like Miley Cyrus and Ashton Kutcher. Surely, our government will never compete for attention on this level. Trying to do so would be like placing public service announcements inside of the pop culture magazine *US Weekly*.

Perhaps the government has walked into a party that it wasn't invited to. The corporate world is already learning this lesson the hard way. Internet marketer B.L. Ochman commented on her blog, "Watching big ad agencies (and corporations) trying to master new media is a lot like watching people who are having mid-life crises trying to look hip, cool and young by adopting the toys, tools, and language of youth. It's rather pathetic."

Most government organizations are just getting their feet wet in the Twitter pool. For example, a simple Google search reveals that The City of Memphis Gas, Light, and Water, The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are each using Twitter – mostly for emergency preparedness alerts.

However, Twitter is not currently optimized to make this type of communication effective. To follow someone on Twitter is easy - that's why the average Twitter user is following almost 70 users. The problem is that by the time you're following this many people there's no way you can possibly keep up with all the tweets. Granted, software exists today to make the filtering process easier but until this becomes standard, Twitter's effectiveness as a tool will remain limited to certain audiences and types of communication.

How sustainable is this technology? Does it merit the amount of time agencies are investing in this venture? According to CNN, last September Twitter was raising capital at a valuation of \$1 billion. However, the northern California start-up has yet to announce a business model or revenue strategy. For now, the cost of utilizing Twitter is very low and takes little time, which makes it easy for the government to experiment with its use. But nothing is for free and changes are sure to come. So let's assume Twitter begins charging for the service – is the government in a position to start investing money to continue this experience? Alternatively, would the government accept advertisements on their tweets? Even worse, what if Twitter fails to find a successful strategy and crashes altogether?

Despite these disadvantages of Twitter, the fact is that our government deserves credit for becoming an early adopter of a technology with still unknown outcomes. Its actions represent a mega-shift in government's typical risk-adverse decision making. Additionally, Twitter upholds an essential duty of the public communicator. According to the National Association of Government Communicators Code of Ethics, "the public-at-large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable, and timely facts about their government." As long as Twitter remains an easy, affordable tool for distributing information to the public, the government has little to lose. Who cares if it's cool enough for this party – the cover charge hardly costs a dime.

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