“A mandate for change”: Diffusion of social media applications among federal departments and agencies

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Abstract
Social media applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs have become an accepted use for online interactions in the U.S. federal government. It remains unclear however why and how government can use social media applications to establish an interaction channel with their audience(s). In this paper, I present findings from interviews with social media directors to gain a deeper understanding why government organizations adopt social media applications and how they navigate the insecurities in this relatively unregulated space. The findings show that depending on the mission and existing operating structure, three different adoption tactics emerge: representation, engagement, and networking. Furthermore, I show that social media directors rely heavily on their informal network of peers, on passive observations of perceived best practices in government and the corporate sector, and received almost no formal top down guidance. My findings point to the need for formalized knowledge sharing when it comes to disruptive technology innovations such as social media use in a highly bureaucratic reporting structure. Furthermore, research on the impact and necessary changes on information flow from the public into government, organizational capabilities, cultural changes, as well as metrics and outcomes to prove the value of time and resources invested into social media use in government.

Keywords
Social media adoption, cross-agency knowledge sharing, social networking services, qualitative network analysis

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Over the past two years agencies and departments in the U.S. government’s executive branch have started to use social media applications, such as Facebook fanpages, Twitter updates, YouTube videos, blogs and RSS feeds. This development was triggered largely by President Obama’s “Transparency and Open Government” memo (2009a) published one day after his inauguration on January 21, 2009. In this memo he highlights three distinct areas of open government: Executive departments and agencies have to increase participation, collaboration and transparency.

While every administration in the past forty years has developed a variation of Open Government, the Obama Administration has clearly defined information as a public asset that needs to be shared with the citizens. Moreover, the memo specifically urges executive departments and agencies to “harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public.”(Obama, 2009a). In subsequent speeches and blogposts, President Obama has even urged students to be as innovative and creative as the founders of Google or Facebook (Obama, 2009b).

The initial memo was followed by a series of necessary regulations, such as the Terms of Service Agreements with social network services providers prepared by the U.S. General Services Administration (Aitoro, 2009; GSA, 2010), the National Archive and Records Administration’s social media records keeping guidelines (Franks, 2010; Sunstein, 2010), supported by the Library of Congress’ decision to archive all tweets (Library of Congress, 2010), as well as the recent changes in the cookie policy that allow government agencies to collect user data (Orszag, 2010).

This study analyzes the use of innovative social media applications as a reaction to the mandate by President Obama to “harness new technologies” in order to increase
participation, transparency and collaboration of executive departments and agencies in the U.S. federal government (Obama, 2009a). As a result, social media applications, i.e. Facebook fan pages, Twitter accounts, YouTube channels, blogs and photo sharing services were added to selected agencies’ websites, opening up new channels for information sharing and even conversational opportunities for citizens to interact with government. At this point, we have few insights about why and how social media applications are used by agencies and departments.

In this study, I examine therefore 1) how and why agencies are using social media applications, 2) the formal and informal information sharing channels used by social media directors to share best practices, and 3) how they design their online tactics as a result. I suggest that informal information sharing, as well as passive observations of what are perceived innovative web practices, contribute to the decision to adopt social media which is seen as highly disruptive e-government technology with the potential to transform the existing information paradigm in the public sector (Dawes, Cresswell, & Pardo, 2009; Mergel & Schweik, 2012; Schweik, Mergel, Sanford, & Zhao, 2011).

**Understanding diffusion of social media practices**

*Characteristics of social media applications*

Social media applications are new types of information production and sharing tools. The tools are used in digital environments, in which contributions and interactions among all stakeholders are enabling a high degree of collaborative knowledge creation, sharing and relationship building (Chang & Kannan, 2008; O'Reilly, 2005). Social media practices in the public sector include the use of online social networking services, such as
Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs or other digital media sharing sites to support the organization’s mission, service delivery and relationship management (Bretschneider & Mergel, 2010; Mergel, 2011; Mergel, 2010). Common features of social media applications include a) profile pages that display descriptive information about the user; b) contact or friend lists and c) bidirectional information exchanges (for a complete overview see for example boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social networking websites, such as Facebook, attract more than 100 million unique visitors a month and provide the ability for “social searches” – trusted information sourcing in a social network’s newsfeed that enables users to pay attention to information posted by their contacts (Watts, Dodds, & Newmark, 2002). They are highly visible with a relatively low complexity for use by all age groups – as a matter of fact the largest growing age groups on Facebook are 35-55 and +55 year olds (Corbett, 2010).

According to Rogers’ definition social media applications present a form of technological and behavioral innovation for government and are therefore perceived as highly innovative and oftentimes challenging or even disruptive (Christensen & Overdorf, 2000; Rogers, 1995, 2005). Citizens have started to use social media applications such as MeetUp or Facebook to organize themselves or find a common voice long before government has taken these tools seriously as a valid information channel (Shirky, 2008, 2010). In many cases government organizations are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tweets and or comments on their Facebook newsfeeds that are snowballing through the network.

For government social media application provide the opportunity to integrate information and opinions from citizens into the policy making process in innovative ways.
that might challenge the current communication strategies of public officials. The traditional information creation, vetting and approval process includes multiple steps and does not provide the opportunity for real-time feedback cycles as social media applications demand. They do however have the potential to increase the degree of transparency, accountability and collaborative content creation. For example, Obama’s presidential campaign showed that these tools are important (if still emerging) superior tools that complement the traditional top-down approach of citizen participation: political volunteers can self-organize, with the support of a knowledgeable campaign team and the use of collaborative social media tools (Talbot, 2008).

Moreover, many social media technologies are highly interactive and allow users to generate content or to edit the work of other participants (Surowiecki, 2004). This again challenges government standard operating procedures and pushes government from uni-directional information provision to multi-directional communication and conversations (Meijer & Thaens, 2010) – pushing government from a “need to know” toward a “need to share” information paradigm (Dawes, et al., 2009). These features as well as the observable use practices among citizens show that social media tools in the public sector create opportunities to potentially promote deeper levels of civic engagement (Hinchcliffe, 2006).

What is less known is how and why government organizations decide to adopt social media practices as a response to a) the presidential mandate; and b) their audiences’ current use and interaction needs.
Research design

Government agencies are beginning to explore the use of social media tools (O'Reilly 2007). The real uptake started in 2010 – about a year after President Obama’s Transparency and Open Government memo – when the U.S. General Services Administration signed pre-negotiated agreements with social media providers, so that agencies can use the services for free and without restrictions to reach out to citizens (Aitoro 2009). This formal agreement provided a framework in which departments and agencies felt comfortable to use social media applications to support their missions.

Case selection and context

In order to understand the decisions and information needed to adopt social media applications, I used a qualitative approach and interviewed social media directors of the most innovative departments and agencies in the executive branch of the federal U.S. government. There is one primary reason why I have selected the sample: The Transparency and Open Government memo was directed only at the heads of executive departments and follow-up directions and regulations came out in direct reference to the initial memo.

I decided to focus on the adoption of social media applications, because the memo explicitly directs departments to “harness new technologies” to become more participatory, collaborative and transparent. Social media tools are a novelty, even though many departments did have a relatively sophisticated web presence. The existing rules of interactions with the public did not include innovative web practices and records management activities focused on documents, rather than online conversations or web
updates. It was therefore unclear to what extent social media directors receive formal
guidance or feedback on how to implement or use social media applications for their
agencies. My core research question is therefore to understand the ways that departments
navigate this problem space and what influences their decision to adopt social media
applications. I can break this question down into two different research questions:

*Research question 1:* How are public managers making adoption decision to use social
media applications?

*Research question 2:* What are the resulting adoption tactics public managers choose
for their use of social media applications?

### Data collection

To understand how and why federal agencies and departments are adopting social
media practices for their government agencies, I conducted interviews with the agency’s
person who had the primary responsibilities for their agency’s social media activities. In
some agencies this person was located in the IT department and took social media
responsibilities on in addition to their existing website responsibilities. In other
departments, a new media director or social media director position was created with
resources to hire additional staff writers, technologists or community managers.

The sample for the interviews was purposefully constructed based on the above
mentioned “Transparency and Open Government” memo that was directed at all heads of
the 15 executive departments in the U.S. federal government. The sample was
constructed so that all departments were included. When a department was unresponsive
to my interview request, I added one of their agencies as a replacement to the sample.
The agencies were chosen based on their high degree of innovativeness in their social
media practices. Overall 15 interview partners agreed to be included into the study – reflecting the breadth of all adopters. Only those departments that did not adopt social media applications did not respond.

The semi-structured interviews contained questions about the main target audience(s), goals of the social media strategy, social media tools, managerial day-to-day processes and social media policies, top management buy-in, hurdles and benefits, outcomes and impact measurement, lessons learned and most importantly, the information search and sharing processes that informed the decisions to adopt a social media approach.

The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, were recorded, transcribed and hand-coded paragraph-by-paragraph in an iterative process to derive the main themes in a grounded theory-like approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994; NVivo 8, 2008). Using a grounded theory approach, initial themes were derived from the existing literature on diffusion of innovation, and additional themes emerged from the data.

In order to understand to what extent the chosen sample of departments are currently using social media applications, I coded their websites and social media accounts by the type of tools they are using and the number of interactions they had via their social media accounts. The following table shows the additional agencies that were included in the analysis in table 1 below:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>2010 # of Subscribers</th>
<th>2010 # of Channel Views</th>
<th>2010 # of viewers (highest number)</th>
<th>2010 # of “Likes”1</th>
<th>2010 # of Followers</th>
<th>2010 # Following</th>
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<td>112,412</td>
<td>46,139</td>
<td>12,483</td>
<td>14,537</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>9,123</td>
<td>866</td>
<td>1,068</td>
<td>1,524</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>927</td>
<td>50,229</td>
<td>72,623</td>
<td>57,420</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>930</td>
<td>66,896</td>
<td>21,046</td>
<td>4,852</td>
<td>29,054</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Energy</td>
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<td>42,742</td>
<td>107,260</td>
<td>2,678</td>
<td>6,585</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>Department of Health and Human Services</td>
<td>24,920</td>
<td>2,162</td>
<td>99,787</td>
<td>13,240</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td>5,757</td>
<td>262,275</td>
<td>2,100,508</td>
<td>62,762</td>
<td>7,934</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>FDA</td>
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<td>51,244</td>
<td>30,418</td>
<td>1,581</td>
<td>2,915</td>
<td>112</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Homeland Security</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>106,190</td>
<td>11,360</td>
<td>19,813</td>
<td>92</td>
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<td>3,350</td>
<td>4,685</td>
<td>5,538</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Justice</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>12,416</td>
<td>2,032</td>
<td>52,886</td>
<td>349,749</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Labor</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>113,245</td>
<td>25,355</td>
<td>652</td>
<td>11,840</td>
<td>81</td>
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<td>393,726</td>
<td>427,468</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>40,318</td>
<td>161</td>
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<tr>
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<td>570</td>
<td>4,390</td>
<td>5,343</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,318</td>
<td>68,426</td>
<td>4,466</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,654</td>
<td>17,618</td>
<td>10,073</td>
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<td>8,157</td>
<td>1,113</td>
<td>8,450</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>20,091</td>
<td>23,523</td>
<td>1,465</td>
<td>369,250</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation</td>
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<td>45,040</td>
<td>1,465</td>
<td>1,748</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Service Administration</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>5,893</td>
<td>2,030</td>
<td>155,727</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White House</td>
<td>148,549</td>
<td>6,881,778</td>
<td>5,918,903</td>
<td>1,047,092</td>
<td>2,159,627</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Overview of views, followers and likes on social media channels2

1 “Likes” on Facebook fanpages can be compared to friends on Facebook’s individual contact pages or followers on Twitter.

2 Except for DHHS, DOT all surveyed departments and agencies maintain a blog (including RSS feed). Only DOJ and FCC maintain MySpace accounts. All agencies allow their followers to comment on their Facebook feeds. GSA and the White House were added to this table to highlight those organizations that provide “formal” top down guidance for the use of social media.
Findings

My research interest focuses on how and why federal agencies and departments are adopting social media applications. The findings can be distinguished into two different categories: (1) network locus of innovation; and (2) the resulting social media tactics.

Network locus of innovation

Social media application can be described as technology innovations in the public sector. Government has existing communication and formalized interaction processes set up to interact with its stakeholders on and offline. So that the question is to what extend do departments and agencies learn from each other and make the decision to adopt social media practices themselves. Social media directors all sit in the same boat and need to fulfill the mandate of the Transparency and Open Government memo to increase participation, collaboration and transparency. They need to find ways to implement highly disruptive technologies in a space with minimal formal guidance and institutional knowledge about the problem area.

The interviewed social media directors receive information about innovative uses of social media applications through different channels. In some cases they actively search for information and existing best practices, in other cases they passively observe and copy other agencies’ behavior. The decision to adopt social media practices follows three distinct input mechanisms: 1) passive observations of highly innovative departments and agencies; 2) active interaction with peers; and 3) formal guidelines developed by lead agencies.
**Passive attention network**

Many social media directors report that they are paying attention to what their peers are doing in other departments. The attention network among agencies and departments includes those organizations that are displaying best practices in their use of social media practices. They are browsing websites; sign up for social media accounts and based on that input try to evaluate what of practices might be of value for their own use. The social media director were not able to point to one agency that is doing everything right, but instead mention that they are paying attention to several agencies – each of which is showing one best practice in one area.

As one of the social media directors states:

“Yes, we take the best practices where we can find them. We’re not shy at all about borrowing ideas, especially from other services or other federal agencies… because you know within the federal government it’s all fair game. I might have to worry about plagiarism or intellectual property if I borrow something outside the federal government, it’s fair game from anyone else. […] If we come across a good example of another federal agency doing something well, for example your State Department’s doing some very interesting things, I’ll see if I can emulate some of it.

The following figure shows a summary of the “passive” attention networking among federal agencies and departments. The social media directors are not necessarily actively reaching out to their peers in other departments, instead the passively observe behavior and innovations and copy what they perceive as best practices. Blue icons highlight the interviewed agencies and red icons highlight agencies and departments that did not respond to my interview request. Squares highlight agencies, circles departments and triangles highlight the three organizations that are providing formal guidance to the departments and agencies: White House New Media Office, GSA’s Center for Digital Government and the Federal Web Managers’ Forum.
The six isolates on the left-hand side of figure 2 can be labeled non-adopters, were not mentioned by any of the adopters, but also did not reply to interview requests.

Other guidance comes through a similar channel, passive observations of online best practices, but from a different set of actors. Several social media directors highlight that they are paying attention to proven social media practices outside of government. Especially online retailers and large e-Business companies are a source of innovation. Examples include the rating and user interaction services provided by Amazon, Zappos, Google, and EBay. Others frequently take in technology guidance and best practices from social media and technology blogs such as Mashable, or TechCrunch.
The overall system of departments and agencies in the executive branch of the federal government is by nature organized in a highly centralized fashion: all national headquarters of the departments and agencies are located in one geographic area (Washington, DC) and are not scattered around the country. This provides the opportunity for the social media directors to build a community of peers with weekly phone conferences, webinars, face-to-face meetings organized by the Federal Web Managers’ Forum, meetings at conferences, etc. While none of these interaction opportunities can be labeled as formal guidance, they do provide opportunities for the social media directors to hear about best practices ask questions and build a network of peers to tap into.

Formal hierarchy and market guidance

As opposed to the informal guidance social media directors either search for or can access through their informal networks, there is very little formal guidance provided within each agency. While many are looking at the White House’s Office of New Media, the Federal Web Manager’s Forum or recently also the General Service Administration’s Office of Digital Government (GSA), guidance was developed and made available with a significant lag time of over two years in a top down fashion. As an example, the Social Media Navigator is described by GSA as the guide “to provide government agencies and employees with information about using the many available social media tools.” and can be labeled a formal advice mechanism.³ Another guideline is “HowTo.gov” set up by

³ See: http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/277157 (last accessed on May 24, 2011).
GSA in 2011 that now gives federal agencies access to concrete guidelines which social
media tools to use for what kind of purpose.

None of the social media directors mentioned that they received formal guidance
through the existing hierarchy. Instead they were waiting for regulations and guidelines
to be set up, such as the Terms of Use agreements with social networking services in
2010. This has delayed adoption decision in many cases.

Pathways of adoption

With the introduction of social media applications the interview partners
highlighted a series of goals for their use of these additional communication channels.
The majority of social media directors started to use social media as part of the
presidential mandate: “We had to use social media to accomplish the goals of the Open
Government and Transparency initiative”. Nevertheless, the actual pathways and extents
of adoption are more distinct than just the mandate to change to a different interaction
style. The pathways can be divided into three broad categories: a) representation, b)
engagement, and c) networking. For each of the three areas the social media directors
provided examples that highlight the connection to their mission and objectives.

Representation

The overwhelming reason to participate in social media spaces can be
summarized with one main goal: Representation of the agency on all available channels.
Especially the success of Facebook with about 500 million users and Twitter with 17
million active users in 2010 has convinced social media directors that they want to be
where the citizens are. The following quote is representative to statements of all interview partners:

“Why we’re on Facebook or Twitter: to be where the people are. So 400 million users now on Facebook for example, so you wanna be there. When people search for [suppressed by author] stuff on Facebook, they find us.”

As table 1 shows all agencies maintain several different social media accounts including accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and RSS feeds. Many agencies are experimenting with additional – less mainstream – social networking services, such as alternative video or photo sharing services. The reason for choosing several different channels was stated by the following social media directors as follows: “We wanted to be active in various social media spaces.” Only those agencies that are targeting younger audiences or their representatives, such as teachers or professors, also maintain a MySpace account.

The representation objective is to be as inclusive as possible and reach audiences in their social spaces they frequent on a daily basis. Several interview partners recognize the need to reach audiences that do not routinely interact with federal agencies and are therefore excluded from decision-making and interpretation processes. They see the use of additional channels on social networking sites as a way to institutionalize their interactions and bring citizens’ knowledge into government. The following quote is therefore representative for many agencies: “Get the message out to the audiences that might not normally hear it and have a lower the engagement with government.”

Agencies that are following a representation tactic as their main social media strategy describe themselves as “by nature very conservative organizations” and are repurposing existing content. They are using social media channels to notify their
audiences about policy statements or major press releases, but are not creating specific social media content – again highlighting that the only purpose is to represent the agency or department on multiple channels:

“There is part of our stakeholder group out there that uses Twitter exclusively or Facebook as their main website to get information, to disburse information, to communicate with people. [...] It’s easier for people to get notified of things if they’re using Facebook. If they’re logged in all the time, or have Twitter open all the time, it’s easier to tell them about that. I mean people are using that almost as much they’re using email now.”

The resulting social media tactic can be described as a “push strategy”, where minimal resources are invested into content creation, monitoring, or active bidirectional interactions. Social media directors in these types of organizations have low confidence in the usefulness of social networking applications and actively shut off the commenting function for their Facebook accounts. Social media channels are used because the agencies understand the expectations and online destinations where their audiences are interacting and have started to provide existing information through social networking services. This centralized approach allows for little innovative interactions or engagement, instead it makes existing content more acceptable or appropriate for various audiences.

**Engagement**

The second most frequently mentioned objective to maintain social media accounts is *engagement*. Social media tools are still very new to most agencies and therefore best practices in the public sector are rare. Most interview partners perceive their actions as an experiment in an unknown problem space:
Our social media strategy is to put a face on what has often been a faceless, kind of anonymous or overbearing bureaucracy. Nobody sticks with a press release for more than 2-3 paragraphs the most.

Even though they are constantly exploring best practices outside of government (such as Starbucks’ My Starbucks Idea or BestBuy’s Twitter customer service Twelpforce), there are very little role models within government to mirror an interactive engagement approach.

Most social media directors are bound by institutional hurdles they need to overcome and early experimentation has led to the use of social media tools in the same way that traditional static website content is provided: “We wanted to engage. But, when we started a year ago, a lot of things were just push. Recognizing that we should be engaging, more so to push on listen-type of strategy.” Several interview partners report that they decided to create a business case with one specific tool first, experiment, and gain experiences and insights from their use. Only when they felt they collected enough insights and were able to make their case, they presented their findings to the top management and ask for additional support. This approach was mentioned by several interview partners because oftentimes initial support was difficult to find. One social media director says:

Initially some thought it was just a fad and would detract from the press mission. But I was able to argue for social media as a supplement – to supplement our communication as an “and also” approach as opposed to an “and/or” approach.

Recognizing the shortcomings of push strategies, agencies have switched to an active “pull strategy” (for a detailed overview of federal social media policies and strategies see Mislove, Lehmann, Ahn, Onnela, & Rosenquist, 2010). Early practices
indicate that content produced for the core website were duplicated and pushed through social media channels. While these practices can still be observed, some agencies have recognized the additional value of social networking services: bidirectional interaction. Citizens are invited to co-produce content that is then replicated on the agencies’ websites:

“One side of the communication strategy that we did was a little mini campaign called ‘Share Your Stories’ [...] from there we put together our blog posts [...] pushing them out onto different subnets.”

Another social media director highlighted a similar pull strategy, where the agency invited citizens to provide content:

“One side of the communication strategy that we did was a little mini campaign called “Share Your Stories” [...] from there we put together our blog posts [...] pushing them out onto different subnets.”

**Networking and “mingling”**

Very few of the interviewed social media directors also recognize that they do not always have to play an active role when using social media applications. Instead, a passive strategy to listen and absorb comments provides them with very valuable insights. As one of the social media directors said in this representative quote:

“This is really exciting and willing to provide really fantastic insight in things that help us get closer to the taxpayer and to the people that we serve by listening.”

The agency adopting a networking strategy provides the social media tools to facilitate conversations and “mingling” opportunities among its stakeholders. They are
providing the agency’s knowledge experts to co-write or co-design strategic plans or policies with a highly knowledgeable audience – instead of the general public.

This highly interactive and bidirectional responsiveness of the agency produces reciprocated feedback cycles. While several social media directors mentioned this objective, very few interview partners was able to point to examples, instead they listed reciprocated feedback and interaction as a desirable goal for their social media use.

Others step into a relatively passive networking strategy by allowing the public to socialize the content they are producing. As an example, the following social media director explains their use of YouTube:

“We started talking about YouTube because we have quite a video library, and we wanted to find a way to socialize and make it more easy for people to find, make it more easy for people to share it.”

A networking tactic of a social media strategy therefore does not only include active interactions with the public, but also an enhanced interaction of the public with the content an agency produces and a snowballing of the content through their social network. This gives the public on the one hand a larger responsibility and control over the content – on the other the agency itself has to come to a more generous understanding of their own role and responsibility as a partner in the overall network. It actively has to leave the conversation to the people, instead of guiding, constraining or controlling the content.
Discussion

How and why government organizations are deciding to adopt disruptive social media practices for their department and agencies? In this paper, I have examined the different localities that social media directors are using to access information about best practices, experiences and guidance for their own use of social media applications. The factors that are driving the decisions to adopt innovative web practices include passive observations and comparisons of government and corporate best practice examples, the informal attention network among departments, and to a certain extent also some formal guidance. The departments are still experimenting with social media tactics and depending on their traditional communication and interaction style, they are taking on three distinguishable social media tactics: a push strategy to represent formal government information on social media as additional channels; a pull strategy to engage and include information from the public; and a networking strategy that includes both pull and pull, but also leaves room for engagement beyond active involvement of government. While many different regulations for interaction between government and the public exists, the Open Government memo does initiate the use of new media. The extent of the interpretation of the memo text and the extent to which departments are actively using social media vary widely. Even though all social media directors acknowledge that the need and incentive to use social media is driven through the formal mandate, many also highlight, that innovation is driven by their audiences’ behavior. Innovative citizen behavior therefore drives adoption in government – a reactionary decision making process that put many agencies into a defensive position and increases the need to
navigate this unknown problem space. Table 2 in the appendix summarizes the main findings of social media strategies, tactics, policies and forms of interactions.

While innovation in government traditionally comes through the formal hierarchy or through market mechanisms, such as vendors or consultants, it seems that the need to innovate is pushed from citizens onto government (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf 1993; Powell 1990; Staw & Epstein 2000).

The key drivers for the adoption of innovative social media practices include the location of the social media director within the overall organizational hierarchy and the resources dedicated to the use of social media applications. In departments in which social media is regarded as a technological problem, the social media responsibility stays with the IT department. In departments where it is seen as part of the mission and included in strategic communication efforts, the social media responsibility is located in the public affairs office and oftentimes knowledge experts in subunits are included in the broadcasting efforts. The latter two then also actively work on social media policies – day-to-day administrations – and social media strategies on how social media use can support the mission of the organization.

What did come as a surprise in this study is that market mechanisms don’t seem to play a role in these early adoption decisions. As opposed to other technological innovations, vendors or consultants do not play a role in the adoption decisions. This might have to do with the free and open source nature of the social networking services or with the openly observable nature of best practices.

Moreover, non-existent or just barely emerging formal guidelines don’t seem to stall adoption. Instead all interview partners did report an adoption strategy of social
media applications, even though they receive very little top down guidance. Many departments therefore had to find a way to navigate this highly innovative and volatile environment to understand how they can translate existing practices into a new online environment. The passive attention network with highly observable practices played a major role: central agencies and departments receive a lot of attention, even if they are catering toward different audiences – the applicability of practices seems to transcend audiences and content. The literature on technology adoption has pointed to interpersonal networks as an important dimension of adoption decision (Rogers 1971; Rogers 2003). In the case of social media adoption does not come through private – interpersonal – channels that are unobservable, instead it comes through highly public channels. The formal network in form of the Federal Web Managers Forum then helps to navigate the procedural and technological components.

What is necessary going forward is an in-depth understanding of the nature of the impact these new forms of interactions provide for government. Do they help a government organization to increase their decision making processes by including diverse opinions from the public; are they improving the standard operating procedures toward a more efficient and effective use of technology; are they indeed increasing transparency, accountability, participation and collaboration in government?

Moreover, right now it is unclear to what extent the information that flows into government is governed, processed, used and how government interacts with the knowledge. Social media applications provide an innovative mechanism to incubate innovative knowledge outside of government. To what extent can government channel the knowledge into actual transactions or public services? Social media as ways to break...
up knowledge silos in the public sector (within government, across departments and jurisdictions, but also with citizens and among civil society (Mergel 2010). Additional research is necessary to understand the implications of social media applications and the measurement of their effectiveness for government organizations.
# Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Business value</th>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th># of accounts</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Information vetting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT department</td>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>Informational broadcasting</td>
<td>Push</td>
<td>No interactions allowed, commenting disabled</td>
<td>One account for the whole agency</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Typical information clearing process as for any public statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Affairs office</td>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Pull</td>
<td>Dedicated social media policy (i.e., commenting policy)</td>
<td>Official public affairs account plus agency accounts</td>
<td>Dedicated social media department, incl. staff and budget</td>
<td>Information vetting for repurposed statements; ad hoc interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge experts</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Transactional &amp; empowering</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Open exchanges with social media guidelines</td>
<td>Unrestricted</td>
<td>Dedicated social media department, incl. staff and budget</td>
<td>Information vetting for repurposed statements; ad hoc interactions; responsible exchanges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 2: Summary of social media adoption practices |
References


Landmark Agreements Clear Path for Government New Media (2010).


