Open Government at the National Archives: Our First Year

In December 2009, President Barack Obama issued the Open Government Directive to create a culture among federal agencies of transparency, participation and collaboration. These principles of open government are embedded in the mission and strategic goals of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). In fact, the cornerstone of the work that we do every day is the belief that citizens have the right to see, examine, and learn from the records that document the actions of their Government. However, in this digital age, and with this directive, we have been called to work and communicate more efficiently, effectively, and in completely new ways. This is requiring a change not only in processes, but also in the culture of the National Archives.

Records Management

On April 7, 2010, NARA published our first Open Government Plan with extensive input from employees and the public. In the plan, we focused on reclaiming our records management leadership role by finding and developing cost-effective IT solutions needed to meet the electronic records management challenges of today and the future. The fact is, without good records management it is impossible for us to learn from the past and plan for the future; records management is the backbone of open government. The plan called for bringing together leaders in records management and information technology to collaborate on our most pressing issues. Toward that end, NARA sponsored the first combined meeting of the Chief Information Officers (CIO) Council and the Federal Records Council last fall to discuss electronic records management issues.

NARA is monitoring federal agencies' records management activities and exploring how technologies related to email archiving and search, deployed for other business purpose like e-discovery, enterprise-wide knowledge management, and other related functions, might meet archival and records management needs. NARA is also testing auto-capture approaches for email. We expect to share the results of our analysis and our own work with the wider community in the coming year. You can keep up to date on our records management program at: http://blogs.archives.gov/records-express/.

OGIS

Another important part of NARA's Open Government efforts has been the establishment of the Office of Government Information Services, or OGIS, which opened its doors just eighteen months ago, in September 2009. OGIS has a unique perspective on the way FOIA works. As an entity that works side-by-side with agency FOIA professionals to improve the process from within and that also works closely with requesters on the outside to address shortcomings, OGIS can testify to the importance of building relationships and trust among all the stakeholders of the FOIA community. The OGIS report on its first year is available at www.archives.gov/ogis/reports. In March, OGIS launched a new blog, The FOIA Ombudsman, to provide information and advice. You can read it at: http://blogs.archives.gov/foiablog.

NDC

 Yet another important Open Government effort has been the establishment of the National Declassification Center (NDC), responsible for the declassification of 400 million documents by the end of 2013. Thus far, the NDC has declassified over 13 million pages in that effort.

The NDC has also included opportunities for public input and comment in developing its strategic prioritization plan. Draft versions of the plan were posted on the NDC website and comment was invited on the NDC Blog, via email, and at a public open forum. Additionally, the NDC publishes and invites comment on its semi-annual progress report to the President and hold periodic small group meetings with interested stakeholders. Inviting public participation into the planning process is how NDC is doing business.

NDC sponsors an active blog at: http://blogs.archives.gov/ndc.

NARA's Flagship Initiative: Online Public Access and More

One of my priorities as the Archivist of the United States has been to improve out online capabilities in order to foster the public's use of our records. Included in this effort has been a redesign of archives.gov, launched in December 2010. We asked for public participation in choosing the final design for our web page, and you responded. The result is a cleaner, easier to use web site. For more on this effort, see: http://www.archives.gov/open/redesign/.

That same month, we launched a new search prototype, Online Public Access, which allows users to search across multiple NARA resources simultaneously (see: http://www.archives.gov/research/search/. Public participation, through social media tools, has been key to the successful development of both of these projects. These efforts have resulted in positive reviews from many of you, including educators, genealogists, researchers, as well as general visitors to our web site. Consulting with you and inviting your participation is making all the difference.

The Open Government plan also kicked off a number of successful social media projects over the last year, including a meet up in January with Wikipedians to celebrate the 10th anniversary of Wikipedia. With over 90 in attendance, we hosted day of lightning talks, unconference sessions, and stack tours. This summer, NARA will host a Wikipedian-In Residence, who will serve as a community liaison to help us identify projects to collaborate on with Wikipedia.

We also greatly expanded our online presence throughout Facebook, Flickr, and Twitter, over the past year and we have recently ventured onto Foursquare and Tumblr. We launched a new mobile app, "Today's Document," downloaded over 10,000 times since its launch in December, and highly rated by users. We participated on Challenge.gov with "History Happens Here," with a popular photo contest using documents from our online catalog. We also drafted a comprehensive social media strategy for the agency, the development of which included more public participation efforts using new media tools. All to reach out to you where you are online.

Although we have made progress, we are not resting on the work that has been accomplished. This year, we intend to develop our current catalog into a social catalog that allows our online users to contribute information or "tags" to descriptions of our records. Once again we will be inviting your participation as we develop this capability.

Transforming an Agency

The fact is that the way we do our work is changing. We understand that inviting the public to participate is not just an option, it is essential to the success of our work. We are also undergoing an agency reorganization to support the cultural changes we need to make in order to accomplish our mission. This is just the beginning of our transformation, much is left to do, but our initial steps over the course of the last year, toward the goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration, are already moving us to becoming a more responsive and more efficient agency.

Last year, I launched my own blog, "AOTUS: Collector in Chief" available at http://blogs.archives.gov/aotus/.   I invite you to join me in discussing the challenges we have yet to face and the future of the National Archives.

David S. Ferriero

Archivist of the United States